

An examination of the role of images in the  
spread of disinformation on social media:  
The case of the Westminster Bridge  
photograph

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PhD 2022

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the  
requirements of Manchester Metropolitan  
University for the degree of Doctor of  
Philosophy

Education & Social Research Institute  
Manchester Metropolitan University  
in collaboration with First Draft News

2022

## ABSTRACT

By deeply and intensely investigating how a high-profile and well-known example of visual disinformation evolved, the thesis contributes a nuanced understanding of the phenomenon of visual disinformation as it works to shape public debate and, consequently, society and the democratic process. This was achieved through the examination of the Westminster Bridge photograph, a press photograph taken in the aftermath of a terrorist attack in the UK. The photograph was shared on Twitter by an account operated by Russia's Internet Research Agency and was verbally reframed with an Islamophobic message, thus changing its meaning. Yet, while mis-/disinformation is of significant academic interest and has seen a substantial increase in research from a range of different disciplines, the role of images is often overlooked despite a considerable amount of mis-/disinformation being visual. Therefore, the thesis works to highlight the power and persuasiveness of a press photograph, shared in the aftermath of a terrorist attack with opportunistic framing, to spread Islamophobic disinformation.

Long-recognised theories of photographic representation with contemporary conceptualisations of disinformation are incorporated to establish an understanding of how this photograph functioned as disinformation. With the photograph's journey across social and traditional media being the principal component that drives the research, a case study methodology was established. This involved collecting data from Twitter, online news, and focus groups with British Muslim women, accompanied by content, thematic, and semiotic analysis, to encapsulate the photograph's evolution.

The examination of this case shows how, when recontextualised and shared in a context that fosters anxiety and division, a photograph can snowball from an inconsequential, rarely shared press photograph to visual disinformation to news story. That the photograph used was a press photograph is significant; audiences treat such images as visual facts, so press photographs like this example can be used to ascribe truthfulness to the accompanying verbal message. Moreover, the thesis reinforces that visuals can be harmful vehicles for spreading mis-/disinformation, especially when images are recontextualised to elicit an emotional response. The evolution of the photograph across media also highlights the significant consequences of a foreign state actor meddling in domestic politics.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, I would like to thank the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) for this thesis would not have been possible without their support and First Draft News as a collaborating organisation. I am eternally grateful to my supervisors, past and present, Prof. Farida Vis, Dr Simon Faulkner, Prof. Karen Pashby, and Prof. Maggie MacLure, for providing invaluable support, advice, and belief in me throughout my PhD journey. I am also deeply thankful for my participants; their comments and insights provided vital understandings which would not have been possible without their involvement. Finally, I thank my family, friends, and partner for their unwavering encouragement these past four years, through thick and thin.

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# CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

## BACKGROUND & RATIONALE

Research on disinformation has experienced exponential growth, particularly in the context of and following the 2016 US Presidential Election and subsequent presidency of Donald Trump. Generally considered to be purposefully manipulated online content designed to cause harm intentionally (Freelon & Wells, 2020), disinformation is of substantial journalistic, political, and cultural concern. The act of deliberately spreading manipulated or false information to influence others is not a new concept, having precedents in earlier forms of propaganda (Burkhardt, 2017; Gorbach, 2018). However, the contemporary rise of social media has provided certain actors and parties with intentions to influence, mislead, and harm others with an effective vehicle for widely and quickly spreading disinformation worldwide<sup>1</sup>. Thus, the act of promulgating falsified and manipulated information has evolved significantly. The field of mis-/disinformation research is notably disparate and increasingly interdisciplinary as mis-/disinformation has a growing impact on various aspects of society, including journalism, education, and health. Indeed, in considering the role of images in mis-/disinformation, this thesis incorporates Visual Studies to gain a theoretical grounding of the societal function of photographs as a means of approaching visual disinformation.

There are a variety of reasons that explain this sharp rise in false and manipulated content online. Social media is now the most significant means of news distribution and consumption, making it the recognisable, go-to place for many people to access news (Canter, 2018; Newman et al., 2018; Ross & Rivers, 2018). However, unlike traditional news media, social media is not regulated and consequently does not adhere to the same strict regulations as mainstream news organisations (DCMS Committee, 2018), though the regulatory space in the UK is changing (Woodhouse, 2022). These two factors present a

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Cambridge Analytica, a data analytics firm, was found to have harvested private information from 50 million Facebook profiles. This was done so that Americans deemed susceptible to disinformation were targeted with pro-Trump content during the 2016 US Presidential election in an effort to secure Trump's presidential win (Cadwalladr & Graham-Harrison, 2018).

fertile opportunity for actors driven by certain political interests to spread disinformation disguised as news on social media (Dawson & Innes, 2019), as these practices are often met without challenge (Bakir & McStay, 2018). The communication structures on social media also make platforms effective vehicles for disseminating disinformation to a broad audience with little effort. By its nature, social media use is dependent on sharing information, and research suggests that platform users themselves contribute significantly to the spread of disinformation (Nelson & Taneja, 2018; Vosoughi et al., 2018; Grinberg et al., 2019). News consumption on social media can also be superficial, meaning the information is not consumed thoughtfully or critically. This can make certain users more susceptible to disinformation when spread in this context (Kiss, 2016; de Zúñiga et al., 2017; Boczkowski et al., 2018; Kalogeropoulos et al., 2018; Pennycook & Rand, 2020). The social nature of social media also means some users may trust their peers over journalists, relying more on the judgements of the people they know when considering which information is worth their attention (Weeks et al., 2017; Boczkowski et al., 2018; Marwick, 2018).

Various researchers have consequently sought to understand online disinformation, providing vital insight concerning, for example, tracking disinformation, its origins, and the common topics addressed by disinformation. This work has begun to define the area of mis-/disinformation research. Yet, existing research and literature on mis-/disinformation have limitations regarding the online content examined and the range of methodologies deployed. Consequently, the purpose and significance of this thesis are to propose two additional approaches. First, there is a considerable knowledge gap in mis-/disinformation research concerning the role of images. Visuals such as photographs, videos, and GIFs play a vital and highly varied role in communication on social media, yet images are often overlooked when examining mis-/disinformation (Tucker et al., 2018). This is a trend common across all research that examines social media content (Thelwall et al., 2015; Highfield & Leaver, 2016; Faulkner et al., 2018) and is, therefore, a knowledge gap this thesis addresses by examining a high-profile contemporary example of visual disinformation: the use of a photograph showing a veiled Muslim woman, taken in the aftermath of a terrorist attack in the United Kingdom - the 22 March 2017 Westminster Bridge attack in London (Figure 1).



**FIGURE 1: THE WESTMINSTER BRIDGE PHOTOGRAPH**

Second, methodological approaches within the main fields that examine disinformation, namely Journalism Studies and Social Media Studies, commonly involve analysing large, text-based datasets. Such text-oriented and quantitative methodological approaches, although essential to research on mis-/disinformation, generally neglect images and the nuances of meanings to be found through the use of more qualitative methods. Consequently, this thesis proposes an approach to visual disinformation that can produce different kinds of knowledge, thus expanding the scope of research, methodological approaches, and ultimately knowledge of this subject through the detailed study of a single example of visual disinformation. This entails collecting various kinds of data from three main sources. The first source is social media, specifically Twitter, which is a typical data source in disinformation research. However, two additional datasets were used to collect data concerning the journey of the Westminster Bridge photograph to produce both a broad and deep picture of the disinformation examined. The second source was online news articles, as the photograph evolved into news in and of itself, and the third source involved speaking to relevant media consumers about the photograph. When brought together, these three data sources produced a rich set of materials for analysis that enabled

the development of a nuanced set of findings about this particular image and its use as disinformation.

## THE CASE STUDY

It is important to provide a detailed overview of the event to which the case study relates and how the photograph developed in its aftermath. On the 22<sup>nd</sup> of March 2017, at 14:40, converted British Muslim Khalid Masood drove down the pavement of Westminster Bridge, injuring dozens and killing four. Reaching New Palace Yard, Masood exited the car and stabbed and killed a police officer. Masood was shot and killed by plainclothes police officers (Bowcott, 2017; BBC, 2018). Press photographer Jamie Lorriman was on the bridge and immediately photographed the aftermath of this attack (Scott, 2017). Lorriman's photographs were submitted to Rex Features under Set 8550198 (Rex Features, 2017). Seven of these photographs were a sequence frame (Figure 2) accompanied by the caption: "Sequence frame showing a woman visibly distressed passing the scene of the terrorist incident on Westminster Bridge, London" (Rex Features, 2017: Online). The first photograph shows people kneeling over an injured person (8550198ac). The second shows a Muslim woman entering the scene holding a mobile phone (8550198as). The third photograph appears identical (8550198aq), and the fourth (8550198ar) and fifth (8550198at) are cropped versions of 8550198as/8550198aq. The sixth shows her extending her leg as her eyes move down to her phone (8550198au). The final photograph shows the woman stepping forward and looking at her phone (8550198l). It is this last photograph that I will be calling the Westminster Bridge Photograph, and that is the central focus of this thesis.





**FIGURE 2: THE SET 8550198 SEQUENCE FRAME**

The Westminster Bridge Photograph first appeared in a *NY Daily News* article published at 17:35 (Cullen, 2017), which is likely how the photograph became widely accessible to the public. The SouthLoneStar Twitter account, appearing to be a right-wing, Trump-supporting, Islamophobic Texan man, tweeted the photograph around 20:00 with the caption: “Muslim woman pays no mind to the terror attack, casually walks by a dying man while checking phone #PrayforLondon #Westminster #BanIslam” (Texas Lone Star, 2017: Online), illustrated below in Figure 3. This thesis will refer to the veiled woman in the photograph as “the woman” or “the Muslim woman” as the woman’s identity was not made public. Through the anti-Muslim hate charity *Tell Mama*, she expressed her dismay at how she had been represented in SouthLoneStar’s tweet and the significant effect the

attack had had on her (Hunt & Pegg, 2017). Therefore, to respect the woman’s privacy, no effort was made to seek out her name or any further identifying factors beyond what was identifiable in the photograph.



FIGURE 3: SOUTHLONESTAR'S TWEET

The tweet from the SouthLoneStar account spread quickly on Twitter and garnered significant attention, so much so that dozens of UK mainstream newspapers published articles about the tweet. The photograph gained such mainstream attention that its journey across social and mainstream UK media was described at the time by journalists as a “minor cause célèbre” (Hern, 2017: Online), and the Muslim woman anonymously came forward to defend herself (Hunt & Pegg, 2017). Thus, the photograph and SouthLoneStar’s disinformation campaign did not solely circulate on social media, instead spreading across the hybrid media system of social and traditional mainstream media.

In November 2017, US senators held hearings about 'fake news'. They revealed that Russia's Internet Research Agency (IRA) attempted to meddle in the 2016 US election by spreading disinformation on social media (Jacobs, 2017). A hearing on 13<sup>th</sup> November also revealed that SouthLoneStar was an IRA account deleted by Twitter earlier in 2017. Thus, SouthLoneStar intentionally used the photograph to spread Islamophobia in the aftermath of a terrorist attack. Its evolution into a news story also suggests that the photograph was an effective vehicle for spreading such a narrative. Indeed, in November, many UK news organisations cited SouthLoneStar's Westminster Bridge photograph tweet as a highlight of the account's disinformation activity (Hern, 2017), thereby corroborating the tweet's impact on the UK mainstream media ecosystem. The following section summarises the aims and research questions of the thesis.

## AIMS & RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This thesis aims to understand the role images play in the spread of disinformation on Twitter in relation to the Westminster Bridge attack and the journey of the Westminster Bridge photograph. The research questions are:

1. What images were shared in the aftermath of the Westminster attack and by whom?
2. How did the Westminster Bridge Photograph become such a prominent news image and what was the news media's role in the photograph's journey?
3. How have social media users on Twitter and those commenting on UK online newspaper articles responded to the Westminster Bridge photograph?
4. How can discussions with the community negatively depicted by the Westminster Bridge disinformation campaign contribute to the case study of this thesis?
5. How might the thesis' examination of the Westminster Bridge case study enable the further development of approaches for the critical analysis of visual disinformation?

## LITERATURE AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Due to the interdisciplinary nature of mis-/disinformation research, the literature on this topic is considerable. Moreover, as the thesis also considers the role of images, literature related to the function of photographs is also relevant. Reflective of this, the literature review for this thesis is wide-ranging. To manage this variety and ensure clarity, the exploration of pertinent literature is divided into a literature review chapter and a conceptual framework chapter. The first chapter situates the thesis within relevant disciplines: Journalism Studies, Social Media Studies, and Visual Studies. This is followed by situating the thesis within the field of mis-/disinformation research, tackling the significant knowledge gap within this field by focusing on the role and function of images. Finally, the thesis is situated within more expansive relevant research fields. As noted, mis-/disinformation research can touch on various related research fields and topics, so these are considered. Namely, in correspondence with the specific case study of the Westminster Bridge photograph, the research topics explored are:

- Online responses to disaster events;
- Russia’s Internet Research Agency (IRA);
- The alt-right and right-wing populism;
- Media representations of Muslim women;
- Media amplification, and the news media’s role in online disinformation.

This chapter ensures the thesis’ location is established to identify the knowledge gaps addressed and where the thesis builds on existing knowledge, both concerning the limited research on visual disinformation as well as broader topics the case study sits within.

The conceptual framework chapter examines the literature on key concepts employed to contribute to the thesis’ understanding of visual disinformation. The first key concept is disinformation. Definitional clarity matters, especially when working with a concept like disinformation, for which scholars employ a variety of terminology and definitions. Although the most common and recognisable means of referring to the concept under investigation is ‘fake news’, this term will be avoided unless used by others. ‘Disinformation’ will be used instead to refer to the phenomenon<sup>2</sup>. The literature on disinformation is also explored by examining the roles of truth, falsehood, and societal/cultural narratives.

Photographic objectivity is a further examined concept. Because the example of disinformation under examination involves the manipulation of a press photograph, it is vital to understand how photographs are used as vehicles for communication. The consideration of this concept begins with the role of objectivity in news reporting in general and how news photographs are often given an elevated status of evidence and truth value. The section ends with a reflection on arguments that critique and problematise this elevated status. These arguments concern how photographs are often quite limited in what they can tell about the scene captured. Yet, because photographs are associated with

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<sup>2</sup> The purpose of this is to provide quick clarification of how the concept is referred to in the thesis. The concept of “disinformation” is scrutinised in much more detail in Chapter 3 (“Establishing the Conceptual Framework”).

veracity and objectivity, they can be used effectively to mislead and construct a false narrative, as argued by, for example, Berger (1968;1978a;1978b), Barthes, and Sontag (1990). Finally, Twitter is conceptualised as a vehicle for disinformation. The architecture, communication structure, and the ways users can present themselves contributed to the wide and fast promulgation of the Westminster Bridge photograph as disinformation. Therefore, it is necessary to understand how Twitter's architecture facilitated this disingenuous spread of the photograph.

## METHODS

Methodologically, the overarching aim of the thesis is to document the journey and evolution of the Westminster Bridge photograph. This aim is addressed through the development of a case study approach that emphasises depth and nuance. The journey of the Westminster Bridge photograph functioned as the central case to be examined, and mixed methods were utilised to gain knowledge and insight about this case. Three primary data sources were used: Twitter, online news, and focus groups. The Twitter and online news data involved collecting data from a variety of sources related to the SouthLoneStar account's use of the photograph and the journey of the photograph across social and mainstream media. The SouthLoneStar account was deleted by Twitter in May 2017, so its content can no longer be accessed. Therefore a range of related sources was identified to construct the photograph's journey and mitigate this data gap as much as possible (e.g., other users who shared the photograph on Twitter during this time and users who replied to SouthLoneStar's original tweet). Three types of analysis were performed on this data: content, thematic, and semiotic. The focus groups (conducted online due to the COVID-19 pandemic and its subsequent restrictions) involved speaking with British Muslim women about their response to and understanding of SouthLoneStar's use of the photograph as Islamophobic disinformation. Disinformation research rarely involves speaking to affected parties and communities as media consumers. This thesis, therefore, additionally aimed to highlight how speaking to those potentially affected by disinformation can work to strengthen and nuance the analysis of social media and other online data. Thematic analysis was also performed on the focus group data and compared with the thematic analysis of the Twitter and online news data. The comparison between all three datasets

allowed for an understanding of how primary and secondary data collection methods can be used together to produce deep insights about disinformation, each strengthening and enhancing the other.

The thesis gained ethical approval from the ethics board at Manchester Metropolitan University before data collection began. Regarding the Twitter data, while publicly available social media data is open for collection and analysis, it is important to respect users' expectations, privacy, and confidentiality. Users agree that third parties can access their publicly available data when they sign up to a social media site; however, this does not equate to informed consent. Therefore, any social media data collected needs to be carefully managed in a way that protects users. In light of this, data was only collected from users whose data was intentionally and explicitly made public. Anonymity was paramount throughout the project, and identifiable information is not included in the thesis. This includes altering quotes so they cannot be traced back to a single user.

All focus group participants were provided with an information sheet and a signed consent form, consenting to their participation and the use of their data. All data was appropriately stored in password-protected locations. Positionality was also a crucial matter to consider. I was approaching a piece of Islamophobic disinformation as a white woman, so there were potential issues related to cultural differences and problematics of white researchers representing minority communities. Therefore, Harding's (1992;1995) paradigm of strong objectivity, Parson's (2019) consideration of positionality, and Chadwick's (2021a;2021b) encouragement to embrace discomfort were incorporated throughout the construction, recruiting, conducting, and analysis of the focus groups. While the researcher/participant power imbalance can never be fully rectified, it was essential to integrate these steps of reflexivity to alleviate these issues where possible.

## KEY FINDINGS

Following the analysis of data from the three main sources, nine key findings were identified concerning the journey of the Westminster Bridge photograph:

1. Based on the semiotic analysis, the signs within the photograph work to separate the Muslim woman, isolating her and making her behaviour seem unusual, which is then used and mobilised by SouthLoneStar to frame the image in a particular way.
2. A range of responses was identified on Twitter in the aftermath of the attack, including expressions of solidarity and mourning, information seeking and sharing, and Islamophobia.
3. Twitter users who shared the Westminster Bridge photograph as disinformation generally manipulated the photograph's context, not its content.
4. The Twitter replies to SouthLoneStar's tweet were intense and negative.
5. The UK mainstream news media significantly covered SouthLoneStar's tweet, and the majority of article commenters accepted the news media's narrative.
6. In November, when the true identity behind the account was revealed, UK news reportage was less compared to March in the immediate aftermath of the attack, and many commenters appeared to reject the corrective information regarding SouthLoneStar's origin.
7. Two major themes were identified in the analysis of the Twitter data: **Othering** and **Photographic veracity**.
8. Three major themes were identified in the analysis of the online news data: **Othering**, **Photographic veracity**, and **Cynicism about the media**.
9. Four major themes were identified in the focus group data: **Othering**, **Photographic veracity**, **Cynicism about the media**, and **Lived experience**.

## LIMITATIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

Regarding limitations, it is acknowledged that this approach to visual disinformation is particularly onerous and time-consuming for one researcher. The COVID-19 pandemic and the deletion of the SouthLoneStar Twitter account also produced further limitations. Finally, although steps were taken to mitigate issues related to my own cultural experiences



and biases where possible, my identity as a white woman investigating Islamophobic disinformation likely caused further limitations. In response to these limitations, it is recommended that further research should examine examples of visual disinformation using methods similar to those used in the thesis to build on the knowledge produced, as well as produce new knowledge. The methodology's labour-intensive nature also questions whether such an approach to visual disinformation is more suited to a research team of experts across different disciplines.

## THESIS OUTLINE

This thesis is divided into ten chapters:

- **Chapter 1** is introductory, providing information regarding the topic of investigation, the rationale for the research, key definitions, aims and objectives, and contextual information about the case under investigation.
- **Chapter 2** is the literature review chapter, used to situate the research within (1) a broader multi-disciplinary context, (2) mis-/disinformation research and the field's key knowledge gaps, and (3) the literature related to the specific case under study.
- **Chapter 3** is the conceptual framework chapter. This is used to establish the concepts utilised by the thesis, which include disinformation, photographic objectivity, and Twitter as a vehicle for disinformation.
- **Chapter 4** is the methodology chapter. This details the methodological approach and justification for the thesis, along with information about data collection, sampling, analysis, and ethical considerations.
- **Chapter 5** details the semiotic analysis performed on the Westminster Bridge photograph, both in and out of context.
- **Chapter 6** breaks down the descriptive statistics and content analysis findings from data collected from Twitter and online UK news articles.
- **Chapter 7** explores the thematic findings from the analysis of the Twitter and online news data.

- **Chapter 8** describes the themes identified in the analysis of the focus group data.
- **Chapter 9** is the discussion chapter. Here, all findings are brought together to establish the overall key findings for the thesis, which are then interpreted.
- **Chapter 10** is the concluding chapter. This summarises the research and explores how research aims and questions were answered. The chapter also reflects on the thesis' knowledge contributions, provides recommendations for future research, and acknowledges research limitations.
- References are included in the final bibliographic chapter. This is followed by the appendices, which fully detail, for example, ethical information, findings, and code frames.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

### INTRODUCTION

The literature review chapter works to identify the disciplines the thesis is located, situate the thesis within the research field of mis- and disinformation research, and explore further relevant areas of literature specific to the case study. While the thesis sits within the field of mis-/disinformation research (with an emphasis on the visual), this is an emerging, dynamic, and highly interdisciplinary field. Therefore, it is first important to establish how this thesis operationalises different disciplines to position the research. This thesis draws upon three core disciplines: Journalism Studies, Social Media Studies, and Visual Studies<sup>3</sup>. While the former two disciplines are regularly mobilised in mis-/disinformation research, Visual Studies are rarely incorporated. The intersection of these three disciplines is where this thesis sits, and the utilisation of Visual Studies (in examining the role of images in mis-/disinformation) is the thesis' key contribution to knowledge, with the case study constituting the application of this knowledge.

The second section of this chapter looks at how the thesis is situated explicitly within the existing mis-/disinformation research literature. Here, the overarching topics of investigation, methodologies, and findings are identified to highlight the knowledge gaps within the literature this thesis aims to address. The most significant knowledge gap highlighted is the lack of attention given to images, despite images playing an intrinsic role in social media communication. Moreover, studies also approach the topic from a top level, using primarily quantitative methods to analyse text-based datasets. To date, most research in this field has also focussed on mis-/disinformation in an American context, specifically concerning the 2016 US Presidential election. Considering these limitations of current disinformation research, the thesis makes a strong contribution to knowledge by focusing on the role of images through the deep examination of a piece of visual disinformation, both outside of an American context and through the incorporation of qualitative research methods.

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<sup>3</sup> A number of other disciplines are also utilised in specific ways; however, it is these that represent the core disciplines used by this thesis.

The third and final section contextualises the case study, providing the knowledge needed for the later thesis analysis. This section draws on existing research relating to five different areas:

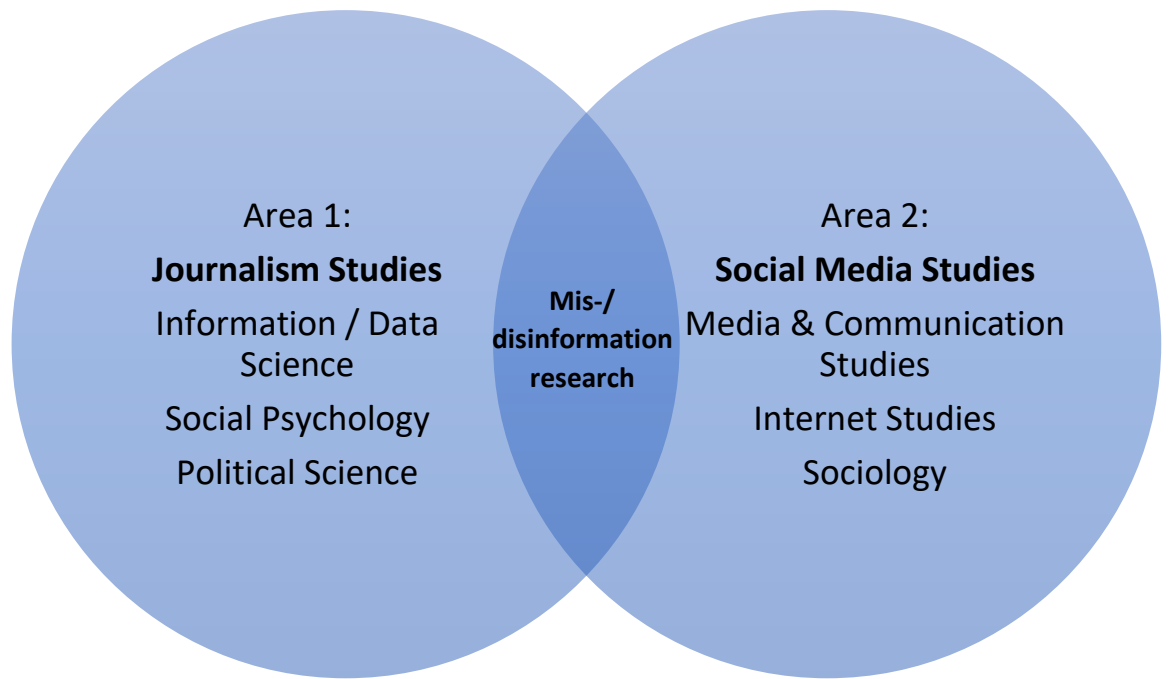
1. Online responses to disaster events (drawing on the disciplines of Social Psychology and Social Media Studies);
2. Russia's Internet Research Agency (IRA) (drawing on the disciplines of Political Science and Information/Data Science);
3. the alt-right and right-wing populism (drawing on the disciplines of Political Science and Sociology);
4. media representations of Muslim women (drawing on the disciplines of Media & Communication and Sociology);
5. media amplification. and the news media's role in online disinformation (drawing on the disciplines of Journalism Studies and Social Media Studies).

#### SITUATING THE THESIS WITHIN DISCIPLINES

Overall, this thesis sits within the field of study of mis- and disinformation research, with an emphasis on the visual. However, mis-/disinformation research is a developing and dynamic field and is consequently highly interdisciplinary (Sample et al., 2020). Generally, mis-/disinformation research sits within two main areas of study: Journalism Studies and Social Media Studies. This is highlighted in the following Venn diagram in Figure 4<sup>4</sup>:

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<sup>4</sup> This Venn diagram is not an exhaustive analysis of the field of mis/disinformation research. Indeed, there are other disciplines not covered by the Venn diagram that also explore and examine the concept of mis/disinformation. Instead, the Venn diagram is used to highlight the broad disciplinary areas that fall into mis-/disinformation research.



**FIGURE 4: VENN DIAGRAM OF THE CORE DISCIPLINES OPERATIONALISED BY MIS-/DISINFORMATION RESEARCH<sup>5</sup>**

Journalism is one overarching field of research in which mis-/disinformation is a core concern. There is a growing collective effort amongst both journalists and academics in this field to understand the issue and provide solutions (Waldrop, 2017; Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). Existing research has established the causes of this concern. Many users use social media to access news, and social media sites are increasingly recognised as news sources (Newman et al., 2018; Ross & Rivers, 2018). Consequently, many legacy news organisations have transitioned to social media to access their audience and distribute news (Ahmad, 2017). Moreover, there is an increasing presence of digital-born news organisations that distribute news on social media (Canter, 2018). As many researchers have highlighted, however, this trend is problematic. Unlike legacy news media, social media platforms are not regulated and do not adhere to the same strict regulations (DCMS Committee, 2018). Furthermore, social media platforms are generally inclined to take a neutral and hands-off approach to the information shared on their sites (Daniels, 2018). This presents a fertile opportunity for actors driven by certain political interests to spread disinformation disguised as news on social media, which is often met without challenge and left to spread

<sup>5</sup> This Venn diagram was constructed by reviewing the bibliography of this thesis and identifying broadly the areas the different research was situated. It was also influenced by the work of Sample et al. (2020).

(Bakir & McStay, 2018; Dawson & Innes, 2019). Examples of mis-/disinformation on social media are also increasingly reported on by legacy news media, so there is a growing connection between the two mediascapes. The above outlines why Journalism Studies is often mobilised by those investigating mis-/disinformation and is similarly mobilised by this thesis.

Several disciplines sit under the core discipline of Journalism Studies, namely Information/Data Science, Social Psychology, and Political Science. When examining mis-/disinformation from a journalistic perspective, Information/Data Science elements are also frequently included because mis-/disinformation spreads online, an environment where the data is noisy and unstructured. Such data needs to be collected and organised to examine it. Therefore, Information/Data Science methodological elements are often mobilised in mis-/disinformation research and are likewise utilised in this thesis. Concepts and findings from Social Psychology are also frequently drawn on by mis-/disinformation research to understand, for example, how people respond to mis-/disinformation, why they might be susceptible to it, and why certain people spread it. The thesis consequently draws on findings from social psychology studies that offer explanations for user behaviour in particular contexts, specifically during disaster events. Finally, disinformation tends to have a political purpose or motivation, including the piece of disinformation at the centre of the case study. Thus, the frameworks and findings offered by Political Science provides insight into how the examined piece of disinformation became so prominent.

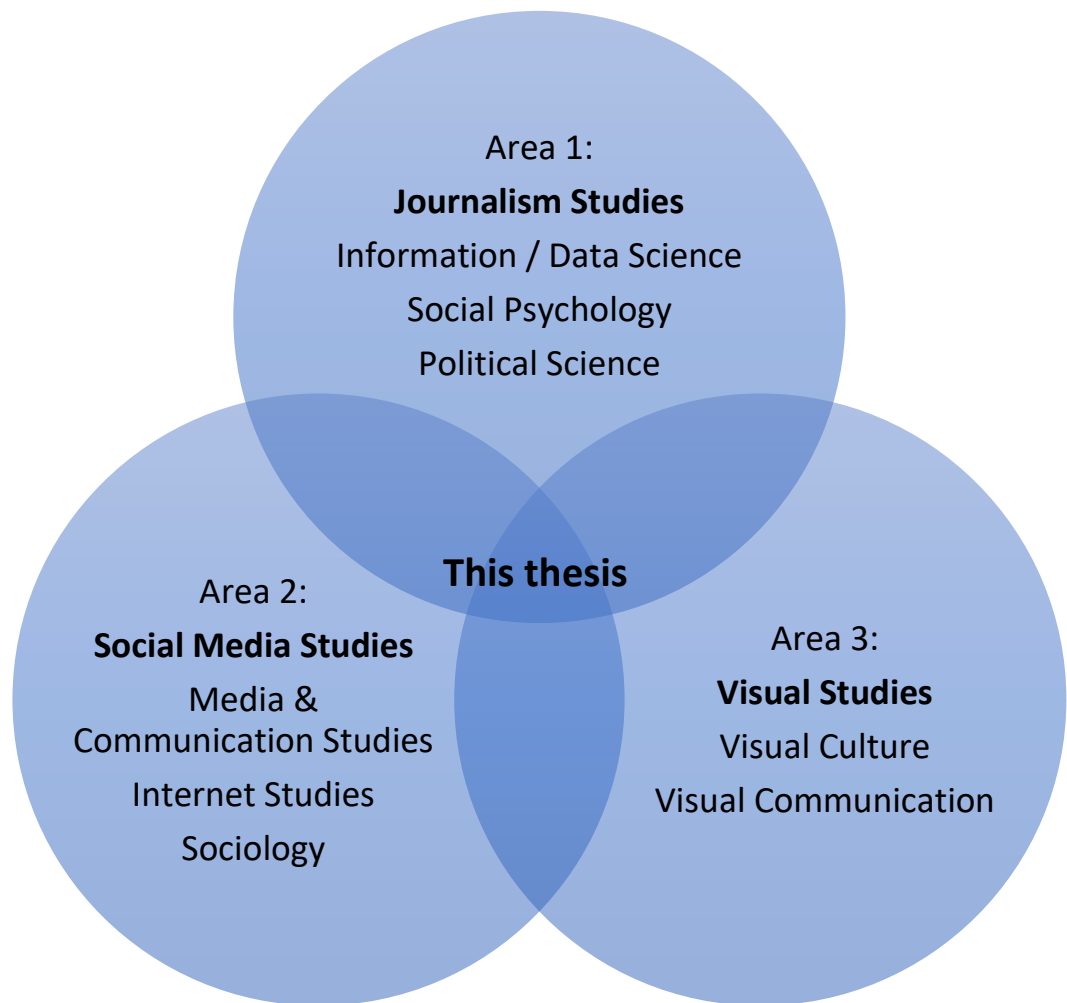
The second core discipline is Social Media Studies. Mis-/disinformation almost exclusively circulates on social media, so it is a uniquely online phenomenon<sup>6</sup>. Therefore, Social Media Studies is almost always a discipline that needs to be mobilised when examining the phenomenon. Social Media Studies is also a rapidly changing field of study; social media is

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<sup>6</sup> Although it is again acknowledged that social and legacy media are becoming increasingly interconnected, often referred to as the hybrid media system (Waldherr, 2018). There are many examples of legacy media picking up and reporting on online mis-/disinformation (including the case study of this thesis) and circulating it within a wider media audience. However, this is often in response to a piece of mis-/disinformation that has reached a level of online virality and is not its point of origin or initial place of circulation. Therefore, in this sense mis-/disinformation is an online phenomenon with which legacy media subsequently responds to.

ubiquitous in everyday life, allowing for complex communication systems and, thus, various activities to take place within online social spaces. Social Media Studies, therefore, touch on various disciplines, some of which are listed within area 2. Media and Communication Studies examine human relationships and how people interact with each other in the context of mass media. As social media hinges upon communication between users, it is essential to mobilise broader theories on how communication functions in online contexts to examine its role in mis-/disinformation. Similarly, Internet Studies take into consideration digital culture in an online context. The operationalisation of this discipline allows for insight into the function of such cultures concerning mis-/disinformation. Sociology also examines social life, culture, and communication, albeit on a broader scale. The thesis aims to understand the potential effects of disinformation on media consumers, and so sociological theories related to concepts such as the societal 'other' and stereotyping are utilised to provide the knowledge needed to approach the analysis of this data appropriately.

This thesis differs from most other mis-/disinformation research as it mobilises a third core discipline, Visual Studies. The thesis centres on the role of images as a unique contribution to knowledge by conducting a case study that examines a piece of visual disinformation. As with areas 1 and 2, related disciplines such as Visual Culture and Visual Communication are part of Visual Studies, highlighted below in Figure 5:



**FIGURE 5: COMPLETE VENN DIAGRAM OF DISCIPLINES THAT ARE OPERATIONALISED BY THIS THESIS**

Communication on social media is primarily image-based (Gibbs et al., 2015; Highfield & Leaver, 2016), with Aiello & Parry (2020) noting the “proliferation and pervasiveness” of images and urging for the recognition of “the centrality of images in meaning-making processes” (20). Yet, images are often overlooked, which is an overarching issue with most research examining social media content (Thelwall et al., 2015; Faulkner et al., 2018). Researchers often instead lean towards “the [written] text-only aspects of online communication”, in part because images are considered more complicated to understand and analyse (Highfield & Leaver, 2016:48).



The underappreciation of images in broader social media research is equally, if not more so, applicable to mis-/disinformation research, in part because it is a much younger field than social media research and is still emerging. This thesis thus aims to develop the field and address this significant knowledge gap. Visual Culture and Visual Communication fall under research area 3, Visual Studies. The former examines explicitly how images are used in cultural expression and the latter how visuals are used to communicate information, ideas, and meaning to others. Visual Culture and Visual Communication, therefore, guide how the thesis conceptualises the role of photographs in disinformation.

To conclude, the thesis is situated within the amorphous field of mis-/disinformation research. This young and evolving discipline can be approached from various disciplines as mis-/disinformation becomes an increasingly pervasive issue. The core disciplines this specific thesis mobilises are Journalism Studies, Social Media Studies, and Visual Studies. The former two are typical of most mis-/disinformation research; the concept is a significant journalistic concern and almost exclusively exists on social media. Mis-/disinformation research, therefore, largely constitutes an overlap between these two disciplines. The explicit inclusion of Visual Studies makes this thesis' approach to mis-/disinformation research distinctive. Research examining social media content rarely considers images, and this trend is echoed in mis-/disinformation research. The thesis aims to address this central knowledge gap and applies knowledge about the role of images in mis-/disinformation to the case study of the Westminster Bridge photograph.

## SITUATING THE THESIS WITHIN THE FIELD OF MIS-/DISINFORMATION RESEARCH

The next step of the literature review is to establish where the thesis sits within the field of mis-/disinformation research. The most significant knowledge gap identified is the omission of the examination of images, this omission being the defining context for this project's key contribution to knowledge. However, several other gaps are also identified. Methodologically, research primarily provides a macro view of disinformation, with an emphasis on quick, quantitative methods. While such research has provided vital insight, it

arguably provides a narrow, limited means of examining the phenomenon. Moreover, there is a tendency to examine disinformation through a true/false binary, which does not encapsulate its full complexity. This is particularly true when examining disinformation with a visual component as the truth claim of the disinformation relies on the visual as supporting evidence.

An overview of existing mis-/disinformation research literature provides insight into current methods of understanding the phenomenon. Many studies approach disinformation by examining large, text-based datasets mainly using quantitative methods and often through the lens of the 2016 US Presidential election (for example, Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Lazer et al., 2018; Vosoughi et al., 2018; Nelson & Taneja, 2018; Vargo et al., 2018; Grinberg et al., 2019; Guo & Vargo, 2020). The results of these studies provide several key findings concerning this period:

- Leading up to 2016, ‘fake news’ content was on the rise;
- Disinformation shared was generally right-wing and pro-Trump;
- A significant portion of Americans was exposed to disinformation;
- Disinformation spreads farther, faster, deeper, and more broadly than truthful news;
- Disinformation often evoked fear, disgust, and surprise;
- Humans were more likely to spread disinformation than automated accounts;
- Disinformation sharing consisted of small groups of heavy Internet users;
- Those most likely to engage with ‘fake news’ were older, conservative-leaning, and deeply engaged with political news.

While studies like these give vital insights into disinformation, they provide a macro view of the phenomenon and tend to focus on verifying wholly falsified or fabricated content. This can create “a true/false dichotomy” which “is useful for dividing data cleanly” but arguably is not wholly reflective of disinformation and negates more nuanced types of disinformation which involve a combination of facts and fiction (Colley et al., 2020:103).

Moreover, Chouliaraki & Al-Ghazzi (2022) highlight the issue of journalists often concentrating solely on verification when reporting news and suggest also incorporating and acknowledging the voices and testimonies of affected parties. This concentration on true, false, and verification is reflective of earlier and some contemporary visual disinformation research, which often centres on falsified or edited photographs (for example., Gupta et al., 2013; Zubiaga & Ji, 2013; Phillips, 2014; Shen et al., 2021). Therefore, while researchers are working hard towards understanding social media-based disinformation, a complete understanding is overlooked if the role of images is not fully considered.

Researchers have emphasised this lack of attention to images in mis-/disinformation research, but there is a lack of response. For example, in a review of research on mis-/disinformation, Tucker et al. (2018) identify “disinformation spread through images and video” (7) to be a fundamental research gap where understanding is “urgently needed” (61). They go on to note that most disinformation research “focuses on the *textual* rather than the *visual* and *audiovisual* component of these messages. Yet substantial amounts of social media content nowadays are visual and audiovisual, and visual content is more likely to be shared” (47). Specifically, their review highlights images “taken out of context” are a common type of image-based disinformation that “we know very little about” (48). From this perspective, Tucker et al. present image-based disinformation, specifically recontextualised images, as more harmful than text-based disinformation because images are more likely to spread online than text. Colley et al. (2020) echo this concern in their observation that researchers often overlook more subtle kinds of disinformation.

Other scholars recognise that image-based disinformation may be particularly harmful. Fallis (2015) argues that misleading images “might easily be more epistemically dangerous than misleading words” because images have greater evidentiary value (417). Hameleers (2020b) recognises that visual disinformation “may be highly persuasive as audiovisual content is typically perceived as credible and authentic” (109), with further research finding that multimodal disinformation (text-plus-visual), regardless of where it comes from, to be

considered more credibly than text-only disinformation (Hameleers et al., 2020). Dan et al. (2021) emphasise the power of what they refer to as “multimodal disinformation”, similarly noting that this is often more credible and “can help to realistically embed false storylines in digital media ecologies” (651). Echoing this, Innes (2020) contends that images are used “to try and persuade their audiences about the ultimate “truth” of their knowledge claims. Photographs and videos possess an almost inherent persuasive potency” (296)<sup>7</sup>.

Several scholars specifically voice concern towards recontextualised images. Tandoc et al. (2018) note that “misappropriated” images are “an increasingly widespread practice” of spreading disinformation (145), and Paris & Donovan (2019) acknowledge that “the most accessible forms of AV [audio-visual] manipulation are not technical but contextual” (16). Fazio (2020) also discusses the accessibility of recontextualised images, noting that “out-of-context photos are a very common source of misinformation” (Online). Several recent studies support these claims. Garimella & Eckles (2020) examined misinformation in Indian political WhatsApp groups, finding that images taken out of context were the most common type of image-based misinformation, with doctored images constituting only a small sample of the dataset. A further study of Covid-19 visual misinformation found that most examples consisted of mislabelled, unaltered images accompanied by a false claim (Brennen et al., 2020). Thus, the images in isolation were genuine and not fabricated or altered; instead “used as false evidence for claims” (18). Taken together, the above suggests that image-based disinformation is potentially more harmful than text-based disinformation, particularly involving images taken out of their original context and placed in a false context “to support a concocted narrative” (Tandoc et al., 2018:145). This is a non-technical and highly accessible means of creating disinformation that most people are capable of producing (Paris & Donovan, 2019) and is an increasingly common means of spreading visual disinformation. Yet, this type of disinformation is largely missing from mis-/disinformation research.

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<sup>7</sup> The evidentiary nature of images is discussed in more detail in the section of the Conceptual Framework chapter: “Contextualising (photo)journalism”

Deepfakes are of growing academic interest (Chesney & Citron, 2018; Chesney & Citron, 2019; Maras & Alexandrou, 2019; Paris & Donovan, 2019). Defined as “the product of artificial intelligence or machine-learning applications that merge, combine, replace and superimpose images and video clips onto a video, creating a fake video that appears authentic” (Maras & Alexandrou, 2019:255), this technology allows the manipulation of videos to make someone look like they did or said something they did not. A famous example is former US President Barack Obama superimposed onto actor/director Jordan Peele in a video discussing the potential dangers of deepfakes (BuzzFeed Video, 2018). Some researchers warn that deepfakes are exceptionally harmful, arguing that their use can facilitate identity theft, exploitation, distortion of democratic discourse, manipulation of elections, and undermining diplomacy, journalism, and public safety (Chesney & Citron, 2018). However, beyond videos that bring awareness to the technological capabilities of deepfakes or use deepfakes for comedic effect (for example, birbfakes, 2019), there are no current examples of deepfakes being used in these ways. Brennen et al. (2020) observed no deepfakes or AI-based manipulation in their dataset of Covid-19 visual disinformation, concluding that “while deepfakes may become more common over time... at least for now, misinformation producers are employing simpler means of producing false or misleading content” (18). Moreover, deepfake technology “is both computationally reliant and also the least publicly accessible means of manipulating media” (Paris & Donovan, 2019:11). While such technology may be used to spread disinformation in the future, it appears that currently, much more accessible forms of visual manipulation are being used.

There are a small number of studies that specifically examine image-based disinformation. Bakir & McStay (2018) analysed 75 images shared by *Breitbart* (a “far-right American news, opinion and commentary website”) on Facebook during the 2016 US election (156). They conducted a thematic analysis to identify how *Breitbart* used a combination of text and images to push pro-Trump disinformation. They note that most images were emotionalised and targeted the candidates’ personalities, the news media, voters, and policy issues. Howard et al. (2018a; 2018b) briefly examined the most shared images from Russia’s Internet Research Agency (IRA) on Facebook and Instagram, suggesting that images centred on race, patriotism, and immigration received the most engagement. Zannettou et

al. (2019) also explicitly examined IRA images, analysing 1.8 million images for IRA Twitter accounts released by Twitter in October 2018. This big-data quantitative study identified the main focuses of these images, which included Russia, Donald Trump, and Hilary Clinton, as well as the image types, which included screenshots, comics, and memes. Although this paper exclusively studied images, the extensive dataset means the individual images were not deeply examined, meaning insights were limited. Brennen et al. (2020) specifically examined visual misinformation concerning Covid-19 on a global scale, finding that most images were unaltered and mislabelled instead of altered or fabricated. Finally, Dan et al. (2021) looked at several examples of visual disinformation involving recontextualization, describing this method as “visually powerful” because the images themselves were not false (652). While these studies show some research interest in examining visual components of disinformation, many do not address the core issue, this being recontextualised photographs used as evidence to support fabricated narratives (Fallis, 2015; Tucker et al., 2018; Tandoc et al., 2018). However, it is important to acknowledge that recent studies and writings such as Brennen et al. (2020), Garimella & Eckles (2020), and Dan et al. (2021) indicate that recontextualised images are beginning to emerge as areas of research interest.

Images are not only omitted from academic research, but governmental reports investigating mis-/disinformation tend not to pay attention to images. Both the UK parliament and European Commission have launched inquiries into disinformation. While these have produced valuable findings and recommendations, images are only discussed vaguely, if at all. The following highlights the key components of each and examines how images are discussed. This further emphasises the omittance of images, not only from mis-/disinformation research but in broader investigations looking to tackle the issue.

The UK parliament’s Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee (DCMS) launched an enquiry into ‘fake news’ in 2017 (Digital, Culture, Media and Sports Committee, 2017a) and subsequently published two reports (Digital, Culture, Media and Sports Committee, 2018; Digital, Culture, Media and Sports Committee, 2019). Both reports dedicate little attention

to images. When discussing definitions of ‘fake news’, the first report states that “the distortion of images is a related problem” (Digital, Culture, Media and Sports Committee, 2018:7). Deepfakes are also mentioned, defined as “audio and videos that look and sound like a real person, saying something that person has never said” (7). It is observed that “these examples will only become more complex and harder to spot, the more sophisticated the software becomes” (7). This paragraph is the only part of this report that discusses visual disinformation of any nature, and there are no conclusions or recommendations concerning them. In the second report, images are also scarcely considered. Deepfakes are discussed in the context of “micro-targeted messaging”; “distortion is made even more extreme using ‘deepfakes’” (Digital, Culture, Media and Sports Committee, 2019:11).

Instead, the reports concentrate on other areas. The first report discusses the definition of ‘fake news’ and the need for government to work with fact-checkers and the Electoral Commission. The report also highlights the responsibilities of tech companies as the proclaimed neutrality of social media platforms is criticised. Recent events surrounding Cambridge Analytica and Russian influence are likewise examined thoroughly, particularly in the context of the 2016 US Presidential election and the 2016 Brexit referendum. This report concludes by emphasising the need for digital literacy, particularly that these skills need to be taught in schools. The second report specifically targets Facebook, noting that the site is “unwilling to be properly scrutinised” (13). The unethical management of user data that facilitated the Cambridge Analytica scandal is also discussed<sup>8</sup>. Potential Russian interference in UK elections is also examined, with evidence suggesting that the “UK is clearly vulnerable to covert digital influence campaigns” (71). It ends by considering digital literacy and provides further recommendations, including a code of ethics for tech companies, regulators having the power to launch legal action against social media sites that breach these ethics, and a reformation of the electoral communication laws.

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<sup>8</sup> Cambridge Analytica also used micro-targeting on social media to support Leave.EU in the Brexit referendum. The firm harvested personal data from social media users to target pro-Brexit advertisements at specific demographics deemed susceptible to such messages.

Further, related reports have also been released. The House of Lords Select Committee report on Democracy and Digital Technologies (2020) centres on three key areas: empowering citizens by ensuring they are informed, the role of platforms, and ensuring elections are free and fair by regulating digital campaigning. While these are important topics that need addressing to tackle mis-/disinformation, again, the role of images is not addressed. The Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee's (2020b) report on online misinformation in the context of COVID-19 does discuss images in a small way. It states that AI moderation is limited, particularly regarding images and videos, noting that Google is starting to "add warning labels to edited or decontextualised images" (Online). While these considerations of the role of images in Covid-19 disinformation are limited, the committee's report reinforces the importance and complexity of visual disinformation. It suggests the need for more intelligent moderation than AI. Moreover, the report acknowledges that visual disinformation varies in form, specifically naming decontextualized images as a type of visual disinformation. While it is not the main topic of the report, the attention visuals are given suggests a need to consider the role of visual mis-/disinformation in research on COVID-19 disinformation more substantively.

The European Commission published two reports on disinformation in 2018 (European Commission, 2018a; European Commission, 2018b). These were followed by an action plan with specific targets for tackling disinformation (European Commission, 2018c). Similar to the UK reports, little attention is paid to the role of images. In the first report, visuals are mentioned in the recommendations; journalists should be empowered by mastering "technologies that help in discovering breaking news and verifying the veracity of online audiovisual and text material" (28). The report also recommends that newsrooms be equipped with "professional automatic content verification tools for audiovisual and text-based reports spread online" (28). Thus, images are not considered a specific problem. The later report similarly pays little attention to images, with one paragraph considering their role: "Most cases have involved written articles, sometimes complemented by authentic pictures or audio-visual content taken out of context. But new, affordable, and easy-to-use technology is now available to create false pictures and audio-visual content (so called "deep fakes"), offering more potent means for manipulating public opinion" (European



Commission, 2018b:5). Here it is acknowledged that images are used to bolster textual disinformation, and that visual disinformation can range from low-tech recontextualised images to the high-tech deepfakes.

There is also a lack of attention towards images in the subsequent action plan. It reiterates the key findings of the previous reports and presents four pillars of action: (1) Improving the capability of Union institutions to detect, analyse and expose disinformation (2) Strengthening coordinated and joint responses to disinformation (3) Mobilising private sector to tackle disinformation (4) Raising awareness and improving societal resilience. In all, images are scarcely mentioned. It is reiterated that techniques of spreading disinformation “include video manipulation (deep-fakes)” (European Commission, 2018c:4)<sup>9</sup>. The report notes that the Commission will work in collaboration with the European Regulators Group for Audio-visual Media Services, asserting that “online platforms should also cooperate with the national audio-visual regulators” (9). These are the only instances in the action plan related to images. While this action plan shows that the EU is working towards tangible and monitorable aims for combatting disinformation, there is again a gap regarding the specific role images play in spreading mis-/disinformation.

To conclude, limited academic studies examining mis-/disinformation consider the role of images. Similarly, UK and EU reports take little consideration regarding the role of images. Thus, there is currently a significant knowledge gap. With visual communication being such an important component of social media use, addressing this knowledge gap is of pressing importance if disinformation is to be better understood. Moreover, many studies follow a similar methodological approach in which large datasets are analysed quantitatively to

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<sup>9</sup> Deepfakes are similarly highlighted in a report from the European Parliament (2018) aimed at addressing ‘fake news’ at an EU level. Marking them as a “longer term issue”, the report argues that “Deep fakes will become increasingly a problem. Political speech and even imagery can easily be manipulated at low cost and with professional quality: this, in turn, makes the transparency of the origin and circulation of content way more important as an element of fact checking” (29). However, like previous reports, other types of visual manipulation like images with fabricated contexts are not discussed, despite these currently being much more common on social media than deep fakes.

provide a macro-overview of the phenomenon. This limited the ability to consider the consequences of disinformation and the spread of potentially harmful narratives. While this research has provided crucial insight into disinformation, particularly in terms of how disinformation spreads, the content of disinformation, and who is exposed to and shares it (mainly in the context of the 2016 US election), it arguably does not fully encapsulate the complexity of the phenomenon, particularly concerning the role of the visual. Consequently, a comprehensive understanding of disinformation is arguably unachievable until images are taken into greater consideration. This thesis aims to achieve this via the mobilisation of Visual Studies in conjunction with Journalism Studies and Social Media Studies.

#### SITUATING THE THESIS WITHIN WIDER RESEARCH AREAS

There are further areas of study explicitly related to the case study of the thesis. It would be neglectful to examine and analyse the case study through a contextless lens when broader societal, political, and media influences played a key role in shaping the narrative and journey of the Westminster Bridge photograph. Moreover, there are several knowledge gaps across these areas of study that the thesis also works to address. As a reminder, the areas of study were identified as follows:

- Online responses to disaster events;
- Russia's Internet Research Agency (IRA);
- The alt-right and right-wing populism;
- Media representations of Muslim women;
- Media amplification, and the news media's role in online disinformation.

Across the first three areas, the role of images continues to be a knowledge gap. In addition, research examining the IRA tends to take place in an American context, so examining the organisation's activities in other countries is a further knowledge gap. Media representations of Muslim women are a well-researched area; however, a limited number of studies take into consideration the potential consequences of such representations on Muslim women, particularly in a UK context. Finally, news media amplification of content is a similarly well-researched field, yet there is little research examining the amplification

of online content and the potential consequences. These are the knowledge gaps related explicitly to the case study that the thesis aims to address.

#### ONLINE RESPONSES TO TERRORIST ATTACKS

Communication and interaction with others are common means of coping with and making sense of disaster events like terrorist attacks. Social media, therefore, provides the ideal platform to facilitate this behaviour as it “can be utilised almost from everywhere at any time” and allows “everybody to spread information without verification” (Bunker et al., 2017:3). Response to disaster events has primarily been examined from the field of Social Psychology, and two overarching theories have emerged: Terror Management Theory (TMT) (Greenberg et al., 1997; Pyszczynski et al., 1999; Yum & Schenck-Hamlin, 2005) and Crisis Convergence Behaviour (Fritz and Matthewson, 1957; Kendra & Wachtendorf, 2003; Subba & Bui, 2010; Bunker & Sleight, 2016). Both present typologies of the different ways people typically respond to disaster events. For example, under TMT, typical responses range from prosocial behaviour, information seeking and sharing, counter-bigotry advocacy, and increased nationalism, patriotism, and intolerance. Behavioural archetypes identified by Crisis Convergence Behaviour theory include: ‘the returnees’, ‘the anxious’, ‘the helpers’, ‘the curious’, and ‘the exploiters’. Therefore, while both are distinct theories, they approach and understand the topic similarly.

These behaviours can easily be enacted on social media in an environment where people no longer need to congregate physically at a disaster site and instead can do so virtually. Online reactions to disaster events can also reach a much wider audience, particularly through the use of hashtags<sup>10</sup>. There is ample evidence to support this, showing that Twitter activity spikes significantly in the wake of terrorist attacks. For example, the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing, the 2014 Sydney Hostage crisis, the 2015 Charlie Hebdo

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<sup>10</sup> Co-occurrence hashtags (hashtags that re-emerged during different events across time) are commonly operationalised by users following terrorist attacks and create a “discursive and collaborative process of meaning making” (Kruatrök & Lindgren, 2018:10) and serve as a “communal coping strategy, or an expression of social support and solidarity” (Buntain & Lim, 2018:12). This allows for people to be part of the discourse without the restriction of geographical distance (Buntain & Lim, 2018).

shooting (Buntain et al., 2016), the 2015 Paris terrorist attacks (Magby et al., 2015), the 2016 Munich shooting (Bunker et al., 2017), the 2016 Berlin Christmas market terrorist attack (Fischer-Preßler et al., 2019), and the 2017 Manchester Arena bombing (Mirbabaie & Marx, 2019). This suggests that, for many, Twitter has become the communication tool of choice when reacting to disaster events like terrorist attacks. Researchers have also found that existing approaches to understanding disaster response (TMT and Crisis Convergence Behaviour) neatly fit into examinations of online responses to such events. However, most research of this nature overlooks the role and function of images.

Fischer-Preßler et al. (2019) used a TMT approach to understand online responses to the 2016 Berlin Christmas market attack, identifying positive occurrences of "sense-making and search for meaning and value", "counter-bigotry activism", "altruistic and pro-social behaviors" and "information seeking and sharing" (143-144). They also identified negative responses, specifically "nationalistic sentiment, less tolerance, and hostility toward different values and views" (143). Magby et al. (2015) observed similar intolerance online following the 2015 Paris attacks, the perpetrators being Islamic militants. While positive hashtags related to Islam were prominent (for example, #MuslimsAreNotTerrorists), there was also a considerable number of negative hashtags circulating on Twitter (for example, #IslamIsTheProblem). In terms of Crisis Convergence Behaviour, 'the exploiters' in particular have been identified across research examining online response to terrorism (Bunker et al., 2017; Mirbabaie & Marx, 2019). This often involves "scamming or spreading of false information" (Mirbabaie et al., 2018:5), which works to interrupt sense-making processes.

Most relevant to the case study, Innes et al. (2019) and Innes (2020) examined similar behaviour following four terrorist attacks in the UK in 2017, including the Westminster Bridge attack. The spread of false information was identified, as well as "spoofed (fake) accounts deliberately spreading soft facts" (Innes et al., 2019:6). In both studies, SouthLoneStar is specifically named, and Innes (2020) describes the account's activity of "truthing": the use of "images to try and persuade their audiences about the ultimate

“truth” of their knowledge claims” (296). This research suggests that images are beginning to be taken into consideration concerning how social media users use visuals to communicate their responses to terrorist attacks. The case study aims to contribute to this emerging area of research.

Social media’s use in responding to terrorist attacks is a significantly researched topic, incorporating existing social psychology theories to understand how social media users react and respond to such events. However, while visuals are a key component of social media communication, there are seemingly overlooked by most research in this area. As noted previously, this is a common trend in social media research in general and extends to this topic of investigation. While the core purpose of the thesis is to examine the role of images in the spread of mis-/disinformation, examining the broader context in which the piece of visual disinformation circulated will also provide insight into how images were used in response to the Westminster Bridge attack.

#### RUSSIA’S INTERNET RESEARCH AGENCY (IRA)

The IRA is a private Russian company linked to and sponsored by the Russian government and Russian oligarchy, which uses primarily social media to attempt to influence people’s socio-political beliefs and actions for the benefit of Russian interests (Prier, 2017). This involves eroding people’s perception of truth, destabilising their certainty about events, and targeting users with certain narratives (O’Loughlin, 2015; Giles, 2016)<sup>11</sup>. IRA accounts have operated on Twitter since 2009 (Howard et al., 2018a; Farkas & Bastos, 2018; Miller, 2020), used to target a wide variety of events via the systematic spreading of

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<sup>11</sup>This activity often involves IRA accounts communicating between themselves in partisan-orientated clusters, where one worker “would function as ‘the villain’ criticising the authorities; then the others would enter a debate with him/her” (Dawson & Innes, 2019:246). These accounts will also engage in conflict with genuine users, which often involves spreading “fearmongering stories, stoking populist sentiments, and encouraging hostile expression” (Bastos & Farkas, 2019:11). Thus, false conflict is used to generate artificial division, and this activity then attracts authentic audiences who are affected by or invested in these divisions (Freelon & Lokot, 2020). In order to garner an audience, the accounts often either buy followers or engage in follower fishing, which involves following thousands of accounts with the expectation that a percentage will follow back. The accounts will initially make themselves appear ‘normal’ by expressing hobbies and interests, serving to make the account appear to be operated by a real person with a genuine life, attracting followers based on mutual interests. Over time however, the accounts align with “pro-Russian interest narratives”, switching between different political positions to suit Russian priorities (Dawson & Innes, 2019: 247-250).

disinformation that muddied political discourses online, potentially having a real influence on political events (Giles, 2016; Ruck et al., 2019). As with social media research, how the IRA uses images is generally overlooked. Moreover, IRA activity is primarily examined from an American perspective. These are, therefore, the knowledge gaps this thesis aims to address, as the case study is an example of an IRA account using an image to spread disinformation and an example of the IRA targeting the UK.

In 2018, Twitter published a dataset of banned IRA disinformation accounts and invited data analysis (Gadde & Roth, 2018). Consequently, a great deal of research has been conducted on this dataset, mainly within the context of the 2016 US election. Several findings and trends have emerged from this research, namely:

- The IRA had no cohesive political motive, with tweets attacking and sustaining both the political right and left (Linville et al., 2019). The former unanimously supported Trump and expressed nativist and right-wing populist messaging, while the latter concentrated on social identity and attacked centralist Democrats (Linville & Warren, 2020).
- At the same time, however, far more right-wing, pro-Trump IRA accounts have been identified than left-wing (Miller, 2019; Bastos & Farkas, 2019), suggesting that the IRA has identified an asymmetric vulnerability to disinformation amongst right-leaning individuals (Nikolov et al., 2021). This is possibly because right-leaning individuals have been observed as more likely to generate, spread, and interact with election-related disinformation (Edelson et al., 2021; Center for an Informed Public, Digital Forensic Research Lab, Graphika, & Stanford Internet Observatory, 2021).
- The IRA encouraged right-leaning users to be more confrontational and spread the disinformation the IRA shares further (Howard et al., 2018b).
- The IRA continued to spread disinformation targeted at the US after the 2016 election (Howard et al., 2018a).
- The IRA has also been observed targeting other issues or political events in America, such as the #BlackLivesMatter movement (Stewart et al., 2018), LGBTQ+ topics and issues, gun control (Howard et al., 2018a), immigration, and Islamophobia (Select Committee on Intelligence United States Senate, 2019; Freelon & Lokot, 2020).

Howard et al. (2018a; 2018b) are some of the few studies that looked at the role of images in IRA activity targeted at the US. Examining Facebook and Instagram, their findings present important insight into the types of America-targeted IRA visual content that received the most engagement from users. Most notably, this content centred on race, both positively and negatively. Positive images denoted concepts of Black empowerment, Black pride, and the #BlackLivesMatter movement. These images were not specifically disinformation but instead often empowering stories. Negative images centred on Islam and refugees and were more akin to disinformation. Thus, while there is limited research examining how the IRA uses images, this suggests that Islam may be a common target when spreading visual disinformation.

Although the above research contributes significantly to understanding IRA activity, it considers the IRA influence within an American context. A limited number of studies have looked outside of the US (Dawson & Innes, 2019). Farkas & Bastos (2018) took a global view, finding similar trends as identified in the US, with techniques of spreading disinformation designed differently depending on the country targeted. In a UK context, there has been some investigation as to whether the IRA attempted to influence the 2016 Brexit referendum. However, current research suggests there was limited Brexit-related IRA activity attempting to influence the referendum's outcome (Narayanan et al., 2017; Krasodonski-Jones et al., 2018; Llewellyn et al., 2018; Bastos & Farkas, 2019).

Instead, current evidence suggests that the IRA heavily targeted the UK in 2017 (Howard et al., 2018a). The lead-up to and aftermath of the 2016 Brexit referendum was marred with divisive, populist-like narratives in the media<sup>12</sup>. The summer of 2017 was also marked by

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<sup>12</sup> This was characterised by tribalist and false polarising rhetoric in which 'we' (the UK) needed to protect ourselves against 'them' (the EU). The conspiratorial fear of Turkey, a Muslim country, joining the EU was also a significant argument for leaving the EU. It was framed by many prominent pro-Brexit campaigners that, if the UK did not leave the EU, then 75 million Turks would have access to UK health services, schools, and jobs. As Bergmann (2020) argues, "such discourse was highly xenophobic; migrants were linked to a loss of identity and the erosion of British culture" (259). That the UK did vote to leave the EU suggests that such narratives

several major terror attacks: The Westminster Bridge attack, the Manchester Arena bombing, the London Bridge attack, and the Finsbury Park attack. Evidence suggests that these attacks garnered significant IRA attention, in particular the spread of right-wing, Islamophobic disinformation that served to spread fear and antagonism (Innes, 2020). Many IRA accounts that targeted these attacks ramped up their activity, with Islamophobic content seeming to garner the most interaction from other Twitter users (Krasodonski-Jones et al., 2018). Both Krasodonski-Jones et al. (2018) and Innes (2020) identify SouthLoneStar as a significant contributor to spreading Islamophobic disinformation following these attacks. However, these studies do not examine how the account uses images or how the IRA used images to spread disinformation in a UK context.

To conclude, significant research has explored IRA activity on Twitter in a US context, particularly concerning the 2016 election. This has provided vital insight into how the IRA operates and the methods used to attempt to influence social media users during political and social events and issues. However, limited research has examined IRA activity outside the US, particularly in the UK. Moreover, research rarely considers how the IRA uses images to spread disinformation. This thesis, therefore, works towards highlighting and addressing two knowledge gaps related to IRA-related research: activity targeting the UK and how the organisation uses images.

## THE ALT-RIGHT

The term alt-right was coined in 2008 by a white supremacist think-tank and is usually used to refer to a populist<sup>13</sup>, predominantly online, right-wing, generally American political

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resonated with some voters. Thus, the aftermath of Brexit was likely an exploitable opportunity to spread divisive, populist disinformation.

<sup>13</sup> Populism is a contested, amorphous term which has become “morally and politically charged” (Brubaker, 2017: 359). Thus, the concept is ambiguous and difficult to wholly define (Tumber & Waisbord, 2021). However, populism can be broadly characterised as “an appeal to ‘the people’ against both the established structure of power and the dominant ideas and values of the society” (Canovan, 1999: 3). Populism claims that it supports and represents ‘the people’ (a beneficially ambiguous term) and subsequently acts and speaks against ‘the elite’ (“the rich, the powerful, the well-connected, the (over-) educated, and the institutionally empowered”) (Brubaker, 2017: 363). There is therefore always a societal enemy for the ‘authentic people’ to be antagonist towards, such as cosmopolitan elites and minority groups (de la Torre, 2021). Populism is generally ideologically empty, anti-institutional, and anti-intellectual, prioritizing simplicity, directness, first-hand experience, and common sense “over abstract and experience-distant forms of knowledge” (367). In



movement that rejects mainstream conservatism (Hawley, 2017). In reference to the previous section of this chapter, IRA accounts that adopt a right-wing persona often reflect alt-right attitudes to generate conflict and division. However, it is a genuine political movement that has only grown since its inception. Subsequently, there have been significant investigations into its origins, beliefs, and consequences. Research concerning the alt-right mobilises a variety of disciplines, such as politics, cultural studies, media and communication studies, cybersecurity, social psychology, and sociology. This has produced a well-rounded and dense understanding of the political movement. However, more research is required to examine how the movement incorporates and uses images, whether it is fabricated disinformation accounts or genuine believers.

Three political and societal shifts have been identified regarding the origin of the alt-right. Firstly, a contemporary crisis in white male identity related to a perceived decline in social power (Kelly, 2017; Daniels, 2018). Secondly, the rise of social media and how the social media ecosystem operates. Social media sites are reluctant to moderate content, viewing their responsibility as “middle men providing a platform to their users” (Wardle & Singerman, 2021:2). Although certain sites do now manage content to an extent, platforms like 4chan and Reddit generally remain unmoderated, providing a home for the alt-right and other populism movements. Algorithms likely also play a role by prioritising content deemed most interesting to the user, regardless of the content topic (Daniels, 2018). Thirdly, the 2016 US Presidential election and Donald Trump’s subsequent presidency. While Trump is not alt-right, and alt-right ideologies do not wholly align with Trump, there is some overlap, and his political actions have altered the tone of US politics and helped push certain populist, alt-right beliefs into the mainstream (Stolee & Caton, 2018; Forscher & Kteily, 2019; Klein, 2019). Trump’s homogenization of nativist rhetoric and openness to nationalistic discourse, combined with his lambasting of Muslims and immigrants, has

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the same sense, populists will dismiss restrained, polite speech and political correctness, instead engaging in plain speak and relishing in breaking taboos, prioritising emotive over balanced, constrained language, and disrupting what would be considered polite, ‘normal’ demeanour. In terms of contemporary right-wing populism, this is defined “by its rabid opposition to progressive parties and human rights movements”, with movements such as the alt-right and xenophobic groups being “fundamentally online phenomena” (Tumber & Waisbord, 2021:18).

damaged traditional conservatism and normalised more extreme right-wing views (Hawley, 2017; Nagle, 2017; Wilson, 2018).

In alt-right beliefs, white nationalism is at its core, meaning discourse often centres around race, immigration, and Islam and is underpinned by narratives of identity, exclusion, fear, and nationalism (Wodak, 2015; Forscher & Kteily, 2019). Thus, the central aims of the alt-right are to maintain or restore the dominance of white people at the expense of other social groups, meaning anyone who does not fit within or is seen as working against this ideology is perceived as an enemy. This results in a tribalistic 'us' versus 'them' view of society, causing "a preoccupation with cultural enemies" and "common disdain for "outsiders" - primarily immigrants, refugees", who are caricatured as dangerous and dishonest (Klein, 2019:305-307). Islam, in particular, is reviled by the movement due to the perception that Muslims are fundamentally incompatible with white, Western values (Tanner & Campana, 2019; Udupa et al., 2020).

A further consequence of populist, alt-right-like attitudes is a distrust in mainstream traditional news sources, which are perceived as aligning with 'cultural enemies', making mainstream news a further enemy. Thus, for those who align with alt-right beliefs, the mainstream media, empirical evidence, and experts cannot be trusted (Lewis & Marwick, 2017). This distrust allows for the unchallenged creation and propagation of alt-right beliefs and disinformation within alt-right circles, leading to a reshaping of concepts such as truth and trust. This is done through various methods, such as scapegoating the media by claiming it is biased and spreading lies. Instead, common sense, emotions, opinions, and lived experiences are prioritised and viewed as authentic and trustworthy (Hameleers, 2020a). This consequently fosters further societal division within the movement (Hameleers, 2020b).

Islamophobic populist discourse is, however, not unique to the alt-right or American politics. Growing concerns about Muslim immigration have been observed across

contemporary Europe (Culloty & Suiter, 2021), and in the UK, the 2016 Brexit referendum was a trigger point for greater Islamophobic rhetoric<sup>14</sup>. Brexit, combined with a decade of a Conservative government, fostered rhetoric similar to the alt-right, developing an ‘us’ versus ‘them’ view of British society, ‘us’ being the white British and ‘them’ being either anti-Brexit ‘elites’ or ethnic minority groups (Corbett, 2016; Bhattacharyya et al., 2021). Research supports these observations. Those who voted to leave the EU have been found more likely to have Islamophobic beliefs and believe Islamophobic conspiracy theories (Swami et al., 2018). It has also been found that those tweeting about Brexit generally framed Islam, migrants, and refugees negatively (Evolvi, 2017). Further research also observed that Brexit tweets were not only tied to Islamophobia but often also mis-/disinformation based on unverified or falsified claims (Evolvi, 2018). This latter research from Evolvi (2018) also concludes that internet-based Islamophobia is under-researched. This case study, therefore, contributes to this knowledge gap.

The emergence and evolution of the alt-right and similar right-wing populist beliefs have been well examined, particularly regarding the movement's growth and overarching beliefs. The amalgamation of contemporary anxiety amongst certain white men, how social media operates, and Donald Trump's 2016-2021 US presidency works toward explaining the movement's contemporary prominence. Alt-right beliefs centre on nationalism, race, and identity, so marginalised groups, particularly Muslims, are viewed as incompatible with alt-right goals. The movement is, therefore, notably Islamophobic. However, little research has been conducted on online alt-right-like Islamophobia within a UK context, particularly post-Brexit. In examining a piece of Islamophobic visual disinformation within this context, the case study works towards addressing this specific research gap.

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<sup>14</sup> After decades of Euroscepticism, followed by a more contemporary rise in populism and English nationalism, the UK voted to leave the European Union on 23rd June 2016 (Faulkner et al., 2021). Corbett (2016) describes Brexit as “a case study in populist right-wing Eurosceptic discourse” (11) by delivering “the opportunity for a popular revolt by “the people” against both elites and minorities” (27).

## MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS OF MUSLIM WOMEN

The Islamophobic rhetoric tied to SouthLoneStar's contextualisation of the Westminster photograph was not born of the alt-right but stemmed from older and deeper media presentations of Muslims. Therefore, the Islamophobic discourse of the alt-right is taking place within a much broader and more established mainstream media environment that pushes similar, albeit less extreme, rhetoric. This often centres on the sociological concept of the "racialised other", which refers to persons or groups who are distinguished from the 'norm' and thus progressively become seen by larger society as deviant. These groups/persons are ascribed identities related to their social practices to make this distinction, and these identities are often inaccurate or oversimplified. Ample research has examined media representations of Muslim women, and some research has examined Muslim women's responses to these representations. However, a small percentage of this research has taken place in a UK context, and there is no research examining Muslim women's responses to *online* representations, specifically through disinformation.

Since the September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, attacks on New York's World Trade Centre, Muslim women are generally presented by the media in two ways: (1) victims of Islam and/or (2) Islamic terrorists. Jaspal & Cinnirella (2010) refer to this as "hybridised threats", divided into a "symbolic threat", in which the perceived cultural differences between Muslims and the ethnonational ingroup mean Muslims are considered other and deviant, and a "realistic threat", in which Muslims are frequently linked to terrorism (298-299). Concerning the former "symbolic threat", it has been observed that in both the UK and US media, news stories about Muslim women disproportionately centre around oppression, violence, and gender discrimination (Mishra, 2007; Abu-Lughod, 2013; Al-Hejin, 2015; Terman, 2017). Such representations of women as victims of their religion risk "further stigmatizing a vulnerable group" (Werbner, 2007: 170) and results in Muslim women being frequently framed as a hindrance to modernisation and their assumed victimhood seen as a threat to Western society (Navarro, 2010; Ahmed & Matthews, 2017).

Muslim women are also often presented by the media as terrorists or terrorist sympathisers, the “realistic threat”, as described by Jaspal & Cinnirella (2010:298). The religion of Islam as a whole is often “framed within the context of religious extremism... as a threat to universal ‘white’ values of democracy and freedom” (Ahmed & Matthes, 2017:231). Concerning Muslim women specifically, the media have repeatedly been observed associating them with terrorism, suicide bombing, violence, and fanaticism (Bullock & Jafri, 2000; Werbner, 2007; Perry, 2014). Significantly, Bhattacharyya et al. (2021) highlight that the concepts of radicalisation and extremism are “so fluid and ambiguous that they allow for the production of suspicious communities, rather than individual suspects”, and so “Muslims from a range of ethnic backgrounds... are assumed to be potentially ‘radicalised’ and susceptible to ‘extremism’” (51). Thus, through this lens, all Muslims are presented as potential terrorists.

Both these media representations of Muslim women are underpinned by the concept of the ‘racialised other’. Othering is a key sociological concept and describes the process in which “persons or groups are labelled as deviant or non-normative... through the constant repetition of characteristics about a group of people who are distinguished from the norm in some way” (Mountz, 2009:328). This creates an ‘us’ versus ‘them’ dichotomy, in which individuals or groups with characteristics that do not fall within the societal ‘norm’ can experience social rejection, isolation, villainization, and/or be considered abnormal. Inaccurate or harmful media representations link to othering because they embed representations in society and people’s psychology through repetition (Bailey & Harindranath, 2005; Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2010). Veil-wearing amongst Muslim women is often the physical embodiment of otherness in the media. News stories about Muslim women regularly fixate on veiling and link it to “hidden terror, gender violence and extremism” (Werbner, 2007:163). This narrative presents veiled Muslim women as “the other against whom the collective self should be on guard” (Karim, 2006: 118). Veiling is often present in media reportage about Muslim women even when the news story is not about clothing (Mishra, 2007), and so veiling is frequently presented “as if that is the only relevant aspect of Muslim women’s identities” (Bullock & Jafri, 2000:36).

Despite this preoccupation, mainstream media discourse about veiling is frequently oversimplified, vague, and lacks nuance, which could lead to further confusion, misunderstanding, and frustration about Muslim culture (Navarro, 2010; Al-Hejin, 2015). Body covering practices are diverse and are not unique to Islam, yet mainstream media fail to encapsulate this, presenting veiled Muslim women as a symbol of exclusion and repression (Macdonald, 2006). Moreover, the news media often portray veiling as a societal problem, presenting the practice as a barrier to progression, communication, and integration, an endorsement of religious extremism, and in opposition to national values and freedoms (Meer et al., 2010; Baker et al., 2013; Al-Hejin, 2015; Zine, 2016). This results in presentations of Muslim women as defiant agitators, part of “a problematic out-group” (Baker et al., 2013:208-209). The press is also prone to using negative and dehumanising terms when discussing veiling (Baker et al., 2013), further presenting Muslim women as strange and abnormal.

As a consequence of these inaccurate and potentially harmful media representations, there is significant research that examines how Muslim women respond to such representations and the potential consequences they may have on their lives. Specifically, this topic is examined chiefly in a Canadian, Australian, and UK context. In Canada, Muslim women were aware that the hijab had “become a sign of a “terrorist” woman” and discussed experiencing “verbal, racial, and ethnic assaults” while veiled (Ruby, 2006:63). In response, some participants “consciously chose to wear the *hijab*” to undercut “the myth of the submissive Muslim woman” (64). Similarly, Nagra (2011) observed Muslim women reclaiming their identity by choosing to wear a hijab to counter the narrative that such attire was imposed upon them, even if it meant compromising their safety. Conversely, studies in Australia have found Muslim women felt compelled to change or consciously monitor their behaviour to prove they were not “the ‘other’ with ‘un-Australian’ values” (Hebbani & Wills, 2012:98). Parallel observations were made by Harris & Karimshah’s (2019), whose participants felt motivated to prove they were not un-Australian by asserting their “ordinary Australianness... implying that their Muslimness equated to their ‘differentness’ or ‘failings’” (623).

Both responses have also been observed in the UK, where a concern for the consequences of negative media representations is evident. Ryan (2011) found participants working on challenging stigma by socially distancing from extremism and presenting themselves and Muslims as a whole “as ‘good’ members of society” (1051-1052). Endelstein & Ryan (2013) believed the increased Islamophobia experienced by their participants was based on a “collective stigma” that “may involve wider socio-structural factors... [including] media and government policies” (257). Their participants’ stories emphasised “links between stereotypes of terrorism and negative reactions towards visible Muslims”, and veiling “defines them as different, ‘outsiders’, and as potential threats to mainstream British society”, characterised by suspicion and stigma (257-258). Chapman’s (2016) participants similarly believed veiling was associated with oppression and fundamentalism and acted to counter this narrative while still experiencing hostile public reactions. Thus, similar to research in Canadian and Australian settings, British Muslim women have acted to manage the consequences of these representations by asserting their ‘normality’ and embracing certain activities deeply tied to these stereotypes, such as veiling, to undermine them.

The above shows that, for over two decades, the mainstream media has presented inaccurate representations of Muslims. In particular, there are two overarching media representations of Muslim women as victims and as terrorists, and the concept of otherness underpins both. This has worked to ‘other’ Muslim women, who have reported experiencing real-world consequences of such representations. Research showed that participants developed diverse means of managing and undermining these representations. While this topic has been extensively studied, this has overwhelmingly been through the lens of representations of Muslim women in traditional and mainstream media. As noted previously, online Islamophobia is under-researched (Evolvi, 2018) and the above shows that Muslim women’s responses to *online* representations, particularly regarding understanding mis-/disinformation more broadly, are equally underexamined.

## NEWS MEDIA AMPLIFICATION

The act of the news media amplifying an event is referred to in several ways and brings into play several different concepts. Thus, terminology and definitions in this area of study are varied, and the concept is referred to in several ways, such as media hype, media storm, media wave, and media amplification. This thesis uses media amplification to refer to the phenomenon as this is the term most commonly used by researchers examining the hybrid media system, this being the interconnectivity between social media and mainstream media (Nanabhay & Farmanfarmaian, 2011; Zhang et al., 2017; Phillips, 2018). While the study of this interconnectivity is growing, there is limited research examining the mainstream media reporting on and subsequently amplifying online disinformation. As the case study also considers how the UK news media responded to a piece of visual disinformation, the thesis works towards addressing this knowledge gap.

There is variation in the literature as to what constitutes media amplification. Van Atteveldt et al. (2018) note this conceptual variety, observing that the phenomenon is often referred to differently by different authors, each held together by “a loose definition” to describe “a sudden burst of attention for a topic” (61). Describing the concept as media hype, Vasterman (2005) defines it as the “news media suddenly generate surprisingly high news waves on one specific story... creating the impression that a situation has suddenly deteriorated into a real crisis” (508-509). Bringing the literature together produces an overall idea of what an instance of media amplification looks like:

- A key event receives more news media attention than other similar events would when reported on in the news (Vasterman, 2005, 2018; Wien & Elmelund-Præstekær, 2009; van Atteveldt et al., 2018).
- This intense media attention results in imitation, in which media outlets emulate the reportage of other media sources while also hunting for newer news about the event, even if this new information would not typically be considered news under normal circumstances (Vasterman, 2005, 2018; Hardy, 2018).
- The news threshold is lowered as anything related to the event is elevated to the status of ‘news’ (Hardy, 2018).



- This disproportionate news attention is not linked to event frequency, and so the media often begins to create the news rather than report on actual events<sup>15</sup> (Vasterman, 2005, 2018).
- There is then a period of “interactive media momentum” characterised by a societal response to the news event (Vasterman, 2005:515). This includes reporting on people who have had similar experiences and responses from official and interested groups.
- Eventually, the “hype” dies down as media interest reaches saturation until the event disappears from the news.

In terms of common topics, media amplification is often tied to events that garner strong emotions and/or echo societal anxieties, for example, health-related news (Wien & Elmelund-Præstekær, 2009; Chang, 2012; Vasterman & Ruigrok, 2013; Klemm et al., 2016; Garfin et al., 2020) and, more relevant to the case study, news about violent and unexpected criminal acts (Hardy, 2018; Martin & Hill, 2019). A consequence of such media attention is that the audience assumes that the level of attention given to the story reflects how serious or concerning it is. This “leads to amplified social concern over the issue in question”, resulting in heightened risk perception (Chung, 2018:213).

Several studies have examined the amplification of crime news by the news media, many of which are tied to certain racist tropes and/or stereotypes about racialised groups. For example, Portuguese news incorrectly accused a group of Black beachgoers of a ‘mass mugging’ (Rosa, 2018), and Italian news connected the Roma community to a ‘rape emergency’ without evidence (Maneri, 2018). Both examples are linked to the concept of moral panics<sup>16</sup>. Wien & Elmelund-Præstekær (2009) also examine moral panics, providing

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<sup>15</sup> Wien & Elmelund-Præstekær (2009) conversely argue that the concept of media amplification making news is problematic, because the ability to distinguish between news ‘reporting’ and news ‘making’ is difficult in practice. Events changes as time passes and the story develops, and so “we believe that a news-reporting story is easily converted into a news-making story and vice versa” (185).

<sup>16</sup> One of the most prominent pieces on moral panics is Cohen’s 1972 publication *Folk devils and moral panics: The creation of the mods and rockers*, where “a condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians

a helpful outline of where they fit in the context of media amplification. Described as “a more narrow concept”, it is argued that moral panic “mostly relates to the coverage of violence, sex and crime” and involves the stigmatization of “‘perpetrators’ (normally a marginalised group) as ‘evil folk devils’” (184). Maneri (2018) discusses this further, arguing that “if media hypes amplify the representation of a problem”, the problem appears to be more serious, which in turn leads the public to “build on a sense of moral outrage, qualifying as a moral panic”, resulting in not only worry but indignation towards the demonised group (443).

Some studies have considered the role of social media in news amplification. The dynamic of media amplification has changed because traditional media and social media are now part of a hybrid media ecosystem. This means that the public, as social media users, plays a much greater and more active role in the news media and news creation. While traditional media is still very much in control of the news flow, “non-elite actors increasingly participate in constructing news via online media” (Waldherr, 2018:293). Rather than solely being news consumers, social media users can create, share, contribute to, and in some ways, control the news. This can make social media “the market place where gossip, breaking news and media hypes spread”, which in turn can “empower regular people to be the media themselves” (Roese, 2018:314-315). Consequently, the interconnectivity between social and mainstream media may function as “an accelerant to media hypes: It helps spread the news to the extent that previously was not possible before without social media” (Roese, 2018:328). Social media platforms can, therefore, play a significant role in contemporary examples of media amplification within the hybrid media system.

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and other right-thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions; ways of coping are evolved or (more often) resorted to; the condition then disappears, submerges or deteriorates and becomes more visible” (2002:1). The mass media is closely tied to moral panics as it is often the method in which these supposed threats are presented to the public. Hall et al. (1978) use Cohen’s definition to discuss moral panics in relation to muggings and the way the media has used crime statistics to make claims of ‘raising crime rates’ as a justification for social control and the need for public police support. Like Cohen, Hall et al. also draw attention to the relationship between mass media and moral panics, highlighting that the news is not naturally but socially constructed.

However, there has been limited research into the consequences of the news media amplifying online content, particularly problematic content like disinformation, partly because this is difficult to measure (Wardle, 2021). Phillips (2018) stresses that journalists must reflect on the newsworthiness of such content, such as whether it has reached a tipping point<sup>17</sup>, as well as weighing up the social benefits and potential harms of coverage. In many instances, the news media reports disinformation to fact-check it, and there is evidence that content warnings added by third-party fact-checkers can reduce the sharing of disinformation (Pennycook et al., 2020; Yaqub et al., 2020). Yet, the literature concerning the effectiveness of fact-checking is unclear. Factors including audience partisanship, pre-existing attitudes, ideological beliefs, audience interest in the topic, how the corrective information is formatted and presented, and the context of the disinformation being fact-checked have been observed to influence the effectiveness of fact-checking (Garrett et al., 2013; Thorson, 2016; Robertson et al., 2020; Walter et al., 2020; Nieminen & Rapeli, 2019). There is also the assumption that the disinformation and its corrective information carry equal weight, so once the corrective information is released, it cancels out the disinformation. However, research suggests that disinformation can have a lingering influence over an individual's attitudes even when they have received the corrective information (Thorson, 2016). Moreover, while fact-checking generally focuses "solely on factual statements", disinformation often operates within "a shade of gray rather than completely true or false" (Walter et al., 2020:368). This suggests a potential asymmetry between certain types of disinformation and how fact-checkers then tackle it.

There is also limited research examining mainstream media fact-checking of online disinformation. Cerase & Santoro (2018) examined media amplification of racist online false stories in Europe. While observing that the news media overwhelmingly worked to undermine and fact-check these stories, the researchers argue that the news media still risked amplifying the diffusion of the stories, reinforcing the stories as newsworthy, and consolidating them as "plausible truths" (346). The most comprehensive literature about mainstream media fact-checking disinformation is from Tsfati et al. (2020), who

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<sup>17</sup> If users are sharing the content outside of its core group of participants.

synthesised the causes and consequences of mainstream media disseminating 'fake news'. They first note that evidence suggests most people are not exposed to disinformation via social media but through the mainstream media, noting that exposure online takes place in a heavily concentrated audience. This "implies the mainstream media are responsible for much of the public attention fake news stories receive", describing the media as "a significant amplifier and disseminator" of 'fake news', even when it is covered for fact-checking (160). Tsifti et al. also observed that "despite media refutations, sizable shares of the audience deduce that there is a chance that the 'fake' information might be right" (166). This may be because, to correct the disinformation, mainstream media has to introduce the audience to the content and often repeat it before debunking it. Moreover, people are more likely to perceive something as true if it is simple, coherent, and easy to understand, whereas refutations are often complicated and detailed. Finally, the researchers highlight that audiences do not automatically perceive news sources as more credible than false information, stressing that trust in the mainstream media is low in many countries.

In summary, while research concerning more traditional news amplification is ample, news amplification within the context of the hybrid media system is limited (Waldherr, 2018:294). There is also minimal literature on the consequences and effects of the news media amplifying false or manipulated content, even if its purpose is to fact-check it. While some research does exist as to the effectiveness of online fact-checking disinformation, it generally centres on professional fact-checking organisations and not the mainstream media. Nevertheless, examining the former may provide some insight into the latter. There are, therefore, knowledge gaps concerning the general amplification of online content by the news media and the specific examination of the news media reporting on and online fact-checking disinformation.

## CONCLUSION

The purpose of the literature review chapter was to (1) establish where the thesis sits within disciplines and detail how different disciplines are mobilised, (2) establish where the

research sits specifically within the nebulous field of mis-/disinformation research, including key research gaps the thesis aims to address, and (3) situate the thesis within the wider research relevant to the case study. This highlighted specific literature gaps that the case study aims to address.

The thesis falls into the loose field of mis-/disinformation research, with an emphasis on visual disinformation. However, this is an emerging and disparate field, and so the three key disciplines mobilised were: Journalism Studies, Social Media Studies, and Visual Studies. Disinformation is a pressing journalistic concern that is overwhelmingly present on social media. These are, therefore, the two disciplines commonly mobilised by researchers examining mis-/disinformation. However, the explicit contribution of Visual Studies is unique to this thesis as it considers the role of images in mis-/disinformation. Several disciplines also sit under these core disciplines and are mobilised by the thesis in more specific ways, such as sociology, political science, and visual culture. Thus, this thesis' approach to mis-/disinformation research is distinctive due to its emphasis on, and explicit inclusion of, Visual Studies within these broader and overlapping fields.

In addition to the wider disciplinary areas relevant to the research, this thesis is explicitly situated within the field of mis-/disinformation research. Current approaches to disinformation and their strengths and limitations have been established by exploring existing literature and governmental investigation examining disinformation. While vital insight has emerged from existing research, there are several knowledge gaps that this thesis aims to address. Most significantly, images are mostly overlooked, despite visuals being a core method of communication on social media. Through scrutinising existing literature, it is also apparent that mis-/disinformation research centres on quick, quantitative methods, often providing a macro view of the phenomenon. Conversely, this thesis emphasises a mixed-method approach that examines a single piece of disinformation in detail, intending to provide deep insight into the phenomenon of visual disinformation. There is also a tendency to approach disinformation through a true/false binary, focussing on wholly fabricated content. This does not reflect the full scope of disinformation, which

often constitutes a mixture of true and falsified information. This thesis also addresses this knowledge gap by examining a piece of disinformation of this nature, which uses an unaltered photograph to promulgate a false narrative.

Finally, the literature review concludes by exploring the broader research areas specifically relevant to the thesis' case study. These areas were: online responses to disaster events, Russia's Internet Research Agency (IRA), the alt-right, media representations of Muslim women, and news media amplification. The role and use of images continue to be under-examined across these topics, but knowledge gaps specific to each research area were also identified. Research examining the IRA primarily takes place in an American context, and the case study is an example of IRA activity in a UK context. Internet-based Islamophobia within an alt-right/right-wing populist context is a concern that requires further investigation. While media representations of Muslim women are well-researched, Muslim women's responses to online representations are underexplored. Finally, little research examines the amplification of online content by the news media, as well as the news media fact-checking online content.

In summary, while research examining disinformation is growing and becoming more diverse to reflect the issue's complexity, images are often overlooked despite being a key component of social media communication. This is the central knowledge gap this thesis addresses, and the case study of the Westminster Bridge photograph is the application of this knowledge. Moreover, the thesis provides an alternative methodological approach not commonly used by those examining disinformation, in which a single piece of visual disinformation is examined deeply. This reflects the complexity needed to examine an image thoroughly, and the employment of this methodology also offers an alternate approach to examining disinformation, with this methodology then tested through the case study application.

## CHAPTER 3: ESTABLISHING THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

### INTRODUCTION

This chapter works to outline the theoretical framework that underpins this thesis. It brings together the three concepts of disinformation, photographic objectivity, and Twitter as a vehicle for disinformation. Each includes explorations of what the concept is, the themes at play within these concepts, examinations of key debates, definitions, and perspectives, and concludes with how the thesis approaches each concept. These conceptual breakdowns are then brought together in the concluding section, outlining what they do for the case study.

The examination of the concept of disinformation explores what it is and how others have approached and understood it, concluding with how this thesis defines the concept. Examinations of photographic objectivity explore and critique the longstanding association of news photographs with evidence, truth, and objectivity. Therefore, it is important to understand the tropes, associations, and conventions at play when we assume that photographs are objective and truthful. The final concept involves an examination of the architecture of Twitter, the communication practices the platform offers, and how users can present themselves. This builds an understanding of how disinformation can spread on Twitter.

### CONCEPTUALISING DISINFORMATION

Disinformation is a central concept for this thesis. Terms such as ‘fake news’, ‘hoax news’, ‘junk news’, ‘propaganda’, ‘trolling’, ‘misinformation’, and ‘disinformation’ have become commonplace in contemporary media vernacular and are frequently used to describe a wide variety of falsified, manipulated, and misleading information (Wardle, 2017; Spies, 2020a; Armitage & Vaccari, 2021). Phrases like these have also come to be used by certain political and public actors to attack the media, the most common being ‘fake news’. There is, therefore, rarely a clear consensus on what the concept means and constitutes. Some

propose strict definitions and consider disinformation to be content that is entirely falsified.

In contrast, others are flexible in their definition and argue that disinformation can be a multimodal juxtaposition of truth and fiction. Thus, the concept is fluid regarding name, definition, and what it constitutes. Thus, while understandings often overlap, there is no overarching, universally accepted definition (Spies, 2020a). This fluidity means it is essential to establish how this thesis uses the concept of disinformation. Therefore, this thesis explores current debates and discussions regarding disinformation terminology and definition in the following section, used to determine how disinformation is defined for this thesis and concluding in a working definition.

#### TERMINOLOGY

Firstly, the terminology used for this thesis, and the justification for using this terminology, should be established. This thesis refers to the concept under investigation as “disinformation”. This decision was made following a detailed examination of how other researchers name the phenomenon, debates about how the phenomenon should be referred to, and how understandings of the phenomenon have changed as research developed. This examination is broken down below.

“Fake news” is probably the most common, universal, and recognisable means of referring to the concept. This is likely because of the term’s frequent use by former US President Donald Trump and his presidential team (Massie, 2017). Consequently, this phrase has become regular in the news media, making it part of the mainstream social consciousness. The contemporary commonality of “fake news” has seemingly led academics also to use this term to describe the concept. Pre-Trump’s 2016 election victory, “fake news” had been used in academia to describe “political satire” (Holbert, 2005:444; Balmas, 2014:432) and “intentionally deceptive (fake, fabricated, staged news, or a hoax)” news articles (Rubin et al., 2015:1). Since 2016 and up until the writing of this thesis, “fake news” has continued to



be used by researchers. However, this is now within the context of Trump's presidency and the increased prominence of misleading, manipulated, and falsified information spread online (for example, Vargo et al., 2017; Berghel, 2017; Tandoc et al., 2018; Lazer et al., 2018; Gelfert, 2018; Bakir & McStay, 2018; Grinberg et al., 2019; Zhang & Ghorbani, 2020; Guo & Vargo, 2020), commonly referred to as the "post-truth" era (Farkas & Schou, 2019; Farkas, 2020).

Others warn against using "fake news". Habgood-Coote (2018) argues that it has become a destructive and empty phrase used as a weapon to control information and does not fully encapsulate the issue. Benkler et al. (2017) observe that "fake news" is now associated with "politically disinterested parties out to make a buck of Facebook advertising dollar" and not what it should be associated with, namely "propaganda and disinformation", and so "fake news... is not an adequate term" (Online). It is seen by some as a "simplistic" term that "hides important distinctions and denigrates journalism" (Wardle, 2019:84) and is also readily "appropriated by politicians around the world to describe news organisations whose coverage they find disagreeable" (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017:5). Thus, "fake news" has become a muddied term, unavoidably partisan, and associated with attacks against journalists and the media. Consequently, "fake news" was dismissed as a means of referring to the investigated phenomenon of this thesis.

The terms misinformation and disinformation are more appropriate to describe the phenomenon, the distinction being that misinformation is "unintentional mistakes such as inaccurate captions, dates, statistics or translations or when satire is taken seriously", and disinformation is "fabricated or deliberately manipulated content, intentionally created conspiracy theories or rumours" with intent to cause harm (Wardle, 2019:84). The UK House of Lords Select Committee on Democracy and Digital Technologies (2020) similarly make this distinction between misinformation and disinformation, extending it further by arguing that false information spread by people who genuinely believe it can be considered misinformation, while false information spread by those who know the content is false can be considered disinformation. Many other scholars similarly use intent as a means of

distinguishing and defining misinformation and disinformation (Floridi, 2012; Jack, 2017; Bennett & Livingston, 2018; S e, 2018; Colley et al., 2020; Park et al., 2020; Spies, 2020a; Hameleers, 2020a; Freelon & Wells, 2020; Tumber & Waisbord, 2021; Armitage & Vaccari, 2021)<sup>18</sup>. Misinformation and disinformation, therefore, are more appropriate terminology, the distinction being the motivation behind sharing. Consequently, for this thesis, misinformation is sharing false/manipulated information by mistake or with genuine belief in the claim(s) made. Thus, there is no intent to cause harm (although harm may inadvertently be caused (Spies, 2020a)). Disinformation is knowingly and purposefully sharing false/manipulated information to mislead and cause harm (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017).<sup>19</sup>

The case study of this thesis involves a Twitter account, in the guise of a fake persona, intentionally created to spread false and misleading information. Scholars have argued that intent is difficult to assess (Colley et al., 2020), for example, when it comes to ironic or satirical information (Marwick, 2018). For other research examining mis-/disinformation, this may be a significant issue, particularly when the full context of the mis-/disinformation under investigation is unknown. However, as Russia’s Internet Research Agency operated SouthLoneStar, the account purposefully and intentionally spread Islamophobic disinformation in the context of the 2017 Westminster Bridge attack, likely to propagate

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<sup>18</sup> Nonetheless, intent can also be difficult to determine, particularly when the person sharing the information is an ordinary social media user and their reason for sharing the information cannot be known. However, within the context of this thesis, the intent of SouthLoneStar’s tweet is evident as the user was a dedicated foreign disinformation account. Therefore, the distinction of intent fits within the thesis. Moreover, while determining intent can be tricky, this distinction “captures an important normative as well as empirical difference” (Armitage & Vaccari, 2021:38).

<sup>19</sup> At the same time, it is also acknowledged that outside of this thesis, such clear and divisive conceptual distinctions between misinformation and disinformation could be limiting and counterproductive. The fluidity and often subjective nature of some of the concepts which underpin mis- and disinformation, such as intent and truth (the latter of which represents wider epistemological arguments of what truth is and whether it can be known, thus problematising the ability to produce concrete definitions further), means that there may never be a way of sufficiently and wholly capturing the concept of disinformation (Floridi, 2012; Fallis, 2015). Instead, Fallis (2015) suggests that disinformation may be used as a “prototype concept” in which “there may simply be prototypical instances of disinformation, with different things falling closer to or further from these prototypes” (416). So, Fallis continues, while scholars can and should work towards producing a “counterexample proof” concept of disinformation, this may never be achieved in an absolute sense. Thus, it seems that definitions of mis- and disinformation will remain at least somewhat fluid and context-specific to the nature and aims of the research with which they are employed, with conceptual reflections from other scholars used to construct definition(s) that serve the research in the most appropriate way.

negative stereotypes about Muslims. Therefore, this event can be understood as disinformation, the terminology chosen for this thesis.

#### DEFINING DISINFORMATION

Having established that “disinformation” is the most appropriate means of referring to the concept under investigation, what this concept constitutes within the context of this thesis should also be determined. As noted, definitions are highly varied. Scholars approach the phenomenon in various ways as they work to understand it. Key differences between these definitions and understandings appear to be (1) strict categorisation versus fluidity and (2) the role of truth. These varying definitions and constitutions are examined below, followed by a conclusion of how this thesis defines the concept based on this examination.

Generally, the phenomenon is defined amongst scholars as false/misleading information presented as legitimate information to purposefully influence people’s opinions, emotions, and/or actions (Rubin et al., 2015; Berghel, 2017; Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Nelson & Taneja, 2018; Tandoc et al., 2018; Lazer et al., 2018; Gelfert, 2018; Bakir & McStay, 2018; Grinberg et al., 2019; Zhang & Ghorbani, 2020; Zimdars, 2020; Hameleers, 2020a). Disinformation can therefore vary considerably. Hameleers (2020b) notes that it can range from “decontextualization of information” to “the pairing of different sources of multimodal information to present an alternative storyline” to “the complete fabrication and manipulation of reality” (109). Zhang & Ghorbani (2020) similarly recognise that it can range from rumours, to fabricated reviews, to conspiracy theories, meaning “it is not easy to construct a generally accepted definition” (2-4).

This has led some scholars not to present a singular, all-encapsulating definition but instead understand the phenomenon through categorisation and typologies. Pre-2016, Rubin et al. (2015) divided “fake news” into “serious fabrication”, “large-scale hoaxes”, and “humorous fakes (news satire, parody, game shows)” (4). This presents a scale ranging from wholly and intentionally falsified information to harmless jokes, which echoes how some scholars

contemporarily distinguish between disinformation and misinformation. Within the context of the “post-truth” era, Wardle (2017: Online) presents a similar, more sophisticated scale-based typology based on the level of harm, the least harmful type being “satire or parody”, followed by “false connection”, “misleading content”, “false context”, “imposter content”, “manipulated content”, and the most harmful being “fabricated content”. Tandoc et al. (2018) echo some of these categories. Their review of how other studies have operationalised “fake news” presents six categories: “news satire”, “news parody”, “fabrication”, “manipulation”, “advertising”, and “propaganda”. The researchers note that these categories centre on levels of facticity and intent to deceive. For example, advertising, propaganda, and satire have high facticity, while manipulation, fabrication, and parody have low facticity. The severity of harm and the role of truth are important to consider when constructing a definition.

Rather than building strict typologies, other scholars have instead presented broad definitions of the concept to capture its vastness. Benkler et al. (2017) define disinformation as “the purposeful construction of true or partly true bits of information into a message that is, at its core, misleading... combining decontextualized truths, repeated falsehoods, and leaps of logic to create a fundamentally misleading view of the world” (Online). Again, there is a consideration of the role and function of truth. However, this understanding presents truth as an essential component of disinformation in which truth is manipulated, presented misleadingly, or recontextualised to produce an incomplete, inaccurate, or falsified narrative. Here, concepts of true and false are not presented in binary terms, with Benkler et al. suggesting there is a synergy. Echoing this, McDougall’s (2019) examination of “fake news” in the context of media literacy education argues that the media as a whole should not be examined within a “false binary” of ‘real’ and ‘fake’ and should instead be critically deconstructed as most, if not all media is both ‘real’ and ‘fake’ to a certain degree. By extension, “fake news” also cannot be examined through a true/false binary lens. Wardle & Singerman (2021) are reflective of this, arguing that mis- and disinformation is not simply “a problem of falsehoods” but often constitute a spectrum of distinct kinds of narratives which, at their core, are misleading (2).

Wardle (2021) later goes on to discuss the role of narratives in disinformation in more detail<sup>20</sup>, asserting that “individual false claims... combine into larger stories, which can include elements of truth” (Online). Using the example of vaccine disinformation, Wardle notes that while individual false claims may not have a substantial impact, “when we pulled back for perspective, we heard these posts working together... to form a coherent chorus telling one story: “Vaccines aren’t safe.”” (Online). Similar evidence has been found related to the 2020 US Presidential election, where false and misleading claims of voter fraud melded into a dominant narrative of a stolen election (Center for an Informed Public, Digital Forensic Research Lab, Graphika, & Stanford Internet Observatory, 2021). This makes certain disinformation far more complicated to deconstruct and understand.

Building on the above, the concept of cultural narratives often ties to deeper concepts such as control, racialised discourse, and representation, which cannot be explored fully within the remit of this section. Briefly, however, cultural narratives “function as a form of social control in diverse communication contexts” (Mumby, 1993:1). Thus, they are a means of controlling and holding power over the way individuals view and process the world<sup>21</sup>. One of the most powerful tools of this social control concerns racialised discourse, and there is significant work concerning societal/cultural narratives, racism, and racialised discourse. Racialised discourse refers to “language use (spoken and written) that sorts some people, things, places, and practices into social categories marked as inherently dangerous and Other” (Dick & Wirtz, 2011:E2). Van Dijk’s (1993) extensive research into racism and narratives views “racism as a form of group dominance” (122), again tying into power and

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<sup>20</sup> Wardle (2021) argues that: “By ‘narrative’ we mean a cultural narrative, a kind of story that humans use to make sense of the world. Narratives take many particular forms but relate to a central idea. One example would be “hard work is the path to success”. Another would be “governments lie to their people”. Narratives can exist in direction opposition to each other, such as “immigrants make this country great” vs. “immigrants are destroying this country.”” (Online).

<sup>21</sup> Mumby uses the example of ‘political correctness’, seeing it as a tension between those who want to maintain monopoly over deciding what constitutes as legitimate knowledge and those within largely disenfranchised groups who lack this monopoly but wish to shape our understanding of the world. Political conservatives use the phrase “as a way to denounce any efforts to breach the monolith of truth claims that makes up the body of Western thought”, and so anyone from marginalised social groups attempting to disrupt this are “framed by the Right as a threat to both the political and intellectual stability of democratic society” (2). Thus, certain groups in positions of power have constructed a narrative of what ‘political correctness’ means as a way of undermining it as it threatens their power and truth claims. Consequently, narratives of this nature also often relate to an exclusion/inclusion or outsider/insider dichotomy, underpinned by power and control.

control. This ranges from the micro (for example, “everyday racism”) to the macro (for example, institutional inequality). The repetition and reproduction of racist narratives, along with hearing further stories that support said narratives, produce a snowballing, cyclical effect where these narratives become commonplace. Racialised discourses thus “implement, enact, legitimate, or challenge group knowledge, attitudes, and ideologies and thereby contribute to the reproduction of ethnic prejudices, which in turn underlie discrimination and hence indirectly condition ethnic inequality” (112). There is also an element of fear, with the ‘other’ functioning as a scapegoat for the problems of the ‘us’. Therefore, the prevalence and influence of these broader societal narratives play a role in certain types of disinformation and should be considered when examining the concept.

Thus, there are various aspects to consider when conceptualising and defining “disinformation” for deployment in a piece of research. This includes whether it serves the research better to utilise typography or an expansive definition, the function of truth, a reflection on the “false binary”, and the role of wider societal discourses.

## CONCLUSION

Taking on board the above reflections, this thesis will approach the terminology and conceptualisation of disinformation in these ways:

- The term “fake news” will be avoided unless used by others, and “disinformation” will be used instead, as it appropriately describes the phenomenon under investigation.
- As the thesis deeply examines a single piece of visual disinformation rather than a larger dataset, a single definition will be developed rather than a typology.
- In line with the work of researchers such as Benkler et al. (2017), McDougall (2019), and Wardle & Singerman (2021), the thesis takes the perspective that disinformation contains some element of truth, which has then been manipulated to create a misleading narrative.

- Following this, disinformation cannot be viewed through binary concepts of “true” and “false”, as the phenomenon is often an amalgamation of the two, especially if it contains visual elements, such as photographs.
- Individual pieces of disinformation often relate to and support greater societal/cultural narratives. Consequently, the thesis will explore disinformation by questioning these broader concepts. At the same time, the research deals with complex representational forms that are not necessarily true or false in any absolute sense.

The thesis consequently proposes the following working definition for visual disinformation: *an amalgamation of both image(s) and text, which may contain true elements, used to spread misleading, inaccurate, or false information implicated in societal discourses and designed to cause harm.*

#### CONCEPTUALISING PHOTOGRAPHIC OBJECTIVITY

A news photograph is central to the thesis’ case study and the veracity of SouthLoneStar’s tweet. The tweet distorted the context of the photograph and hinged on the photograph’s assumed evidential power. News photographs have a long-standing cultural association with notions of objectivity and truth, in which photographs function as visual proof. However, this association is questionable. The extent to which news photographs represent the truth cannot be examined thoroughly within the remit of this thesis because this brings into play more profound ontological arguments concerning what truth is and whether it can be known. Instead, the following discusses the concept of objectivity within a news context, how news photographs have been constituted and understood as truthful, and critical reflections on the cultural construction of photographs as truthful.

## OBJECTIVITY IN NEWS REPORTING

Before specifically examining the veracity of news photographs, it is important to consider their wider environment to gain contextual understanding. Photography is one of many methods journalists use to construct the news. News photographs inherently reflect and adhere to the professional standards of journalism, which often centre around the concept of objectivity. However, research has contested the role, purpose, and meaning of objectivity in journalism. Thus, while objectivity underpins journalism, its position is unstable.

Journalism centres on “truth-telling”, with journalists seen as “our eyes and ears about important events” (Jacquette, 2012:213). It is the consensus that a journalist’s primary role is “to provide citizens with the information they need to be free and self-governed”, acting as authenticators, sense makers, witness bearers, watchdogs, intelligence aggregators, forum leaders, empowerers, role models, and community builders (Kovach & Resenstiel, 2014:12). To achieve this, journalists operate within a series of norms centred around “the idea of ‘professionalism’” with objectivity seen as “accepted journalistic practice, designed to deliver trusted information and debate” (Sambrook, 2012:8). This suggests that historically and from a general stance within liberal democracies, journalists have an elevated and trusted status as information providers, underpinned by an assurance of objectivity. Franklin et al. (2005) consider objectivity in journalism to be the ability to deliver facts unexposed to subjective influence or decisions. Sambrook (2012) proposes that objectivity relates to “identifying facts and evidence” (3) and McNair (1998) presents a conceptual framework of “objective journalism” involving the “validation of facts” and “balance of interpretation” (69). These observations suggest the ability to deliver news independent of subjective influence and curated via professional standards.

Yet, while objectivity is a key aim of journalism, it is often unclear how objectivity is maintained and achieved (Franklin et al., 2005). Many researchers acknowledge that absolute objectivity is unrealistic because every person is “epistemically fallible”



(Jacquette, 2012:216). Hall et al.'s (1978) seminal work on media reportage argues that "the media do not simply and transparently report events which are 'naturally' newsworthy *in themselves*. 'News' is the end-product of a complex process beginning with a systematic sorting and selecting of events and topics according to a socially constructed set of categories" (53). This suggests that journalists cannot fully detach themselves from their subjectivity, participation in social discourses, or the subjective process in which news is produced. These biases are both externally influenced by society and internally influenced by how journalists, as individuals, uniquely view and understand the world. Therefore, "there is no single absolute truth but a multiplicity of available accounts from which the journalist has to select and construct 'news'" (McNair, 1998:72). While the general public often perceives journalists as impassive observers, they actively construct news, making objectivity "an active enterprise" (Mindich, 1998:8). This suggests that to produce 'objective' news, a journalist cannot avoid making subjective decisions. At the same time, readers often perceive the end product as objective.

Kovach & Resenstiel (2014) argue that objectivity is still achievable in journalism. The truth found in journalism is not absolute but functional, practical, and verified through an established process, where facts are assembled to present a well-founded and fair account of events. As Kovach & Resenstiel explain, "because journalists could never be objective, their methods had to be... a process for reporting that is defensible, rigorous, and transparent". Thus, journalistic objectivity is an "objectivity of method", not "personal objectivity" (10). This echoes Tuchman's (1972) notion of "objectivity as strategic ritual", which contends that professional practices allow journalists to assert themselves as objective vehicles. Boudana (2011) aligns with this sentiment, arguing that objectivity in journalism needs tangible goals because "by assessing the authority of empirical standards, the concept of objectivity provides the journalists with distinct professional norms to guide their daily practices" (395). This implies that a version of objectivity can be attained through performance by employing universal professional practices and standards.

Carpentier & Trioen (2010) present a similar interpretation of journalistic objectivity, distinguishing it as “objectivity-as-a-value” and “objectivity-as-a-practice”. The former describes objectivity as an abstract universalized value held by journalists, and the latter works to tangibly quantify objectivity through professional practices. However, Carpentier & Trioen contend that the “ideological construct of objectivity can never be fully captured by these practices”, so there is “tension between the objectivity concept and its concrete realization” (317). This suggests that journalists need objectivity as a tangible frame of reference, but practices may not reflect objectivity conceptually. There is friction between what objectivity means and how it is operationalised in journalism.

Moreover, evidence suggests that journalists fail to adhere to professional practices. As Donsbach & Klett (1993) observed, objectivity is interpreted, defined, and judged differently by different journalists, suggesting practices of upholding objectivity are not universal. A further study proposed that objectivity is “negotiated and shaped differently for different journalists to create, for the individual journalist, a coherent interpretation of the ideology” (Skovsgaard et al., 2013:35-36). This suggests that objectivity management may be a personal, not standardised, practice. Furthermore, a study of British journalists concluded that the “practical application” of objectivity “requires a degree of care that is rare” (Richards & Rees, 2011: 863). The researchers conclude that news story construction is at odds with objectivity because “it demands an intuitive (and implicitly emotional) engagement with the subject matter”, which is antithetical to objectivity. Yet, news story construction is “construed as an ‘objective’, not intuitive, activity” (864).

Objectivity is highly contested in journalism. It is accepted by most researchers that journalists cannot be absolutely objective. Some assert that journalistic practices mean news can be considered objective. Others argue that this practical approach to objectivity conflicts with the abstract concept of objectivity. There is also evidence that journalists struggle degrees to adhere to established practices, which are sometimes understood and

performed differently by different journalists. Objectivity in journalism is, therefore, seemingly unstable, unquantifiable, and arguably unobtainable.

#### THE VERACITY OF NEWS PHOTOGRAPHS

The ability of photographs to depict something that existed and present it to others who did not witness it is powerful. While textual testimonials are subject to duplicity, photographs allow us to ““see through” the photograph to the scene itself” making the photograph seem “transparent” (Moran, 2005:10). Thus, news photographs function as “visual, spatial and temporal prosthetic, giving the opportunity to see things from places and times that the viewer is unable to see” (Good & Lowe, 2017:115). This is pertinent in journalism, as eye-witnessing is a crucial method of verifying information, and photographs play this role. Consequently, the notion that news photographs are objective and truthful has become culturally ingrained.

Upon the invention of photography, this new way of representing reality “thought to be devoid of human agency” was heralded as a means of communicating news that “accurately represent material aspects of society in a truthful, transparent, and authentic manner” with the ability to record objective reality (Brennen, 2012:71-72). As Adatto (2008) describes, photographs offered “reality over illusion... accuracy over art... at last it would be possible to document world objectively” (42). Thus, in contexts where photographs constitute evidence such as documentaries (Milton, 1999; Philips, 2009), advertisements (Messaris, 1997; Philips, 2003; Jeong, 2008), law enforcement (Robinson, 2013), and, most pertinent to this thesis, journalism, they function as a substitute for the real thing (Mnookin, 1998), are given a “distinct epistemic status” (Meskin & Cohen, 2010:70), and work as “evidence of a particular truth, as likenesses, as news items” (Berger, 1968:27).

Photographs are a vital element of journalism and, through their use of providing news, they have “acquired an aura of reality, truth, and objectivity” (Brennen, 2012:74). Used to authenticate information, photographs play “a key role in the truth-seeking mission of journalism” (Pantti & Siren, 2015:495) and are “crafted with a commitment to transmit timely and reliable information” (Hill & Schwartz, 2015:4). Newton (2001) describes photojournalists as “guardian of the real” (18) and Straw (2015) “custodians of collective memory” (139). As discussed, objectivity is central to the journalistic process, and the “idea of credible news photographs is closely linked to this” (Mäenpää, 2013:123). In this regard, photojournalism is understood as a reliable and objective way of documenting reality, underpinned by the longstanding convention of photographs-as-evidence in the context of news reporting. As journalists seek to assemble and verify facts, and photographs are used to do this, the medium becomes associated with this practice. Thus, news photographs are considered objective via their association with truth-seeking and -telling.

Reflective of the broader discussions about journalistic objectivity, researchers acknowledge that news photographs cannot be absolutely objective. Yet, the assumption that news photographs are objective is “an ideology on which the whole project of photojournalism depends; it is a compelling standard... to which many viewers hold the photographs they see in the news” (Good & Lowe, 2017:6). Like Kovach & Resenstiel’s concept of “objectivity of method”, some attest that news photographs can be considered objective via the employment of standardised methods. Mäenpää (2013) presents objectivity as a tentpole with which photojournalists orientate themselves. This is managed through “certain ‘ritualistic actions’ aimed at resolving and negotiating questions concerning the credibility” and “by following practices tacitly agreed in the field, the professionals are able to legitimate the notion of objectivity” (129-130). This implies that when photojournalists adhere to standardised practices, the photographs they produce can be considered objective.

Others encourage photojournalists to embrace their subjective influences, with Good & Lowe (2017) arguing to use objectivity as “a kind of touchstone or reference point” (9). The researchers encourage photojournalists to dismiss rigid ideals of objectivity as they are unobtainable, instead engaging with a type of photojournalism that “combines the intimacy of the journalistic imperative with the rigour of deep and extensive research, and then adds the personal vision of the photographer, all mediated by a worked-through and developed ethical stance” (148). This suggests that objectivity in photojournalism is part of reflective practice, supported by an established code of practice. Brennen (2012) makes similar observations, noting that contemporary photojournalism is less concerned with rigidity and now focuses “on a more interpretative role, providing representations, persuasions, and understandings of larger issues in society” (77). Thus, one means of managing subjectivity is to make it part of the professional photographic process.

The above explains why news photographs are deeply associated with evidence and truth value. Photographs present us with a means of viewing events we cannot see ourselves. Thus, they are valuable tools for news presentation, where they are accepted as substitutes for the real event. This contributes to a societal consensus that news photographs are truthful. Even with the acknowledgement that news photographs cannot be absolutely objective, some argue that professional practices help to mitigate subjectivity influence. Others encourage photojournalists to use subjectivity as part of their photographic representations. However, the act of photography is only the first step of a multistage process when a photograph changes into a news photograph. Looking at this entire process, much greater and more powerful actors and influences come into play which significantly inhibits the veracity of news photographs and deeply problematises the assumption that they function as truth. The following subsection examines this, arguing that these influences and actors have too much impact on news photographs to claim they are reliable.

## CRITIQUES OF THE VERACITY OF NEWS PHOTOGRAPHS

Some scholars emphasise that photographs are limited in their ability to accurately and wholly depict events based on decisions made by the photographer. As Berger (1968) explains, “a photograph is a result of the photographer’s decisions that it is worth recording that this particular event of this particular object has been seen” (25). This subjective decision determines which events are given value. While photojournalists are professionally trained, it is unlikely that two photojournalists would take the same photograph. Berger ultimately dismisses the notion that photographs are representative forms of news delivery, instead viewing them as “a means of testing, confirming, and constructing” reality (27). This relates to the concept of mechanical objectivity. While photographs have been considered mechanically objective, capable of “hands-off epistemology”, the necessity of human influence over what is photographed and how it is photographed destabilised the notion that cameras can record reality objectively (Daston & Galison, 2007:130).

Scholars also highlight that photographs are limited by time. As Berger continues (1968), “choice is not between photographing X and Y: but between photographing at X moment or at Y moment... It isolates, preserves, and presents a moment taken from a continuum” (26). Sontag (1990) presented similar arguments, asserting that while photographs can contain truth, this is constrained due to their narrow perspective. Photographic depictions are “a duplicate world... a reality in the second degree” (52). Thus, photographs are a means of “imprisoning reality... recalcitrant, inaccessible; of making it stand still” (163). Shore (1998) echoes this, arguing that photography does not reflect but creates new meaning. The world flows with time, and photographs are static, so the new photographic meaning delineates. From these perspectives, little of the world can be captured by a photograph, and more is omitted than is included. Apply these arguments to photojournalism; when photographs are used to exemplify a news event, they cannot do so wholly. Thus, while news photographs have an elevated evidentiary status, they often cannot fully capture an event, highlighting their limited veracity.

Context, which in most cases is determined by words and text, can also significantly alter what a photograph depicts, means, and represents. Words almost always encapsulate news photographs. Mitchell (1994) speaks extensively about the relationship between photographs and words, proposing that “texts explain, narrate, describe, label, speak for (or to) the photographs; photographs illustrate, exemplify, clarify, ground, and document the text” (94). This suggests that the text has power over the message of the photograph; while the text articulates the message, the photograph only serves to support this textual message. Mitchell (2003) later argues that photographs have only abstract meanings and words are necessary to gain concrete meaning. Thus, “in the act of interpreting or describing pictures... language enters the visual field” (52-56).

Berger (1968) also touches on this, noting that “the formal arrangement of a photograph explains nothing. The events portrayed are in themselves mysterious or explicable according to the spectator’s knowledge of them” (25). Berger (1978a) later contends that “photographs themselves do not preserve meaning... do not narrate” (48). While acknowledging private photographs can have stable meaning, a public photograph “is torn from its context, and becomes a dead object which... lends itself to any arbitrary use” (51). Like Mitchell, Berger (1978b) asserts that public photographs are difficult to read and understand on their own and tell “us nothing of the significance of their existence” (56). This tells us that “all photographs are ambiguous... taken out of a continuity”, which leads Berger to conclude that “we are surrounded by photographic images which constitute a global system of misinformation” (58-60) and so “in itself the photograph cannot lie, but, by the same token, it cannot tell the truth; or rather the truth it does tell, the truth it can by itself defend, is a limited one.” (70). Thus, building on this, it is the “context in which a photograph is seen”, not the photograph’s content, which affects “the meanings a viewer draws from it” (Shore, 1998:10).

Barthes (1978) applies these considerations to news photographs, arguing that they comprise of “a *denoted* message, which is the analogon itself, and a *connoted* message,

which is the manner in which the society to a certain extent communicates what it thinks of this" (197). The connoted message is controlled by elements outside a photograph, such as a textual caption, which controls what news photographs show and mean. Thus, this relationship between text and photograph is not homogenous: "the image no longer *illustrates* the words; it is now the words which, structurally, are parasitic to the image" (204). Consequently, the news photograph no longer elucidates the text, but the text "comes to sublimate, patheticize, or rationalize the image" (204). Simultaneously, the text inherits the assumed objectivity of the news photograph because "the connotation of language is "innocented" from the photograph's denotation" (205). Hall (1981) observes this in newspaper photographs. In different newspapers, the same photograph often had vastly different captions dependent on how the newspaper wanted to construct the story. This is the newspapers controlling, with words, how photographs were interpreted by the audience, which is not apparent to the audience because newspapers present news photographs as "as literal visual-transcriptions of the 'real world'" (241).

Other scholars take into consideration the industry in which news photographs circulate. News photographs are owned and controlled by the news media. Foucault (1980) proposed that society functions on "regimes of truth" (131), and these regimes support and push certain discourses within society that are accepted and function as truth (Reyna & Schiller, 2010). Thus, truth is not absolute, and discourses are assigned the status of truth by systems of power, such as governments, educational institutes, and the media. This is done using discursive formations, such as images and texts. Thus, from this perspective, news photographs are used by the media as a system of power to propagate certain ideas in society to function as truth.

Several scholars examine news photographs from this Foucauldian perspective. Tagg (1988) argues that "the camera is never neutral... and the power it wields is never its own" (63-64), and so the production and attribution of meaning to news photographs is not voluntarist or arbitrary but is done by "specific social and institutional contexts" (188).



Therefore, “agency and power” are “central to the way images work” (Mitchell, 1994:6), and photojournalism “is part of the dominant group’s way of controlling the masses” (Newton, 2001:18). Berger (1978a) also acknowledges that, while we are expected to trust news photographs, what they show “has nothing to do with us, its readers, or with the original meaning of the event... they lend themselves to any use” (49). These arguments suggest that the contexts and meanings of news photographs are controlled and/or manipulated by macrosystems of power. Thus, the “evidentiary value of a photo is a convention rather than an inherent property” (Pantti & Siren, 2015:497). Taylor (2000) similarly argues that supposed photojournalistic authenticity does not lie with the photograph but with journalists, editors, and readers. The notion of news-photograph-as-evidence is a convention and not a guarantee; their evidentiary status is only gained when systems of power deem them authentic.

Reflective of these perspectives, Gürsel (2016) refers to news photographs as *rich fictions* because they are constructed and only represent the truth because the media has judged them true. Image brokers in the news industry manage hundreds of photographs of news events, and they decide which photograph(s) will be used to illustrate said events. The chosen photograph(s) are given the status of “truthful, visual facts” and work to construct “our very understanding of the world at large in which we formulate our points of view” (11). This highlights the power of news photographs, and by extension, the news industry, in influencing how we see the world. Newton (2001) emphasizes the subjective nature of these news broker practices. Describing this as covert and overt manipulation, Newton asserts that journalistic codes of ethics “are upheld differently by editors in different media” (8). Thus, the concept of photojournalistic objectivity is an “unobtainable value, a myth, a societal ritual, an organisational routine” (8) because news images are “at once mediated and true” (12). Others observe that news photographs need to reduce complex issues into static events, which suggests a level of “agenda-setting by journalistic news production” (Wodak, 2011:75). They walk a line between “a lack of standards for how to use images” and “a strong almost undisputable regard for images” (Zelizer, 2005:173), and the tension between photograph-as-evidence and photograph-as-product “raises ontological questions about realistic representation” (Carlson, 2019:6-7). This is because

news photograph function, paradoxically, as objective visual proof and as aesthetically pleasing products produced via professional, albeit subjective, activity (Brennen, 2012).

## CONCLUSION

It can be concluded that the unavoidable influence of various actors and processes undermines the assumed veracity of news photographs. There are issues when we assume that photographs are veracious due to decisions made by the photographer and their limited framing of the world. The context and information surrounding a photograph also greatly influence how the audience reads and understands it. There are also issues of power; the news industry controls photographs and dictates which are used as news, how they are used as news, and what they mean when illustrating a news event. Thus, veracity does not reflect how news photographs are constructed. Yet, audiences generally assume that news photographs objectively depict a news event. Therefore, there is a dichotomy between audience expectations of news photographs and how they are actually produced.

## CONCEPTUALISING TWITTER AS A VEHICLE FOR DISINFORMATION

The final component for constructing the thesis' conceptual framework is Twitter as a vehicle for disinformation. Examinations of disinformation almost entirely concern social media, as this is where disinformation is overwhelming shared and consumed. The goal of disinformation is to influence the opinions, actions, and emotions of as many people as possible. This suggests that the architecture and functionality of social media sites like Twitter readily facilitate these motives and are recognised as effective vehicles for spreading disinformation. This section examines Twitter's architecture, communication structure, and how users can present themselves. This discussion aims to determine how and why Twitter functions as an effective propagative source of disinformation.

## ARCHITECTURE

First, the history of the architecture of social media is briefly explored to contextualise Twitter's contemporary architecture. boyd & Ellison (2008) define social media as "web-

based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system” (211). While this definition is over a decade old, it is still relevant, emphasising user connectivity and platforms' at least semi-public nature. A later definition produced by Obar & Wildman (2015) similarly emphasises the role of the user, defining it as “*individuals and groups create user-specific profiles for a site or an app designed and maintained by a social media service*”, observing that “*user-generated content is the lifeblood of social media*” (746-747). Therefore, according to this definition, the user is central to social media, particularly their role in producing and sharing content.

The nature of this content varies from site to site and has become more varied as sites have developed. Older social media such as Facebook and Twitter, which still maintain popularity today, launched in the mid-2000s with primarily text-based communication, meaning content sharing was markedly restricted compared to today. The incorporation of basic and then more advanced forms of image and video sharing was gradually incorporated into these platforms. This made content-sharing options more varied, allowing users to blend different types of content. Now, users can combine or exclude, for example, text, images, videos, and GIFs when creating social media content, all of which can take varying forms depending on their function and use. Moreover, more contemporary social media platforms like Snapchat, Tik Tok, and Instagram centre entirely on sharing images and/or videos. Thus, over time platforms have adapted to enable the dissemination of a variety of content, progressively facilitating the sharing of image-based content and so making most content on social media at least partially image-based (Gibbs et al., 2015; Highfield & Leaver, 2016; Aiello & Parry, 2020).

Looking specifically at Twitter, launched in 2006, the SMS-based communication platform centres on keeping track of friends and followers by sharing short statuses limited to 280 characters (MacArthur, 2019). Weller et al. (2013) characterise the site as “the formation of complex follower networks with unidirectional as well as bidirectional connections

between individuals” (xxix-xxx). Others describe the site as “the leading microblogging platform”, which provides “a particular communicative space” (Schmidt, 2013:3-4) and “a complex, networked, social phenomenon... nearly bereft of formal structure” (Halavais, 2013:29). The company itself declares that “when it happens it happens on Twitter. Spark a global conversation” (Twitter, 2020a: Online). Thus, complex and open communication is central to Twitter.

Twitter shares some functionality with other large sites, like Facebook and Instagram<sup>22</sup>. Many of these functionalities focus on maintaining user attention and keeping users on the site, as social media functions on an attention economy. One example is platforms adopting the “infinite scroll” method of presenting content to users, which involves the site automatically loading new content when the user reaches the end of the page rather than requiring the user to select a “load more” or “next page” button (Holst, 2016). This means consuming content via infinite scrolling is uninterrupted and more seamless (Holst, 2016). A consequence is that infinite scrolling can give the impression that the content is endless, with research suggesting that infinite scrolling compared to other content-loading techniques, increases the average time users spend on platforms (Zhang & Liu, 2013; Bedjaoui et al., 2018).

Platforms also use algorithms to encourage users to stay on the site. Algorithms are defined as “a program that decides based on a set of ranking criteria which option from a set of alternatives to prioritize”, thus determining “the content that will be presented to the individual user”, with the content with the highest predicted level of engagement presented to the user first (Ghonim & Rashbass, 2018: Online). This means certain content is almost always displayed to users first, while other content remains almost invisible. Algorithms will prioritise content regardless of what it is, with research suggesting that critical and controversial content garners more engagement and impulsive reactions (Pew Research Centre, 2017; Ghonim & Rashbass, 2018). Consequently, if a user engages with

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<sup>22</sup> As of October 2019, Facebook had been reported to have 2.4 billion active users worldwide, Instagram 1 billion, and Twitter 330 million (Clement, 2019).

such content, algorithms will prioritise it and continue to feed similar content if it is deemed the most interesting.

Algorithms are, therefore, potentially problematic, as this method of content ranking may obscure understanding, reframe thinking, and deny access to information (Bucher, 2012; Noble, 2018; Jiang & Vetter, 2020). There are arguments amongst scholars as to the existence of “echo chambers” or “filter bubbles” on social media, in which algorithms only feed users information that supports their beliefs and filter out information which may challenge these beliefs or present alternative opinions (Spies, 2020b). Researchers argue that this can work to entrench certain users further in their views, push societal fragmentation and political polarisation, and hinder the consumption of balanced news and information (Möller, 2021). There is evidence that both support (Pariser, 2011; An et al., 2013; Bakshy et al., 2015; Flaxman et al., 2016) and dismiss (Bechmann & Nielbo, 2018; Guess et al., 2018; Fletcher & Nielsen, 2018; Lu & Lee, 2019) the existence of echo chambers and filter bubbles, and there is no unequivocal evidence that they exist. This is because they are difficult to identify and study and are highly context-dependent (Spies, 2020b). Whether or not filter bubbles/echo chambers exist to the extent that users become caught within them, that algorithms are designed to keep users on sites by feeding information regardless of the content, does speak to the argument that algorithms do obscure and feed certain content to users.

In combination, infinite scrolling on Twitter encourages users to consume content while algorithms present information that has been finely curated to maintain attention. These features benefit platforms because they can maintain user interest and keep them on the site. There are potential negative consequences, however, as algorithms may prioritise controversial and emotive content, and infinite scrolling will continue to feed this content to users. Selective feeds of this nature construct an online environment where users are unknowingly encouraged to consume problematic content continually.

## COMMUNICATION

Where Twitter differs from other social media is its communication capabilities. The communication structures available to Twitter users are intricate and highly varied, allowing communication styles that range from almost private to highly public. A typical communication tool used by Twitter is the hashtag (#), a symbol that is now synonymous with the site (Messina, 2007; Parker, 2011). On Twitter, hashtags function “primarily as metadata tags facilitating the retrieval of content from the site” (Scott, 2015:8) and as a method of “subject matter categorisation” (Rogers, 2014, p. xxi), marking tweets as relevant to a specific topic (Bruns & Stieglitz, 2014). If a user wants to participate in public conversations, they can include a hashtag in their tweet to label it as relevant to this conversation. This tweet becomes part of the stream of conversation about that topic and is searchable to other users. Hashtags on Facebook and Instagram also have this practical functionality; however, Scott (2015) argues that hashtags on Twitter also facilitate complex communication styles, providing “background contextual information which guides the overall interpretation of the utterance” (17). The hashtag delivers this contextual information without the need for a specific explanation. Thus, hashtags avoid the need for overt explication, which otherwise would “detract from the casual, informal style [and] allowing a conversational, personal style to be maintained” (19).

Moreover, communication on platforms like Facebook and Instagram is more straightforward: a user posts content and other users reply. Replies are not unique posts and only appear as part of a chain below the original post. There is, therefore, a hierarchy. However, Twitter has what Bruns & Moe (2014) describe as “structural layers of communication”, and these structures can be divided into three ways: micro, meso, and macro. Macro communications are tweets containing hashtags, considered macro because “the message has the potential to reach well beyond the user’s existing number of followers” (17). Bruns & Moe equate hashtag tweets to a “public gathering – a protest rally, an *ad hoc* assembly” (18). This means that Twitter users can respond to current events communally and instantaneously in what has been described as “ad hoc publics” (Bruns & Burgess, 2015:23). Micro communication is @mentions conversations, in which a user can communicate directly with another user using @ symbol followed by said user’s username.

This communication structure is very narrow, and few users outside this interaction are privy to the conversation<sup>23</sup>. Meso communications are tweets that contain neither @mentions nor # and are directed at the account's followers. This is the "default level of tweet dissemination" (16-17), and Bruns & Moe (2014) refer to this as "personal publics" (20). Thus, communication on Twitter can, all at once, be public, personal, and highly collective, encompassing "a new kind of publicness which consists of information selected and presented according to personal relevance, shared with an (intended) audience of articulated social ties in a conversational mode" (Schmidt, 2014:11).

Retweets also play a role in communication on Twitter, as they can move tweets across these different layers (Brun & Moe, 2014). If a user retweets a tweet from another user, it appears on their feed, making it visible to their followers. This, therefore, affects the structural position of the original tweet. This feature is unique to Twitter, and Halavais (2014) describes it as a "model of multiple, user-centric publics", simultaneously a means of affirming the content of the tweet, spreading the tweet further, and inviting "a structure for conversation and comment" (35). Therefore, retweets add a further dimension to the complex communication capabilities of Twitter. Moreover, replies to tweets (@replies) are treated as original tweets, not just replies below the original tweet (Halavais, 2014). There is, thus, no clear or strict hierarchy of content on Twitter. The types and variety of communication the platform offers are vast, and users can move and alter content between different communication structures.

These different structures mean Twitter facilitates a variety of broadcasting models. Traditional media generally only enables one type of broadcasting model. For example, television is one-to-many as information comes from a singular source and is shared with a large audience (Jensen & Helles, 2010). The advent of social media introduced new communication practices, where different broadcasting models could operate on a singular site. On Twitter, one-to-one, one-to-many, and many-to-many broadcasting models can be

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<sup>23</sup> Although it is noted by Bruns & Moe (2014) that @mentions are not limited to these macro, one-to-one conversation. For example, many users will @mention celebrities, although there is no expectation for a reply or conversation. These types of tweets are often used for referential purposes.

operationalised by a user. Thus, the communicative architecture of Twitter enables highly complex and varying communication styles. Through features like hashtags and @mentions, users have autonomy over their tweet's audience, how big that audience could potentially be, and the extent to which the tweet is public or private. Other users can take over this autonomy via retweets, so once a tweet has been shared, its potential audience is immeasurable unless the account is set to private.

#### USER PRESENTATION

Finally, user presentation on Twitter is also important when considering how the platform's features may enable the spread of disinformation<sup>24</sup>. User presentation on Twitter varies from other social media platforms, and how users present themselves may tie into how the site can be a uniquely effective vehicle for spreading disinformation. In the following, Twitter is compared to Facebook to illustrate the difference in how user accounts are operationalised across the two sites.

Facebook encourages users to provide personal information. To create a Facebook account, users must provide a first and last name, email address/phone number, birth date, and gender (Facebook 2020a). Personal information like relationship status, family members, interests, education, and work history can be added to the account once created, and Facebook encourages users to do so (Facebook, 2020b). Conversely, users provide an email address to create a Twitter account and choose a unique username (Twitter, 2020b), which is not encouraged to be tied to their offline identity. Name, a short bio, location, website, and birth date can then optionally be added to the account once created (Twitter, 2020c). Therefore, much less personal information is required and encouraged to create and maintain a Twitter account compared to Facebook.

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<sup>24</sup> This is not in relation to Goffman's (1959) theories of self-presentation, which is often used to examine interaction on social media, but the different ways users can construct and present their profiles and identities on Twitter.



Privacy settings are also highly customisable on Facebook. Users can pick which profile information is public and private and the level at which it is public and private (Facebook 2020c). Privacy settings on Twitter are more simplistic when compared to Facebook. Accounts are public by default (Zimmer & Proferes, 2014), and bio, location, website, and profile picture are always publicly available (Twitter, 2020d). The only level of privacy is the ability to protect tweets. Accounts with unprotected tweets are entirely public, while tweets from protected accounts can only be seen by account followers (Twitter, 2020e). Therefore, Twitter accounts are always at least semi-public, while Facebook accounts are generally private in some way. Although there is limited research concerning the ratio of private and public social media accounts, what does exist supports these assumptions. In 2009, the number of Twitter accounts set to “protected” sat at around 10% (Moore, 2009). Conversely, Facebook users have been observed increasingly restricting their personal information (Dey et al., 2012).

Facebook profiles are therefore designed to reflect users’ offline lives, known as “the real-name web” (Hogan, 2013:299) and “the “real-name” movement” (van der Nagel & Frith, 2015: Online). Facebook expects users to have one identity, use their real name, and share real photos to the extent that the site will delete accounts deemed deceptive (van der Nagel & Frith, 2015). Consequently, Facebook grants users a modicum of agency over their data in terms of privacy. Twitter, conversely, encourages little linkage to offline life. The site requires almost no personal information to create an account; while users can provide personal information, this is unnecessary. Therefore, accounts can be entirely detached from the ‘real’ people operating them. This lack of requirement for personal information means Twitter accounts are notably public and can only be partially private. Therefore, Twitter profiles and content are overwhelmingly orientated around public access.

This means that accounts with pseudonymised or fabricated personas are much more common on Twitter (Recuero et al., 2012; Highfield, 2016). Hogan (2013) discusses the potential benefits of operating such an account, arguing that it allows people to express themselves and explore their identity without consequence. However, Hogan also

acknowledges that certain people embody fabricated/pseudonymise personas to enact antisocial and harmful behaviours. Indeed, van der Nagel & Frith (2015) note that “the ability to comment under disposable identities... can encourage people to act in uncivil ways” (Online). Thus, the ease at which Twitter allows for the creation of accounts with false personas is important to highlight. It is quick and straightforward for someone to create a Twitter account for any purpose, including those with deceptive intentions. In combination, the lack of necessity for personal information, the emphasis on the public, and the ability to create accounts with pseudonymised or fabricated personas suggest that Twitter is easily accessible and its features beneficial for those aiming to spread problematic content deceptively.

## CONCLUSION

While Twitter shares some similarities with other platforms, such as infinite scrolling and the deployment of algorithms, it is unique in that communication is highly structured and deeply complex. This means content can spread quickly and widely in various ways, across different channels, to different types of users. Therefore, it is difficult to ascertain a tweet's potential audience size. Moreover, users are free to create fabricated identities, tailoring their Twitter accounts to a persona that suits their motivations for using the platform. Therefore, Twitter users have much more freedom to produce their identity creatively, are not encouraged to attach said identity to their offline selves, and the tweets they create can quickly spread to an immeasurable audience.

## SYNTHESIS OF THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

In reflecting on these three concepts, the contemporary prevalence and danger of visual disinformation can be contextualised. When considering the varying scope, definitions, and classifications of disinformation, this thesis concludes that visual disinformation constitutes image(s) and text used to spread inaccurate, false, or manipulated information designed to cause harm. It will always contain false or inaccurate information and often contain an element of truth. Thus, ‘true’ and ‘false’ cannot be viewed in strict, binary terms. Instead, there is a synergy between the two concepts to construct disinformation. For

disinformation to be effective, it must, at its core, stem from some form of truth, and this truth is then manipulated to paint a misleading picture of events.

This thesis also follows the approach that photographs cannot be considered objective representations of reality. While there is a long-established cultural association of photographs with truth and objectivity, this understanding has been applied to photographs and is not innately correct. The assumed objectivity of photographs can be disrupted by human intervention at every stage of a photograph's journey, from the process of taking the photograph to how the photograph is used and presented. Therefore, too many external influences are at play to consider photographs objective and reliable documents of reality. The only objective aspect of a photograph is what is physically captured when the photograph is taken. Any truth outside of this is subjective, lent legitimacy because it is 'innocented' by the photograph. This explains why photographs can be effective tools of disinformation. The photograph, seen as objective, serves as visual proof of the manipulated claim presented by the disinformation. This claim gains the assumed objectivity of the photograph, and so the claim is considered an objective interpretation of the photograph. Thus, visual disinformation can be highly veracious.

Visual disinformation often circulates within a context where evocative and emotional information spreads quickly, widely, and to various audiences. Twitter is constructed to keep people on the site by continually feeding them content because the platform is designed to provide information users are interested in seamlessly. Moreover, the complex communication structure on Twitter means certain content can spread exceptionally widely in a short space of time. Users are also able to easily mask themselves by creating pseudonymised personas.

In summary, visual disinformation is fundamentally built from something truthful. This can be very effective when the truth is visual evidence in the form of a photograph because

photographs have an ingrained, elevated, and assumed status as truth and evidence. The visual evidence then legitimises the false textual claim as it inherits the visual evidence's supposed objectivity. The constructed disinformation is then embedded in an online space where, because of its architecture and communicative capabilities, such content can spread so quickly and widely that the potential audience size is immeasurable. Each of these elements, when brought together, work towards explaining why visual disinformation, in particular, can be an exceptionally powerful method of spreading misleading information.

## CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY

### INTRODUCTION

The literature review chapter (Chapter 2) explored current methodological approaches to mis-/disinformation research. In general, methods are quite homogenous. Most research examining the phenomenon uses large, text-based datasets to investigate such topics as tracking and engagement using, for example, automated content analysis and network analysis methods. While this has generated valuable insight into the phenomenon in terms of, for example, how disinformation spreads and who its sharers are, it has also produced a notably limited perspective on mis-/disinformation, which in itself is a disparate and complex issue. Markedly, approaches of this nature do not prioritise richness and nuance, which consequently do not reflect the density and diversity of the phenomenon.

This thesis, therefore, approaches mis-/disinformation from an interdisciplinary and mixed-methods perspective to produce a different kind of knowledge, which in turn produces different implications and questions about the topic. The overall methodological aim, which reflects the research aim and questions of the thesis, is to produce a richer and more nuanced knowledge set about an example of visual disinformation. This has meant taking a different approach to what is conventional in mis-/disinformation research, in which the photograph used to spread disinformation and its journey is the central component that drives the research. There are examples of similar methodological approaches used to examine visual content within the disciplines with which this thesis overlaps. For example, in *Journalism Studies*, Perlmutter & Wagner's (2004) research analysed an iconic photojournalistic image taken during the 2001 G8 summit in Genoa. The approach adopted by this thesis to examining the Westminster Bridge photograph is, therefore, not unprecedented within research fields connected to this thesis. However, it is notably uncommon in the specific field of mis-/disinformation research.

Consequently, in reviewing and reflecting on methodological approaches, a case study-based mixed-method approach was determined to be the most appropriate. The approach

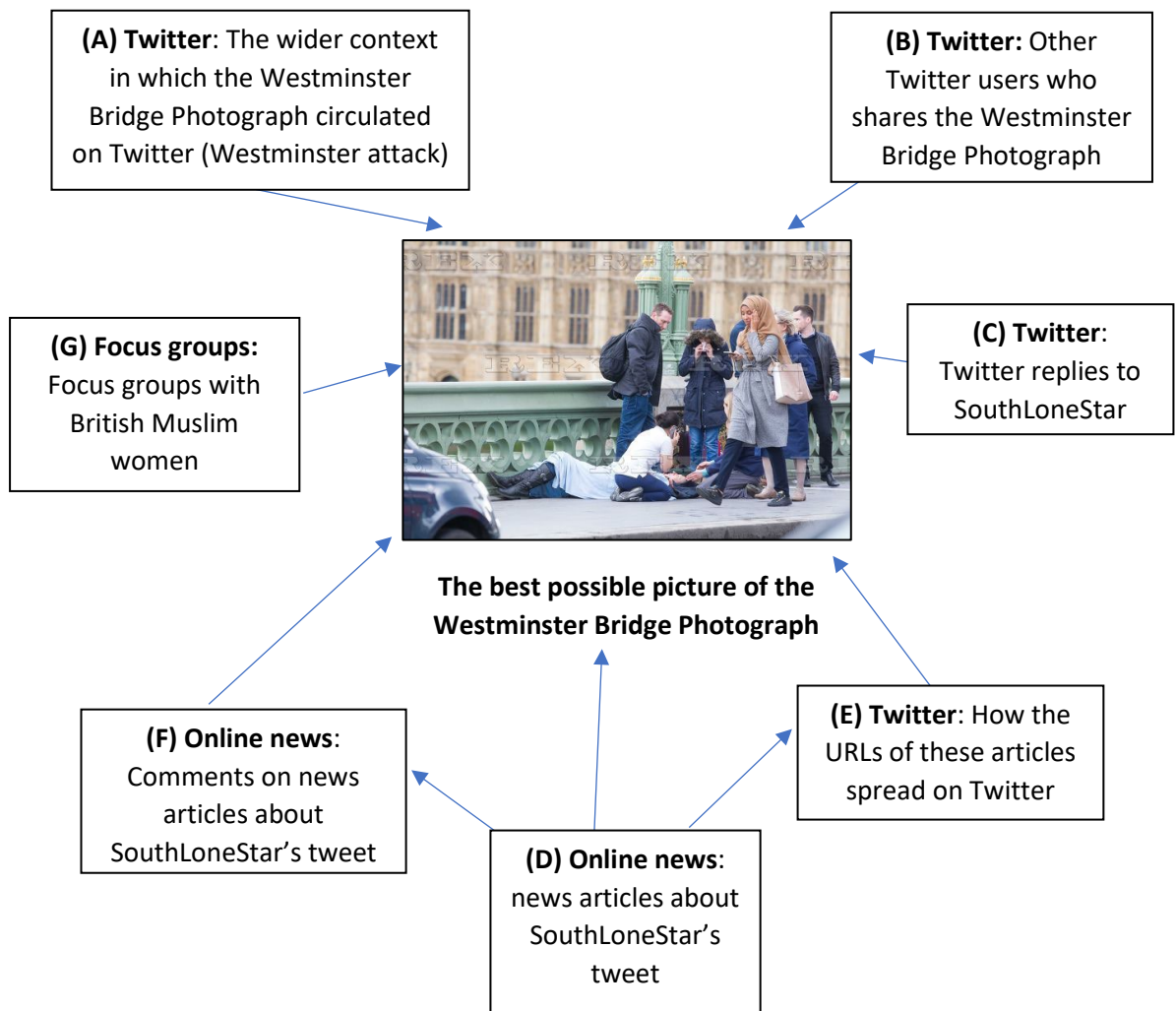
developed for the methodology of this thesis also aligns with the Case Study-Mixed Methods Design (CS-MM) approach, as described by Guetterman & Fetters (2018). The case study is the journey of the Westminster Bridge photograph, and mixed methods are utilised to gain knowledge about this case. This means that the case study design is intrinsic to the project as the single case itself is the main interest of the research. To gain knowledge about the case, mixed methods units of analysis are used as an understanding of the case must come from multiple levels, granted through a combination of quantitative and qualitative analysis of data from multiple sources (905).

Therefore, the approach and alignment with CS-MM design are used to focus on one piece of visual disinformation from various standpoints and data sources, creating deep and nuanced knowledge. This consequently granted a level of triangulation, adding further rigour and depth. Triangulation of data also helped mitigate the issue of missing data crucial to the case study as much as possible. Twitter removed the SouthLoneStar account in November 2017, and thus the account and its data are entirely inaccessible beyond screenshots and captures from the Wayback Machine<sup>25</sup>. As the central data of investigation is unavailable, the focus became the collection and examination of a variety of related data, thus producing the most rounded picture possible of the journey of the Westminster Bridge photograph. This is a benefit of using a case study to examine an online phenomenon; boundaries are often difficult to define with online data, as the digital often bleeds across different sites and profiles. A case study can help mitigate this messiness because they “create bounded systems to help organize data, thereby providing cohesive, detailed narratives”, creating a “holistic system that capture the complexity and richness of that

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<sup>25</sup> These snapshots only provide a limited overview of what was on the first page of the account at the specific time the snapshot was taken. Moreover, because the event took place several years ago, some relevant Twitter data will have been deleted or become inaccessible; a percentage of users will have deleted tweets and/or accounts or chosen to protect their tweets. These represents a data ‘blackhole’ so to speak. Missing data is a common issue across a variety of different types of research (Fichman & Cummings, 2003), in particular, archival research (Smith, 2004; Gidley, 2018). This thesis in part archival research due to the secondary nature of the online data collected and online spaces being considered as “archives of the everyday” (Harris, 2017:46). There is consequently a further benefit for engaging with a CS-MM approach as it emphasises the collection of data from multiple sources, thus granting triangulation and working to omit the issues of missing data as much as possible (Fidel, 2008; Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Lune & Berg, 2017; Mills & Mills, 2017).

system” (Gallagher, 2019:2). As the Westminster Bridge photograph can only be examined through related sources and not the primary data source (SouthLoneStar’s Twitter account), there is a risk of being overwhelmed with how many sources, sites, and accounts can be considered related to the journey of the photograph. Therefore, Gallagher’s (2019) method of establishing spatial, temporal, and relationship data boundaries when mapping out data sources for the investigated case was considered. Doing so produced the following data source framework shown in Figure 6.



**FIGURE 6: THE DATA SOURCE FRAMEWORK FOR THE CASE STUDY**

Data were collected from three main sources: Twitter, online news, and focus groups. More specifically, within these three data sources are seven separate datasets (**A-G**) related to SouthLoneStar's Westminster Bridge tweet and the journey of the Westminster Bridge photograph<sup>26</sup>. Each of the seven datasets was also designed to address four of the five research questions<sup>27</sup>:

- A) Twitter: The wider context in which the Westminster Bridge Photograph circulated on Twitter (Westminster Bridge attack).
  - Collect tweets from users who responded to the Westminster Bridge attack to identify the wider context in which the tweet spread, also allowing for the analysis of images shared in the aftermath of the Westminster attack and by whom (**RQ1**).
- B) Twitter: Other Twitter users who shared the Westminster Bridge Photograph.
  - Collect tweets from other users who also shared a version of the Westminster Bridge photograph to gauge responses to SouthLoneStar's disinformation campaign and the Westminster Bridge photograph. This also provides insight into how the photograph became so prominent (**RQ2 & RQ3**).
- C) Twitter: Twitter replies to SouthLoneStar.
  - Collect tweets from users who replied to SouthLoneStar's tweet to gauge user responses to SouthLoneStar's disinformation campaign and the Westminster Bridge photograph (**RQ2 & RQ3**).
- D) Online news: news articles about SouthLoneStar's tweet.
  - Identify online news articles about SouthLoneStar's tweet to determine how the UK news media presented the photograph and the tweet, allowing for further insight into how Westminster Bridge Photograph became such a prominent news image (**RQ2 & RQ3**)<sup>28</sup>.

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<sup>26</sup> The literature review was a further method used to assist in the analysis of the case study and the addressing of the issue related to missing data. However, this section solely pertains to methods which involved the collection of participant data.

<sup>27</sup> Research Question 5 (*How might the thesis' examination of the Westminster Bridge case study enable the further development of approaches for the critical analysis of visual disinformation?*) involves a review of the thesis as a whole once all data has been collected, analysed, and synthesised. Therefore, none of the data sources specifically address this question, although the methodological approach its findings do contribute to addressing this research question.

<sup>28</sup> As noted previously, disinformation research tends to exclusively involve the collection and examination of social media data, despite many prominent pieces of disinformation often moving to and from social and mainstream media, i.e., the "hybrid media systems" (Colley et al., 2020:89). This is evident with the case study of this thesis. Therefore, mainstream media data was also collected and analysed for this thesis, as ignoring



- E) Twitter: How the URLs of these articles spread on Twitter.
- Observe the spread of the URLs of these news articles on Twitter to determine the photograph's journey as a news photograph (**RQ2 & RQ3**).
- F) Online news: Comments on news articles about SouthLoneStar's tweet.
- Collect a sample of comments from the identified online news articles that reported SouthLoneStar's tweets to gauge responses to SouthLoneStar's disinformation campaign and the Westminster Bridge photograph (**RQ3**).
- G) Focus groups: Focus groups with British Muslim women.
- Conduct focus groups with British Muslim women to determine how communities negatively depicted by a visual disinformation campaign like the Westminster Bridge Photograph understand, respond to, and process visual disinformation (**RQ4**).

The culmination of the findings from these seven data sources, in conjunction with findings from the literature review, are consequently used to answer the overarching aim of the thesis and **RQ5**.

Mis-/disinformation research typically collects and analyses exclusively social media data as this is where the phenomenon is produced and initially circulates. However, the depth of the online methodological approach is how this thesis' approach differs from existing research examining mis-/disinformation. The literature review highlights that current mis-/disinformation research typically collects data from one data source and uses one analysis method. The methodology for this thesis not only collects the data from multiple online sources, as detailed in Figure 6, but there is a layered approach to the quantitative analysis in which the content analysis is performed on data multiple times from a multitude of angles and topics, and so a variety of findings from the data emerge. This deepens the quantitative methodology and produces more sophisticated findings. Moreover, data is also analysed qualitatively through thematic and semiotic analysis.

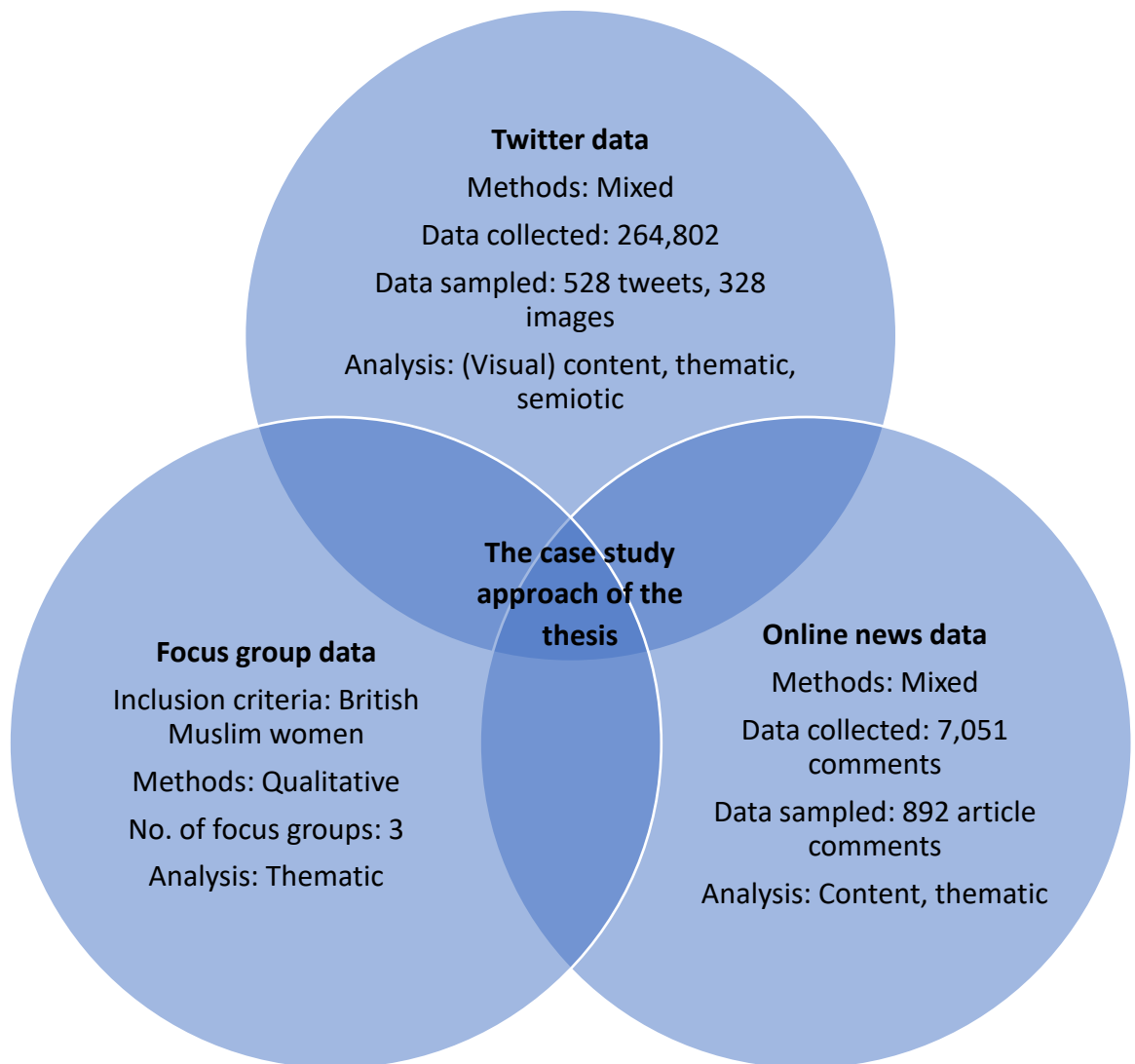
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this data source would only provide a limited picture of the photograph's journey and SouthLoneStar's disinformation campaign. This was also a further means of remediating the issue of missing data.

As the case study of the journey of the Westminster Bridge photograph emphasises depth, breadth, and richness, which is accordingly labour-intensive and time-consuming, while over 250,000 pieces of data from Twitter and online news were collected, generally, the top 100 retweeted tweets from each dataset, and ~10% of article comments, were sampled and analysed. This is a notable limitation of the methodological approach used as producing the desired richness and nuance takes time and considerable effort, and so sample sizes need to be relatively small. This differs from most mis-/disinformation research, which often collects and analyses large datasets. However, as the aims of the thesis require a deep and rich methodology, smaller sample sizes are required.

The case study also involves conducting focus groups, specifically with British Muslim women, as the SouthLoneStar's presentation of the woman in the Westminster Bridge photograph was Islamophobic. What separates disinformation from misinformation is that it is considered misleading content intentionally created and shared to cause some form of harm. This suggests that disinformation has damaging effects and consequences. Yet, mis-/disinformation research rarely speaks to media consumers and potentially affected parties, often exclusively examining social media data. Therefore, there is an opportunity to understand what could be learned when speaking to people about their experiences and responses to visual disinformation. The focus groups were severely hampered by the COVID-19 pandemic, which is discussed in more detail later in the chapter. However, briefly, while it was aimed that six focus groups would take place, a total of three were conducted within the confines and consequences of the pandemic. While there was, therefore, a significant reduction in the desired number of focus groups, the central knowledge aim of the focus groups was not representation but a means of testing what new knowledge could be learned and how research could be strengthened and nuanced when stepping outside typical methods when examining mis-/disinformation. The focus groups were also analysed thematically to reinforce cohesion between the three main data sources. The value CS-MM design is the merging of quantitative and qualitative results to gauge the extent to which they "confirm, contradict, or related", which in turn provides a more "complete case understanding" (Guetterman & Fetters, 2018:915). The three

components of this thesis must not be separated or considered distinct stages, instead working together to produce overall, integrated findings. A breakdown of this case study approach of the thesis is illustrated below in Figure 7.



**FIGURE 7: THE CASE STUDY APPROACH OF THE THESIS**

## LITERATURE REVIEW & CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The first stage of analysing the case study was undertaking a literature review and constructing a conceptual framework. This assisted in determining where the thesis was located in terms of disciplines and within the field of mis-/disinformation research. There are many benefits to utilising a literature review in research, as outlined by Kamler & Thomson (2011). Literature reviews allow for identifying and exploring developments in the research field, theoretical bases, major debates, and key pieces of text, all of which can significantly strengthen research. They also allow researchers to identify existing research to build upon it and justify the rationale of the research by identifying knowledge gaps in the field. These allow researchers to understand the contribution to knowledge their research will make.

Consequently, a literature review was completed. Due to the interdisciplinary nature of the thesis, the relevant research areas were outlined to get an idea of where the relevant literature would be found. A long-term, systematic search was performed, with each piece of literature and its source evaluated. As this collection grew, themes across the literature began to emerge, along with the ability to determine leading debates across the fields and research gaps the thesis would address. These trends assisted in formulating the ultimate structure of the literature review. As the topic of investigation is highly contemporary, new research continued to emerge throughout the completion of the thesis, and so leading sources and publications were monitored, with relevant literature then included in the literature review where appropriate. The literature review was also completed in correlation with a conceptual framework. This assisted in understanding how the thesis approached the concepts of disinformation, photographic veracity, and Twitter as a vehicle for disinformation, which aided in constructing the thesis' approach to and understanding of online visual disinformation.

## TWITTER & ONLINE NEWS

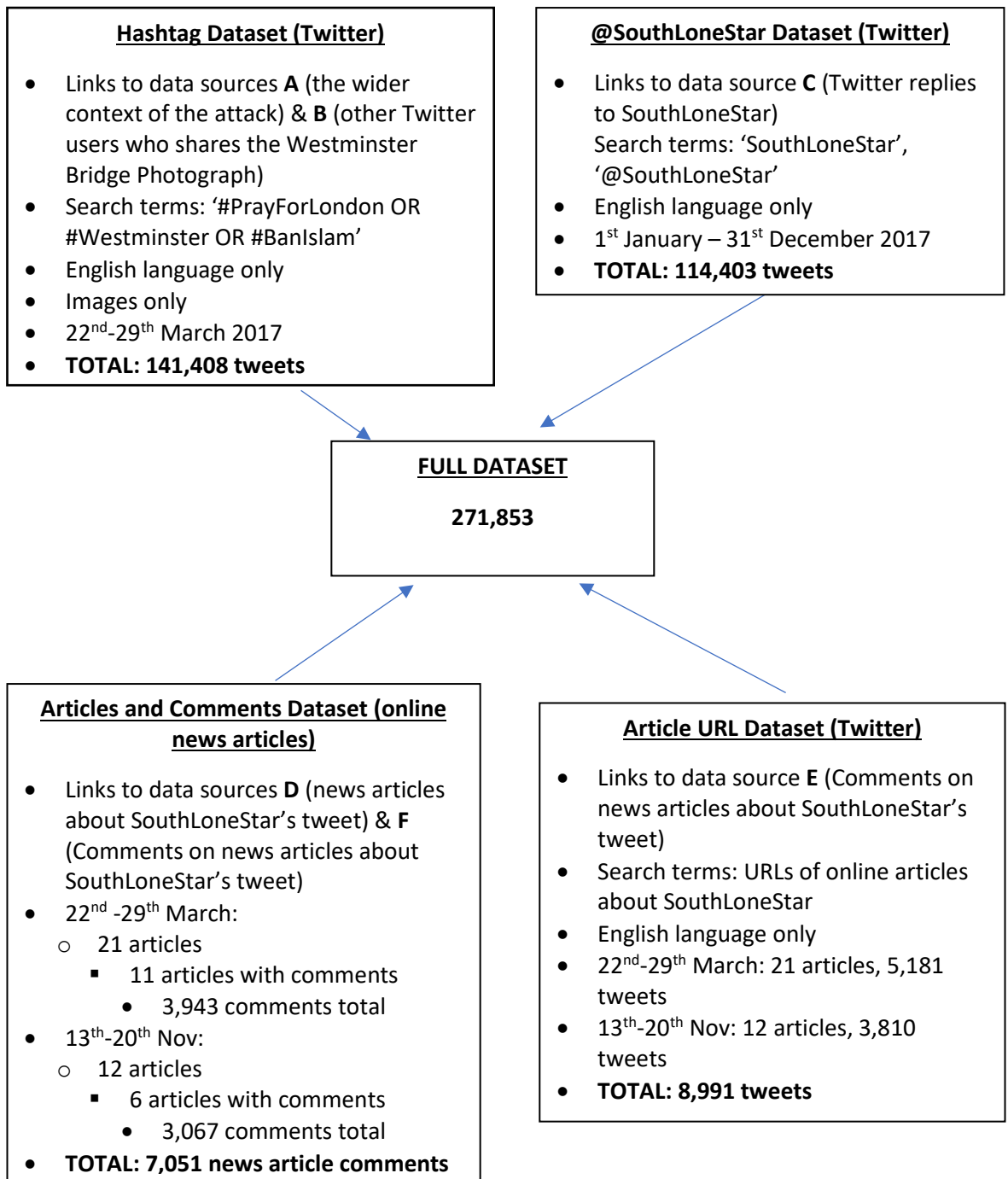
The data from the two online sources, Twitter and online news, was collected and analysed before the focus groups. This was because these findings were used to guide the direction and design of the focus groups, providing areas of discussion that otherwise may have been unknown if this data had not been analysed first. This provided a deep contextual understanding of the case, which worked to support and strengthen the focus groups.

## DATA COLLECTION

Twitter data was collected using *Pulsar*, an online social analytics software that can collect publicly available social media data. Online news articles were collected manually using a combination of Google News and Lexis Nexis' News Library<sup>29</sup>. In correspondence with the data sources framework (Figure 6), four separate datasets were produced from the Twitter and online news data (highlighted below in Figure 8), each of which linked with one or more of the six online data sources (A-F).

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<sup>29</sup> Pulsar is capable of tracking certain keywords, both in real time and historically. These keywords can be hashtags, singular words, phrases, or URLs, depending on the aims and objectives of the research (DiCesare, 2019; Jamie, 2019). Once the desired keyword(s) are inputted into the tool, the search can then be customised further, for example by country, date, language, and media type. The tool has full access to Twitter's archived Search API, meaning all public tweets and account information can be collected (Hawes, 2015). Once Pulsar launches a search, the data can then be extracted and downloaded as an Excel document, which contains all the metadata from the collected tweets, such as date and time, content, URL, user location, number of followers, likes, retweets, and user bio. Pulsar therefore served as an ideal tool for collecting the desired historical Twitter data. While Pulsar is able to collect news articles based on keywords, there was a concern that some articles may be unknowingly missed by an automated search, and so manual collected was deemed most appropriate.



**FIGURE 8: THE DATA COLLECTION FRAMEWORK OF THE TWITTER & ONLINE NEWS DATA**

### **Hashtag dataset (Twitter)**

This dataset corresponded with data sources **A** (the wider context in which the Westminster Bridge Photograph circulated on Twitter (the Westminster Bridge attack)) and **B** (other Twitter users who shared a version of the Westminster Bridge Photograph). ‘#PrayForLondon’, ‘#Westminster’, and ‘#BanIslam’ (the hashtags SouthLoneStar used in the Westminster Bridge tweet) were used as the keywords for this search. The search was limited to tweets that shared images and was set between 22<sup>nd</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup> March 2017 (the day of and week following the Westminster attack) and returned 141,407 tweets.

### **@SouthLoneStar dataset (Twitter)**

This dataset corresponded with data source **C** (Twitter replies to SouthLoneStar). The keywords ‘SouthLoneStar’ and ‘@SouthLoneStar’ were used in this search, which was also limited to the dates 1<sup>st</sup> January and 31<sup>st</sup> December 2017. This provided an overview of how the SouthLoneStar account was interacted with throughout the year to draw a comparison. This search returned 114,403 tweets.

### **Article URLs dataset (Twitter)**

This dataset corresponded with data source **E** (how article URLs spread on Twitter). Using URLs of the March and November articles as keywords, a search was set up for the two relevant months, the first between the 22<sup>nd</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup> of March 2017 for the March articles and the 13<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> of November 2017 for the November articles. The March search returned 5,181 tweets; the November search returned 3,810 tweets, equalling 8,991 tweets.

### **Articles and comments dataset (online news)**

This dataset corresponded with data sources **D** (news articles about SouthLoneStar’s tweet) and **F** (comments on news articles about SouthLoneStar’s tweet). Relevant articles were identified using the search terms ‘Muslim Woman AND Westminster’ or ‘Muslim AND

Westminster', accompanied by 'Southlonestar' between 22<sup>nd</sup>-29<sup>th</sup> March 2017 and 13<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> November 2017. The returned searches were reviewed, and any articles from a UK newspaper or news website that reported on SouthLoneStar were logged into an Excel document. These searches returned 21 relevant UK news articles in March and 12 in November. 11 of the 21 articles collected from March allowed users to comment (Daily Mirror x3, Daily Mail x3, Independent x2, Yahoo! News, Manchester Evening News, LBC) and 6 of the 12 articles collected in November allowed users to (Daily Mirror, Daily Mail, Independent, Yahoo! News, Evening Standard, and Birmingham Mail). These comments were collected using NVivo's NCapture Chrome extension, which captures website screenshots.



## SAMPLING

Once the Twitter and online news data had been collected, it was sampled for analysis. The sampling strategy is shown below in Figure 9.

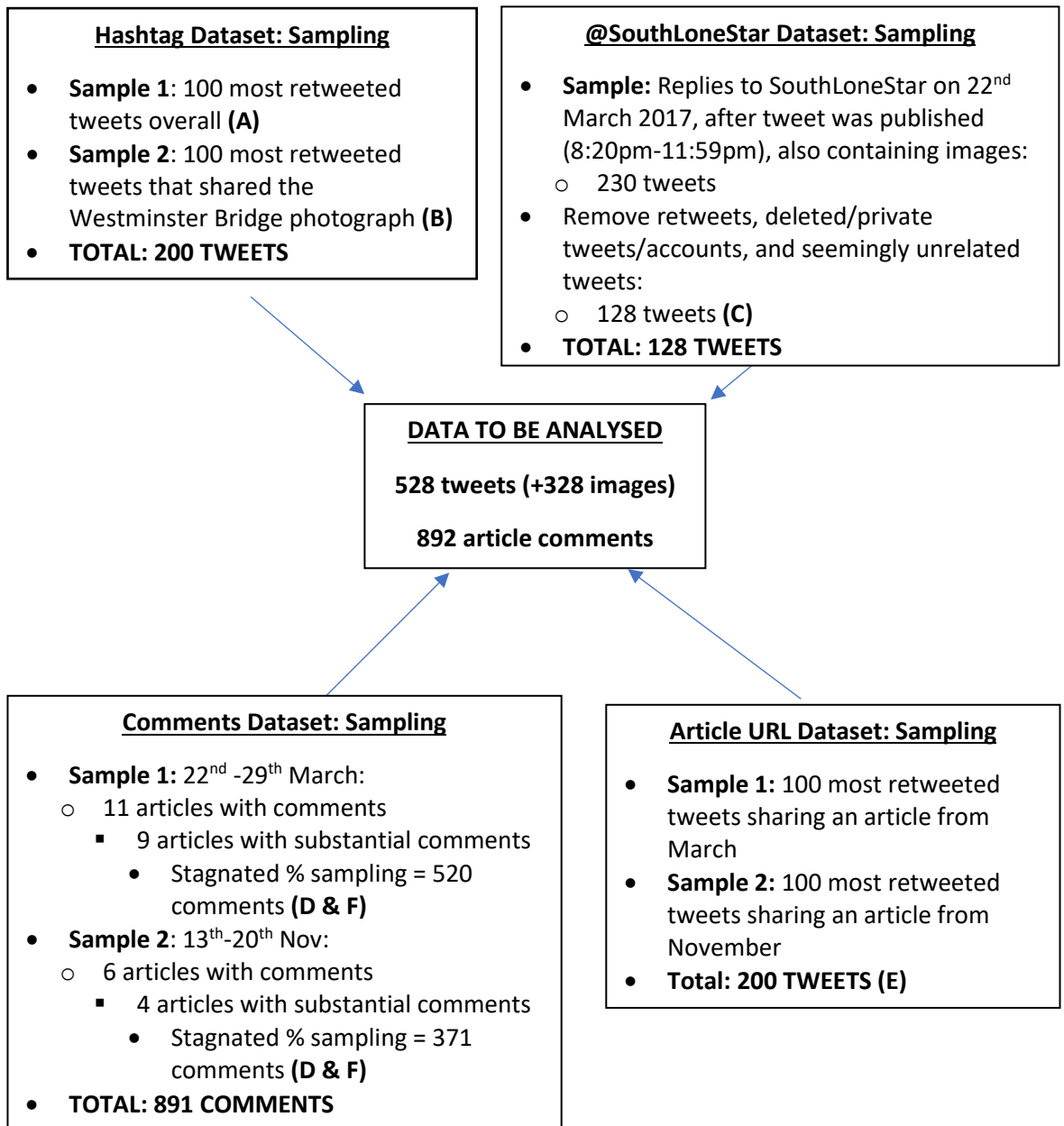


FIGURE 9: THE SAMPLING FRAMEWORK OF THE TWITTER & ONLINE NEWS DATA

Sampling size generally depends on research objectives, but Rose (2016) suggests that variation could be used as a guide when analysing images. A relatively small sample should suffice to provide an appropriate overview if the dataset has little to no variation across

the images. The images collected for this thesis are generally homogenous as they primarily examine variations of the same image or images related to a specific event/topic. Therefore, it was determined that a comparatively small percentage of each dataset would be sufficient to provide representative insight into the datasets as a whole. There are several ways to sample social media data, and it was decided that the data would be sampled based on the number of retweets. Retweets “order tweets for the purposes of evaluating Twitter users’ contribution to event-following” (Rogers, 2014, p xix) and represents “both an affirmation of the content... and a way of spreading the conversation more widely” (Halavais, 2014, p. 35). Therefore, ranking tweets by retweets order them hierarchically in terms of significance. Thus, these tweets would likely be emblematic of the Twitter conversation about the Westminster Bridge attack, SouthLoneStar, and the Westminster Bridge photograph<sup>30</sup>. In more detail, the sampling strategies for each dataset were:

### **Hashtags (Twitter)**

Two samples were taken from this dataset. For **A** (the wider context of the Westminster Bridge photograph), the 100 most retweeted tweets from the whole dataset were sampled for analysis.

For **B** (other users who also shared the Westminster Bridge photograph), the dataset was manually reviewed for instances in which the Westminster Bridge photograph, or a version of the photograph, was shared. Firstly, the top 1,500 most retweeted were examined manually. Pulsar tags keywords from the tweets; therefore, the keyword “Muslim” was searched beyond this manual review. Pulsar also uses AI to tag images, and it became apparent that “government building” applied to most occurrences of the photograph. Although Pulsar’s ability to accurately tag images is limited, this provided a pragmatic means of identifying further occurrences of the photograph. It is, however, acknowledged

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<sup>30</sup> The retweet number returned by Pulsar is sometimes slightly inaccurate. To ensure the retweet number was reflective of actual retweets, the top 200 most retweeted tweets based on Pulsar’s metadata were manually reviewed, and their actual retweet number was recorded. This number was then used to sample the top 100 most retweeted of each relevant Twitter dataset.

that some uses of the Westminster Bridge photograph from this data may have been inadvertently overlooked. Subsequently, using this method, 114 tweets were identified. Retweet numbers were then reviewed, and the 100 most retweeted tweets were sampled.

### **@SouthLoneStar (Twitter)**

A significant issue with sampling this dataset was knowing which tweets were specific responses to SouthLoneStar's Westminster Bridge photograph tweet. As the SouthLoneStar account is deleted, the replies do not record which of SouthLoneStar's tweets was being responded to by users. Therefore, a purposeful sampling strategy, combined with the researcher's judgements, was used to generate a sample of tweets that was likely in to reply to the Westminster Bridge photograph tweet, resulting in a sample of 128 tweets<sup>31</sup>.

### **Article URLs (Twitter)**

For the article URLs dataset, the 100 most retweeted tweets from March and the 100 most retweeted tweets from November were sampled for analysis, totalling 200 tweets.

### **UK news articles and comments (online news articles)**

Of the 21 articles from March that reported on SouthLoneStar's tweet, 11 had comments, which totalled 3,964. The below (Table 1) shows a breakdown of the news sources, the number of articles from these sources, and the number of comments per article.

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<sup>31</sup> Firstly, the timeframe for sampling was limited to tweets that had been published between 20:19 (the time of SouthLoneStar's tweet) and 23:59 on 22nd March 2017, making it more likely that replies would have been in response to the Westminster Bridge photograph tweet. Limiting this to tweets that also shared images reduced the sample to 230. These tweets were then reviewed manually, and any tweets that seemed unrelated to SouthLoneStar's Westminster Bridge photograph tweet, retweets, and now removed/privatised tweets were removed. This reduced the sample to 128 tweets that appeared to be in response to the Westminster Bridge photograph tweet. Only 27 of these tweets were retweeted at least once, the remaining 101 had no retweets. This made it difficult to reduce the sample to 100 based on retweets, as only ~20% of the tweets had been retweeted at all. As the sample was only slightly larger than 100 tweets, and to avoid losing insight if the sample was reduced further via randomised sampling, all 128 tweets were analysed.

News source	Article	Article summary	No. of comments	Total per source
Daily Mail	<b>ARTICLE 1:</b> 'Who is the real monster?' Internet turns on trolls who criticised 'indifferent' Muslim woman seen walking through terror attack	Responses to SouthLoneStar's tweet	622	2562
	<b>ARTICLE 2:</b> 'I was devastated by witnessing aftermath of a numbing terror attack': Muslim woman who was vilified for 'walking past Westminster Bridge horror' reveals she HAD helped the victims and was phoning her family to let them know she was safe	Muslim woman's response	1890	
	<b>ARTICLE 3:</b> 'Had they stopped he would be alive today': 'Angel of Woolwich' hits out at onlookers for not helping Lee Rigby... as Muslim woman is trolled for 'walking past Westminster horror'	Muslim woman's response	50	
Independent	<b>ARTICLE 1:</b> London attack: Woman in hijab pictured on Westminster Bridge was 'traumatised not indifferent', photographer says: 'Her behaviour was completely in line with everyone else on the bridge, but you're not assuming others are callously ignoring the scenario'	Photographer's response	334	586
	<b>ARTICLE 2:</b> London attack: Muslim woman photographed on Westminster Bridge during terror incident speaks out: The woman was vilified on social media after some said it looked like she was walking past the wounded without concern	Muslim woman's response	252	
LBC	<b>ARTICLE 1:</b> Twitter Outrage Over Muslim Woman Walking Past Injured Person	Photographer's response	4	4
Manchester Evening News	<b>ARTICLE 1:</b> 'Devastated' Muslim woman accused of 'walking by dying man' after London terror attack speaks out: "Not only have I been devastated by witnessing the aftermath of a shocking and numbing terror attack, I've also had to deal with the shock of finding my picture plastered all over social media"	Muslim woman's response	66	66
Mirror	<b>ARTICLE 1:</b> People are making alarming assumptions about this photo of 'woman in headscarf walking by dying man': The image was shared with a worrying caption, which was swiftly condemned	Responses to SouthLoneStar's tweet	64	177
	<b>ARTICLE 2:</b> Photographer reveals what was actually happening in photo of 'woman in headscarf walking by dying man': Jamie Lorrigan's image showed a distressed	Photographer's response	84	

	woman - wearing a hijab and holding a mobile phone in her hand - walking along Westminster Bridge as people in the background helped a victim on the floor			
	<b>ARTICLE 3:</b> 'Devastated' Muslim woman accused of 'walking by dying man' after terror attack speaks out	Muslim woman's response	29	
Yahoo! News UK	<b>ARTICLE 1:</b> Muslim woman pictured on Westminster Bridge asks media to stop using her image	Muslim woman's response	548	548
Total				3943

**TABLE 1: A BREAKDOWN OF THE MARCH ARTICLES**

Of the 12 articles from November 6 had comments, which totalled 3,087. The below (Table 2) shows a breakdown of the news sources, the number of articles from these sources, and the number of comments per article.

News source	Article headline	Article summary	No. of comments	Total per source
Birmingham Mail	<b>ARTICLE 1:</b> Man who posted Muslim woman 'ignoring Westminster terror victims' picture was Russian troll	SouthLoneStar was an IRA account	2	2
Daily Mail	<b>ARTICLE 1:</b> Revealed: 'Fake news' Twitter account that posted photo of 'Muslim woman ignoring the Westminster terror attack' was run from RUSSIA	SouthLoneStar was an IRA account	946	946
Evening Standard	<b>ARTICLE 1:</b> Photographer reveals how his photo of Muslim woman 'ignoring' Westminster attack was hijacked by Russian trolls	SouthLoneStar was an IRA account	3	3
Independent	<b>ARTICLE 1:</b> Man who posted image of Muslim woman 'ignoring Westminster terror victims' was a Russian troll: The account, SouthLoneStar, tweeted a picture of a woman in a hijab walking past a victim lying on the ground and incorrectly claimed she was unaffected	SouthLoneStar was an IRA account	217	217
Mirror	<b>ARTICLE 1:</b> Russia's role in photo of 'Muslim woman ignoring Westminster terror attack victims' revealed: Twitter user SouthLoneStar shared an image of a distressed woman, who was wearing a hijab, walking past victims while appearing to look down at a mobile phone	SouthLoneStar was an IRA account	35	35

Yahoo! News UK	<b>ARTICLE 1:</b> Man who shared image of Muslim 'ignoring Westminster terror victims' was Russian troll	SouthLoneStar was an IRA account	1864	1864
			Total	3067

**TABLE 2: A BREAKDOWN OF THE NOVEMBER ARTICLES**

When reviewing these articles, it became apparent that four news sources published articles which received significant attention via comments: *Daily Mail*, *Independent*, *Mirror*, and *Yahoo! News UK*. It was consequently decided that these four sources would be sampled. This meant that comments from 9 articles were sampled from March (Table 3) and 4 from November (Table 4).

News source	Article	Article summary	No. of comments	Total per source
Daily Mail	<b>ARTICLE 1</b>	Responses to SouthLoneStar's tweet	622	2562
	<b>ARTICLE 2</b>	Muslim woman's response	1890	
	<b>ARTICLE 3</b>	Muslim woman's response	50	
Independent	<b>ARTICLE 1</b>	Photographer's response	334	586
	<b>ARTICLE 2</b>	Muslim woman's response	252	
Mirror	<b>ARTICLE 1</b>	Photographer's response	64	177
	<b>ARTICLE 2</b>	Muslim woman's response	84	
	<b>ARTICLE 3</b>	Responses to SouthLoneStar's tweet	29	
Yahoo! News UK	<b>ARTICLE 1</b>	Photographer's response	548	548
Total				3873

**TABLE 3: THE MARCH ARTICLES THAT WERE SAMPLED FOR COMMENTS**

News source	Article	Article summary	No. of comments	Total per source
Daily Mail	<b>ARTICLE 1</b>	SouthLoneStar was an IRA account	946	946
Independent	<b>ARTICLE 1</b>	SouthLoneStar was an IRA account	217	217
Mirror	<b>ARTICLE 1</b>	SouthLoneStar was an IRA account	35	35
Yahoo! News UK	<b>ARTICLE 1</b>	SouthLoneStar was an IRA account	1864	1864
Total				3082

**TABLE 4: THE NOVEMBER ARTICLES THAT WERE SAMPLED FOR COMMENTS**

There was a significant disparity between the number of comments across articles. Sampling was performed on a gradient to mitigate this. Sampling needed to reflect the

varying number of comments per each article, but not to the extent that so little would be sampled from the articles with fewer comments or that too much would be sampled from the articles with many comments. Consequently, the sample sizes were staggered depending on the number of comments to produce a manageable sample from each article which would be as representative as possible of all comments (Table 5):

Number of article comments	Percentage sampled	Number of articles that fall into this category
Less than 150	30%	6
150 to 1500	15%	5
1500+	10%	2

**TABLE 5: STAGGERED SAMPLING STRATEGY FOR ARTICLE COMMENTS**

Per this plan, the comments were sampled as follows (Tables 6 & 7):

MARCH News source	Article	Article summary	No. of comments	Percentage sampled	Sample size
Daily Mail	<b>ARTICLE 1</b>	Responses to SouthLoneStar's tweet	622	15%	93
	<b>ARTICLE 2</b>	Muslim woman's response	1890	10%	189
	<b>ARTICLE 3</b>	Muslim woman's response	50	30%	15
Independent	<b>ARTICLE 1</b>	Photographer's response	346	15%	50
	<b>ARTICLE 2</b>	Muslim woman's response	261	15%	38
Mirror	<b>ARTICLE 1</b>	Photographer's response	64	30%	19
	<b>ARTICLE 2</b>	Muslim woman's response	84	30%	25
	<b>ARTICLE 3</b>	Responses to SouthLoneStar's tweet	29	30%	9
Yahoo! News UK	<b>ARTICLE 1</b>	Photographer's response	548	15%	82
Total					520

**TABLE 6: COMMENT SAMPLING FROM MARCH ARTICLES**

NOVEMBER News source	Article	Article summary	No. of comments	Percentage sampled	Sample size
Daily Mail	<b>ARTICLE 1</b>	SouthLoneStar was an IRA account	946	15%	142
Independent	<b>ARTICLE 1</b>	SouthLoneStar was an IRA account	217	15%	33
Mirror	<b>ARTICLE 1</b>	SouthLoneStar was an IRA account	35	30%	11
Yahoo! News UK	<b>ARTICLE 1</b>	SouthLoneStar was an IRA account	1864	100%	186
Total					371

**TABLE 7: COMMENT SAMPLING FROM NOVEMBER ARTICLES**

~13% of all March comments and ~12% of all November comments. These were deemed to be appropriate samples across the dataset. Comments were sampled in the order they were posted, so the oldest comments were collected first<sup>32</sup>. Irrelevant comments, such as spam, were not sampled as they would have no analytical value.

#### DATA ANALYSIS

The analytical methodology for the Twitter and online news data was layered, designed to increasingly interrogate the data in more detail as the analysis deepened. This involved using both quantitative and qualitative methods, starting with broad, quantitative analysis and moving progressively into more detailed qualitative analysis depending on the desired depth of understanding. The engagement with both qualitative and quantitative is “able to generate *better understandings*”, resulting in “elaborate and comprehensive understandings of complex social phenomena” (Greene et al., 2011:260). As this thesis aims to interrogate the case study intensely and extensively, this analytical approach was felt the most appropriate means of achieving this, as it scrutinises the data in various ways using several analytical traditions.

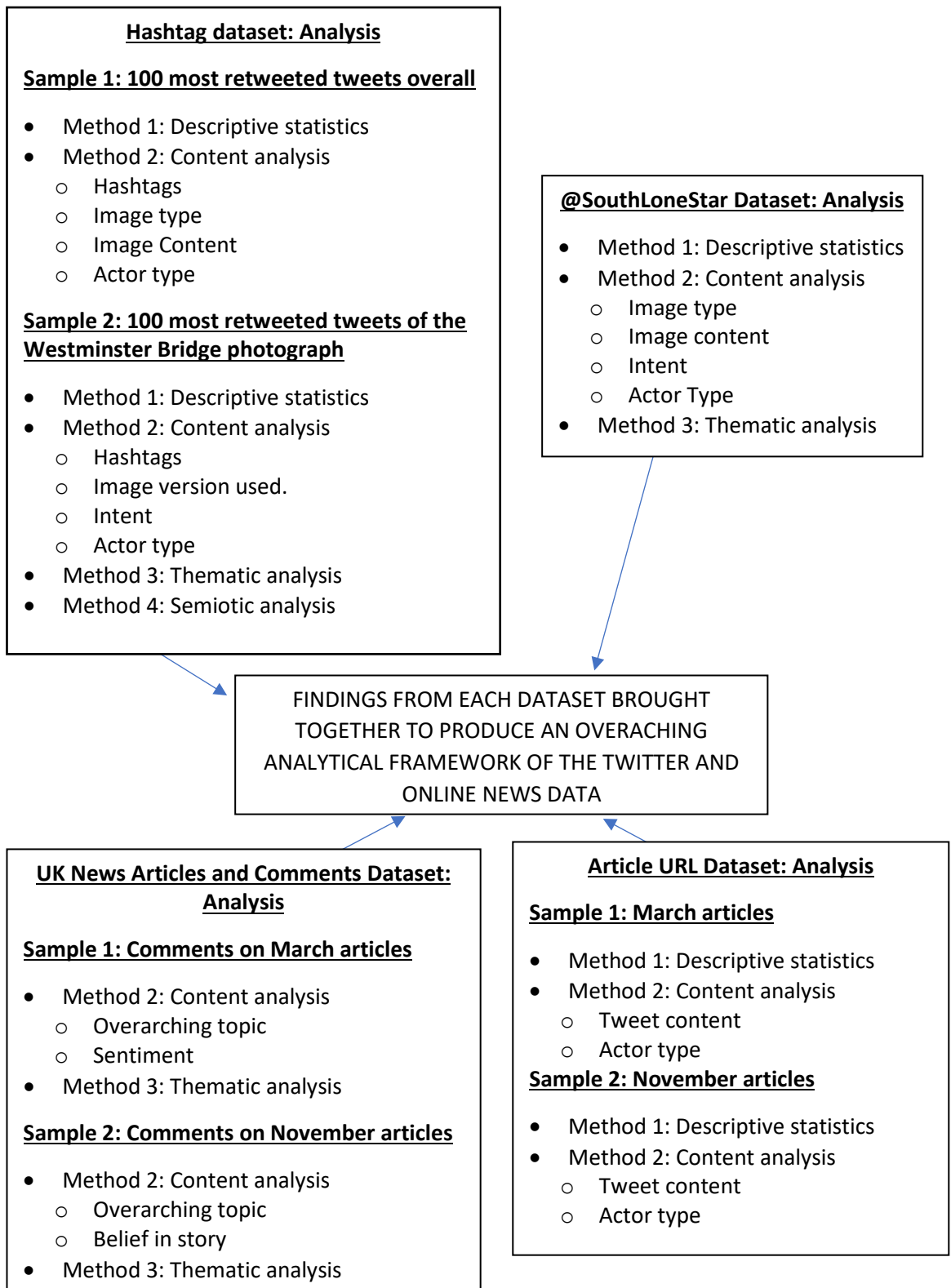
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<sup>32</sup> Replies to original comments were collected, but only the first three replies were sampled per comment. This was because some original comments had over ten replies, which, in some cases, would take up a significant portion of the sample. Therefore, to maintain variety and not limit significant portions of the data to specific conversations/topics, the number of replies collected per original comment were restricted.



This approach subsequently meant that four different analytical methods were used for the Twitter and online data (see Figure 10 below):

1. **Method 1: Descriptive statistics** – using metadata to provide a macro-overview of the data before examining content.
2. **Method 2: (Visual) content analysis** – systematically organising data into categories based on primarily inductively developed code frames.
3. **Method 3: Thematic analysis** – derive deeper meaning from the data in more nuanced ways, which cannot be achieved with quantitative analysis.
4. **Method 4: (Social) semiotic analysis** – explicitly performed on the original Westminster Bridge photograph and a select few different versions of the photograph. The examination of visual forms to identify signs that tie to broader political and social conventions and discourses, thus granting great depth.



**FIGURE 10: ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK FOR THE TWITTER & ONLINE NEWS DATA**

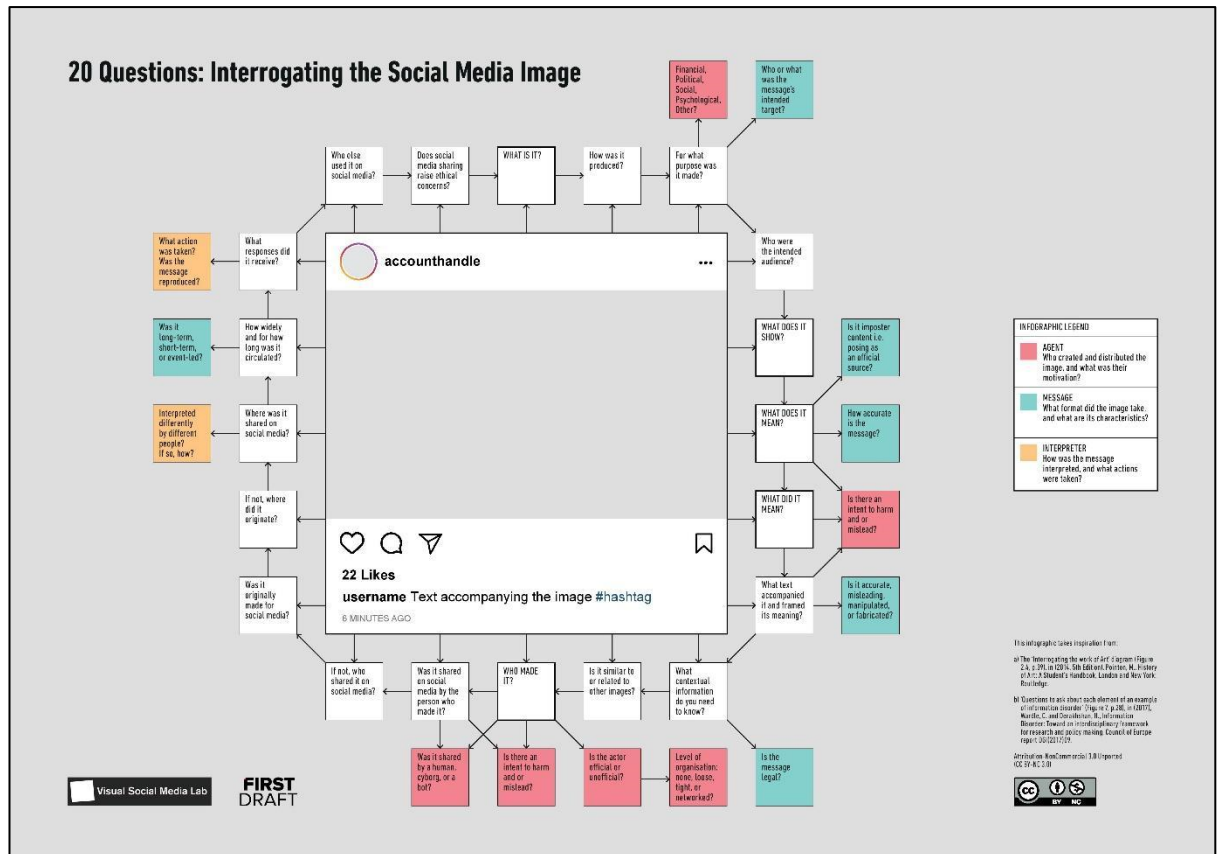
Not all datasets followed this four-layered analytical plan, with some datasets analysed in more detail and depth than others (Table 8). This was because some datasets were less complex than others, so further analysis was not needed to address the research questions.

<b>Dataset</b>	<b>Method 1 (Statistics)</b>	<b>Method 2 (Content)</b>	<b>Method 3 (Thematic)</b>	<b>Method 4 (semiotics)</b>
Hashtag dataset (sample 1)	✓	✓		
Hashtag dataset (sample 2)	✓	✓	✓	✓
SouthLoneStar	✓	✓	✓	
Article URL	✓	✓		
UK news article comments		✓	✓	

**TABLE 8: ANALYTICAL STRATEGY FOR THE TWITTER & ONLINE NEWS DATA**

#### QUESTIONING IMAGES

The "20 Questions: Interrogating the Social Media Image" framework was developed by the Visual Social Media Lab and First Draft News to build on existing verification methods to understand and combat disinformation (Figure 11). "20 Questions" asks the user to consider other aspects of the image, such as how the image was used and shared, who the intended audience was and audience response, accuracy, origin, and ethical concerns. The tool, therefore, requires the user to do more comprehensive research and encourages lateral reading (leaving the source and searching for information elsewhere) as opposed to vertical reading (assessing accuracy based solely on the source) of image(s) to answer the questions. Research suggests that engaging with lateral reading is quicker, more efficient, and more reliably. It does not take place in a contextless vacuum, so it is a better method when evaluating the accuracy of content than vertical reading (Wineburg & McGrew, 2017; McGrew et al., 2019; Brodsky et al., 2021).



**FIGURE 11: THE "20 QUESTIONS: INTERROGATING THE SOCIAL MEDIA IMAGE" FRAMEWORK (FOR A LARGER VERSION, SEE [HTTPS://TINYURL.COM/39B5BH9Z](https://tinyurl.com/39B5BH9z)).**

I am a member of the Visual Social Media Lab, and First Draft News is a collaborating organisation for this thesis. Therefore, as part of my collaboration, this thesis provides an opportunity to use the framework on a prominent and complex piece of visual disinformation. The framework is extensive, so it is recommended that the five main questions be answered. Then, specific questions are selected and deemed best suited to understand the image(s) under investigation (Faulkner et al., 2020). Thus, methods of approaching SouthLoneStar’s tweet were viewed through the lens of the “20 Questions” framework.

#### DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

Descriptive statistics were used on all Twitter datasets to provide a macro-overview of the data. Pulsar provides the metadata for each tweet collected. The relevant types of metadata were identified, which included:

- User location,
- Number of followers,
- Use of hashtags.

This data was then collated in Excel to produce findings. This initial, basic analysis provided a contextual overview before manually analysing the data.

#### TEXTUAL & VISUAL CONTENT ANALYSIS

Content analysis is a “rigorous, reliable and objective” (Rose, 2016:85) method used to determine trends, patterns, or differences in data (Krippendorff, 2013) as well as “the presence and frequency of specific terms, narratives or concepts” across data (Seale & Tonkiss, 2018:404). This is done by producing “replicable and valid inferences” (Krippendorff, 2013:24), involving the breakdown and rearrangement of data “to produce categories that facilitate comparisons” (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009:253). This method is also one of the most common forms of analysis in media and communication studies (Aiello & Parry, 2020), so it was highly appropriate.

Content analysis begins by taking a sample of the data, which is then organised into categories based on the researcher identifying “any kind of meaningful visual/verbal information” (Bell, 2001:15) that would benefit research objectives. These categories often begin loose, descriptive, and flexible and rely on deep data immersion, creating as many categories as possible to fully explore and understand the data (Walliman, 2006). The categories are developed into more rigorous code frames by engaging with and rereading the data (Seale & Tonkiss, 2018). Once the categories have been solidified, more data is coded, likely requiring further adjustments. The coding process is incremental because categories need to be “*mutually exclusive and exhaustive*” (Bell, 2001:16) so that codes and their descriptions are not ambiguous or cause confusion (Parry, 2020).

The content analysis method is useful for understanding images because it reduces their complexity into manageable codes (Bock et al., 2011; Seko, 2013; Rose, 2016). Therefore,

the potentially overwhelming nature of an image-based dataset can be mitigated using content analysis. Visual content analysis follows the same structure as textual content analysis, with visual components of the images serving as meaningful information with which to group, divide, and categorise data (Bell, 2001; Parry, 2020). Codes should be exhaustive and exclusive; however, Rose (2016) argues that visual content analysis should also be enlightening in producing coherent and analytically interesting findings that relate to the research question(s) and the broader literature.

Content analysis has increasingly been used to understand social media data. Yet, the adoption of content analysis for image-based datasets has lagged behind text-based datasets. This is reflective of the frequent omission of images in social media research as a whole (Thelwall et al., 2015; Faulkner et al., 2018; Aiello & Parry, 2020). However, there is a growing pool of research that uses visual content analysis on small datasets of social media images (for example, Seo, 2014; Vis et al., 2014; Kharroub & Bas, 2015; Thelwall et al., 2016; Holmberg et al., 2016; Faulkner et al., 2018). This thesis, therefore, adds to this pool of research, thus contributing to knowledge and providing further evidence that content analysis is an insightful and practical method of analysing social media images.

In more detail, the datasets were coded for<sup>33</sup>:

### **Hashtags (Twitter)**

- Sample 1 (100 most retweeted tweets overall):
  - Other hashtags – To determine the type of hashtag(s) used in the tweet,
  - Image type – To determine the type of image the user chose to share,
  - Image Content – To determine the content of the image the user chose to share,
  - Actor type – To determine the user type.
- Sample 2 (100 most retweeted tweets of the Westminster Bridge photograph):
  - Other hashtags – To determine the type of hashtag(s) used in the tweet,

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<sup>33</sup> For the full code frames, see appendix 2. All code frames were produced inductively but were influenced by Procter et al. (2013) and Thelwall et al. (2016).

- Image version used – To determine the version of the Westminster Bridge photograph the user shared,
- Actor type – To determine the user type,
- Intent – To determine the intent behind sharing the Westminster Bridge photograph or a certain version of the photograph.

#### **@SouthLoneStar (Twitter)**

- Image type<sup>34</sup> – To determine the type of image the user chose to share,
- Image content<sup>35</sup> – To determine the content of the image the user chose to share,
- Intent – To determine the reason why the user chose to respond to SouthLoneStar’s tweet and the intention(s) behind it,
- Actor Type – To determine the user type.

#### **Article URLs (Twitter)**

- March:
  - Tweet content<sup>36</sup> – To determine the content of the tweet,
  - Actor type – To determine the user type.
- November:
  - Tweet content – To determine the content of the tweet,
  - Actor type – To determine the user type.

#### **UK news articles and comments (news websites)**

- March:
  - Overarching topic – To determine what the comment was about,
  - Sentiment – To determine the basic sentiment behind the comment.

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<sup>34</sup> This code frame had two layers; an overarching code frame, with some codes accompanied by a second-layered, sub-code frame, which allowed for more detailed analysis.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

- November:
  - Overarching topic – To determine what the comment was about,
  - Sentiment – To determine the basic sentiment behind the comment.

Once all data was coded and code frames constructed, the coding quality was tested for intercoder reliability, this being “the extent to which independent coders evaluate a characteristic of a message or artifact and reach the same conclusion” (Lombard et al., 2002:589). This secondary coding is compared to the original coding, and the degree of agreement is tested, with a percentage of agreement of 61%-80% considered “substantial agreement” and 81% or over considered “almost perfect agreement” (Seale & Tonkiss, 2018: 406). If the percentage agreement is subpar, the primary coder and secondary coder(s) discuss inconsistencies, and the coded data is subsequently reworked to address these discrepancies. Intercoder reliability with the secondary coder(s) is conducted again based on these changes. This process is repeated until the desired percentage agreement is achieved. This testing method strengthens the reliability of findings and confirms that the analysis is coherent to those unfamiliar with the research.

For this thesis, an experienced secondary coder was given all Twitter data to analyse, as opposed to a sample, to strengthen the analysis' reliability further. For the news article comments data, the second coder was given a sample of 20% of comments from each article to code (n=178). All code frames were reworked, and intercoder reliability was conducted repeatedly until an intercoder reliability agreement of at least 81% was achieved, again to strengthen the reliability of the analysis. Once the desired percentage agreement was achieved with each code frame, the coding from both coders was run through ReCal2 (Reliability Calculator for 2 coders)<sup>37</sup>. For intercoder reliability results for all code frames, see appendix 1.

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<sup>37</sup>This is “an online utility that computes intercoder/interrater reliability coefficients for nominal data coded by two coders” (Freelon, 2010b: Online). ReCal2 calculates the percentage agreement between two coders, as well as Scott’s  $\pi$ , Cohen’s  $\kappa$ , and Krippendorff’s  $\alpha$ . While percentage agreement is generally quick and easy to calculate, it does not consider chance agreement. This is potentially problematic as there is always a chance of random agreement between coders, which may artificially inflate coder agreeability (Lombard et al., 2002;



Across all code frames, the lowest percentage agreement was 89%, and the highest was 98.9%. The mean average percentage agreement was 94.2%, and the median was 94.2%. The lowest Scott's  $\pi$  score was 0.809, and the highest was 0.987, with an average of 0.91544 and a median of 0.916. The lowest Cohen's  $\kappa$  score was 0.809, and the highest was 0.987, with an average of 0.91548. The lowest Krippendorff's  $\alpha$  score was 0.81, and the highest was 0.987, with an average of 0.916 and a median of 0.917. Thus, while percentage agreement suggests the lowest agreement was 89%, the highest was 98.9%, and the average was 94.2%, chance agreement recalculated these scores more accurately as 81%, 98.7%, and 91.5%, respectively. While this lowers the agreement between coders, all coding still falls within what would be considered "almost perfect agreement" (Seale & Tonkiss, 2018: 406).

Although content analysis is praised for being scientific, replicable, unobtrusive, and reliable, it is criticised for not deriving deeper meanings from data (Bell, 2001). While visual content analysis is beneficial in reducing images, which are often polysemic and lack recognised syntax, to manageable and tangible numeric values, this can also be detrimental as such reduction "can tell the analyst very little about the meaning or intentions of the content" (Parry, 2020:355). Therefore, deeper qualitative methods were utilised on datasets where it was felt that richer meaning was required to answer the research questions appropriately.

#### THEMATIC ANALYSIS

Thematic analysis is similar to content analysis, albeit generating purely qualitative findings, thus producing a further layer of depth to the analysis. Thematic analysis is a

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Freelon, 2010a). Scott's  $\pi$ , Cohen's  $\kappa$ , and Krippendorff's  $\alpha$  mitigate this issue as these methods are "more computationally complex due to the mathematical corrections for chance agreement integrated into their formulae. For this reason they are generally considered... superior to percent agreement as indices of intercoder reliability" (Freelon, 2010a:21). Similar to percentage agreement, intercoder reliability of these three measures ranges from 0 to 1, the higher the score the stronger the intercoder reliability, with 0 being no agreement 1 being perfect agreement between coders. As ReCal2 is able to automatically compute these four calculations to determining intercoder reliability, it served as a useful tool of testing the coding of this thesis in a way that was both robust and pragmatic.

common method for analysing both textual (Shepherd et al., 2015; Richardson et al., 2016; Caplan et al., 2017; McGregor & Li, 2019) and visual (Cranwell et al., 2017; Pila et al., 2017; Shanahan et al., 2019) social media data and has been used in combination with content analysis (Deighton-Smith & Bell, 2018). Similar to content analysis, data is organised into different categories, reflective of similarities and differences identified by the researcher(s). Conversely, however, it is used for “identifying, analysing and reporting patterns, (themes) within data. It minimally organises and describes your data set in (rich) detail” (Braun & Clarke, 2006:79). Therefore, the results of the thematic analysis are not statistical, but thematically descriptive abstract categories (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). Thematic analysis is more flexible than content analysis; categories do not need to be exhaustive or mutually exclusive as this method emphasises identifying overarching themes, ideas, and patterns, not organising data into strict categories. This means that thematic analysis is much more abstract and often deals with more nuanced concepts than content analysis.

Braun & Clarke (2006) generated a system for thematic analysis, which was followed for this thesis:

- The researcher begins by reading and re-reading the data and recording initial ideas. These ideas are then used to generate codes, in which the data is coded “in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code” (87).
- As data is reviewed, these codes are reworked and scrutinised. These codes are then organised into the “broader level of themes” (89), in which codes are organised and combined into overarching themes, some of which may be main themes, while others may become sub-themes related to the central theme.
- Themes are tested against the entire dataset, where the significance of each theme will emerge, meaning some themes may be collapsed or removed.
- Once themes are solidified, a thematic ‘map’ or ‘framework’ is created, where themes are defined, named, and examples are provided.

- As themes are abstract, it is essential to define and describe them to comprehend those unfamiliar with the research, as not doing so can produce ambiguous concepts that may weaken findings (Besbris & Khan, 2017).

Four datasets were analysed thematically:

- Sample 2 of the Hashtags dataset (100 most retweeted tweets of the Westminster Bridge photograph),
- The @SouthLoneStar dataset (replies to SouthLoneStar's tweet),
- News article comments from March,
- New article comments from November.

Many of these tweets and comments are tied to larger societal ideas, tropes, and concepts. It became apparent that content analysis would fail to capture this, and a deeper, more detailed analysis was required. Maintaining the mutual exclusivity required of content analysis would also be challenging, with certain findings likely slipping through the cracks if these datasets were only analysed through a quantitative lens. The thematic analysis allowed for an exploratory, flexible understanding of the data within these datasets. For the framework from the thematic analysis of these datasets, see appendix 3. As this framework demonstrates, major themes were identified, with several related minor themes within these major themes.

#### (SOCIAL) SEMIOTICS

Semiotic analysis was used as a further layer of analysis, allowing for a deeper understanding of the Westminster Bridge photograph. Semiotics is the study of signs, signs being anything “as long as someone, or more importantly, a group of people who are part of the same culture or society, interprets it as ‘signifying’ something” with the aim to “make the hidden structures, underlying cultural codes, and dominant meanings of such texts both visible and intelligible” (Aiello 2020:367). This is linked to Foucauldian considerations of power, dominant narrative structures, and ideological and social inequality, in which

certain semiotic choices become normalised over time and come to represent knowledge, truth, and information (van Leeuwen, 2001; Caldas-Coulthard & van Leeuwen, 2003; Rose, 2016; Aiello, 2020).

Semiotics analysis begins by identifying signs, “the basic unit of language” (Rose, 2016: 113). Signs make up two parts: the signifier and the signified. The signifier is the object, word, or picture depicted, and the signified is the greater concept(s) the signifier can represent (Saussure, 1995)<sup>38</sup>. In terms of visual representations, van Leeuwen (2001) notes that an image of a woman wearing a headscarf (signifier) can represent an immigrant (signified)<sup>39</sup>. This relationship between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary; there is no logic, the connection is not inherent, and signifiers can often have different interpretations. The relationship between the two can therefore be scrutinised because the relationship is manufactured (Rose, 2016). Understandings of what objects represent become normalised and are often considered natural interpretations. Yet, in reality, the construction of these representations is entirely based on social, ideological, and political societal influences (Aiello, 2020). This links to Barthes’ (1978) discussion of visual denotation and connotation, where signified representations are referred to as myths that become naturalised and innocented. From a semiotic perspective, the connoted message represents “the broader concepts, ideas and values which the represented people, places and things ‘stand for’, ‘are signs of’” (van Leeuwen, 2001:97). These broad concepts, in turn, “condense everything associated with the represented people, places or things into a single entity”, which serves an ideological purpose as it legitimises “the status quo and the interest of those whose power is invested in it” (van Leeuwen, 2001:97). Thus, signified

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<sup>38</sup> Textually, Saussure provides an example of the letters C-A-T (signifier), which, in this order in the English language, represent the concept of a cat (signified). The same word in different languages – Katze, felis, قطة, 猫 – although appearing and sounding vastly different, all refer to the concept of a cat.

<sup>39</sup> There are innumerable reasons for women to wear headscarves, and while some women who wear headscarves may be immigrants, this is not always the case. Yet, one of the overarching signified for women who wears headscarves is immigrant, this is based on certain societal conventions and tropes and not any logical or natural relationship. Thus, for certain audiences, the seemingly ‘natural’ interpretation of a woman wearing a headscarf is ‘immigrant’. Photographs are an effective vehicle for doing this because the representation and meanings that emerge seem natural and not constructed – unlike text, these representations and meanings are not overtly ‘spelt out’ to the audience and seem to be produced naturally by said audience.

representations can come to represent the object as a whole, removing any nuance and sometimes enforcing certain ideas, values, or stereotypes.

There are myriad ways in which signs can be approached, described, and understood. This is explored by Rose (2016), who states that the relationship between signifiers and signifieds can be:

- Iconic (a likeness),
- Indexical (a culturally inherent relationship),
- Symbolic (the signifier signifies a greater concept),
- Syntagmatic (“gain their meanings from the signs that surround them” (120)),
- Paradigmatic (“gain their meaning from a contrast with all other possible signs” (120)),
- Denotive (simply describe something),
- Connotative (carry a variety of higher meanings),
- Metonymic (“something associated with something else” (120)),
- Synecdochal (“a part of something standing in for a whole” (121)).

Thus, there is a detailed and rich vocabulary associated with semiology, which provides a comprehensive understanding of the different ways signs can function. However, Rose also notes that the terminology is complex and can be challenging to understand.

Images are the analytical focus for the semiotic analysis of this thesis. As almost anything in an image can be considered a sign so long as it represents something else, it can be difficult to determine where to look. Although specifically examining visual advertisement, Dyer (1982) provides a useful list with guidance as to what can carry signs in images:

- Gender,
- Nationality/race,
- Hair,
- Body,
- Size,

- Looks,
- Expression,
- Eye contact,
- Pose,
- Clothing,
- The person's/people's actions,
- The props used.

Social semiotics is a branch of semiotics that centres on the social contexts in which the object under investigation is constructed, placed, and functions. Traditional semiotics tends to focus on objects themselves without considering this. Social semiotics offers another layer examining how “the meanings of signs are made socially” (Rose, 2016:136), explicitly investigating “how these resources are used in a specific historical, cultural and institutional context, and how people talk about them in these contexts – plan them, teach them, justify them, critique them, etc.” (van Leeuwen, 2005:3). Social semiotics was also explicitly developed for examining images (Kress et al., 1997) and so emphasises “the significance of both context and practice for a semiotic understanding of the visual” (Aiello & Parry, 2020:27). For social semioticians, there is a dialect between the examined image and its external context. So to fully understand the image, its social contexts also need to be explored. Thus, methodologies also often relate to larger sociological themes (Caldas-Coulthard & van Leeuwen, 2003). At the same time, they acknowledge that communication is often multimodal, so “nothing is ever just visual” and “all visual images are accompanied by other kinds of semiotics resources that are integral to their meaning” (Rose, 2016:138).

Social semiotics generally analyse images using a three-way framework of meaning (Jewitt & Oyama, 2004; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Aiello, 2020; Aiello & Perry, 2020):

1. Representational: the ‘story’ that is represented in the images, for example, the people/objects depicted, what these people/objects represent, and the actions that are being performed.

2. Interactive: how the image interacts with the audience, for example, the point of view, contact, distance, and camera angle.
3. Compositional: the placement of things within the image, for example, the framing, modality, salience, and how the viewer's attention is attracted.

Social semioticians also argue that this framework is “not a sufficient method to address the specificity and situatedness of visual images” (Aiello & Parry, 2020:28), and so other examination areas are also recommended. Namely, some argue looking beyond the images themselves and taking into consideration “the cultural and social contexts in which images are made and consumed... the broader ‘lives’ of images themselves” (Aiello, 2020: 378). Rose (2016) refers to this distinction as “the site of production” (27) and “the site of audiencing” (38). Consequently, Aiello (2020) proposes that the images' materials, uses, types, and practices could also be examined to explore the broader contexts of an image<sup>40</sup>. These considerations present a more comprehensive, contextual dimension to social semiotic analysis, which was also taken into consideration during the analysis for this thesis.

#### ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Social media is a relatively new data source, so research has developed over a short period, beginning in the mid-2000s (Obar & Wildman, 2015; Kapoor et al., 2018). Early Internet research ethics protocols centred on the argument that the traditional ‘human subject’ research model did not apply to online data because the subject of the investigation was not a person but a type of public document, and so informed consent was not required (Bassett & O’Riordan, 2002; White, 2002; Eynon et al., 2009; Thelwall, 2010; Wilkinson & Thelwall, 2011). This suggests a level of detachment from participants and the data they produced, and so Internet data was viewed as the ethical equivalent of analysing old

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<sup>40</sup> Materials concerns the physical material of the examined visual such as stillness and movement. Use examines the ‘typical work’ of the visual, “the histories and traditions that shapes the ways in which images are used in specific contexts and the discourses and values that particular types of images are usually made to communicate”. Types explores “the role that non-figurative, plastic elements play in shaping the style and overall content of imagery” such as “shape, light, colour, texture, and layout”. Finally, practices concern “the specific creative, professional, or viewing practices that contribute to the visual resources and meaning potentials that set apart particular visual texts” (375).

dairies, art, film, or literature (White, 2002), which only requires limited, and in some cases no, ethical considerations or consent.

However, understanding of user relationships with and uses of online sites and platforms have developed significantly since the early 2010s, with social media now playing an integral role in most people's lives, used to socialise, document their everyday experiences, share personal and political views, and consume news, amongst a plethora of other things. This suggests limited detachment between the offline person and their online data, with the offline and online-self blurring and increasingly hard to distinguish. As Zook et al. (2017) assert, "data are people", and it should be understood that "privacy is contextual and situation, not reducible to simple public/private binary" (2-3). Therefore, contemporary ethical considerations of online data are more nuanced and introspective, increasingly more reflective of the type of ethical protocols found in traditional data collection methods.

One ethical hurdle social media research will likely never overcome is the issue of informed consent. Data-scraping tools like Pulsar are now common, used by academic researchers, commercial businesses, and marketers to understand online audiences. These tools can collect the desired publicly available data automatically, without the users' knowledge, all within the terms and conditions of the social media site (Wilkinson & Thelwall, 2011). In these situations, it is impossible to gain informed consent from participants because the users' identities are unknown until the data has been collected. In most cases, data is collected from thousands of users, so contacting all participants is an impossible expectation.

The lack of informed consent from participants must consequently be carefully managed. Therefore, while the contemporary leading argument is that publicly available social media data can be collected if anonymised, there is a heavy emphasis on respecting user expectations, privacy, confidentiality, autonomy, and dignity (Evans et al., 2015; The British Psychological Society, 2017). When users sign up to social media platforms and accept the



terms and conditions, they agree that third parties can collect the publicly available data they produce. However, this does not equate to informed consent. Therefore any social media research “needs to take appropriate action to consider the rights and expectations of social media users during the collection, analysis and reporting of social media content” (Evans et al., 2015:4). Users do not use social media with the expectation that their public data will be used in research. So there may be certain content on a participant’s profile which, while they have chosen to make it public, was not with the knowledge that it would be used for research. Therefore, their data must be respected appropriately, and researchers must protect participants from identification (Moreno et al., 2013; Zook et al., 2017).

Consequently, it is recommended that researchers thoughtfully consider the ethical impact of their research, with the conventional belief that ‘data is always public’ being naïve and unjustified (Zook et al., 2017). The necessity to protect those involved from identification is contextual to each research project, as project aims, contexts, data collection, and findings can vary greatly. Ethical risks to participants should not be greater than the research justification (Franzke et al., 2020). Even if data has been anonymised, it can become deanonymized by linking what has been included in the research to a user’s digital traces. Therefore, if data is presented in research results, it must be carefully censored so that it cannot be traced back to users (Jürgens, 2014).

In light of these ethical considerations, this thesis gained approval from the ethics board at Manchester Metropolitan University before data collection began. Data was only collected from online users who intentionally and explicitly made their data public. Anonymity, confidentiality, and protecting participants’ privacy were paramount throughout all project stages. All data were stored on a password-protected laptop and backed up onto a password-protected cloud storage system provided by Manchester Metropolitan University. Identifiable information was not included in the results, including complete and unaltered quotes. Any quotes included in the results have either been anonymised through

word alteration or have been checked and deemed too small or vague to trace back to a single user.

## FOCUS GROUPS

### RATIONALE

Disinformation research generally only collects and examines data from online sources, such as social media, which limits “the ability to discover where, how, and why disinformation generates societal impact” (Colley et al., 2020:103). As explored in the literature review, disinformation organisations like the IRA primarily orientate their activity around fostering division and distrust to strengthen already-existing societal fractures. This is, therefore, an important aspect to reflect on when considering the Westminster Bridge photograph’s journey, as it may have had an offline societal impact. Conducting focus groups with British Muslim women was, therefore, a novel approach to understanding the impact of the Westminster Bridge photograph as visual disinformation.

Moreover, digital ethnographers emphasize the need to look beyond the digital to understand online phenomena fully. For example, in examining the #BlackLivesMatter movement, Freelon et al. (2016) argue that “looking beyond Twitter provides a more complete account of how online media have influenced the social and political discourse around race and criminal justice” (14). Similar arguments have been made by digital ethnographers exploring youth culture (boyd, 2015; Standlee, 2017), pornography (Tiidenberg, 2016), and the dark web (Gehl, 2016; Barratt & Maddox, 2016). By incorporating qualitative interaction with participants, these studies achieved “a fuller, more comprehensive account” (Murphy, 2008:849). Although this project does not utilize an ethnographic methodology, the subject of investigation involves complex social issues regarding race, religion, and identity. Therefore, this project follows the recommendations of digital ethnographers.

Focus groups were the method of choice as they are highly suited to research examining groups with similar experiences and emphasise deep interaction between participants (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009; Davies et al., 2014), with data that is “informal”, “conversational”, and “flexible” (Longhurst, 2010:105-106). This is beneficial, as the topic of investigation is notably specific. There is a broad focus on Islamophobia across mainstream media, but it is also important for participants to be able to discuss their specific responses to the photograph. Prompting from other participants could jog memories and encourage conversation. Focus groups are also useful for investigating personal and sensitive topics, which, for this thesis, centre on race, religion, and identity issues. Moreover, as I am non-Muslim, it was important that participants felt comfortable speaking with me. The conversational nature of focus groups and the focus on multiple participants can help to de-centre the perceived power position of the researcher through rapport building via the conversations among participants. This also allows participants to gain insight into how other participants interpret the attitudes of others and facilitates a more natural social context (Wellings et al., 2000).

It is also important to establish that the Twitter data, online news data, and focus groups were not three distinct stages. Once all data was collected and analysed, the different findings were brought into dialogue. The Twitter and online news data analysis dictated how to approach the focus groups. The focus groups fed back into the former analysis, with each interwoven to produce an overall integrated understanding of a single instance of visual disinformation. The Twitter and online news analysis assisted in generating discussion topics for the focus groups that otherwise may have been omitted, particularly concerning how the mainstream media reported on the photograph. Equally, analysis from the focus groups granted reflection on previous analyses, especially when identifying themes. This approach produced an overall understanding of the Westminster Bridge disinformation campaign: from production, to circulation, to audience response. This approach presented a highly innovative way of approaching visual disinformation, which, in turn, works towards addressing the fifth research question: how the thesis enables further development of the critical analysis of visual disinformation.

Lastly, it is critical to highlight the COVID-19 pandemic, which has impacted everyday life from March 2020 to the present day to varying degrees. This created an unavoidable, unpredictable, and significant obstruction to the focus groups, significantly changing their direction from what was initially proposed. This meant the focus groups needed to take place online rather than face-to-face, and recruitment proved difficult for various reasons explained further in this chapter.

## DATA COLLECTION

### RECRUITMENT & CONDUCTING

The target demographic for recruitment for the focus groups were British Muslims who identified as women. This was because the subject at the centre of the Westminster Bridge photograph was a Muslim woman, and so speaking to people of the same religion and gender would provide the greatest insight into the potential impact of presenting Muslim women in the same way as SouthLoneStar did, as well as provide valuable broader insight into their experiences of being a Muslim woman in Britain. In terms of the number of focus groups, the general academic consensus is that there should be no fewer than three and that data saturation is often achieved between three and six (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009; Masadeh, 2012; Guest et al., 2017; Hennink et al., 2019). However, the COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted the recruitment of the focus groups. Therefore, within the remit of the thesis completion, three online focus groups were conducted with three participants in each group. With all focus groups, convenient dates and times were agreed upon across participants. Information sheets and consent forms were supplied to each participant before the focus groups took place, with participants returning signed consent forms ahead of their respective focus groups.

The British Muslim community was disproportionately affected by COVID-19, including an over-representation amongst the critically ill and a potentially higher risk of death (Public Health England, 2020; The Muslim Council of Britain, 2020). This was important to take into consideration when planning and organising recruitment. During the pandemic, people's priorities and concerns changed, which may have led to increased reluctance or

unavailability to take part. Thus, it was important to be mindful of these limitations and acknowledge that recruitment may be hindered and prolonged during the pandemic<sup>41</sup>. The focus groups also had to transition from face-to-face to online, which may have been a further barrier to recruitment. For example, this relied on participants having an internet connection, technology, and space needed to participate in a focus group.

Furthermore, the length and consequences of the pandemic were highly unpredictable, with restrictions frequently changing with limited warning (Baker et al., 2021). When the pandemic took hold in March 2020, the focus groups were delayed with the expectation that they would be able to take place face-to-face later in 2020. However, when it became apparent that the pandemic restrictions would be longstanding, arrangements were made to transition the focus groups online, specifically using Zoom's video conferencing software. In considering the previously discussed concerns, the recruitment pool was also widened. Initially, the strategy was to recruit participants from a Muslim organisation in Manchester. However, when this proved difficult, several other gatekeepers were identified, including several at Manchester Metropolitan University. Through a student organisation at the Student Union, a gatekeeper was identified who was able to recruit six female Muslim students as focus group participants. These were divided into two focus groups, which took place in March 2021.

Given the circumstances caused by the pandemic, the aim was to conduct one further focus group with three further participants. This would mean that the thesis met the lower threshold concerning the consensus on focus group numbers. However, Guest et al. (2017) observed that, in a review of 40 focus groups, 80% of themes were identified within two to three focus groups, and the prevalent themes were identified within three. Therefore, while it would be impossible to claim that the findings of the focus groups would be

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<sup>41</sup> This also led to further reflection on positionality and the researcher/participant relationship. I was not only approaching the community as an outsider, but from a community (White British) that, while still affected by the pandemic, was not affected to the extent of British Muslims. This added a further dimension to the often-problematic research/participant power imbalance, as so was another aspect to take into consideration when managing researcher positionality.

representative of all Muslim women in the UK, it was decided that an additional focus group would deliver the data needed to provide observable insight<sup>42</sup>. Recruitment for this third focus group proved difficult, and several recruitment strategies were used, including:

- speaking at Manchester Metropolitan University undergraduate lectures in an attempt to recruit female Muslim undergrad students;
- identifying further individuals within the university who could act as gatekeepers;
- the supervisory team identifying students they believed may be interested.

Three more participants were identified at Manchester Metropolitan University through these three recruitment strands, and the final focus group took place in November 2021. Thus, all participants were university students. It is therefore acknowledged that this further limited the focus groups' ability to make knowledge claims. However, as previously noted, this is not the primary methodological purpose of the focus groups.

#### PROTOCOL

A semi-structured protocol allowed open, free-flowing conversations where new or unexpected topics could also be explored. It was important to allow participants to have some autonomy over the direction of the conversation, as this would allow for unexpected topics and issues of value to arise. However, a protocol was used to grant some structure:

1. **Recall and recognition of the photograph.** This first area of discussion will introduce the topic: the Westminster Bridge photograph and SouthLoneStar's tweet. Questions will be asked concerning when and how they were exposed to the image/tweet, for example:
  - a. Do they recognise the photograph?
  - b. Do they remember from where they recognise it?

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<sup>42</sup> At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that, from the offset, the methodological aim of the focus groups was not to make knowledge claims about the experiences of Muslim women and thus the thesis cannot make claims in relation to all British Muslim women's responses to Islamophobic disinformation. The key purpose of conducting the focus groups in the context of mis-/disinformation research was to provide an alternative methodology not typical of wider mis-/disinformation research, in which the offline impact of disinformation is often not taken into consideration, nor studied deeply using qualitative methods like focus groups. The aim from the findings of the focus groups was to give an idea of the alternative insights that could be gleaned from examining disinformation in this way.

- c. Do they remember the tweet from when it circulated online/in the mainstream media in 2017? Or were they exposed to it elsewhere?
2. **How they responded to the photograph/tweet.** This discussion area explored their emotional and personal responses to the photograph and how SouthLoneStar used it. Example questions include:
  - a. How do they respond to the photograph on its own? What do they think it shows?
  - b. How do they respond to SouthLoneStar's caption?
  - c. How do they respond to the overall journey of the photograph as it became news in and of itself as a result of the spread of SouthLoneStar's tweet?
3. **A wider discussion on media representations of Muslims.** Examination of the broader literature and findings so far suggest that SouthLoneStar's contextualisation of the photograph was not new or unique but stemmed from existing, longstanding media stereotypes. Thus, how the media has presented Islam over the last few decades also played a role in SouthLoneStar's tweet. It is therefore important to have a broader discussion concerning media representations of Muslims, including participants' experiences with and responses to these representations.
4. **Further Islamophobic disinformation.** So much has changed since March 2017 – new government, Brexit, COVID-19 – which has reframed disinformation. Moreover, this thesis only explores one widespread piece of Islamophobic disinformation. Consequently, I would like to hear from participants whether they have encountered any other Islamophobic disinformation online or, more broadly, any disinformation which targets marginalised groups/uses existing stereotypes about marginalised groups.
5. **Potential offline consequences of Islamophobic disinformation.** It is difficult to measure whether targeted online disinformation has any 'real world' consequences, where exposure to certain disinformation may influence certain users' offline behaviours. However, it would be interesting to discuss with participants whether they believe Islamophobic disinformation, like SouthLoneStar's tweet, does have offline consequences, for example, whether they believe it can influence the perceptions and opinions of certain people or whether

they feel they have experienced Islamophobia or racism as a consequence of online disinformation.

## DATA ANALYSIS

### THEMATIC ANALYSIS

The focus groups' data were analysed thematically, using the same analytical approach used when analysing the Twitter and online news data. This was considered the most appropriate method to use for the focus groups as it is "a foundational method for qualitative analysis" (Braun & Clarke, 2006:78). The data produced by the focus groups was text-heavy and deeply qualitative, much more so than the Twitter and online news data. Thus, managing the focus group data involved an element of wrangling to organise and describe it. Thematic analysis provides the means of doing this without compartmentalising the data to the point where its depth and richness are lost. Thematic analysis is notably flexible, allowing for the identification of patterns and trends without the rigidity of other methods. Due to the profoundly qualitative nature of the focus groups, data were analysed using NVivo. Whereas the thematic analysis of the Twitter and online news data could be conducted in Microsoft Word and Excel (because the data was already divided, and each of these pieces of data consisted of a few sentences at most), a more complex program was required.

Moreover, because thematic analysis had also been conducted on the Twitter and online news data, this allowed for the comparison of themes across all data sources. Several themes were identified across the two online field sites. The themes that emerged from the focus groups fed back into and strengthened the Twitter and news data thematic findings, as this provided greater context regarding Muslim experience of Islamophobic disinformation. Using thematic analysis across the field sites also produced integrated and combined findings, presenting an overall understanding of the examined piece of visual disinformation rather than separate findings with a limited relationship. As stated, the different components of this thesis must not be separated or considered distinct stages, instead working together to produce overall, integrated findings.



## ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS & POSITIONALITY

Changing from face-to-face to online for the focus groups meant that, while many of the ethical concerns remained the same, there were unique factors to consider. The ethical approach to the focus groups emphasised anonymity, confidentiality, and protecting participants' rights, privacy, and safety. As noted, the focus groups dealt with sensitive topics, so care was taken to avoid risk to participants' self-esteem, cultural practices, and/or safety, mainly because focus groups are susceptible to "synergistic" conversations resulting in oversharing and stress (Smith, 1995:482). Therefore, the focus groups were carefully moderated and allowed the opportunity to debrief informally for reflections.

Before the focus groups took place, all participants were provided with an information sheet, which detailed the project and what they would be asked to do, and a consent form, which listed the different aspects of involvement they were consenting to, such as agreeing for their responses to be recorded and that their participation was voluntary. It was ensured that all participants who participated in the focus groups had signed and returned the consent forms before their participation. Consent was also confirmed at the beginning of each focus group. As stated in the ethics section concerning the Twitter and online news data, the project received full approval from Manchester Metropolitan University, and changes to the project regarding moving from offline to online due to the COVID-19 pandemic adhered to recommendations from the university's ethics board.

New ethical considerations also arose from moving the focus groups online. Rather than the participants' data being recorded on an audio recording device, the recording feature on Zoom was used, which captures both the audio and video of a meeting. The means of storing data remained the same, stored on a password-protected laptop and a password-protected cloud storage system provided by the university. The video recording was only used when transcribing the focus groups to understand which participant was speaking. Once transcription was complete, and the videos were no longer needed, they were destroyed.

Positionality was a crucial matter to consider. As I am white and not a member of the Muslim community, and given the culturally sensitive nature of the project, I acknowledge that there would potentially be issues related to cultural differences and problematics of white researchers representing minority communities (Adikaram, 2018). Researchers inherently “hold a privileged status within the research process, regardless of their other salient identities” in the sense that they make the decisions about the research, create and reify knowledge, and receive rewards and recognition for producing the research (Parson, 2019:16). Conversely, participants often do not gain anything despite the research being unable to exist without them volunteering information about themselves and their experiences. Even if participants are compensated, generally financially, this is unlikely to carry the same weight. Thus, it is essential to be cognizant of “one’s role, placement, and motivation” because “identifying one’s positionality prompts researchers to explore the power and privilege inherent in one’s identity” (Parson, 2019:15). This reflection is increasingly salient if the researcher is examining marginalised communities.

The conducting and analysis of the focus groups were aided using Harding’s (1992; 1995) paradigm of strong objectivity. ‘Truth’ and objectivity play a vital role in this thesis in a variety of ways, from the dichotomy of truth and falsehood in SouthLoneStar’s tweet to the inaccuracies of media representation and narratives that shape how audiences understand the world, to the assumed but often problematic veracity of news photographs. Claiming that this thesis can achieve value-neutral objectivity would therefore be disingenuous, particularly concerning the focus groups. Harding encourages researchers to question objectivity, how or if objectivity can be achieved, and whether it is even necessary. For Harding, claiming that a piece of research is neutrally objective is not only misleading but unhelpful. Such a claim is a barrier to maximising strong objectivity because researchers view themselves as epistemologically infallible, which they are not. Moreover, the normalised and institutionalised patriarchal, Eurocentric, white-centric, heterosexual means by which research is approached shape how knowledge about the social world is constructed and legitimised, meaning that at its base contextual level, research cannot be claimed to be objectively neutral. My own knowledge, identity, life experiences, and biases

underpin and affect every stage of this thesis. Acknowledging this creates a “stronger” objectivity claim than a false claim that I can be wholly neutral. This is particularly important to take into consideration as I am not only researching a social group to which I do not belong but one that is more marginalised than my own social group.

Parson (2019) provides a robust framework for considering one’s positionality when researching marginalised or racialised groups, so this was also used as a guide for approaching this thesis. Parson first advises the researcher to define their identity. Following this, the researcher should consider how their identity relates to the identities of participants, not as a means of differentiating the participants as deficient compared to the researcher, but by “exploring one’s identity as it relates to the identities of the group whose experiences one hopes to improve”, which “acknowledges differences to consider how the intersection of power and privilege impacts a researcher’s ability to conduct research ethically” (18). This also involves considering how the investigated group has been marginalised and/or exploited.

Considering this, I am a white, UK-born, educated woman of no religion (albeit raised in a household that celebrated some Christian holidays, such as Christmas). Thus, while I am disadvantaged by my gender because of systemic sexism, I am privileged by my race and educational level and not *othered* due to assumptions about my origin or religion. While all participants were women, and some may have had a similar educational status to myself, I was separated from all participants by race and religion, both of which put me in a privileged position. As a non-Muslim, I cannot directly experience and feel the consequences of marginalisation and can only view them as an outsider. Thus, this is a significant power imbalance between the researcher and the participants. However, this thesis aims to understand the marginalisation that stems from Islamophobic disinformation. While this will not rectify the issue entirely, as it is vast and deeply entrenched in society, these considerations will at least work towards understanding Muslims’ experiences of Islamophobic disinformation, which is currently understudied.

Researcher discomfort was also a topic of reflection. Participants discussed their often negative and sometimes distressing experiences as members of an ethnic and religious minority in a majority white Christian society. Thus, while they belonged to the former, I belonged to the latter, with white British people as the reason for their negative experiences. I was taken aback by how open some participants were discussing the fear and harassment they experienced being visibly Muslim in Britain, which led to discomfort on my part. Chadwick (2021a; 2021b) encourages researchers to embrace their discomfort when working across different social powers and statuses because it is “an *actant* in research practices” and so “dwelling on discomfort is an important part of reflexive and critical qualitative research practices” (2021b: Online). While I did not reach the discomfort Chadwick (2021a) felt in her research, I was acutely aware that I am a part of the social group that had caused my participants fear and distress and that they may have associated me with those experiences. This led to feelings of guilt and embarrassment as I was confronted with stories of people like myself subjecting my participants to harassment.

While there is an innate human response to distance oneself from discomfort, Chadwick (2021a) encourages researchers to hold the “‘sticky praxis’ of staying with discomfort” (10) because “fieldwork, analytic, writing and interpretive practices are charged with socio-material and emotional flows, (dis)connections and intensities” (14). As Harding (1992; 1995) argues through the paradigm of strong objectivity, Chadwick asserts that researchers are not neutral and acknowledging and reflecting on discomfort allows researchers to confront issues of domination, coloniality, inequality, and systematic oppression. Not only does this potentially strengthen the quality of analysis and findings, but embracing discomfort can be a process of surrendering researcher power, an act of “resisting and undoing colonising reiterations of authorial and epistemic privilege... a potential route towards ethical accountability for our ways of reading, hearing, interpreting and articulating” (Chadwick, 2021a:15-16). To mitigate this as much as possible, I invited participants to comment on my analysis once it had been completed to ensure I represented their voices accurately. The feedback provided by participants regarding my interpretation of their responses was considered and incorporated into analysis where applicable, which further strengthened analytical findings.

Thus, while the researcher/participant power and agency imbalance can never be fully rectified, for this thesis, it was essential to incorporate steps and means of reflexivity to alleviate these issues where possible. This was particularly important because the thesis aims to understand Muslims' experiences of Islamophobic disinformation stemming from their marginalisation. By embracing and reflecting on my positionality and researcher discomfort and allowing participants to discuss my analysis, I aimed to produce a research space for transformation. The aim was for this interactivity to be meaningful to participants, giving them an element of control over what happened to their data. Thus, research potentially acted in an emancipatory way and as a form of micro-level activism to give voice to marginalised participants.

## CONCLUSION

In response to the research aims and questions of the thesis, the methodology was designed to produce deep and nuanced insights into the journey of the Westminster Bridge photograph. Thus, a case study approach utilising mixed methods was used, with the journey of the photograph functioning as the central case and mixed methods applied to learn and gain knowledge about this case. Data was also collected from multiple sources, an additional benefit in mitigating the data gap caused by the inaccessible SouthLoneStar account. Three primary strands of data collection were established: Twitter, online news, and focus groups. The collection of Twitter and online news data involved a variety of online data sources related to SouthLoneStar's tweet to track the journey, use, and evolution of the Westminster Bridge photograph across social and mainstream media. As the collected data was vast and varied, a strict sampling strategy was employed to produce the most manageable and representative data samples possible. The sampled data were analysed in four ways: descriptive statistics, content analysis, thematic analysis, and semiotic analysis. The variety of these analytical approaches, with each building on the former and becoming increasingly nuanced and detailed, ensured that a deep understanding of the online journey of the photograph was produced.

A further layer of data collection and analysis was also utilised through focus groups with British Muslim women. Disinformation research mainly occurs online and rarely engages with primary data collection methods like focus groups. Engaging with these methods for the case study of this thesis was therefore seen as an additional means of expanding the scope of disinformation research and as a way of strengthening and enhancing the analysis of Twitter and online news data. Moreover, the piece of disinformation examined is Islamophobic, so it was deemed extremely valuable to include the voices of Muslim women, particularly as a white woman approaching the Westminster Bridge photograph, having not experienced racist or Islamophobic discrimination. The COVID-19 pandemic severely hampered the focus groups, so the number of six focus groups was reduced to three, which is generally seen as the minimum required to glean meaningful insight. Despite these drawbacks, the focus groups were still considered essential to include as they would demonstrate how engaging with such methods could strengthen and nuance online methods when examining disinformation. As the data produced was deeply qualitative, the focus groups were analysed thematically, allowing for comparison with the Twitter and online news thematic findings.

## CHAPTER 5: SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS

Photographs by themselves are often difficult to understand without external, textual information, and so audiences often rely on information around the photograph to tell us what it means (Berger, 1968;1978a;1978b). Indeed, it is difficult to ascertain what the Westminster Bridge photograph shows without knowledge of the attack. This makes the understanding of an image subjective and likely to vary amongst audiences depending on existing beliefs, experiences, and worldviews. This can consequently make a photograph versatile depending on the context in which it has been placed, as is evident from the Westminster Bridge photograph's journey across the hybrid media system.

The semiotic findings are divided into two subsections. The former analyses the photograph void of context. A three-way framework is adapted, in which the photograph is analysed:

1. Interactionally (how the audience interacts with the image, such as point of view, distance, and camera angle);
2. Compositionally (the placement of things within the image);
3. Representationally (the content of the image and what this content could represent).

The second subsection analyses the photograph within the contexts it was presented through its journey, based on Aiello's (2020) analysis scheme: uses and practices. The former examines the 'typical work' that the material carries out in culture, considering the histories and traditions that underpin how audiences understand images. The latter explores the professional, creative practices that contribute to the meaning of the images.

## OUT OF CONTEXT

This first layer of semiotic analysis helps understand how the photograph's content made it an effective vehicle for disinformation. A reminder of the photograph is provided below in Figure 12.



**FIGURE 12: A REMINDER OF THE WESTMINSTER BRIDGE PHOTOGRAPH**

## INTERACTIVE

The photograph is a wide/long shot (Canini et al., 2013) and appears to have been taken at eye level from the perspective of the photographer. All subjects have indirect contact with the camera and have their attention on something else. It can consequently be assumed that they were unaware that they were being photographed. This indirect contact presents a sense of action and authenticity and indicates that the subjects did not alter their behaviour because they were photographed. This makes the scene and the subjects' actions appear genuine.



The distance and point of view place the viewer as if they were present in the scene, the photographer acting as a stand-in. This works to place the viewer as if they were a participant. The photograph, therefore, involves the viewer in it. This further makes the photograph feel more authentic, as viewers see the scene as if they were physically there.

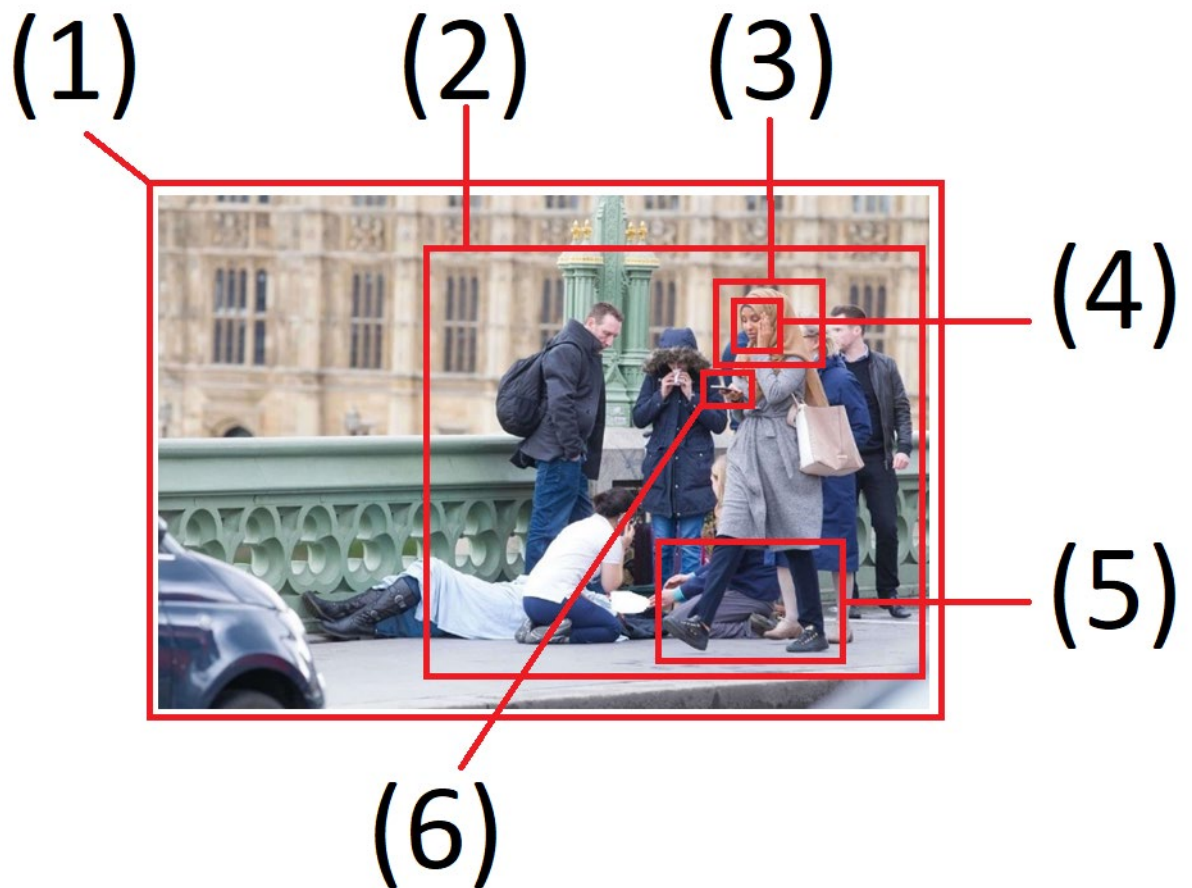
#### COMPOSITIONAL

The main visual cues in this photograph are people, with the car, building, and railing out of focus or obscured. Most people are situated in the photograph's centre-right, taking up most of the image and therefore being the most salient. The colours are particularly neutral, with no significantly bright colours present; subjects mainly wear dark blue, black, grey, and white. What differs, however, is the colour of the woman's hijab, which is a light brown colour. While the neutrality of the colours means that nothing overtly stands out, the uniformity of the black/blue/grey/white colour scheme draws attention to the hijab. The subjects' indirect contact with the viewer also grants the photograph a level of modality.

There is a visual disconnect between the group of people in the background and the woman walking in the foreground. The group are centrally focused on the person on the ground, creating cohesion. Conversely, the woman is markedly separated. Firstly, she is far from them, closer to the camera than the others. Secondly, she is in forward motion, while the others appear stationary. Thirdly, she is facing away from the person on the ground, focusing on her mobile phone. Thus, there is a visible divide between the group in the background and the woman in the foreground, isolating her.

## REPRESENTATIONAL

Representational semiotic analysis examines the narrative of the photograph. This also relates to the deeper concepts present in the photograph. The signifiers identified in the photograph are highlighted below in Figure 13.



**FIGURE 13: KEY SIGNIFIERS IDENTIFIED IN THE WESTMINSTER BRIDGE PHOTOGRAPH**

### 1) The image as a whole:

Markedly, the photograph tells little of what is happening in the scene aside from a few basic clues. The scene is outside and appears to be on a bridge. A collection of people is present. A person is lying on the ground, covered in a blanket, with most other people gathered around them. This suggests that the person is hurt. A woman is walking past and away from the group, her attention on the mobile phone in her hand. Her face is partially obscured by her hand, and her expression is vague. From this, when viewing the

photograph in isolation, it could be ascertained that it shows a medical emergency in progress.

2) The background crowd:

Six or seven people are gathering around the person on the ground. The exact demographics of these subjects are unclear as most are facing away from the camera or are obscured. However, there are both men and women of a variety of different ages. All also appear to be white. The two kneeling people are leaning over and touching the injured person, with one speaking on a phone and others encircling them. One person appears to be blowing their nose. Overall, this paints a scene of an emergency.

3) The woman:

The woman is Black, contrasting her with the other subjects, whom all appear white. She is also wearing a hijab. The signifier of veiled Black and brown woman has deeply entrenched significations. At its most basic level, this represents Islam, as veiling of this nature is most prominent among Muslim women. However, as outlined in the literature review, veiled Black and brown women are generally seen to symbolise either female oppression or tacit support for terrorism and extremism. In both instances, Islam is presented as dangerous and the veiled woman as deviant (Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2010). Thus, the symbolism of female veiling is markedly negative, underpinned by the assumption that veiling is non-normative. Juxtaposed with the background crowd, the woman, therefore, stands out and draws the viewer's attention, symbolically disconnected from the others present.

4) The woman's facial expression:

With the woman's distance from the camera, it is challenging to pinpoint her emotions. Moreover, her free hand is holding the side of her face. It is, therefore, hard to establish her response to the scene behind her. At the very least, in this specific photograph, it could be determined that she has no strong reaction to her surroundings.

5) The woman's body position/language:

The woman is taking a step in a forward motion. Her striding motion appears clear and direct, making it unambiguous that she is walking away from the scene behind her. Conversely, the crowd encircles the injured person, with movements oriented towards the laying person. This places the woman's body language and position in opposition to the others in the photograph. Again, this disconnects her from everyone else.

6) The mobile phone:

Finally, the woman is looking down at a mobile phone in her hand. This behaviour, using a mobile phone in the presence of others, has become known as phubbing. A portmanteau of phone and snubbing, phubbing is the act of ignoring your surroundings and instead interacting with a mobile phone (Ducharme, 2018). The acting of phubbing is overwhelmingly viewed negatively. Research suggests that those who are phubbed see it as damaging to communication, conversation quality, and relationship satisfaction and those who phub are viewed as inattentive and impolite (Abeelee et al., 2016; Chotpitayasunondh & Douglas, 2018; Ergün et al., 2020). That the phone appears to hold the woman's attention while the injured person holds the attention of everyone else could lead to assumptions that she is disinterested in the scene behind her.

SUMMARY

The most significant finding from analysing the photograph out of context is the division between the woman and the crowd of people. The woman is disconnected from the group in three ways:

1. She is physically separated, appearing closer to the camera than everyone else and walking and facing away from the injured person. Conversely, the injured person is holding the attention of everyone else. The differing colour of her hijab also breaks cohesion with the background group.

2. Her actions separate her. While the background group is unified in their actions, her mobile phone appears to hold her attention.
3. She is separated symbolically by her veil. Her hijab is the most significant sign in the image, carrying weighted and deeply rooted meanings. Thus, the woman is not only physically separated from the others but also symbolically separated.

The photograph also has a level of authenticity. The subjects' indirect gaze suggests they are unaware they are being photographed, making their actions appear genuine and natural. Yet, it is also difficult to determine what precisely the photograph illustrates. At best, it appears to show a medical emergency. Therefore, while a notable amount of information can be gleaned from the image, the image itself tells us little about what is happening.

#### IN CONTEXT

Examining the components outside an image brings a further dimension to the semiotic analysis. This is particularly important to consider for the Westminster Bridge photograph because its use and presentation changed significantly. This approach involves considering the practices and contexts of an image and how these may affect audience interpretation. This also explores the social identities of those viewing the image (Rose, 2016; Aiello & Parry, 2020).


AS A PRESS PHOTOGRAPH

SEARCH SECTIONS DAILY NEWS | NEWS f w e c

Cover U.S. World Politics

## Attack at UK Parliament leaves at least one dead, suspect shot

f t e



BY  
TERENCE CUNNEEN  
@terencecunneen  
DAILY NEWS  
@nydailynews


NEW YORK (NY Daily News) — Updated Wednesday, March 22, 2017, 12:08 PM

Numerous people were injured, including a police officer and a suspect, and at least one person has died following an attack outside UK Parliament Wednesday.

House of Commons leader David Lidington told ministers an "alleged assailant was shot by armed police" after a "serious" incident, according to the BBC.

Bangs and gunshots could be heard as Britain's House of Commons was suspended. Members of Parliament told the BBC they heard "three or four gunshots."

A police officer was seen with his foot on what appears to be a knife while pointing a gun at a man on the ground as other officers surrounded him.

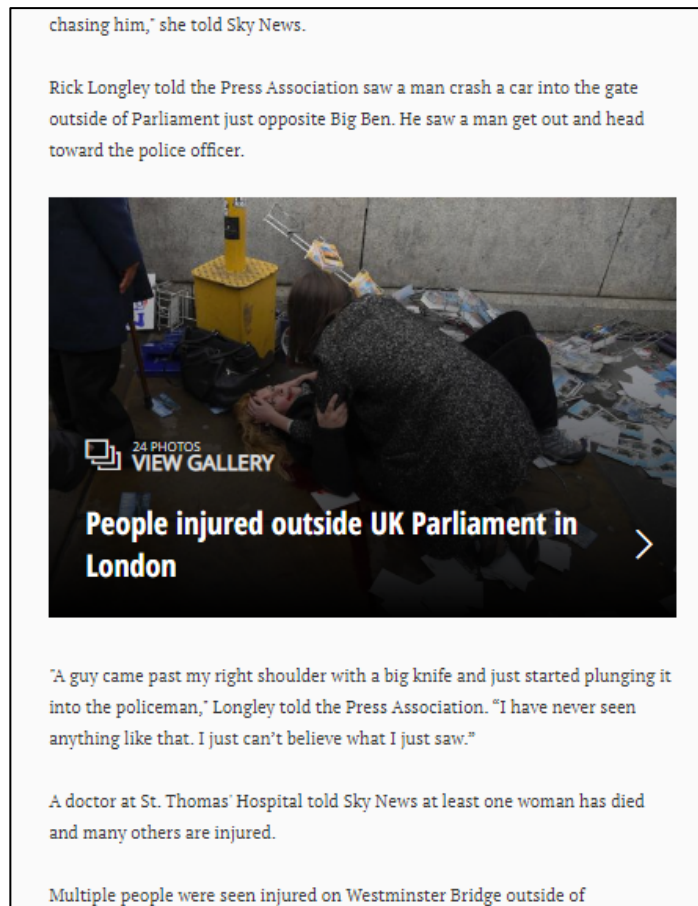


The street outside of Parliament on Wednesday. (AP Photo/Chris Wedel)

Jayne Williamson told Sky News she saw a middle-aged man carrying a

FIGURE 14: THE NY DAILY NEWS ARTICLE ABOUT THE WESTMINSTER BRIDGE ATTACK

Firstly, the image was a press photograph, used in combination with other photographs from the aftermath of the Westminster Bridge attack in a *NY Daily News* article<sup>43</sup> (A screenshot of the article is shown above in Figure 14)<sup>44</sup>. The article was published on 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2017 at 12:25 EST (17:35 GMT), three hours after the attack. The photograph was not a headline photograph or even part of the main article but was photograph number 28 of 36 in a photo gallery linked in the article (shown below in Figures 15 & 16)<sup>45</sup>.



**FIGURE 15: THE PHOTO GALLERY CONTAINING THE WESTMINSTER BRIDGE PHOTOGRAPH EMBEDDED IN THE ARTICLE**

<sup>43</sup> This article was identified using reverse image website TinEye, in which a reverse image search was performed on the photograph and ordered oldest to newest. *NY Daily News* appeared to be the only news site that used the photograph when initially reporting on the attack before it had become disinformation.

<sup>44</sup> Due to GDPR data protection rules, the *NY Daily News* website cannot be accessed by EU/UK residents and content can only be viewed via the Internet Archive's Wayback Machine. The article can be viewed at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20170322164217/http://www.nydailynews.com/news/world/attack-uk-parliament-leaves-dead-suspect-shot-article-1.3005409>

<sup>45</sup> While the screenshot in Figure 16 states the photo gallery contains 24 photographs, when viewing the gallery there appears to be 36. This may be due to when the webpages were captured by the Wayback Machine; the gallery may have initially contained 24 photographs but extended to 36.



**FIGURE 16: THE WESTMINSTER BRIDGE PHOTOGRAPH IN THE NY DAILY NEWS ARTICLE PHOTO GALLERY**

Therefore, the photograph was not immediately visible in the article. Viewers would have to interact with the article multiple times before seeing it. Thus, in the context of the *NY Daily News* article, the photograph was of little significance to the viewer. This implies that *NY Daily News* did not act to push the photograph or draw attention to it. The photograph's caption also does not draw attention to the woman: "Injured person being treated at the scene in London, England on March 22, 2017". This caption is minimal and does not invite the viewer to speculate on the image.

Consequently, at the first stage of the photograph's journey, it was used in a passive, informative way, with no effort to draw attention to it or make assumptions. While some viewers may have made assumptions about the image based on their social identities or beliefs, the photograph was not presented to lead viewers to do so. This is expected in the news media, as viewers expect information to be presented objectively and informally (Brennen, 2012). Thus, at this point, the photograph is no different from any other photograph from the attack.



## AS VISUAL DISINFORMATION

By approximately 18:00 GMT, users were sharing the photograph on Twitter and captioning it with Islamophobic claims<sup>46</sup>. The timing and that the *NY Daily News* article appears to have been the only news organisation that used the photograph before it spread on Twitter suggests that the *NY Daily News* provided the avenue through which Twitter users had access to the photograph. SouthLoneStar's tweet was posted between 20:00 and 20:30 GMT<sup>47</sup>. Therefore, SouthLoneStar's tweet was not the first to give the photograph an Islamophobic caption. Instead, the tweet was shared in an online environment where these interpretations were in the process or had already been established.

Sharing the photograph on Twitter drastically changed its function from its original use, severing the connection to this original context as a press photograph. On Twitter, there is no indication that this is a journalistic photograph taken by a press photographer. Image sharing in the news and social media is also vastly different in terms of motivation, use, and purpose. In the news media, photographs are shared to illustrate and provide visual evidence about a reported event. Conversely, image sharing on social media has a myriad of motivations, many of which are oriented around social interaction, including exchanging personal experiences, widening online audiences, self-expression, self-presentation, and maintaining and fostering social connections (Lee et al., 2015; Oeldorf-Hirsch & Sundar, 2016; Keep et al., 2019). This suggests that images shared on social media are not expected to be veracious but instead more associated with lived experiences and expressions of emotions and opinions. This means viewers may be more inclined to approach social media images with personal and emotional interpretations based on their social identity, suggesting that, in this context, viewers may be more likely to allow their opinions, beliefs, and emotions to influence how they understand an image.

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<sup>46</sup> This was the earliest identified use of the photograph in this manner in the datasets collected for this thesis, although it is possible that earlier tweets were published.

<sup>47</sup> The Wayback Machine captured the account at 21:24 GMT and this capture marks the tweet as having been posted an hour previously. Moreover, reply tweets which could be determined to be in response to this specific tweet started to appear around 20:20 GMT.



**FIGURE 17: SOUTHLONESTAR'S TWEET, CAPTURED BY THE WAYBACK MACHINE (SIGNIFICANT COMPONENTS HIGHLIGHTED IN RED)**

Figure 17 above is a screenshot taken of SouthLoneStar's tweet around one hour after it was tweeted. There are several aspects of this screenshot to take into consideration when examining how external factors may have influenced viewer interpretation of the photograph, which have been highlighted in red.

Firstly, the tweet text is notably loaded and makes assumptions about the woman's actions. SouthLoneStar begins by drawing attention to the woman, specifically that she is likely Muslim, thus ensuring that the woman is front and centre of the message. There is then a judgement of what the photograph purportedly shows the woman to be doing. Specifically, she "pays no mind" and "casually" walks past a "dying man". Here, SouthLoneStar emphasises the purported apathy of the woman. This is used in conjunction with the assumption that the person on the ground is dying. This presents a narrative that a dire

situation is happening behind the woman, escalating the urgency. SouthLoneStar, therefore, uses the signs within and the composition of the image to stress the urgency of the situation in contrast with the assumed indifference of the woman. Finally, the hashtags solidify the intention of the tweet, using two hashtags to situate the tweet in the attack, and #BanIslam to vocalise Islamophobia.

The profile picture, username, and @ handle of the account tell the viewer information about the user. The profile picture suggests a white man operates the account, and the presence of a cowboy-style hat indicates that the man is potentially associated with a rural Southern/Western American lifestyle or at least has an affinity with such a lifestyle<sup>48</sup>. The username and handle strengthen this assumption further. “Lone Star” is the official nickname of the US state of Texas (Scudder, 2018). Using “South” and “Texas” in conjunction with this further emphasises the user’s apparent connection with Texas. It can therefore be assumed that the user is a Texan American who cares deeply about the state, which links to notions of liberty, freedom, and nationalism<sup>49</sup>.

Finally, the amount of interactivity the tweet received may have also influenced how viewers processed the photograph. While the number of replies, retweets, and likes the tweet received can no longer be ascertained due to the account’s deletion, the screenshot shows how much interaction the tweet received. That the tweet garnered almost 500 replies and over 500 retweets and likes within the first hour shows that it attracted attention quickly and intensely<sup>50</sup>. This strong and immediate response may have suggested

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<sup>48</sup> A reverse image search has been performed on the profile picture; however, it returned no results.

<sup>49</sup> Profile information on SouthLoneStar’s account further supports this. The bio confirms that the person is Texan and deeply nationalistic, describing themselves as an “AMERICAN patriot”. Several political endorsements are made using hashtags in the bio. For example, “#2A” stand for the American Second Amendment, “#Prolife” is a movement advocating against abortion rights, and “#Trump2016” and “#TrumpPence16” are expression of support for Donald Trump during the 2016 US Presidential election. Finally, the bio ends with statements of hostility towards Islam and “PC” (political correctness).

<sup>50</sup> A further screenshot of the tweet shows that it at least received 1,648 retweets and 1,871 likes, although the date of this screenshot is unknown. See: <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/nov/14/british-mp-calls-on-twitter-to-release-russian-troll-factory-tweets>

to users that the content was important or warranted attention, thus attracting further engagement.

As visual disinformation, the photograph became extremely loaded, no longer a neutral press photograph but a means of propagating Islamophobia. Thus, the context and use of the photograph changed from an illustrative press photograph to complex and emotionally laden. Under typical circumstances, image exchanged on social media is associated with lived experience and personal expression. This was potentially intensified further in the aftermath of the attack, characterised by heightened fear, confusion, anxiety, and anger. Thus, the use and practice of the photograph likely transformed, with viewers no longer regarding it passively as a press photograph but invited to judge SouthLoneStar's presentation and apply their own interpretation.

#### AS NEWS

The photograph became news when the mainstream UK media reported on SouthLoneStar's tweet. Example news articles are presented below in Figure 18. All sources headlined the article with either the Westminster Bridge photograph, a version where the woman's face had been blurred, or another photograph from Lorriman's photo series. Therefore, in this context, when the photograph returned to the news media, it was both visually and narratively central. With the *NY Daily News* article, the photograph was hidden within a photo gallery as one of many images used to illustrate the attack. Here, the photograph is the story, transformed into a news piece in and of itself.

### 'Who is the real monster?' Internet turns on trolls who criticised 'indifferent' Muslim woman seen walking through terror attack

- Woman seen walking past victim treated on Westminster Bridge after attack
- She was criticised for allegedly appearing indifferent by one social media user
- But others leapt to her defence and said 'she looks terrified, which she would be'
- Do you know this woman? Please email: mark.duell@mailonline.co.uk

By MARK DUELL FOR MAILONLINE  
PUBLISHED: 13:36, 23 March 2017 | UPDATED: 07:57, 24 March 2017

Share
 




**5.8k**  
shares
**622**  
View comments

A row has broken out over a photo of a Muslim woman who was trolled after walking through the terror attack on **Westminster Bridge** while looking at her mobile phone.

The pedestrian wearing a brown headscarf and grey coat was pictured holding one hand to her head while walking past a victim being treated on the pavement.

She was criticised by one social media user for allegedly appearing indifferent to Wednesday's attack that brought terror to London – but others leapt to her defence.



### Trolls shamed for calling terrified Muslim woman a 'monster'

Charles White Thursday 23 Mar 2017 10:47 pm



A visibly distressed woman has been attacked online (Picture Jamie Lorrinan)

## London attack: Muslim woman photographed on Westminster Bridge during terror incident speaks out

The woman was vilified on social media after some said it looked like she was walking past the wounded without concern

Charlotte England | @charlottengland, Lucy Pasha-Robinson | @lucypasha  
 | Friday 24 March 2017 19:13 | 80 comments



**FIGURE 18: EXAMPLE SCREENSHOTS OF ONLINE NEWS ARTICLES WHICH ALLUDE TO OR MAKE DIRECT REFERENCES TO SOUTHLONESTAR'S TWEET. TOP L-R: DAILY MAIL, METRO. M BOTTOM: INDEPENDENT**

In all instances, the news media refuted SouthLoneStar's contextualisation by undermining the claim or providing contradictory evidence. Thus, the media's effort to provide an

alternative contextualisation of the photograph opened up discussions about what the photograph showed. Consequently, the photograph seemingly became a subject of debate, providing audiences with alternative metrics of assessment to understand what the photograph showed.

Reporting on the photograph also likely gave the image a level of newsworthiness, which may have suggested to the viewer that the photograph and story were important and warranted attention. The news media is used to shape individuals' social, cultural, and political understanding of the world. Dedicating a significant amount of coverage to SouthLoneStar's tweet presented it as relevant to viewer understanding of the Westminster Bridge attack. To many, the news media was likely their first exposure to the image. This exposure would have presented the photograph and the story surrounding it as significant and attention-worthy.

Thus, transforming the photograph to headline news likely influenced how users regarded it in three ways:

1. The choice to use the photograph as a headline image likely caused the photograph to become memorable and the resulting controversy surrounding it recognisable.
2. The photograph was contextualised with information that conflicted with SouthLoneStar's interpretation. This may have further intensified tribalistic response to the image, centring on whether the audience chose to believe the media's narrative.
3. The prominence of the image in the media in the days following the attack likely gave it an elevated status of importance and relevancy.

In summary, the news media's coverage increased exposure and also likely increased debates about the photograph. Cerase & Santoro (2018) argue that attempts by the media to destabilize viral disinformation risk amplifying the original message, enhancing the story's newsworthiness, and potentially transforming the disinformation into a plausible

truth. Indeed, research suggests that it is unclear whether media fact-checking fulfils its desired purpose (Tsfati et al., 2020).

#### AS (KNOWN) VISUAL DISINFORMATION

Finally, in November 2017, the truth behind the SouthLoneStar account came to light. The photograph re-entered the news media as a news theme when Twitter presented evidence to the US Congress of Russian-backed 'troll' disinformation accounts, one of them being SouthLoneStar (Burgess, 2017). Thus, the photograph's context changed again. Many of the November articles looked similar to the March articles, with the Westminster Bridge photograph headlining the article, shown in Figure 19 below.





**FIGURE 19: EXAMPLE SCREENSHOTS OF ONLINE NEWS ARTICLES THAT REPORTED ON THE NOVEMBER NEWS. TOP L-R: GUARDIAN, TELEGRAPH. BOTTOM: MIRROR.**

Again, by covering this new information as news, the media presents the photograph as important and attention-worthy. The photograph was likely the first aspect of the articles that drew the eye of the viewer. By this point, the photograph was an established piece of journalistic history and likely cemented in audience memories. Therefore, for many, the November news possibly served as a reminder of the photograph and not the first instance they were exposed to it.

The information surrounding the image differs from the coverage in March 2017. In March, the photograph became news due to the virality of SouthLoneStar's tweet and its relation to a current event. The March coverage was much more orientated around rebuffing the tweet, covering reactions to the tweet, and reporting on key actors' responses. Thus, the March coverage was primarily concerned with emotional reactions to and opinions towards the photograph. Conversely, the November coverage was much more informed, guided by new evidence which granted an accurate picture of SouthLoneStar's use of the photograph. Consequently, the purpose of reportage between March and November was notably different.



Thus, the photograph's meaning, context, and what it potentially represented changed again. In March, the photograph was part of a news story about a right-wing Twitter user spreading Islamophobia. Russian interference became evident in November, gaining a much more serious and consequential context. The overall contextualisation of the photograph in November presents it in a more factual, knowledgeable way compared to March, discussing it in relation to the wider danger of foreign informational warfare.

#### SUMMARY

Examining the contexts in which the photograph was used provides further insight into how viewers may have responded to the photograph and how these changing contexts may have influenced viewer understanding. As the photograph moved from a press photograph to visual disinformation, to a news story itself, the photograph's potential audience size increased exponentially. As one of 36 photographs in an image gallery within a *NY Daily News* article, the potential audience was small. In this initial use, the image was presented neutrally to illustrate the attack. Thus, the use and context did not try to influence how the viewers saw the image overtly.

The audience size then increased considerably when the photograph was used as Islamophobic disinformation. Here, it lost its status of objectivity as a press photograph, instead presented in a context in which image sharing is orientated around personal expression, self-presentation, and nurturing social connections. The caption of the photograph was loaded, making unsubstantiated assumptions about what the photograph showed and using heightened language to present the woman as deviant. The SouthLoneStar persona was also aggressively overt in its right-wing beliefs. Thus, the context in which the photograph was presented when it moved to social media was vitriolic, attention-drawing, and based on subjective assumptions. Viewers with Islamophobic beliefs likely rallied around the tweet. Viewers who did not hold these beliefs were likely drawn to the photograph to undermine SouthLoneStar's messaging. Overall, moving to social media placed the photograph in a vastly different environment. Viewers

were more inclined to process and respond to the photograph in a way driven by emotions, opinions, and personal identity.

The potential audience size increased further when the UK mainstream news reported the photograph. Here, the image re-entered the news media, albeit in a markedly different way in which it was transformed into news in and of itself. The photograph headlined all the articles, acting as the centrepiece. The information surrounding the photograph focused on chastising SouthLoneStar's claim, reporting on how Twitter users responded to the claim, and in some cases, how affected parties responded. Consequently, coverage was focused on reactions to and opinions about the photograph. The media's alignment against SouthLoneStar's messaging may have entrenched some viewers in further tribalism, particularly those who had Islamophobic beliefs and considered SouthLoneStar's caption accurate. The March media reportage also likely gave the photograph an elevated status of newsworthiness and importance.

The photograph then re-entered the news media a final time in November when the true nature of SouthLoneStar came to light. The November articles looked similar to March, with the photograph headlining most of the articles. What differs is the type of information surrounding the photograph. While the March coverage was generally more opinion-driven, the information in November presented to the viewer centred around providing evidence and reflecting on the consequences of this evidence. Therefore, viewers may have regarded the photograph in more serious terms.

## OVERALL SUMMARY

Analysing the photograph semiotically, both out of and in context, helped understand how and why the photograph functioned as disinformation. Within the photograph itself, there are a variety of visual cues that, when brought together, signal a division between the woman and the crowd. The candid nature of the photograph, taken from an eye-level perspective, grants the photograph a level of authenticity. Compositionally, the woman is

disconnected from the crowd as she is physically apart from them. The colour of her hijab also makes her stand out from the overall colour scheme, and her body positioning differs significantly from the group. Finally, several signifiers also separated the woman. She is Black, while everyone else in the photograph appears white, and her hijab links to representations of otherness. Using a mobile phone in the presence of others can also signal apathy and impoliteness. Consequently, there is a disconnect between the woman and the other actors. These are the foundation that supports SouthLoneStar's claim; using the photograph's vagueness, combined with the visual cues, composition, and symbols, allowed the photograph to fit within a falsified narrative.

Examining the photograph's different contexts showed that SouthLoneStar transformed it from a largely inconsequential, neutrally presented press photograph to a fervid topic of debate on Twitter. As image sharing on social media centres around self-expression and personal identity, those who supported the claim flocked to it in affirmation, with those who opposed it doing the same to express disapproval, as highlighted by the intense, immediate interactions the tweet received. The mainstream news media coverage served to solidify the emerging debate around the photograph, presenting it as a legitimate and important issue by contextualising it within the news media. This set the photograph and the story surrounding it in journalistic history, ensuring that the image and SouthLoneStar's contextualisation would become memorable to many.

Thus, the photograph's evolution and notoriety were the results of opportunistic events which lent the photograph to serve well as disinformation. The photograph itself is not particularly illustrative, and the most that can be ascertained from the image shows the woman to be separate from the group. This served as the root of SouthLoneStar's claim, the visual signs serving as evidence for the manipulated claim that the woman was purposefully ignoring the scene behind her. The news coverage took this a step further. While the effect of the news coverage is unknown, there is no doubt that it elevated the photograph, granting it a level of importance and significance that it otherwise would not have received if it had solely remained on Twitter.

## CHAPTER 6: CONTENT ANALYSIS FINDINGS

As detailed in the Methodology chapter, to manage issues related to missing data, data were divided into four datasets which provide the best possible picture of the Westminster Bridge photograph with the remaining data available. One or more samples were then taken from each dataset for analysis. These four datasets and their respective samples were:

- **Hashtag dataset** – this provides the wider context in which the Westminster Bridge photograph circulated (Westminster attack) and other Twitter users who also shared the Westminster Bridge photograph:
  - Sample 1: 100 most retweeted tweets (with images) overall,
  - Sample 2: 100 most retweeted tweets of the photograph.
- **@SouthLoneStar dataset** – this provides data regarding those who replied to SouthLoneStar’s Westminster Bridge tweet:
  - Sample 1: replies to SouthLoneStar on 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2017.
- **Article URL dataset** – this shows how news articles spread on Twitter;
  - Sample 1: 100 most retweeted tweets sharing an article from March,
  - Sample 2: 100 most retweeted tweets sharing an article from November.
- **Article comments dataset** – this shows how a portion of the news audience responded to the media’s reportage of SouthLoneStar’s tweet:
  - Sample 1: March article comments,
  - Sample 2: November article comments.

The analysis is presented in the following way:

- Data overview – provides a broader overview of the whole dataset before delving into the specific sample(s);
- Descriptive statistics – each sample is introduced with descriptive statistics that were collected when Pulsar scraped the data<sup>51</sup>;
- Content analysis – these findings follow, with each code frame and its respective findings presented and discussed separately.

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<sup>51</sup> With the exception of news article comments, as these were not scraped automatically by Pulsar.

## TWITTER: HASHTAG DATASET

Below, Table 9 highlights in blue the content analysis findings presented in this subsection<sup>52</sup>.

<b>Dataset name</b>	<b>Data Source</b>	<b>Sample(s)</b>	<b>Analysis Performed<sup>53</sup></b>
<i>Hashtag dataset</i>	<i>Twitter</i>	<i>100 most retweeted tweets overall</i>	<i>Descriptive statistics</i>
			<i>Content: Hashtags</i>
			<i>Content: Image type</i>
			<i>Content: Image Content</i>
			<i>Content: Actor type</i>
		<i>100 most retweeted tweets that shared the Westminster Bridge photograph</i>	<i>Descriptive statistics</i>
			<i>Content: Hashtags</i>
			<i>Content: Image version used</i>
			<i>Content: Intent</i>
			<i>Content: Actor type</i>
<i>@SouthLoneStar dataset</i>	<i>Twitter</i>	<i>Replies to SouthLoneStar</i>	<i>Descriptive statistics</i>
			<i>Content: Image type</i>
			<i>Content: Image content</i>
			<i>Content: Intent</i>
			<i>Content: Actor type</i>
<i>Article URL dataset</i>	<i>Twitter</i>	<i>March articles</i>	<i>Descriptive statistics</i>
			<i>Content: Tweet content</i>
			<i>Content: Actor type</i>
		<i>November articles</i>	<i>Descriptive statistics</i>
			<i>Content: Tweet content</i>
			<i>Content: Actor type</i>
<i>Article comments dataset</i>	<i>Online news articles</i>	<i>March comments</i>	<i>Content: Overarching topic</i>
			<i>Content: Sentiment</i>
		<i>November comments</i>	<i>Content: Overarching topic</i>
			<i>Content: Belief in the story</i>

**TABLE 9: BREAKDOWN OF THE LAYOUT OF THE CONTENT ANALYSIS FINDINGS**

<sup>52</sup> Please refer to the corresponding code frames. For the code frames related to the analysis of this dataset, see appendix 2.

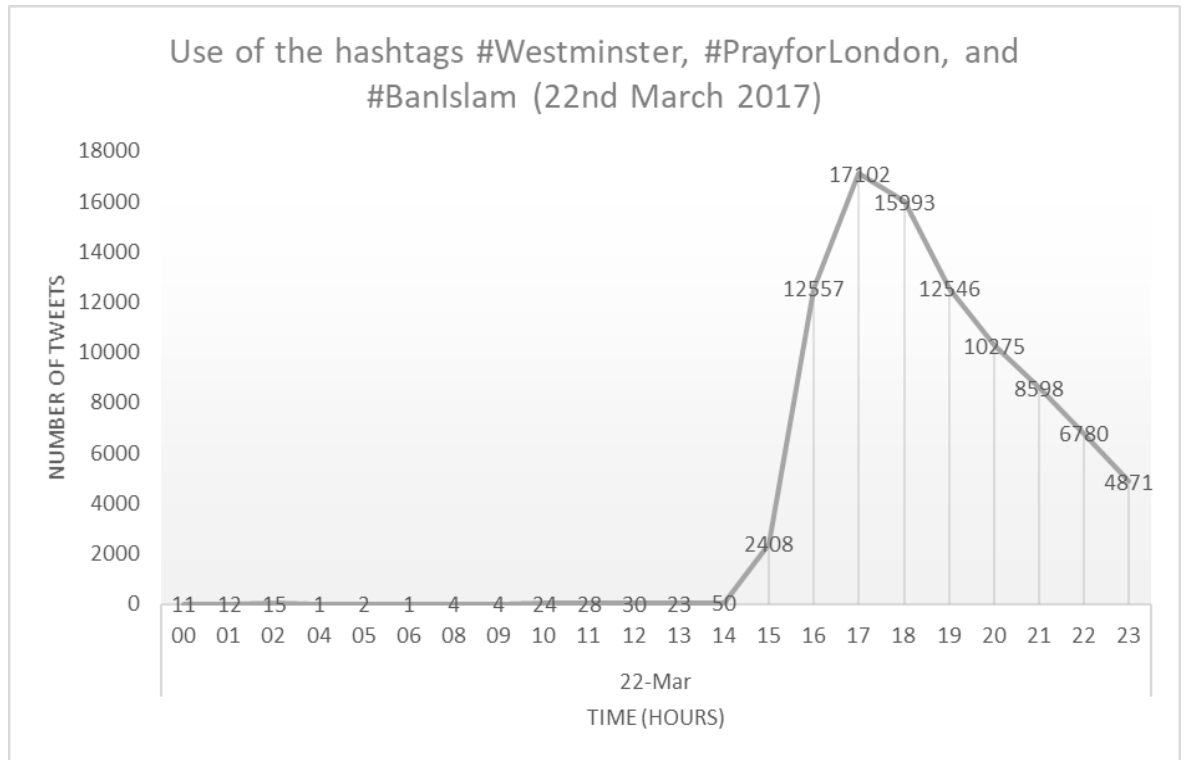
<sup>53</sup> While all the analysis listed in the table was performed on the datasets, not all findings could be included within the remits of this thesis. The most important and interesting findings were therefore prioritized over findings that, while still interesting, contributed less to answering the research aims and objectives.

As a reminder, the Hashtag dataset constitutes tweets shared on 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2017 that used one or more of the three hashtags: #Westminster, #PrayForLondon, #BanIslam. For the content analysis, the dataset was divided into two samples:

- The top 100 most retweeted tweets (with images) overall across the day – this is to investigate the broader context in which the Westminster Bridge photograph circulated, as well as gain an understanding of the images shared in the aftermath of the attack.
- The 100 most retweeted tweets that shared the Westminster Bridge photograph – this is to examine how the photograph was circulated and who circulated it.

## DATA OVERVIEW

Before delving into the two samples from this dataset, a brief statistical overview of the whole dataset is presented. This provides a picture of how the Westminster Bridge attack evolved on Twitter.



**CHART 1: USE OF THE HASHTAGS #WESTMINSTER, #PRAYFORLONDON, AND #BANISLAM (22ND MARCH 2017)**

Chart 1 presents the use of the hashtags #Westminster, #PrayforLondon, and #BanIslam over 24 hours on 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2017. In total, 106,554 tweets were identified, showing that the attack drew significant attention on Twitter. The attack began at 14:40 and hashtag use increased from 15:00, peaking at 17,102 tweets at 17:00. Across the day, 52.92% (n=56,416) of tweets used #Westminster, 46.82% (n=49,911) used #PrayForLondon, and 0.26% (n=227) used #BanIslam<sup>54</sup>.

<sup>54</sup> Note that some tweets used more than one of these hashtags.

## SAMPLE 1: 100 MOST RETWEETED TWEETS OVERALL

### SAMPLE INTRODUCTION

The key finding from this sample is that the social media response to the attack was typical and reflective of previous research, orientated around support, solidarity, information-seeking and -sharing, and to a minor extent, intolerance directed at Muslims. This, therefore, confirms existing literature. These findings also build on and add to our understanding of how social media responds to crisis events in a UK context, specifically concerning the Westminster Bridge terrorist attack. Moreover, it extends our understanding of how images function and are used when users respond to crisis events on social media.

### DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

Overall, the range of hashtags used across the 100 tweets was limited to two. 49% of tweets used just the hashtag #Westminster, 30% used just the #PrayForLondon, and 19% used a combination of #Westminster and #PrayForLondon. Only one 1% used just #BanIslam, while 1% used all three hashtags, this being SouthLoneStar.

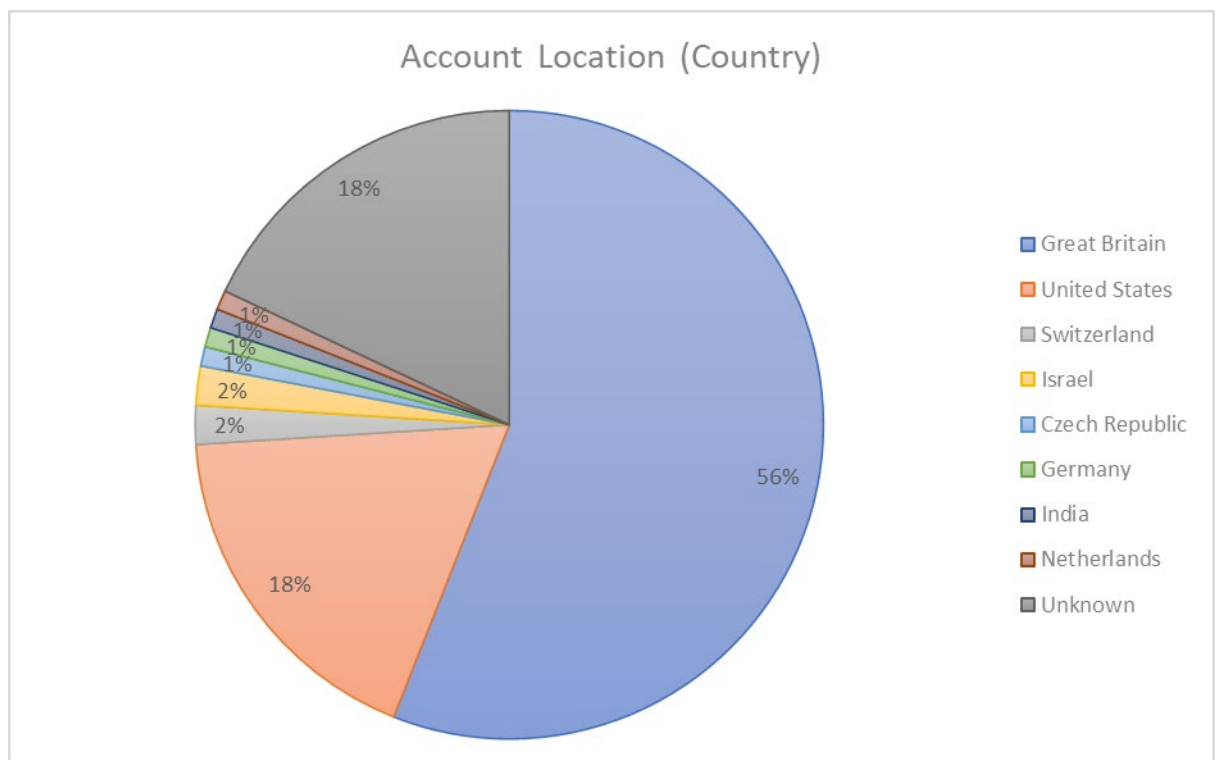


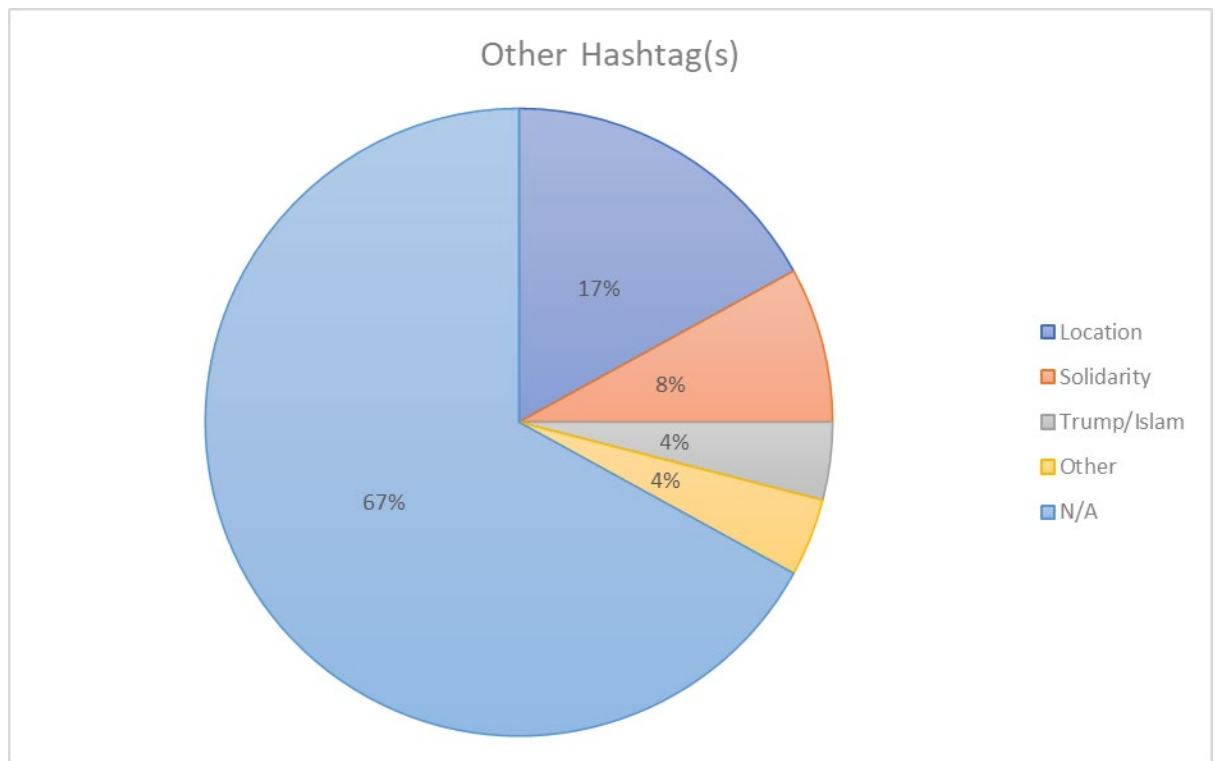
CHART 2: ACCOUNT LOCATION BY COUNTRY



Looking above at Chart 2, we can see that more than half of users (56%) located themselves in Great Britain<sup>55</sup>. This was followed by the United States (18%) and accounts with unknown locations (18%)<sup>56</sup>. The remaining handful of accounts was located across a variety of countries.

#### CONTENT ANALYSIS FINDINGS<sup>57</sup>

##### OTHER HASHTAGS



**CHART 3: OTHER HASHTAGS USED IN THE TWEETS**

First, hashtag use outside of #Westminster, #PrayforLondon, and #BanIslam was examined. Chart 3 highlights that the majority of tweets (67%) did not use any hashtags outside of these three. Of those that did use different hashtags, 17% related to the location of the

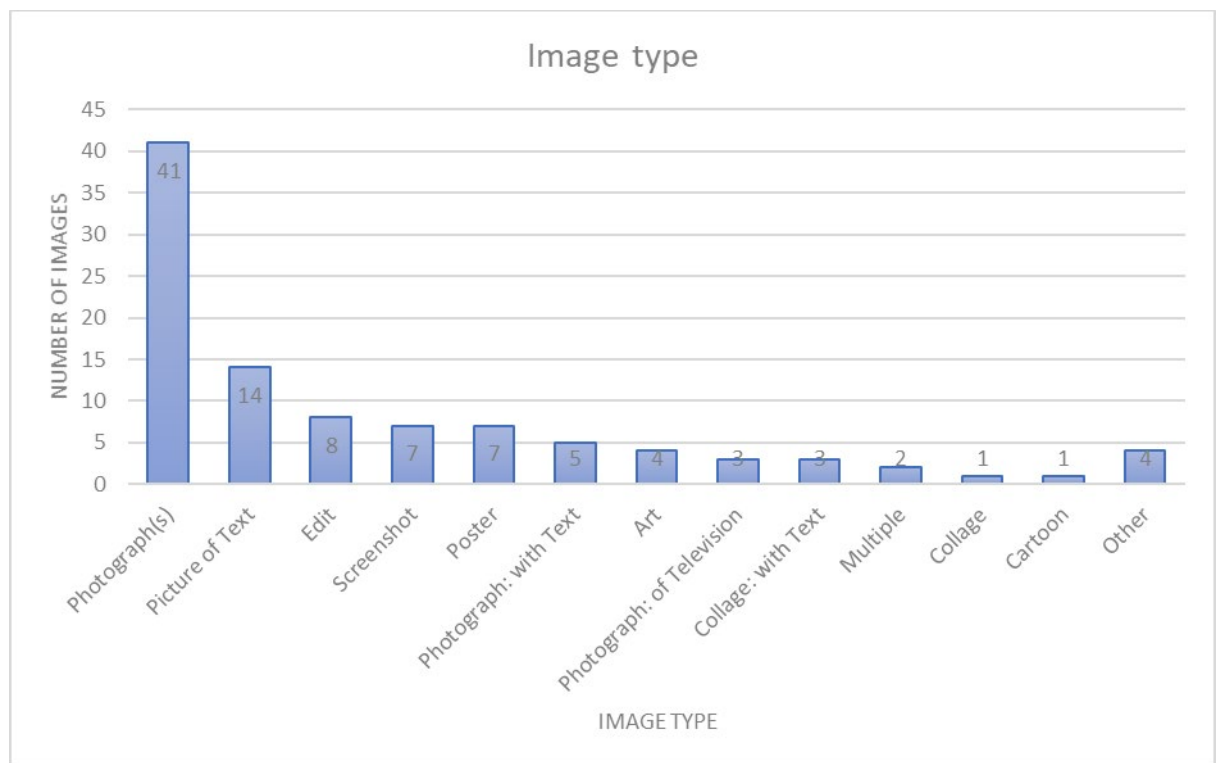
<sup>55</sup> On Twitter, location is self-reported, meaning the location is where the user claims to be and may not reflect their actual location. Therefore, while this should only be taken at face value, it does contribute to how each user chose to present their account.

<sup>56</sup> Providing your location on Twitter also is optional, so a varying portion of the account location from all samples was unknown.

<sup>57</sup> For the code frames related to the analysis of this specific sample, see appendix 2.1.

attack (e.g., #londonTerrorattack, #Parliament). 8% displayed sentiments of solidarity related to the attack. (e.g., #WeAreNotAfraid, #RIP). Lastly, 4% linked to Trumpism and/or Islam (e.g., #MAGA, #allahuakbar).

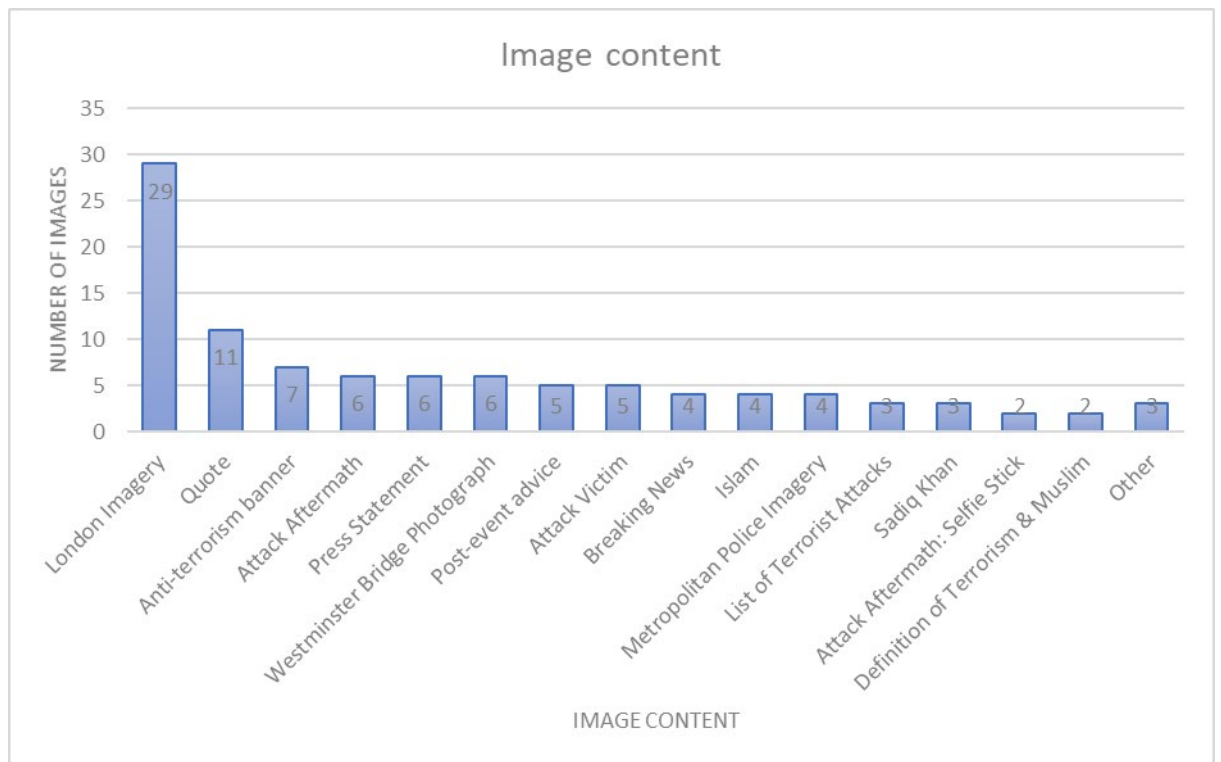
*IMAGE TYPE*



**CHART 4: IMAGE TYPE**

The images shared in the tweets were then analysed for image type, with Chart 4 showing that photographs were the largest image type, constituting nearly half of the images (41%). This was followed by pictures of text (14%), edits (8%), screenshots (7%), posters (7%), and photographs with text (5%). A small number of images were creatively produced, including art (5%) and cartoons (1%).

## IMAGE CONTENT



**CHART 5: IMAGE CONTENT**

Following image type, the images were analysed for their content, as illustrated in Chart 5. The most common image content orientated around London imagery (29%), examples of which can be found in Figure 20 below. This was followed by images containing quotes (11%) (examples in Figure 21) and then a specific image of an anti-terrorism banner (7%) (Figure 22). These images denote expressions of solidarity with others, condemnation of the attack, and mourning of those killed.



FIGURE 20: LONDON IMAGERY

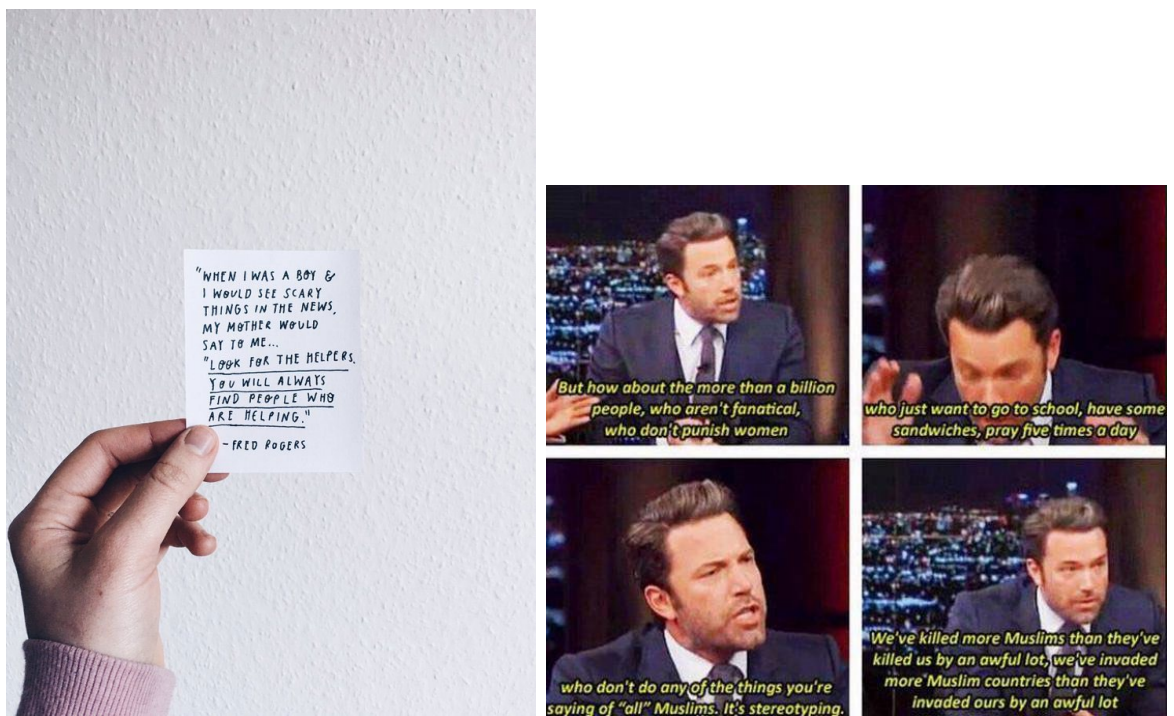


FIGURE 21: QUOTES



**FIGURE 22: ANTI-TERRORISM BANNER**

Following on from the three most common image contents, around one quarter (26%) of images were used as a means of imparting information about the attack: images of the aftermath of the attack (6%), press statements (6%), images of attack victims (5%), post-event advice (5%), and breaking news announcements (4%) were all present, as illustrated in Figure 23 below.



In a statement given today, 22 March, by Commander BJ Harrington at New Scotland Yard, he said:

Since 14:40hrs this afternoon (Wednesday, 22 March) the MPS has responded to an incident in the area of Parliament Square, and the Senior National Coordinator has declared this a terrorist incident.

And although we remain open minded to the motive, a full counter terrorism investigation is already underway - this is led by the Met's Counter Terrorism Command.

At this stage I will confirm what we know has happened, but I will not speculate.

We received a number of different reports - which included a person in the river, a car in collision with pedestrians and a man armed with a knife.

Officers were already in the location as part of our routine policing operation. Immediately, additional officers were sent to the scene and that included firearms officers.

We are working closely with the London Ambulance Service and the London Fire Brigade.

I'd like to repeat our request for the public to avoid the following areas:

Parliament Square: Whitehall; Westminster Bridge; Lambeth Bridge; Victoria Street up to the junction with Broadway and the Victoria Embankment up to Embankment tube.

This is to allow emergency services to deal with this ongoing incident.

There is an ongoing investigation being led by the Counter Terrorism Command and we would ask anybody who has images or film of the incident to pass those to police.

We know that there are a number of casualties, including police officers, but at this stage we cannot confirm numbers or the nature of these injuries.

Our response will be ongoing for some time as it is important that we gather all possible information and evidence.

Public safety is our top priority and we are reviewing our policing stance across London and throughout the course of this afternoon there will be additional police and officers deployed across the Capital.

I would like to ask the public to remain vigilant and let us know if they see anything suspicious that causes them concern and dial 999 immediately.

The Acting Commissioner Craig Mackey is being treated as a significant witness as he was at the scene when the incident started. Whilst he is not injured, it would be inappropriate for him to talk about the incident at this stage. Ours and his thoughts are with all those involved and those responding to both incidents.

Anyone with information can also call 0800 789 321.

**FIGURE 23: IMAGES USED TO CONVEY INFORMATION**

There was also a small amount of hostility directed at Muslims: 4% of images related to Islam (Figure 24), 3% were lists of terrorist attacks (Figure 25), and 3% related to Sadiq Khan, London’s Muslim mayor<sup>58</sup> (Figure 26). As the examples illustrate, these images overwhelmingly presented Islam negatively.



FIGURE 24: IMAGES RELATED TO ISLAM



FIGURE 25: A SCREENSHOT DETAILING OTHER TERRORIST ATTACKS

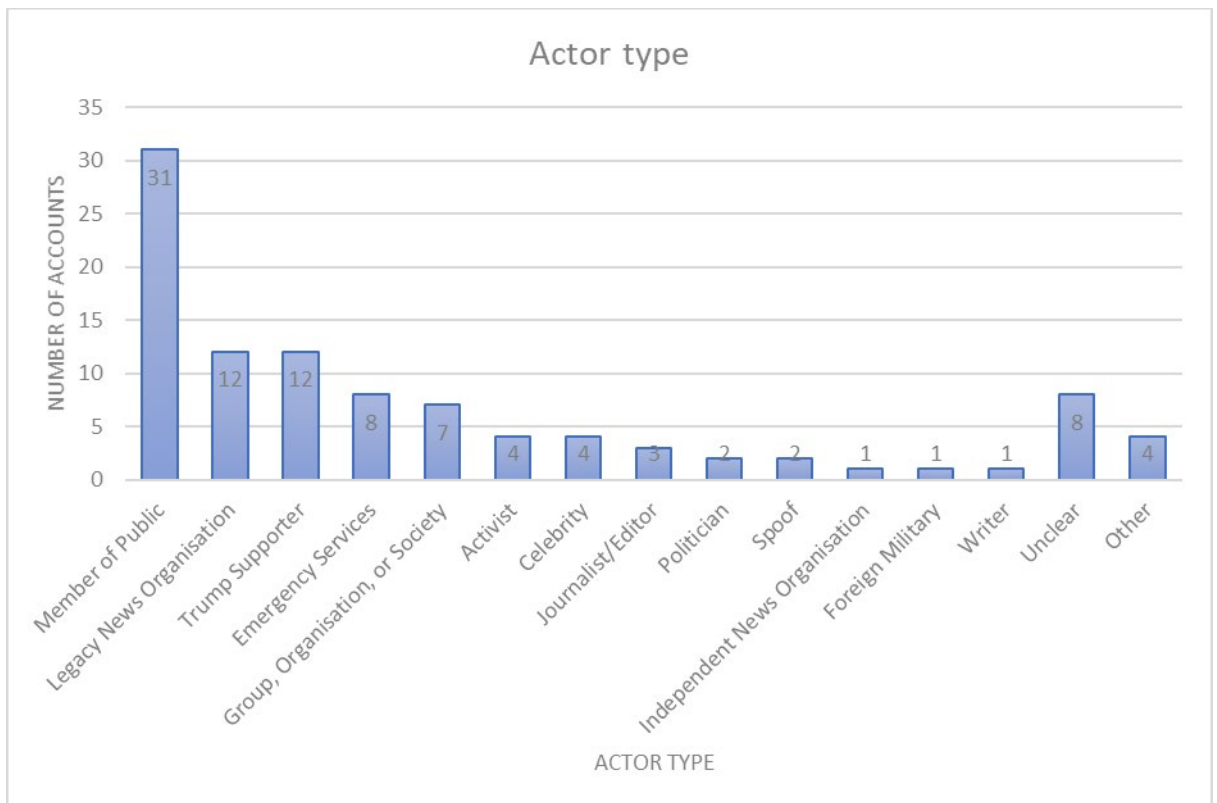
<sup>58</sup> Sadiq Khan has voiced repeated opposition to former-President Trump’s once-proposed Muslim travel ban and dismissed Trump’s claim that London had become dangerous due to immigration (Weaver, 2019).



**FIGURE 26: PHOTOCOLLAGE RELATED TO SADIQ KHAN**

The Westminster Bridge photograph also appeared 6 times, including SouthLoneStar’s tweet. This highlights the prevalence of the photograph in the overarching Twitter conversation about the attack.

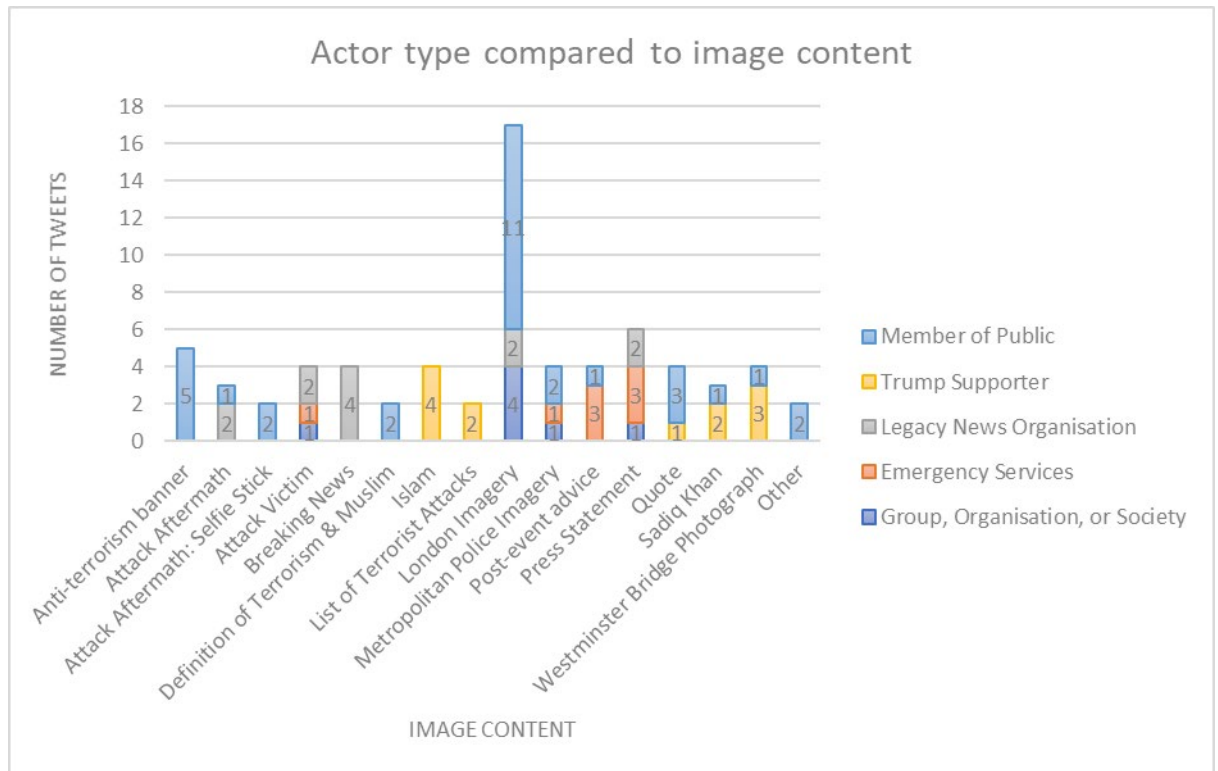
*ACTOR TYPE*



**CHART 6: ACTOR TYPE**



Looking above at Chart 6, we can see that the most common actor types were members of the public (31%), followed by Trump supporters (12%), legacy news organisations (12%), and emergency services (8%). It was of particular interest to ascertain which kinds of users shared what kinds of content. Therefore, in Chart 7, five of the most common actor types (totalling 70% of the 100 accounts) were compared to image content.



**CHART 7: ACTOR TYPE COMPARED TO IMAGE CONTENT**

When looking at Chart 7, three trends emerge:

1. Members of the public, and to a lesser extent, groups, organisations, or societies, generally shared images that imparted solidarity, condolence, and mourning, such as London imagery, the image of the anti-terrorism banner, and metropolitan police imagery.
2. Legacy news organisations and emergency services shared images that conveyed information about the attack, such as press statements, breaking news notifications, and images of attack victims.

3. Trump supporters shared images that expressed hostility towards Islam, for example, images that depicted Islam more generally, the Westminster Bridge photograph, lists of terrorist attacks, and images of Sadiq Khan.

#### SAMPLE SUMMARY

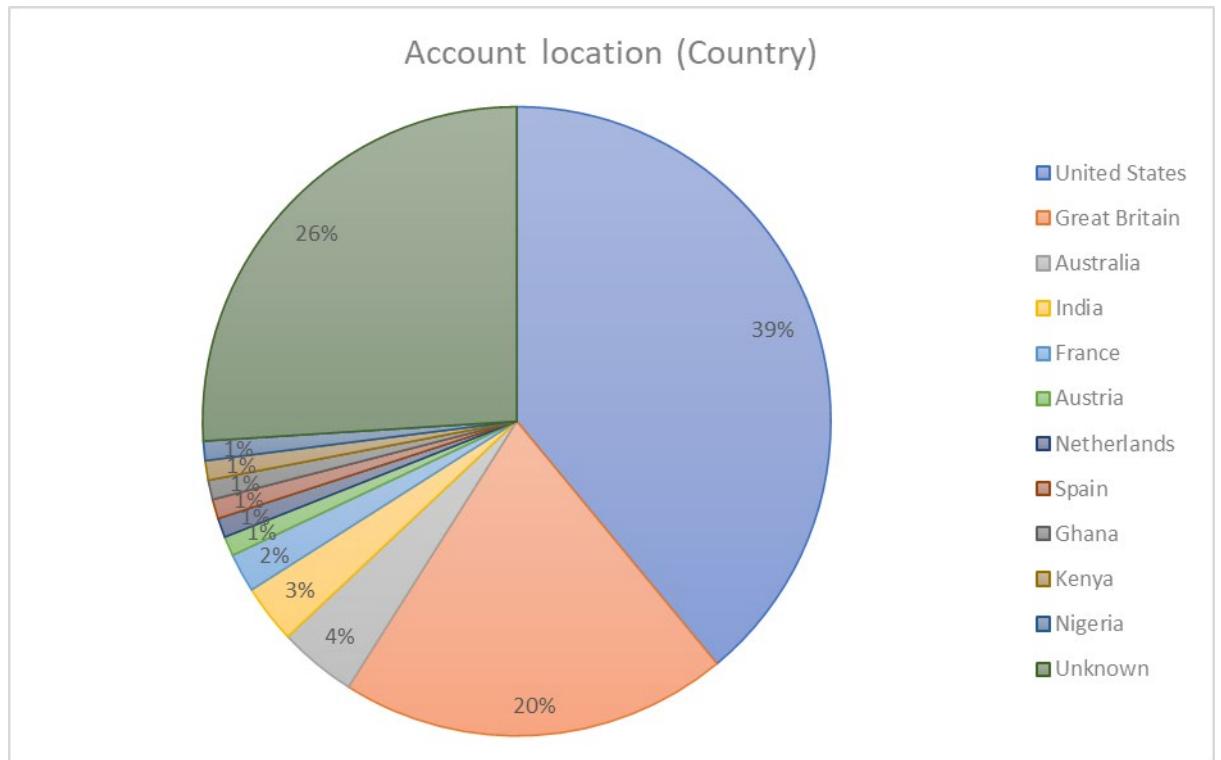
The key finding from this analysis is that the response to the attack was typical, based on previous research. The prominent use of the co-occurrence hashtags, the sharing of images invoking solidarity, mourning, and comradeship, images used to impart information, and hostility and intolerance have all been observed in earlier research examining crisis events on social media (Yum & Schenck-Hamlin, 2005; Magby et al., 2015; Bunker et al., 2017; Mirbabaie et al., 2018; Krutrök & Lindgren, 2018; Buntain & Lim, 2018; Fischer-Preßler et al., 2019; Mirbabaie & Marx, 2019; Innes et al., 2019). This thesis, therefore, affirms and builds on these patterns. These findings present evidence that Twitter users responded to the Westminster Bridge attack similarly to responses to other analogous events. Moreover, this analysis involved a detailed examination of images which, despite images being a vital component of social media communication, is a novel approach to examining how social media users respond to crisis events.

## SAMPLE 2: 100 MOST RETWEETED TWEETS OF THE WESTMINSTER BRIDGE PHOTOGRAPH

### SAMPLE INTRODUCTION

Several interesting findings emerged from the analysis of this sample. First, users who shared the photograph as disinformation generally shared the original photograph without manipulating its content. Instead, the photograph's context was manipulated through captioning. This finding is deeply significant as it supports the argument that unaltered images with fabricated contexts are prevalent, persuasive, and easy to produce and therefore require further examination. Therefore, this thesis reinforces the need to investigate this kind of visual disinformation and adds to the growing evidence that images are an integral part of disinformation and recontextualised images are a common method of deception. Secondly, actor type analysis showed that users who shared the photograph as disinformation primarily located themselves in the US and presented themselves as right-wing. This suggests that we need to learn more about why these types of users are motivated to use images like the Westminster Bridge photograph in this way.

## DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

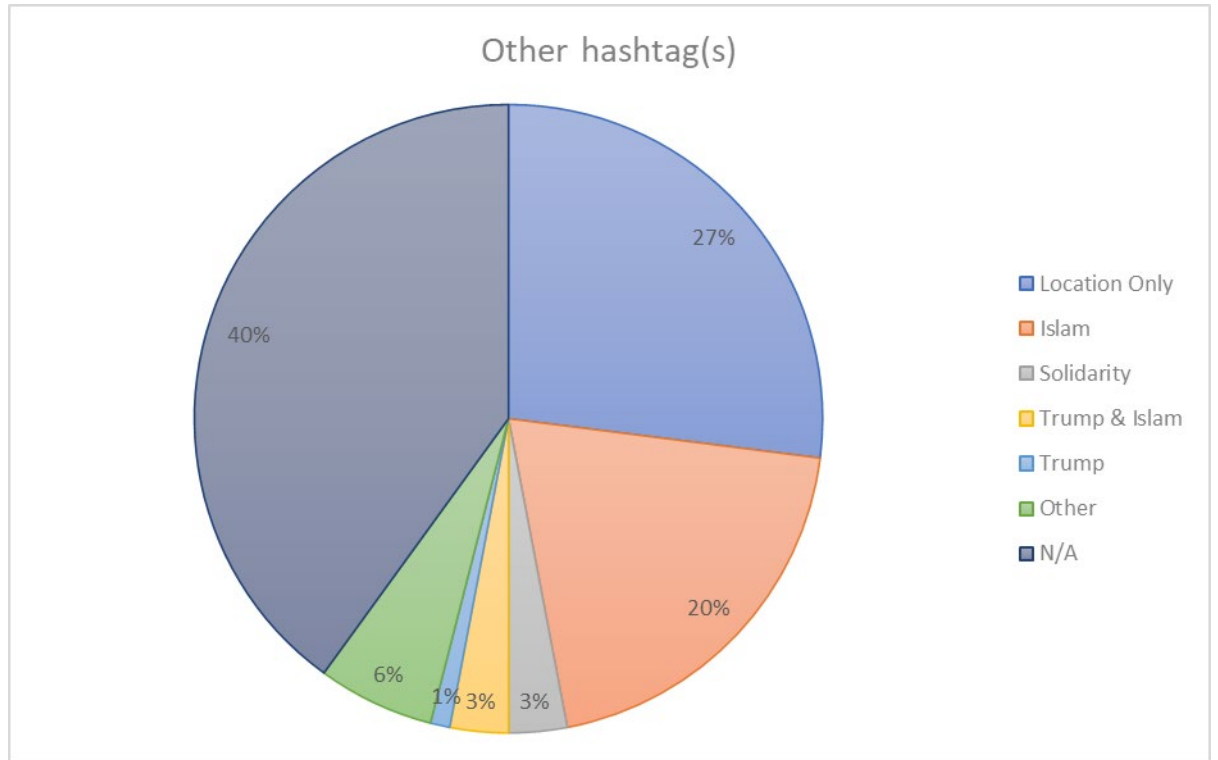


**CHART 8: ACCOUNT LOCATION (COUNTRY)**

Chart 8 presents the country each user located themselves. When compared with the previous sample, this is a notable difference. While around half of users were located in Great Britain in the top 100 retweeted images overall, in this sample, it is only 20%. Conversely, the US was the largest location, with approximately double (39%) the number of users locating themselves in this country compared to the previous sample (18%). This is significant as the Westminster Bridge attack was relatively localised and UK-specific, and so it would be expected that most responding to it would be in the UK. These findings suggest that the Westminster Bridge photograph attracted an American audience.

CONTENT ANALYSIS FINDINGS<sup>59</sup>

OTHER HASHTAGS

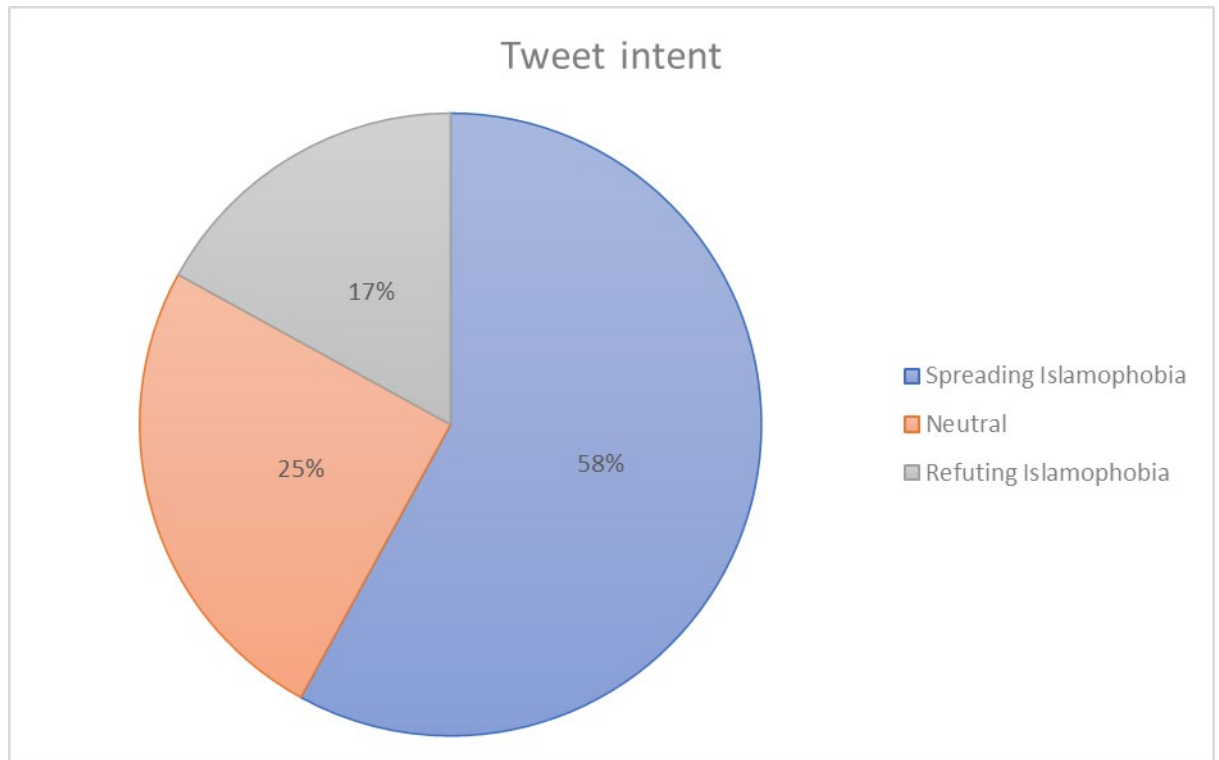


**CHART 9: OTHER HASHTAG(S) USED IN THE TWEET**

Chart 9 presents the analysis of the hashtag used in this sample outside of #Westminster, #PrayForLondon, and #BanIslam. Like the previous sample, a portion of tweets did not use any other hashtags (40%). Following this, 27% of tweets contained hashtags related to the attack location. Significantly, 20% of hashtags related to Islam, for example, #MuslimBan and #IslamIsTheProblem. A small number of tweets used various hashtags related to Islam and Trump (3%).

<sup>59</sup> For the code frames related to the analysis of this specific sample, see appendix 2.2.

INTENT



**CHART 10: USER INTENTION FOR SHARING THE WESTMINSTER BRIDGE PHOTOGRAPH**

The tweets were then analysed for their intent, specifically their purpose of sharing the Westminster Bridge photograph. As Chart 10 highlights, over half (58%) of tweets seemed to use the photograph to spread Islamophobia. Below, Figure 27 provides some visual examples of this.



**FIGURE 27: EXAMPLES OF USERS SHARING A VERSION OF THE WESTMINSTER BRIDGE PHOTOGRAPH TO SPREAD ISLAMOPHOBIA**

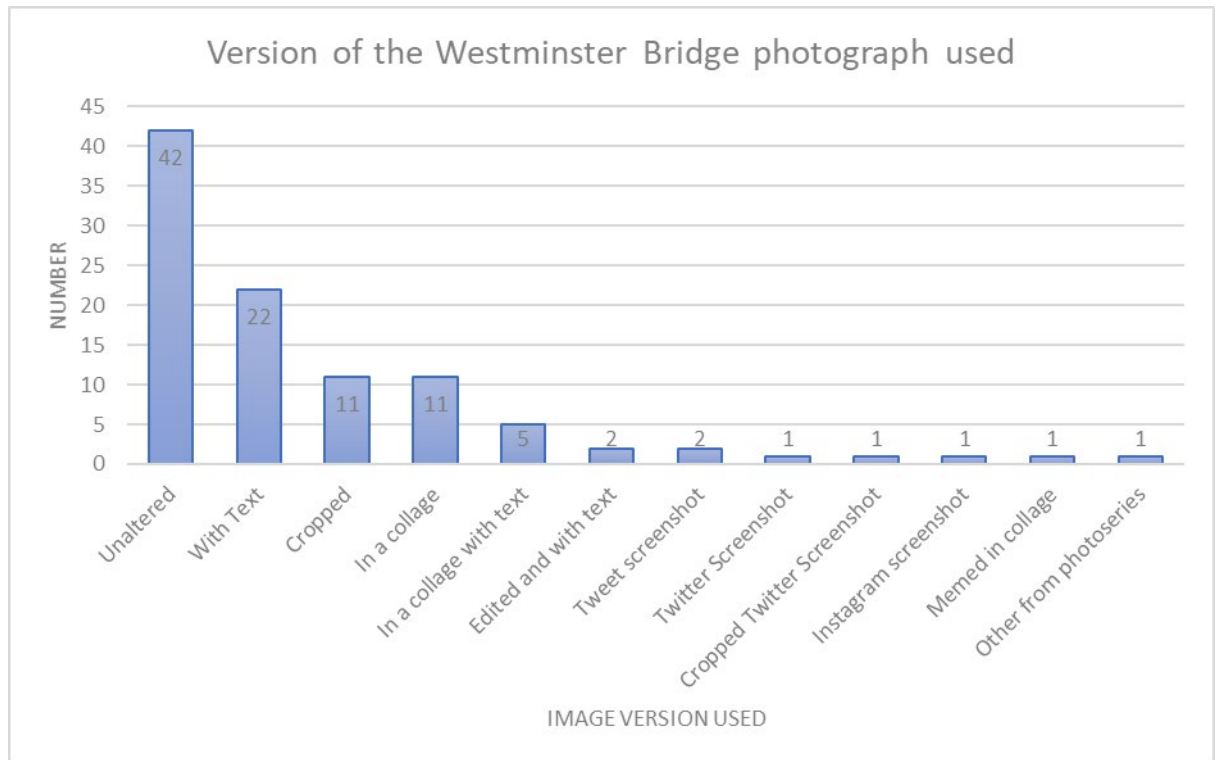
Conversely, 17% of tweets used the photograph to refute the Islamophobia applied to it. Figure 28 provides visual examples, generally involving users providing more context to the photograph.



**FIGURE 28: EXAMPLES OF USERS EDITING AND ALTERING THE WESTMINSTER BRIDGE PHOTOGRAPH TO REFUTE ISLAMOPHOBIA**

The remaining 25% of tweets neither used the photograph to spread Islamophobia nor refute it, instead making a neutral or ambiguous comment about the photograph, where intent could not be determined.

IMAGE VERSION USED



**CHART 11: VERSION OF THE WESTMINSTER BRIDGE PHOTOGRAPH USED IN THE TWEET**

Following intent, the images were then analysed to determine what version of the photograph had been shared. This was to understand how much (or how little) the photograph had been altered when it was shared. Significantly Chart 11 shows that almost half (42%) shared an unaltered version of the photograph. Following this, 22% shared a version of the photograph with text. In these instances, text had been added, but the photograph itself remained unaltered beyond cropping and/or minimal additions, as shown in Figure 29 below. Thus, a key finding from this analysis is that almost two-thirds of the sample (64%) did not involve altering the image significantly.





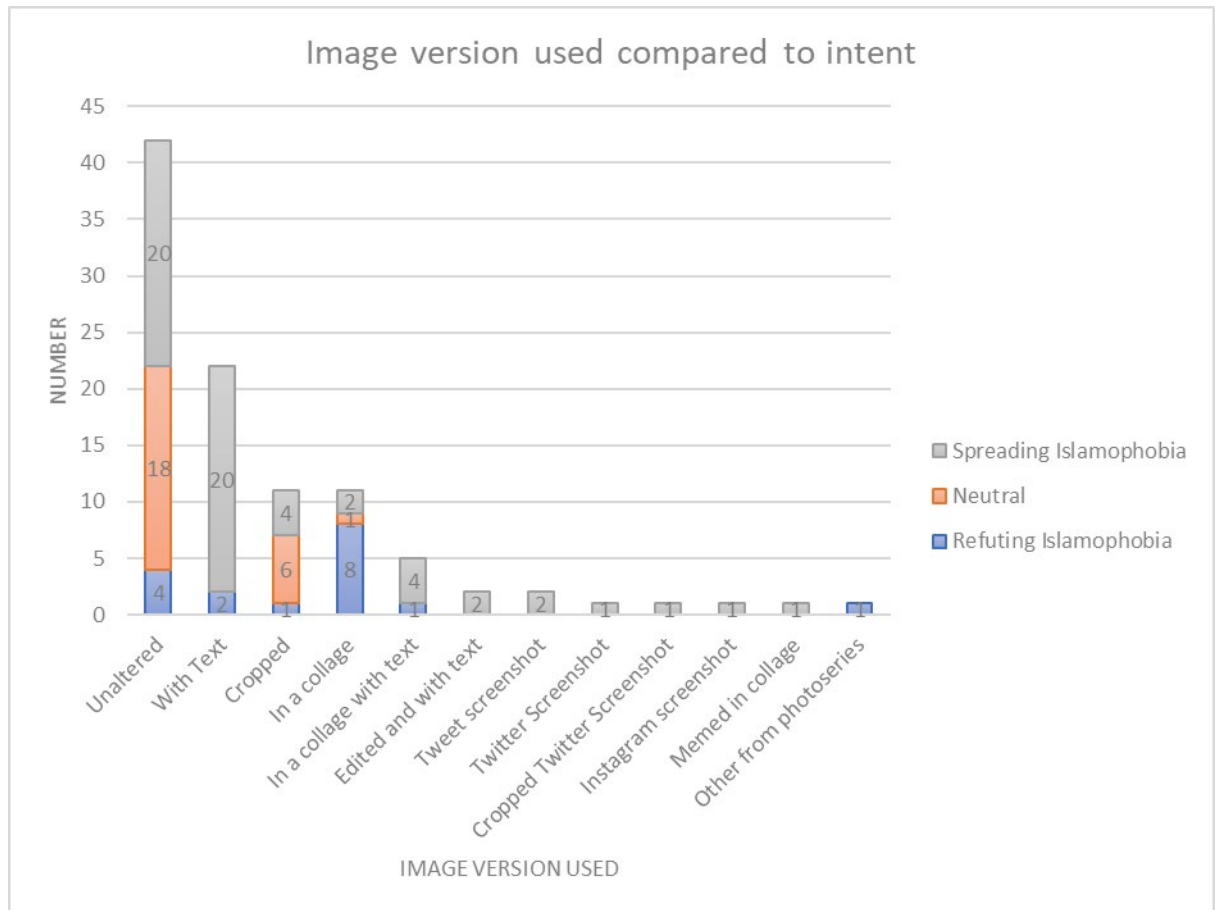
**FIGURE 29: EXAMPLES OF THE WESTMINSTER BRIDGE PHOTOGRAPH WITH TEXT ADDED**

The remaining versions shared included instances where the photograph had been cropped (11%), the photograph being used as part of a collage without text (11%) and with text (5%). Only in two examples was the photograph overtly edited. This is illustrated below in Figure 30. In the image on the left, the photograph has been turned monochrome except for the woman<sup>60</sup>, likely as a means of highlighting her, and text was also added. On the right, London Mayor Sadiq Khan was added to the photograph with accompanying text.

<sup>60</sup> As a reminder, the woman in the photograph is referred to as “the woman” or “the Muslim woman” as her identify remained anonymous throughout the journey of the Westminster Bridge photograph.



**FIGURE 30: THE TWO INSTANCES IN WHICH THE PHOTOGRAPH HAD BEEN OVERLY EDITED, BOTH OF WHICH ALSO HAD TEXT APPLIED**



**CHART 12: VERSION OF THE WESTMINSTER BRIDGE PHOTOGRAPH USED IN THE TWEET**

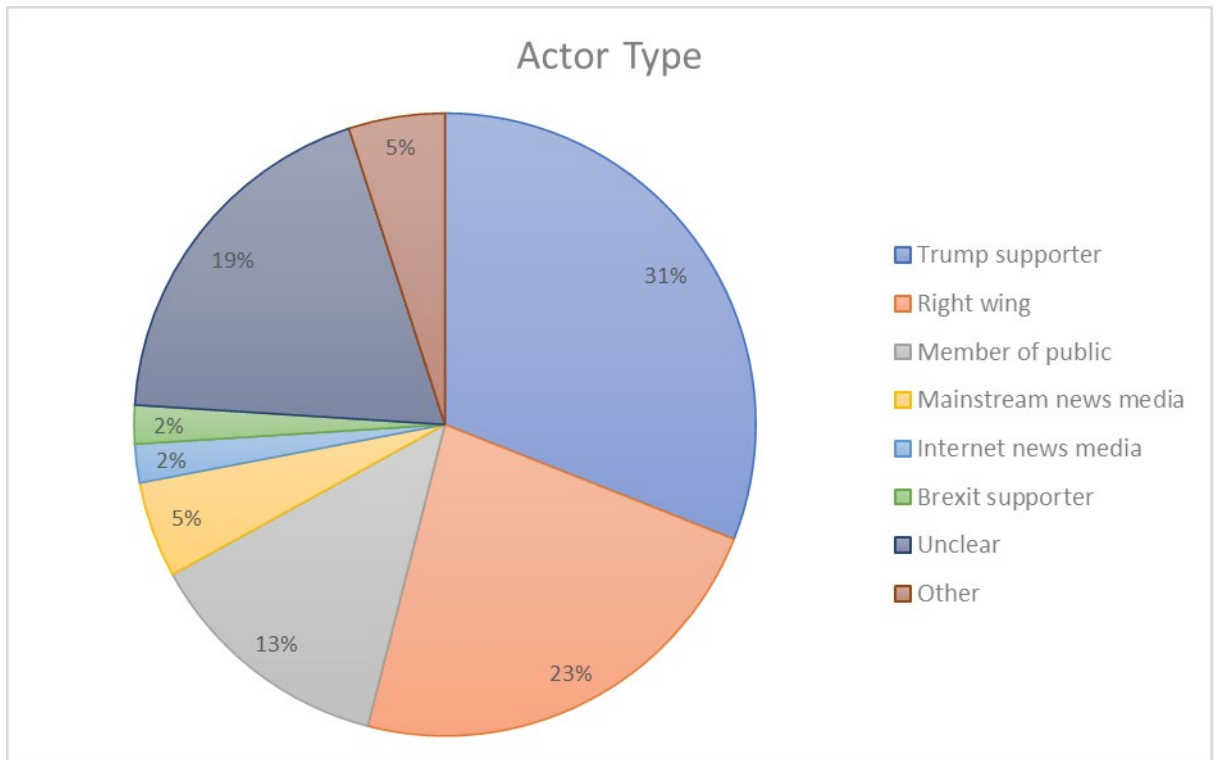
A comparison was performed comparing intent with the version of the image shared, illustrated above in Chart 12. Three trends emerged:

1. Of those who used the photograph to spread Islamophobia (n=58), an equal number of users shared unaltered versions (n=20) and versions with text (n=20), making these the dominant means of spreading Islamophobia. This suggests that the promulgation of disinformation tied to this photograph was not dependent on altering the photograph's content but altering its context.
2. Those with neutral intent (n=25) mostly shared either unaltered (n=18) or cropped (n=6) versions of the photograph. This speaks to the neutrality of these tweets.
3. Of those who shared a version of the photograph to refute Islamophobia (n=17), almost half shared a version of the photograph within a collage (n=8). In most cases, this was a specific image where the Westminster Bridge photograph was juxtaposed with another photograph from the attack of a man seemingly walking past an injured person, shown below in Figure 31.



**FIGURE 31: WESTMINSTER BRIDGE PHOTOGRAPH COMPARED TO A SIMILAR IMAGE OF A MAN SEEMING TO WALK BY AN INJURED PERSON**

ACTOR TYPE

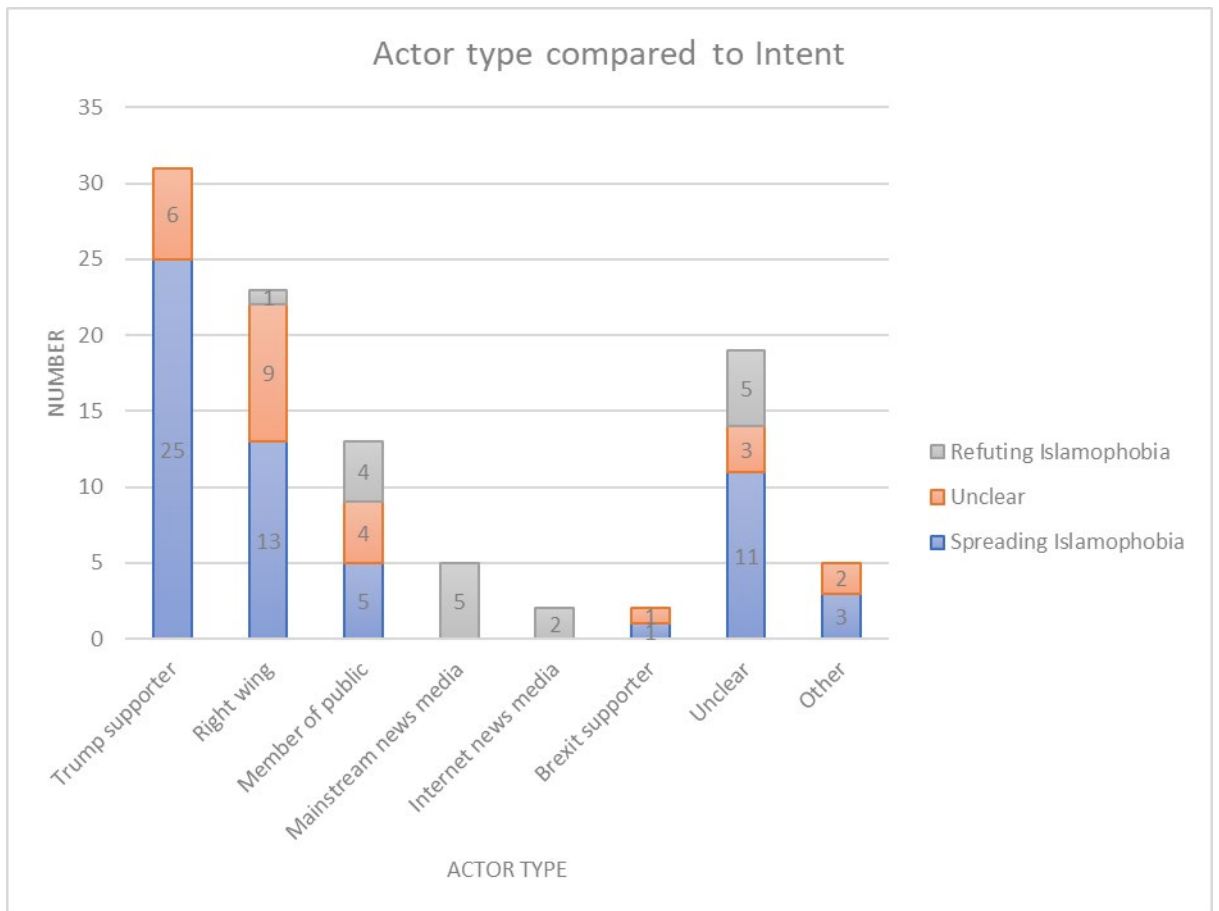


**CHART 13: ACTOR TYPE OF THOSE WHO SHARED A VERSION OF THE WESTMINSTER BRIDGE PHOTOGRAPH**

Finally, the users' accounts were analysed to determine actor type. Chart 13 shows that this sample was dominated mainly by accounts aligned with right-wing politics, presenting themselves as Trump supporters (31%) or expressing more general support of right-wing policies (23%). This amounted to more than half of the tweets (54%). Those identified as Trump supporters were notably overt in their alignment with Trump, for example, through profile banners, illustrated in Figure 32. In addition, the majority of these accounts located themselves in the US (n=29, 54%). Following this, only 13% of accounts were identified as members of the public, which is notably lower than the previous sample (31%).



**FIGURE 32: TRUMP-RELATED PROFILE BANNERS**



**CHART 14: ACTOR TYPE AND INTENT COMPARISON**

Actor type was then compared to the intent to identify any correlations between the two. Chart 14 illustrates this, and a pattern emerges:

- Of those that shared the photograph with an Islamophobic message, 66% (n=38) were either Trump supporters (n=25) or right-wing (n=13). There was, therefore, a relationship between sharing the photograph with Islamophobic messaging and the user being allied with right-wing beliefs.
- Conversely, those that shared the photograph to refute the Islamophobic messaging were the mainstream news media (n=5), a portion of members of the public (n=4), and internet news media (n=2). The majority of these user profiles were largely apolitical.

## SAMPLE SUMMARY

Overall, two key findings emerged from this sample:

1. Users who shared the photograph as disinformation generally did not manipulate its content (or only did so minimally) but manipulated its context using text. These findings are highly significant and reflective of broader discussions regarding visual disinformation. As explored previously, there are growing arguments that unaltered images given a fabricated context are affective, pervasive, and easy to create and thus require examination (Tucker et al., 2018; Tandoc et al., 2018; Paris & Donovan, 2019; Fazio, 2020; Garimella & Eckles, 2020; Brennen et al., 2020). These findings subsequently support these arguments and present new evidence from the Westminster Bridge attack that the most prominent photograph to emerge from the attack was used in this way.
2. Building on this first finding, users who shared the photograph as disinformation mainly located themselves in the US and were presented as Trump supporters and/or right-wing. Islamophobia is a pillar of right-wing American populism (Klein, 2019; Tanner & Campana, 2019; Udupa et al., 2020), so it could be predicted that these types of users would be prone to spreading Islamophobia. This suggests that we need to learn more about what motivates this community to comment on images like the Westminster Bridge photograph and use them in this way.

These findings also show that the SouthLoneStar account and the Westminster Bridge photograph tweet it produced were not unique. The account both looked like other accounts that shared the photograph with Islamophobic messaging (right-wing/Trump supporters) and used the photograph as disinformation in a similar way (unaltered with a manipulated context). This suggests SouthLoneStar was intentionally disguised to look and act like this type of user. From this, it can be inferred that genuine Twitter users also contributed to the spread of the photograph as disinformation. Again, further research would be needed to understand why this type of user engages in this type of image-sharing.

## OVERALL SUMMARY

Overall, three significant findings emerged from the analysis of the two Hashtag dataset samples:

1. The Twitter response to the Westminster Bridge attack was reflective of existing research and therefore adds to these findings. Moreover, it builds on current findings by specifically examining the Westminster Bridge attack and also looks in particular at the role of image in online responses to crisis events.
2. When the Westminster Bridge photograph was used to spread disinformation, this was not done by altering the photograph but by sharing largely unedited versions with a manipulated context. This supports the growing argument that not only the role of images in disinformation needs serious examination, but specifically that the pervasiveness and effectiveness of recontextualized photographs require investigation.
3. Those who shared the Westminster Bridge photograph to spread disinformation predominantly located themselves in the US and were presented as either Trump supporters or right-wing. While it is not unexpected that these kinds of users would share Islamophobic content, it does suggest that additional research may be needed to understand why these users shared the Westminster Bridge photograph in the way that they did.

Finally, it is important to reiterate that this thesis' approach to examining visual disinformation is novel in and of itself, therefore adding to and building on existing examinations of visual disinformation. As explored in the literature review, it is uncommon for disinformation research to take into consideration the role of images, and research that does generally does so in a macro way which makes it difficult to analyse the images in depth. Therefore, this thesis took an alternative, micro-methodological approach in which one piece of visual disinformation was examined in as much depth and from as many angles as feasible within the thesis' remit. The aim is to present an alternative method for exploring visual disinformation, in which new and unique insights can be learned using this approach.



## TWITTER: @SOUTHLONESTAR DATASET

As before, the below table highlights the findings presented in this subsection<sup>61</sup>.

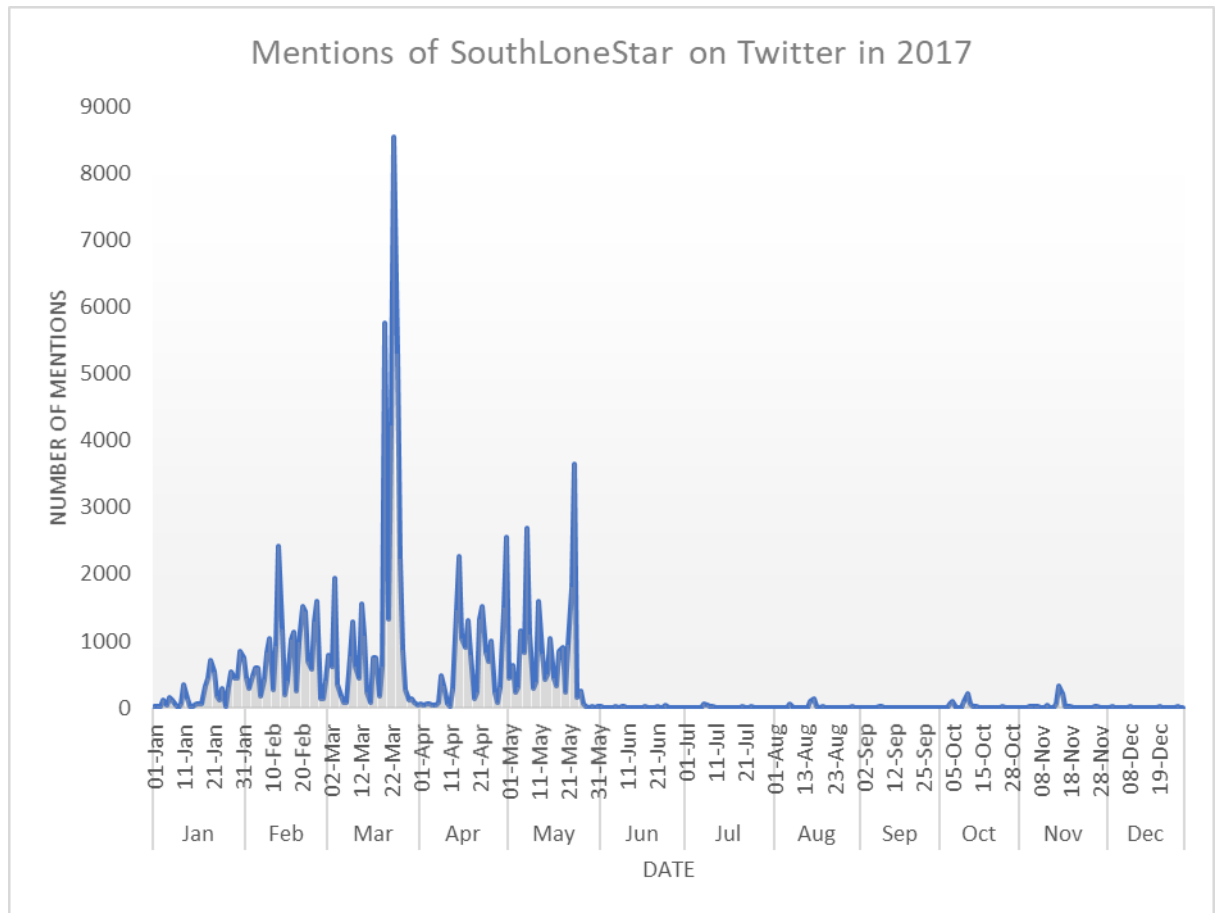
Dataset name	Data Source	Sample(s)	Analysis Performed
Hashtag dataset	Twitter	100 most retweeted tweets overall	Statistical
			Content: Hashtags
			Content: Image type
			Content: Actor type
		100 most retweeted tweets that shared the Westminster Bridge photograph	Statistical
			Content: Hashtags
			Content: Image version used
			Content: Actor type
<i>@SouthLoneStar dataset</i>	<i>Twitter</i>	<i>Replies to SouthLoneStar</i>	<i>Statistical</i>
			<i>Content: Image type</i>
			<i>Content: Image content</i>
			<i>Content: Intent</i>
			<i>Content: Actor type</i>
Article URL dataset	Twitter	March articles	Statistical
			Content: Tweet content
			Content: Actor type
		November articles	Statistical
			Content: Tweet content
			Content: Actor type
Article comments dataset	Online news articles	March comments	Content: Overarching topic
			Content: Sentiment
		November comments	Content: Overarching topic
			Content: Belief in the story

As a reminder, the @SouthLoneStar dataset constitutes tweets (which also shared images) that were identified as responding to SouthLoneStar's tweet on 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2017. For the content analysis, one sample was extracted from the dataset:

- Those who responded to @SouthLoneStar's Westminster Bridge tweet between the time of the tweet (20:00 - 21:00) and 23:59 on 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2017. This was to determine how other Twitter users immediately responded and interacted with the Westminster Bridge tweet and the SouthLoneStar account.

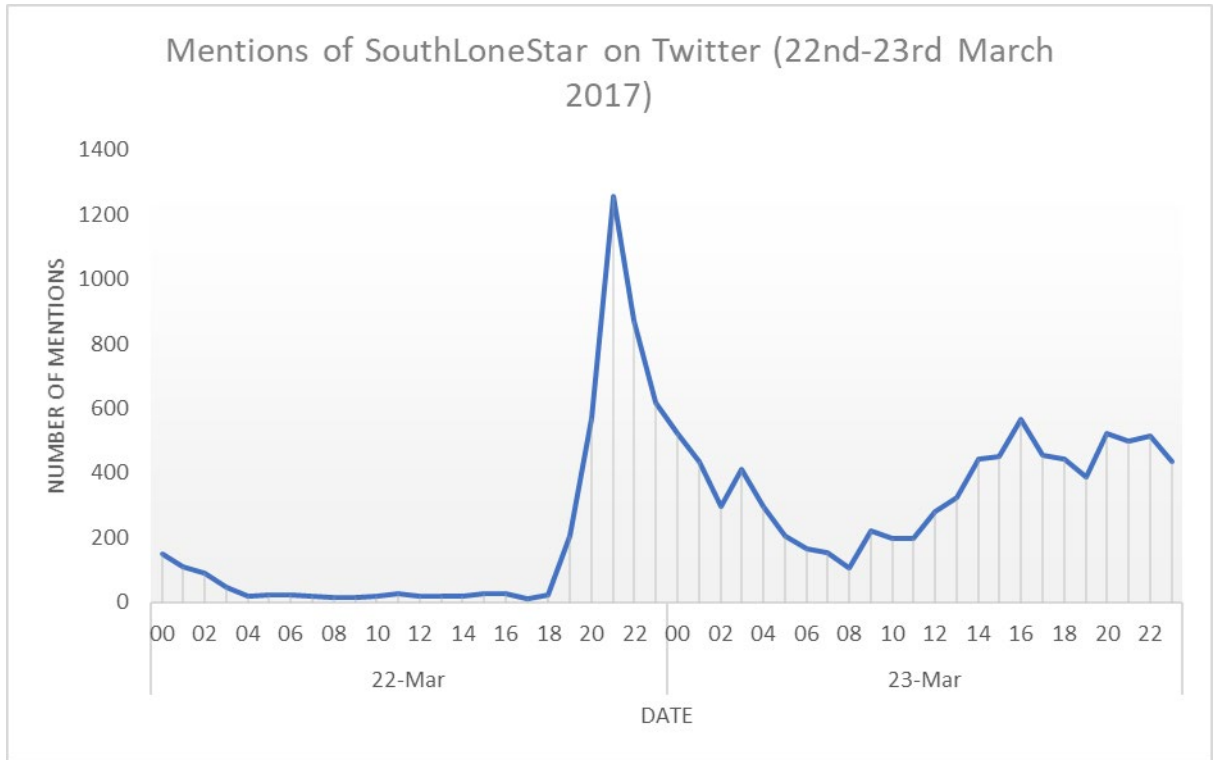
<sup>61</sup> Please refer to the corresponding code frames. For the code frames related to the analysis of this dataset, see appendix 2.

## DATA OVERVIEW



**CHART 15: INTERACTIONS WITH/MENTIONS OF THE SOUTHLONESTAR ACCOUNT IN 2017**

Firstly, an overview of how users interacted with the SouthLoneStar account throughout 2017 is illustrated in Chart 15. SouthLoneStar was mentioned on Twitter 114,403 times in 2017, receiving thousands of interactions in the first half of 2017, with several significant peaks in March. The most interactions were received on 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2017, the day after the Westminster Bridge photograph tweet, with 8,535 mentions. This shows that tweets shared around 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2017 garnered much attention, and these were likely related to the Westminster Bridge attack. After May 2017, interactivity dropped and remained low. This suggests that by the end of May, the SouthLoneStar account was deleted.



**CHART 16: INTERACTIONS WITH AND MENTIONS OF SOUTHLONESTAR ON TWITTER (22ND-23RD MARCH 2017)**

To investigate this March peak further, Chart 16 presents interactions with the SouthLoneStar, specifically on the 22<sup>nd</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup> of March. As the chart illustrates, on 22<sup>nd</sup> March, interactions increased significantly at 20:00, peaking at 1,257 at 21:00. This timely peak suggests that many of these interactions were in response to the Westminster Bridge photograph tweet<sup>62</sup>. The Westminster Bridge photograph appears to have attracted an unusually high level of attention to the account. This is significant as SouthLoneStar regularly spread disinformation throughout the account’s activity, so this tweet seems to have resonated with Twitter users.

SAMPLE 1: @SOUTHLONESTAR

This sample from the @SouthLoneStar dataset examines those who responded on Twitter to SouthLoneStar’s Westminster Bridge tweet on 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2017 from the time the tweet was shared until the end of this date, which was a 3–4-hour window of time. Only replies

<sup>62</sup> The Westminster Bridge tweet was shared by SouthLoneStar between 20:00 and 21:00.

that shared images were sampled, resulting in a sample of 128 tweets. This sample details the next step in the Westminster Bridge photograph's journey, in which the photograph had become visual disinformation and was subsequently responded to by an online audience. The most significant finding is that this response was large, intense, and hostile. As explored previously, disinformation aims to foster confrontation and vitriol, as this will draw increasing attention to the content. The immediate reaction observed in this analysis suggests that the tweet achieved this, which subsequently thrust the tweet further into the broader media ecosystem.

DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

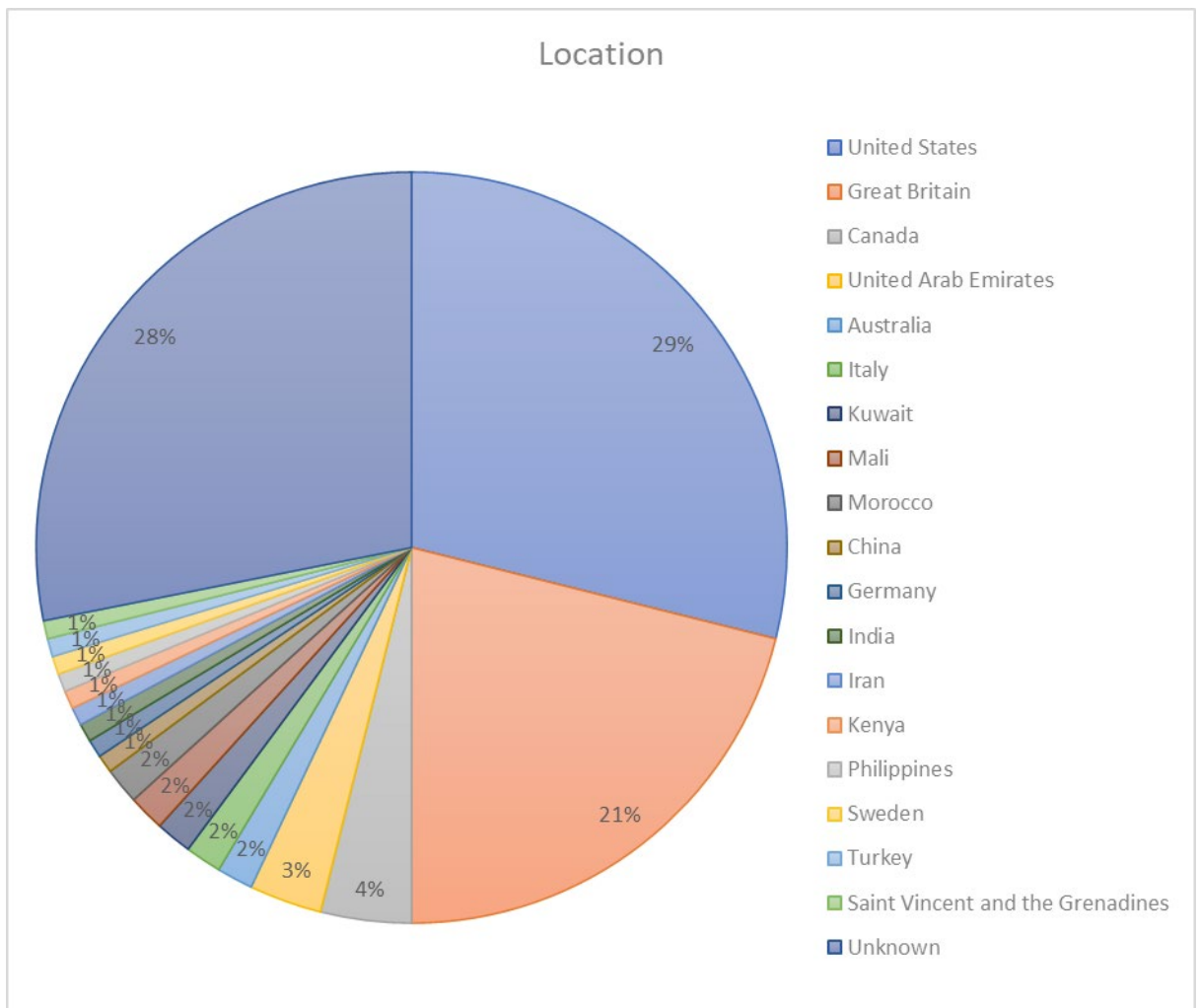
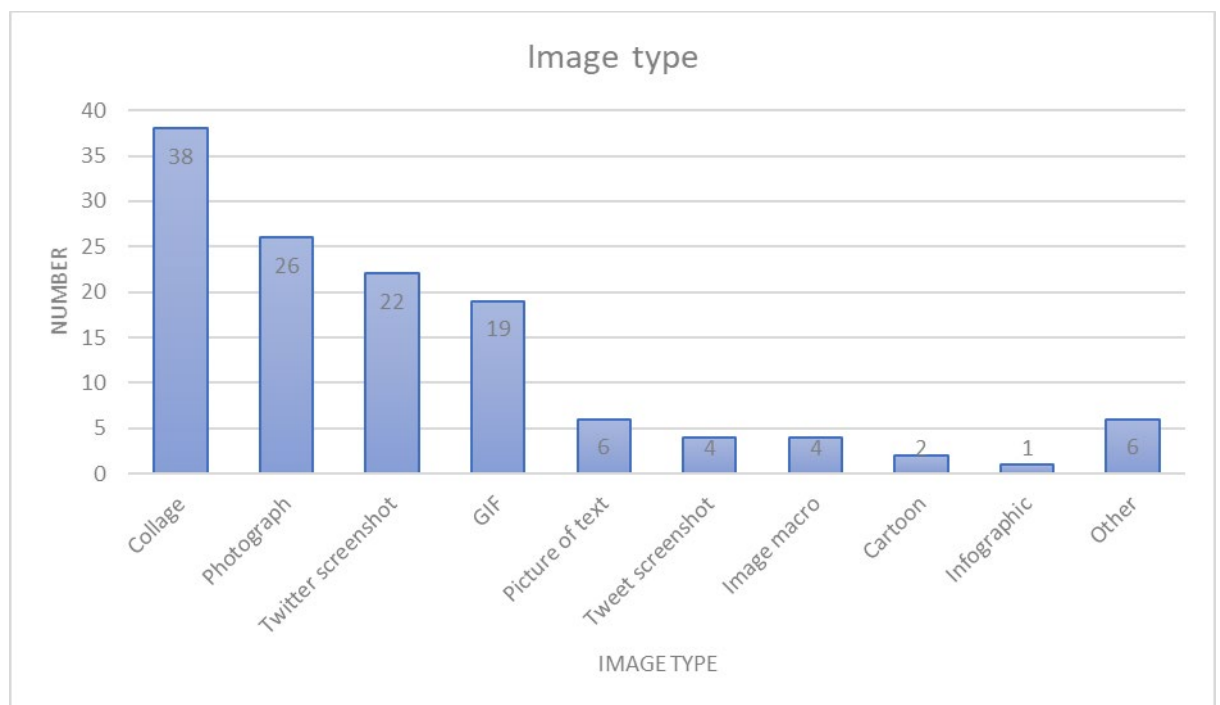


CHART 17: ACCOUNT LOCATION BY COUNTRY

Chart 17 illustrates the reported location of Twitter users who responded to the Westminster Bridge tweet on 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2017. As with previous samples, locations were varied but primarily dominated by the United States and Great Britain, which accounted for 29% and 21% of the users' locations, respectively. A range of other locations followed this.

CONTENT ANALYSIS FINDINGS<sup>63</sup>

IMAGE TYPE



**CHART 18: THE TYPE OF IMAGES USED TO REPLY TO SOUTHLONESTAR**

Following a similar pattern to the analysis of the other samples, the images used to respond to SouthLoneStar's tweet were analysed for image type. This is illustrated in Chart 18, which demonstrates that 30% (n=38) of the reply images were collages. This was followed by photographs (20%, n=26) and Twitter screenshots (17%, n=22). Of these three, a significant portion incorporated the same image, the photograph of the man seeming to walk past a victim during the attack. Collages combined this photograph with the

<sup>63</sup> For the code frames related to the analysis of this specific sample, see appendix 2.3.

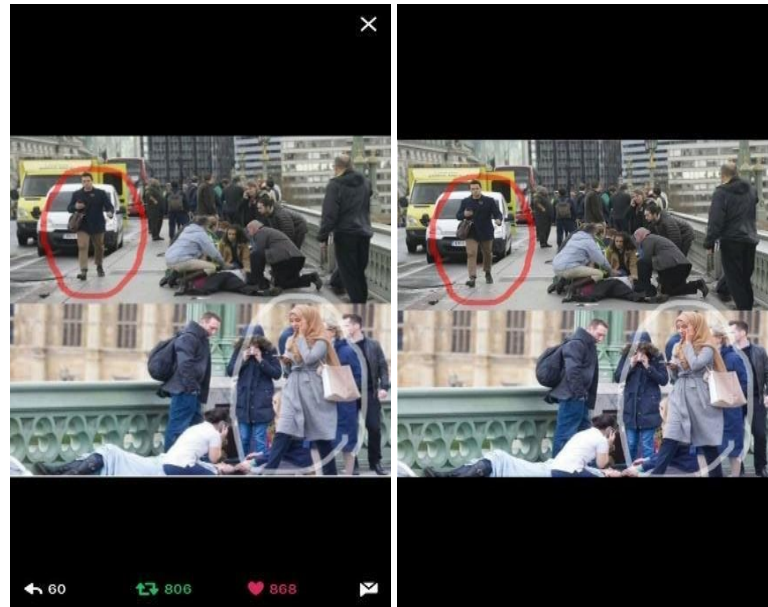
Westminster Bridge photograph, shown below in Figure 33. Photographs involved sharing the photograph, generally unaltered, as seen in Figure 34. Most screenshots shared the collage, screenshotted from Twitter, shown in Figure 35.



**FIGURE 33: COLLAGE OF THE WESTMINSTER BRIDGE PHOTOGRAPH COMPARED TO A PHOTOGRAPH OF A MAN SEEMINGLY IGNORING AN ATTACK VICTIM, WITH THE MUSLIM WOMAN AND WHITE MAN CIRCLED**

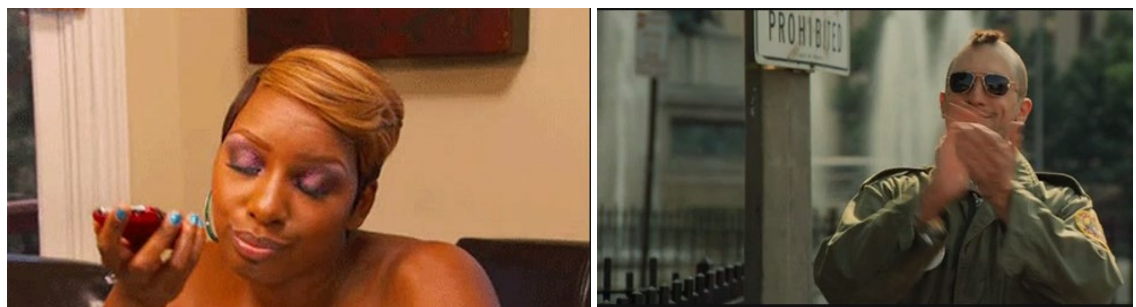


**FIGURE 34: THE PHOTOGRAPH OF A WHITE MAN WALKING PAST AN ATTACK VICTIM**



**FIGURE 35: TWITTER SCREENSHOTS OF THE MUSLIM WOMAN/WHITE MAN COLLAGE. TWITTER'S INTERFACE CAN BE SEEN IN THE LEFT SCREENSHOT**

19 images (22.7%) were animated GIFs, examples of which are presented in Figure 36<sup>64</sup>. The remaining image types included pictures of text (5%, n=6), tweet screenshots (3%, n=4), and image macros (3%, n=4).



**FIGURE 36: EXAMPLES OF THE ANIMATED GIFS USED TO RESPOND TO SOUTHLONESTAR'S TWEET. LEFT CAN BE VIEWED AT: [HTTPS://GIPHY.COM/GIFS/ZQBHDW5NF91WQ](https://giphy.com/gifs/zQBHDW5NF91WQ). RIGHT CAN BE VIEWED AT [HTTP://GPH.IS/1U1LJBW](http://gph.is/1U1LJBW)**

<sup>64</sup> GIFs are “endless looping of image sequences” and described as “a remarkably dexterous, malleable, and versatile file format that is central to digital cultures and communication” (Miltner & Highfield, 2017:2). Often taken from popular media, they are a textless, flexible means of providing a visual representation of the user’s expression. They are “polysemic” as the same GIF can often be applied to a variety of diverse contexts (Miltner & Highfield, 2017: 3-4). Since 2016, Twitter has had an integrated GIF library (Reddy, 2016).

IMAGE CONTENT

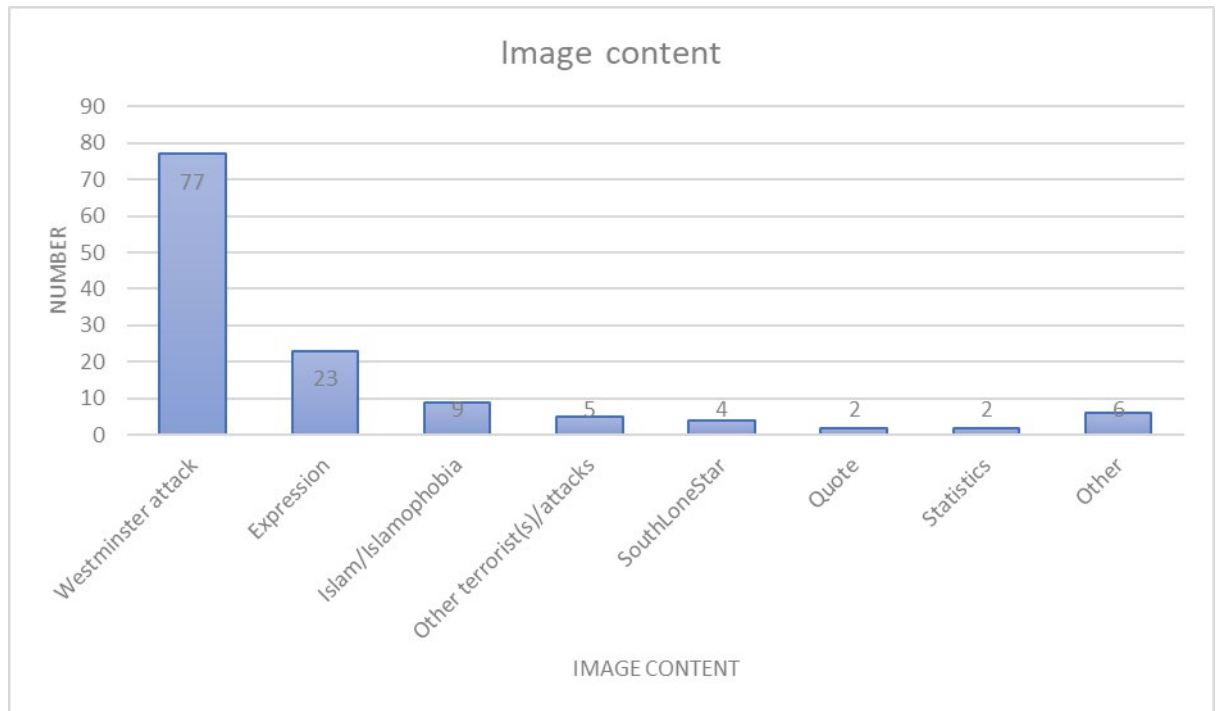


CHART 19: THE CONTENT OF IMAGES USED TO REPLY TO SOUTHLONESTAR

The images were then analysed for their content, the results of which are shown in Chart 19. The most common type of content related to the Westminster Bridge attack (n=77, 60.2%). These generally concerned the previously discussed image of the man walking past an injured person, versions of the Westminster Bridge photograph, shown in Figure 37, and other scenes from the attack, shown in Figure 38.



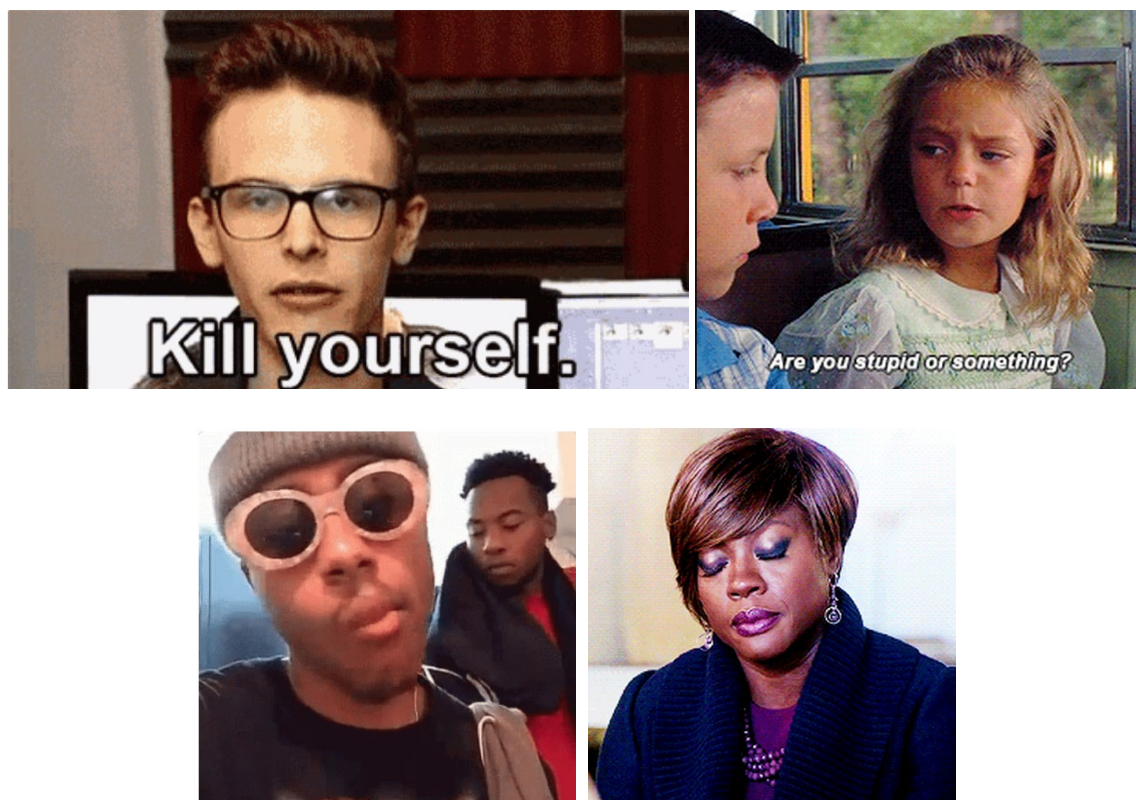
FIGURE 37: EXAMPLES OF USERS REPLYING WITH VERSIONS OF THE WESTMINSTER BRIDGE PHOTOGRAPH





**FIGURE 38: IMAGES DEPICTING OTHER SCENES FROM THE WESTMINSTER BRIDGE ATTACK**

23 images (18%) contained content that depicted a reaction or expression. This was generally done using GIFs, the majority of which expressed negative reactions such as aggression, insults, and disapproval (Figure 39).



**FIGURE 39: GIFS USED TO EXPRESS A REACTION OR EMOTION. TOP LEFT CAN BE VIEWED AT [HTTPS://BIT.LY/2D2944X](https://bit.ly/2D2944x). TOP RIGHT AT [HTTP://GPH.IS/1JZAZM5](http://gph.is/1JZAZM5). BOTTOM LEFT AT [HTTPS://BIT.LY/3AZYIUF](https://bit.ly/3AZYIUF). BOTTOM RIGHT AT [HTTPS://GPH.IS/1G1YSCQ](https://gph.is/1G1YSCQ)**

Following this, 9 images (7%) contained content related to Islam, with examples shown in Figure 40. Finally, 5 (4%) contained content related to other terrorists or terrorist attacks, 4 (3.1%) related to SouthLoneStar, 2 (1.6%) were quotes, and 2 (1.6%) contained statistics.

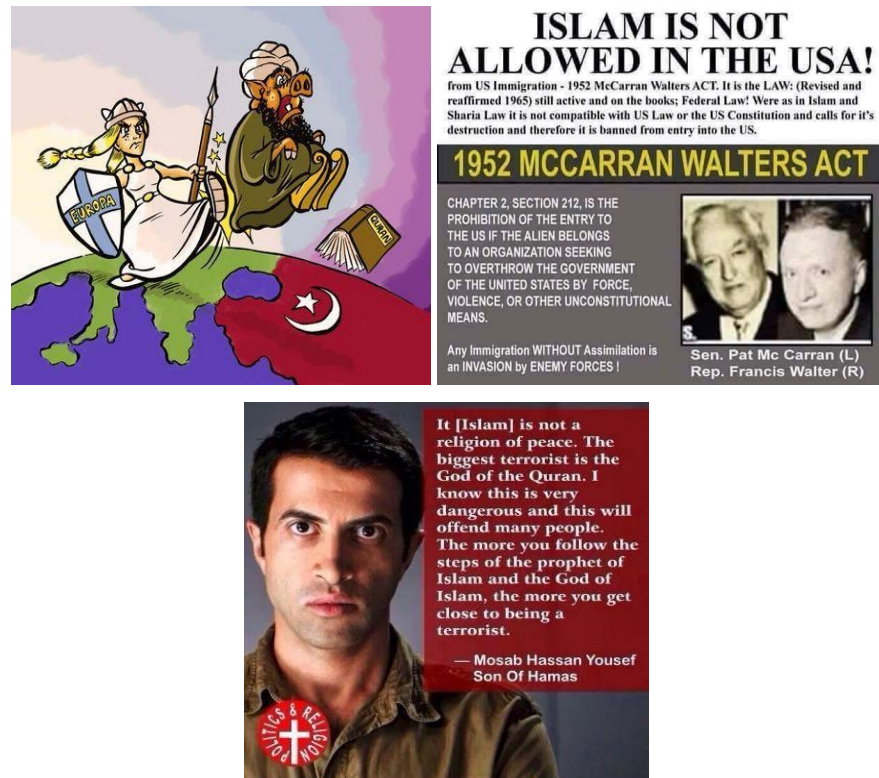


FIGURE 40: IMAGES WITH CONTENT RELATED TO ISLAM OR WITH ISLAMOPHOBIC CONTENT

INTENT

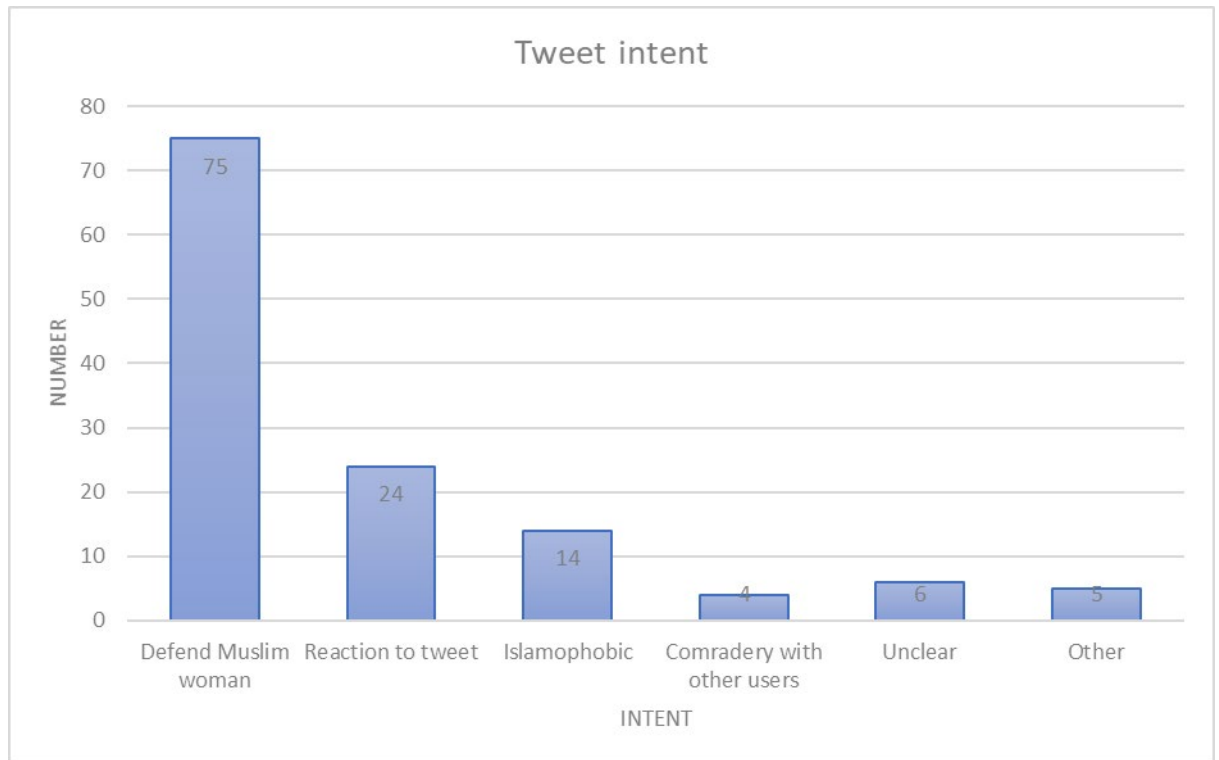


CHART 20: INTENT BEHIND REPLYING TO SOUTHLONESTAR'S TWEET

Tweets were then analysed for intent. We can see in Chart 20 that the majority (n=75, 58.6%) of users responded with an image as a means of defending the Muslim woman. Again, in many cases, this involved sharing a version of the image of the man appearing to walk past victims. Some contested SouthLoneStar's interpretation of the photograph in the tweet text: "@SouthLoneStar her facial expression indicates otherwise". In contrast, others shared pictures of white terrorists with captions such as: "@SouthLoneStar Maybe we should outlaw white guys as well while we're at it".

Following this, the intent of 24 tweets (18.8%) was to react to SouthLoneStar's tweet, generally in a negative way and primarily through the use of GIFs. However, different kinds of images were also used, as shown in Figure 41.



FIGURE 41: IMAGES USED TO INSULT SOUTHLONESTAR

Finally, the intent of 14 images (10.9%) appeared to be used to spread Islamophobic rhetoric, as can be seen in Figure 42:

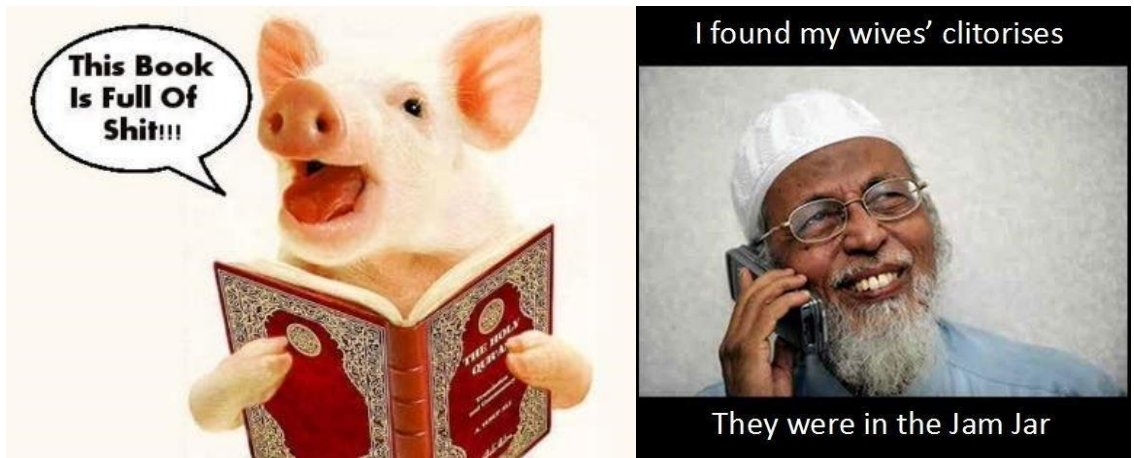
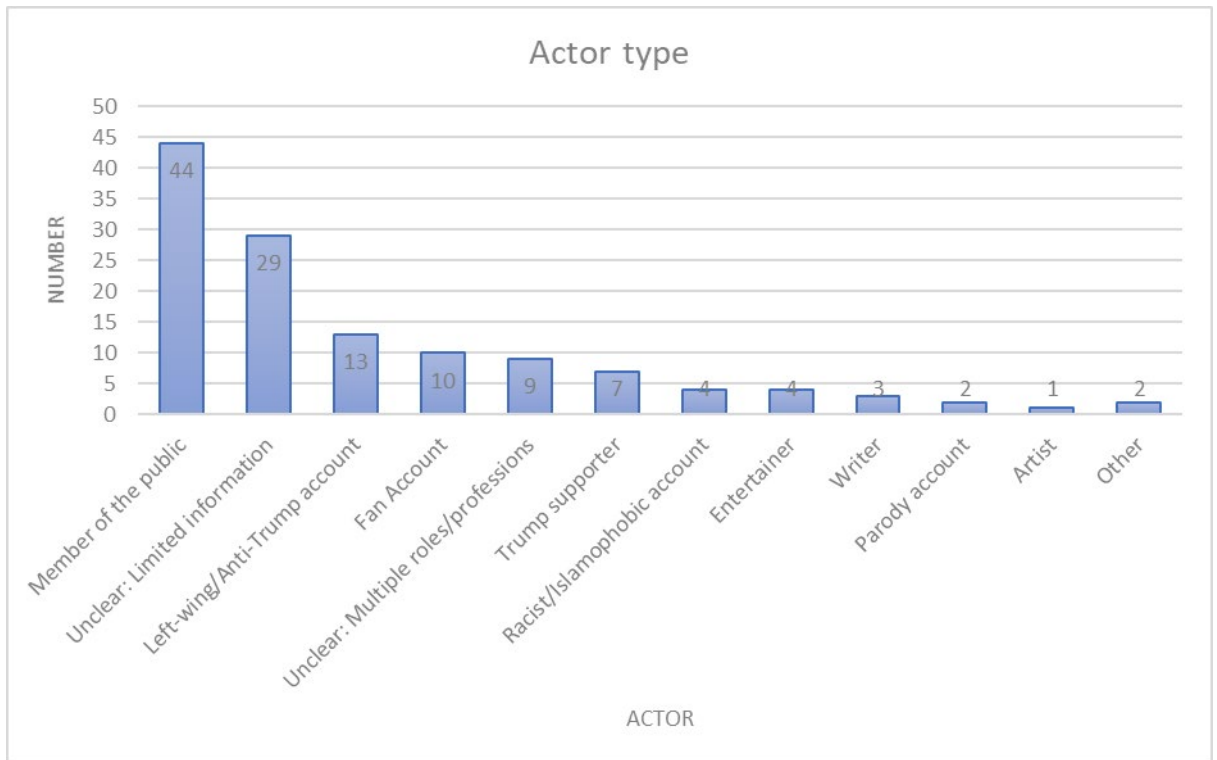


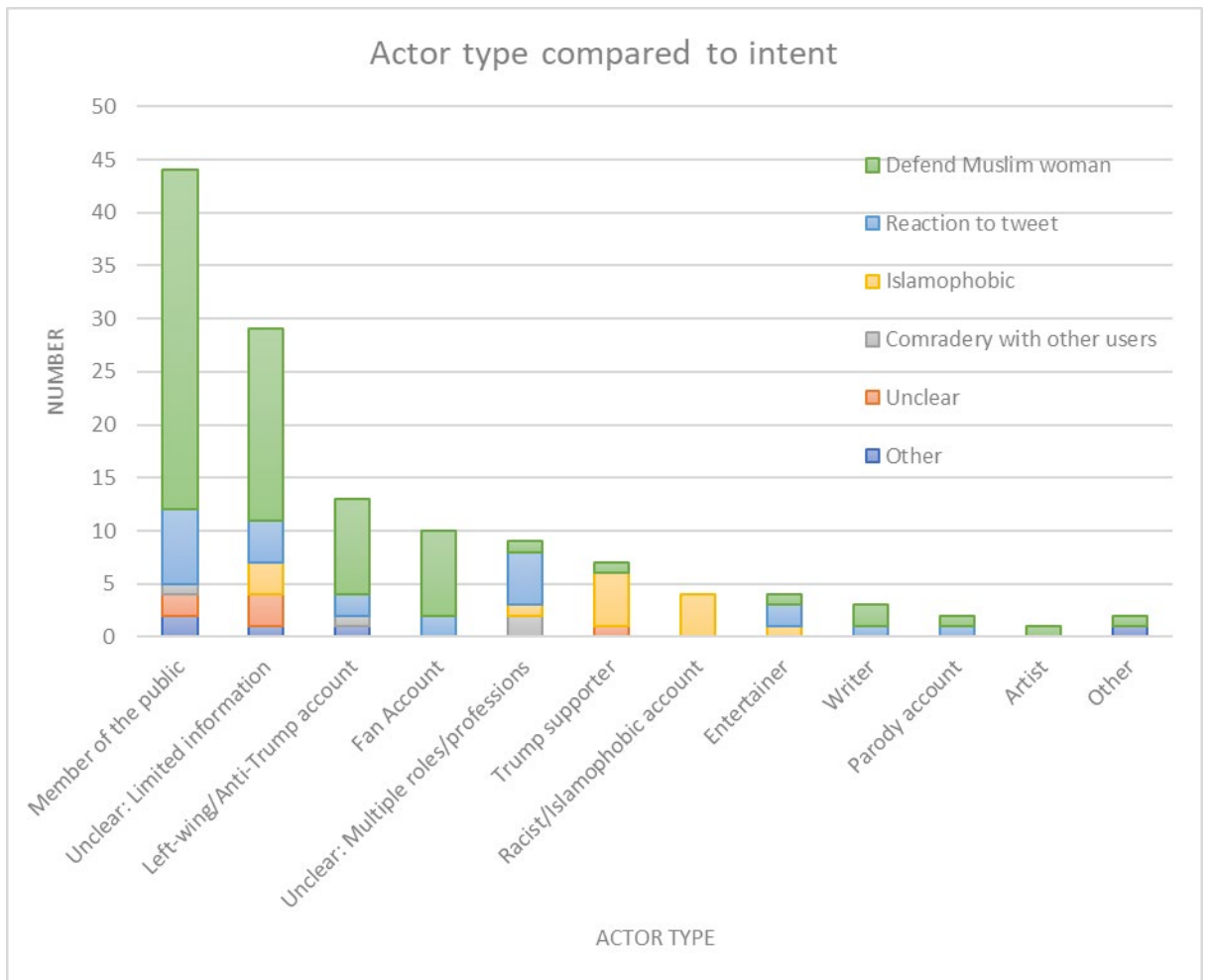
FIGURE 42: EXAMPLES OF IMAGES WITH ISLAMOPHOBIC MESSAGES

ACTOR TYPE



**CHART 21: ACTOR TYPE OF THOSE WHO RESPONDED TO SOUTHLONESTAR'S TWEET**

Finally, accounts were analysed for actor type. Chart 21 shows that around one-third (n=44) of accounts were identified as members of the public. Almost one-quarter (22.7%) of the account actor types could not be determined because the accounts had limited information about the user. There were also some political accounts; 13 (10.2%) were identified as aligning with left-wing politics or displaying anti-Trump sentiments, and 7 (5.5%) were identified as Trump supporters.



**CHART 22: ACTOR TYPE OF ACTORS WHO RESPONDED TO SOUTHLONESTAR’S TWEET, COMPARED TO THE INTENTION OF THE TWEETS**

To determine how different users responded to SouthLoneStar’s tweet, actor type was compared to intent. Looking at Chart 22, we can see that members of the public and left-wing/anti-trump accounts generally acted in defence of the Muslim woman. Conversely, accounts identified as Trump supporters and accounts dedicated to racism/Islamophobia generally echoed SouthLoneStar’s Islamophobic narrative.

## OVERALL SUMMARY

This analysis outlines the next stages of the journey of the Westminster Bridge photograph. Once the photograph had become disinformation, the immediate response on Twitter was strong and negative. Some responded with visual evidence that undermined SouthLoneStar's claim, while others used images to display an intensely negative reaction. This suggests that SouthLoneStar's tweet cultivated vitriol, which is the main aim of IRA disinformation campaigns (Dawson & Innes, 2019; Freelon & Lokot, 2020). This intense response grabbed the attention of the mainstream media, leading to widespread online news reportage in the following days.

## ONLINE NEWS ARTICLES: OVERVIEW

The following sections concern the online UK news coverage of the Westminster Bridge photograph, starting with how news articles about SouthLoneStar circulated on Twitter, followed by an examination of comments on these articles. This pre-emptive section introduces an overview of the online articles before delving into the specific analyses.

News source	Format	Article	Publishing date
Daily Mail	National tabloid	<b>ARTICLE 1:</b> 'Who is the real monster?' Internet turns on trolls who criticised 'indifferent' Muslim woman seen walking through terror attack	23/03/17
		<b>ARTICLE 2:</b> 'I was devastated by witnessing aftermath of a numbing terror attack': Muslim woman who was vilified for 'walking past Westminster Bridge horror' reveals she HAD helped the victims and was phoning her family to let them know she was safe	24/03/17
		<b>ARTICLE 3:</b> 'Had they stopped he would be alive today': 'Angel of Woolwich' hits out at onlookers for not helping Lee Rigby... as Muslim woman is trolled for 'walking past Westminster horror'	24/03/17
Daily Mirror	National tabloid	<b>ARTICLE 1:</b> 'People are making alarming assumptions about this photo of 'woman in headscarf walking by dying man''	23/03/17
		<b>ARTICLE 2:</b> 'Photographer reveals what was actually happening in photo of 'woman in headscarf walking by dying man''	24/03/17
		<b>ARTICLE 3:</b> "'Devastated' Muslim woman accused of 'walking by dying man' after terror attack speaks out'	24/03/17
Daily Star	National tabloid	<b>ARTICLE 1:</b> 'Muslim woman reveals all about THAT terror attack pic after being trolled'	25/03/17
Evening Standard	Regional tabloid	<b>ARTICLE 1:</b> 'Photographer speaks out to defend photo from London attack scene which was used to incite hate'	24/03/17
		<b>ARTICLE 2:</b> 'Muslim woman slams vile trolls who used photo of her on Westminster Bridge to spread hate'	24/03/17
The Guardian	National broadsheet (Compact)	<b>ARTICLE 1:</b> 'Woman photographed in hijab on Westminster Bridge responds to online abuse'	24/03/17
Independent	National tabloid (online)	<b>ARTICLE 1:</b> London attack: Woman in hijab pictured on Westminster Bridge was 'traumatised not indifferent', photographer says: 'Her behaviour was completely in line with everyone else on the bridge, but you're not assuming others are callously ignoring the scenario'	24/03/17
		<b>ARTICLE 2:</b> London attack: Muslim woman photographed on Westminster Bridge during terror incident speaks out: The woman was vilified on social media after some said it looked like she was walking past the wounded without concern	24/03/17



LBC	Online news radio	<b>ARTICLE 1:</b> Twitter Outrage Over Muslim Woman Walking Past Injured Person	24/03/17
Manchester Evening News	Regional tabloid	<b>ARTICLE 1:</b> Devastated' Muslim woman accused of 'walking by dying man' after London terror attack speaks out: "Not only have I been devastated by witnessing the aftermath of a shocking and numbing terror attack, I've also had to deal with the shock of finding my picture plastered all over social media"	24/03/17
Metro	National tabloid (Freesheet)	<b>ARTICLE 1:</b> 'Trolls shamed for calling terrified Muslim woman a 'monster''	23/03/17
		<b>ARTICLE 2:</b> 'The truth behind photo of the Muslim woman walking past victim on Westminster Bridge'	24/03/17
		<b>ARTICLE 3:</b> 'Muslim woman branded a 'monster' for 'casually' walking past Westminster attack victim speaks out'	24/03/17
The Sun	National tabloid	<b>ARTICLE 1:</b> 'YOU'RE THE REAL MONSTER HERE' Outrage at sick trolls who blast a Muslim woman for her 'indifference' to London terror attack when she clearly looks horrified'	23/03/17
		<b>ARTICLE 2:</b> 'LOOK BEYOND MY ATTIRE' Muslim woman slams trolls who accused her of 'casually' walking past Westminster terror victims as she reveals she HELPED'	24/03/17
Telegraph	National broadsheet	<b>ARTICLE 1:</b> 'Muslim woman on bridge during Westminster attack speaks out after becoming target of Islamophobes'	24/03/17
Yahoo! News UK	Online news site	<b>ARTICLE 1:</b> Muslim woman pictured on Westminster Bridge asks media to stop using her image	24/03/17
			<b>Total number of articles: 21</b>

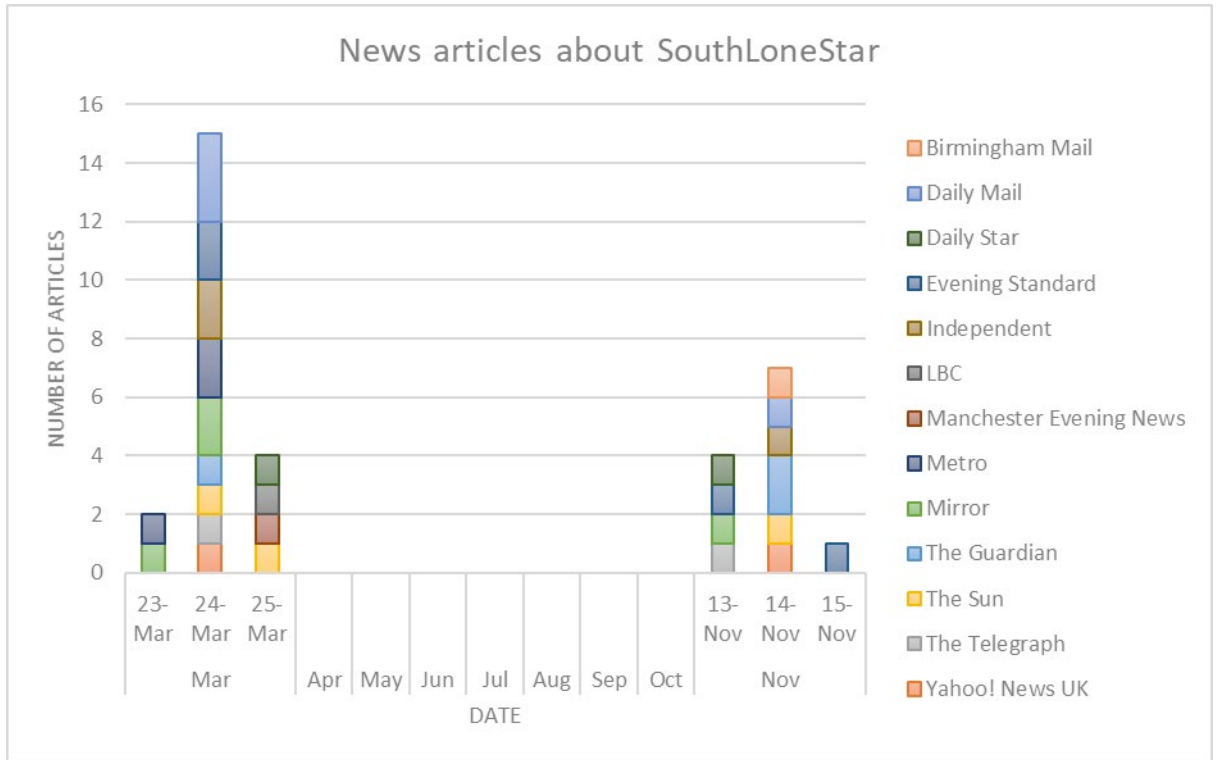
**TABLE 10: UK ONLINE NEWS ARTICLES ABOUT SOUTHLONESTAR, 23RD - 29TH MARCH 2017**

Firstly, the above Table 10 details the UK online news articles published in March 2017. Most UK daily national tabloid newspapers published at least one article about the tweet. This included the *Metro* and *Daily Mail*, each of which published three articles, and *The Sun*, which published two. These three news sources are currently the three largest circulated newspapers in the UK (Mayhew, 2020) and have large online readerships (Ofcom, 2020).

News source	Format	Article	Publishing date
Birmingham Mail	Regional tabloid	<b>ARTICLE 1:</b> 'Man who posted Muslim woman 'ignoring Westminster terror victims' picture was Russian troll'	14/11/17
Daily Mail	National tabloid	<b>ARTICLE 1:</b> 'Revealed: 'Fake news' Twitter account that posted photo of 'Muslim woman ignoring the Westminster terror attack' was run from RUSSIA'	13/11/17
Daily Mirror	National tabloid	<b>ARTICLE 1:</b> 'Russia's role in photo of 'Muslim woman ignoring Westminster terror attack victims' revealed'	13/11/17
Daily Star	National tabloid	<b>ARTICLE 1:</b> 'FAKE NEWS: Twitter account that demonised Muslim woman was Russian fake'	13/11/17
Evening Standard	Regional tabloid	<b>ARTICLE 1:</b> 'Muslim woman pictured 'ignoring victims of London terror attack' was fake news Tweet created by Russians'	13/11/17
		<b>ARTICLE 2:</b> 'Photographer reveals how his photo of Muslim woman 'ignoring' Westminster attack was hijacked by Russian trolls'	15/11/17
The Guardian	National broadsheet (Compact)	<b>ARTICLE 1:</b> 'British MP calls on Twitter to release Russian 'troll factory' tweets'	14/11/17
		<b>ARTICLE 2:</b> 'How a Russian 'troll soldier' stirred anger after the Westminster attack'	14/11/17
Independent	National tabloid (online)	<b>ARTICLE 1:</b> 'Man who posted image of Muslim woman 'ignoring Westminster terror victims' was a Russian troll'	14/11/17
The Sun	National tabloid	<b>ARTICLE 1:</b> 'HACKERS OF CYBERIA How Russia's web trolls tried to create race hatred with Sun pic during Westminster terror attack'	14/11/17
Telegraph	National broadsheet	<b>ARTICLE 1:</b> 'Russian bot behind false claim Muslim woman ignored victims of Westminster terror attack'	13/11/17
Yahoo! News UK	Online news site	<b>ARTICLE 1:</b> 'Man who shared image of Muslim 'ignoring Westminster terror victims' was Russian troll'	14/11/17
<b>Total number of articles:</b>			<b>12</b>

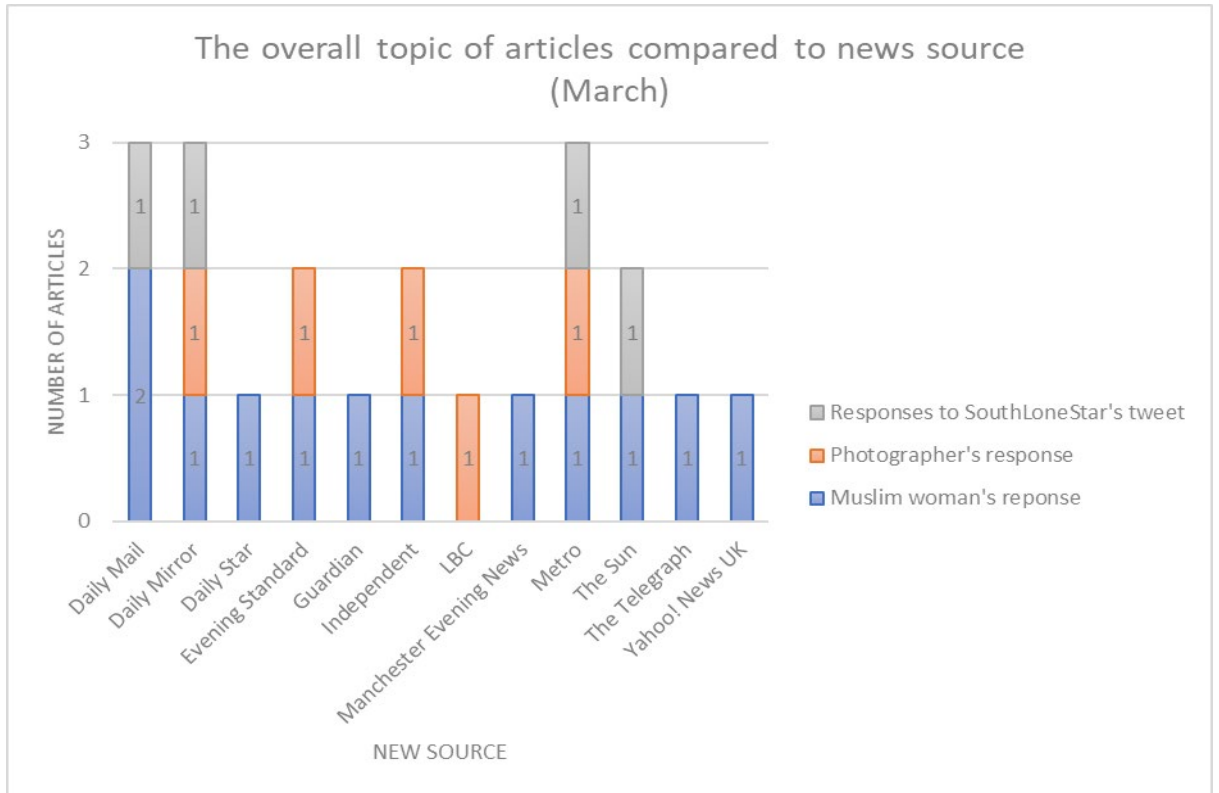
**TABLE 11: UK ONLINE NEWS ARTICLES ABOUT SOUTHLONESTAR, 13TH - 20TH NOVEMBER 2017**

Table 11 breaks down the UK news articles from November 2017. The most striking difference between March and November is the drop in articles. While a similar variety of news sources reported on the November story, only 12 articles were published, half of that in March. Moreover, very few sources published multiple articles.

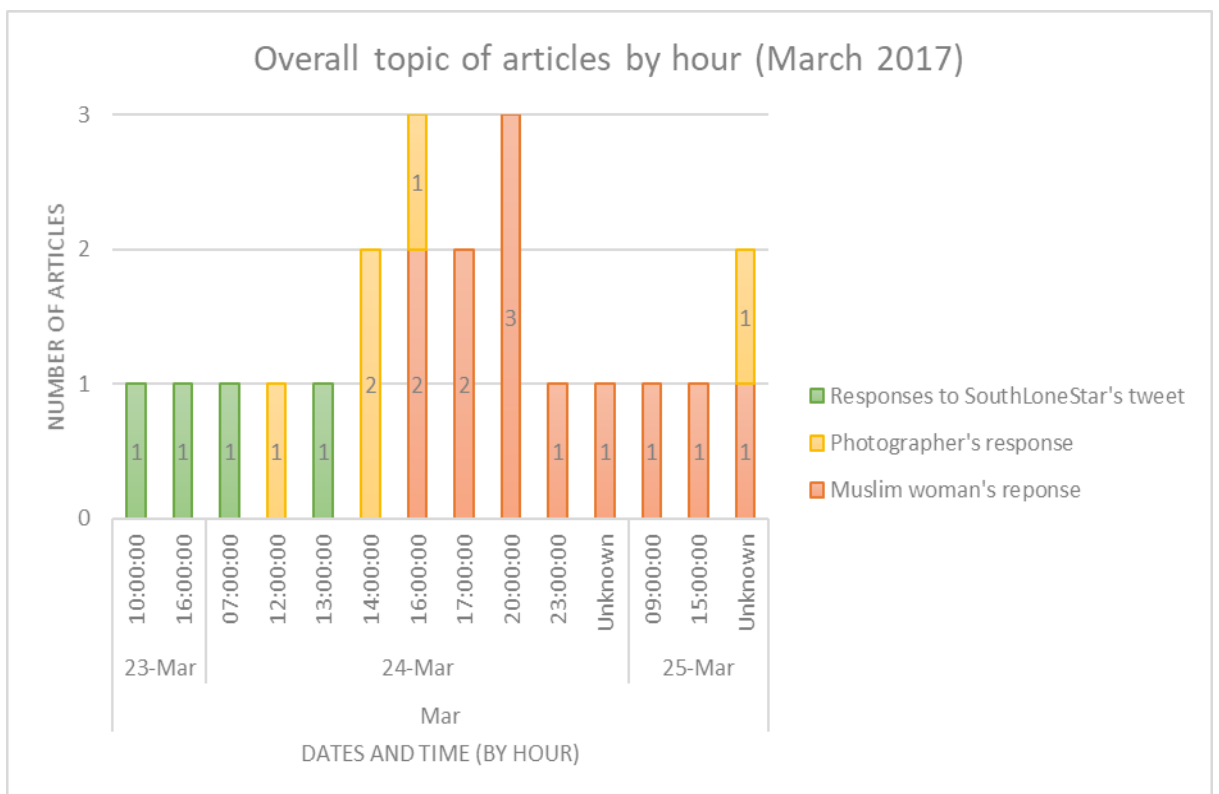


**CHART 23: ONLINE NEWS ARTICLES THAT REPORTED ON SOUTHLONESTAR'S WESTMINSTER BRIDGE PHOTOGRAPH TWEET (MARCH & NOVEMBER 2017)**

Examining this difference in more detail, Chart 23 compares articles published in March and November. 15 online articles were published at the height of the media cycle in March on 24<sup>th</sup> March, as opposed to 7 articles published at the height of the media cycle in November on 14<sup>th</sup> November. Moreover, outlets that published heavily in March did not echo this behaviour in November; *Daily Mail* and *Mirror*, while publishing three articles in March, published only one in November, and *Metro* did not publish anything in November. Altogether, this suggests that reportage in March received much more intense and widespread media coverage than in November.



**CHART 24: THE OVERALL TOPIC OF THE NEWS ARTICLES COMPARED TO NEWS SOURCE (MARCH)**



**CHART 25: THE OVERALL TOPIC OF THE ARTICLES (BY HOUR) IN MARCH 2017<sup>65</sup>**

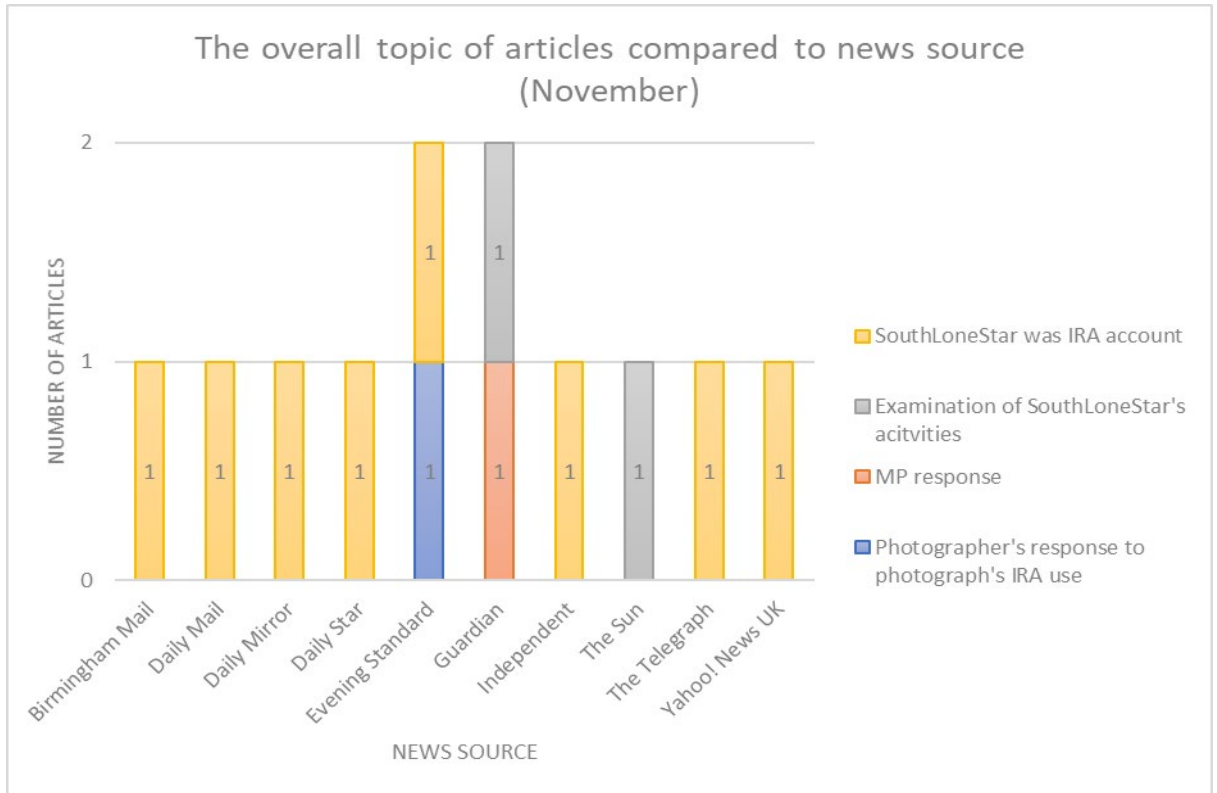
<sup>65</sup> Three articles did not state the time they were published, only the date.

The content of each article was also summaries to gain a picture of how the story evolved in the press. In March, three distinct article topics emerged, as shown above in Charts 24 & 25<sup>66</sup>. Looking at Chart 24 specifically, we can see that the most common story reported on was the Muslim woman's response to SouthLoneStar's tweet. The least reported story was the initial Twitter response to the tweet. Concerning Chart 25, which presents a timeline of the article publications by topic, we can see that the first article was published at approximately 10 am on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of March, followed by another at approximately 4 pm. Both articles concerned the Twitter response to SouthLoneStar's tweet. A further article of this nature was published at approximately 7 am the following day. By midday of the 24<sup>th</sup>, the photographer Jamie Lorrigan had responded. This led to four further article publications. Thus, the media cycle evolved, bringing further attention to the story. Before 4 pm on 24<sup>th</sup>, the Muslim woman also made a statement, resulting in nine articles on the 24<sup>th</sup> and a further three on the 25<sup>th</sup>. This suggests intense coverage and a snowballing effect, which are typical of media amplification (Vasterman, 2005; Wien & Elmelund-Præstekær, 2009; van Atteveldt et al., 2018).

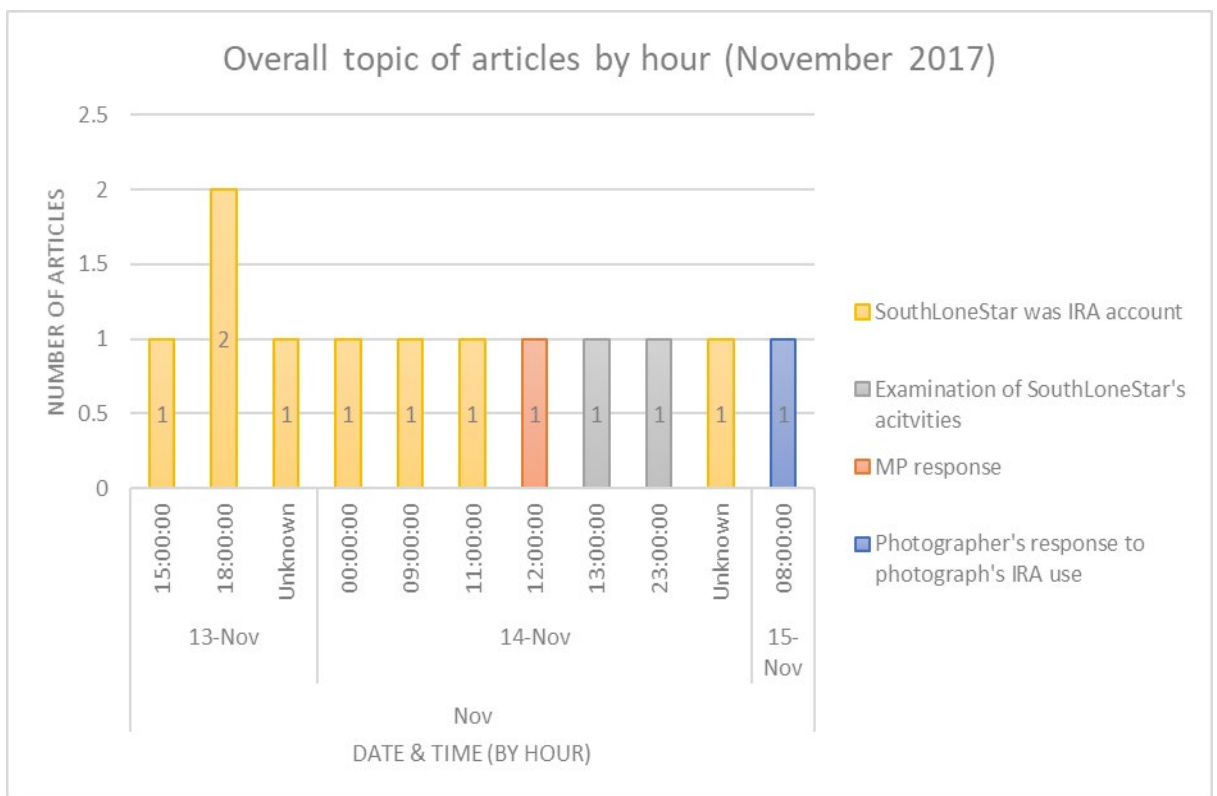
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<sup>66</sup> In chronological order as the story evolved, the three distinct article topics were:

- "Responses to SouthLoneStar's tweet" concerns articles centred around the initial condemnation of the tweet from Twitter users;
- "The photographer's response" concerns articles reporting on Jamie Lorrigan's condemnation of SouthLoneStar's tweet;
- "The Muslim woman's response" concerns articles reporting on the Muslim woman's condemnation of SouthLoneStar's tweet.



**CHART 26: THE OVERALL TOPIC OF THE NEWS ARTICLES COMPARED TO NEWS SOURCE (NOVEMBER)**



**CHART 27: THE OVERALL TOPIC OF THE ARTICLES (BY HOUR) IN NOVEMBER 2017**

Charts 26 & 27 similarly break down the November articles by topic<sup>67</sup>. Chart 26 shows that the initial story received the most attention in November. 8 of the 10 news sources reported on the preliminary breaking news that SouthLoneStar was IRA-operated, with only *The Guardian*, *The Evening Standard*, and *The Sun* instead/also reporting on further developments. Looking at Chart 27, the story also progressed steadily in the news media, with no peak as distinctive as March. Thus, while the story about SouthLoneStar's IRA origins did evolve as new information was discovered, this new information produced a small number of articles and did not result in a snowball effect similar to March. The November revelation about SouthLoneStar was arguably more akin to a typical news cycle.

This overview provides the context needed to understand the following analysis sections. In addition, it also provides further insight into whether the reportage can be considered media amplification. As the breakdown of the articles published across March and November has shown, more news attention was paid in March compared to November. In March, the story evolved and grew as more information about the tweet came to light. There was also a significant peak of articles published in March, in which ten separate articles were published between 2 pm and 10 pm on the 24<sup>th</sup> of March. In contrast, when it was reported in November that SouthLoneStar was an IRA account, the story did not evolve as new information was released and there was no significant peak in publication. Therefore, it could be argued that while the November reportage could not be considered media amplification, the intensity of the reportage in March is much more akin to media amplification, as defined in the wider literature.

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<sup>67</sup> In chronological order as the story evolved, the four distinct article topics were:

- "SouthLoneStar was an IRA account" centred around the news that SouthLoneStar was a disinformation account operated by the IRA;
- "Examination of SouthLoneStar's activities", these articles took a broad view of the SouthLoneStar account and presented an examination of the account, its connection to the IRA, and wider IRA activity on Twitter;
- "MP response", this singular article reported on British MP, Damian Collins, calling for further investigation into potential IRA involvement in British politics;
- "Photographer's response to photograph's IRA use", this singular article reported on how photographer Jamie Lorrigan responded to SouthLoneStar's IRA connection.

## TWITTER: ARTICLE URL DATASET

As before, the below table highlights the findings presented in this subsection<sup>68</sup>.

Dataset name	Data Source	Sample(s)	Analysis Performed <sup>69</sup>
Hashtag dataset	Twitter	100 most retweeted tweets overall	Statistical
			Content: Hashtags
			Content: Image type
			Content: Actor type
		100 most retweeted tweets that shared the Westminster Bridge photograph	Statistical
			Content: Hashtags
			Content: Image version used
			Content: Actor type
@SouthLoneStar dataset	Twitter	Replies to SouthLoneStar	Statistical
			Content: Image type
			Content: Image content
			Content: Actor type
<i>Article URL dataset</i>	<i>Twitter</i>	<i>March articles</i>	<i>Statistical</i>
			<i>Content: Tweet content</i>
			<i>Content: Actor type</i>
		<i>November articles</i>	<i>Statistical</i>
			<i>Content: Tweet content</i>
			<i>Content: Actor type</i>
Article comments dataset	Online news articles	March comments	Content: Overarching topic
			Content: Sentiment
		November comments	Content: Overarching topic
			Content: Belief in the story

As a reminder, the Article URL dataset constitutes tweets that shared a link on Twitter to one of the articles discussed in the previous section. Two samples were extracted from the dataset:

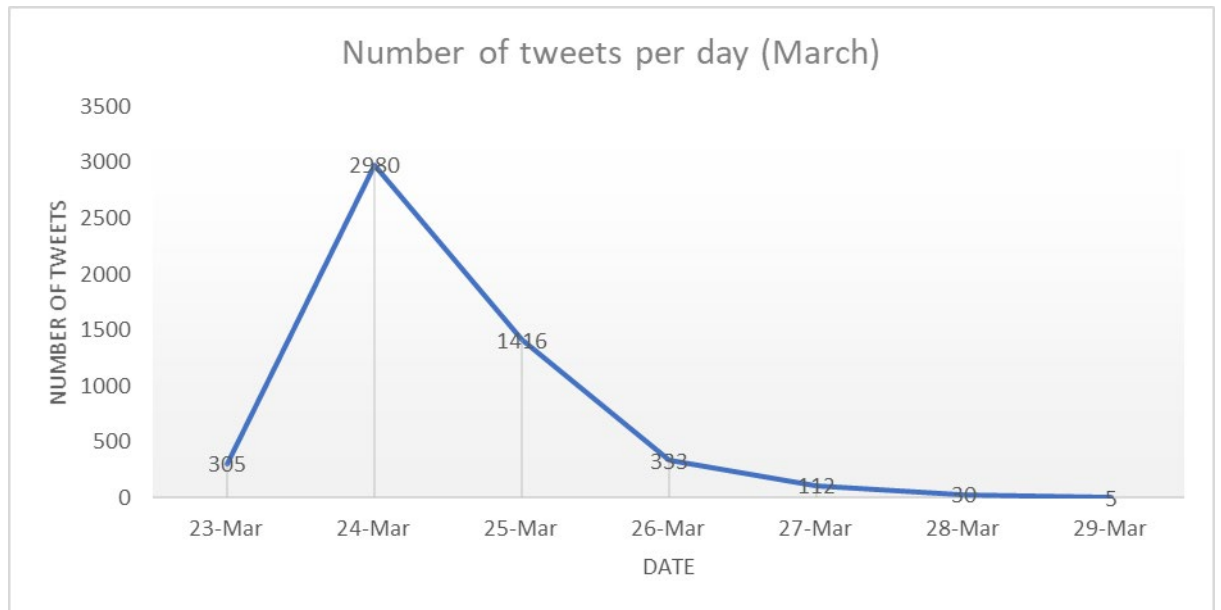
1. Top 100 retweeted tweets from users who shared an article in March.
2. Top 100 retweeted tweets from users who shared an article in November.

<sup>68</sup> Please refer to the corresponding code frames. For the code frames related to the analysis of this dataset, see appendix 2.

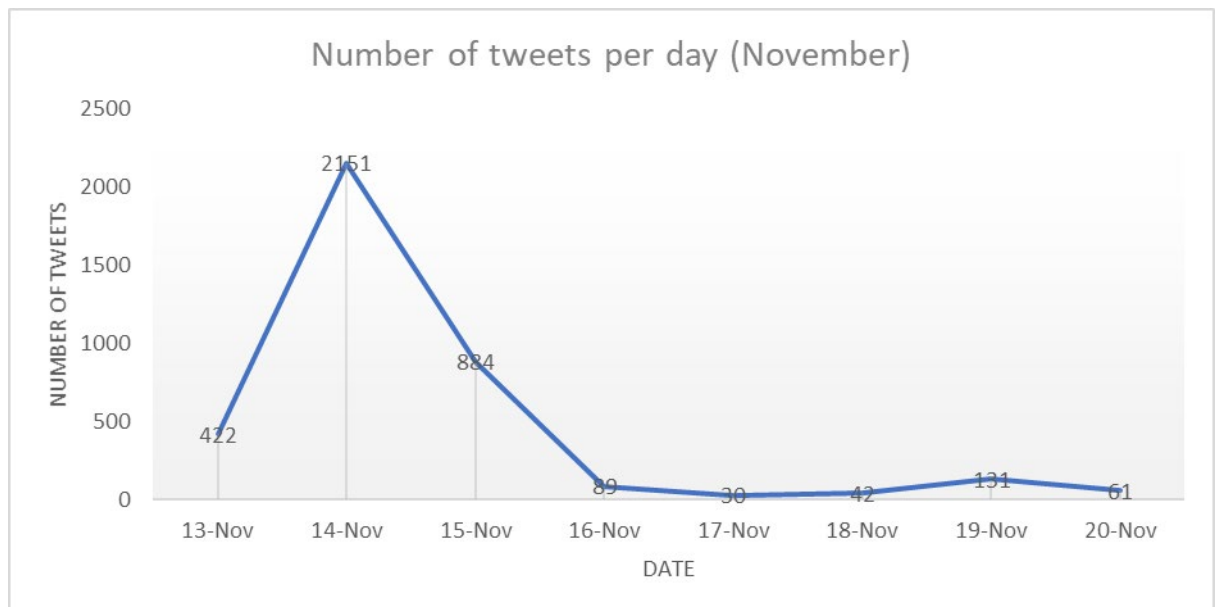
<sup>69</sup> While all the analysis listed in the table was performed on the datasets, not all findings could be included within the remits of this thesis. The most important and interesting findings were therefore prioritized over findings that, while still interesting, contributed less to answering the research aims and objectives.



## DATA OVERVIEW

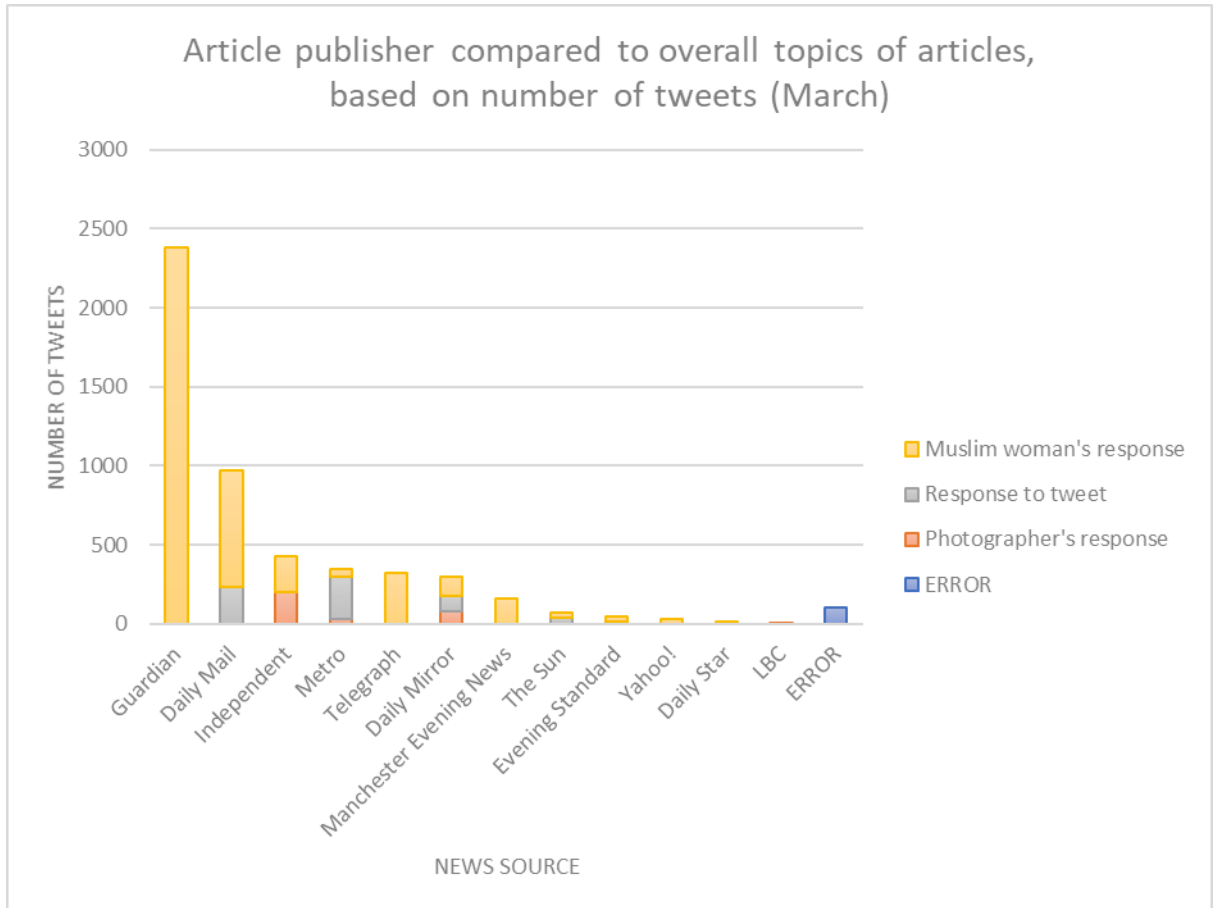


**CHART 28: THE NUMBER OF TWEETS WHICH SHARED ONE OF THE ARTICLE URLS (MARCH)**



**CHART 29: THE NUMBER OF TWEETS WHICH SHARED ONE OF THE ARTICLE URLS (NOVEMBER)**

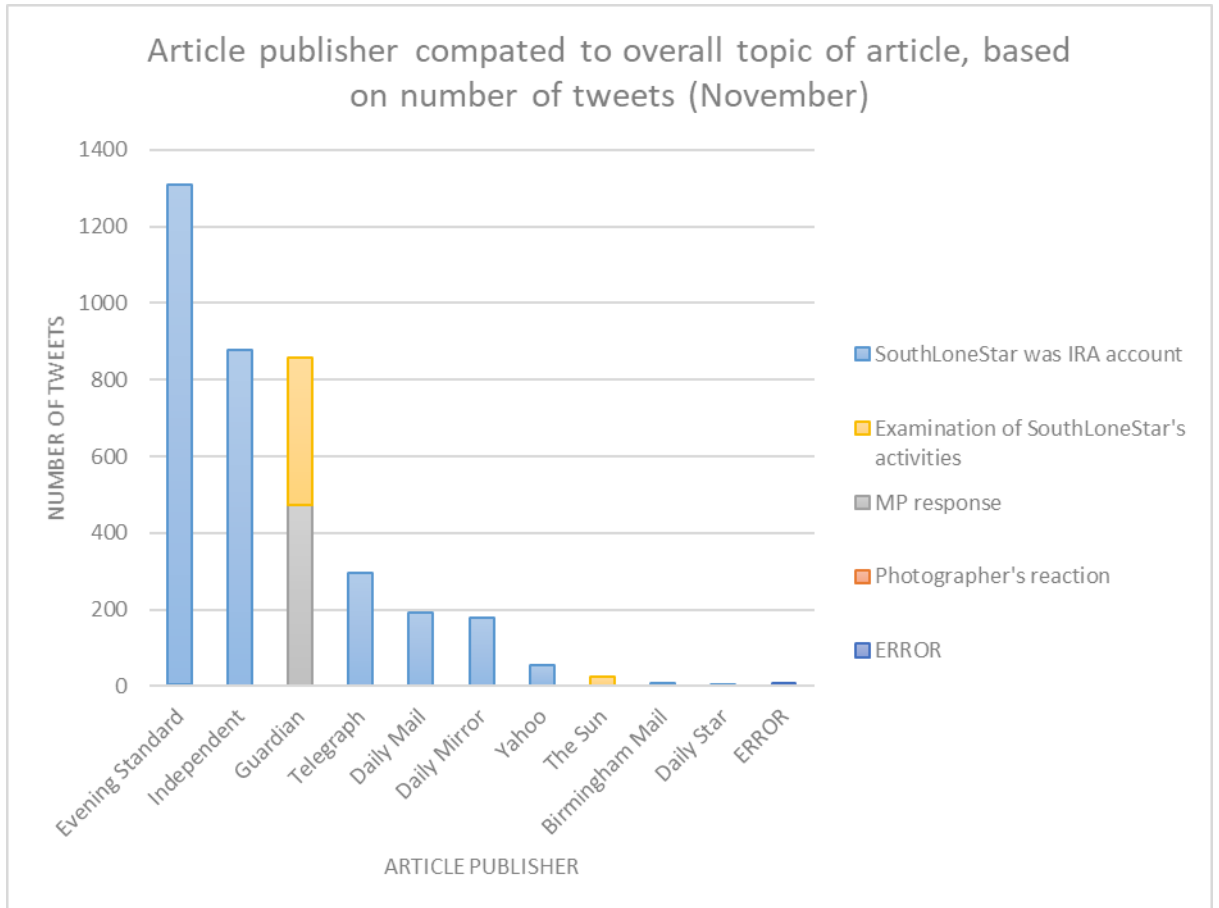
Charts 28 and 29 above show the number of tweets sharing articles across the week in March and November, respectively. They show that article sharing peaked on the second day in both weeks. Following these peaks, tweets then dropped significantly, although this drop was more significant in November compared to March.



**CHART 30: COMPARING THE OVERALL TOPICS OF ARTICLES WITH THE ARTICLE PUBLISHER, BASED ON NUMBER OF RETWEETS (MARCH)**

Chart 30 compares the number of March articles shared on Twitter, comparing news sources with article topics<sup>70</sup>. The most shared articles on Twitter were national, widely circulated, mainstream news sources with significant online audiences, such as *The Guardian* and *Daily Mail*. Moreover, the vast majority of articles shared centred on the woman’s response to SouthLoneStar’s tweet. This further highlights the snowball effect that occurred in March, when the most attention was paid to the latter stage of the news cycle.

<sup>70</sup> A small portion of the article links in the tweets were broken, which likely happened between data collection and analysis. In these cases, the link could not be used to identify which article was shared in the tweet. These instances were labelled as ERROR.



**CHART 31: COMPARING THE OVERALL TOPICS OF ARTICLES WITH THE ARTICLE PUBLISHER, BASED ON NUMBER OF RETWEETS (NOVEMBER)**

Chart 31 compares the number of November articles shared on Twitter, comparing news sources with article topics. *Evening Standard*, a London-based regional newspaper, published the most circulated article. *The Independent* and *The Guardian* followed this. As a regional newspaper, the *Evening Standard* would have a more limited and localised audience than more prominent publications, such as the *Daily Mail*. This suggests that the March news cycle may have had a wider Twitter audience than November. Moreover, the most circulated articles reported on the initial news story that SouthLoneStar was IRA-operated. This continues to support the argument that the news coverage in March constitutes media amplification, while the November coverage was reflective of a typical news cycle.

## SAMPLE 1: MARCH ARTICLES

### SAMPLE INTRODUCTION

While no significant findings emerged from this analysis, it does show that the March articles circulated heavily on Twitter, particularly the article from the national newspaper, *The Guardian*. This suggests that interest in and knowledge about the Westminster Bridge photograph continued to snowball. Due to the limited findings from this sample, summaries of the overall analytical results are provided.

### DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

- Of the top 100 most retweeted tweets that shared an article, 40 shared *The Guardian* article, followed by articles published by the *Daily Mail*. These articles heavily concentrated on the woman's response, which again emphasises the snowballing of the story as new information emerged.
- Tweets that shared *The Guardian* article received over 1,000 retweets, which again emphasises the dominant circulation of this article on Twitter.
- Regarding account location, 60% were located in Great Britain, followed by the United States (11%). This concentration of accounts located in Great Britain is notably greater than in previous samples.

### CONTENT ANALYSIS FINDINGS<sup>71</sup>

#### TWEET CONTENT

- The majority (75%) of tweets simply copied or paraphrased the article headline/content when tweeting the article with no further comments beyond this.
- The text of 21% of the tweets was used to refute the Islamophobic narrative applied to the photograph.
- 1 tweet had Islamophobic sentiments.

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<sup>71</sup> For the code frames related to the analysis of this specific sample, see appendix 2.4.

#### ACTOR TYPE

- 36% of accounts were the mainstream news media sharing their own published article.
- 18% of users listed many roles and/or professions, so their actor type was unclear. Many of these accounts were orientated around media production, highly skilled and specialist professions, and/or politics.
- 10% of users were specifically media professionals.
- 7% were members of the public.
- This suggests that the articles circulated on Twitter amongst certain mainstream media Twitter communities.

#### SAMPLE SUMMARY

While this sample did not produce any noteworthy findings, it illustrates that some of the articles did circulate heavily on Twitter, particularly *The Guardian* article, and further supports evidence that articles about the woman's response were heavily circulated. It also shows that a particular Twitter community shared articles related to the mainstream media.

#### SAMPLE 2: NOVEMBER ARTICLES

##### SAMPLE INTRODUCTION

This sample from the Article URL dataset examines the top 100 most retweeted tweets that shared a November article on Twitter. Like the previous sample, no standout findings emerged, so summaries of the overall analytical results are provided. However, unlike the wide circulation of *The Guardian* article in March, it was an *Evening Standard* article that was most circulated on Twitter.

## DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

- The distribution of articles across the top 100 most retweeted tweets was more even in November compared to March. In November, *The Guardian* articles were shared in 27 of the tweets and articles from the *Evening Standard*, and *The Independent* were both shared in 20 of the tweets.
- However, the 20 tweets that shared the *Evening Standard* article received nearly 1,500 retweets. This was followed by *The Independent* (689 retweets) and *The Guardian* (410 retweets).
- Like the March sample, the largest account location was Great Britain (52%), followed by the United States (11%).

## CONTENT ANALYSIS FINDINGS<sup>72</sup>

### TWEET CONTENT

- Like the March sample, the textual content of around  $\frac{3}{4}$  of tweets (73%) was the article headline verbatim or a summary.
- 7% emphasised the role of Russia.
- 5% reflected on the dangers and/or consequences of 'fake news'.

### ACTOR TYPE

- Reflective of the March sample,  $\frac{1}{4}$  of tweets come from news media accounts sharing their own articles.
- Following this, the actor type of 18 accounts was unclear because they listed multiple roles and professions. Again, these users were generally involved in media production, politics, and/or highly skilled professions.

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<sup>72</sup> For the code frames related to the analysis of this specific sample, see appendix 2.5.

#### SAMPLE SUMMARY

While no significant findings emerge from this sample, it does show that the *Evening Standard* article was the most circulated on Twitter. This contrasts with the March sample, where *The Guardian* article was most circulated. Again, this sample also demonstrates that these articles circulated within a Twitter community orientated around the news media.

#### OVERALL SUMMARY

Although the analysis of this dataset and its two samples produced limited results, it covers the next stage of the evolution of the photograph from visual disinformation to news in and of itself. Most significant is that the most shared article in March was from *The Guardian*, a national newspaper, compared to the *Evening Standard* article in November, a local newspaper. This potentially suggests that while the audience for the initial news in March was on a national scale, the corrective November information was regional and therefore had a smaller audience. It could, therefore, be inferred that fewer people on Twitter were exposed to articles with the corrective information in November compared to those exposed to the initial story in March.

## ONLINE NEWS: ARTICLE COMMENTS DATASET

Again, the below table highlights the quantitative findings presented in this subsection<sup>73</sup>.

Dataset name	Data Source	Sample(s)	Analysis Performed <sup>74</sup>
Hashtag dataset	Twitter	100 most retweeted tweets overall	Statistical
			Content: Hashtags
			Content: Image type
			Content: Actor type
		100 most retweeted tweets that shared the Westminster Bridge photograph	Statistical
			Content: Hashtags
			Content: Image version used
			Content: Actor type
@SouthLoneStar dataset	Twitter	Replies to SouthLoneStar	Statistical
			Content: Image type
			Content: Image content
			Content: Actor type
Article URL dataset	Twitter	March articles	Statistical
			Content: Tweet content
			Content: Actor type
		November articles	Statistical
			Content: Tweet content
			Content: Actor type
<i>Article comments dataset</i>	<i>Online news articles</i>	<i>March comments</i>	<i>Content: Overarching topic</i>
			<i>Content: Sentiment</i>
		<i>November comments</i>	<i>Content: Overarching topic</i>
			<i>Content: Belief in the story</i>

As a reminder, the article comments dataset constitutes comments from articles published by the *Daily Mail*, *Independent*, *Mirror*, and *Yahoo! News UK* in March and November 2017.

Two samples were extracted from the dataset:

1. Article comments from March articles.
2. Article comments from November articles.

<sup>73</sup> Please refer to the corresponding code frames. For the code frames related to the analysis of this dataset, see appendix 2.

<sup>74</sup> While all the analysis listed in the table was performed on the datasets, not all findings could be included within the remits of this thesis. The most important and interesting findings were therefore prioritized over findings that, while still interesting, contributed less to answering the research aim and questions.



## SAMPLE 1: COMMENTS ON MARCH ARTICLES<sup>75</sup>

### SAMPLE INTRODUCTION

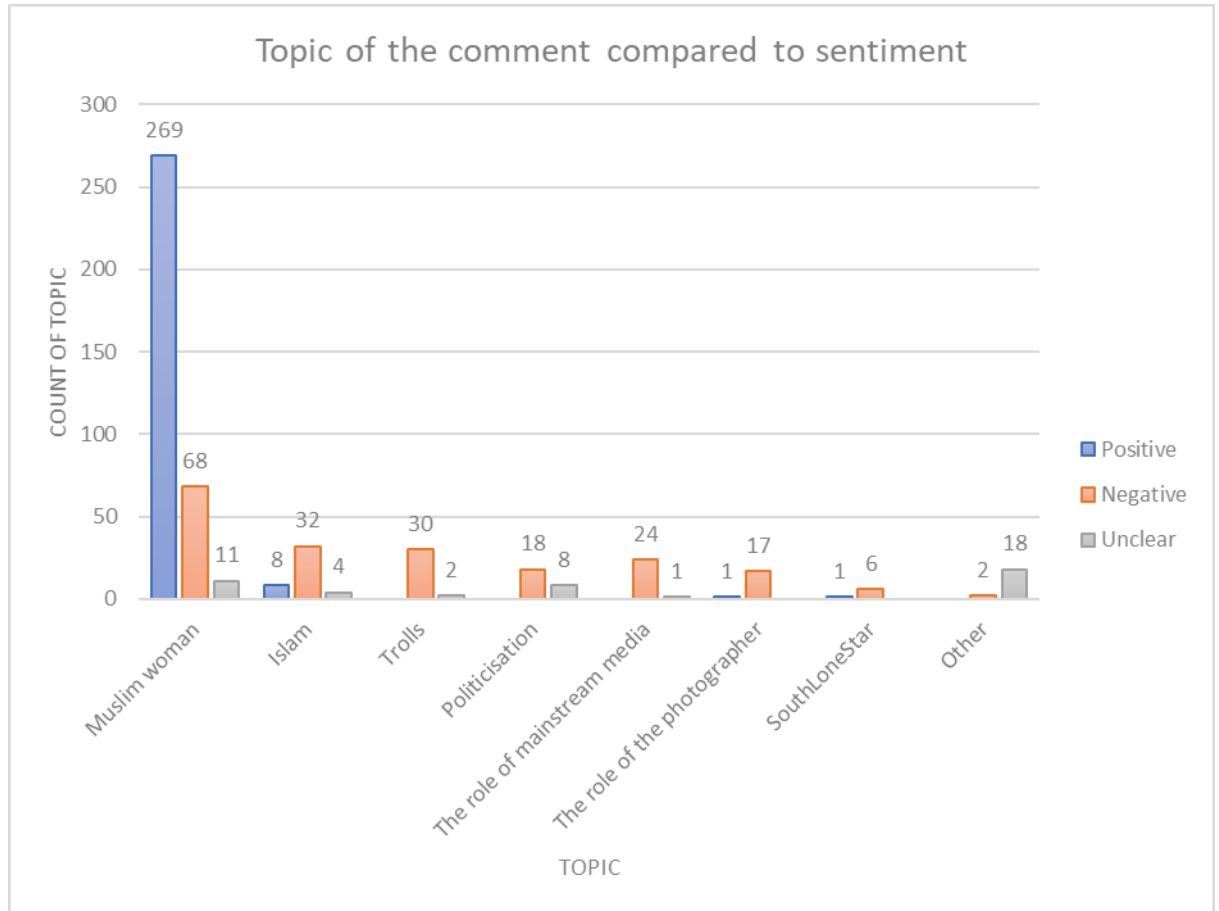
This sample examines comments from March articles published across four news sources. This sample and analysis represent the final stages of the Westminster Bridge photograph's online journey, in which it became mainstream news and, in turn, was responded to by a news audience. The most significant finding from this analysis was that most comments centred on the Muslim woman, and the majority of these comments were positive and acted in defence of the woman. This suggests that much of the analysed news audience accepted the news media's narrative about the photograph and rejected SouthLoneStar's. This, therefore, indicates that the news media's attempt to undermine and debunk SouthLoneStar's narrative was generally successful.

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<sup>75</sup> As this data was collected manually, there is no statistical findings to provide a data overview for the dataset.

CONTENT ANALYSIS FINDINGS<sup>76</sup>

OVERARCHING TOPIC & SENTIMENT



**CHART 32: OVERALL TOPIC OF MARCH COMMENTS, COMPARED TO SENTIMENT**

Chart 32 shows that the majority of comments (n=348, 66.9%) focused on the Muslim woman, with 77.3% (n=269) of these comments being positive. These generally expressed sympathy for the woman and accepted the corrected narrative, for example: “She clearly looks distressed. Anyone criticising her is doing so for their own, prejudiced reasons, not because she is at fault”. Conversely, 19.5% (n=68) of comments about the woman discussed her negatively, for example: “the rationalisation in these comments is amazing. It's pretty clear to me that she doesn't give a toss”. The second most common topic was Islam (8.5%, n=44), the majority of which (32 of 44) discussed Islam negative: “It is not a religion, it is a communist cult that threatens to kill anyone who criticises it”.

<sup>76</sup> For the code frames related to the analysis of this specific sample, see appendix 2.6.

Following this, a small number (6.2%, n=32) criticised others spreading similar Islamophobic rhetoric ('trolls') and 5% (n=26) of users politicised the photograph, meaning they used the story to refer to wider political events. 4.8% (n=25) commented on the role of mainstream media, and 3.5% (n=18) commented on the role of the photographer Jamie Lorriman. Finally, a fraction of commenters (1.3%, n=7) discussed SouthLoneStar.

#### SAMPLE SUMMARY

The majority of the news article comments from March centred on the Muslim woman, and of these comments, most acted in defence of the woman. Thus, the Muslim woman was a key focus for March article comments, a continuing trend across most of the datasets. That most commented positively and defended the Muslim woman suggests they accepted the news media's narrative over SouthLoneStar's. However, there was still a small albeit notable portion of users who discussed the woman negatively, and some expressed Islamophobic rhetoric.

#### SAMPLE 2: COMMENTS ON NOVEMBER ARTICLES

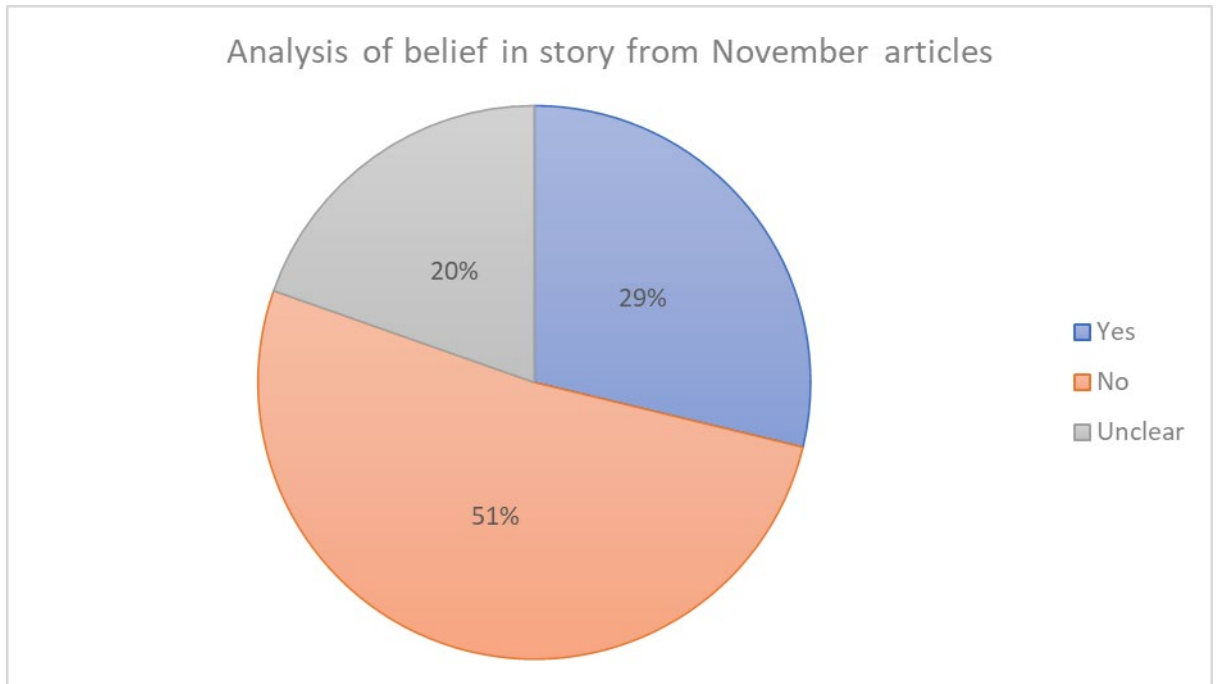
##### SAMPLE INTRODUCTION

This sample examines comments from November articles published across four news sources. This sample and analysis represented the end of the Westminster Bridge photograph's online journey when the truth behind the SouthLoneStar account and the true motivation behind using the photograph was revealed. Interestingly, this sample's key findings suggest many doubts about the corrective information. This starkly contrasts with the March sample analysis, in which audiences generally accepted the news media's narratives. This doubt in the corrective information primarily centred on the notion that because the photograph was 'real', it was not deceptive. This brings into question the general public's understanding of disinformation, suggesting that if an element of the content is 'real', some may struggle to see it as disinformation.

CONTENT ANALYSIS FINDINGS<sup>77</sup>

*BELIEF IN STORY*

Similar to the March sample, the November sample comments were analysed by overall topic. Conversely, however, comments were also analysed to determine whether commenters appeared to believe the new information released in November.



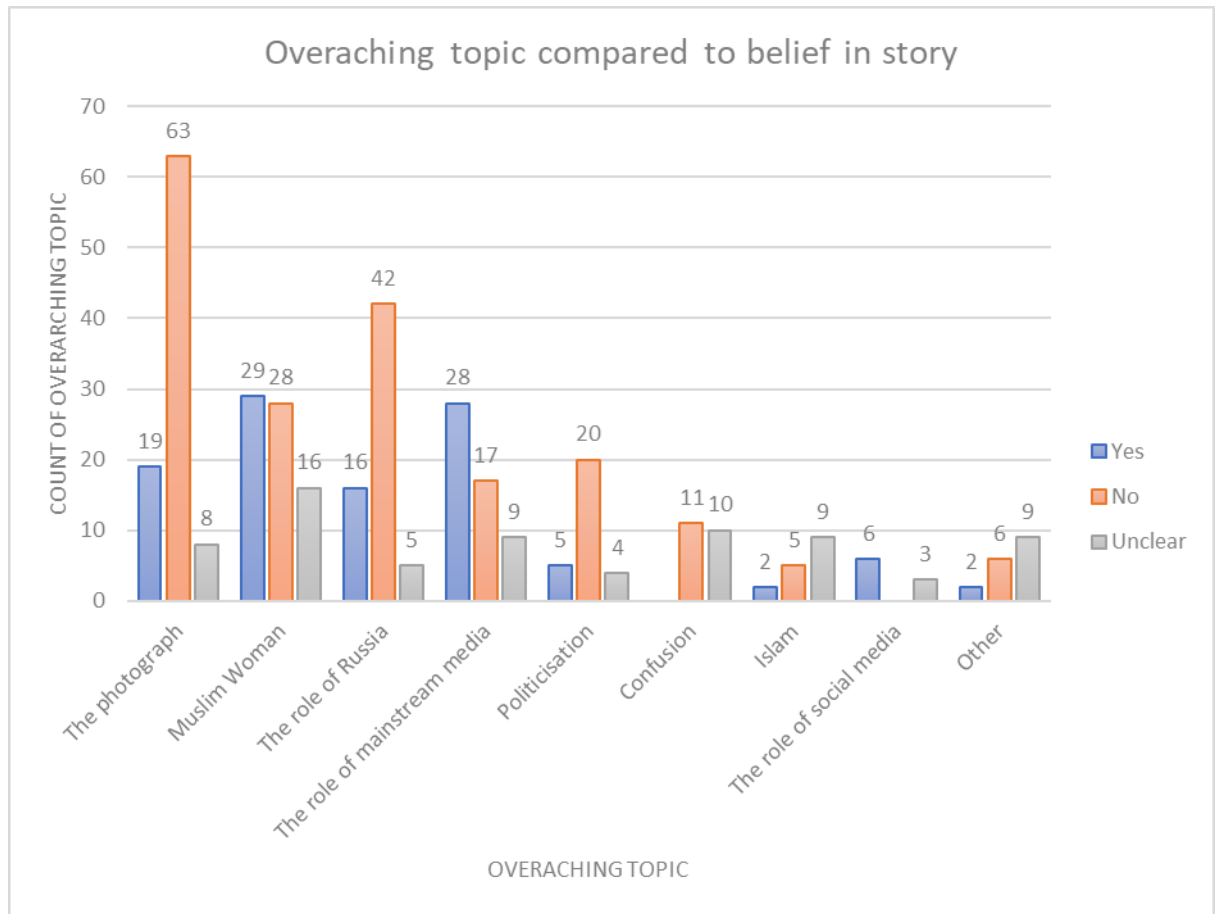
**CHART 33: ANALYSIS OF BELIEF IN THE STORY FROM THE NOVEMBER ARTICLES**

Chart 33 demonstrates that of the 372 comments analysed, only 29% (n=107) seem to accept the corrective information, while 51% (n=192) appeared to disbelieve it. Belief could not be determined in 20% (n=73) of the comments.

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<sup>77</sup> For the code frames related to the analysis of this specific sample, see appendix 2.7.

OVERARCHING TOPIC & BELIEF IN STORY



**CHART 34: OVERARCHING TOPIC COMPARED TO BELIEF IN THE STORY**

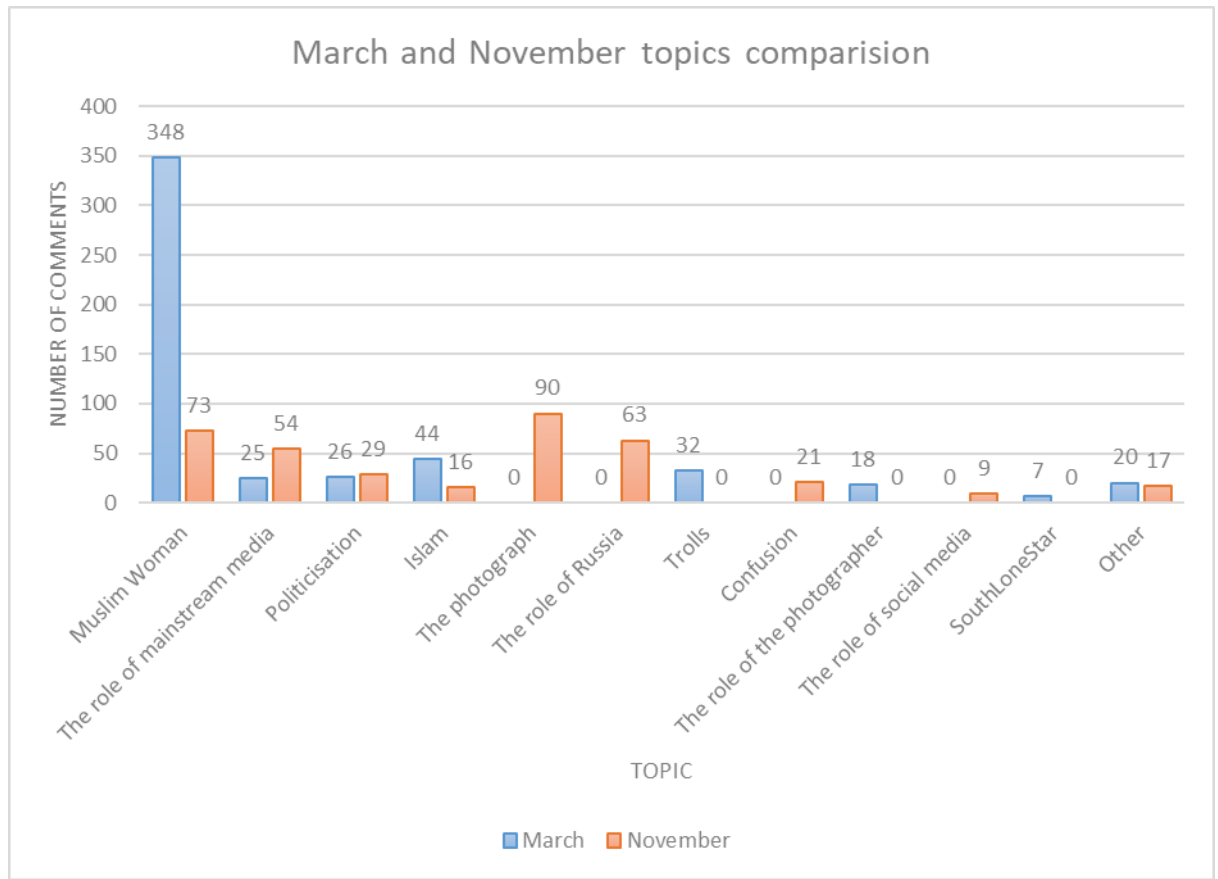
Chart 34 breaks down belief in the story by overarching topic, with some topics overlapping the March sample. The most discussed topic was the photograph, constituting 24.2% (n=90) of the comments. Most significantly, 70% of these displayed doubt in the story. These comments centred on the assumption that photographs depict the ‘truth’, for example: “no matter who shared the picture, it still doesn't change what we see in the picture”. This suggests that, to these commenters, what they believed the photograph showed made other information about the photograph irrelevant, most significantly, its context. Further, but slightly different, examples include: “Was the photo a fake? Then it is what it is... a real photo”. Here, that the photograph was ‘real’ meant it could not be disinformation. This suggests a misunderstanding of why the photograph constituted disinformation because it was genuine.

Following this, the Muslim woman was the second-largest topic (n=73, 19.2%). This showed that she continued to be an important topic of interest. The role of Russia was the next topic (n=63 16.9%), with most commenters expressing disbelief in the corrective information (n=42). For example: “Just the usual lies from the US. No evidence has been provided to show that Russia had anything to do with this”. Several users also mocked the idea of Russia’s involvement: “I stood on some lego yesterday. It was Russia's fault!”. Others ruminated on the role of mainstream media (n=54, 14.5%), with more accepting of the story (n=28) than not (n=17). Like the March sample, a small portion (n=29, 7.8%) of commenters politicised the story, generally appearing not to believe it (n=20). A few commenters (n=21, 5.6%) expressed genuine confusion about the corrective information. Many of these comments suggested that such commenters viewed disinformation through a true-false binary. Therefore, because the content was not wholly false, they struggled to understand why the tweet was disinformation. Finally, Islam (n=16, 4.3%) and the role of social media (n=9, 2.4%) were minor discussion topics.

#### SAMPLE SUMMARY

The key finding from the November comment sample is the apparent disbelief in the corrective information. This generally centred on the belief that because the photograph was ‘real’, it was not misleading. These commenters appeared to conflate what they believed the photograph to show with the ‘truth’, and this ‘truth’ took precedence over actual evidence. This suggests that they viewed disinformation through a binary lens, so because the photograph was ‘real’, it was not misleading. The role of Russia also garnered notable disbelief in the story.

## OVERALL SUMMARY



**CHART 35: COMPARISON BETWEEN MARCH AND NOVEMBER ARTICLE TOPICS**

There are key similarities and differences between the March and November comment samples, presented together in Chart 35. Regarding similarities, the Muslim woman was a central topic of debate. SouthLoneStar drew attention to the woman by speculating about her opinions and actions, which developed into a point of contention on social media. This extended to the news media. The role of the mainstream media, politicisation, and Islam were also topics across both samples.

The most significant takeaway when comparing the analysis from these two samples is that while March commenters generally accepted the news media's presentation of the Westminster Bridge photograph over SouthLoneStar's, November commenters were resistant to the later corrective information. Research suggests that several factors can contribute to someone resisting information that corrects disinformation (Garrett et al.,

2013; Thorson, 2016; Nieminen & Rapeli, 2019; Robertson et al., 2020; Tsfati et al., 2020; Walter et al., 2020), and there appears to be evidence of this in these findings. It is not possible to determine why these commenters resisted evidence that SouthLoneStar's tweet was intentional IRA disinformation. However, this does show how SouthLoneStar's tweet was corrected by the mainstream media and was met with significant resistance.

#### SUMMARY: CONTENT ANALYSIS FINDINGS

Attention around SouthLoneStar's tweet and prominence of the Westminster Bridge photograph involved a steady, online cross-media build. It began with a single tweet of a recontextualised journalistic photograph and ended with this photograph and tweet becoming headline news in the UK for several days. This is an example of how significant and influential one piece of visual disinformation can be if shared opportunistically.

Overall, five key findings emerged from the content analysis:

1. The response on Twitter to the wider terrorist attack was typical of social media responses to other terrorist attacks. This, therefore, supports existing research that examines social media response to disaster events.
2. Users who shared the Westminster Bridge photograph as disinformation generally did not manipulate its content (or only did so minimally), instead manipulating its context through text. This strengthens the growing argument that low-tech visual disinformation is more pervasive than high-tech methods such as deep fakes.
3. Users who shared the photograph as disinformation were primarily located in the US and were identified as Trump supporters and/or supportive of right-wing/alt-right ideologies. This suggests that more needs to be learned about what motivates this community to comment on these images and use these images like the Westminster Bridge photograph in this way.
4. UK newspapers reported heavily on the tweet in March and reported on new information as it broke. It can therefore be argued that this is a minor example of media amplification. This brings into question the role of the mainstream media in reporting on disinformation, as well as the potential consequences.



5. In November, there was a notable amount of resistance towards the corrective information from article commenters, showing that some also continued to believe SouthLoneStar's contextualisation of the photograph. Again, this suggests more needs to be understood regarding the role and consequences of the mainstream media reporting on and correcting disinformation.

## CHAPTER 7: THEMATIC ANALYSIS (TWITTER & ONLINE NEWS DATA)

Three major themes were identified in the thematic analysis of the Twitter & online news data: **Othering**, **Photographic veracity**, and **Cynicism about the media**. **Othering** refers to instances where the Muslim woman was presented as foreign and/or deviant, often linked to her Muslim identity. **Photographic veracity** relates to comments about and uses of the photograph, particularly whether users appeared to believe or echo SouthLoneStar's recontextualization of the photograph. **Cynicism about the media** involves users commenting on the role of the media, for example, the argument that SouthLoneStar's use of the Westminster Bridge photograph did not constitute news. Several minor themes were also identified concerning each major theme.

## OTHERING

Table 12 provides an overview of the themes identified. The major and minor themes discussed in this section are highlighted in blue<sup>78</sup>.

Major theme	Minor theme	Datasets				
		Top 100 Shared: Westminster Bridge Photograph	Replies to SouthLoneStar's tweet	Article URLs	March news article comments	November news article comments
<i>Othering</i>	<i>Islam = terrorism</i>	✓	✓		✓	
	<i>Societal incompatibility</i>		✓		✓	
	<i>Divisive rhetoric</i>	✓			✓	
	<i>Attire</i>	✓		✓	✓	
	<i>Challenge</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Photographic veracity	"The photograph speaks for itself"	✓				✓
	Context is irrelevant, content is paramount					✓
	The photograph is 'real'					✓
	Limited & subjective context	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Cynicism about the media	Amplification & news value				✓	✓
	Distrust					✓

**TABLE 12: THEMATIC FINDINGS FRAMEWORK**

**Othering** covered instances when the Muslim woman was presented as a dangerous outsider. Her Muslim identity is central to this theme, with religious practices and attire emphasised to present Islam as deviant. Islamic terrorism is also accentuated to claim that Muslims are untrustworthy.

<sup>78</sup> For a more detailed breakdown of each of the themes, see appendix 3 for the full thematic framework.

ISLAM = TERRORISM

The user equates Islam with terrorism, suggesting Islam is fundamentally dangerous. For example, the user may urge others to ‘wake up’ to a supposed Muslim threat, present the rhetoric that ‘the West’ is at war with Islam, or that terrorist attacks are to be expected when Muslims live in traditionally non-Muslim societies. Overall, it is asserted that Islam cannot be separated from terrorism, and so Muslims are dangerous due to their religion.



FIGURE 43: IMAGES USED TO SUGGEST MUSLIMS ARE DANGEROUS AND ENDORSE TERRORISM

Figure 43 provides examples of how the Westminster Bridge photograph was altered to present this narrative. These assert that the Muslim woman was indifferent towards the injured person, with some implying that the woman outright encouraged or participated in the attack. Many tweets shared unaltered versions of the photograph with captions such as: “Attacks like today will continue to happen until liberals wake up and realize that Islam is at war with us. #PrayForLondon”.

This minor theme was also identified in replies to SouthLoneStar’s tweet and March article comments. The former mainly used images to express harmful Islamophobic stereotypes (Figure 44) or present Islam as dangerous (Figure 45). Further examples of this nature from March article comments include: “Islam is a RELIGION and NOT a race. A violent and perverted religion” and “deep down in her hideous heart she must be happy seeing the carnage and violence against the Non-Muslims”.

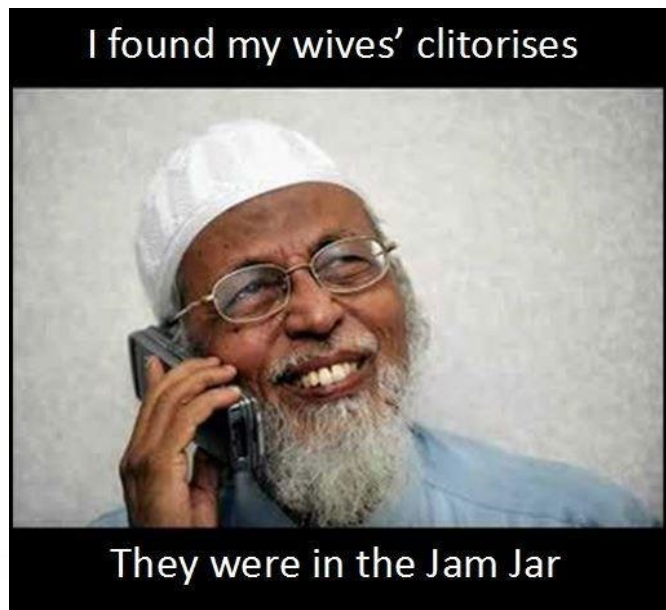


FIGURE 44: IMAGES PRESENTING HARMFUL CARICATURES OF ISLAM

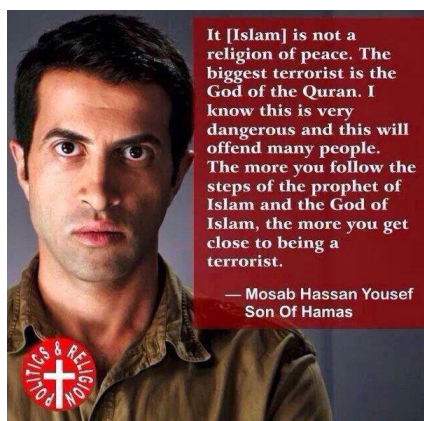


FIGURE 45: IMAGES ASSERTING THAT ISLAM IS DANGEROUS


## SOCIETAL INCOMPATIBILITY

This minor theme relates to the concept of assimilation and the perception that Muslims either cannot or chose not to assimilate into the society they occupy, therefore seen as the unassimilated ‘other’.

### Muhammad's Last Will and Testament — Surah 9

1. No agreements are valid with idolaters (which includes Jews and Christians as explained in 9:30) (9:3)
2. Slay the idolaters wherever you find them. (9:5)
3. Do not make friends with non-Muslims (9:23)
4. Idolaters (including Jews and Christians) are filth – *najisun*. (9:28)
5. Fight Jews and Christians until they become Muslims or pay tribute in utter humiliation. (9:29)
6. Islam must be triumphant over all other religions. (9:33)
7. There is no “sacred month” in which fighting non-Muslims is forbidden. (9:36)
8. Using a 365-day solar calendar in lieu of a 354-day lunar calendar is a “grossly impious practice.” (9:37)
9. Muslims who don't fight against non-Muslims will be sternly punished and replaced by others. (9:39)
10. Whether unarmed or well-equipped, fight for the cause of Allah with your money and your persons. (9:41)
11. Charitable contributions shall be used to advance Islam, among other things. (9:60)
12. Muslims are called to “kill and be killed,” and for this they will be rewarded paradise. (9:111)
13. Provoking non-Muslims is a good deed in the sight of God. (9:121)
14. Muslims are called to make war on all infidels who dwell around them. (9:123)

The Qur'an – unlike the Torah or the New Testament – is one book, by one man, in his own lifetime. It shows itself to be merely the ranting of the criminal mind, of a self-proclaimed prophet, a man named Muhammad.



**FIGURE 46: IMAGES USED TO PRESENT MUSLIMS AS INCOMPATIBLE WITH TRADITIONALLY NON-MUSLIM SOCIETIES**

Figure 46 above presents visual examples of this. The left image appears to present a list of rules from the Qur'an related to how Muslims should treat non-Muslims, most of which centre around disagreeing with, opposing, harming, and killing Christians and Jews<sup>79</sup>. The right image presents Europe (“Europa”), depicted as a white, blonde-haired woman, kicking an Islamophobically caricatured Muslim from Europe into Turkey, a majority Muslim country. This creates a visual division between the two characters, implying that the Muslim does not belong in Europe but Turkey.

<sup>79</sup> Many of these verses have been taken out of context or summarised to the point where their original message is lost. For example, while the image asserts that 9:33 is: “Islam must be triumphant over all other religions”, the actual verse is: “He is the One Who has sent His Messenger with ‘true’ guidance and the religion of truth, making it prevail over all others, even to the dismay of the polytheists” (Qur'an, The Repentance, 9:33).

This minor theme was also present in the March article comments, for example: “Muslims should live with other Muslims, there are plenty of Muslim countries. But Europe should be for Europeans” and “they do not have any desire to integrate rather than to divide”. Repeatedly, there is an ‘us’ versus ‘them’ rhetoric, presenting the view that Muslims should and can only occupy Muslim-majority societies/countries and are thus incompatible with other societies/countries, most predominantly Europe.

#### DIVISIVE RHETORIC

In this minor theme, the woman is othered textually by using divisive rhetoric to contrast her with the others in the photograph, implying her behaviour is deviant or abnormal. The people in the photograph are presented as part of the ingroup, while the woman is part of the outgroup.

A picture can say a thousand words. Moments after the London muslim terrorist attack a group of people ran to help a victim. One didn't.



FIGURE 47: IMAGES WITH WORDING THAT USES DIVISIVE LANGUAGE TO OTHER THE MUSLIM WOMAN

Firstly, this was done by adding text to the photograph, as demonstrated in Figure 47 above. All convey that one person within the image is acting differently from others, deviating from the norm. The juxtaposition of words/phrases such as “some” with “others” and “them” with “us” creates a dichotomy between the group and the woman.

Secondly, users shared unaltered versions of the photograph and instead captioned the photograph with this rhetoric. Examples include: “casualty on #Westminster #Bridge Everybody is worried for the victim, except one. How come?” and “#PrayForLondon Londoners come to aid of terror victim, one doesn't”. Again, divisive language fosters a dichotomy between the woman and the others in the photograph. Some article comments also echoed this, for example, “Could have stopped to help - most others would” and “Shocked or not I would still try to help those injured”. Like the tweets, these pushed the narrative that the normative majority would have acted differently than the woman and that her behaviour was abnormal.

#### ATTIRE

This minor theme draws attention to the woman’s attire. Users specifically highlighted that she was wearing a hijab and accompanied this with Islamophobic messaging, for example, in Figure 48 below.



FIGURE 48: A VERSION OF THE WESTMINSTER BRIDGE PHOTOGRAPH, WHERE IT IS HIGHLIGHTED EXPLICITLY THAT THE WOMAN IS WEARING A HIJAB



This concentration on the woman's attire was most prominent in the March article comments, for example: "How do we know this woman was a Muslim? Because she wears that thing on her head... Take it off and fit in" and "Wearing the head scarf symbolises the extreme side of her religion". Conversely, others contested this narrative, for example: "Why such hatred and xenophobia because of a veil?" and "people need to stop jumping to conclusions just because she's wearing a head scarf". Some commenters, therefore, contested those who used her clothing to make Islamophobic claims.

#### CHALLENGE

In opposition, some worked to undermine narratives of othering. Challenge was present in all the datasets aside from the November article comments. Users generally argued that the woman was being singled out because she was visibly Muslim, with many sharing images of others who appeared to be ignoring victims, most prominently the photograph of the white man (Figure 49).



**FIGURE 49: COMPARING THE WESTMINSTER BRIDGE PHOTOGRAPH WITH ANOTHER PHOTOGRAPH OF SOMEONE ELSE WALKING BY AN INJURED PERSON**

This is emphasised further through tweets' textual content: "Innocents got injured and you decide to focus on someone for their faith - while ignoring the white man. Revolting" and "@SouthLoneStar what about the white dude???". Examples from March article comments include: "What about the western looking chap walking past as well...where is that picture DM?" and "Anyone have a pop at the bloke at the back standing looking with his hands in his pockets?". There was, therefore, an effort throughout the photograph's journey to undermine narratives orientated around othering, centred on the argument that the woman only attracted attention because she was visibly Muslim.

#### SUMMARY

**Othering** was a significant theme identified in the Twitter and online news, present in almost all data samples. Some orientated the photograph around a narrative that equated Islam to terrorism, asserting that the woman was apathetic or approved of the attack. Others used the photograph as evidence of the purported societal incompatibility of Muslims. Divisive rhetoric uses words to suggest a division between the woman and the others within the photograph. Her hijab was also emphasised, again highlighting her difference from others in the photograph. Finally, weaved amongst this were efforts to challenge these othering tactics.

## PHOTOGRAPHIC VERACITY

The below table again provides an overview of the themes, with the major theme discussed in this section highlighted in blue<sup>80</sup>.

Major theme	Minor theme	Datasets				
		Top 100 Shared: Westminster Bridge Photograph	Replies to SouthLoneStar's tweet	Article URLs	March news article comments	November news article comments
Othering	Islam = terrorism	✓	✓		✓	
	Societal incompatibility		✓		✓	
	Divisive rhetoric	✓			✓	
	Attire	✓		✓	✓	
	Challenge	✓	✓	✓	✓	
<i>Photographic veracity</i>	<i>"The photograph speaks for itself"</i>	✓				✓
	<i>Context is irrelevant, content is paramount</i>					✓
	<i>The photograph is 'real'</i>					✓
	<i>Limited &amp; subjective context</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Cynicism about the media	Amplification & news value				✓	✓
	Distrust					✓

The second major theme, **Photographic veracity**, centred on the common association of photographs with evidence and truth value. This included both belief in this association and efforts to critique it. The former involved users elevating the veracity of the Westminster Bridge photograph and assuming that textual captions accurately represent what the photograph shows. The latter involved users problematising the supposition of photographic veracity. Thus, the physicality and material value of the photograph were crucial for this theme, underpinned by longstanding associations of photographs with evidence and truth.

<sup>80</sup> For a more detailed breakdown and descriptions of each of the themes, see appendix 3 for the full thematic framework.

“THE PHOTOGRAPH SPEAKS FOR ITSELF”

The minor theme “*The photograph speaks for itself*” concerns users using a version of the idiom “a picture is worth a thousand words” with the photograph. This hinged on the assumption that photographs are capable of carrying detailed illustrative information and, thus, are more effective at conveying information than verbal or textual descriptions. This seemingly allowed users to consider their own or others’ interpretations to represent the truth. The idiom was used in one of two ways. Firstly, to bolster the Islamophobic interpretation of the photograph by arguing that the content of the photograph irrefutably illustrated it. Examples of this are presented in Figure 50.



**FIGURE 50: TWO IMAGES OF ISLAMOPHOBIC CLAIMS PREFIXED WITH VARIATIONS OF "A PICTURE SPEAKS A THOUSAND WORDS"**

Users also incorporated this into tweet text, for example: “When a snapshot says so many words... #BanSharia #BanIslam #BanRefugees #BanMuslims” and “Sometimes one image says everything. Muslim compassion... #StopIslam #WednesdayWisdom #BanIslam”. While the phrasing differs, each conveys the same message, emphasizing that the ‘truth’ to their Islamophobic claim lies in the photograph’s believed veracity.

Secondly, users shared the photograph captioned with a variation of “a picture is worth a thousand words” but did not provide further explanation. In these instances, users exclusively shared either an unaltered or a cropped version of the photograph. These tweets were accompanied by text such as “They say pictures are worth a thousand words..... This was captured today on #ThamesBridge in London” and “perhaps I’m way

off... but this image speaks volumes to me....". These users imply that the photograph says something but leaves the reader to determine what this is. These users may be trying to spread Islamophobia by not overtly giving the photograph an Islamophobic frame. Again, this employs the motif of 'photograph as evidence', where the assumed evidentiary nature of photographs is used to support the claim made, albeit this claim is left open.

Some commenters on November articles also used the idiom, arguing the photograph had stronger evidentiary value than the corrective information. Examples include: "So is the picture fake? It speaks a thousand words and none of them are good", and "The photo speaks for itself. Who cares where it came from? Russia does not control how I act or vote or think". It is, therefore, significant that this idiom was utilised multiple times across the data, its use appearing to give priority to the assumed veracity of the photograph over other factors.

#### CONTEXT IS IRRELEVANT, CONTENT IS PARAMOUNT

This theme is similar to the former in that it prioritises the photograph's content to ascertain meaning. However, in this case, the content is given priority by juxtaposing it with the context, the latter of which is dismissed. This perspective is at odds with longstanding theories of photographic representation (Berger, 1968;1978a;1978b) and ignores that a photograph's context greatly influences its meaning (Barthes, 1978; Hall, 1981; Shore, 1998).

This minor theme was exclusively present in the November article comments once the full context of SouthLoneStar's use of the photograph was known. Some reiterated SouthLoneStar's narrative, for example: "Yet she still walked by" and "Sorry but she does not look visibly upset in the next frame to me". Others stated that the new information was irrelevant: "No matter who shared the picture, it still doesn't change what we see in the picture" and "What difference does that make? All that matters is if it happened, not who shared it". Comments like these suggest a muddying between fact and opinion, with users

putting their subjective understanding of the photograph's content ahead of its factual context.

While this minor theme was only present in one dataset, these findings are significant in understanding how recontextualised visual disinformation functions. Some of the news audience rejected the corrective information and prioritised either SouthLoneStar's or their interpretation of the photograph. This suggests that mainstream media fact-checking may not be effective if a portion of the audience continues to maintain the disinformation narrative.

#### THE PHOTOGRAPH IS 'REAL'

This minor theme centres on believing that the photograph was 'real', so it cannot be disinformation. This suggests that some only believed something to be disinformation if it was entirely false or fabricated. They thus viewed disinformation through a binary lens of true and false. Again, these were identified in the November article comments when the corrective information was published.

In comments of this nature, words/phrases such as "real", "accurate", "true", and "not fake" were heavily present. Example comments include: "But the picture is REAL, showing her IGNORING the attack", "It doesn't matter whether he's Russian or Santa Claus, the photo is genuine", and "Does that make the image any less fake though? No. It was a very real image". This suggests that these commenters did not accept that SouthLoneStar's tweet was disinformation because the photograph was authentic.

Some users seemingly struggled to understand why the tweet was disinformation, ostensibly from a place of confusion. For example: "So the picture is real?", "So, then what's the truth of the photo?" and "So this was photo shopped and the Muslim woman actually cared about the victims? Or the photo happened as depicted and it's bad cause a Russian took the photo?". This further implies that some orientated disinformation around a

true/false binary, and so when presented with disinformation using a ‘real’ photograph, there was confusion. This minor theme suggests that some audiences are unaware of the nuances of disinformation; if a photograph is ‘real’, then some are motivated to believe that content is not disinformation because of the image's authenticity.

#### LIMITED & SUBJECTIVE CONTEXT

Unlike the previous minor themes, the final centres on the fragility of photographic veracity. This was identified in all datasets, showing there were attempts to refute photographic veracity at each stage of the photograph's journey. In these instances, users problematised the idea that photographs represent objective truth. For example, one tweet read: “Ludicrous some are using this still picture (a fraction of a second in time) to denigrate this Muslim woman's entire character #Westminster”. Others shared more photographs from Lorriman's photo series to provide a fuller picture of the event, specifically images where the woman's expression is clearer (Figure 51). An example tweet that shared one of these photographs stated: “Those who criticised the Muslim lady who walked by wounded ppl in the #Westminster attack have no idea what she witnessed: it's all in her face”.



**FIGURE 51: MORE PHOTOGRAPHS FROM JAMIE LORRIMAN'S PHOTO SERIES OF THE MUSLIM WOMAN**

The news media also worked to undermine the Islamophobic interpretation of the photograph by providing more context to the event, as seen in Figure 52, which includes a quote from the woman.



FIGURE 52: BUZZFEED PROVIDING MORE CONTEXT BY INCLUDING COMMENTS FROM THE WOMAN

Some replies to SouthLoneStar's tweet shared similar rhetoric. Images like Figure 53 accuse SouthLoneStar of fabricating his narrative and providing alternative interpretations of the photograph:



FIGURE 53: A SCREENSHOT OF AN UNSENT TWEET SENT IN REPLY TO SOUTHLONESTAR

This minor theme was also present amongst users who shared an article on Twitter, both in March and November, for example: "A case study for History or Art History: photographs



are complicated and require just as much analysis as words”, acknowledging that photographs are complex. Once the tweet had been identified as disinformation in November, a small number of tweets sharing a November article reflected on the use of images when sharing disinformation, for example: “This is why we should be cautious before assessing or sharing "news" articles and photographs”, an admission that photographs need a careful approach.

Finally, article comments from March and November also worked to undermine the assumed veracity of SouthLoneStar’s tweet. In March, this primarily centred on the argument that no one could ascertain the woman’s thoughts based on one photograph, for example: “People ought to be very careful what they assume from a snap shot”. Some November comments also emphasised the need for critical thinking, for example: “Maybe people will start to think for themselves now, rather than simply accepting a tweet”. Others reflected on how difficult it is to determine what the photograph showed based solely on its content, for example: “It is real but shows nothing”. Therefore, while a considerable number of commenters in November rejected the November news, a number accepted it and used it to reflect on the fragility of photographic veracity.

#### SUMMARY

**Photographic veracity** was a key theme that emerged across the two datasets. Many accepted SouthLoneStar’s interpretation as a true reflection of what the photograph showed. As Barthes (1978) argued, captions often inherit the assumed veracity of images. Therefore, a portion of the audience likely accepted SouthLoneStar’s interpretation which explains why some users defended Islamophobic interpretations of the photograph.

With “The photograph speaks for itself”, users leaned into the assumed illustrative nature of photographs, with the textual captions influencing what they believed the photograph to show. “Context is irrelevant, content is paramount” similarly involved users emphasising the photograph's content. This was combined with a rejection of the context, which suggests that, with certain types of visual disinformation, some may maintain the original

narrative and reject corrective information. Again, this may speak to the strength of falsified claims if accompanied by supposed visual evidence. “The photograph is ‘real’” found that some users struggled to understand why the photograph’s use was considered disinformation or rejected the tweet being disinformation because the photograph was genuine. This suggests that some only understood disinformation to be wholly fabricated content, which is not representative of all types of disinformation. Finally, knitted throughout all datasets were efforts to undermine the assumed veracity of SouthLoneStar’s claim. This involved sharing information that counteracted the claim, providing alternative interpretations of the photograph, and arguing that the photograph could not fully illustrate the woman’s thoughts and actions.

## CYNICISM ABOUT THE MEDIA

As before, the below table provides an overview of the themes, with the major theme discussed in this section highlighted in blue<sup>81</sup>.

Major theme	Minor theme	Datasets				
		Top 100 Shared: Westminster Bridge Photograph	Replies to SouthLoneStar's tweet	Article URLs	March news article comments	November news article comments
Othering	Islam = terrorism	✓	✓		✓	
	Societal incompatibility		✓		✓	
	Divisive rhetoric	✓			✓	
	Attire	✓		✓	✓	
	Challenge	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Photographic veracity	"The photograph speaks for itself"	✓				✓
	Context is irrelevant, content is paramount					✓
	The photograph is 'real'					✓
	Limited & subjective context	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
<i>Cynicism about the media</i>	<i>Amplification &amp; news value</i>				✓	✓
	<i>Distrust</i>					✓

The theme **Cynicism about the media** centred on the role of the mainstream news media in the journey of the Westminster Bridge photograph. A small number of users discussed the media's role positively: either to praise the media for counteracting SouthLoneStar's tweet in March or to thank the media for sharing the corrective information in November. However, a much larger number of users negatively discussed the media's role. This was done in two ways. Firstly, users debated the news value of the tweet, asserting that the tweet was not news and that the media was unnecessarily amplifying it. Secondly, users expressed distrust in the media.

<sup>81</sup> For a more detailed breakdown and descriptions of each of the themes, see appendix 3 for the full thematic framework.

## AMPLIFICATION & NEWS VALUE

This minor theme was present in the online news datasets. It involved users contending that SouthLoneStar's tweet did not constitute news, so the news media should not have reported on it. There were also accusations that the articles were unnecessarily amplifying the tweet.

Concerning March's article comments, several users asserted that the tweet had no news value, for example: "none of this is news" and "It is great people stood up for her, but this is not news". Others stated that the media was further building controversy surrounding the tweet: "the DM decided to single her out and cause a bit more trouble. This rag should be ashamed" and "Why is this being revamped? Stop regurgitating this and move on". These comments suggest that the media paid unnecessary attention to the tweet, and the woman suffered from this.

In November, several comments chastised the media for reporting on the story in March, again insinuating that this was damaging: "and which newspaper was so quick to use the photo for exactly that purpose? The hypocrisy is staggering", and "the DM were so quick to shame her". Tweets from those who shared a November article on Twitter also echoed this sentiment: "Its rich of the Daily Mail to start accusing Russia now, when it played an equal part in causing so much anguish for this lady". A portion of the news media audience, therefore, thought the tweet had no news value and so should not have been reported on and that this reportage had negative consequences.

Therefore, despite all articles undermining SouthLoneStar's narrative, some audiences maintained the belief that the reportage was damaging and only worked to spread SouthLoneStar's narrative further. Others believed the story did not constitute news and did not see value in turning the tweet into a news story. Overall, this minor theme displays scepticism by suggesting that the story was reported on for nefarious purposes.

## DISTRUST

This minor theme was only present in the November article comments dataset. However, the strength at which some users rejected the corrective information based seemingly on media distrust was significant. Moreover, rejecting corrective information based on distrust in the news media is significant in the context of disinformation intervention strategies.

Some expressed doubt, for example: “This story seems made up” and “don’t believe ya DM”. Others accused the mainstream media of being ‘fake news’: “Honestly, how do we know that this story isn’t fake and is just trying to calm racial tension?” and “Funny thing is. I bet this article is fake news like everything DM prints”. The remaining argued there was not enough evidence that SouthLoneStar was IRA-operated or that evidence could not be trusted: “Some people believe in fairies. Produce evidence or this is just another smear. Hey Ho” and “just the usual lies from the US. No evidence has been provided to show that Russia had anything to do with this”.

Some users rejected the November information due to distrust, either specifically doubting article content or expressing more general cynicism about the media. There were clear efforts to dismiss the corrective November information, suggesting that, for some, even when presented with corrective information from official sources, they will reject it. This potentially problematises the method of retroactively correcting disinformation, as some may be inclined to maintain the original narrative. In this example, the mainstream media being the vehicle for disseminating the corrective information caused some to distrust this information.

## SUMMARY

The mainstream news media is a key component of the journey of the Westminster Bridge photograph. This led to the emergence of a major theme centred on **Cynicism about the media**. This firstly concerned news value, specifically that the tweet had little to no news value. Related to this, some argued that the reportage had negative consequences. Secondly, several commenters distrusted the mainstream media, and the corrective information presented. This opens a discussion as to the role of the mainstream media when reporting on disinformation. The media overwhelmingly worked to undermine SouthLoneStar's narrative, condemning it and providing contradictory and corrective information. Yet, some audiences were cynical about the media's involvement. There is growing evidence that the news media increasingly contributes to the amplification of viral material by covering it as news (Nanabhay & Farmanfarmaian, 2011; Zhang et al., 2017; Roese, 2018; Waldherr, 2018), along with existing arguments that highlight the potential negative consequences of the media reporting on disinformation (Cerase & Santoro, 2018; Phillips, 2018; Tsfati et al., 2020). These findings suggest that, in certain contexts, there may be issues with the news media correcting online disinformation.

## OVERALL SUMMARY

Three major themes emerged from the thematic analysis of the Twitter and online news data. The first was **Othering**. This is centred on the stereotype that Muslims are non-normative and will not adhere to the prevailing societal expectations, norms, and beliefs (Bailey & Harindranath, 2005; Sonwalkar, 2005; Karim, 2006; Mountz, 2009). The process of othering took a variety of forms:

- "Islam = terrorism" links to the perception that Islam cannot be separated from terrorism, asserting that Muslims are potential terrorists and therefore are a threat to society.
- "Societal incompatibility" involved asserting the belief that Muslim traditions, beliefs, and practices as non-normative to the extent that, in some cases, it was argued that Muslims should only participate in Muslim-majority societies/countries.

- “Divisive rhetoric” similarly presented Muslims as societal outliers, in this instance, by using reoccurring words and phrases. This included the combination of opposing words such as “them” with “us”, “some” with “others”, and “a group... helped” with “except for one”.
- “Attire” saw some users drawing attention to the woman’s hijab as a means of othering her.
- Conversely, “Challenge” saw some users undermining efforts to other the Muslim woman and Islam in general.

With **Photographic veracity**, the visual form of the photograph was central. Specifically, this is related to the common-held assumption that photographs are inherently veracious and highly explanatory. This theme was divided into four minor themes:

- “The photograph speaks for itself” involved users utilising this or a similar phrase. In some instances, this was done without further explanation, so the intention was unknown. With others, this phrase suffixed or prefixed an Islamophobic claim.
- “Context is irrelevant, content is paramount” again leans into the assumption that photographs are inherently illustrative. This involved a rejection of corrective contextualising information, instead continuing to maintain SouthLoneStar’s interpretation of the photograph’s content.
- “The photograph is ‘real’” emerged with users viewing disinformation through a binary lens of true and false. As the photograph was ‘real’, some users were confused or rejected that the tweet was disinformation.
- “Limited & subjective context”. Here, users understood that it could be problematic to assume that photographs are inherently veracious. Comments and tweets encouraged critical thinking, pointing out how photographs are often limited and subjective.

**Cynicism about the media** was the final major theme identified. This was related to how users responded to the media coverage of SouthLoneStar’s tweet, which was generally negative:

- With “Amplification & news value”, users contended that the tweet did not constitute news. Connected to this, there was the perception that the news coverage was damaging and only served to amplify SouthLoneStar’s tweet further.
- “Distrust” involved users displaying distrust in the corrective information provided by the news media. This evidence of scepticism when the media presents corrective information raises questions about whether this method of communication through the mainstream news media is effective at correcting and combatting disinformation.



## CHAPTER 8: THEMATIC ANALYSIS (FOCUS GROUP DATA)

### INTRODUCTION & OVERVIEW

This chapter discusses the findings from the focus group analysis. As noted in the methodology, the focus groups were hampered by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. This meant that the aim of six focus groups could not be achieved, and a total of three focus groups were completed<sup>82</sup>. The purpose of the focus groups is to be exploratory and a methodological contribution to the field of mis-/disinformation research. The aim is to ask questions about current methodologies used to examine mis-/disinformation and potentially make suggestions for future methodological development. This could contribute to the agenda-setting of how the field could move forward methodologically. While this contribution is discussed in more detail in the concluding chapters, it is important to outline this here before exploring the focus group findings.

The focus groups, therefore, work to address questions four and five of the thesis' research questions, highlighted below:

4. How might the thesis' examination of the Westminster Bridge case study enable the further development of approaches for the critical analysis of visual disinformation?
5. How can discussions with the community negatively depicted by the Westminster Bridge disinformation campaign contribute to the case study of this thesis?

Question 4 examines what could be learned when focus groups are applied to the Westminster Bridge photograph case study. Here, the focus groups are used to determine how the participants responded to SouthLoneStar's tweet, along with wider considerations of their everyday experiences as British Muslim women. This also works towards understanding the value of approaching mis-/disinformation this way; the insight gleaned from the focus group highlights what nuanced information about mis-/disinformation could potentially be learned when examining the topic using this approach. Question 5

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<sup>82</sup> This is generally considered the minimal number of focus groups needed in order to attain insight (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009; Masadeh, 2012; Guest et al., 2017; Hennink et al., 2019).

relates to the overall methodological approach of the thesis and how it questions, and thus may potentially develop, future approaches to mis-/disinformation. This assesses the overall value of approaching mis-/disinformation using focus groups, including the unique insights that can potentially be learned about mis-/disinformation and how such an approach could provide a more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon, weighing up the pros and cons of engaging with such an approach. The two questions are discussed briefly in this chapter, although the full assessment of how and to what extent the focus groups address these research questions is reviewed in more detail in the concluding chapters.

Before discussing the findings from the focus groups, participant information and the materials used in the focus groups are presented below.

	<b>Date</b>	<b>Participant pseudonyms</b>	<b>Participant gender &amp; age</b>
Focus group 1	09/03/21	Ayaat, Habiba, Sonam	All young female
Focus group 2	10/03/21	Amara, Imani, Yara	All young female
Focus group 3	25/11/21	Isaf, Maira, Anisha	All young female

**TABLE 13: A BREAKDOWN OF THE FOCUS GROUPS**

Table 13 above breaks down the focus groups. In total, three took place, two in March 2021 and one in November 2021. Three participants were in each focus group, totalling nine. All were young females over the age of eighteen. Thus, participants were notably homogenous, partly due to the recruitment issues related to the COVID-19 pandemic.



**FIGURE 54: THE MATERIALS USED IN THE FOCUS GROUPS**

Figure 54 details the material used in the focus groups. At the beginning of each focus group, participants were first shown the image on the left, the Westminster Bridge photograph. This was first to ask if they recognised the image, and if they did, if they could remember from where they recognised the image. Participants were then asked how they responded to the photograph, specifically what they believed it showed. Participants were then shown the image on the right, SouthLoneStar’s tweet sharing the Westminster Bridge photograph with an Islamophobic caption. This was to compare and contrast their interpretation of the photograph with SouthLoneStar’s and understand how they responded to SouthLoneStar’s captioning. Following these discussions, specifically about the Westminster Bridge photograph, questions opened up to broader conversations about media representation of Muslims and participants’ experiences as Muslims in the UK. Therefore, no additional materials were used.

## REFLECTION ON CONTRIBUTION TO KNOWLEDGE

The findings from the focus groups reflect the views of a small number of participants and, therefore, cannot be claimed to be representative of the views of British Muslim women. Nevertheless, these findings provide some insight into the responses and experiences of the victims of Islamophobic disinformation. Moreover, focus group findings are suggestive of wider views and experiences and, as such, are a valuable qualitative addition to the data gathered for this thesis.

Regarding the methodological contribution of the focus groups, the aim is to put into question current approaches to mis-/disinformation and provide a potentially complementary approach that could provide new understandings of the phenomenon. As discussed in the literature review, current mis-/disinformation generally takes macro approaches that concentrate on whether the content is or is not mis-/disinformation, the topic of the investigated content, tracking the spread, and verification. This has provided vital insight into disinformation, but at this stage, the phenomenon has been approached methodologically in a notably limited way. This thesis' methodology aims to delve more into what disinformation means and what it does, with an emphasis on the visual. One way of addressing this methodological aim is to talk about the case with the community negatively depicted by SouthLoneStar's disinformation campaign, Muslim women. The Twitter and online news components of the case study allowed for an in-depth and detailed understanding of the online journey of the Westminster Bridge photograph. They do not, however, allow for insight into active media consumers who were potentially affected by the journey of the Westminster Bridge photograph. The focus groups, therefore, consider the extent to which engaging with these kinds of methods when investigating visual disinformation can contribute to or nuance methods. This also works towards understanding what SouthLoneStar's tweet does and means, as well as what its potential effects could be.

Additionally, it should be noted that this is my reading of the focus group data as the researcher, and it is not the aim to speak for the participants involved in the focus groups. The methodology discussed positionality in more detail, but the key points should be reminded before examining the focus group findings. The analysis of the focus group data considered Harding's (1992; 1995) paradigm of strong objectivity, which recognizes that achieving value-neutral objectivity is impossible; instead, researchers should question and reflect on the role of objectivity in their research. No one is epistemologically infallible, so it is important to consider my biases, knowledge, and identity. Parson's (2019) reflections on positionality were also incorporated, which further emphasises the need for the researcher to acknowledge their own identity and consider the role of power and privilege

in order to conduct ethical research. While this may lead to researcher discomfort, Chadwick (2021a; 2021b) encourages researchers to embrace this discomfort to produce reflexive and critical research which allows reflection on issues such as domination, inequality, and oppression, which may work to break down the researcher-participants power imbalance. However, it is accepted that while all of the above is taken into consideration, I am ultimately responsible for analysing and representing the words of the participants. This is, therefore, an unavoidable tension that requires acknowledgement.

## THEMATIC ANALYSIS

Four themes emerged from the analysis of the focus group data, three of which were also identified in the Twitter and online news data, one unique to the focus groups:

- **Othering** related to feelings of fear, paranoia, and isolation as a Muslim woman in Britain, with many discussing such feelings as a consequence of Islamophobic disinformation. Participants also discussed the effects of Islamophobic disinformation on non-Muslims, with the belief that the spread of such content would work to normalise Islamophobic beliefs and fuel harassment and violence towards Muslims.
- Participants also provided detailed reflections on their own lived experiences as Muslim women in the UK under the theme **Lived experience**. These stories generally centred on experiencing harassment, self-consciousness when in public, and being associated with terrorist attacks by their peers. Participants associating such experiences with Islamophobic disinformation was unexpected and therefore deemed important to highlight.
- **Photographic veracity** continued to be a significant theme, with participants reflecting that, while the Westminster Bridge photograph does accurately show an event that was captured by the camera lens, without context, it provides limited knowledge of the depicted event.
- **Cynicism about the media** was also identified in the focus group data, specifically that participants perceived media representations of Muslims to be inaccurate, negative, and harmful, with conversations noting that veiling is often associated

with these kinds of media representations. For many participants, Islamophobic disinformation was not seen as an issue unique to social media but also in the mainstream media.

The final section provides some further interesting points of discussion that do not fit fully into the identified themes but provide further insight into the data. For the entire focus group transcripts, see appendix 4. For the thematic framework of the focus group analysis, see appendix 5.

#### OTHERING

Many participants discussed what they believed to be the negative consequences of Islamophobic disinformation, as these consequences often related to the othering of Muslims. This was generally divided into consequences for non-Muslims and Muslims. Concerning the former, there were concerns that such content would influence how non-Muslims would perceive Muslims (particularly if they did not regularly interact with Muslims), which may lead to the validation and normalisation of Islamophobic beliefs. Many participants expressed that this may lead non-Muslims to believe Muslims are dangerous, untrustworthy, and no longer seen as people but as a societal threat. Taken a step further, participants saw such beliefs evolving into increased societal division, hate, anger, confusion, microaggressions, the fuelling of existing racism/Islamophobia, institutionalised Islamophobia/racism, and hate crimes. Some example comments from participants include:

“They will see that image, and they could go out later in the day, see me walking in exactly the same way, maybe dressed the same way, wearing my hijab and think “, oh my god, like, she feels that way” or “she’s a terrorist” ... Socially, it completely adds to that rhetoric and to racist and to all the hate comments and all the hate crimes. Definitely, I don't think there's any kind of doubt that there isn't a negative impact there” (Imani).

“Obviously, people who are only on social media and only get to see these negative reactions to Muslims would assume that “oh, since everybody's reacting to them this way, it probably means that it's right” (Maira).

“And of course, with people who are non-Muslims, I think it creates that divide and that hate even more, or it confuses people, because I think you do have some people who are really against Islam and they just have hatred and that racists and for them, of course, it fuels that, ignites that even more, whereas there are some people who are genuine citizens who have maybe never met a Muslim person, and it confuses them even more” (Anisha).

Ayaat depicted this process strikingly, describing the consequences of such Islamophobia as progressing and building from the personal, to media, to cultural, and finally to institutional:

“And that just reinforces the cycle of, you know, “they're [Muslims] doing nothing”, “they're useless” blah blah blah. So, it's kind of like, becomes just a huge cycle from one person hating Muslims to the society hating Muslims, to institutions putting Muslims on the side, and then obviously, now we've reached the top of institutions where the government are making laws in order to discriminate against Muslim. It started off with one person hating us, and now the government hates us”.

Several participants, therefore, expressed the belief that Islamophobic disinformation can have a negative impact on non-Muslims, which would strengthen the representation of Muslims as ‘other’. In particular, they presented this as a process of growth in which a piece of Islamophobic disinformation contributes to and reinforces an overall Islamophobic narrative. This reflects some perspectives on disinformation, in which individual examples of misleading content support and reinforce a false narrative (Wardle & Singerman, 2021; Center for an Informed Public, Digital Forensic Research Lab, Graphika, & Stanford Internet Observatory, 2021).

On the opposite side, participants discussed the effect they believed Islamophobic disinformation had on Muslims, which again linked to Muslims being othered and isolated in British society. Conversations centred on feelings of fear and anxiety when out in public.

For example: “I think for Muslims, men and women, it makes them more paranoid when they're outside, especially now in the time of social media, and everyone's got their phones out” (Anisha) and “[After a terrorist attack] you can sense tension after something's happened and I can understand how it would create anxiety in terms of the micro-social impacts” (Amara). There was, therefore, a belief that online Islamophobic disinformation would lead Muslims to feel heightened anxiety, paranoia, and isolation in public spaces.

Linked to the above, there were further discussions of self-consciousness of one's behaviour when out in public and a feeling of needing to monitor one's behaviour to avoid standing out. For example:

“[Young Muslims] feel they have to be this modern Muslim trying to get away from the label of being ‘too religious’ or ‘I'm not like that, I'm like you guys, I'm ordinary’” (Sonam).

“For Muslims, when they do go outside, they feel like they have to be on, like, their best behaviour or they always need to keep that behaviour in check, or, you know, they have to make sure they sort of blend in, or they hide within other people in society, because of fear of them being exposed or, you know, shown in a bad light like this [the Westminster Bridge tweet]” (Anisha).

“What my mindset is normally is I should try and be, you know, who I am and what Islam actually represents. And you know, all the morals of Islam, I should try and make sure I present that to everyone. Because I know there's some people who have never interacted with Muslims and have only seen it in the media” (Maira).

“It just really messes up your confidence in being able to do things because you think, “You know what? If I do this or if I do XYZ, how is that going to impact how visible I am?” (Imani).

The above links to some studies that examined how Muslim respond to and manage the effects of media representation, specifically that they change or monitor their behaviour so as not to stand out, present themselves as ‘good’ Muslims, and prove their ‘nativeness’ to the country they live in (Ryan, 2011; Hebbani & Wills, 2012; Harris & Karimshah, 2019).



There were, therefore, some deep discussions about the potential effects of Islamophobic disinformation, many of which linked to othering and feelings of being other. Almost all participants shared stories about how they believed they had been affected negatively by the sharing of Islamophobic content.

#### LIVED EXPERIENCE

Lived experience was a theme unique to the focus groups, centring on participants' personal stories about their lives related to disinformation and media representations. These stories often linked back to **Othering**; however, it is important to note the severity of some of the participants' experiences, which in some cases involved abuse and harassment. It was not expected that participants would share such experiences, suggesting that, for the participants, mis-/disinformation and/or mainstream media representations had significant consequences on their everyday life. The visceral nature of the stories meant it was often difficult to hear how deeply their lived experiences were reported to be impacted by online disinformation and similar Islamophobic content across the media ecosystem.

Several participants expressed feelings of desensitisation, either when exposed to Islamophobic narratives or experiencing abuse in public. For example: "I think I'm quite numb to it. And it doesn't bother me, the news doesn't bother me, because I don't expect anything different" (Ayaat) and "I don't think it [media representation] surprises us Muslims anymore, to be honest, you've just got accepted" (Amara). Habiba provided a more detailed response:

"I've got desensitised to it. When somebody says something to you, I don't take it to heart anymore. I just take it how it goes. If somebody calls me a terrorist on the street or calls me a name, it's just one of those things that I'm used to. I don't take it to heart, but that's really sad because why should that be the norm?... And it's because of social media. It's because of newspapers and how they portray us".

This suggests that some participants were subjected to Islamophobia to the point where they felt it had little emotional effect on them, almost as if it was part of their everyday experiences.

Several participants talked about how they had been verbally attacked and the emotional effect this had on them. Ayaat recounted a story of being called a terrorist and noted that her mother had stopped wearing a niqab out of fear that she might face harassment. Habiba noted wearing headphones when walking down the street and not driving with her car windows down to avoid hearing abuse when in public. Amongst many participants, there was a genuine fear of being harmed in public, and this stemmed from them knowing that they appeared visibly Muslim. For example: "I'm always thinking, "right, who's going to look at me today? There's a Muslim that I want to attack, get my frustrations out", even though I'm just a normal, 20-something-year-old" (Ayaat), "When you're on the train station... you're wearing the scarf, you'll notice that you're noticeably Muslim and anything could happen at any time" (Habiba), and "I get really on edge when there are attacks... Obviously, I'm visibly Muslim... you don't know who these people are on the streets at the end of the day, everyone's a stranger" (Amara). More detailed comments included:

"After the Manchester Bombing, my parents asked me so many questions when I was leaving, like, where I was going? Because everyone is worried. I'm going out to do my job and I don't even have the privilege to be able to think I will be able to get there safely because you never know what's around the corner. I feel like that really has an impact on your self-worth and your self-esteem" (Imani).

"I know it [the way the Westminster Bridge photograph had been used] affects Muslim women because it affected me. Like I remember that was the first time where I actually had the thought, "Oh, my God, like, this is something that could happen to me. I could be scapegoated, for you know, whatever agenda people might have if I'm just walking on the street, and a terrorist attack happens". So, it made me feel quite anxious" (Isaf).

Isaf also provided a personal story about how she responded to the tweet at the time, as a teenager who was very active on Twitter:

“I really took it to heart because people were going in on her. So, I remember it made me feel like really upset and maybe even anxious because I remember putting myself in her shoes and thinking, if this happened to me, if I was just walking and a terrorist attack happened, what would I do? What would I do if my face was all over social media?” (Isaf).

The above shows participants linking aspects of their lived experiences as Muslim women with the sharing of Islamophobic content online and in broader media representations.

Finally, a few participants had experienced being asked about terrorists by their peers, which made them feel uncomfortable and as if they were being linked to the attack:

“It's kind of like, “Oh, well, what do you think?” ... what's my opinion going to be? It kind of insinuates that my opinion is going to be not what everyone else's is. I condemn this thing as well. It's kind of like I have to then reaffirm, “yeah, I condemn this. I don't believe in this kind of thing” (Imani).

“I'm just asked what I think about the situation. It's quite uncomfortable because I have nothing to do with terrorism. I have nothing to do with the corruption that these people do. So, to be asked stuff like that, and what I think about situations just because they put me in the same category as these people that cause corruption. It's not very comfortable” (Yara).

Anisha also remembered being asked what she thought of the Westminster Bridge photograph, which motivated her to assert that the woman's religion was irrelevant.

In summary, participants provided ample personal experiences to express their attitudes towards and thoughts about the impact of Islamophobic disinformation. Some participants expressed feelings of numbness towards both media representations and harassment. At the same time, however, practically all expressed being affected to different degrees by their lived experience of being a young Muslim woman in the UK. These experiences included verbal abuse, feelings of fear and paranoia, being uncomfortably questioned about terrorist attacks, and acts of monitoring and changing one's behaviour not to draw attention. Participants were, therefore, conscious of their visibility as Muslim women and

how this may place them in danger. This suggests that participants partially associated the negative experiences they described with online and media representations of Muslims. Moreover, these stories overwhelmingly linked back to **Othering**, expressed succinctly by Ayaat: “People say to us “go back home”, but if you were born here. Where’s home?”. Moreover, these experiences reflect wider research examining the othering of Muslims concerning media representations (Bailey & Harindranath, 2005; Karim, 2006; Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2010).

#### PHOTOGRAPHIC VERACITY

This theme centred on what the participants believed the Westminster Bridge photograph showed, as well as reflections on the ability of photographs to be objective and representative. All participants had similar responses to the photograph, and all perceived SouthLoneStar’s presentation of the photograph to be misleading. From many participants, her Muslim identity was central to how SouthLoneStar used the photograph, and many focused on her hijab. For example: “You see the picture, and you see a veiled woman who’s clearly Muslim, and then the hashtag at the end, #BanIslam, it’s definitely... agenda-driven” (Imani), “If she wasn’t wearing a headscarf or if she was white, would that picture have been taken as well?” (Yara), and “I really do believe because she was wearing a headscarf that’s why she was attacked. And that’s why it became so viral” (Anisha). These considerations of the woman’s attire relate to broader research concerning media representations of Muslims. Veiling is usually disproportionately central to media stories concerning Muslim women and is often used as a visual symbol of otherness and deviance (Meer et al., 2010; Baker et al., 2013; Al-Hejin, 2015; Zine, 2016). Participants, therefore, seemingly understood how an image of a veiled Muslim woman could be used to spread Islamophobic rhetoric due to societal connotations regarding veiling.

In reviewing the photograph, several participants emphasised that they did not see the woman as different from anyone else in the image, asserting that she was unwarrantedly singled out. Consequently, many participants did not see how SouthLoneStar’s caption correlated with what the photograph showed. This led participants to state that they

believed the photograph and the woman's actions had been misinterpreted by SouthLoneStar, which developed into further discussions about how it can be difficult to make assumptions about someone based on a photograph. For example: “We don't know what happened before that... that's only one snapshot” (Yara), “If I didn't know the context, it would just be that someone's collapse and everyone's just reacting in their own different way” (Maira), and “We don't really know what was going through her mind” (Anisha). More detailed comments from participants include:

“This is just one picture from an incident that took place over a couple of hours... it's annoying that because of that one picture, just one picture of out of, like, a whole thing that happened. How does he [SouthLoneStar] know what's happening? It's just one picture. They don't know what happened during the whole scene” (Habiba).

“It's just a single photograph. You can't make any kind of assumptions about what's going through her head. We don't know this woman. I'm sure this man [SouthLoneStar] doesn't know who this woman is and know the complete context of why she's in the picture, why the picture was taken” (Imani).

“I don't think there's enough there to assume anything about her intentions. I think anything other than saying that she's uncomfortable would be a stretch. It's only two seconds. You can't tell what's happened. And there's not enough to say that she's like careless or doesn't care” (Amara).

There was repeated emphasis across these comments of not knowing the woman's thoughts and actions, with reflections on the limitations of making assumptions based on a photograph. This echoes the writing of scholars such as Berger (1968; 1978a; 1978b), Barthes (1978), and Sontag (1990), who argue that photographs alone are void of context and, therefore, can tell very little. It is the information surrounding a photograph that provides the context and, in turn, influences how a photograph is interpreted.

Finally, there were discussions about other pieces of visual disinformation participants encountered. Ayaat recalled seeing photographs in the media of Eid prayers during the

COVID-19 pandemic. She contrasted these with photographs taken at Brighton beach when the first COVID-19 lockdown restriction in the UK eased:

“I remember pictures of people on the beach and pictures on streets celebrating some British event, and it was all white people, and it was fine, it was happy, because “community coming together blah blah blah”. And then pictures of Eid prayer where people were one metre two metres away with face masks with their own prayer mats completely spread in an open space was deemed as: “Look at these lot. They don't care” ... The media took it [the photograph of Eid prayers] at an angle where people looked like they were close together. But someone took a video, and literally, as you turn the angle, you can see everyone's wearing face masks, and everyone is literally two metres away from each other. So, there's, like, clear media disinformation.”

There was, therefore, further reflection from participants regarding photographic veracity and the issue of assuming photographs are inherently representative. Again, participants' perceptions of mis-/disinformation, in this instance in the context of visual manipulation, cover an amalgamation of social media and mainstream media, with Ayaat considering her example of media photography of the Eid prayers to be disinformation.

In summary, all considered SouthLoneStar's tweet to be disinformation, and this centred on the woman wearing a hijab. Many participants believed this fuelled the deception, understanding that veiling can carry deep societal connotations. Participants overwhelmingly rejected SouthLoneStar's interpretation, with many stressing that a single photograph is often not representative, particularly when the whole context is unknown. This is, therefore, reflective of arguments regarding photographic veracity, in which participants believed the photograph itself could tell very little and had been manipulated by SouthLoneStar's captioning.

#### CYNICISM ABOUT THE MEDIA

Many participants had negative comments about and perceptions of the media, with many frequently referencing the news media concerning disinformation. There seemed to be an overall distrust in the British media, particularly about right-wing news sources such as *The*

*Daily Mail*. There was clear frustration with how the media presents Muslims. For example: “I feel like the media just loves to take any opportunity to slam Muslims and just putting us in that light. And it's just, it's annoying, it's irritating” (Habiba) and “I hate The Daily Mail; I feel like it's responsible for so much” (Isaf).

There was agreement across all participants that media representations of Muslims contributed to the significant spread of SouthLoneStar’s tweet and that such representations are overwhelmingly negative. An example from one participant was that acts of terror are presented by the media differently if the perpetrator is Muslim compared to if they are not. The topic of veiling also came up repeatedly, with some believing the media presented hijabs as a barrier to integration and as a Muslim woman’s “entire identity” (Isaf). Ayaat described media representations of Muslims as “oppressive” and “destructive”, further commenting that: “we’re [Muslims] deemed as the ‘evil people’ trying to take over the world”.

There was, therefore, clear frustration and upset amongst participants across all focus groups concerning how Muslims are presented in the media. For example:

“They [the media] don't really portray Muslims as how they are. And that's what's really annoying as well about media. I feel like the media just loves to take any opportunity to slam Muslims and just putting us in that light. And it's just, it's annoying, it's irritating” (Habiba).

“It's prominent how racist the media can be. And stereotypes always put Islam in such a negative light. So, it's like Muslims, Islam, everything is just an easy target for them” (Yara).

“If I think of Muslim representation in the media, and especially Muslim women, and then if we go further with that, Muslim women wear a hijab, I feel like it's always negative. I feel like the only time people bring up Muslims in the news when, like, something negative happens, for example, if it's, a terrorist attack in this case, or it's refugees” (Isaf).

“The media has such a really bad representation. Especially in movies or films, if there's a main Muslim girl, she's always like, has to wear a hijab, she has restrictions at home, she's upset with her religion, and she tries to find freedom” (Maira).

These comments suggest that participants believed that media representations of Muslims are not only negative but are also inaccurate by linking Islam to negative events such as terrorism and refugees<sup>83</sup>, and presenting the religion as oppressive, particularly towards Muslim women and girls. For example: “It's sad, just because of the way a person dresses, you know, they're linked to negative things” (Anisha) and:

“I feel like a lot of people see wearing hijab as a negative thing. And even if she wasn't wearing hijab, maybe we wouldn't even be having this conversation because a hijab is often a tell-tale sign of being Muslim. I feel like a lot of people. They can't see past the hijab” (Isaf).

The above echoes broader research that examines media representations of Muslim women, in which the media often fixates on veiling and links it to distrust, extremism, and a barrier to integration (Macdonald, 2006; Meer et al., 2010; Baker et al., 2013; Al-Hejin, 2015; Zine, 2016). Thus, focus group participants similarly believed that media representations of veiling played a role in the proliferation of SouthLoneStar's tweet.

Moreover, when discussions centred on examples of Islamophobic disinformation participants may have seen, many gravitated towards mainstream media instead of social media. There was, therefore, the general perception that disinformation was not confined to social media but was also present in wider media. For example, Ayaat named British Prime Minister Boris Johnson as a source of Islamophobic disinformation<sup>84</sup>. Many participants discussed recent media narratives that presented the BAME (Black, Asian and minority ethnic)<sup>85</sup> community as being responsible for the spread of the COVID-19 virus.

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<sup>83</sup> The UK right-wing media frequently reports refugees and asylum seeking negatively, and the current UK government has put several legislations in place that make it harder for refugees and asylum seekers to reach the UK, some of which are seen as breaching the United Nations' 1951 Refugee Convention (Knight, 2021).

<sup>84</sup> Johnson wrote a newspaper column calling veiled Muslim women “bank robbers” and “letterboxes” (Parveen, 2019).

<sup>85</sup> Although not all Muslims belong to the BAME community, a large majority do.



Many participants believed Muslims were presented as uneducated, inconsiderate, and indifferent regarding the pandemic, specifically concerning their religious practices:

“In the media, we were portrayed as the reason as to why COVID cases were increasing, which kind of feeds into that we’re uneducated or that we don't really care, that we have our own system, that we're not really following the government.” – Ayaat

“You always have people in the comments that are like, “oh, yeah, most Asian people... they go to pray in the mosque, and you know, it's because of that [the virus spreading], and it's because they're not educated, and they're ignorant”” – Anisha

Interestingly, participants’ perceptions of how the media presented Muslims as indifferent to the COVID-19 pandemic align with SouthLoneStar’s presentation of the woman in the photograph as indifferent about the Westminster Bridge attack. This also links back to how the tweet's presentation of the woman is not new but stems from broader, similar presentations of Muslim women in the mainstream media (Karim, 2006; Werbner, 2007; Ahmed & Matthes, 2017).

There was some discussion about disinformation in the context of social media. To manage disinformation exposure, some participants heavily tailored their social media activity or significantly reduced their social media use and were rarely exposed to such content. Conversely, other participants noted that they were frequently exposed to disinformation. For example, Isaf stated: “I see disinformation towards Muslims, towards immigrants, any marginalised group all the time”. Imani also provided a more detailed explanation of this experience:

“I feel like when you're on social media a lot, there's just so many kinds of little, small instances where it happens that you're so used to it. I feel like I can't recall anything specific because I'm just seeing that kind of thing all the time. I'm trying to think of an example related to Islamophobia, but I just feel like there's so many little, little things that it's not even, like, a spectacle when I do see these incidents, it's like, “oh, not again” kind of thing... It's just everyday things, everyday pictures of people, everyday people doing their

own thing. And any kind of thing that Muslim men, women are doing seems to be just overshadowed by stereotypes and things like that online”.

Some participants also reflected on why disinformation is seemingly so prominent on social media:

“With the rise of social media, is the freedom to speak whatever you want, whether it's factual or not, or they tend to take bits and pieces of maybe things they hear or things from the Quran that they kind of twist and post about and write whatever they want. I think people now use freedom of speech in a different sort of way to attack Muslims and say whatever they want because they don't see them no longer as people. They see them as a sort of tool” (Sonam).

“I feel like no one's born a racist, so everyone's just influenced by what's around them, and obviously, we're in the technological age where everything is fed on social media and by certain people and certain powers. They're the ones that influence everything we read, not just Twitter but when it comes to the media, the *Daily Mail*, stuff like that” (Yara)

Here, Sonam considers disinformation not wholly to consist of fabricated content but often involves “bits and pieces” of information that are “twisted” to produce an overall inaccurate narrative, which is a perspective taken by researchers such as Benkler et al. (2017) and McDougall (2019). Sonam also touched on the idea of disinformation agents using certain marginalised groups or areas of friction in society as “tools”, which is a common method disinformation agencies such as the IRA have been observed undertaking (Krasodonski-Jones et al., 2018; Innes, 2020). Yara's comment also considers the power and influence social media sites can hold over people's perceptions of events. Some participants, therefore, provided deep reflections and awareness of the potential causes and dynamics of disinformation.

In summary, the media, in particular the mainstream news media, was a central topic of discussion in the focus groups. Participants overwhelmingly discussed it negatively, linking long-standing negative media presentations of Muslims to Islamophobic disinformation.

There was also significant conflation between disinformation on social media and disinformation in mainstream media, with participants gravitation more towards the latter when asked to discuss examples of Islamophobic disinformation. This suggests that participants considered disinformation an issue not just present on social media but in the wider media ecosystem.

#### OTHER FINDINGS

This final section covers other points and conversations from participants that are important to consider while not fully fitting into the above themes. It also provides further detail of the unique insight that could be learned about visual disinformation when speaking to media consumers about the phenomenon.

When participants struggled to provide examples of online disinformation specifically related to Islamophobia, the discussion was opened to disinformation regarding all marginalised groups, and not just online. This included a discussion about the media scrutinization of Meghan, Duchess of Sussex, comments made by Prime Minister Boris Johnson about Muslim women, how the BBC had interviewed the first female leader of the British Muslim Council, film presentations of Muslims, and media representations of Shamima Begum<sup>86</sup>. Concerning the latter and the removal of Begum's British citizenship, Amara stated: "Had she [Begum] been white, it wouldn't be the same situation... I think once you're Muslim, it doesn't really matter what you are beyond that". Imani also contributed to this conversation, using it to reflect on her own citizenship as a British-born Muslim woman: "It kind of instils the belief... having been born and brought up in this country, this is essentially my country, too. I am English, I'm British. [There's a] 'none-of-us-are-safe' kind of feeling." This is a further example of participants expressing feelings of otherness, in this instance considering the risk of being stripped of their British citizenship because they are Muslim.

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<sup>86</sup> Begum is a British-born woman who, at the age of 15, left the UK to join the Islamic State in Syria. In 2019 she attempted to return to the UK, but had her British citizenship revoked.

Participants were also asked to discuss whom they think should be responsible and combatting disinformation like SouthLoneStar's tweet. Overall, this centred on the government and social media sites. Those who stated the government argued that this should be done by giving the government more power on social media, enabling them to enact laws to prevent the spread of disinformation. Those who leaned towards social media's responsibility stated that it should be better moderated. There were reflections on how social media sites moderate other divisive topics. Yara used the example of Twitter removing far-right political commentator Katie Hopkins from the site, and Isaf and Maira cited how strongly they had seen social media sites moderating, labelling, and fact-checking content related to COVID-19, questioning why this could not be done for Islamophobic content. However, Anisha, who was part of this focus group, asked the salient question: "Is social media ready to do that for a religion like Islam?". This again links to themes of othering; the belief that, while social media will readily moderate certain content, they would not hold Islamophobic content to the same standards.

A small number of participants cited education as a means of combatting online disinformation, such as organising schemes to teach digital literacy and teaching more about the diversity of Muslim and South Asian cultures. Some proposed that the responsibility lay everywhere and that the issue could not be appropriately addressed without systematic collaborative effort across institutions, including government, education, journalism, and individuals themselves. Concerning the latter, there were arguments for the need to understand that there is a fine line between hate speech and free speech and that people should be more mindful and aware of the consequences of sharing certain content.

#### SUMMARY

**Othering** was identified as a prominent theme. All participants believed the potential effects of Islamophobic disinformation to be negative. Many of these effects are linked to the othering of Muslims, either to influence non-Muslims to perceive Muslims as

dangerous and/or untrustworthy or to influence Muslims to feel paranoid, anxious, and fearful in public. Related, many participants provided personal stories of their experiences of being visibly Muslim in Britain under the theme **Lived Experience**. Several of these stories were deeply visceral, such as experiencing abuse and harassment. Participants linking these experiences to discussions about SouthLoneStar's tweet and broader media representations of Muslims suggested that they believe that how Muslim women are presented online and in the news media has some influence over their negative experiences.

**Photographic veracity** involved instances in which participants reflected on how photographs can be used to manipulate. All participants did not agree with SouthLoneStar's contextualisation of the Westminster Bridge photograph. Many emphasised that a single photograph is inadequate at accurately representing an event, making it difficult to ascertain the reality the photograph depicts. One participant also provided a further example they had seen in the media, in which a single photograph was used to suggest Muslims were not social distancing during Eid prayer. This suggests that many participants had an insightful and critical perspective of how photographs function and can be used to manipulate.

**Cynicism about the media** was a further theme identified, resulting from the distrust and pessimism many participants expressed towards both mainstream media and social media. There were significant observations that media representations often associated Muslims with negative events like terrorism and, in particular, presenting Muslim women as unhappy and stifled by their religion, centring on veiling. The media representation of the hijab was linked to the woman in the Westminster Bridge photograph, with participants seeing her veiling as contributing to the spread of SouthLoneStar's tweet. Participants also did not consider Islamophobic disinformation to be an issue confined to social media and saw sections of the mainstream media as producers of Islamophobic disinformation.

## CHAPTER 9: DISCUSSION

### INTRODUCTION

The aim of this thesis is to understand the role images play in the spread of disinformation on Twitter, specifically in relation to the 2017 Westminster Bridge attack. The research questions centre on examining the methodological contributions of the thesis (RQ4 & 5) and, specifically: asking questions about how the images of this attack were shared on Twitter in the aftermath (RQ1), understanding how the Westminster Bridge photograph became so prominent (RQ2), and how different online users responded to the photograph (RQ3).

Data were collected from three main sources: Twitter, online news articles, and focus groups. Specifically, these were subdivided into the following seven datasets:

1. Twitter: the wider context in which the photograph circulated;
2. Twitter: users who also shared the photograph;
3. Twitter: replies to SouthLoneStar's tweet;
4. Twitter: tweets which shared the URLs of collected online news articles;
5. Online news: March and November 2017 articles about SouthLoneStar's tweet;
6. Online news: comments on the collected online news articles;
7. Focus groups: with British Muslim women.

To capture the complexity of the variety of data collected from these sources, several different analytical methods were used: semiotic analysis was used to analyse the Westminster Bridge photograph itself, content analysis was performed on Twitter and online news datasets, and finally, thematic analysis was performed on a select number of Twitter and online news datasets, and the focus group data.

Analysis of the different datasets identified nine key findings overall:

1. Based on the semiotic analysis, the signs within the photograph worked to separate the Muslim woman, isolating her and making her behaviour seem unusual, which was then used and mobilised by SouthLoneStar to frame the image in a particular way.
2. A range of responses was identified on Twitter in the aftermath of the attack, including expressions of solidarity and mourning, information seeking and sharing, and Islamophobia.
3. Twitter users who shared the Westminster Bridge photograph as disinformation generally manipulated the photograph's context, not its content.
4. The Twitter replies to SouthLoneStar's tweet were intense and negative.
5. The UK mainstream news media significantly covered SouthLoneStar's tweet in March, and the majority of article commenters accepted the news media's narrative.
6. In November, when the true identity behind the account was revealed, UK news reportage was less compared to March in the immediate aftermath of the attack, and many commenters appeared to reject the corrective information regarding SouthLoneStar's origin.
7. Two major themes were identified in the analysis of the Twitter data: **Othering** and **Photographic veracity**.
8. Three major themes were identified in the analysis of the online news data: **Othering, Photographic veracity, and Cynicism about the media**.
9. Four major themes were identified in the focus group data: **Othering, Photographic veracity, Cynicism about the media, and Lived experience**.

This chapter begins by explaining each of the nine key findings identified in more detail. These key findings are then unpacked and interpreted in more depth to provide an account of the journey of the Westminster Bridge photograph. This also includes identifying how findings work to address the research questions and recognize where findings support existing research and where they provide new insights and contribute to knowledge gaps. The chapter is then rounded off with a conclusion.

## KEY FINDINGS

This first section systematically lists the nine key findings identified in the analysis. This includes naming the finding, pinpointing which data the finding emerged from and the method(s) of analysis used. The findings are briefly explained, and how they do or do not connect to the existing literature is identified, followed by highlighting the research question(s) each key finding addresses. The findings in this section relate specifically to what has been identified in the data analysis, and so these alone do not work towards addressing all the research questions, specifically RQ5 (understanding the overall contribution of this thesis to visual disinformation research). This research question is addressed later in this chapter, where findings are unpacked in more detail.

**Key finding 1:** The signs within the photograph work to separate the Muslim woman, isolating her and making her behaviour seem unusual.

**Data:** The Westminster Bridge photograph

**Method:** Semiotic analysis

There is a clear division and disconnect in the Westminster Bridge photograph between the woman and the group of people. In particular, the woman's position, movement, actions, and appearance (specifically her race and attire) put her at odds with the others in the photograph. This makes it easy to separate and isolate her as other and is also reflective of broader research examining media stereotyping of veiled Muslim women (for example, Werbner (2007) and Baker et al. (2013)), which often fixates on veiling amongst Muslim women as a representation of exclusion, repression, and terrorism. When analysing the photograph in context, its across social and mainstream media increasingly drew tension towards and invited debate about the woman's thoughts and actions. This progressively changed the narrative and context of the photograph from a neutral press photograph to a fervid topic of debate, making it more acceptable to apply one's personal opinions and perspectives in terms of what the photograph showed and represented. This analysis addresses RQ2 (how the Westminster Bridge photograph became so prominent) as it shows how the isolation of the Muslim woman within the photograph made it easy to suggest, as SouthLoneStar did, that she was purposefully indifferent about the attack



because of her Muslim identity. This also addresses the overall research aim of providing an example of how an image can be used to spread disinformation.

**Key finding 2:** A range of responses were identified in the aftermath of the attack, including expressions of solidarity and mourning, information seeking and sharing, and Islamophobia.

**Data:** Twitter data (the wider context in which the Westminster Bridge photograph circulated, the Westminster Bridge attack).

**Method:** Textual and visual content analysis

Analysis suggests that Twitter response to the Westminster Bridge attack largely centred on expressions of support and solidarity, mourning, and information seeking and sharing. Users who engaged in this behaviour were mostly members of the public (accounts appearing to be operated by a private citizen in their personal capacity), certain groups and organisations (for example, accounts operated on behalf of NGOs and religious societies), and news organisations. There was also a small amount of Islamophobic expression and hostility towards Muslims, particularly connecting Islam with terrorism and presenting Islam as dangerous and invasive. Those that engaged in this behaviour appeared to identify as Donald Trump supporters. This supports findings from wider research examining responses to terrorist attacks on social media, which collectively suggests that Twitter has become a key online space to discuss a terrorist attack, whether this is to mourn, learn about the attack, or respond with hostility directed at the community to which the perpetrator purportedly belongs (for example, Magby et al. (2015) and Fischer-Preßler et al. (2019)). This analysis, therefore, addresses RQ1, examining the kinds of images shared in the aftermath of the attack and by whom.

**Key finding 3:** Twitter users who shared the Westminster Bridge photograph as disinformation generally manipulated the photograph's context, not its content.

**Data:** Twitter data (other Twitter users who shared the Westminster Bridge photograph)

**Method:** Textual and visual content analysis

Rather than altering the photograph to spread Islamophobic disinformation, most left the photograph unaltered or only altered it in a way that did not modify the photograph's content, for example, by adding a textual caption. Instead, like SouthLoneStar, many of the analysed tweets that used the photograph to spread Islamophobic disinformation did so by altering the photograph's context through the tweet's text. This supports and provides evidence for the growing argument from researchers such as Fallis (2015), Tucker et al. (2018), and Brennen et al. (2020) that unaltered images with manipulated contexts are pervasive and easy to produce and thus require more examination. This use of the photograph was also primarily done by users who appeared to locate themselves in the US and presented themselves as right-wing and/or supporters of Donald Trump. While this is not unexpected, as Islamophobia was a pillar of Trump's tenure as US President, it shows that this subset of users shared the photograph similarly to SouthLoneStar. This analysis contributes to answering RQ2 and RQ3, as it speaks to the prominence in which the photograph spread and how certain users responded to it.

**Key finding 4:** The Twitter replies to SouthLoneStar's tweet were intense and negative.

**Data:** Twitter data (replies to SouthLoneStar's tweet)

**Method:** Descriptive statistics and textual and visual content analysis

Analysis suggests that user response to SouthLoneStar was at its highest in March 2017. Specifically, the account received thousands of mentions and replies on the evening of the Westminster Bridge tweet on 22<sup>nd</sup> March and the following day, 23<sup>rd</sup> March. The replies sampled and analysed indicate that most worked to undermine the narrative SouthLoneStar applied to the photograph. In many cases, this involved sharing a photograph of a man seeming to also walk past an injured person. GIFs were also used to react to the tweet negatively, generally to insult SouthLoneStar. This shows that the tweet garnered attention and vitriol as it moved across Twitter, which would have drawn more attention to the tweet to the point where the mainstream media picked it up. This reflects the snowballing effect that can happen to Twitter content when it receives attention and

interaction (Brun & Moe, 2014; Halavais, 2014). This finding, therefore, contributes towards addressing RQ2 (how the Westminster Bridge photograph became so prominent) and RQ3 (how Twitter users responded to the Westminster Bridge photograph).

**Key finding 5:** The UK mainstream news media reported heavily on SouthLoneStar's tweet in March 2017, and the majority of article commenters accepted the news media's narrative.

**Data:** Online news data (articles about SouthLoneStar's tweet and comments on news articles about SouthLoneStar's tweet (from March)).

**Method:** Descriptive statistics and content analysis

Many UK mainstream news sources published multiple articles about SouthLoneStar's tweet in March 2017, including the *Daily Mail*, *Daily Mirror*, and *Metro*. It can therefore be argued that this is an example of media amplification based on the parameters set by broader research that examines the phenomenon (for example, Vasterman (2005; 2018) and Hardy (2018)). This is a key step in the journey of the Westminster Bridge photograph becoming a prominent news image, addressing RQ2. The news media unanimously worked to undermine the narrative SouthLoneStar applied to the photograph and acted in defence of the woman, mainly by providing further evidence that contradicted SouthLoneStar. Moreover, readers who posted comments on articles mostly appeared to accept the news media stories and reject SouthLoneStar's narrative. At the same time, the intense news reporting also potentially amplified the tweet's negative aspects. As researchers such as Walter et al. (2020) highlight, it can be difficult to ascertain the effectiveness of news media fact-checking and the consequences of amplifying disinformation to report on it. This addresses RQ3 (how readers who commented on UK online news articles responded to the Westminster Bridge tweet).

**Key finding 6:** In November, when the true identity behind the account was revealed, UK news reportage was less compared to March in the immediate aftermath of the attack, and

many commenters appeared to reject the corrective information regarding SouthLoneStar's origin.

**Data:** Online news data (news articles about SouthLoneStar's tweet and comments on news articles about SouthLoneStar's tweet (from November)).

**Method:** Descriptive statistics and content analysis

The November online news coverage of SouthLoneStar's IRA origins was far smaller compared to March and was, therefore, more akin to a typical news cycle. It is consequently possible that the audience size of those that received this new information was smaller than the March audience when the photograph first became a news story. Moreover, just over half of the article comments analysed showed readers rejecting the corrective information. This primarily centred on the belief that the photograph was 'real' and therefore could not have been used to intentionally deceive, as well as asserting that Russia could not have been involved. This suggests that more needs to be understood regarding the consequences of how the news media reports on and fact-checks online disinformation. It also further supports researchers such as Walter et al. (2020) and Robertson et al. (2020, who argue that determining the effectiveness and consequences of fact-checking disinformation can be difficult. This finding further addresses RQ3 (how readers who commented on UK online news articles responded to the Westminster Bridge tweet).

**Key finding 7:** Two major themes were identified in the analysis of the Twitter data: **Othering and Photographic veracity**<sup>87</sup>

**Data:** Twitter data

**Method:** Thematic analysis

**Othering** was the presentation of the woman in the photograph as dangerous and/or untrustworthy. Her visibility as a Muslim woman was central to this theme, linked to the

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<sup>87</sup> In this section, the themes are divided into the three different datasets in which they were each identified: Twitter data, online news data, and focus group data. This is to establish which themes were present in each dataset, however because the themes are also so similar and overlap in many ways, they are discussed together in the following Interpretation section of this chapter.

common association of Islam with terrorism, the belief that Muslims are societally incompatible, the use of divisive language to isolate the woman, and the discussion of her religious attire. At the same time, there were also examples of people challenging these presentations. This finding is in line with leading examinations of media representations of Muslims, in which othering is the primary method of presenting Muslims as a marginalised social group, deviant and non-normative (Mountz, 2009). Much research in this area centres on the role of the veil (Navarro, 2010; Baker et al., 2013; Al-Hejin, 2015). Data examined for this thesis shows Twitter users similarly fixating on the woman's hijab. This thematic finding addresses RQ2 (how the photograph became prominent) as the photograph's use as disinformation was underpinned and supported by existing Islamophobic media narratives, which would have been familiar to many of its audience. It also addresses RQ3 (how Twitter users responded to the photograph) as several Twitter users responded to the photograph similarly to SouthLoneStar, by spreading it as disinformation.

**Photographic veracity** centred on the role of the common association of photographs with evidence and truth value. This generally involved Twitter users using a version of the idiom "a picture is worth a thousand words" to defend their interpretation of the photograph. This emphasised the 'truth' of their often Islamophobic contextualisation was supported by the photograph's perceived veracity. The phrase was also used ambiguously without further explanation, implying that the photograph said *something* but not explaining what this was. Conversely, other users problematise this assumption by asserting that photographs have limited and subjective contexts. These tweets reflect arguments from researchers such as Barthes (1978) and Mitchell (1994). They extensively discuss the relationship between a photograph and its external textual explanations and how this relationship is not homogenous but often results in the text inheriting the assumed objectivity of the photograph, meaning the text can be used to manipulate what the photograph shows. This interpretation from users of what the photograph showed was a significant subject of debate on Twitter and likely contributed to the photograph becoming so prominent (RQ2). This also speaks to the overall role of images in the spread of

disinformation; in the Westminster Bridge photograph example, the photograph functioned as evidence for SouthLoneStar's manipulated claim.

**Key finding 8:** Three major themes were identified in the analysis of the online news data: **Othering, Photographic veracity, and Cynicism about the media.**

**Data:** Online news data

**Method:** Thematic analysis

**Othering** was also identified in the online news data. This was similar and reflective of the analysis of the Twitter data, in which some article commenters, specifically comments on articles from March 2017, repeated common media tropes about Islam, such as associating the religion with terrorism, asserting that the woman was societally incompatible, using divisive rhetoric, and emphasising the woman's religious attire. As with the Twitter data, this was reflective of existing research examining media representation of Muslims (for example, Al-Hejin (2015)). There were also examples of other commenters working to challenge these attempts to other the woman. Thus, while the content analysis suggested that most article commenters in March accepted to news media's undermining of SouthLoneStar's tweet, others appeared to receive and accept SouthLoneStar's original contextualisation by echoing Islamophobic stereotypes. This theme further scrutinises the role and consequences of the news media fact-checking online disinformation, an issue highlighted by researchers such as Tsfati et al. (2020). It also addresses RQ2 (the news media's role in the photograph's journey) and RQ3 (how commenters on news articles responded to the photograph).

**Photographic veracity** was another major theme, which again functioned similarly to the Twitter data. As commenters seemed largely receptive to the news media's rebuttal of SouthLoneStar's tweet in March 2017, a significant portion of commenters emphasised the subjective nature of the photograph, highlighting that it was only a single image and therefore was not particularly illustrative. There were, therefore, efforts across both Twitter and online news to undermine SouthLoneStar's use of the photograph. Yet, many

commenters on November 2017 news article, when SouthLoneStar's IRA connection was revealed, conversely rejected the news media's new information and instead insisted that SouthLoneStar's interpretation was accurate. This generally centred on commenters asserting that "the photograph speaks for itself", meaning that the photograph's context did not matter and its content was more important because the photograph was 'real'. It, therefore, could not have been used deceptively. It is not within the remit of the thesis to determine why so many commenters responded to the November news in such a way. However, it is further reflective of existing discussions about the effectiveness of the news media fact-checking disinformation (for example, Phillips (2018)). Moreover, it further highlights how entrenched tropes about photographs and their perceived objectivity are, as the use of a genuine photograph seemed to motivate some commenters to reject the November information. This finding also contributes to understanding the role of the news media in the photograph's journey (RQ2) and how commenters on news articles responded to the photograph (RQ3).

**Cynicism about the media** was a further theme identified in the online news data. This specifically relates to the role of the news media in the photograph's journey, with many commenters expressing distrust or scepticism towards media coverage. In March 2017, several commenters contended that SouthLoneStar's tweet did not constitute news and scolded the media for reporting on it and giving it unnecessary attention. This was also identified in the coverage of the November news, in conjunction with outright rejections of the corrective information. This finding again questions the effects of the media reporting on disinformation, as providing the true story of SouthLoneStar in November appeared not to cancel out the influence of SouthLoneStar's presentation of the photograph. Thorson (2016) and Walter et al. (2020) have also observed this trend. This contributes to understanding the news media's role in how the photograph evolved (RQ2) and article commenters' responses to the photograph (RQ3)

**Key finding 9:** Four major themes were identified in the focus group data: **Othering**, **Photographic veracity**, **Cynicism about the media**, and **Lived experience**.

**Data:** Focus group data

**Method:** Thematic analysis

**Othering** was a theme also identified in the focus groups, specifically relating to the perspectives and experiences of the focus group participants. In discussing how the photograph functioned as disinformation, many conversations centred on the woman being veiled and how this would have fuelled Islamophobic narratives. This is related to previous findings, such as Macdonald (2006) and Werbner (2007), who highlight how veiling has been used in the media to present Muslim women as untrustworthy and dangerous. Many participants also believed that tweets like SouthLoneStar's resulted in negative consequences that further exacerbated the othering of Muslims in British society. There was a belief that this affected both Muslims and non-Muslims. It was contended that such presentations would result in Muslims experiencing discomfort, anxiety, paranoid, and harm when out in public and would introduce and justify Islamophobic beliefs for non-Muslims, which would result in non-Muslims viewing Muslims negatively and treating them differently, thus othering them. Therefore, identifying this theme in the focus groups worked to strengthen and nuance examples of othering identified in the Twitter and online news data. This, therefore, addressed RQ4, which questions how discussions with Muslim women could contribute to the case study. It enhanced the thematic analysis of the other datasets and allowed for a deeper and more nuanced exploration of othering within the case of the Westminster Bridge photograph.

**Photographic Veracity** was also identified in the focus group data. None of the focus group participants supported SouthLoneStar's interpretation of the photograph. There was an emphasis on SouthLoneStar's claim hinging on a single photograph, which reflected how some Twitter users and article commenters argued it was difficult to understand what the photograph showed. Discussions about the photograph with participants were particularly insightful and reflective, emphasising the participants as active, thoughtful media consumers who believed the photograph itself told little about what was depicted. This is reflective of arguments such as Berger (1978), who asserted that photographs "do not preserve meaning... do not narrate" (48). Therefore, findings from the focus group data



added a further layer to the theme of photographic veracity; speaking directly to media consumers about visual disinformation allows much deeper discussions about photographic representation and the function of photographs. This highlights a further means by which the focus groups contributed to the case study (RQ4).

**Cynicism about the Media.** Focus group participants also expressed cynicism towards the media; however, this also involved broader discussions about the media's ability to accurately and respectfully represent Islam. Many participants talked about inaccurate and harmful media presentations of veiling amongst Muslim women. This further emphasises the role of the veil in how the photograph functioned as visual disinformation. Participants were particularly dismissive of right-wing news sources like the *Daily Mail*, accusing such sources of also spreading Islamophobic disinformation. There was evident frustration at the media, with the overwhelming belief that how the media has historically presented Muslims contributed to the spread of SouthLoneStar's tweet. There was thus conflation between Islamophobic disinformation on social media and perceived Islamophobic disinformation in the mainstream media, seen by many participants as one and the same. At the same time, however, there was discussion about the role of social media, with several participants noting they regularly encounter Islamophobic disinformation online. All in all, this indicated that participants considered disinformation not just an issue on social media but one within the wider media ecosystem. Again, the role of the mainstream media in disinformation is brought into question, further emphasising the hybridity of social and mainstream media (Waldherr (2018); Roese (2018)). Moreover, participants believed that the mainstream media played a significant role in the photograph's journey, contributing to RQ2.

**Lived Experience** was a further theme that emerged explicitly from the focus groups. Many participants shared distressing stories of their experiences of being visibly Muslim in the UK. These stories are linked to feelings of alienation, fear, and the perception that they may be singled out and thus face harassment and harm. This, therefore, links to the theme of **Othering**. However, participants' willingness to share these often-visceral experiences was

considered essential to highlight. Wider research examining media representations of Muslims also often considers how Muslims respond to and manage such representations. For example, working to fight against stereotyping associated with veiling (Nagra, 2011), changing one's behaviour to appear 'normal' (Harris & Karimshah, 2019), and associating media representations with experiencing harassment (Chapman, 2016). Echoes of these were seen across the focus groups; therefore, this theme supports and builds on existing research by considering representations of Muslims in online disinformation. **Lived Experience** worked towards addressing RQ4 (how the focus groups contributed to the case study), providing insights into the potential cause-and-effect of targeted visual disinformation.

## INTERPRETATION OF KEY FINDINGS

The key findings, when brought together, outline the journey of the Westminster Bridge photograph. In the space of nine months, the photograph evolved from a relatively unseen and inconsequential press photograph, to a visual vehicle to spread Islamophobic disinformation, to a news story in and of itself, and finally as evidence of Russia engaging in foreign information warfare targeted at the UK. In this section, these key findings are brought together in discussion to succinctly outline the extent to which the research questions were answered, as well as underlining findings that align with existing research and/or support existing arguments. Findings that produce new insights are also highlighted.

## SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS

Firstly, examining the photograph in isolation contributed to understandings how the Westminster Bridge photograph became so prominent (RQ2). Aspects of the photograph meant that it lent itself to function as an effective tool for spreading Islamophobic disinformation. The analysis of literature concerning how photographs function and the mythologisation of the photograph contributed to understanding this in combination with the semiotic analysis of the photograph itself. Photographs can be understood as documents or indexes of reality because of the capacity of cameras to record appearances in a way that is directly and causally linked to the real, in contrast to other forms of pictorial

depiction, such as drawings. Consequently, photographs can be understood to have a greater degree of veracity than many other visual communication methods (Moran, 2005; Brennen, 2017; Good & Lowe, 2017).

The centuries of using photographs as methods of evidencing and as vehicles for truth claims means audiences have a heightened perception of their objectivity and veracity. However, this assumption is problematic as photographs are limited by the choices made by the photographer (Berger, 1968; Sontag, 1990; Shore, 1998). Moreover, if one does not have a personal connection to or contextual knowledge about the photograph, its context is unknown, so it can be difficult to understand what a photograph shows without external textual information, like captions (Berger, 1978; Mitchell, 1994). Audiences are therefore accustomed to seeing photographs accompanied by external information, which works to explain what the photograph shows. However, this external information has been constructed by someone (for example, the author or editor of the news article) yet is seen to represent the event depicted truthfully (Hall, 1981; Tagg, 1988; Gürsel, 2016). The construction of these captions is, therefore, not neutral. As detailed in the conceptual framework chapter, Barthes (1978) explains the relationship between the photograph and its external information. The relationship is not homogenous, as the external information works as a parasite to the photograph by inheriting and unseating the photograph's assumed objectivity. The verbal information instead illustrates the photograph.

Applying the above assessment to the Westminster Bridge photograph, without knowing its context, it is not easy to ascertain what is shown aside from what is visibly present in the photograph, therefore requiring external information to understand better. This ambiguity also opens the photograph to audiences interpreting the image using their own opinions, emotions, and experiences to understand what is shown and what it means. Thus, as Berger (1978) observed in his consideration of what photographs without contextualisation are capable of showing, the Westminster Bridge photograph "has nothing to do with us, its readers, or with the original meaning of the event" (49). This consequently means that external information does the heavy lifting regarding what the

photograph is taken to mean. Therefore, external information is essential for anyone attempting to understand the photograph and holds significant status in exemplifying the photographic meaning. Moreover, and reflective of Barthes' (1978) considerations, external contextualisation would therefore be considered by many to be accurately reflective of the Westminster Bridge photograph's content. This includes SouthLoneStar's framing of the photograph.



The photograph (shown above for reference) also contains several signifiers that can be seen as supporting SouthLoneStar's presentation of the woman as uncaring and indifferent about the attack. The photograph has a candid quality as no one seems aware they are being photographed, which suggests a level of authenticity. The woman is also visibly disconnected from the other subjects in the photograph by her position, action, and appearance. The people in the background encircle the injured person, concentrating on the person on the ground. One person appears to be blowing their nose, suggesting there are upset, and the person kneeling and speaking on their phone suggests they are calling for help, emphasising the perceived emergency of the situation. Conversely, the Muslim woman is taking a full step away from the scene behind her. Her attention appears to be on her phone, which can be connected to the act of phubbing (a portmanteau of phone and snubbing, used to describe someone who prioritises using their mobile phone over

engaging with company), generally seen as ignorant, inattentive, and impolite (Ducharme, 2018; Abeelee et al., 2016; Chotpitayasunondh & Douglas, 2018; Ergün et al., 2020).

Moreover, the woman is Black and veiled, which has deeply entrenched societal signification. Veiling amongst Muslim women in dominant media discourses around Islam has come to represent extremism, distrust, and a barrier to progression and integration, all of which are underpinned by the concept of the 'societal other' (Karim, 2006; Werbner, 2007, Meer et al., 2010; Baker et al., 2013; Al-Hejin, 2015; Zine, 2016). Conversely, every group member in the background appears to be white. Thus, the woman is not only physically othered from the group by her actions but also othered based on her appearance. All in all, this makes the Westminster Bridge photograph a fertile visual tool for spreading Islamophobic disinformation because the ingredients are there to connect the photograph to dominant media discourses about Islam. While it is not possible to fully ascertain from the photograph what is happening in the image, there are enough signifiers in the image to allow for some level of interpretation, and this could mobilise an audience into seeing the Muslim woman as isolated from her surroundings. In clarifying that the photograph shows the aftermath of the Westminster Bridge terrorist attack, SouthLoneStar combines the interpretation with this knowledge, thus producing an example of visual disinformation in which the photograph remains unaltered. Yet, its context has been manipulated to great effect. This links back to researchers such as Benkler et al. (2017) and McDougall (2019), who argue that disinformation is often constructed using an authentic piece of information that has been manipulated.

The above findings take into consideration how press photographs function and apply this to the semiotic analysis of the Westminster Bridge photograph. The result suggests that the photograph was ready to be used to spread an Islamophobic narrative. These findings also contribute to explaining why the Westminster Bridge photograph became so prominent (RQ2) as the features of the photograph, in combination with the often-assumed objectivity of press photographs, means it was open to opportune manipulation,

primed for deployment as Islamophobic disinformation for anyone with the motivations to do so<sup>88</sup>.

## CONTENT ANALYSIS

The contexts in which the photograph was deployed as disinformation was also important to understand. There has been extensive research into how people use social media to respond to terrorist attacks, with ample evidence that Twitter is often the go-to online space to respond communally to such an event. The content analysis of the 100 most retweeted tweets with images that responded to the Westminster Bridge attack supports existing research. There were examples of solidarity, mourning, support, information seeking and sharing, and intolerance and hostility towards Muslims. This is reflective of broader research such as Magby et al. (2015), Bunker et al. (2017), Mirbabaie et al. (2018), and Fischer-Preßler et al. (2019). Therefore, the findings of this thesis build on this existing research and support the notion that there is an observable trend in how Twitter users respond to terrorist attacks, which works towards addressing RQ2.

A smaller cohort of research examining online responses to UK terrorist attacks, specifically Innes et al. (2019) and Innes (2020), also note that the aftermath of such events can attract false information. These two studies examined four UK terrorist attacks in 2017, which included the Westminster Bridge attack and specifically named SouthLoneStar as a spreader of false information. This also aligns with some research examining online IRA activity. While a large portion of this research has approached the IRA from an American context, a small number have looked at the UK, for example, Narayanan et al. (2017), Llewellyn et al. (2018), and Krasodonski-Jones et al. (2018), although none specifically

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<sup>88</sup> It is also important to stress, however, that this priming did not mean that the photograph was destined to be used in this way. The purely descriptive and more neutral caption provided by the photographer on the photo agency website ("Sequence frame showing a woman visibly distressed passing the scene of the terrorist incident on Westminster Bridge, London" (Rex Features, 2017)) makes it clear that the photographer did not intend this photograph or any of the photographs in the sequence frame to be used as disinformation. Compared to the other photographs within the sequence frame however, this photograph in particular was more open to Islamophobic framing, in particular because it was the only one where the woman appeared to be looking down at her phone, her facial expression was obscured, and she was taking a clear step forward, away from the scene behind her.

focussed on images. In alignment with Innes (2020), SouthLoneStar was identified as a significant contributor in some of these studies. Therefore, the findings of the thesis support both research examining online response to terrorism in the UK and IRA activity targeted at the UK in further highlighting that the Westminster Bridge attack was used to spread false information, which largely centred on Islamophobic stereotypes. The thesis also provides a more academic understanding of how the SouthLoneStar account functioned during the Westminster Bridge attack. These findings, therefore, further contribute to addressing RQ2 in understanding how the photograph became prominent.

Furthermore, the content analysis of the images shared in the aftermath of the Westminster Bridge attack showed that SouthLoneStar was not the only right-wing, Trump-supporting American account to share the Westminster Bridge photograph as disinformation. These accounts generally did this in a similar way to SouthLoneStar. The analysis of other users' use of the photograph shows that little effort was made to alter the image. Instead, the way the photograph lends itself to a particular framing, combined with the fact that it was taken in the aftermath of a terrorist attack (perpetrated by a Muslim), was used to fuel the Islamophobic presentation of the photograph. This was done by applying a manipulated and unsubstantiated context to the photograph through textual captions<sup>89</sup>. This finding is significant when considering the role of images in disinformation in the context of the Westminster Bridge attack. As reiterated throughout the thesis, mis-/disinformation research often overlooks the role of images, despite images being a central form of communication on many social media platforms. Moreover, research that does take into consideration images generally centres on the falsification or manipulation of photographs' contents, such as Gupta et al. (2013), Zubiaga & Ji. (2013), Phillips. (2014), and Shen et al. (2021). This thesis supports and supplies evidence for the growing argument that recontextualised photographs are one of the most common and pervasive means of using images to spread disinformation (Fallis, 2015; Tandoc et al., 2018; Paris & Donovan,

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<sup>89</sup> As a reminder, 42% of users who shared the photograph as disinformation did not alter it in any way. 22% added a textual caption to the photograph (examples in Figure 55), thus not altering the content of the original photograph. 11% shared a cropped version of the photograph, thus altering the photograph minimally and not in a meaningful way. Therefore, 75% of the sampled and analysed uses of the photograph made no or minimal changes to the photograph, instead manipulating its context.

2019, Fazio, 2020; Garimella & Eckles, 2020; Dan et al., 2021). This contributes to addressing the overall research aim of understanding the role of images in disinformation concerning the case study of the thesis. In the context of the Westminster Bridge attack, the role of this specific photograph was to function as the visual truth to support a manipulated Islamophobic claim. As outlined previously, photographs have an elevated status of evidence and truth value, often inherited by a photograph's caption. It is this status that enhances the assumed authenticity of the caption, the caption being viewed as representative of the photograph. This aligns with arguments from researchers such as Fazio (2020), Brennen et al. (2020), and Dan et al. (2021) and assertions that unaltered photographs can be deeply powerful at spreading manipulated narratives. This finding also addresses RQ3: some Twitter users responded to the Westminster Bridge photograph by echoing SouthLoneStar's use. Moreover, how the photograph was turned into disinformation was pervasive and compelling, which likely contributed to the photograph becoming as prominent as it did (RQ2).



**FIGURE 55: EXAMPLES OF USERS MANIPULATING THE PHOTOGRAPH'S CONTEXT TO SPREAD IT IS ISLAMOPHOBIC DISINFORMATION.**

Once the Westminster Bridge photograph was established as visual disinformation, it was then the turn of its Twitter audience to process and respond. Overall, analysis suggests the response was rapid, intense, and negative. An overview of mentions of the SouthLoneStar account in 2017 suggests that it was on the 22<sup>nd</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup> of March 2017, the day of and



day following the tweet, when the account received the most mentions. Therefore, the response to this particular tweet was abnormally high in terms of levels of interactivity with the account. Moreover, many of the replies analysed showed a negative, and in some cases vitriolic, reaction to the tweet. The most common response was to share another picture from the attack of a white man seeming to do what SouthLoneStar accused the woman of, being indifferent about the attack and uncaring of an injured person (Figure 56). This was used to highlight the hypocrisy of SouthLoneStar and argue that he was only targeting the woman because she was Muslim and/or Black. Other responses were emotive through the use of GIFs (a central component of visual communication on social media (Miltner & Highfield (2017)) to express enragement and annoyance at SouthLoneStar's captioning of the photograph. Only a small number of the replies analysed echoed SouthLoneStar's narrative. Thus, unlike those who shared a version of the Westminster Bridge photograph, responses to SouthLoneStar's tweet were notably resistant to it.



**FIGURE 56: THE PHOTOGRAPH USED IN COMPARISON WITH THE WESTMINSTER BRIDGE PHOTOGRAPH**

The main aim of IRA disinformation campaigns is to fearmonger, create arguments, and cultivate division and hostility, as evidenced by research such as Bastos & Farkas (2019), Dawson & Innes (2019), and Freelon & Lokot (2020). Findings regarding responses to SouthLoneStar's tweet support this and suggest this aim was achieved. The account received an unusually high number of interactions, and many of those interactions centred on opposing SouthLoneStar's narrative and expressing anger at the user. This continued to make the photograph's content and meaning a subject of debate, further fostering

hostility, tension, and division. There is ample research showing the IRA undertook similar campaigns targeted at America, centring on divisive topics like right-wing populism and President Trump (Howard et al., 2018b; Miller, 2019; Linvill & Warren, 2020), #BlackLivesMatter (Stewart et al., 2018), LGBTQ+ (Howard et al., 2018a), and immigration and Islam (Select Committee on Intelligence United States Senate, 2019; Freelon & Lokot, 2020). The findings from this thesis show that such campaigns extended beyond America, in line with findings from Krasodonski-Jones et al. (2018) and Innes (2020) and contributing to the notable knowledge gap of IRA campaigns targeted at the UK. This examination of how Twitter users responded to SouthLoneStar's tweet further answers RQ2 & 3. The fervent response to SouthLoneStar's tweet is the next step in the photograph's journey, the fierce attention the tweet garnered contributing to it becoming such a prominent image. These findings also show that some Twitter users did not respond positively to SouthLoneStar's tweet or echoed its sentiment, as was found by analysing those who also shared a version of the photograph. Therefore, there was both endorsement of and resistance to SouthLoneStar's tweet.

The heavy Twitter response to SouthLoneStar's tweet captured the attention of the UK mainstream news media, with many publishing multiple articles about the tweet in the days that followed. When comparing this media coverage with the parameters outlined in the broader literature of what can constitute media amplification, the reportage of SouthLoneStar's tweet in March 2017 by the UK news media constituted media amplification. As a quick summary, the parameters of media amplification are considered to be<sup>90</sup>:

- An event that received more media attention than other similar events typically would.
- Imitation across the media in which outlets emulate the reportage of other sources and hunt for newer information about the event, regardless of whether such information would typically meet the news threshold.

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<sup>90</sup> Using the work of Vasterman, (2005, 2018), Wien & Elmelund-Præstekær (2009), Nanabhay & Farmanfarmaian (2011), Zhang et al. (2017), van Atteveldt et al. (2018), Hardy (2018), and Phillips (2018).

- The overall lowering of the news threshold, in which anything that relates to the event is considered to be news.
- News attention is not linked to event frequency.
- The news covers the societal response to the news event, such as reporting on people experiencing similar events or affected parties.
- Media interest reaches a saturation peak, and then interest falls as quickly as it rose.

The analysis of how SouthLoneStar's tweet was reported on and developed in the UK news media following the Westminster Bridge attack provides enough evidence to suggest that this was an example of media amplification. The tweet received substantial media attention, peaking at 15 articles published on 24<sup>th</sup> March, and intense coverage of a single tweet is arguably abnormal. The range of media sources reporting on the tweet was also significant, suggesting imitation across the news media. There were also efforts to uncover new information, specifically comments from the photographer and the woman herself. This suggests a hunt for new information and a lowering of the news threshold, as these pieces of information constituted news within the context of amplifying the news story. News attention also was not linked to event frequency, as the tweet had already circulated on Twitter and interactions with the account had already fallen away by the time the news attention peaked on 24<sup>th</sup> March. In reporting on the photographer's and the women's comments, the media also incorporated affected parties into the reportage. Finally, the story reached a saturation point on the afternoon of 24<sup>th</sup> March. Only four articles about the story were published on 25<sup>th</sup> March, with no following articles until the November revelation of IRA involvement. This suggests a steep climb and fall in interest. Thus, the pattern of how the media reported on SouthLoneStar's tweet aligns with many of the attributes of media amplification, making the reportage an example of such an event.

The above contributes to answering RQ2 concerning how the photograph became so prominent. This specific contribution is significant because the news media itself contributed to the final stage of the Westminster Bridge photograph becoming prominent by elevating it to news status, cementing it in news history. In reviewing how RQ2 has been

answered, with multiple findings coming together to construct an answer for this question, the photograph becoming a prominent news image was not due to one aspect or single event but a build-up as the photograph travelled across the media ecosystem and gained traction and attention. In this sense, the Westminster Bridge photograph went on a transformative journey, built upon debate and division, across the media until it became news in and of itself. It is also important to mention that the article comments analysed suggest that commenters generally accepted the news media's undermining of SouthLoneStar's captioning. This should be taken into consideration when contrasted with how commenters responded to the November news articles.

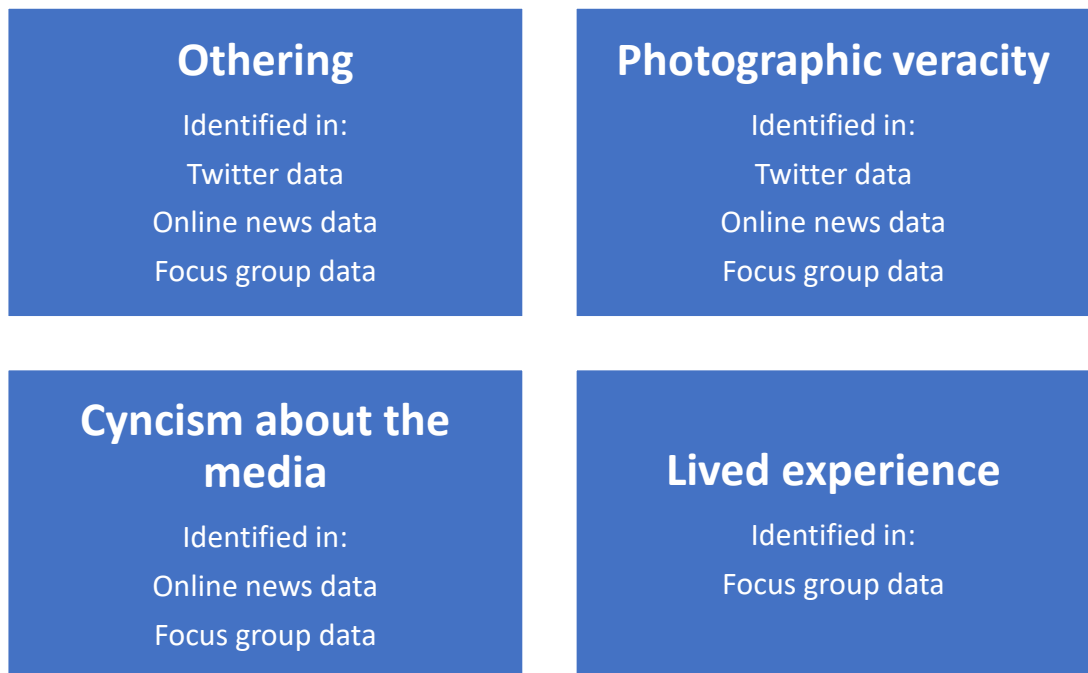
The analysis of the November media coverage of SouthLoneStar being IRA-operated suggests a more typical news cycle that does not constitute media amplification. Unlike the March coverage, there was not, for example, a seeking out new information or a significant peak in article publication. Instead, many news sources reported on the initial story that SouthLoneStar was IRA-operated, with only a handful of sources reporting on or seeking out further information, such as a wider examination of the SouthLoneStar account. Therefore, it can be concluded that a portion of audiences exposed to the initial story in March would not have encountered the corrective November information. Moreover, unlike comments on March articles, November commenters seemed much more resistant to the information reported by the news media. Overall, comments were significantly more negative, with just over half appearing to disbelieve that SouthLoneStar had IRA connections and that the account's sharing of the Westminster Bridge photograph was an example of foreign information warfare. Disbelief of this nature primarily centred on the photograph, specifically that, because it was genuine, it could not have been used for manipulation. This links back to the longstanding association of photographs with evidence and truth value, as described by photograph theories such as Berger (1968; 1978a; 1978b) and Barthes (1978).

While there is currently limited research examining the consequences of the news media reporting on online disinformation, what does exist warns that journalists should consider

the consequences (Phillips, 2018; Tsfati et al., 2020) because it is currently unclear whether media fact-checking is effective. This is because how corrective content is presented (Garrett et al., 2013; Robertson et al., 2020; Nieminen & Rapeli, 2019) along with corrective information not automatically cancelling out disinformation for some audiences (Thorson, 2016; Walter et al., 2020; Tsfati et al., 2020), means it is difficult to definitively ascertain whether news media correcting of online disinformation has the desired remedial effects. The overall findings from the analysis of how commenters responded to the corrective information relating to the use of the Westminster Bridge photograph suggest that a notable portion of commenters were not accepting of the corrective information. This aligns with the existing limited literature examining this issue and contributes to understanding where there is a knowledge gap. It also suggests that further research is required to understand why some audiences struggle to accept news media fact-checking of online disinformation, particularly when the disinformation is visual.

#### THEMATIC ANALYSIS

The thematic analysis of the journey of the Westminster Bridge photograph provided a deeper understanding. Many themes overlapped across the datasets, as shown below in Figure 57, resulting in more nuanced and strengthened findings across the identified themes.



**FIGURE 57: THEMATIC FRAMEWORK**

**Othering** was found in all three datasets and centred on the presentation of Muslim women and Islam as abnormal and dangerous. Presenting the woman this way largely revolved around the association of Islam with terrorism and socially incompatible, using divisive rhetoric, and emphasising the woman’s attire, specifically her hijab. These kinds of narratives and stereotypes about Muslims have been extensively observed in research examining news and mainstream media, for example, Werbner (2007), Jaspal & Cinnirella (2010), and Ahmed & Matthes (2017). The findings of this thesis thus build on and provide a new angle to media representations of Muslims, in this case examining representations on *social* media as opposed to more traditional media sources. These findings, therefore, suggest that such representations extend beyond traditional media and are used in social media in the form of disinformation. In the focus groups, participants discussed experiences that they believed to be the potential consequences of online disinformation, such as SouthLoneStar’s tweet. This centred mainly on feelings of desensitisation, fear, paranoia, and being cognizant of and/or monitoring behaviour in public. The participants were seemingly very aware of their visibility as Muslim women, and many of their responses and experiences of this were deeply tied to othering. These findings aligned with current findings related to the consequences of media representations of Islam (Endelstein

& Ryan, 2013), an awareness of what being visibly Muslim can symbolise to non-Muslims (Ruby, 2006; Chapman, 2016), and monitoring or changing behaviour to appear 'normal' (Ryan, 2011; Hebbani & Wills, 2012; Harris & Karimshah, 2019). This alignment suggests that such experiences may also happen due to the online representation of Muslims.

**Photographic veracity** was a further prominent theme across all datasets. This centred on the commonly held assumption that photographs are veracious representations of reality. There were ample examples of Twitter users and article commenters aligning with this mythologisation. Some emphasised the assumed illustrative nature of the photograph, insisting that the single image *provided significant visual evidence to show the woman's indifference*. Others put their perceived presumption of the photograph's content ahead of its context and insisted that because the photograph was 'real', it could not be used to deceive. This aligns with the longstanding association of photographs with evidence and truth value due to a photograph's ability to visually represent an event that actually happened (Adatto, 2008; Brennen, 2012; Pantti & Siren, 2015). Consequently, these finding suggests that these assumptions may permeate the digital, with a considerable number of online users aligning with and defending SouthLoneStar's caption because the central evidence of the claim was a photograph<sup>91</sup>. This speaks to the potential power and permeation of recontextualized images as visual disinformation, as argued by researchers such as Fallis (2015), Tucker et al. (2018), and Innes (2020), and also, therefore, provides evidence for this argument.

Conversely, there were also examples of users and participants critiquing SouthLoneStar's caption, in which they argued that it was difficult to ascertain what the photograph showed and that there was no evidence to support SouthLoneStar's contextualisation. All focus group participants did not support SouthLoneStar's interpretation of the photograph, engaging in insightful conversations about the possible reasons for how and why the photograph was able to function effectively as disinformation. This included discussions

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<sup>91</sup> Although, it is important to acknowledge that there are a number of further aspects which may contribute to a user's belief in SouthLoneStar's claim, such as their beliefs or political alignments. However, these examinations are outside the remits of this thesis.

about the woman being visibly Muslim, the ambiguity of what the photograph showed, and the role of social and mainstream media. These findings provide insight into the unique findings about visual disinformation that could be generated when engaging with the methodological approach used for this thesis, particularly using methods such as focus groups to allow for in-depth discussions with affected parties and media consumers.

**Cynicism about the media** involved expressions of distrust and pessimism towards the media's role in disinformation and representations of Islam. In March 2017, several article commenters accused the media of unnecessarily amplifying the tweet and questioned its news value, which links back to the thesis' deduction that the media coverage of SouthLoneStar's tweet constituted media amplification. Evidently, despite the news media in March working to undermine SouthLoneStar's tweet, there was a perception by some that this only unnecessarily amplified the tweet. This again links back to existing arguments that it is difficult to measure whether news media reporting on disinformation has the desired consequences (Tsfati et al., 2020; Wardle, 2021), with research suggesting there is a plethora of aspects which may influence effectiveness (Garrett et al., 2013; Thorson, 2016; Robertson et al., 2020; Walter et al., 2020; Nieminen & Rapeli, 2019). This theme was also reinforced in the comments from November, in which some commenters appeared to distrust and not believe the corrective information, in some cases asserting that it was the media that was 'fake news'. This further parallels Tsfati et al.'s (2020) observation that "despite media refutations, sizable shares of the audience deduce that there is a chance that the 'fake' information might be right" (166). These findings, therefore, contribute to the small, albeit growing research concerning the consequences of mainstream media fact-checking disinformation. However, as with much of the existing research, findings further highlight the complexity of the issue.

Moreover, focus group participants expressed cynicism towards right-wing news sources like *The Daily Mail*, linking what was perceived as a history of Islamophobic reportage to SouthLoneStar's tweet. Veiling in media representation was an important topic of discussion, connected to the Westminster Bridge photograph and how the woman's hijab



played a role in SouthLoneStar's ability to use it as disinformation. Therefore, participants placed significant emphasis on media representations when considering the case of the Westminster Bridge photograph. This also echoed wider research related to media representations of Muslims, notably the ample evidence showing that Muslim women are presented as deviant threats and the hijab as hidden terror and extremism (Karim, 2006; Werbner, 2007; Perry, 2014; Ahmed & Matthes, 2017). These findings, therefore, support this thesis' perspective that long-standing mainstream media representations of Muslims played a role in the promulgation of SouthLoneStar's tweet. This, in turn, contributes to addressing how the Westminster Bridge photograph became so prominent (RQ2). These thematic findings also address RQ4 & RQ5 (ascertaining what the focus groups contribute to the case study and evaluating the overall thesis' approach to examining visual disinformation, respectively). Engaging with focus groups worked to build on, strengthen, and nuance previous findings.

**Lived experience** was a theme uniquely identified in the focus group data. By speaking directly with Muslim women about Islamophobic disinformation, many opened up about their experiences of being visible Muslim in the UK. This included being harassed in public and feeling the need to monitor their behaviour, which again is reflective of existing research in this area (Ryan, 2011; Hebbani & Wills, 2012; Harris & Karimshah, 2019). It was not expected that participants would relate such experiences to Islamophobic disinformation. This suggests that negative online representations of Islam, like SouthLoneStar's tweet, could be linked to the lived experiences of Muslims. This is not to say that lived experiences take place exclusively offline. For example, #DrivingWhileBlack is a hashtag used on Twitter to document Black Americans' experiences of driving in Sundown Towns<sup>92</sup> (Onibada, 2021), used by Black Americans to share their experiences and raise visibility of the issue. Indeed, one participant, Ayaat, similarly discussed their experiences of being harassed, specifically being called a terrorist, when driving with their car windows down. That some participants linked such visceral experiences of racism and Islamophobia with Islamophobic disinformation suggests a relationship between the two

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<sup>92</sup> This generally refers to all-white towns in American where, historically, Black people had to leave the town by sundown or face assault.

and that participants considered online representations of Islam similar to and have similar consequences as media representations of Islam.

The thematic findings of the case study of the Westminster Bridge allowed for a more nuanced approach which would not have been achieved if engaging solely with content analysis. Thematic findings ask more complicated questions about how the examined piece of visual disinformation became so prominent (RQ2), the contribution of speaking to Muslim women about the Westminster Bridge photograph (RQ4), and a question about the overall methodological approach of the thesis (RQ5). Concerning RQ5, the case study approach, which has included data from multiple sources and a mixed quantitative and qualitative approach, has produced a deep, detailed, and nuanced understanding of the journey of the Westminster Bridge photograph. Engaging with this approach has provided insight into what can be learned from the in-depth analysis of a single example of visual disinformation. Consequently, this is how the thesis enables the further development of approaches for the critical analysis of visual disinformation by offering alternative means of studying the phenomenon that can produce new and unique findings in the field of mis-/disinformation research. This allowed for the analysis to follow the evolving online journey of the Westminster Bridge photograph and the opportunity to speak to the community negatively depicted by SouthLoneStar's tweet to glean what kinds of insights can be learned when having conversations with this cohort. The focus groups worked to strengthen and nuance the Twitter and news media findings, as well as provide insights into what can potentially be learned about mis-/disinformation when engaging directly with media consumers. This highlights the value of including primary qualitative methods like focus groups, allowing the researcher to ask desired questions and generate their own primary data about mis-/disinformation.

## CONCLUSION

The case study of the Westminster Bridge photograph explored the photograph's journey as it evolved from a press photograph to visual disinformation to a news story. The semiotic analysis allowed examination of the photograph itself, both out of and in context, to

identify signifiers and ascertain how these contributed to the photograph's use as visual disinformation. Overall, the visual components within the photograph worked to isolate the Muslim woman and separate her from the people behind her. Therefore, there were visual cues with the photograph that appeared to align with SouthLoneStar's caption.

The wider context of the Westminster Bridge attack on Twitter showed a range of responses related to expressions of solidarity and mourning, information seeking and sharing, and Islamophobia. This seeking of community and information meant that SouthLoneStar's tweet would have had a substantial audience, especially because relevant hashtags were used. Other Twitter users who shared the photograph as disinformation largely also manipulated its context, not its content. This presented evidence that recontextualised photographs are a particularly pervasive and easy-to-create form of visual disinformation. The response to SouthLoneStar's tweet was particularly intense and negative. While these replies highlight an effort to fight against and weaken SouthLoneStar's tweet, content spreads on Twitter based on interactivity, so these responses would have widened the tweet's audience further. This is likely how the tweet spread so much that it was reported in the news media. This reporting in March was significant, fitting within the parameters of media amplification. All news sources reported on the tweet to undermine it, and most article commenters appeared receptive to this. Conversely, the November reporting of SouthLoneStar's IRA origins was more akin to a typical news cycle, and many commenters did not seem to accept the new information. This was based mainly on the photograph being 'real', highlighting a potential issue in news media fact-checking of visual disinformation like the Westminster Bridge photograph, as it was not entirely false and was an amalgamation of authentic and inaccurate content.

Finally, the thematic analysis allowed for a deeper examination of the three datasets. **Othering** concerned presenting the Muslim woman as alien or deviant, reflective of longstanding presentations of Muslim women in wider media. This theme was further developed in the focus groups, with participants discussing the othering effects SouthLoneStar's tweet potentially had. **Photographic veracity** centred on the common

association of photographs with evidence and truth value. For some Twitter users and article commenters, this commonly held assumption means the photograph functioned as evidence of SouthLoneStar's claim. Conversely, focus group participants undermined these assumptions and provided astute reflections on the limited nature of photographs. **Cynicism about the media** brought into question the news media's role in the photograph's journey. March article commenters did not believe the tweet constituted news, and many November commenters expressed distrust in the new corrective information. Focus group participants similarly considered the media negatively, particularly the media's often inaccurate presentations of Muslims. **Lived experience** was unique to the focus groups and constituted participants providing distressing personal stories of their experiences being Muslim in the UK in relation to online disinformation.

The significance of approaching visual disinformation using a case study that focuses on a photograph has illustrated that an unaltered photograph, placed within a manipulated context, can be a highly effective tool for spreading harmful deception. It also shows that the need to consider images in mis-/disinformation research is vital. By deeply examining the photograph itself, the different stages of its evolution, the likely causes of these evolutions, and speaking to affected media consumers, the thesis provides an alternative means to examine the phenomenon, thus asking different kinds of questions and producing different kinds of knowledge. This was done by making the examined photograph the central focus of the case study and emphasising the role and functions of photographs in culture and society. Such an approach, in which a single photograph is the key focus of research, does exist in disciplines with which the thesis sits, for example, Perlmutter & Wagner's (2004) analysis of a press photograph from the G8 summit. This thesis, therefore, highlights the unique knowledge that can be learned about visual disinformation when applying a similar approach.

## CHAPTER 10: CONCLUSION

"The photographic quotation [the appearance it derives from reality] is, within its limits, incontrovertible. Yet the quotation, placed like a fact in an explicit or implicit argument, can misinform. Sometimes the misinforming is deliberate, as in the case of publicity; often it is the result of an unquestioned ideological assumption." (Berger, 1978b:69-70).

The above from Berger from the late 1970s appropriately captures how this thesis has come to understand the function of visual disinformation. When considering these longstanding theories about photographic representation alongside the contemporary issue of visual disinformation, it is evident that societal assumptions about photographs continue to be relevant concerning modern examples of visual manipulation.

Fittingly, the conclusion chapter of this thesis is being written during the fifth anniversary of the Westminster Bridge attack. This has also led to reflections on current events and how visual disinformation continues to be a significant global issue. Russia is currently conducting a military assault on Ukraine, deceptively presenting the invasion of a sovereign country as justified. To match this narrative, the Russian government is spreading misleading claims worldwide on social media, rationalizing the invasion. During wartime, as with all disaster events, it is difficult to ascertain reliable information as many first-hand accounts and citizen journalism emerge. While events on the ground in Ukraine are ever-evolving, current evidence suggests that Russia has once more deployed the IRA to spread pro-Putin, anti-Ukrainian online disinformation (Silverman & Kao, 2022). Moreover, several examples of recontextualised visuals have already emerged. These include a video claiming to show a Ukrainian girl confronting a Russian soldier. The video is actually ten years old, from 2012, of a Palestinian girl confronting an Israeli IDF soldier (Reuters Fact Check, 2022). A photograph showing a pregnant woman carried away on a stretcher from a bombed hospital in Mariupol, Ukraine, has been widely claimed on Russian social media to be an image of a crisis actor (Macaluso, 2022). The method of using recontextualised visuals to spread deceptive narratives continues to be a means of manipulation, and audiences are still persuaded by the underlying connotations of photographic objectivity. These highly

contemporary examples of visual disinformation further highlight the relevance of the need to examine and better understand visual manipulation.

Consequently, this concluding chapter works to highlight the knowledge generated and outlines what the thesis contributes to mis-/disinformation research. The key findings are summarised in the first section, followed by an examination of how these findings work to address the research aim and questions. The third section allows for a reflection on the thesis' contribution to knowledge. In deeply examining a single example of visual disinformation, the thesis shows how unaltered photographs can function as highly effective vehicles for manipulation. This emphasises the importance of investigating the use, role, and function of images in disinformation, addressing this current knowledge gap. The thesis also contributes to methodological innovation by presenting an alternate means of examining visual disinformation that stresses depth. Methodologies utilised in mis-/disinformation research are generally similar, with researchers focussing on text-based content and engaging primarily with quantitative methods to analyse large datasets. Alternatively, this thesis used mixed methods to examine a single example of visual disinformation deeply. This third section also reflects on me as a white woman examining an example of Islamophobic disinformation. The final section discusses the limitations of the thesis, as well as suggestions for future directions of research. The approach is particularly onerous and time-consuming for a single researcher, and its concentration on a single example of visual disinformation hinders the ability to consider the findings representative. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic provided further, unexpected limitations to the research. The means of potentially addressing these limitations and building on the findings from this thesis are also explored.

## SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

Disinformation research is notably interdisciplinary and constitutes an overlap between disciplines, often Journalism Studies and Social Media Studies. The thesis further incorporated Visual Studies, which umbrellas other fields such as Visual Culture and Visual Communication. Therefore, before collecting and analysing data, a wide-reaching literature

review, in conjunction with a conceptual framework, was constructed to ensure the researcher had the knowledge to conduct the required analysis. The literature review worked to locate the thesis within the fields of Journalism Studies, Social Media Studies, and Visual Studies. Building from this broader disciplinary grounding, the thesis was also contextualised within the field of mis-/disinformation research, highlighting a knowledge gap concerning the role of images. Finally, the thesis was situated within five wider research areas related to the case study under examination: (1) online responses to disaster events; (2) Russia's Internet Research Agency (IRA); (3) the alt-right and right-wing populism; (4) media representations of Muslim women; and (5) media amplification, and the news media's role in online disinformation.

The conceptual framework assessed how the thesis approached the relevant concept of disinformation, photographic objectivity, and Twitter as a vehicle for disinformation. Disinformation often cannot be viewed through a binary lens of true and false and instead is frequently an amalgamation of the two, particularly concerning visual disinformation. The thesis also explored the longstanding association of photographs with evidence and truth value and how this association has led to photographs gaining an elevated status of objectivity. Finally, examining Twitter as a vehicle for disinformation highlighted that the platform has specific architectural and communication structures and allows content to spread exponentially as long as users interact with it. This contributed to SouthLoneStar's tweet spreading so quickly and widely across the platform.

The overall aim of this thesis was to understand the role images play in the spread of disinformation on Twitter in relation to a specific case, the Westminster Bridge photograph. In examining this aim, nine key findings emerged when analysing the journey of the photograph:

1. Using semiotic analysis, the signifiers within the photograph worked to separate the Muslim woman. This isolated her and made her behaviour appear unusual. While the crowd behind her appeared fixated on the person on the ground, the woman seemingly walked away, her attention on the mobile phone in her hand. The

woman's facial expression is also difficult to ascertain. She is also Black and veiled (a signifier for Muslim women), while the people behind her all appear to be white. This difference in appearance further isolates and disconnects the woman from the rest of the photograph. Moreover, veiling is often associated with extremism and distrust. This suggested that SouthLoneStar's claim was not wholly unfounded because signifiers in the image worked to isolate the woman and make her stand out.

2. The photograph circulated within a specific context: the aftermath of the Westminster Bridge terrorist attack. Existing research has established that Twitter is used to express mourning, solidarity, and a need to find information about such attacks. Users have also been observed responding in hateful ways, in particular expressing hostility towards perpetrator(s) religious/social group. Users responding to the Westminster Bridge terrorist attack echoed these research findings, and so this thesis reinforces existing knowledge.
3. Users who also shared a version of the Westminster Bridge photograph as disinformation generally did not alter its content and instead manipulated its context. This supports evidence from researchers such as Brennen et al. (2020) that unaltered images with manipulated contexts are prevalent and are an easy, low-tech means of spreading disinformation. These users also overwhelmingly located themselves in the US and identified as right-wing and/or Trump supporters.
4. SouthLoneStar's tweet received significant negative responses on Twitter and angered many users, garnering an immediate, vitriolic response. This contributes to understanding how the Westminster Bridge photograph become such a prominent news image. The more interaction the tweet received, the larger its potential audience was. Therefore, even if users' motivations were to undermine the tweet, interacting with it would have increased its audience.
5. The UK news media's coverage of the SouthLoneStar tweet in March is considered an example of media amplification. This coverage significantly increased the potential audience size of the tweet. While articles overwhelmingly worked to undermine the tweet, it is unclear whether this had the desired effect of refuting the disinformation or serving to spread it further. Indeed, existing research suggests that it is difficult to determine whether such media undermining of disinformation



is successful (Nieminen & Rapeli (2019); Walter et al. (2020)). The majority of comments analysed suggest audiences were generally receptive to the news media's reportage. However, reporting also worked to increase attention towards the tweet.

6. In November 2017, the reporting of SouthLoneStar being IRA-operated was significantly less than in March 2017 and more reflective of a typical news cycle. Moreover, many comments rejected SouthLoneStar's IRA connection and echoed SouthLoneStar's original contextualisation of the photograph. For a portion of the audience, that the photograph was 'real' problematised the evidence that it had been used to mislead. This further reinforces the argument that more needs to be learned about the effects and consequences of the mainstream news media reporting on and fact-checking disinformation.
7. Two major themes were identified in the analysis of the Twitter data: **Othering** and **Photographic veracity**. **Othering** centred on presenting the Muslim woman in a way that othered her, underpinned by notions of isolation, alienation, and deviance. This often echoed wider, long-established media representations of Muslims, in which the woman was characterised as ignoring the attack and, in some cases endorsing it. Her hijab was also highlighted, this being a common means of othering Muslim women in the media. Overall, tropes related to othering were used to reinforce the Islamophobic presentation of the photograph. **Photographic veracity** is related to the mythologisation of photographic truth, as argued by theorists such as Barthes (1978). This theme centred on SouthLoneStar's Islamophobic claim, purportedly evidenced by an unaltered press photograph. The 'truth', therefore, hinged on the long-standing association of photographs with evidence and truth value. Generally, the explanatory textual information surrounding a photograph inherits the assumed veracity of the photograph, which allows for SouthLoneStar's captions to be considered an accurate interpretation of what the Westminster Bridge photograph shows.
8. Three major themes were identified in the analysis of the online news data: **Othering**, **Photographic veracity**, and **Cynicism about the media**. Examples of **Othering** were also present in comments on news articles reporting on SouthLoneStar's tweet. This similarly revolved around presenting the woman as

abnormal and/or deviant. **Photographic veracity** was also identified in the analysis of the online news data, again centring on the assumed evidence and truth value of the photograph. This was particularly prevalent in the November 2017 news article comments, as many seem to hold the assumed objectivity of the photograph above the corrective information provided by the news media. **Cynicism about the media** was unique to the news coverage and concerned the belief amongst commenters that the tweet did not constitute news and so should not have become news. This also included the rejection of the corrective information in November.

9. Four major themes were identified in the focus group data: **Othering**, **Photographic veracity**, **Cynicism about the media**, and **Lived experience**. In the focus groups, **Othering** concerned discussions about how the Muslim woman was othered, mainly through her hijab. There were also conversations about the consequences of Islamophobic disinformation, with participants asserting that such content would have a negative effect on both Muslims and non-Muslims. The focus groups, therefore, further developed this theme by considering how tweets like SouthLoneStar's may have affected those who saw it. **Photographic veracity** was evident through participants' dismissal of SouthLoneStar's claim, where it was argued that the woman's attitude could not be ascertained using a single photograph. Participants provided insightful reflections on how photographs can be used to spread disinformation, which added a further dimension to this theme. This highlighted that discussions with media consumers about visual disinformation can provide a deep understanding of how they respond to it. **Cynicism about the media** revolved around participants' cynicism towards broader media presentations of Muslims. This highlighted that, to the participants, Islamophobic disinformation was not confined to social media but also constituted wider media representations. Finally, the theme of **Lived experience** was unique to the focus groups and involved participants sharing visceral experiences of being a Muslim woman in the UK. This included experiencing harassment and changing one's behaviour to avoid drawing attention.

## ADDRESSING THE RESEARCH AIM AND QUESTIONS

The overall aim of the thesis was achieved by intensely examining the evolution of the Westminster Bridge photograph from a press photograph, to visual disinformation, to a standalone news item. The photograph and its varying uses and contexts throughout this journey were analysed using a range of methods that produced a deep understanding of the role and function of the photograph to spread an Islamophobic narrative. This examination has shown that an unaltered photograph placed within a manipulated context can be a highly effective vehicle for manipulation because photographs have a longstanding association with evidence and truth value. In particular, press photographs have an elevated objectivity and veracity status because they are historically and culturally used to illustrate events. This aspect underpins the use of such photographs for disinformation purposes. In all instances where photographs, like the Westminster Bridge photograph, are reframed as disinformation the assumed objectivity/truthfulness of the photograph is likely mobilised to support the lie the disinformation promotes. Thus, SouthLoneStar and others who shared the photograph similarly used these assumptions of photographs to manipulate the photograph's context. Audiences are accustomed to press photographs being accompanied by textual explanations of what the photograph depicts, and these explanations are assumed to be accurate representations. Consequently, a portion of those exposed to SouthLoneStar's tweet likely believed it to characterise what the photograph depicted accurately. Therefore, unaltered photographs can play a powerful role in the spread of disinformation; the assumption that photographs are intrinsically objective, along with their textual caption inheriting this assumption, means that the narratives they push can be highly persuasive, particularly because it contains an element of 'truth' through the employment of a genuine photograph.

More specifically, the research questions have been answered as follows:

1. *What images were shared in the aftermath of the Westminster attack and by whom?*

The overall images shared in the aftermath of the Westminster Bridge attack were typical of how users respond to terrorist attacks online, as highlighted by existing research on this

topic. The images centred on themes of solidarity, mourning, and information-seeking/sharing. A small number of users also shared Islamophobic content. As social media response to terrorist attacks is a significantly researched topic, it can be confirmed that responses to the Westminster Bridge attack were reflective of this wider research.

Specifically, the most retweeted tweets that shared the Westminster Bridge photograph overwhelmingly presented it with an Islamophobic narrative, similar to SouthLoneStar. The majority did not alter the photograph's content but used a misleading context, again similar to SouthLoneStar. Many accounts that shared the photographs in this way, also like SouthLoneStar, presented themselves as right-wing/supporters of Donald Trump. Therefore, SouthLoneStar's presentation of the photograph was not unique but was part of a wave of users with similar personas sharing the Westminster Bridge photograph with an inaccurate, Islamophobic caption. This further emphasises that this type of visual disinformation, recontextualised photographs, is particularly prevalent, echoing arguments from researchers such as Tandoc et al. (2018) and Paris & Donovan (2019).

*2. How did the Westminster Bridge Photograph become such a prominent news image and what was the news media's role in the photograph's journey?*

Rather than a single cause, several components came together to cause the Westminster Bridge photograph to become so prominent. The photograph itself is ambiguous, and it is difficult to ascertain what it shows without knowing its context. This, therefore, lends it to be used to mislead by presenting it in an inaccurate context. SouthLoneStar also shared the photograph as disinformation at an opportune time. Therefore, the potential audience size on Twitter was significant, especially because the relevant hashtags #Westminster and #PrayForLondon were used. Evidently, SouthLoneStar's tweet was able to gain substantial prominence to the point where it was considered to enter the news threshold, likely because it was relevant to the Westminster Bridge attack, as news coverage would have concentrated on any new information related to the attack.

Overall, the news media worked to amplify the photograph further, taking it beyond the confines of Twitter and presenting it as a piece of news. Some research investigates the consequences of news media reporting on disinformation. However, the limited research in this area is mixed, with many factors such as partisanship, audience interest, and how the corrective information is presented potentially influencing the effectiveness of debunking. It is not within the remit of the thesis to determine whether the news media's coverage of SouthLoneStar's tweet worked to correct SouthLoneStar's misleading interpretation of the photograph or simply widened the audience for SouthLoneStar's Islamophobic narrative. However, it cannot be denied that the news media functioned as a vehicle for amplifying the photograph. Thus, how the photograph became a prominent news image was multifaceted, with the attention towards the photograph snowballing into a news story.

*3. How have social media users on Twitter and those commenting on UK online newspaper articles responded to the Westminster Bridge photograph?*

Analysis suggests that those who responded to SouthLoneStar's tweet on Twitter mostly resisted SouthLoneStar's captioning and countered it with dismissal. This suggests that Twitter users were not receptive to how SouthLoneStar presented the photograph. However, the intense rejection of the tweet also likely contributed to its amplification, as Twitter interactivity often determines the size of a tweet's audience. People who commented on UK online news articles in March similarly did not appear to accept SouthLoneStar's narrative. Instead, many accepted the evidence from the news media that contradicted SouthLoneStar's captioning of the photograph, such as comments made by the Muslim woman. Yet, many commenters resisted this corrective information when the news media reported in November 2017 that the SouthLoneStar was an IRA account. This suggests that, as researchers like Phillips (2018), Nieminen & Rapeli (2019), and Walter et al. (2020) argue, reporting on disinformation by the news media is a complex issue in which the corrective information does not easily cancel out the disinformation. Indeed, as Colley et al. (2020) assert, fact-checking may have influenced audience views, but "whether this changed or merely reinforced existing views is unclear" (98).

4. *How can discussions with the community negatively depicted by the Westminster Bridge disinformation campaign, contribute to the case study of this thesis?*

It is rare for mis-/disinformation research to engage in methods that involve speaking directly to relevant parties about the phenomenon. As the thesis' example of disinformation was Islamophobic and linked to deeply entrenched media stereotypes about Muslim women, it was important to include the voice of Muslim women. This was to strengthen the analysis of Twitter and online news data and ensure the examination of this example of disinformation was informed by the first-hand experiences of affected parties. Overall, the focus groups proved invaluable in re-enforcing the findings identified in the thesis' previous data analysis and highlighting how including the voices of communities potentially affected by disinformation can enrich research. For example, the theme of **Othering** allowed for reflections on my position as a researcher representing focus group participants' experiences. This worked to strengthen the overall thesis and highlight the importance of including the voices of affected parties to understand the case of the Westminster Bridge photograph.

5. *How might the thesis' examination of the Westminster Bridge case study enable the further development of approaches for the critical analysis of visual disinformation?*

This thesis examined a single example of disinformation as it evolved in the media and looked at what a case study-based mixed methods methodology, which is not typical of mis-/disinformation research, could offer the field. Research often involves analysing large datasets using generally quantitative methods, which produce certain kinds of knowledge about the phenomenon, centred on numerical findings and knowledge regarding trends, relations, and structures across data. This has produced vital insight into mis-/disinformation; however, this thesis aimed to intensely examine one example of visual disinformation to deeply understand its intricacies and glean complex insight into how a single photograph evolved so significantly once it was used as disinformation. Moreover, the thesis also sought to understand how speaking to affected communities as media consumers could strengthen research and potentially produce new knowledge. Speaking

to Muslim women worked to reinforce what was identified in the Twitter and online news data, as well as allowing for the generation of deep, insightful conversations about Islamophobic disinformation beyond what can be learned when exclusively collecting and analysing existing data from sources like social media. Therefore, including methods that allow for discussions with potentially affected groups of people about their experiences with disinformation highlights opportunities for future research, especially when deeply examining a single example of disinformation.

## REFLECTING ON KNOWLEDGE CONTRIBUTIONS

The main knowledge contribution of this thesis is the examination of the role of images in the spread of disinformation on social media through the lens of the Westminster Bridge photograph. There are growing arguments emphasising the effectiveness of visual disinformation, for example, Tucker et al. (2018), Tandoc et al. (2018), and Innes (2020). Moreover, research specifically examining the use of images in disinformation is growing (Brennen et al., 2020; Garimella & Eckles, 2020; Dan et al., 2021), which repeatedly stresses the pervasiveness of recontextualised photographs. The findings of this thesis contribute to this small pool of visual disinformation research and support the argument that unaltered photographs are a common and effective means of spreading disinformation. The findings consequently work to broaden the scope of disinformation research beyond text-only content and encourage researchers to consider how images are used to spread disinformation.

Through the examination of the Westminster Bridge case study, the need to consider the visual is evident. Photographs are complex communication tools, and their longstanding societal associations with evidence and truth value and the myth of photographic veracity are mobilised in examples of visual disinformation like SouthLoneStar's tweet. Lens-based visuals like photographs continue to be a key method in which our understanding of reality is communicated and structured. This happens not only in mundane everyday communicatory practices but also in visual mis-/disinformation. The intricacy of visual communication means that this kind of visual disinformation is difficult to fact-check

because understanding and combatting SouthLoneStar's tweet cannot be done through a simple true/false binary but is connected to and within the wider socio-political context. The fictitious element of disinformation is always combined with a level of veracity based on the utilisation of a genuine photograph. Moreover, audiences will bring their own ideological and societal assumptions to the image and interpret images differently. Indeed, that some users accepted and even shared SouthLoneStar's presentations of the photograph, while others vehemently denied it, shows how an individual's experiences, knowledge, biases, and beliefs can influence how they respond to visual disinformation. Thus, attempting to combat the phenomenon through a true/false lens is inappropriate because understanding the photograph is based on such things as meaning-making, representation, and culture. This is evident in how news article commenters responded to the reporting of the corrective information in November 2017; although there was evidence that the photograph had been used deceptively by a foreign disinformation account, many commenters perceived the assumed veracity of the photograph to take precedence. Therefore, methods of understanding and combatting such examples of visual disinformation require a more nuanced approach in which the examined photograph(s) is at the heart of the research.

In approaching the phenomenon in such a way, researchers who want to look at visual disinformation need to bring into bear recognised approaches to photographs. To gain the contextual knowledge needed to understand the societal function and uses of a photograph, theories from well-established researchers such as Berger (1968; 1978a; 1978b), Barthes (1978), and Sontag (1990) were essential to this thesis. This knowledge could then be applied to the case of the Westminster Bridge photograph, allowing for the identification of the system of signifiers within the photograph, as well as a wider understanding of how photographs are presented and interpreted in different contexts. This knowledge is, therefore, essential if a deep and complex understanding of an example of visual disinformation is desired. Yet, the disciplines this thesis sits between, Journalism Studies and Social Media Studies, have primarily developed in such a way as not to consider images because text is often much easier to interpret, analyse, and understand. This is not to say that these disciplines entirely omit images, but disciplines often utilise certain types



of analysis that lead to leaving images out. Yet, the findings from the thesis show that audiences continue to be persuaded by the fundamental underlying connotation of the press photograph showing something that is 'real' through their ability to record appearances of physical reality. There are, of course, examples in disciplines such as Journalism Studies that offer a deep examination of a single controversial or big news image, such as Perlmutter & Wagner (2004), who analysed a press photograph of the death of a protester during the 2001 G8 summit in Genoa. Therefore, there is precedent for examining (iconic) press photographs in this way, and these approaches and methods of examination could be applied to the study of visual disinformation to produce a different kind of knowledge about this phenomenon. If the Westminster Bridge photograph had not been approached this way, the documentation of its journey and evolution would be difficult to unpack. By focusing on the visual and having the photograph as the key element of the research, the thesis observed how a single photograph, presented misleadingly at an opportune time, could snowball into a significant news event. This highlighted the potential power of visual disinformation and brought into question the role of institutions like the mainstream media in spreading online disinformation.

The thesis, therefore, also contributes methodologically to mis-/disinformation research by using a different kind of methodology to what is typically used to examine this phenomenon. The journey and evolution of the photograph across the media ecosystem were followed using multiple data sources and methods of analysis as it grew from its first online use as a press photograph to its manipulation as visual disinformation, to a news story in and of itself, to a proven example of Russian interference in foreign events. The thesis also utilized focus groups to ask the community negatively depicted by SouthLoneStar's tweet, Muslim women, about the example of disinformation. Speaking to participants worked to reinforce and build on the themes identified from the Twitter and online news data. The use of focus groups also highlighted the positive effects of having conversations with people as perceptive media consumers about disinformation. The participants were incredibly insightful about SouthLoneStar's tweet, as well as their wider experiences of media representations of Muslim women and their experiences as young Muslim women in Britain. Disinformation is often examined within a digital vacuum, yet

behind every social media account are astute and reflective individuals who may take what they have been exposed to on social media and apply it to their everyday lives and experiences. As Chouliaraki & Al-Ghazzi (2021) argue in their discussion of reporting on conflict news, journalists should look beyond verifying content and acknowledge that their reporting should also involve the embodied voices of those experiencing conflict. Similarly, the thesis' methodology looks beyond verification and the strict binary between true and false to glean more profound insight into the examined example of visual disinformation, asking questions such as what disinformation means and what it does. This produces different kinds of knowledge, generating different implications and questions.

It is also important to reflect on the position of the researcher. Throughout the thesis, it was important to keep in mind my positionality as a white female researcher interpreting, analysing, and presenting findings on a piece of Islamophobic and racist disinformation, particularly concerning the focus groups. This is a further additional contribution that could be considered when examining mis-/disinformation, particularly when researching disinformation related to marginalised communities, hate speech, and harmful narratives. Incorporation approaches from Harding (1992; 1995), Parson (2019), and Chadwick (2021a; 2021b) allowed for reflection on the role of positionality and objectivity in the research and how I could work to represent the words of my participants as accurately and as truthfully as possible. This acknowledgement of the role of the researcher when examining disinformation is thus a further knowledge contribution to consider when examining disinformation, as incorporating these reflections into research may allow more insightful understandings of the investigated phenomenon.

## LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

There are several limitations of this thesis that need to be acknowledged. The COVID-19 pandemic and its subsequent effects presented notable practical limitations on the thesis, particularly with the focus groups. The unpredictability of the pandemic meant that it was difficult to arrange and recruit for focus groups, so the desired number of six could not take place within the thesis' timescale. Three focus groups were able to be completed, which

provided enough insight into how including affected parties as media consumers could strengthen and benefit disinformation research. Moreover, the focus groups were supposed to be in-person rather than online. Therefore, the reduced sample size and the requirement to move online are notable limitations. While the number of participants means the focus groups achieved what is considered the minimum requirements to glean insight, further insights could have emerged if the desired number of focus groups had taken place and happened in person.

The deletion of the SouthLoneStar account was an additional, unavoidable limitation. The methodology was designed to overcome this 'data blackhole' as much as possible by triangulating the data collection strategy and collecting data from a wide variety of sources related to SouthLoneStar's tweet. However, the inaccessibility of data from the SouthLoneStar account, which could have been used to answer the research aim and questions, limits the findings of the thesis. This highlights a data collection limitation that is also relevant to mis-/disinformation research more generally. As a means of combatting mis-/disinformation, social media sites will remove content identified as misleading or falsified. While this works to stop such content from being exposed to more users on the platform, it also makes studying the content challenging. This suggests platforms, particularly Twitter, as this was the platform under investigation for this thesis, should implement ways to ensure the content remains on the site for researchers but is inaccessible to users.

A further limitation of the thesis is that the methodological approach is particularly onerous for one researcher. Mixed and qualitative methods are generally time-consuming because they involve the researcher becoming entrenched in the data, spending time reflecting and rereading it to produce deep and detailed insights. Moreover, the methodology involved different levels of data analysis from a significant variety of data sources, so the organisation and analysis of the data were very labour-intensive. The conducting of the focus groups also added additional time and labour pressures. Altogether, this methodological approach to visual disinformation was proven to be a tremendous

workload for a single researcher, so similar work may be better suited to a research team, which is discussed further in the recommendations for future research.

As the thesis approaches the phenomenon of disinformation using a methodology not typical of existing research, its findings produce a certain type of knowledge. While this knowledge provides a different perspective on disinformation, the approach to the phenomenon does have some methodological limitations. Most notably, claims of representativeness and generalisability. The overall purpose of mixed/qualitative research is not to assert the ability to generalise the investigated phenomenon but to glean deep and complex understandings. Indeed, the thesis' approach to disinformation aimed to examine the kind of knowledge that can be produced when examining disinformation differently, namely deeply investigating a single piece of visual disinformation. Therefore, generalisability was a known and accepted limitation. However, it is important to acknowledge this limitation.

My personal cultural experiences and biases should also be considered a limitation. As a white woman investigating a piece of Islamophobic disinformation, I am limited by my own life experiences, opinions, and biases. Another researcher may have approached the analysis of the thesis' data differently, thus producing different results. The limitations of my own experiences and outlooks, and the subsequent influence they have had on my approach to the thesis, was mitigated as much as possible using several approaches. Firstly, by incorporating the perspectives of Harding (1992; 1995), Parson (2019), and Chadwick (2021a; 2021b) on reflexivity and objectivity. Secondly, by speaking to focus group gatekeepers about how I was approaching the focus groups with British Muslim women. Thirdly, offering focus group participants the opportunity to read and critique how I had analysed and presented their views. However, it is acknowledged that this limitation cannot be entirely mitigated as research can never be truly objective or neutral.

In conjunction with the wider findings from the thesis, these limitations have produced several recommendations for future research. Most significantly, the thesis supports the growing argument for the need for future mis-/disinformation research to consider the role of images. The findings of the thesis have shown that using an unaltered photograph as disinformation by manipulating its context can be a highly effective tool to spread a harmful narrative across the media ecosystem and, thus, public discourse. It is therefore advocated that further research examines such examples of visual disinformation to build on the knowledge produced by the thesis and produce new knowledge.

The thesis also encourages future mis-/disinformation research to embrace alternative methodologies like the one employed in this research. Current mis-/disinformation methodologies often use quantitative methods to examine large text-based datasets. By approaching the examination of disinformation differently, the thesis produced deep and complex insight into a single piece of visual disinformation, the journey of the Westminster Bridge photograph. Moreover, focus groups with Muslim women provided the opportunity to understand how speaking to affected parties as media consumers can reinforce and nuance analysis. The themes of **Othering, Photographic veracity, and Cynicism of the media** were identified in the focus groups, thus strengthening previous analysis of Twitter and online news data. For example, while the othering of the Muslim woman was evident in the Twitter and online news data, participants expanded this by discussing how SouthLoneStar's tweet may have influenced the behaviour of non-Muslims to treat Muslims in a way that would 'other' them. **Lived experience** was an additional theme unique to the focus groups, which suggests that unique findings can be identified when engaging in methods that involve directly speaking to participants. The thesis, therefore, advocates for researchers to embrace different methods to discover new knowledge about visual mis-/disinformation.

Finally, the time-consuming and labour-intensive nature of the chosen methodological approach produced suggestions of how similar future research could take place and how the methodology could be improved. Due to the significant workload such an approach to

disinformation can have on a single researcher. There is a conversation to be had about whether a methodology similar to the one utilised by this thesis is better suited to a team of researchers. The highly interdisciplinary nature of disinformation and the complexity of the piece of visual disinformation under examination required a wide variety of existing literature and knowledge across many disciplines to appropriately approach, understand, and analyse the investigated example(s) of disinformation. Moreover, the methodological approach employed various data collection methods and data analysis. Thus, a broad knowledge of these methods was also necessary. Therefore, for future research, and as a means of finalising these methods, several experts across different disciplines and fields could be brought together to complete a similar methodology in a more succinct and structured manner, with each researcher taking on a role most suited to their field of expertise. Furthermore, the thesis encourages bringing affected parties and communities into the conversation, particularly if examining a piece(s) of disinformation targeted at a marginalised community. This could involve, for example, recruiting such communities as participants, as was done in this thesis, or collaborating with affected communities to guide the approach and direction of research. It is the combining of these methodological efforts with long-established theories related to photographic representation that can work to produce new knowledge about visual disinformation. In examining the evolution of the Westminster Bridge photograph, the thesis contributes an understanding of visual disinformation and its influence on public debate and, consequently, society and the democratic process.

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# APPENDICES

## APPENDIX 1: RELIABILITY RESULTS

Code frame	Percentage agreement	Scott's Pi	Cohen's Kappa	Krippendorff's Alpha (nominal)	N agreements	N disagreements	N cases	N decisions
Other Hashtag(s)	98%	0.961	0.961	0.961	98	2	100	200
Image Type	93%	0.911	0.911	0.912	93	7	100	200
Image Content	97%	0.966	0.966	0.966	97	3	100	200
Actor Type	93%	0.917	0.917	0.917	93	7	100	200

### Hashtags dataset: Top 100 general (Twitter)

Code frame	Percentage agreement	Scott's Pi	Cohen's Kappa	Krippendorff's Alpha (nominal)	N agreements	N disagreements	N cases	N decisions
Other hashtag(s)	95%	0.931	0.931	0.931	95	5	100	200
Image Version	90%	0.867	0.867	0.868	90	10	100	200
Tweet sentiment	89%	0.809	0.809	0.81	89	11	100	200
Actor type	89%	0.862	0.862	0.863	89	11	100	200
Profile picture	94%	0.902	0.903	0.903	94	6	100	200
Profile banner	91%	0.898	0.898	0.898	91	9	100	200

### Hashtags dataset: Top 100 uses of Westminster Bridge photograph (Twitter)

Code frame	Percentage agreement	Scott's Pi	Cohen's Kappa	Krippendorff's Alpha (nominal)	N agreements	N disagreements	N cases	N decisions
Image type	96.9%	0.962	0.962	0.962	124	4	128	256
Image content	96.9%	0.95	0.95	0.95	124	4	128	256
Intent	95.3%	0.921	0.921	0.921	122	6	128	256
Actor type	93.8%	0.923	0.923	0.923	120	8	128	256

### @SouthLoneStar dataset (Twitter)

Code frame	Percentage agreement	Scott's Pi	Cohen's Kappa	Krippendorff's Alpha (nominal)	N agreements	N disagreements	N cases	N decisions
Tweet content	98%	0.949	0.949	0.949	98	2	100	200
Actor type	96%	0.951	0.951	0.951	96	4	100	200

**Article URLs dataset: March (Twitter)**

Code frame	Percentage agreement	Scott's Pi	Cohen's Kappa	Krippendorff's Alpha (nominal)	N agreements	N disagreements	N cases	N decisions
Tweet content	96%	0.916	0.916	0.917	96	4	100	200
Actor type	91%	0.895	0.895	0.896	91	9	100	200

**Article URLs dataset: November (Twitter)**

Code frame	Percentage agreement	Scott's Pi	Cohen's Kappa	Krippendorff's Alpha (nominal)	N agreements	N disagreements	N cases	N decisions
Overarching topics	94.2%	0.893	0.893	0.894	98	6	104	208
Sentiment	94.2%	0.886	0.886	0.887	98	6	104	208

**Article comments dataset: March (online article comments)**

Code frame	Percentage agreement	Scott's Pi	Cohen's Kappa	Krippendorff's Alpha (nominal)	N agreements	N disagreements	N cases	N decisions
Overarching topic	90.5%	0.882	0.882	0.882	67	7	74	148
Belief in story	94.6%	0.891	0.891	0.892	70	4	74	148

**Article comments dataset: November (online article comments)**

Totals	Percentage agreement	Scott's Pi	Cohen's Kappa	Krippendorff's Alpha (nominal)
Lowest	89%	0.809	0.809	0.81
Highest	98.9%	0.987	0.987	0.987
Average	94.18%	0.91544	0.91548	0.916
Median	94.20%	0.916	0.916	0.917

**Total across all code frames**



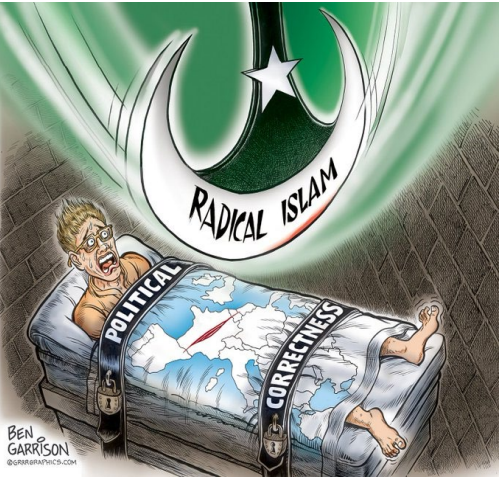





## APPENDIX 2: CONTENT ANALYSIS CODE FRAMES





### 2.1: TOP 100 SHARED: ALL IMAGES

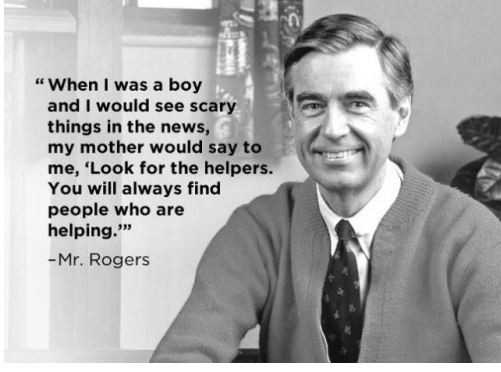






Code	Name	Description	Example
1	Location	The hashtags were used only to denote the location of the attack.	#London #UKParliament
2	Solidarity	The hashtags imply feelings of solidarity in the aftermath of the attack. May also include location-based hashtags.	#LondonIsOpen #WeAreNotAfraid
3	Trump/ Islam	The hashtags are related to Trump and/or Islam/ Islamophobia. May also include location-based hashtags.	#MAGA #Islam
4	Other	Doesn't fit into the above categories.	#retweet #WednesdayWisdom
5	N/A	The tweet has no hashtags aside from #Westminster, #PrayforLondon and/or #BanIslam.	N/A

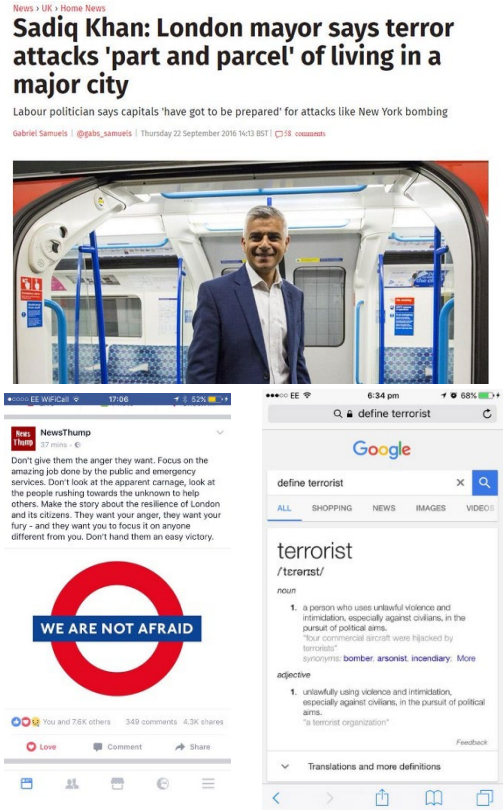

**Other hashtags:** Analysis for the other hashtags in the tweets that are not #Westminster #PrayForLondon #BanIslam.

Code	Name	Description	Example(s)
1	Art	The image is a piece of art, for example, a drawing, but it is not a cartoon.	
2	Edit	The image is a creative appropriation of an existing visual (photograph, logo, etc.) which has been edited or remixed in response to the attack.	
3	Cartoon	The Image is a cartoon.	


4	Multiple	Multiple images are used, each of which can apply to multiple categories. For example, one image is an edit. The other is a quote.	
5	Collage	The image is a collage consisting of more than one image that has been edited into a singular image.	
6	Collage: with text	The image is a collage consisting of more than one image that has been edited into a singular image and also contains text.	



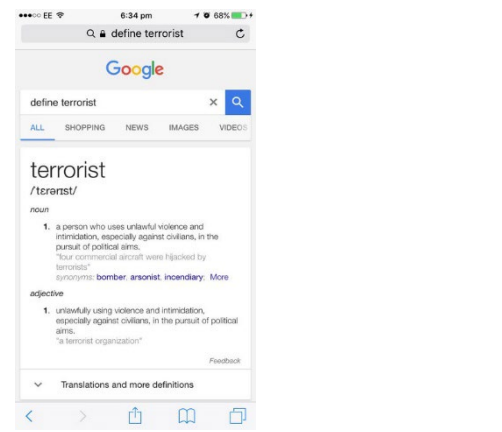

7	Photograph(s)	The image is one or more photographs. May contain text, but it is part of the original image	<p>Here, two photographs have been uploaded side by side. They are not the same photograph, but two separate photos:</p>   
8	Photograph(s): of television	The image is one or more photographs specifically of a television	

9	Photograph(s): with text	The image is a photograph or more than one photograph accompanied by text. The text has been imposed onto the image and is not part of the original image.	
10	Picture of text	The image is a picture of text. There may be a small logo which makes up part of the image. There is no URL or indication that the image has been screenshotted from somewhere else online. If there is, this will fall into the 'screenshot' category.	<p>PRESS RELEASE</p>  <p><b>LONDON TERROR - THE ISLAMIC SOCIETY OF BRITAIN CONDEMNS ATTACK IN THE STRONGEST TERMS</b></p> <p>The Islamic Society of Britain condemns this murderous and cowardly act of terrorism in the strongest terms. Our thoughts and prayers are with the families of those who have lost someone today, and with the injured and hurting.</p> <p>This was an attack upon our nation and our democracy, that was carried out to divide our country and to frighten us. Our message is that this attack will not succeed in dividing or frightening Londoners and the British people. We will hold together as a democracy, we will continue to live our lives without fear, and we will counter and reject division and hate, for these risk our common peace and freedom.</p> <p>Let us all come together in unison to keep our nation safe, to look out for and protect each other, to keep our children and young safe from extremism, to defend our civil liberties and promote the values of British democracy.</p> <p>ISLAMIC SOCIETY OF BRITAIN 22 March 2017</p> 
11	Information poster	The image is a poster designed to impart information	 <p><b>FOLLOW &amp; SHARE</b> updates from @metpoliceuk </p> <p><b>London terror attack: What we know</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>One woman is confirmed dead</li> <li>A number of people have been hurt - some with "catastrophic" injuries</li> <li>Police are treating the incident as terrorism</li> <li>Car mounted pavement on Westminster Bridge</li> <li>Police officer stabbed inside Parliament grounds</li> <li>Alleged assailant shot by armed police</li> </ul> <p> skynews.com</p> 





12	Screenshot	<p>The image is obviously a screenshot or several screenshots. It is clear that that has been screenshotted from somewhere else online, for example, from an online news article, Facebook, or Twitter. The URL or social media interface may be visible.</p>	 <p>The image is a collage of four screenshots. The top-left shows a news article header: "Sadiq Khan: London mayor says terror attacks 'part and parcel' of living in a major city" with a sub-headline "Labour politician says capitals 'have got to be prepared' for attacks like New York bombing". The top-right is a photo of Sadiq Khan in a blue suit standing in a subway car. The bottom-left is a Facebook post from "NewsThump" with a red circular graphic containing the text "WE ARE NOT AFRAID" and a caption about focusing on resilience. The bottom-right is a Google search result for "terrorist" showing the definition: "a person who uses unlawful violence and intimidation, especially against civilians, in the pursuit of political aims."</p>
13	Other	<p>The image doesn't fall into another category</p>	 <p>A full-screen image of the Union Jack flag, the national flag of the United Kingdom, waving.</p>




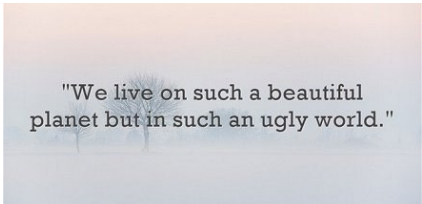
**Image type:** Analysis for the type of image(s) shared in the tweet.



Code	Name	Description	Example(s)
1	Westminster photograph	The image is the Westminster Bridge photograph. This applies to altered versions also. This overrides all other categories.	
2	Anti-terrorism banner	The image(s) is of the anti-war banner with the phrase, "Stop killing people you fucking twats".	
3	Attack aftermath	The image(s) shows the aftermath and/or events following the Westminster attack.	
4	Attack aftermath: selfie stick	The image(s) shows the aftermath of the Westminster attack in which someone was using a selfie stick	

5	Attack victim	The image(s) shows one of the attack victims	
6	Breaking news	The image(s) is a 'breaking news' graphic.	
7	Definition of terrorist & Muslim	The image(s) details the definitions of terrorist and/or Muslim	
8	Islam	The image(s) relates to Islam and is not the Westminster Bridge photograph	
9	List of terrorist attacks	The image(s) is a list of terrorist attacks	<p>#PrayForParis - January 7, 2015  #PrayForParis - November 13, 2015  #PrayForSanBernardino - 2 December 2015  #PrayForBrussels - 22 March 2016  #PrayForOrlando - 12 June 2016  #PrayForNice - 14 July 2016  #PrayForGermany  #PrayForWurzburg - 18 July 2016  #PrayForReutlingen - 24 July 2016  #PrayForAnsbach - 24 July 2016  #PrayForMunich - 22 July 2016  #PrayForOhio - 28 November 2016  #PrayForBerlin - 19 December 2016  #PrayForLondon - 22 March 2017</p>



10	London imagery	The image(s) contains imagery that is symbolic of London, e.g., Big Ben, London Underground, Union Jack	 
11	Metropolitan Police imagery	The image(s) contains imagery related to the Metropolitan Police	
12	Post-event advice	The image(s) imparts advice about what to expect/do after the attack	

13	Press statement	<p>The image(s) is a press release/statement issued by an official source, such as the emergency services or the media, which contains information about the attack.</p>	 <p>In a statement given today, 22 March, by Commander BJ Harrington at New Scotland Yard, he said:</p> <p>Since 14.40hrs this afternoon (Wednesday, 22 March) the MPS has responded to an incident in the area of Parliament Square, and the Senior National Coordinator has declared this a terrorist incident.</p> <p>And although we remain open minded to the motive, a full counter terrorism investigation is already underway - this is led by the Met's Counter Terrorism Command.</p> <p>At this stage I will confirm what we know has happened, but I will not speculate.</p> <p>We received a number of different reports - which included a person in the river, a car in collision with pedestrians and a man armed with a knife.</p> <p>Officers were already in the location as part of our routine policing operation. Immediately, additional officers were sent to the scene and that included firearms officers.</p> <p>We are working closely with the London Ambulance Service and the London Fire Brigade.</p> <p>I'd like to repeat our request for the public to avoid the following areas:</p> <p>Parliament Square, Whitehall, Westminster Bridge, Lambeth Bridge, Victoria Street up to the junction with Broadway and the Victoria Embankment up to Embankment tube.</p> <p>This is to allow emergency services to deal with this ongoing incident.</p> <p>There is an ongoing investigation being led by the Counter Terrorism Command and we would ask anybody who has images or film of the incident to pass those to police.</p> <p>We know that there are a number of casualties, including police officers, but at this stage we cannot confirm numbers or the nature of these injuries.</p> <p>Our response will be ongoing for some time as it is important that we gather all possible information and evidence.</p> <p>Public safety is our top priority and we are reviewing our policing stance across London and throughout the course of this afternoon there will be additional police and officers deployed across the Capital.</p> <p>I would like to ask the public to remain vigilant and let us know if they see anything suspicious that causes them concern and dial 999 immediately.</p> <p>The Acting Commissioner Craig Mackey is being treated as a significant witness as he was at the scene when the incident started. Whilst he is not injured, it would be inappropriate for him to talk about the incident at this stage. Ours and his thoughts are with all those involved and those responding to both incidents.</p> <p>Anyone with information can also call 0800 789 321.</p>
14	Quote	<p>The image(s) contains a quote.</p> <p>The quote can either be:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>imposed onto photograph(s) of the person who said it</li> <li>attributed to them textually</li> <li>the quote may not be attributed to someone but is within quotation marks to denote that someone spoke it.</li> </ul> <p>This category does not apply to quotes on London Underground service information boards, which would fall into the 'London Imagery' category.</p>	  

15	Sadiq Khan	The image(s) features London Mayor Sadiq Khan	<p>News • UK • Home News</p> <p><b>Sadiq Khan: London mayor says terror attacks 'part and parcel' of living in a major city</b></p> <p>Labour politician says capitals 'have got to be prepared' for attacks like New York bombing</p> <p>Gabriel Samuels   @gabls_samuels   Thursday 22 September 2016 14:13 BST   158 comments</p> 
16	Other	The image does not fit into one of the above categories.	




**Image content:** Visual content analysis on the content of the image(s) shared in the tweet.




Code	Name	Description	Example(s)
1	Trump Supporter	<p>The account appears to support Trump overtly:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Trump catchphrases (e.g., MAGA, America First) in the bio</li> <li>• Trump in the profile picture</li> <li>• Trump in the banner picture</li> <li>• Recent tweets suggest they support Trump</li> </ul> <p>This category overrides all other categories.</p>	EXAMPLES REMOVED TO PROTECT USER IDENTITY
2	Celebrity	The user can be considered a celebrity, for example, a singer, actor, or professional footballer. External research may be required here to clarify the user's celebrity status.	
3	Emergency Services	An official and verified account that belongs to an emergency service.	
4	Foreign military	The account belongs to a foreign military.	
5	Journalist/Editor	The user is a journalist or newspaper editor who describes themselves as one, the other, or both.	




6	Member of public	<p>The account is apolitical and appears to belong to and be operated by a private citizen in their personal capacity. For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• appears to be using their real name</li> <li>• appears to have a photograph of themselves as a profile picture</li> <li>• they share personal information about their lives/interests.</li> </ul> <p>The account is not presented as a Trump supporter.</p>	
7	Mainstream news media	The account belongs to and is operated by a mainstream news media organisation	
8	Independent news organisation	The account belongs to a news organisation that is not legacy/mainstream media.	
9	Political activist	The account belongs to someone who describes themselves as an activist and is interested in political activism.	
10	Politician	The user is a politician or has been a politician in the past.	
11	Spoof	The account is a spoof account pretending to belong to a fictional character	
12	Writer	The user describes themselves as a writer.	
13	Group, organisation, or society	The account belongs to or is operated by a group, organisation, or society. For example, an NGO or religious society.	
14	Unclear	<p>Applicable if:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There isn't enough information in the bio, or the bio is too vague to determine the actor type.</li> <li>• The bio lists several varying attributions (writer/politician) and could fit into more than one category or is too broad to pin down.</li> </ul>	
15	Other	The bio provides information about the user but does not fit into the other categories.	

**Actor type:** Actor type analysis for the accounts in the dataset, based on account bio, profile picture, accounts banner etc.

2.2: TOP 100 SHARED: WESTMINSTER BRIDGE PHOTOGRAPH




Code	Name	Description	Example(s)
1	Unaltered	The original, unaltered version of Jamie Lorriman's photograph used by @SouthLoneStar.	
2	Cropped	The image has been cropped in some way, whether significantly or slightly. Doesn't contain any text.	<p>Obviously cropped:</p>  <p>Slightly cropped:</p> 

3	Twitter screenshot	The photograph is a screenshot from Twitter, characterised by a black border at the top and bottom. It is not cropped.	
4	Cropped Twitter screenshot	The photograph is cropped and is a screenshot from Twitter, characterised by a black border at the top and bottom.	
5	With text	Text has been added to the photograph. There may be minimal editing, for example, circling the Muslim woman, including a speech box, but this editing does not alter the content of the photograph. The main alteration is the inclusion of text. The photograph may be cropped or be an iPhone Screenshot.	 <p><b>Muslim woman in hijab walks calmly past, checking her phone</b></p> <p><b>Woman attacked my Muslim cleric Abu Izzadeen lays dying</b></p> <p><b>This is Islam.</b></p> <p>"What the image does not show is that I had talked to other witnesses to try and find out what was happening, to see if I could be any help, even though enough people were at the scene tending to victims. I then decided to call my family to say that I was fine and was making my way home from work, assisting a lady along the way by helping her get to Waterloo station. My thoughts go out to all the victims and their families."</p> <p><b>@BuzzFeedNEWS</b></p>

6	Edited and with text	The photograph has been overtly edited (e.g., another image has been edited into the photograph, and the colouring of the photograph has been significantly altered) and also contains text.	
7	In a collage	The photograph is part of a larger collage consisting of different images. The images may be different versions of the Westminster photograph, other photographs from the scene of the attack, or unrelated. The photograph may have been edited or altered in some way. This applies to both a collage that is a singular image and a series of images. Doesn't contain any text. It can include images that are Twitter screenshots; the most important thing is that it is a collage of different images.	<p>Several different images are put together to form one singular image:</p>  <p>Collage of a series of different images, uploaded as separate images:</p> 



8	In a collage with text	The photograph is part of a larger collage consisting of different images. The images may be different versions of the Westminster photograph, other photographs from the scene of the attack, or unrelated. The photograph may have been edited or altered in some way. This applies to both a collage that is a singular image and a series of images. The image(s) also contain text	<p>Several different images are put together to form one singular image:</p>  <p>Collage of a series of different images, uploaded as separate images:</p> <p>Different versions of the Westminster photograph as part of a collage, with text:</p> 
9	Memed	The Muslim woman serves as a meme template and has been cut out of the original photograph and superimposed into another image. Doesn't contain any text.	




10	Memed in collage	The Muslim woman has been memed, as above, but the meme is part of a larger collage of images that may or may not contain text.	
11	Tweet Screenshot	The image is a screenshot of a tweet that contains the original Westminster photograph: A tweet within a tweet.	
12	Instagram screenshot	The image is a screenshot of an Instagram post that contains the Westminster photograph.	

13	Other from photo series	The Westminster photograph isn't used, and it's a different photograph from Jamie Lorriman's photo series.	
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**Image Version:** Analysis to determine the version of the Westminster Bridge Photograph shared in the tweet.

Code	Name	Description	Example(s)
1	Spreading Islamophobia	The purpose of the tweet is to overtly spread Islamophobia or paint the Muslim woman in a negative light, e.g., implying the woman is ignoring/approving the attack, associating Islam as a whole with terrorism, mocking the concept of 'moderate Muslims', implying that Muslims are at war with the Western world.	<p>Don't discriminate, she's just MINDING HER OWN BUSINESS! 😏 #PrayForLondon #Parliament</p> 
2	Neutral	The purpose of the tweet is neutral; it is neither Islamophobic nor attempting to refute Islamophobia. Generally, the tweet describes the photograph as iconic or implies that the audience understands what the user is conveying without providing further explanation.	<p>This photo taken by UK parliament today after the London terrorist attack could end up being one of the most iconic of our time #westminster</p> 

			<p>One picture says a thousand words. #PrayForLondon</p> 
3	Refuting Islamophobia	<p>The purpose of the tweet is to refute or disagree with the Islamophobic sentiments that have been applied to the Westminster Bridge Photograph. For example, it provides more context to the photograph and argues that a single photograph cannot be used to determine sometimes attitude/intentions.</p>	<p>Ridiculous some are using this still image (a fraction of a second in time) to disparage this Muslim lady's entire character #Westminster</p> 

**Intent:** Analysis to determine the intent of the tweet. Specifically, whether it served to spread Islamophobia, like @SouthLoneStar's tweet, used the photograph to dispute Islamophobia, or made a neutral comment about the photograph. Consider both the version of the photograph used and the text in the tweet.

Code	Name	Description	Example(s)
1	Location only	The hashtags used in the tweet only denote the location of the attack. For example, if the tweet contains #LondonAttacks AND #MuslimBan, it would fall into the 'Islam' category.	#Parliament #LondonAttacks
2	Solidarity	The hashtags used in the tweet imply feelings of solidarity in the attack's aftermath. May also include location-based hashtags.	#WeStandTogether
3	Islam	The tweet contains hashtag(s) related to Islam or Islamophobia. May also include location-based hashtags.	#Islamic #TerroristBan #IslamicTerror #MuslimBan

4	Trump	The tweet contains hashtag(s) that are related to Trump. These may be mentioning Trump by name or one of Trump's catchphrases, such as MAGA and America First. May also include location-based hashtags.	<i>#Trump #AmericaFirst</i>
5	Trump & Islam	The tweet has hashtags that relate to both Islam/ Islamophobia and Trump. May also include location-based hashtags.	In one tweet: <i>#islam #allahuAkbar #Trump #AmericaFirst #TravelBan #DrainTheSwamp</i>
6	Other	Doesn't contain any hashtags that fit into one of the above categories. For example, a tweet containing <i>#WednesdayWisdom</i> AND <i>#LondonAttacks</i> would fall into 'Location Only' because <i>#LondonAttacks</i> is a location-based hashtag.	Outside of the search term hashtags, the tweet only contains: <i>#WednesdayWisdom</i>
7	N/A	The tweet has no hashtags aside from <i>#Westminster</i> , <i>#PrayforLondon</i> and/or <i>#BanIslam</i> .	N/A

**Other hashtags:** Analysis of the hashtags in the tweets aside from the search term hashtags (*#Westminster #PrayforLondon #BanIslam*).

Code	Name	Description	Example(s)
1	Trump supporter	<p>The account appears to support Trump overtly. For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Trump catchphrases (e.g., MAGA, America First) in the bio</li> <li>• Trump in the profile picture</li> <li>• Trump in the banner picture</li> <li>• Recent tweets suggest they support Trump</li> </ul> <p>This category overrides all other categories.</p>	EXAMPLES REMOVED TO PROTECT USER IDENTITY
2	Right wing	<p>The account identifies as right-wing by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• stating they are right-wing/conservative</li> <li>• showing their support for right-wing politics or right-wing ideologies, e.g., pro-life, anti-gun control, white genocide</li> </ul> <p>This account overrides other categories apart from 'Trump supporter'.</p>	

3	Member of Public	<p>The account appears to belong to and be operated by a private citizen in their personal capacity. The account is not operated in a professional capacity. To be considered a member of the public, the account must have at least two of the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Appears to be using their real name as their account name and/or @handle.</li> <li>• Appears to have a photograph of themselves as a profile picture.</li> <li>• They share personal information about their lives/interests in their bio.</li> </ul> <p>The account is not presented as right-wing or a Trump supporter.</p>	
4	Internet news media	The account belongs to and is operated by an Internet news media organisation.	
5	Mainstream news media	The account belongs to and is operated by a mainstream news media organisation	
6	Brexit supporter	The account is operated by someone who describes themselves as a Brexiteer or appears to support Brexit.	
7	Unclear	<p>Applicable if:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The bio lists several professional roles and could fit into more than one category or is too broad to pin down/determine which role takes precedence.</li> <li>• There isn't enough information in the bio, or the bio is too vague to determine the actor type.</li> </ul>	
8	Other	The bio provides information about the user but does not fit into the other categories.	

**Actor type:** Analysis to determine the actor type of the tweeted account. Based on reviewing the account's profile to glean as much information as possible to establish an actor type. This includes the profile picture, banner, and description. If it is still difficult to determine the actor type after reviewing these, consider recent tweets as well, but only as a last resort. Profile information takes precedence.



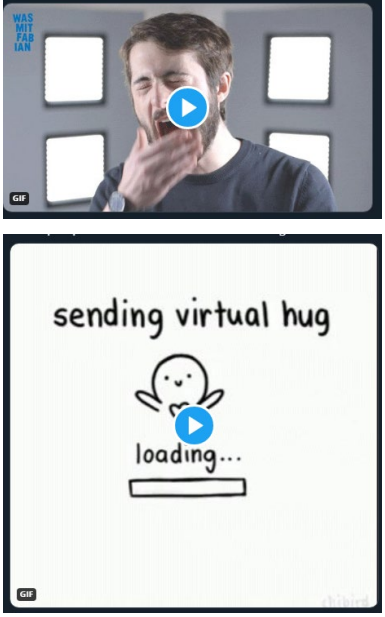
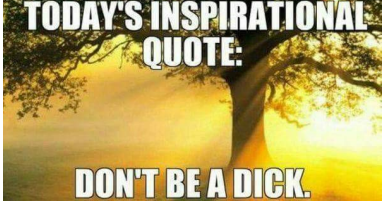
Code	Name	Description	Example(s)
1	American imagery	The account's profile picture contains images that evoke America/American patriotism, such as the American Flag.	EXAMPLES REMOVED TO PROTECT USER IDENTITY
2	Art or cartoon	The account's profile picture is a piece of art or a cartoon/cartoon character	
3	Animal	The account's profile picture is an animal.	
4	Character or celebrity	The account's profile picture is either a fictional character or a celebrity	
5	Logo/Symbol	The account's profile picture is an organisation's official logo or is a symbol with emblematic meaning.	
6	People/Person	The account's profile picture is of people/a person. This includes selfies (a close-up photograph of a person's face where it appears that the person has taken the picture themselves). The photograph appears to be of the person who operates the account. This includes images of people that have been heavily edited.	
7	Politician	The account's profile picture is of a politician who is or has served in government and is not Trump.	
8	Trump-related	The account's profile picture is Trump-related. For example, it is a photograph of Trump/Trump's family member.	
9	Fantasy	The profile picture is a kind of magical/sci-fi fantasy creature. For example, a robot, an angel.	
10	Landmark	The account's profile picture features a landmark that is not American.	
11	Sports-related	The account's profile picture relates to sports/a sports team.	
12	Other	Does not fall into any of the above categories	

**Profile picture:** Analysis of the account's profile picture.


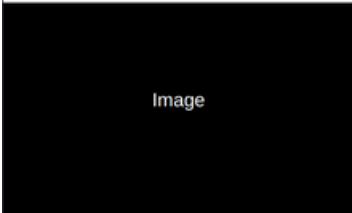
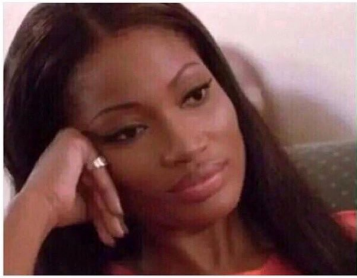
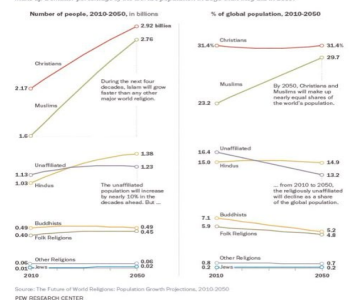

Code	Name	Description	Example(s)
1	American imagery	The account's banner contains images that evoke America/American patriotism, such as the American Flag, an American landmark. It does not feature Trump/is not Trump-related.	EXAMPLES REMOVED TO PROTECT USER IDENTITY
2	British imagery	The account's banner contains images that evoke Britain/British patriotism, such as the Union Jack, British landmark, British politician	
3	Car	The account's profile banner is a car.	
4	Graphic or text	The account's banner is either: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A logo/graphic without text</li> <li>• Just text</li> <li>• A digital graphic edited together using a combination of text and image(s)</li> </ul> It is unrelated to America or Trump.	
5	People/Person	The account's banner predominantly features people/a person. This includes celebrities.	
6	Landmark or landscape	The account's banner is a non-American landmark or a photograph of a landscape. The landmark/landscape may feature people, but this is minor. The main focus of the banner being the landmark/landscape.	
7	Politician	The account's profile banner is a politician who is or has served in government and is not Trump.	
8	Religion	The account's banner is related to religion, for example, a religious quote.	
9	Space	The account's banner is space-related, for example, the moon.	
10	Sports	The account's banner is sports related	
11	Trump	The account's banner is related to Trump.	
12	Animal	The banner is an animal.	
13	No banner	The account does not have a banner	
14	Other	Does not fall into any of the above categories	

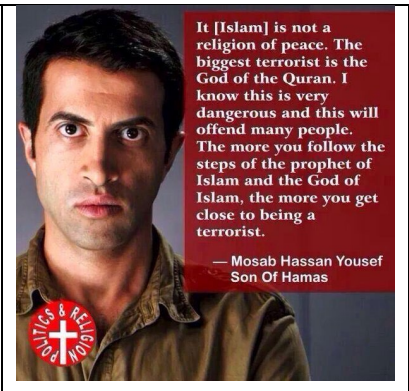
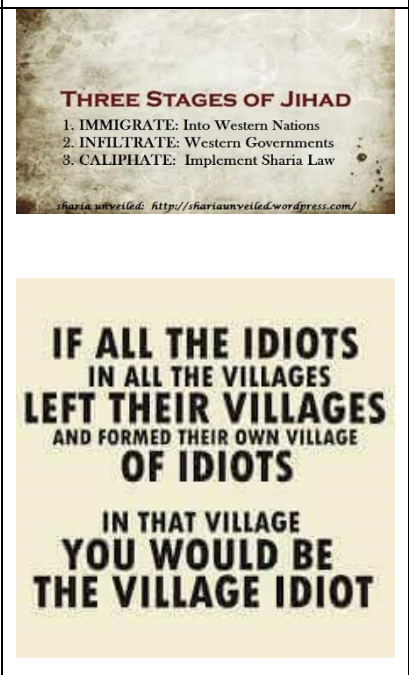
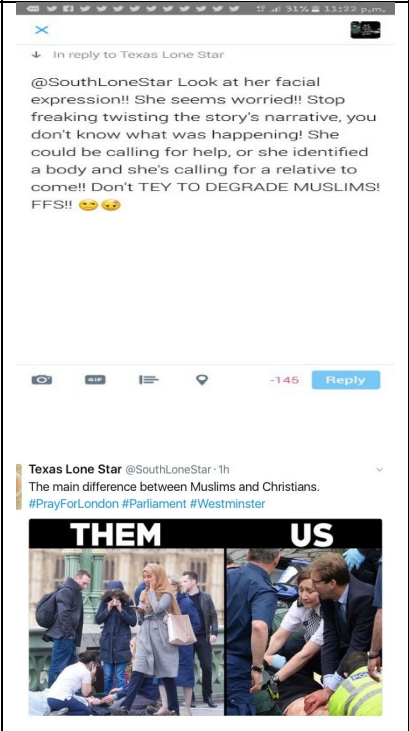

**Profile banner:** Analysis of the account's profile banner.


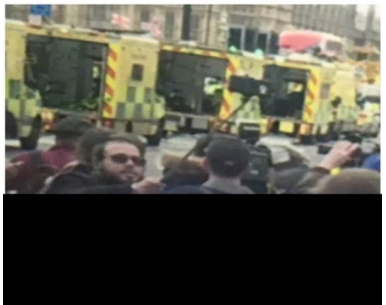


2.3: REPLIES TO @SOUTHLONESTAR'S TWEET (IMAGES)

Code	Name	Description	Example
1	Cartoon	The Image shared is a cartoon.	
2	Collage	The image is a collage consisting of more than one image that has been edited into a singular image. This included edited collages, cropped collages, and collages with text applied.	
3	GIF	The image is a GIF (Graphics Interchange Format), an “endless looping of image sequences” (Miltner & Highfield, 2017: 2).	
4	Image macro	The image is an image macro, a broad term used to describe “captioned images that typically consist of a picture and a witty message or a catchphrase” (KnowYourMeme, 2012: Online). This includes two types of formatting, the older form:	













		 <p>And the newer form:</p> <div> <p>Top text</p>  </div>	<p>Y'all ever hear an opinion so bad that you just sit there like this and genuinely feel bad for their brain</p> 																																			
5	Infographic	The image is an infographic to impart numerical information and/or statistics.	<p>pewforum.org</p> <p><b>Projected Change in Global Population</b></p> <p>With the exception of dualists, all of the major religious groups are expected to increase in number by 2050. But some will not keep pace with global population growth, and, as a result, are expected to make up a smaller percentage of the world's population in 2050 than they did in 2010.</p>  <table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>Religion</th> <th>2010 (billions)</th> <th>2050 (billions)</th> <th>2010 (%)</th> <th>2050 (%)</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>Christians</td> <td>2.27</td> <td>2.76</td> <td>31.4%</td> <td>29.7%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Muslims</td> <td>1.0</td> <td>1.39</td> <td>23.2%</td> <td>24.9%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Unaffiliated</td> <td>1.33</td> <td>1.23</td> <td>16.4%</td> <td>13.2%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Hindus</td> <td>0.49</td> <td>0.45</td> <td>7.1%</td> <td>5.2%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Buddhists</td> <td>0.48</td> <td>0.45</td> <td>5.9%</td> <td>5.2%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Other Religions</td> <td>0.06</td> <td>0.05</td> <td>0.8%</td> <td>0.7%</td> </tr> </tbody> </table> <p>Source: The Future of World Religions: Population Growth Projections, 2010-2050 Pew Research Center</p>	Religion	2010 (billions)	2050 (billions)	2010 (%)	2050 (%)	Christians	2.27	2.76	31.4%	29.7%	Muslims	1.0	1.39	23.2%	24.9%	Unaffiliated	1.33	1.23	16.4%	13.2%	Hindus	0.49	0.45	7.1%	5.2%	Buddhists	0.48	0.45	5.9%	5.2%	Other Religions	0.06	0.05	0.8%	0.7%
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Other Religions	0.06	0.05	0.8%	0.7%																																		
6	Photograph	The image is a photograph. This includes unedited photographs and photographs that have been cropped, overtly edited, and had text applied																																				


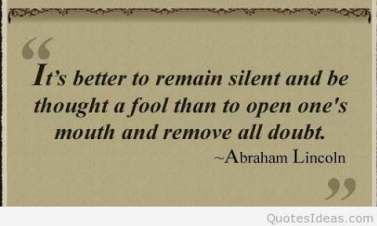


			 <p>It [Islam] is not a religion of peace. The biggest terrorist is the God of the Quran. I know this is very dangerous and this will offend many people. The more you follow the steps of the prophet of Islam and the God of Islam, the more you get close to being a terrorist.</p> <p>— Mosab Hassan Yousef Son Of Hamas</p>
7	Picture of text	The image is a picture of text. There is no URL or indication that the image has been screenshotted from somewhere else online. There are no photographs	 <p><b>THREE STAGES OF JIHAD</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. IMMIGRATE: Into Western Nations</li> <li>2. INFILTRATE: Western Governments</li> <li>3. CALIPHATE: Implement Sharia Law</li> </ol> <p><small>sharia.unveiled: <a href="http://shariaunveiled.wordpress.com/">http://shariaunveiled.wordpress.com/</a></small></p> <p><b>IF ALL THE IDIOTS IN ALL THE VILLAGES LEFT THEIR VILLAGES AND FORMED THEIR OWN VILLAGE OF IDIOTS IN THAT VILLAGE YOU WOULD BE THE VILLAGE IDIOT</b></p>
8	Tweet screenshot	The image is a screenshot of a tweet. This includes cropped tweet screenshots.	 <p>In reply to Texas Lone Star</p> <p>@SouthLoneStar Look at her facial expression!! She seems worried!! Stop freaking twisting the story's narrative, you don't know what was happening! She could be calling for help, or she identified a body and she's calling for a relative to come!! Don't TEY TO DEGRADE MUSLIMS! FFS!! 😞😞</p> <p>-145 Reply</p> <p>Texas Lone Star @SouthLoneStar · 1h The main difference between Muslims and Christians. #PrayForLondon #Parliament #Westminster</p> <p><b>THEM US</b></p> 

9	Twitter screenshot	The image is an image that has been screenshotted from Twitter, characterised by black borders at the top and bottom of the image (see example images).	 <p><b>"This is what's wrong with modern society': Passer-by 'stops to take a SELFIE' in front of victims of the Westminster terror attack</b></p> <p>By Thomas Burrows for MailOnline 17:58 22 Mar 2017, updated 19:31 22 Mar 2017</p> 
10	Other	The image does not fit into any of the above categories	<p>I had this awesome dream, where you just shut the fuck up for once. It was amazing. Felt like I was in OZ or some shit.</p>  

**Image type:** Analysis for the type of image shared in the tweet.


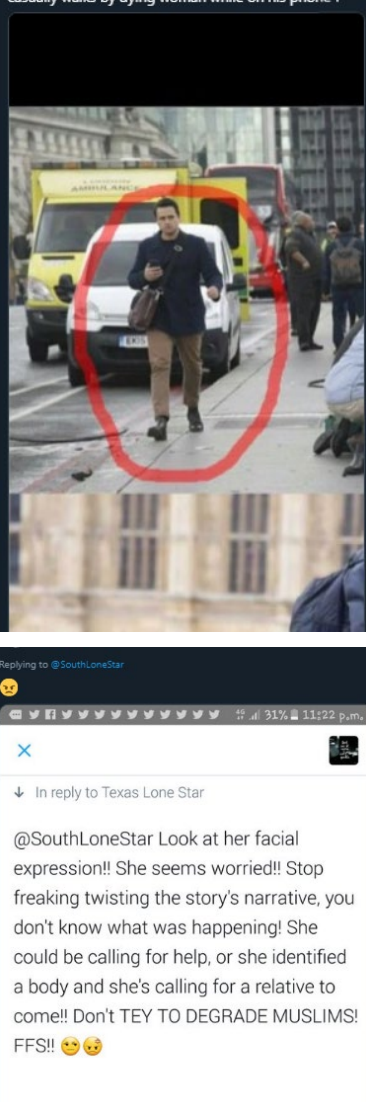
Code	Name	Description	Example
1	Bored/Tired	The image shows someone who looks bored or tired. For example, they are yawning. This category is only applicable to GIFs.	
2	Disapproval/Annoyance	The image shows someone who looks like they are annoyed or disapproving or something. For example, they are shaking their head and rolling their eyes. This category is only applicable to GIFs.	 
3	Love	The image displays love or affection, for example, a kiss. This category is only applicable to GIFs.	
4	Praise/Celebration	The image shows someone who is celebrating or approving or something. For example, they are clapping. This category is only applicable to GIFs.	

5	Insult/ Aggression	The image is a display of insult or aggression, for example, name-calling, a threat of violence, violent, argumentative, or confrontational.	 
6	Islam/ Islamophobia	The image is about Islam and/or presents Islamophobic connotations or ideas. For example, the image caricatures Muslims, reflects stereotypes, is negative towards Muslims, and/or presents Muslims as dangerous.	 
7	Other terrorist(s)/ terrorist attacks	The image refers to other terrorist attacks or shows the image(s) of terrorists.	






			<p>The First Terrorists. 70 years ago today...</p> 
8	Quote	<p>The image is a quote. The quote can either be:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• attributed to someone textually</li> <li>• may not be attributed to someone but is within quotation marks to denote that someone spoke it.</li> </ul>	
9	SouthLoneStar	<p>The image relates to the SouthLoneStar account, for example, is a SouthLoneStar tweet.</p>	 <p><b>Texas Lone Star</b> @SouthLoneStar · 2h The main difference between Muslims and Christians. #PrayForLondon #Parliament #Westminster</p>  <p>429 544 873</p>
10	Statistics	<p>The image conveys numerical statistics.</p>	<p>Crime comparison Sweden - USA</p> <p><b>Murder rates in worst cities:</b> Sweden: Malmö 34/million USA: St. Louis 590/million</p> <p><b>Prisoners:</b> Sweden: 380/million USA: 7000/million</p> <p><b>Police officers intentionally killed:</b> Sweden: 1/10 million since year 2000 USA: approx 25/10 million since year 2000</p> <p>USA rates are between 17 and 25 times higher!</p> <p>Infowars recently portrayed our most murderous city Malmö as a hell hole, but surprisingly gave a correct number for murder rate, 34 per million. This is below the US average, and well below the average for US cities.</p>

11	Westminster attack	The image is from the Westminster attack or refers to the Westminster attack (including the Muslim woman photograph) but does not refer to SouthLoneStar.	
12	Other	The image does not fit into any of the above categories.	

**Image content:** Analysis of the content of the image shared in the tweet.

Code	Name	Description	Example
1	Comradery with other users	The tweet and image show comradery with other users responding to SouthLoneStar's tweet.	
2	Defend Muslim woman	<p>The tweet intends to defend the Muslim woman. This can be to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Compare her to others who also seemingly ignored victims or acted inappropriately.</li> <li>• Compare her to the man who also seemingly walked past a victim on the bridge.</li> <li>• Pointing out that SouthLoneStar doesn't know the context of the photograph (the woman looks upset; she could be calling her family) and so is making assumptions.</li> <li>• Argue that white people and Christians also commit terroristic acts, not just Muslims, as SouthLoneStar suggests.</li> </ul>	 <p>casualty walks by dying woman while on his phone</p> <p>Replying to @SouthLoneStar</p> <p>In reply to Texas Lone Star</p> <p>@SouthLoneStar Look at her facial expression!! She seems worried!! Stop freaking twisting the story's narrative, you don't know what was happening! She could be calling for help, or she identified a body and she's calling for a relative to come!! Don't TEY TO DEGRADE MUSLIMS! FFS!! 😞😞</p>



3	Islamophobic	<p>The tweet intends to spread an Islamophobic message, similar to SouthLoneStar's tweet.</p>	 
4	Reaction	<p>The tweet is a reaction to SouthLoneStar's tweet. This may be to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Shows aggression/anger towards SouthLoneStar, or insults SouthLoneStar, for example, name-calling, insinuating SouthLoneStar is stupid.</li> <li>Dismissing SouthLoneStar's tweet as ridiculous, disappointing, meaningless, and not worth paying attention to.</li> </ul>	 
5	Unclear	<p>There is not enough information available to determine the intent of the tweet.</p>	

6	Other	The intent of the tweet does not fit into any of the above categories.	

**Intent:** Analysis of the assumed intent or motivation behind tweeting and sharing the image. For this code frame, consider both the tweet's image and text.


Code	Name	Description	Example
1	Artist	The account appears to belong to and be operated by a private citizen in their personal capacity who describes themselves as an artist.	EXAMPLES REMOVED TO PROTECT USER IDENTITY
2	Entertainer	The account appears to belong to and be operated by a private citizen in their personal capacity who works as an entertainer, for example, a stage performer, or podcaster.	
3	Fan account	The account is dedicated to a certain celebrity or celebrities, such as a boyband or singer. This is shown through the account bio, saying that the account is a fan account, or with the account name, handle, profile picture etc., being a celebrity or celebrities.	

4	Left-wing/Anti-Trump account	<p>The account identifies as left-wing and/or anti-Trump. This is done by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stating they are anti-Trump/left-wing in the account description.</li> <li>• Recently tweeting negative things about Trump.</li> <li>• Supporting left-wing policies and/or ideologies.</li> </ul>	
5	Member of the public	<p>The account appears to belong to and be operated by a private citizen in their personal capacity. The account is not operated in a professional capacity. To be considered a member of the public, the account must have at least two of the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Appears to be using their real name as their account name and/or @handle.</li> <li>• Appears to have a photograph of themselves as a profile picture.</li> <li>• They share personal information about their lives/interests in their bio.</li> </ul> <p>The account is also apolitical.</p>	
6	Parody account	<p>The account is a parody account. It is presented as operated by a recognisable fictional character, historic figure etc. There is accompanying information with the profile picture that indicates it's a parody account, e.g., the name &amp; bio align with the fictional/historic character.</p>	
7	Racist/Islamophobic account	<p>The account appears dedicated to spreading Islamophobic and/or racist sentiments.</p>	
8	Trump supporter	<p>The account appears to support Trump overtly. For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Trump catchphrases (e.g., MAGA, America First) in the bio</li> <li>• Trump in the profile picture</li> <li>• Trump in the banner picture</li> </ul>	

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Recent tweets suggest they support Trump</li> </ul> <p>This category overrides all other categories.</p>	
9	Unclear: Limited information provided	There isn't enough information in the bio, or the bio is too vague to determine the actor type. For example, if the user does not provide a full name, their bio says nothing or little about who they are/what they do.	
10	Unclear: Multiple roles/professions	The bio lists several varying roles and professions and could fit into more than one category. Alternatively, it is unclear which of their described roles/professions take precedence. For example, a user describes themselves as a writer and an actor, a user describes themselves as a manager and director.	
11	Writer	The user describes themselves as a writer.	
12	Other	The intent of the tweet does not fit into any of the above categories.	

**Actor type:** Analysis to determine the actor type of the tweeted account. Based on reviewing the account's profile to glean as much information as possible to establish an actor type. This includes the profile picture, banner, and description. If it is still difficult to determine the actor type after reviewing these, consider recent tweets as well, but only as a last resort. Profile information takes precedence.

## 2.4: ARTICLE URLS (MARCH)

Code	Name	Description	Example(s)
1	Article headline/ content	The tweet's text is the article's headline, a quote from the article, or a paraphrasing of the article's content. There are no further comments beyond this from the user.	<p>Woman photographed in hijab on Westminster Bridge responds to online abuse</p>  <p>from 2017 The Guardian</p> <p>Woman photographed in hijab on Westminster Bridge responds to online abuse Muslim woman shocked at those who 'draw conclusions based on hate and xenophobia' after anti-Islam blogs circulated her image theguardian.com</p>
2	Refuting Islamophobia	<p>The tweet's text refutes the Islamophobia applied to the photograph of the Muslim woman. This included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Condemning those spreading the Islamophobia</li> <li>• Expressing sympathy for the Muslim woman</li> <li>• Arguing that the Muslim woman was intentionally targeted because of her religion, attire.</li> <li>• Condemning the negative generalisation of Muslims.</li> <li>• Praising those who defended the Muslim woman, e.g., the Muslim woman herself, Jamie Lorriman, Tell Mama, mainstream media.</li> </ul>	EXAMPLES REMOVED TO PROTECT USER IDENTITY
3	Echoing Islamophobia	The tweet's text echoes the Islamophobia narrative. For example, they accuse the Muslim woman of playing the victim.	EXAMPLES REMOVED TO PROTECT USER IDENTITY
4	Other	The tweet's text does not fit into any of the above categories.	EXAMPLES REMOVED TO PROTECT USER IDENTITY


**Tweet content:** Analysis of the textual content of the tweet. Some tweets may feel like they could fall into more than one category because they touch on different topics. In these instances, the code is based on what seems to be the most important central focus of the tweet.

Code	Name	Description	Example(s)
1	Academic/ Researcher	The account appears to belong to and be operated by a private citizen in their personal capacity who describes themselves as an academic or a researcher. For example, a lecturer, a professor, a research fellow.	EXAMPLES REMOVED TO PROTECT USER IDENTITY
2	Campaign account	A named person does not operate the account, instead is dedicated to campaigning for a specific cause(s) or political ideologies.	
3	Government worker/ politician	The account appears to belong to and be operated by a private citizen in their personal capacity who works for a governmental system or is a politician.	
4	Group, organisation, society, NGO etc.	The account belongs to or is operated by a group, organisation, society, NGO etc. For example, a charity, or religious society.	
5	Mainstream News Media	The account belongs to and is operated by a mainstream news media organisation sharing its own article.	
6	Media professional	The account appears to belong to and be operated by a private citizen in their personal capacity who works in the media industry or as a media professional. For example, a photographer, a journalist, an editor, a TV news presenter, reporter.	
7	Member of the public	The account appears to belong to and be operated by a private citizen in their personal capacity. For example: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• appears to be using their real name</li> <li>• appears to have a photograph of themselves as a profile picture</li> <li>• they share personal information about their lives/interests/hobbies</li> </ul>	
8	Musician	The account appears to belong to and be operated by a private citizen in their personal capacity who is a professional musician. For example, is in a band.	

9	News aggregator	The account is not an official news source. It is seemingly used to aggregate and share news articles from various official news sources.	
10	Political commentator	The account appears to belong to and be operated by a private citizen in their personal capacity who is a political commentator.	
11	Unclear: Limited information provided	There isn't enough information in the bio, or the bio is too vague to determine the actor type. For example, the user does not provide a full name, their bio says nothing or little about who they are/what they do.	
12	Unclear: Multiple roles/professions	The bio lists several varying roles and professions and could fit into more than one category. Alternatively, it is unclear which of their described roles/professions take precedence. For example, a user describes themselves as a writer and an actor, a user describes themselves as a manager and director.	
13	Writer	The account appears to belong to and be operated by a private citizen in their personal capacity who describes themselves as a writer.	
14	Other	The bio provides information about the user but does not fit into the other categories.	

**Actor type:** Analysis to determine the actor type of the tweeted account. Based on reviewing the account's profile to glean as much information as possible to establish an actor type. This includes the profile picture, banner, and description. If it is still difficult to determine the actor type after reviewing these, consider recent tweets as well, but only as a last resort. Profile information takes precedence.

## 2.5: ARTICLE URLS (NOVEMBER)

Code	Name	Description	Example(s)
1	Article headline/ content	The tweet's text is the article's headline, a quote from the article, or a paraphrasing of the article's content. There are no further comments beyond this from the user.	<p>Twitter user @SouthLoneStar shared image of distressed woman in a hijab walking past terror attack victims looking at her phone. Turns out account is linked to a Russian bot.</p>  <p>Russia's role in photo of 'Muslim woman ignoring Westminster terror victims'</p> <p>Twitter user @SouthLoneStar shared an image of a distressed woman, who was wearing a hijab, walking past victims while appearing to look down at a mobile ...</p> <p>© mirror.co.uk</p>
2	Brexit	The user relates the revelation of SouthLoneStar's IRA connection to Brexit. For example, suggesting that the IRA played a role in the Brexit referendum, linking the news to Brexit and/or key players in the Brexit referendum, such as Nigel Farage.	EXAMPLES REMOVED TO PROTECT USER IDENTITY
3	Dangers/ consequences of 'fake news'	The user reflects on the larger consequences and/or dangers of 'fake news' and Russian interference. For example, discussing the potential power of Russian interference, how effective SouthLoneStar's tweet was the importance of taking 'fake news' seriously, the need to think critically about what people encounter online.	
4	Emphasising Russia's role	The user draws attention to the fact that SouthLoneStar was a Russian disinformation account and/or that the IRA is a Russian company dedicated to spreading disinformation.	
5	Expression of anger/shock	The user expresses shock and/or anger at discovering that SouthLoneStar was an IRA operated.	
6	Role of mainstream news media	The user argues that the mainstream media is partly to blame for spreading	



		the Islamophobia applied to the photograph.	
7	Power of images	The user reflects on the power of images, and how their interpretation is subjective	
8	Praise of British MP(s)	The user praises the response of British MP(s) to the news that SouthLoneStar was an IRA account	
9	Supporting SouthLoneStar's narrative	The user continues supporting SouthLoneStar's narrative and claims it is the truth.	
10	Sympathy for the Muslim woman	The user expresses sympathy for the Muslim woman.	
11	Other	The tweet's text does not fit into any of the above categories.	

**Tweet content:** Analysis of the textual content of the tweet. Some tweets may feel like they could fall into more than one category because they touch on different topics. In these instances, code is based on what seems to be the most important central focus of the tweet.

Code	Name	Description	Example(s)
1	Academic/ Researcher	The account appears to belong to and be operated by a private citizen in their personal capacity who describes themselves as an academic or a researcher. For example, a lecturer, a professor, a research fellow.	EXAMPLES REMOVED TO PROTECT USER IDENTITY
2	Anti-Brexit account	The account appears to belong to and be operated by a private citizen in their personal capacity that is openly and overly anti-Brexit. For example, the user claims to be anti-Brexit and/or pro-EU, uses anti-Brexit hashtags like #FBPE	
3	Campaign account	The account is not operated by a named person, instead is dedicated to campaigning for a specific cause(s) or political ideologies.	

4	Doctor	The account appears to belong to and be operated by a private citizen in their personal capacity who describes themselves as a doctor, and is not evidently an academic or researcher.	
5	Government worker/ politician	The account appears to belong to and be operated by a private citizen in their personal capacity who works for a governmental system or is a politician.	
6	Group, organisation, society, NGO etc.	The account belongs to or is operated by a group, organisation, society, NGO etc. For example, a charity, or religious society.	
7	Mainstream News Media	The account belongs to and is operated by a mainstream news media organisation sharing its own article.	
8	Media professional	The account appears to belong to and be operated by a private citizen in their personal capacity who works in the media industry or as a media professional. For example, a photographer, a journalist, an editor, TV news presenter, reporter.	
9	Member of the public	The account appears to belong to and be operated by a private citizen in their personal capacity. For example: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• appears to be using their real name</li> <li>• appears to have a photograph of themselves as a profile picture</li> <li>• they share personal information about their lives/interests/hobbies</li> </ul>	
10	Unclear: Limited information provided	There isn't enough information in the bio, or the bio is too vague to determine the actor type. For example, the user does not provide a full name, their bio says nothing or little about who they are/what they do.	
11	Unclear: Multiple roles/	The bio lists several varying roles and professions and could fit into more than one category. Alternatively, it is unclear which of	

	professions	their described roles/professions take precedence. For example, a user describes themselves as a writer and an actor, a user describes themselves as a manager and director.	
12	Writer	The account appears to belong to and be operated by a private citizen in their personal capacity who describes themselves as a writer.	
13	Other	The bio provides information about the user but does not fit into the other categories.	

**Actor type:** Analysis to determine the actor type of the tweeted account. Based on reviewing the account's profile to glean as much information as possible to establish an actor type. This includes the profile picture, banner, and description. If it is still difficult to determine the actor type after reviewing these, consider recent tweets as well, but only as a last resort. Profile information takes precedence.

## 2.6: MARCH NEWS ARTICLE COMMENTS

Code	Name	Description	Example(s)
1	Islam	<p>The comment is centrally about Islam and/or Muslims. The comment can mention the woman, but its main focus/reflection is on Islam/Muslims as a whole. This can include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Arguing that Muslims cannot be trusted</li> <li>• Arguing that Islam is a dangerous religion</li> <li>• Arguing that Islam is or facilitates extremist activity</li> <li>• Arguing that Muslims do not fit into Western society</li> <li>• Arguing that Muslims will not integrate into Western society</li> </ul>	<p><i>If you go on the two main Muslim forums they don't talk about this terrorist attack at all and that's the same every time there is another atrocity. A matter of complete indifference</i></p> <p><i>Racial diversity and harmony do not go hand in hand</i></p> <p><i>Europe is a secular and Christian area. It was defined where Islamic invasions and war were stopped.</i></p> <p><i>What have these islamic ungrateful angry people brought to Britain? Compare the Chinese Caribbean</i></p>

		This also includes instances of people defending the Muslim woman on a religious basis, such as arguing that the terrorist's actions were not reflective of Muslims.	<i>Jewish Hindu immigration. Lovely people integrated and contributed.</i>
2	Muslim woman	<p>The comment is centrally about the woman in the Westminster Bridge photograph. This also includes specifically identifying the woman as Muslim or discussing her Muslim identity, but not wider discussions of Islam. This can include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Questioning her actions</li> <li>• Discussing her attire</li> <li>• Arguing that she needs to assimilate</li> <li>• Supporting SouthLoneStar's narrative and arguing that she did not care about the victims of the attack</li> <li>• Arguing that her actions speak for themselves</li> <li>• Arguing that she did care about the victims</li> <li>• Arguing that she does look upset</li> <li>• Arguing that photographs are limited and so assumptions should not be made about her actions</li> <li>• Expressing sympathy for her</li> </ul>	<p><i>Silly vile woman. Did the tragic event disturb your day? Were your human rights abused? Are you going to sue the government for being traumatised in the street?</i></p> <p><i>Now lets not tear her away from her game of candy crush</i></p> <p><i>NOT TERRIFIED TO KEEP TEXTING THOUGH, stop being apologists!!!!</i></p> <p><i>Worldwide language in operation here "A Picture paints a thousands words"</i></p> <p><i>I think it is truly sad that people actually care what this woman is doing surely their are more important things to worry about</i></p> <p><i>A photo captured less than one second in time. To make judgements based on that is wrong, we do not know what she was doing either before or after! If she could not help and was not a witness then she was correct to walk past. The last thing the emergency services need is huge crowds standing around hampering their rescue efforts</i></p>
3	The photographer	The comment is about the photographer, Jamie Lorriman, who	<i>TBH I don't think she is indifferent to the situation either but the</i>

		<p>took the Westminster Bridge photograph. This can include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Questioning his motive for taking the photograph</li> <li>• Arguing that he knew the photograph would be controversial</li> <li>• Arguing that Lorrigan also stood by and did not help anyone</li> <li>• Arguing that Lorrigan had immoral motives for taking the photograph, i.e. profit, to spread Islamophobia</li> </ul>	<p><i>photographer who is claiming innocence knew exactly what he was doing when he framed the shot. He got the reaction he wanted and commenced his virtue signalling.</i></p> <p><i>Surely the person casually stood there taking a photo of someone in dire need of help is the criminal?</i></p> <p><i>And the guy who took the photograph of her? What was he doing to help apart from trying to make a few quid selling pictures?</i></p>
4	Politicisation	<p>The comment politicises the photograph and/or uses it to comment on wider political issues. This can include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Attacking/discussing left-wing/right-wing politics</li> <li>• Including politically charged phrases such as “snowflake”, “liberal”, “lefty”</li> <li>• Mentions of Trump and/or America</li> <li>• Mentions of immigration and/or deportation</li> </ul>	<p><i>Lol. Trump counts on idiots like you who cheer him on while he phucks your #\$\$%\$ while stealing your money.</i></p> <p><i>Typical lefty do gooders coming out in force that's why this country is in the state it's in</i></p> <p><i>I think you see what you want to see in this picture. I'm not allowed to say what I see but you liberal lefties feel free to go ahead. Enjoy it while you can.</i></p>
5	The mainstream media	<p>The comment centres on the role of the media in the story. This can include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Arguing that the media is (unfairly) protecting or defending the woman</li> <li>• Stating that the story is not news</li> </ul>	<p><i>As per usual, the media is very quick to protect people from the very same crazy beliefs that caused the attack.</i></p> <p><i>Inconsequential rubbish</i></p> <p><i>We all knew that. But the DM decided to single her out and cause</i></p>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Arguing that the media is adding to the amplification and controversy of the story</li> <li>Arguing that the media is hypocritical and also twists stories</li> </ul>	<p><i>a bit more trouble. This rag should be ashamed.</i></p> <p><i>well done mirror for making it worse and splashing her picture all over the place invading her privacy and for showing all the victims suffering for the world to see whether they wanted that or not.</i></p>
6	SouthLoneStar	<p>The comment centres on SouthLoneStar, the Twitter account that tweeted the photograph with an Islamophobic caption. This can include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Insulting SouthLoneStar</li> <li>Agreeing with SouthLoneStar’s caption</li> <li>Arguing that SouthLoneStar is purposefully trying to spread hatred</li> </ul>	<p><i>He calls himself "Texas Lone Star"...nothing more to add about it then....disgusting!!!!</i></p> <p><i>The tweet from "Texas Lone Star" is symptomatic of the current political climate. And people like him are playing right in to the hands of ISIS - they WANT to incite hatred and division. They thrive on it. No prizes for guessing who this idiot voted for in the US elections.</i></p> <p><i>I must have missed the verification the person is a "pro-Trump twitter user" and not just a xenophobic jerk causing the abuse.</i></p>
7	Trolls	<p>The comment is about internet users who purposefully spread hatred online. This can include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Using the word “troll” in their comment</li> <li>Calling certain internet users “trolls”</li> <li>Speaking against internet users who have spread hatred towards the woman online</li> </ul>	<p><i>There is always somebody waiting to siht stir, even though they dont know any of the facts</i></p> <p><i>What the internet trolls and fascist idiots don’t realise is that the British public despise them more than they themselves despise Muslims</i></p> <p><i>the hate that has been aimed at this woman is as disgusting as the hate which is shown by the terrorists</i></p>

8	Other	The topic of the comment does not fit into one of the above categories or is too vague to identify.	<i>Sure, lets go with that</i>  <i>We're not allowed to say anything</i>
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**Overarching topic:** Code frame used to identify the central topic of the comment. Read the comment and identify which of the following you think most reflects the overarching topic of the comment.

Code	Name	Description	Example
1	Positive	<p>The commenter discusses the topic of the comment positively, such as defending, expressing sympathy, providing more context etc. For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Defending the actions of the Muslim woman</li> <li>Expressing sympathy towards the Muslim woman</li> <li>Asserting that the Muslim woman was/looked upset</li> <li>Arguing that other people also seemed to ignore victims</li> <li>Arguing that we cannot judge the Muslim woman's actions based on one picture</li> <li>Defending Islam</li> <li>Defending the photographer</li> </ul>	<p><i>What's the story here? She was probably letting her family know she's OK. What about the guy just standing there or the girl blowing her nose? Or the people behind her just chatting? You can make a stupid innuendo non-issue out of anything</i></p> <p><i>Your talking rubbish, these attacks affect Muslims in this country as much as everyone else. Who do you think is gonna be hit by the backlash from what this guy did?</i></p> <p><i>She was probably in shock and informing her family she was ok. Like we all would. Pan back from that picture and you'd see people of every race/religion doing exactly the same thing.</i></p>
2	Negative	<p>The commenter discusses the topic of the comment negatively, such as expressing anger/aggression, using hateful language, and pushing inflammatory rhetoric/ideas. For example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Arguing that Islam is dangerous</li> </ul>	<p><i>I looked beyond what she was wearing and saw Islam. The root cause of this murderous act. And in my minds eye ,the hand wringing, impotent, politically correct crowd unwilling to talk about the 'elephant in the room'</i></p>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Arguing that Muslims do not fit in society and need to assimilate</li> <li>• Arguing that the Muslim woman should have stopped to help/others helped but she did not/ they would have helped</li> <li>• Arguing that the Muslim woman was happy about the attack or participated in it</li> <li>• Arguing that she did not care about the victims</li> <li>• Politicising the story in a divisive/aggressive way</li> <li>• Arguing that the photographer should have helped/knew the photograph would insight controversy</li> <li>• Criticising the role of the media in spreading the tweet</li> <li>• Expressing anger at @SouthLoneStar/other who also spread disinformation and/or hate online</li> </ul>	<p><i>It is not a religion, it is a communist cult that threatens to kill anyone who criticises it.</i></p> <p><i>islam is not a race any more than its brother-ideology, nazism.</i></p> <p><i>Another 50 years in the UK and you will have a full bin bag dress on my dear, only your eyes available and walking 3 steps behind your husband as wife no. 2</i></p> <p><i>Could have stopped to help - most others would</i></p> <p><i>She felt sad because a Muslim brother has lost his life.</i></p> <p><i>NOT TERRIFIED TO KEEP TEXTING THOUGH, stop being apologists!!!!</i></p>
3	Unclear	The sentiment of the comment is unclear, or is it neither overtly positive nor overtly negative.	<p><i>Why? Is she a terrorist?</i></p> <p><i>Rubbish!</i></p> <p><i>Europe is lost and Britain has fallen ... will America be next ?</i></p>

**Basic sentiment:** Code frame used to determine if the commenter discusses the overarching topic of the comment in a positive or negative light or if this is unclear.



## 2.7: NOVEMBER NEWS ARTICLE COMMENTS

Code	Name	Description	Example
1	Confusion	<p>The commenter appears confused about some aspects of the story. This includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• General confusion about the content of the article and misunderstanding of what the article is reporting on</li> <li>• Confusion about why the article's content is important and/or the potential consequences/ repercussions of SouthLoneStar's action.</li> <li>• They do not understand why SouthLoneStar's tweet was 'fake news' or disinformation – because the photograph was 'real', they do not understand the problem.</li> <li>• They do not understand why the person who posted the story is important or why this makes the tweet disinformation.</li> </ul>	<p><i>Is the picture fake?</i></p> <p><i>So this was photo shopped and the Muslim woman actually cared about the victims? Or the photo happened as depicted and it's bad cause a Russian took the photo?</i></p> <p><i>Okay. Understood that it was the Russians who showed it...but...did they hire the woman to walk into the photo? I understand they put a slant on it to make it highlight the woman's behavior....but.....she DID engage in this behavior right? That's not in dispute correct?</i></p> <p><i>So who regardless who posted the Tweet, the picture does show what appears to be a Muslim woman on her phone walking past the man dying on the sidewalk. Or am I missing something?</i></p>
2	Islam	<p>The comment is centrally about Islam and/or Muslims. The comment can mention the woman, but its main focus/reflection is on Islam/Muslims as a whole. This can include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Referencing the Westminster Bridge attack or other Islamist terrorist attacks</li> </ul>	<p><i>The truth is, 70% of Muslims silently agree with terrorist attacks on the West. And we now have upwards of 5 million of them living amongst us.</i></p> <p><i>The bigots and racists will be gutted, although I see they are</i></p>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Arguing that Muslims are dangerous/terrorists/extremists/cannot be trusted</li> <li>• Discussing prejudice/racism towards Muslims</li> </ul>	<p><i>going into denial mode on this thread. Pathetic.</i></p> <p><i>A lot of DM readers WANTED It to be true. It reinforced their prejudice</i></p> <p><i>So, it's not the weekly terror attacks against innocent women and children that make us question Muslims motives and religious fervor???? It's the Russians. Got it.</i></p>
3	Mainstream media	<p>The comment centres on the mainstream media as a whole or the specific newspaper that published the article being commented on concerning its role in the journey and evolution of SouthLoneStar's tweet and the Westminster Bridge photograph. This includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Praising the newspaper for publishing the corrective information</li> <li>• Arguing that the newspaper/mainstream media played a role in further circulating SouthLoneStar's tweet by reporting on it in March</li> <li>• Chastising the newspaper/mainstream media for reporting on SouthLoneStar's tweet in March</li> <li>• Dismissing the authenticity of the article</li> <li>• Arguing the newspaper/mainstream media is hypocritical because they played a role in spreading the photograph</li> <li>• Calling the newspaper/ article/ mainstream media 'fake news'</li> </ul>	<p><i>WTF... YOU published this story with the same intentions...DM hypocrisy again!</i></p> <p><i>Indeed. If you see an "inflammatory" headline in the DM dig a bit deeper and more often than not it is taken wildly out of context but presented as fact. This story is a good example of how the DM rolls.</i></p> <p><i>Good that you're printing this article, although I must say I was surprised to see it in this paper</i></p> <p><i>But it was mainly due to low-brow media such as Mailonline pushing the myth. Now you're crying 'Fake News'.</i></p> <p><i>And which newspaper was so quick to use the photo for</i></p>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Expressing distrust in the newspaper/mainstream media</li> </ul>	<p><i>exactly that purpose? The hypocrisy is staggering</i></p> <p><i>More fake news in the Indie</i></p> <p><i>Fake News ? Could this story be fake news as well ?</i></p> <p><i>Except it wasn't fake news! If you want fake news then just listen to the BBC output where every day they run some distorted news story for their own agenda.</i></p>
4	Muslim woman	<p>The comment is centrally about the woman in the Westminster Bridge photograph. This includes specifically identifying the woman as Muslim or discussing her Muslim identity, but not wider discussions of Islam. This can include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Expressing sympathy for the woman</li> <li>Arguing that the Muslim woman does look upset in the photograph</li> <li>Arguing that she was likely using her mobile phone to get in touch with family or call for help</li> <li>Arguing that she did nothing wrong</li> <li>Arguing that we do not know what she was doing</li> <li>Supporting SouthLoneStar's original narrative and arguing that she intentionally ignored the victim, was indifferent about the attack etc.</li> <li>Arguing that it does not matter who shared the photograph (i.e. SouthLoneStar) because the narrative SouthLoneStar applied to the</li> </ul>	<p><i>The poor woman had to endure this and it was fake news,,,, how disgusting..</i></p> <p><i>I noticed she looked shaken and upset. I think most people did.</i></p> <p><i>I said at the time they didn't need to have any mawkish bystanders and she was probably letting a worried family know she was safe !</i></p> <p><i>Shocked or not, that despicable human being was not helping when others needed her. It doesn't make any difference who posted the picture</i></p> <p><i>I believe the original story</i></p> <p><i>Yet she still walked by.</i></p>

		<p>photograph is true and reflective of what is happening in the photograph.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Insinuating that the woman played a part in the terrorist attack</li> </ul>	<p><i>She on the phone going " good job, got em"</i></p> <p><i>Its a picture of a woman looking away! Doesn't mean she is ignoring the situation, maybe in the next couple of frames she's helping. Don't judge this person on a picture..</i></p>
5	Politicisation	<p>The comment politicises the story by connecting it to wider political issues/narratives/arguments. This includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Using terms like 'liberal', 'leftist' etc.</li> <li>• Mentioning wider political topics such as elections, Brexit, Trump etc.</li> <li>• Talking about wider political events, both in the UK and in other countries</li> <li>• Dismissing the story because the American Democratic party provided evidence of SouthLoneStar's Russian connections.</li> </ul>	<p><i>Ah, I think I understand the liberals' "logic" now. If a fact comes from someone they don't like, it's dismissed. To be accepted, facts must come from someone they like.</i></p> <p><i>But the liberals don't question the accuracy of the photo. Or the emails Hillary's campaign sent</i></p> <p><i>We will have turned a corner when we accept that the Russian influenced the Brexit referendum</i></p>
6	Russia	<p>The comment centres on Russia's involvement in the disinformation campaign. This can include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Accepting Russia's involvement in the story</li> <li>• Reflecting on the consequences of disinformation that comes from Russia</li> <li>• Discussing the SouthLoneStar account specifically</li> <li>• Not believing Russia's involvement in the story</li> </ul>	<p><i>Most of us already know they're the ones who do this s**t. Seeding discord and hate is what Putin's been doing for a long time ... divide and conquer, he thinks. It will blow back into his nose.</i></p> <p><i>Russia's infowar and cyberwar against us is one of the big issues of the day.</i></p>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The commenter stated that they believe “the Russians” over the information in the news article.</li> <li>• Making jokes about Russia being blamed for everything</li> </ul>	<p><i>By "troll" you mean "person who showed us something the establishment would have preferred not to have been seen".</i></p> <p><i>Meanwhile everyone with half s brain is aware of the manipulation behind the scenes. These Russian bot accounts are everywhere, they're on here too.</i></p>
7	Social media	<p>The comment centres on the role of social media platforms in disinformation campaigns. This can include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Arguing that social media platforms need to be regulated</li> <li>• Acknowledging that social media platforms allow the spread of disinformation</li> <li>• Speaking negatively of social media platforms</li> </ul>	<p><i>Time for Facebook and twitter to be subject to the same rules as any other broadcaster. Long past time in fact.</i></p> <p><i>Including this site Fakebook seems to be taking over the world like many of the other antisocial websites, the scary thing is that people believe them. RR</i></p> <p><i>It may be a fake story but Twitter is still the most important medium we have recording illogical, first thought, emotional over-reactions to world events. Before Twitter, there were just journalists</i></p>
8	The photograph	<p>The comment centres on the concept of photographic veracity, i.e. the support or dismissal of the commonly held belief that photographs function as evidence and ‘truth. This can include:</p>	<p><i>But the picture is REAL, showing her IGNORING the attack.</i></p> <p><i>You just see what you want to see.</i></p>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Arguing the authenticity of the photo overrides everything else, e.g., context, who took the photograph, who posted it etc.</li> <li>• The idea that photographs represent the 'truth'</li> <li>• Using a phrase similar to "a picture speaks one thousand words"</li> <li>• Criticising people for accepting SouthLoneStar's narrative without questioning</li> <li>• Arguing that it is no objective 'truth' to a photograph</li> <li>• Arguing that photographs have limited contexts</li> </ul>	<p><i>But, was the photo fake? Just cause "russian troll" posted doesn't mean there's no truth to the photo posted</i></p> <p><i>So they want us to focus on who sent the photo rather than the content of the picture. hahahahaha Nice try.</i></p> <p><i>Doh! Anyone with half a brain cell knows a photo doesn't tell the whole story! Non news!!</i></p> <p><i>Who would believe this anyway? A photograph is one second caught in time-we don't know what happened right after that.</i></p> <p><i>The picture doesn't say anything about anything!</i></p>
9	Other	The topic of the comment does not fit into one of the above categories or is too vague to identify.	<p><i>It worked didn't it</i></p> <p><i>Aha and that makes a difference.</i></p>

**Overarching topic:** Code frame used to identify the central topic of the comment. Read the comment and identify which of the following you think most reflects the overarching topic of the comment.

Code	Name	Description	Example
1	Yes	<p>It is clear from the user's comment that they believe the article's content, i.e. they believe/accept that SouthLoneStar was an IRA-operated account and that the account's Westminster Bridge Photograph tweet was Russian disinformation. This can include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• General acceptance of the story</li> <li>• Acknowledging that photographic veracity is problematic</li> <li>• Arguing that the tweet was used to encourage prejudice and bigotry</li> <li>• Praising the newspaper for reporting on the corrective information</li> <li>• Arguing that the newspaper/mainstream media also played a role in spreading the disinformation</li> <li>• Expressing sympathy towards the Muslim woman, defending her actions, or supporting her narrative about what happened.</li> <li>• Discussing the wider political implications of disinformation</li> <li>• Accepting Russia's role in SouthLoneStar's disinformation campaign</li> <li>• Reflecting on the role of social media in the spread of disinformation</li> </ul>	<p><i>Doh! Anyone with half a brain cell knows a photo doesn't tell the whole story! Non news!!</i></p> <p><i>Who would believe this anyway? A photograph is one second caught in time-we don't know what happened right after that.</i></p> <p><i>The bigots and racists will be gutted, although I see they are going into denial mode on this thread. Pathetic.</i></p> <p><i>And this is how you counter fake news: by proving it to be untrue, not by banning things left, right and centre and attacking free speech in general.</i></p> <p><i>Yes. And this was obvious to anyone who scratched beneath the surface at the time, but I seem to remember the DM running a story along similar lines. And I remember all the top comments being about how evil this woman was.</i></p>
2	No	<p>It is clear from the user's comment that they do not believe, have doubts about, or are choosing to ignore the content of the article, i.e. they are doubtful that the information is true and/or doubt that SouthLoneStar was an IRA-operated account and that the account's</p>	<p><i>So what was wrong? Picture shows woman walking past victims. I'm sure lots of people would have posted something similar. Why attribute all that's wrong with the world to Russia. Not nice thing to do but it hardly stops the earth from spinning</i></p>

		<p>Westminster Bridge Photograph tweet was Russian disinformation. This can include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• General doubt/disbelief in the story</li> <li>• Cynical confusion about why this new information is important or why it matters</li> <li>• Dismissing this new information as unimportant and or inconsequential</li> <li>• Echoing the Islamophobic sentiments of SouthLoneStar’s original narrative</li> <li>• Expressing distrust in the media</li> <li>• Dismissing/questioning the authenticity of the article</li> <li>• Continuing to believe SouthLoneStar’s interpretation of the Westminster Bridge photograph i.e. chastising the Muslim woman, saying she does not care, is indifferent, and supports terrorism.</li> <li>• Dismissing the story because the American Democratic party provided the evidence of SouthLoneStar’s Russian connections.</li> <li>• Doubting Russia’s involvement</li> <li>• Believing the photograph provides unquestionable evidence of SouthLoneStar’s narrative</li> <li>• Arguing the authenticity of the photo overrides everything else (e.g. context, who took the photograph, who posted it etc.). The photograph is ‘real’ and cannot be questions.</li> </ul>	<p><i>Okay. Understood that it was the Russians who showed it...but...did they hire the woman to walk into the photo? I understand they put a slant on it to make it highlight the woman's behavior....but.....she DID engage in this behavior right? That's not in dispute correct?</i></p> <p><i>Honestly, how do we know that this story isn't fake and is just trying to calm racial tension? The media continually attempt to control the narrative with support from a left wing government.</i></p> <p><i>Shocked or not, that despicable human being was not helping when others needed her. It doesn't make any difference who posted the picture</i></p> <p><i>But she did walk past....That's not fake</i></p>
3	Unclear	<p>It is unclear from the comment whether the user believes or does not believe the article's content. This can include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Genuine confusion about the story</li> </ul>	<p><i>Is the picture fake?</i></p> <p><i>Despite media efforts in this country, or others, we know what is going on in this country.</i></p>



		<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Reflecting on wider topics related to the story, without stating outright whether they believe or disbelieve the story, for example, terrorism, Islam, political partisanship</li></ul>	
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**Belief in the story:** Code frame used to determine whether the user believes the article or is doubtful about its authenticity. It has to be clear from the comment whether they believe or are doubtful; if it is not entirely clear or questionable, it falls into the category of “unclear”.

APPENDIX 3: THEMATIC FRAMEWORK (TWITTER & ONLINE NEWS DATA)

Major theme	Definition	Minor theme	Definition	Motivation
Othering	This theme centred on media tropes associated with Muslims and Islam. Attempts to other the Muslim woman, or Muslims in general, by pushing the narrative that they are incompatible with the society they occupy. This includes accusations that the Muslim woman/Muslims are dangerous, deviant, and that their beliefs and religious practices put them at odds with wider society. This hinges on their identify as Muslims, using Islamophobic tropes of Muslims as untrustworthy	Islam = terrorism	The user equates Islam with terrorism, insinuating that Muslims inherently are or support Islamophobic terrorism because of their Muslim identity.	Endorsement
		Apathy & approval	The user believes that the Muslim woman was passively apathetic towards or actively supported the terrorist attack. This relates to the wider media stereotype that Muslims tacitly support terrorism.	
		Societal incompatibility	This relates to the concept of assimilation, with the user asserting that Muslims cannot or choose not to integrate into the societies they occupy.	
		Divisive rhetoric	This centres on the user's language, specifically divisive rhetoric, to separate the Muslim woman from the others in the photograph. Examples include the juxtaposition of "them" with "us", "some" with "others", and exclusionary language like "except for one".	
		Attire	Users draw attention to or discuss the Muslim woman's attire, specifically her hijab.	Endorsement/ Refutation

	and dangerous societal outsiders.	Challenge	While still falling under the major theme of 'othering', this minor theme functions to challenge and undermine efforts to other Muslims.	Refutation
Photographic veracity	This theme focuses on the central visual form of the disinformation being a photograph, and the common association of photographs with evidence and truth value. This relates to either a belief in this assumption or a critique of it, centring on whether users consider SouthLoneStar's caption to accurately describe what the photograph shows or dismiss it.	The photograph speaks for itself	This minor theme is text-themed, with users using a version of the common idiom, "a picture is worth a thousand words". This relates to the assumption that photographs inherently carry detailed illustrative information and have a greater evidentiary status than speech or text. This allowed users to assume that their own or others' subjective interpretations of the photograph represented the truth.	Unclear/ Endorsement
		Context is irrelevant, Content is paramount	Here, the photograph's content is given priority over the context, where users argue that the visible content of the photograph is more pertinent when assessing what the image means and shows than the wider context surrounding the photograph's creation and use.	Endorsement
		The photograph is 'real'	As the photograph is 'real' in the sense that it is a genuine photograph which was not staged, falsified, or manipulated, some users rejected that the photograph was 'fake news'. This presents	

			disinformation through a false, binary lens where it is believed that only content which is manipulated or fabricated can constitute 'fake news'. Again, this also relates to the assumption that a genuine photograph represents evidence and truth value.	
		Limited & subjective context	Users emphasise the fragility of photographic veracity, refuting the Islamophobic messaging applied to the photograph by problematising the assumption that the photograph could be used as evidence of this messaging.	Refutation
Cynicism about the media	This theme relates to how users responded to the role of mainstream news media in the journey of SouthLoneStar's tweet and the Westminster Bridge photograph. Overall, this centred on a negative response to the media's role, with users distrusting media reportage and	Amplification & news value	Users asserted that the SouthLoneStar's tweet did not constitute news, had no news value, and should not have been covered as a news story. It also relates to users accusing the media of unnecessarily amplifying the tweet	Unclear/ Refutation
		Distrust	Users expressed distrust in the information presented by the mainstream media, specifically the corrective information from November, which explained how and why the photograph was used as disinformation.	Endorsement

	believing this reportage was cynical and caused further harm to the Muslim woman.			
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## APPENDIX 4: FOCUS GROUP TRANSCRIPTS

### FOCUS GROUP 1

#### RECALL AND RECOGNITION OF THE PHOTOGRAPH

RESEARCHER: So I just want to start off by asking each of you if you recognise or remember the photograph? I'll start off in the order that everyone appears on my screen. So, if I start off with Ayaat Do you recognise the photograph or do you remember it from the time?

Ayaat: Yeah, I do yeah, definitely the photograph and I remember the incident too yeah. I remember it very clearly; I recognise the photo.

RESEARCHER: Do you remember it from when the event took place?

Ayaat: Yeah, I do, yeah.

RESEARCHER: Okay. Habiba? Do you recognise it?

Habiba: To be honest I've seen it after the incident, but I didn't see it during.

RESEARCHER: Okay, so you might have seen it like later maybe in the news or something?

Habiba: Yeah.

RESEARCHER: Okay. And then Sonam? Do you recognise the photograph?

Sonam: I do. But I also didn't see at the time of the incident.

RESEARCHER: Do you remember where you might have seen it before?

Sonam: I think I saw it online. Maybe on social media or something.

#### RESPONSE TO THE PHOTOGRAPH AND TWEET

RESEARCHER: Okay. And so now I'd like to talk to you about how you would respond to the photograph? So, looking at it now on its own what do you think it shows? Again, I'll go in the same order starting with Ayaat.

Ayaat: For me, initially, I remember seeing this photo with my mother at the time. We just felt sorry for everyone in the scene. And I guess we didn't really pick out the hijabi girl because she's no different to us, I guess. But then I understood why the media chose this image because she's literally the only non-white person standing there but initially when me and my mum looked at it we feel sorry for everyone who was there and we just included everyone because everyone's in the picture right? And then after seeing that we understood why the picture was taken and what it portrayed. But our first look, was just sympathy for everyone who was there. And obviously everyone's extremely distressed.

RESEARCHER: Okay, interesting and Habiba? When you look at the picture on its own, what do you think it shows? And how do you respond to it?

Habiba: It's like of similar to Ayaat like, obviously the person on the floor you and you like, you automatic think what's happened. But at the same time, I think that this is just one picture from probably like an incident that took over a couple of hours. And obviously, the media pinpoints on this one picture because of like, what's happening - that it looks like

the hijab woman's walking away, but obviously, we know that she was a nurse, and she was helping or something like that. But it's just, it's annoying that because of that one picture, just one picture of out of like, a whole thing that happened from that duration. But they chose that one picture to pinpoint. And to, I guess, attack her for that picture. And obviously, again, like Ayaat, you do you feel sorry for everyone that's been affected as well.

RESEARCHER: Okay. And Sonam, do you have anything to add? Do you respond to it in a similar way?

Sonam: I think in a similar way, because everyone just looks so distressed, she looks stressed. Before you even read the headlines it's just worry and confusion about what's going on and trying to find out. I don't think it crossed my mind what they were going to depict her as, at the time, until you just read the whole thing. Because I think everyone's just so concerned about the actual situation that you don't realise that she was the main focus of it.

RESEARCHER: And I'd like to ask a similar question. Now when it's framed within the tweet. So again, how do you respond to the caption that the Twitter user gave it?

Ayaat: The words I would use is not surprised. I mean, to me, she clearly looks in extreme distress. But I'm not surprised that someone would use that to attack a Muslim woman. Yeah, I'd just say not surprised. But it's confusing as well, because the caption and the picture, for me, is total opposites. Because it says 'Muslim woman pays no mind to the terror attack'. But if you look at the picture, she's clearly like crying or she just looks really distressed. So, it just doesn't make sense. But at the same time I'm just not surprised.

RESEARCHER: Interesting. And Habiba How do you respond to it? Now, when it's put in this new context with this caption?



Habiba: And I agree with Ayaat as well, like you can clearly see that she's got a distressed look on her face. And the caption, like [1] said it isn't very surprising. But it's also annoying, because I feel like some people would see that and they would automatically use as an excuse to start name calling or like attacking, like Muslim women... or just generalising Muslim people in a way from that one tweet. And, yeah, it's just so misleading as well, because the caption does not match her face as well. And at the same time, how does he know what's happening? It's just one picture. They don't know what happened during the whole scene, if that makes sense.

RESEARCHER: Yeah. Had you seen in the tweet before me showing you it now in the focus group?

Habiba: I think I did see this tweet actually, on the news or something similar to this. Yeah.

RESEARCHER: Ayaat Had you seen the tweet before this focus group?

Ayaat: Yeah I did, yeah.

RESEARCHER: And Sonam had you seen the tweet before?

Sonam: Um, I don't think I've seen this particular tweet. But I did see the way other people were reacting, the the back and forth.

RESEARCHER: Okay. And then just going back to my original question, how do you respond to the photograph now, when it's been put into this kind of context with this caption?

Sonam: I feel like it's irritating. It's not surprising as Ayaat and Habiba said. But it's also irritating because I feel like they will do any attempt to put her into a bad light. And I think being Muslim, you don't get a chance to explain anything, you don't get a chance to just like, not even give an explanation, but to be seen in a good light already. So anything you do, you get depicted really badly. So it's frustrating that you know the situation that's happened in the world and you're intended to cause more harm, and you're not trying to be helpful. You just wanted to do some damage. So, yeah, just irritating.

#### MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS OF MUSLIMS

RESEARCHER: Okay. And that's interesting, because it kind of leads into what I was going to ask next because I'd like to talk about wider media representations of Muslims. There's a long history of the media using problematic stereotypes about Muslims whether its in the news, or in TV shows and films and things like that. And I believe that this piece of disinformation spread so widely, because it's underpinned by these long-standing problematic stereotypes, so I'd like to have a wider discussion about that. So firstly, again, I'll go in the same order. Ayaat do you agree that existing media stereotypes played a role in the spread of this tweet?

Ayaat: Yeah, definitely. I don't think it's problematic. I think it's oppressive and destructive towards Muslims. I think it's oppressed, our parents, our grandparents, and now it's oppressing us, the next generation, the younger siblings. In always in history there's always one group that's the villain, the evil people. And unfortunately, for the past 50, 60 years, it's been, you know, Muslims, and we're deemed as the 'evil people' trying to take over the world. I don't think it's problematic, problematic is something- I just don't feel like that's the right word. I think it's oppressive and disruptive and it's just adds to white privilege, I guess. The idea of racism, institutionalised racism, it adds to the idea of media holding power. And people who follow the media will always get the image that Muslims are the bad guys. And I think maybe because I'm a little bit older, I'm so used to it like, and I grew

up here with asylum seeker parents, and just watching my mum and dad go through the racist and Islamophobic experience, and then me growing up and not seeing any change. I think I'm quite numb to it. And it doesn't bother me, the news don't bother me, because I don't expect anything different because almost all my life- maybe for my younger siblings, or, you know, the younger generation now it's like "hang on, I thought we were all equal? Why are we bad? Why are we this?" Yeah, I don't know where I was going with that. But I just feel like it's extremely oppressive, extremely destructive. And I'm not surprised that girl was depicted in that way. Like I said, I'm just not surprised. Maybe I'm just desensitised towards being attacked.

RESEARCHER: No, that's, that's really interesting. And I was going to ask a bit of a follow up question about discussing your experiences with these kinds of media stereotypes. You've kind of already covered it already. But I don't know if you want it to go into more detail about experiencing the stereotypes.

Ayaat: Yeah, definitely. My parents came to this country as asylum seekers. So I was brought up here in Manchester, my whole life. And I saw my mum going through certain, like, incidents when I was a kid, but I just internalised that and we're also raised to think, "look, media isn't everything. What they say about you in the media is not true. This is who we are, this is our religion, and what they're saying in the media just don't listen to them. That's not that's not who we are. And that's not what we're meant to do". As you grow up, you start to realise that you know, the media does really have a massive effect on society because, for example, I have so many Islamophobic incidents I could tell you about, just like off the top of my head. If you want specific like once I let some guy across, I was driving I let some guy crossing town, it wasn't even a person crossing, but I thought "I'm going to be nice and let him cross". And as he crossed, he was like, "oh are you an effing terrorists?" And I'm thinking, "Hello? I was being nice to you? I let you cross?" And I laugh that off, but reality that's happened so many times, and I've seen it happen so many times. We grew up with my mom wearing niqab. So she like covers her face, yeah? And then my parents left the country for a bit and now they're back. My mom's taken it off, she only wears hijab

now, she's like "it's too dangerous for me". And my dad from the beginning always said to her like, "don't wear it". But obviously - you might not know - but it's just between like the woman and God right? And it was a devotion from her to God. My dad always said to her since the 90s "you're putting yourself in danger". And she was like, "Why should I stop what I want to do for safety?" And then when she came back these recent years, she's taken it off because of just safety and abuse. And she's like "I want to be alive to my kids or be alive for my grandkids" because that's how dangerous the situation is right now. Me personally, I don't know the feeling of walking on the street without headphones in, I don't know the feeling of driving with my windows down. You know, all of this stuff just comes from media. I'm always on alert. I'm always thinking, "right, who's gonna look at me today? There's a Muslim that I wanna attack, get my frustrations out", even though I'm just a normal, 20 something year old. And it's just always like, your personal experience puts you always on a stance. I mean, I don't remember like a two to three years ago, it was "torture a Muslim day" or something and it was like a system point. I don't know if Habiba or Sonam remember.

Sonam: Yeah, I remember that.

Ayaat: Yeah. I mean, people laugh about that. But what's the difference between that and just, you know, there were certain points to like, you know, pull a scarf off someone or throw acid on someone, killing someone. It was like a game and everyone was getting it through their letterbox and I'm thinking, "this is people's lives".

RESEARCHER: Thank you so much for sharing that. And so moving on to Habiba. Do you agree that existing media stereotypes about Muslims played a role in the spread of this piece of disinformation?

Habiba: Yeah, I definitely agree as well. Because I feel like the media, they take any chance that they can get to attack Muslims or like just anything, like, especially that picture. They

used it and it clearly did spread, like trying to put a bad light on Muslims like saying that we're like this and push a certain view about Muslims to the world. And the media does play a big role, I think, because they try and push it and it's basically what Ayaat was saying. Everything that Ayaat said is basically I think as well. You do get really desensitised to it. Her personal experiences are very similar to mine as well. You've got to be wary as well about your surroundings when you're going out. Even when you're on the train station, anything you're just, not alert, but you notice that you're wearing the scarf, you'll notice that you're noticeably Muslim and anything could happen at any time. Like what Ayaat was saying as well about that point system, that game thing as well, because even I remember that. And it was so weird because we were just so scared to go out for a couple of days even before and after that that event took place or whatever it was. I remember once I was going to college, I was just walking to college and the area that I live in is quite diverse as well. And the college that I went to is very diverse as well, but I was walking to college and some guy came up to me and then he just fully screamed in my face and walked away. I just stood there. He didn't say anything, it was just some white boy, white man, I don't know. And just screamed in my face and walked away and I'm just like thinking "oh my god", and I was just a bit scared as well. Like, you don't want to live in a country- you don't want to live in fear constantly. And I think that's a major thing the media plays with as well. Because if they push these views about Muslims and these stereotypes as well, they don't think much of it. But in reality, it's affecting so many people's lives, not just the Muslims themselves, but the people who are watching the news. And they take in like a sponge, they start believing what the news is telling them. And they start adopting these views about Muslims, which again, what Ayaat was saying, is so problematic, because their views are obviously incorrect, because they don't really portray Muslims as how they are. And that's what's really annoying as well about media.

RESEARCHER: Thank you. That's, that's really interesting. And I'll just go to Sonam as well, the same question. Do you agree that existing media stereotypes about Muslims played a role in how this piece of disinformation spread?

Sonam: Yeah, I completely agree. It's the same thing as Ayaat and Habiba were saying. I feel like it's that intent to put something on about Muslims and to push it forward. So because there's this kind of whirlwind going on right now of like, attack on Muslims. So I feel like they intentionally put things forward so people can get angry, or it will depict Muslims in a certain light. I do think because the media now has so much control, like social media, what we watch, the news, and it's the ease of things we have to access now, that when you see the news on social media repeating the same thing, people tend to believe it more easily because they think, "oh, it must be true, because so many sources are saying that" because no one does their research no more. So it's easier to attack Muslims and see Muslims as the problem. And it really does separate Muslims from the rest of the world. And it makes them seem like they're no longer human, they're no longer people, it's easy to berate and look down on. And as Ayaat and Habiba was saying about what people say on the street or how people treat you, it was the same for me when I was walking in Piccadilly one time when this random guy with his friends just shouted at me "terrorist" out of nowhere, and I feel like it got so normalised over time because of what you see. So it's more easy for people to connect on what the media seems to- they allow it and for them to actually behave in the outside world and to speak to you in a certain way, like how Ayaat talking about torturing Muslims. They they threw acid on people or pulled people's hijab and the media didn't talk about it in a sense of when the acid attacks were happening, and not trying to prevent it from happening and telling people to stop. But more as "oh, look at this, I can't believe this is happening". But of course, it's going to happen because you're kind of pushing it forward.

#### FURTHER ISLAMOPHOBIC DISINFORMATION

RESEARCHER: That's really interesting from all of you. And thank you for sharing and sharing that. And I'll talk a bit more about sort of consequences towards the end of the focus group. I'd just like now to turn to how this kind of stuff plays out on social media. So Islamophobic content, Islamophobic disinformation, Islamophobic fake news. Even the that tweet and the attack happened only four years ago, a lot has changed since then, since March 2017. You know, we've got a new government, we've left the EU. And now we're in the middle of pandemic. I mean, there's a lot of talk now around disinformation about COVID. And so it's

likely that disinformation has evolved. And it would be really interesting if you could share other examples of Islamophobic disinformation that you might have come across on social media since 2017. And again, I'll start with Ayaat.

Ayaat: I think we can just look at our Prime Minister. He is the most Islamophobic person that has reached a level of power where everyone's just accepting of his racism and Islamophobia. I mean, he's said people who wear niqab are letterboxes and post-boxes and, and stuff like that. And this is a person who people voted for, even though they knew what he said so clearly, as a society. We accept that obviously it's a majority white land and majority of them, if it was something to offend them, they wouldn't be happy about it, but as long as they're okay, and everyone else who's on the other side is hurt, or he didn't mean it or, you know, they just kind of give it a blind eye. If you want recent examples, I mean, the COVID made of all wear niqab, right? My mum laughs, she goes, "I took it off for my safety and then the government are making me wear it now". And in France, the niqab is banned, you get fined for wearing that, right? But you get fined if you don't wear a mask. So if you wear a hijab and a mask, and it kind of looks like a niqab, you get fined. If it kind of looks like a mask, you're not fined. So, what's more Islamophobic? How much more Islamophobic directly does the government want to get to people? Make it makes sense even if you tried to make it make sense it just doesn't make sense. So if my mask looks kind of Islamic, Does that make it now I have to pay a fine because it's illegal? But then if I take off my niqab, but I'm not wearing a mask I'm still getting fined because I'm not covering my face. But you don't want me to cover my face, but you want me to cover my face. You know, choose. Then they will argue that niqab is a matter of national security. And now that the arguing that a mask has to be compulsory, because it's a matter of national security. So like even the arguments on both sides are totally opposite of each other. So where does national security happen when everyone now has to wear masks and everyone's face is covered? But security hasn't been breached or anything. There was the argument of if everyone covers their face, we're not gonna live in a safe environment. But now everyone has to call a face in order for us to live in a safe environment. So in one sense its fine, in another sense, it's not fine, do you know what I mean? So I mean, I just have so many examples of Islamophobia recently. Like COVID is just a major joke really for countries like

France and Belgium who are still fining niqabis, but if it was a white guy wearing a cloth mask, it's fine. But, because she's has a headscarf and she's wearing a cloth mask, she gets fined for it.

RESEARCHER: And have you seen anything on social media that's spreading Islamophobia that you might have come across on your feeds or anything?

Ayaat: I don't go on social media as much so I don't have an opinion about that. If I do go on social media, the pages I follow are more positive and correctly informative rather than just random people saying their opinions. I'm not on Twitter, I'm not on Facebook and stuff like that. But there is one thing that I remember specifically during COVID times in the beginning. Boris banned indoor household meetings on the night of Eid in Manchester. And then he opened it for Christmas. So for us, like I said, Boris Johnson is the biggest example of Islamophobia, you know, that he, on the night of Eid, in Greater Manchester and in other areas where Muslims are quite a large number. We were expecting it but at the same time, it's like how much more obvious can you get? Also the media portrayed as the cause of BAME cases rising within communities when it was Eid and stuff, even though we didn't meet our families. Most Muslims are from BAME communities obviously you have white Muslims because it is a religion it's not a race, but most Muslims are from BAME communities and COVID is affecting us more than it is affecting white communities, so we are more likely to take this seriously because more of us are dying and more of us are getting affected by it. But still in the media we were portrayed as the reason as to why COVID cases were increasing, which kind of feeds into that we're uneducated or that we don't really care, that we have our own system, that we're not really following the government. When in reality, I feel like for me, we're the ones it so most. So within COVID I remember like pictures of people on the beach and pictures on streets celebrating some, I don't know, some British event and it was all white people and it was fine, it was happy because community coming together blah blah blah. And then pictures of Eid prayer where people were one metre two metres away with face masks with their own prayer mats completely spread in an open space was deemed as: "Look at these lot. They don't care".



But the beach, Brighton Beach was literally full, no face masks, no social distancing. And someone decided to take the prayer in a certain angle where it showed a picture of the prayer- the media took it at an angle where people looked like they were close together. But someone took a video and literally, as you turn the angle, you can see everyone's wearing face masks, and everyone is literally two metres away from each other. So there's like clear media disinformation, as you like to call it. And, yeah, that's kind of recent ones I'd say with COVID and stuff.

RESEARCHER: Yeah, that's really interesting. Habiba, I don't know how much you're on social media, but if you are, do you have any examples of Islamophobic disinformation that you've come across recently, whether it's related to COVID, or something else?

Habiba: I feel like I'm very similar to Ayaat where my feed is mostly positive. And I don't really follow that many people, I just follow like my friends that I know, on Twitter and Instagram. But sometimes on my feed, it does come up when people retweet. So again, what Ayaat was saying about the Brighton Beach, there are so many. And I feel like the media just loves to take any opportunity to slam Muslims and just putting us in that light. And it's just, it's annoying, it's irritating. That just the way that they are portraying us as well just from that one angle it sends like a bad message thing that all Muslims or Asians or whatever they're calling us or classing is us as, that they don't care about COVID. They don't care about the rules as well. And that's just really, really irritating. And another thing that I saw recently was that interview from I think it was BBC Radio. I don't know her name. It was a white interviewer, and she was interviewing this Muslim, who recently got a leadership role in the Muslim community for I don't know where it is specifically. I'm so sorry. This is a little bit like-

Ayaat: it was the British Muslim council, Habiba. And that's a really good example. Yeah it was the British Muslim Council.

Ayaat: Yeah. Thanks, Ayaat. And the example that you gave before, I think it was the Veterans Day, that there were lots of people on the street, because I remember seeing that. But yeah, the British Muslim Council and the way that she was directing the interview. Because I watched the video on Twitter, and it was just really irritating, because she was asking the same question about four or five times or three or four times. And she just wouldn't let it go. And clearly, the Muslim woman, she's giving a good response about how she cannot answer that. Yet, the interviewer is still chasing it up. And I think as well the way that the interviewer was asking her she's like trying to blame Muslims or trying to pinpoint Muslims in this kind of, "you've got the Sharia law, and you're very strict on it, and I want to find out more so I can, like, I can show the viewers that Muslims are like this", but in reality, she's clearly not done her homework, or she's not really done her research about the contents of what she's actually trying to ask her. And it was just, it was just really irritating to watch as well.

Ayaat: If I could just add to that, you know, it was a clear attack. It was an abuse of power in that moment as the interviewer, instead of congratulating her and asking her about how she feels about the position, anyone who would interview someone who's become a new landmark, you know, she was the first Muslim woman to be in charge of the British Muslim Council. Instead of congratulating her and asking her how she feels and how she got to that point, and how this is good representation for Muslim girls to feel like they can reach it and all of this, instead of it being very positive interview, young girls looked up to it and thought, I never want to be in that position, because I don't want to be attacked like that. Because she was literally attacked, like, asking questions as if she represents all Muslim women where the interview, I think she, you know, she just abused her and left her and it was just extremely disappointing. But yeah, sorry for interrupting that.

Habiba No, no I was trying to get my point across but I was getting all my facts mixed up. But yeah thanks for that.

RESEARCHER: That's a really interesting example. And, and then just Sonam. Again, I don't know how much you're on social media. But do you have any examples of disinformation that you've come across this like Islamophobic or racist or anything like that?

Sonam: I'm not really on social media that much, but I remember talking with some people about the depiction of Muslim women in films, like on Netflix and how it's always Muslim women that are oppressed, and how they're always yearning for some freedom and how their religion really confining them and how they kind of sort of needs saving. I think with such a big platform such as Netflix presenting it in that sort of way, it kind of perceives women, Muslim women, as victims, as like, they're not choosing to wear the hijab, they didn't choose the religion, they didn't choose the way they dress. So it's up to us, for the people, to save them. And to tell them, no, this is wrong, you can't dress like that you can't speak like that, because this is not what you want. So it's like they're taking away their choice by telling them they're being oppressed when it's the other way around. You're forcing Muslim women to take off the niqab to take off the hijab by berating them in a sense to kind of bully them into changing the appearance or change the way they are. It's oppressive, but they don't see it that way. I think now, because with the rise of social media, is the freedom to speak whatever you want, whether it's factual or not, or they tend to take bits and pieces of maybe things they hear or things from the Quran that they kind of twist and post about and write whatever they want. I think people now use freedom of speech in a different sort of way to attack Muslims and say whatever they want, because they don't see them no longer as people, they see them as a sort of tool. I think Ayaat earlier there is always a group that is being attacked, and this time around it is Muslims. So, they feel like they have an excuse to release an anger out on Muslims for some reason. And also, it doesn't help with the way the government treats Muslims or even the little slight things about like, as Ayaat said earlier, the Eid prayer. Like the night before Eid when it got cancelled and I remember Eid prayer getting cancelled. I think everyone subconsciously expected it. But it was so disappointing. That was the first time in Manchester where it was sunny. And I remember everyone was talking about praying outside and how it's like a really exciting moment after Ramadan. But then the way people got angry for Christmas being cancelled, and how Coronavirus suddenly disappeared. And then a high rate of cases

increased during that time yet, it was the Muslim community or the people of colour community that were to blame for the decisions that the government made, or how the white community when they would go to the beach, or when they would do secret raves and parties. It wasn't really on the news like that. But I feel like the government intentionally or the people intentionally, sometimes already have a set of people they want to blame for something. So it's like the rest of them can get away with whatever, because we already know who we're going to pin it on, if that makes sense.

#### CONSEQUENCES OF ISLAMOPHOBIC DISINFORMATION

RESEARCHER: That's really interesting. And thank you all for your feedback on that. And just like to finish to talk about consequences, the potential consequences of tweets like the one that I shared earlier, where the photograph was captioned in Islamophobic way. And again, I'll start with Ayaat, do you think that a tweet like that one has a social impact on people?

Ayaat: Yeah, of course it does. I mean, we were just talking about this today, in the BAME group, but if you think about it as years of media portraying something negative, so naturally, society in itself is going to internalise those feelings and see those group of people as a negative thing. Which then kind of creates a cycle, a never-ending cycle, where you have Muslims treated in a certain negative way, because of how the media portrays them. And because it's been internalised within society as 'they're bad people' or 'they're going to bring us harm' or 'they're going to take over' or whatever it is they want to say. Then individuals within society feel like we have the right to for example, do many hate crimes and you know, microaggressions and stuff, but then that also leads to a culture thing where in the whole of society now it's accepted to be Islamophobic because all the media is, people are, generations are. So therefore, in culture, in British culture, it's normal to be Islamophobic or racist or whatever because of the media, and then obviously that that goes into a wider form of where it reaches, like institutions. So for example, we're offered less jobs or we're not given opportunities the same as non-Muslims because of our religion. And that puts us back. And then that kind of puts us in a circle where we're affected.

Because if we're not getting jobs, or we're not getting the same opportunities, we're gonna stay in low income, for example, things and just we're not going to get the same opportunities as non-Muslim people. And that just reinforces the cycle of, you know, 'they're doing nothing', 'they're useless' nananananana. So it's kind of like, becomes just a huge cycle from one person hating Muslim, to the society hating Muslims, to institutions putting Muslims on the side, and then obviously, now we've reached the top of institutions where government are making laws in order to discriminate against Muslim. It started off with one person hating us and now the government hates us. You've got Prevent Strategy, you've got the banning of the burqa, the hijab, the niqab and the burqini, even. I mean, you know, Prevent Strategy in itself, like, as a Muslim, when it happened, you think, "Right, is this really my government here?" Just blatantly, just saying, "do you know what? We hate Muslims. you guys can do one. We're gonna put a whole strategy in order to discriminate against you, marginalise you, and make it harder for you to ever live in our society". And everyone accepted it. You know, teachers are getting taught Prevent Strategy, when clearly, it's the most Islamophobic thing there is. So that all started off with the media saying: "all Muslim people are bad". But then that goes, you know, from personal, and then the media, and then a cultural thing and an institutional thing. And here we are, living in a world where we're very marginalised.

RESEARCHER: I find that really interest that you talk about the cycle and it building from one person, to institutions. That's a really interesting perspective to take on it. Do you have something else to add?

Ayaat: It's just, people might play down the role of media. But the role of media is what controls our society and what controls minds. Except for people who choose not to be controlled by it and people who choose to educate themselves and not live in ignorance. It's just sad to see that years and years of civilisation, well, presumed civilisation in this country, you start to realise, how civilised are we as a country if we're all meant to be treated equal but in reality we're not. Because of media. Because no one's going to spit at me, or spit at my mum, or throw acid at us if it wasn't for media. If it wasn't for media

around the world collectively choosing a group of people and saying: “this is the group of people that we’re going to attack” and “this is the group of people that we’re going to base laws on”. But that cycle kind of makes it less of an issue as ‘all media’s unfair to us’, it’s how it’s actually impacted us as Muslims and how it’s going to carry on. It’s going to be generational until we get rid of everything, you know? Or until we go back home \*laughs\*. People say to us “go back home”, but if you were born here, where’s home?

RESEARCHER: Habiba Do you think a tweet like the one I shared with you, where a photograph was given an Islamophobic caption, has a societal impact?

Habiba: I think it definitely does because I feel like photos like that and stuff online and in newspapers, on the news as well, especially online because its so accessible as well for everyone. They just have these pictures or these portrayals, they’re very clickbaity aren’t they? And everyone loves going on these articles like “Oh, look at this woman”, like how that tweet was, like “this woman walked away”. It makes them click on it as well. And the thing is they’re never based on facts either because its just all these assumptions because what’s happening in that picture is obviously not what happened in real life because she’s clearly distressed, she helped out. The way that they portray it, it’s just any way to put Muslims in a bad light. I think the media loves to take that chance, especially all these tabloids as well. Any chance to put Muslims in this bad lens or this bad view. Social media as well, it magnifies it a lot because once one person posts it, it spreads like wildfire because it is very clickbaity, it is very “oh, what’s happening?” and people want to know. It’s annoying because they’re usually never right. It’s not based on facts; it’s just based on presumptions and based on stereotypes and based on racism and hatred. Like Ayaat was saying it’s really hard because we live in a society where the government is, not openly racist, but they are racist because of the laws they are passing, Boris Johnson himself calling Muslims letterboxes. It adds fuel to this fire as well, and I’m guessing they do realise because of how it affects Muslims living here because we live in a society where its ok to be mean or be Islamophobic to Muslims, either to their face, behind their back, on social media. And it’s normalised now, like Ayaat was saying, even I’ve got desensitised to it.

When somebody says something to you I don't take it to heart anymore, I just take it how it goes. If somebody calls me a terrorist on the street or calls me a name, it's just one of those things that I'm used to. I don't take it to heart but that's really sad because why should that be the norm? Why should that be normal for everyone? And it's because of social media, it's because of newspapers and how they portray us. I think I went on a bit of a tangent there, sorry.

RESEARCHER: No that was really insightful, thank you for sharing. And I'll just ask that question as well to Sonam. Do you think that the tweet that I shared with you, the photograph with the Islamophobic caption, do you think that it has a societal impact?

Sonam: I do think that it has a societal impact. I think tweets like that set a tone. It makes people read it and think, especially when it goes along with newspaper articles and mainstream media really discussing and attacking Muslims, it leads to day-to-day people thinking "Oh, it must be true". And then they have a sense of fear, they change the way they speak to you, they change the way they look at you. You can tell there are some that are afraid of you for no reason, just because you're Muslim. Or the ones that justify attacking you verbally or physically because you're Muslim, so now that you have a label on you, that you're a terrorist or Boris Johnson, the way he spoke about Muslim women being letterboxes and laughing about it and not apologising. It opens a can of worms, it opened the door for racist people to just say whatever they want, behave however they want because they have the government support. And that is really detrimental to society as whole because it changes everything. It changes the way you're going to teach children because of their religion, it changes the way you look at them. You no longer see them as children, you see them as a potential threat just because of their religion. And it also moves past that all the positives of Islam, like that it's the fastest growing religion in the world, the most diverse religion in the world, but you push that aside and show a negative light of something that day-to-day people are not. I think the sad thing is, I once heard a comedian talking about that attack in London how his neighbour kind of looked at him in a strange way, his neighbour that he'd know since he was a kid started to look at him as if he

was a terrorist because of the depictions the media was showing. It also affects the mental health of young kids, the way they feel they have to be this modern Muslim trying to get away from the label of being 'too religious' or "I'm not like that, I'm like your guys, I'm ordinary". There's just the fear for their parents, the fear for themselves. Once you've started normalising something the more it will happen, and because we started to get numb to it and kind of, not expected, but we're not surprised by it, that it becomes worse, in a sense, because for the outside public its normal to behave like that, but for us, even though its scary and fearful for myself, for the rest of the community, for my family, but you kind of think "who do you have to go to now?" because there's no way anyone will take you seriously because its embedded so deep into the system. So even if you did get attacked and you go to the police, for example, would they take you seriously? There's this doubt because of the government and the police, the schools, even the way the teachers speak to you. There's this kind of distance between you and the rest of, not the world, but you feel like you have no place here.

RESEARCHER: And I just have one final question. I'd like to get your opinion on how you think tweets like the one I shared with you might be addressed? How they can be combatted? Whether that's done through the social media platforms themselves? Or journalists, or the government? How do you think it could be done? And who do you think should manage this kind of harmful content? Sonam Do you want to go first?

Sonam: Yeah sure. I was just going to say, I think it should just be scrapped [laughs] I think social media has its benefits. It also has its problems. I do think those who create social media should be responsible for what's being put out there. And I do think they have a duty to people to make sure there's no hateful comments. I understand freedom of speech but to the extent that there's certain things you can't say- I don't know how to put it, but I think that there's certain comments that you read that should just automatically be deleted. I think because Twitter is also a place where people just say things they will never say in public to you so it's like being inside someone's mind. So I think with twitter, Facebook, Instagram, whatever, I do think whatever you do put out, there should be someone, not



monitoring it, but there should be certain signs that what you write had to be deleted, if that makes sense.

RESEARCHER: So you think ultimate the buck stops with the platforms?

Sonam: I think it is your responsibility, for something you create its on you because of the affects it has, the damaging affect, the mental health affects, the physical affects also, it's on you because its your place. You should know what's going on. You shouldn't allow such hatred to go on, on something that, in your mind, you created for positivity, for something to be shared, for something fun, something to connect the world together, and then for you to divide the world. So, it is down to you, honestly.

RESEARCHER: Habiba Who you do you think should be responsible for managing this kind of content online, like the tweet I shared?

Habiba: I agree with Sonam as well and, one thing as well, it was in November when it came out that it was some Russian. So why did it take so long for the actual truth to come out? That's what's really annoying. And obviously Twitter should be responsible, but I know it's easier said than done because there are like millions of tweets per minute or whatever, I dunno how many, but obviously Twitter's such a big platform and it would be hard for them to go through all the content on there. But something that is gaining a lot of attention should be fact-checked and the fact that it took a couple of months for the truth to actually come out just shows that they are partly responsible as well because for it to go so viral and for it to be picked up by other tabloids- because when it goes to viral you need to actually check if its true or not because its going out to loads of people, loads of people are seeing it and if it is false information and its been out there for a couple of months then Twitter should be responsible. But I also think maybe news channels or even the government should have made a statement as well rectifying what has gone viral and what social media is showing. Maybe a news channel could have picked it up and said that this

is not what is actually happening because those few months the picture was going around, people who have a hatred towards Muslims use this as a justification to go out and maybe attack them, maybe abuse them. Even if they don't act on their feelings they've still got these thoughts and emotions about Muslims, they've still got this perspective of Muslims because of this tweet and it needs to be rectified, it needs to be told what the truth is because they'll go on thinking Muslims are like this but in reality that's not the case. And again showing that from this one lens, from this one perspective, so much hate can come out of it. Even if they don't act on it they're thinking about it because they've already got this perspective in their mind that's embedded through social media and whenever they see a Muslim or whenever they hear anything else about Muslims they've still got this thing at the back of their head that say "Muslims aren't good, they're bad because of what I've seen on social media". And having that embedded in your head through this post is not a good thing, even if they don't act on it, because it has just a big impact on a person. If you see something and it looks a certain way you're automatically going to be thinking "Muslims are like this". That's why the truth needs to come out.

RESEARCHER: Finally Ayaat, the same question, who do you think should be responsible for addressing and combatting the kind of content like the tweet that I shared?

Ayaat: In a realistic or in an ideal world?

RESEARCHER: Ideal, whether it's the platforms or the government or journalists?

Ayaat: Well, realistically this kind of content benefits media, our government. It feeds into the narrative that they want. But ideally it should be the government and higher powers in society. But realistically, unfortunately, this kind of content is encouraged by the government right now and it plays into their view of what they want Muslims to be seen as within society. But ideally I think it should be within laws. Everyone should have their rights protected within laws, within government. Everyone should be able to feel safe and free to

do what they like without an oppressive system because if a non-Muslim comes to me as says "I know you're oppressed, I feel sorry for you wearing hijab, being forced to do this being forced to do that, I can free you". My response is "yeah, I am oppressed, by *you*, not by this piece of cloth, by you, by non-Muslims who think I'm oppressed, you're oppressing me". In reality I'm not. I always say feminist and stuff, always view Muslim women as victims and fear for our life and want to take us out of our oppression but I always say to any feminist who comes up to me "my religion is a feminist religion and the only people oppressing me is you". So ideally, it should be the government and laws should protect us. I don't think it's our responsibility to educate people, I think ignorance these days is no excuse. Everyone has a resource to educate themselves, it's very easy, if you're looking for the truth you will find it, it's right there. It's sad to see that the majority of society puts responsibility onto the marginalised group, like we saw with with Black Lives Matter, they put the responsibility on black people to educate people. If it's Islamophobia they put the responsibility on Muslims to educate people. I'm being oppressed by you. You the oppressor should go educate yourself on Muslim ideologies. It's not me, I'm not putting this on myself, it's you putting it. So responsibility I think should definitely be on government and society and I think education should be forced about it.

## FOCUS GROUP 2

### RECALL AND RECOGNITION OF THE PHOTOGRAPH

RESEARCHER: So just going back to the original photograph, I just want to go around each of you and just ask if you recognise or recall the photograph? And I guess I'll start with the order that I see everyone. So Imani if you can just say whether you recognise a photograph? Or if you remember where you might recognise a photograph from?

Imani: Yeah, I actually completely forgot that this photograph existed, but as soon as you put it up, obviously, I remember seeing it plastered all over social media. I use Twitter a lot, so I think that was the first place I saw it. And I did see a lot of tweets and lots of articles and things like that, based around the photo.

RESEARCHER: And that was at the time when it happened, around the attack?

Imani: Yep.

RESEARCHER: Okay. And Yara Do you recognise a photograph as well?

Yara: I've only come across it in one of our BAME meetings. I think [project coordinator] put it on.

RESEARCHER: Oh, that's interesting.

Yara: Yeah, I can't remember what it was about at the time. But yeah, that was the only other time that I've seen it. I haven't come across it on social media.

RESEARCHER: Okay, and Amara. Do you recognise the photograph as well?

Amara: I remember at the time of the attack. Yeah, I used Twitter as well, so I remember seeing it and because obviously, on Twitter, I'm going to follow people who are like me, I saw kind of both sides of the discourse and people being like, really shocked at the angle people had taken. And I think someone ended up speaking out on behalf of the girl or something, I'm not 100% sure, but I think she's in the medical industry or something like that. And she was actually helping out at one point. So it was quite telling in terms of when the photo was taken. It just conveniently happened to be as she was like, leaving or something. But yeah, it's just a really interesting how the narrative got twisted.

#### RESPONSE TO THE PHOTOGRAPH AND TWEET

RESEARCHER: And, so looking at a photograph, as it is just go around each of and ask what you think the photograph shows? And again, I'll start with Imani.

Imani: Yeah, so I think just looking at the image, you can clearly see she's very distraught. I mean, it's just a single photograph you can't make any kind of assumptions about what's going through her head this is a completely, like, we don't know this woman. It's unfortunate that the picture got taken when it did just as she was going past. But, you know, you can't really say, "Okay, this is it-" you know, I saw a lot of articles and you know, just like that tweet said, "She's just using our phone she's walking by, she doesn't care". But that's not what I get from the photo. It's just a snapshot of, you know, she's going past. To me, her face is kind of like, "Oh, my God". You know, I, as someone who visibly may look like the woman in the picture, I wear a scarf, I'm not white. I feel like I put myself in that situation, like, what would be going through my head at that point? Like, "Oh, my God, what is happening next to me? I'm walking past this-" kind of thing. But it's completely different to what the tweet said, basically.

RESEARCHER: And Yara, how do you how do you respond? Or what do you think the photograph shows just on its own?

Yara: Obviously, that's just a snapshot of her, you know, leaving, or leaving the scene. We don't know what happened before that she could have asked, "oh, is everything okay? Does anyone need help?" She looks distressed. She looks like she doesn't know what to do as well, like, you never know what's happened, that's only one snapshot. If she was wearing a headscarf or if she was white, would that picture have been taken as well? That's what I want to ask. And also maybe white people or different people, other races, would have walked past in the same sense. Why didn't they target that? But yeah, from the picture just seems like she's going on with her daily life. But she looks distressed at the same time.

RESEARCHER: And Amara do you have anything to add? Is it similar to what Imani and Yara said?

Amara: Yeah, I don't think there's enough there to assume anything about her intentions. But like Imani said it is pretty clear that she's not comfortable. I think anything other than saying that she's uncomfortable would be a stretch, because like Imani said, it's only two seconds. You can't tell what's happened. And there's not enough to say that she's like careless, or doesn't care or anything like that. Yeah, that's what I'd say.

RESEARCHER: So going back to the tweet, now, I'd like to ask the same question, but with the context that the tweet has given it now with the caption. So again Imani how do you respond to the caption that Texas Lone Star has given the tweet, given the photograph.

Imani: I think I feel like being on social media and reading a lot of like hot takes, and things, you know, Islamophobic, disinformation, that kind of thing, I feel like when I read this tweet, it was not unsurprising to me that this kind of like rhetoric exists, or this kind of like

what he said, basically. But to me, I would read that and kind of think, completely, like, that's not what I think when I see the picture. In fact, it's quite wrong. Quite a wild statement to make, because, you know, I'm sure this man doesn't know who his woman is, and know the complete context of why she's in the picture why the picture was taken. So, for me to read that and just kind of like, a bit speechless. Like, why would someone say that kind of thing? Because that's not at all the first thing that comes to mind when I saw that picture, and I saw the woman and her facial expression.

RESEARCHER: And Yara how do you respond to the caption that the person has given the photograph?

Yara: I just feel like it's really targeted towards Muslims especially, just because, you know, he sees that she's a Muslim, she's wearing the headscarf and the hashtag, #BanIslam, I just don't see the correlation. It just seems like it's a completely just targeted, like, she was the issue, like she was the one who, you know, cause this man to be in distress, like he's just targeted for no reason. He obviously has a motive behind that. And, you know, for him to say Muslim woman pays no mind, she's a human at the end of the day. So he's just, you know, looking at it from face value, I feel and just making up his own assumptions. That's what I get from the from this tweet.

RESEARCHER: Okay, and Amara. How do you respond to the caption?

Amara: Same, I think it's clearly agenda driven. I don't think the photo and the caption correlate, it's very much- even the fact that it's behind a fake account, like it just very clear that it's what you'd expect to see from things like this happening. As soon as an attack happens is like very much people will take anything that we can find. And, you know, like they have an agenda and they going to use whatever they can to make it fit. So yeah, that's pretty much what I think as well.

Imani: Just to add to that as well, I think the fact that it's kind of like, specifies Muslim woman, and then the hashtag #BanIslam, because it's not just "young woman walks past and pays no mind to attack" its "Muslim woman". And that's the first word you see, as well, just like, you know, you see the picture and you see a veiled woman who's clearly Muslim, and then the hashtag at the end, #BanIslam, it's definitely, like Amara, agenda driven.

#### MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS OF MUSLIMS

RESEARCHER: That's all really interesting. Thank you. And so I want to have a wide discussion about media representations of Muslims. Because there's a long history of the media in the UK, using problematic and harmful and unrepresentative stereotypes of Muslims. And I believe that this piece of disinformation spread so widely, and became so well known, because it was underpinned by these stereotypes. So, I want to have a wider conversation about that. So do you agree that existing media stereotypes about Muslims played a role in the spread of this piece of disinformation? And against that with Imani?

Imani: Yeah, definitely. I think when you've heard that kind of rhetoric, and that kind of stereotype, before, it's hard not to think of that when you see these kind of images, and I think like as a Muslim woman myself, as well, you kind of see these kinds of things, and get immediately defensive, and that's me as a Muslim woman, and I can see how someone who's not a Muslim woman, may not even be Muslim, would automatically recollect those kind of stereotypes that happen, you know, every time some kind of terror attack or some kind of big thing happens its always these kind of images. And I think, yeah, I definitely agree.

RESEARCHER: Okay. And as a Muslim yourself, would you be able to discuss some more about your experiences of these kinds of media stereotypes?



Imani: I think for me, primarily, it's just being asked my opinion any time some kind of terrorist incident happens, or any kind of incident, it's kind of like, "Oh, well, what do you think?" kind of thing and I think that question is very loaded, because it's not even necessarily like, "Oh, you know, genuinely, what's your opinion?" Because, you know, what's my opinion going to be? It kind of insinuates that my opinion is going to be not what everyone else says is, like, I condemn this thing as well. It's kind of like I have to, I have to then reaffirm, "yeah, I condemn this. I don't believe in this kind of thing". If you know what I mean.

RESEARCHER: Okay, that's interesting. And, and I'll go to Yara now, and so do you agree that the tweet spread so widely and became sort of sort of well-known because it was underpinned by wider existing media stereotypes?

Yara: Yeah, definitely. feel like there's just some, like obviously underlying - not underlying – like, it's prominent how racist the media can be. And stereotypes always puts Islam in such a negative light. So, it's like Muslims, Islam, everything is just an easy target for them. So, for instance, when there's a terrorist attack and a Muslim did it, okay, that's terrorism. But for example, if a white person did the same attack, that would not be classed as a terrorist attack. He's just got mental illness, that's fine. You know, it's always downplayed like that in the media. And it's obviously frustrating for us because you know, us Muslims get the backlash, us Muslims get such a negative light always put on us and projected on us for that reason. I feel like it's big events such as 9/11, where stuff like that was really, really highlighted and, you know, the whole world felt like it was against Muslims. And this just stemmed from that I feel. And yeah, anything in the news in the media about Muslims is always usually negative, usually. And if a Muslim person has done something good, they won't mentioned that they're Muslim. So, I feel like yeah, that's why the tweet has blown up like that in such a negative light.

RESEARCHER: And would you be able to speak more widely about your experiences of these kinds of media stereotypes?

Yara: Yes, it's similar to Imani really, where I'm just asked what I think about the situation like it's quite uncomfortable, because you know, I have nothing to do with terrorism, I have nothing to do with, you know, the corruption that these people do. And it goes against our morals and what we stand for in Islam. So to be asked stuff like that, and what I think about situations just because they put me in the same category as these, people that cause corruption, then it's not very comfortable. It's not.

RESEARCHER: Thank you. And now to Amara do you agree that the tweets spread so widely because of these sort of media stereotypes?

Amara: Yeah, I agree with them, what the girls said as well. I think the term stereotypes kind of suggest that it's like a generalised view of Muslims. And it's like, there's so little people who claim Islam are the ones that are behind this, and it's only because they're, like Imani said, when they do something, their religion is the first thing, whereas every religion has people who will manipulate it for other agendas that they have outside of the religion. And it's only- I think it's just like a media scapegoat. Since 9/11, pretty much. And it's just any opportunity for, you know, for far-rights to take advantage of it, they tend to. And in terms of my own experiences, yeah, like others said, you have to constantly be put in this kind of position where you have to denounce it. And it, like Imani said, makes you feel as though people are questioning your moral integrity, and it's quite demeaning, because it's like, especially in like a setting where these people know you like colleagues or like, classmates, whatever. It is very loaded. Because if you've known me this whole time, to ask me a question like that, just assume that there's even a chance that I'd be like, "yeah, you know, what? This, group had had a point", like, how could I? How could I say that? There's only one real answer to it. So, I'm just having to constantly do not say like, I don't feel the need to, I shouldn't feel the need to reassure people that it doesn't align with my beliefs,

because it should be very obvious. And I think, yeah, the media does have a massive part to play in that.

#### FURTHER ISLAMOPHOBIC DISINFORMATION

RESEARCHER: That's, that's all really interesting. Thank you all so much. And so, I'd like to turn now specifically to how this kind of stuff plays out on social media. A few of you have already mentioned that you're on Twitter, quite a lot. And that even though the tweet happened, only four years ago, a lot has changed since then, like we've got a new government, we've left the EU, Brexit happened. And now we're in the middle of a pandemic, it's likely led to sort of an evolution of disinformation. For example, there's a lot of stuff now in the news about disinformation related to COVID. So it'd be interesting if you could each share any other examples of Islamophobic disinformation, or, like misleading content that you might have seen on social media. And again, I'll start with Imani

Imani: I'm just trying to think of specific examples, I recall, but I feel like when you're on social media a lot, there's just so many kind of little, small instances where it happens that you're so used to it. I feel like I can't recall anything specific, because I'm just seeing that kind of thing all the time. Especially like, I'm going to give an example that's not related to Islamophobia, but like, race, you know, this recent stuff with like Meghan Markel? I saw, for example, one tweet, that was like, like a screenshot of her positioning in the interview, and Prince Harry – sorry if this is completely irrelevant but it was the only recent thing I could think of – but it was basically her positioning. Her back was towards the chair, and he was leaning forward. And it was just this wild, wild interpretation of like, why she was sitting back and he was leaning forward. And it's because she obviously can't lean forward, she's pregnant. But I'm trying to think of an example related to Islamophobia, but I just feel like there's so many little, little things that it's not even, like a spectacle when I do see these incidents it's like “oh, not again kind of thing”.

RESEARCHER: And it's not specifically that Islamophobic disinformation, like if there are other kinds of disinformation you've seen that's targeted different aspects of people, their race, sexual orientation, that kind of stuff. Like as I said, disinformation often does target marginalised communities. So the example of Meghan Markel is like just another example of that kind of thing. And what are they saying, that like her positioning meant that she meant something?

Imani: Honestly, I just kind of read it and was like, This is incredibly, like- I don't know why someone would sit there behind a screen and analyse her positioning as if that means something when it was clearly like nothing. She's a pregnant woman, she's not going to be leaning forward. But it was just kind of saying something about her, like, her being like really scheming. And it's just like a kind of rhetoric that is just absolutely absurd. And it's not unlike things that things that are shown in relation to like Islamophobia, and like Muslim women and Muslim men as well. That's all-over social media. It doesn't even take, you know, big events like terrorist incidents to kind of happen either. It's just everyday things, everyday pictures of people, everyday people doing their own thing. And any kind of thing that Muslim men, women are doing seems to be just trying to be overshadowed by stereotypes and things like that online.

RESEARCHER: And because there has been a lot of things around COVID with related to Islam as well, like I remember seeing things around Eid and the spread of COVID. Have you seen anything related to that? Or your response to the way the media reported on Eid and things like that?

Imani: Yeah, definitely. The main one in relation to that was for me, last Ramadan, Eid at the end of Ramadan, last year, and kind of I think it was either the night before or two nights before, like, 10pm, this announcement had come, that was like, you know, there's gonna be a further lockdown in like Manchester and Greater Manchester areas, because of like, high prevalence. But, you know, that hadn't happened all that time, there was there

been continuous rise of cases, but there wasn't any kind of stricter measures, but it was like, as soon as you know, Eid was happening, it was just kind of very disguised. But it was like, you know, it was quite insulting. Because it's like, kind of portraying that it's Muslims who are spreading COVID because they're having these gatherings and all of that. Whereas, like, personally speaking, I don't know anyone who is still going to the mosque, still doing any kind of congregational prayers. And that for us, like, that was a big thing. Because Ramadan for us is about community, and things like that we have a specific prayer that men and women go to the mosque to do. It's about praying in congregation. And for us not to have that during this time, obviously, because of the pandemic is quite a big thing. It affects your faith, general morale, especially during these. And I think, you know, people weren't doing that, people weren't going praying in congregation - mosques were closed. So to hear those kinds of accusations, because it was accusations, like "it's spreading, because of the Muslim community in the BAME community" is not accurate. And there were things like it being more prevalent in low economic, socio economic areas, and places like estates, places like Moss Side, for example, I'm not living in Manchester at the moment, but that's kind of like an example. But in terms of like BAME, it's not because you know, BAME people have something in them that makes them get COVID more, it's because of like, the social disparities, and having to go to work because a lot of us may not necessarily have the privilege of being able to work from home. So again, like that's major, major disinformation.

RESEARCHER: That's really interesting. Thank you so much, and Yara would you be able to share any examples of Islamophobic disinformation that you might have seen on social media, whether it's related to COVID? Or something else?

Yara: Yeah, it was related to COVID, around EID time when it was literally the night before Ramadan started, that's when they announced the lockdown in Greater Manchester. And I think it was the week before when I think there was an event, one of the Saints days where all the like the white people went out, and you know, not socially distance, like, out on the streets. I think it was like parties, I remember that. And the week after, you know, everyone

was blaming us Muslims for gathering and like breaking social distance rules and all this. So I did see a lot on social media.

Imani: Yeah, I think it was the V day because I remember the same thing. People on my street were having a party.

Yara: That was it yeah. Well no one said anything, even the media.

Imani: Yeah no one said anything. There was so much of that going on everywhere.

Yara: It was on BBC News. Everyone's celebrating, you know, V day, but it just didn't make sense to us. We were the ones that were confused. But we were silenced as well, at the same time. But when it came to Ramadan, you know, everyone was in the houses. No one was gathering. It's such a nice time for us to spend with our families. But we couldn't and we respected that, but yeah, the media just put it on us for spreading it and the cases arise and stuff, it was because of us minority ethnics. Yeah. So that's what I saw on social media about that.

RESEARCHER: And Amara Have you seen any, any examples of Islamophobic disinformation on social media? Again, whether it's related to COVID or something else?

Amara: Yeah similar to what the guys have said already. I feel like when people gather, and they're Muslim, versus when people gather, and they're non-Muslim, like, white people, it's not the same. They might even show it on TV, but it's not the same narrative and angle that's been taken. So it's very much like we're all human. It's not happening in the Muslim communities that much. I mean, we're all from different cities, and every single mosque I know of was close and compliant to the rules. So it's just a matter of finding a few of those

cases that do occur. And then, you know, using them as scapegoats, like I said, and it's never usually the same when, like you guys suggested with VE day and things like that. So it's interesting, because it just, it fuels the hatred that already exists. I think the media wouldn't be doing it then if they didn't know that in society, there weren't there was already kind of a disregard towards immigrants and Muslims and minorities in general. So it's like, as soon as you give them this, they're going to run with it and have someone to blame instead of actually looking at, maybe its distraction, maybe from like how the government's handling everything as it is or something, it's just a lot easier to have someone to blame. Another example I thought of before, was Shamima Begum. I've never seen a teenage girl be vilified like that before. And I know full well that, if she was groomed, and had she been white, it wouldn't be the same situation, not even regarding the debate whether to let her back into the country, but just in general, like, as if she had every intention, and she didn't know the repercussions, and she knew the repercussions, and she knew what she was doing. Like, in any other settings, she would have been a child and some of the way that adults were speaking about her who probably have teenage children the same age, it really showed like a really ugly side of society. And yeah, that was just Islamophobia in its in its purest form, I think because she wants to come back, she understands what was happened. She's a victim. And people just want to put blame on the whole group. Yeah, I think once you're Muslim doesn't really matter what you are beyond that. And the media shows up again and again, and again, to the point where like, Yeah, I don't think it's surprised is Muslims anymore, to be honest, you've just got accepted.

Imani: I completely agree with that. That point, that example of Shamima Begum was like the epitome of like, what you're describing about disinformation and Islamophobia as well, because I think a lot of people are completely forgetting the fact that, you know, she was groomed and she was 15 at the time. You know, does it really matter my opinion on her case, but it's like that, would that happen? If it was anybody else? If she wasn't a brown, Muslim woman? It wouldn't.

Amara: I just remembered, even headlining like the terminology they use was very, very key. Like they described her as a woman way before she was even one - I don't have actual women anyway - but yeah, it's the language that's used and just the way that she's described. It's very clear that the media didn't want anyone to have any sort of empathy for her even when they were trying to take a neutral positioning. And it just even if people aren't feeling hatred there was a lack of empathy in general, I think I don't see many people even viewing her as a child.

Imani: Completely and at the other time, like, obviously, she was 15 years old. And I don't know if it is that people don't know what grooming is grooming means, there was no empathy whatsoever for the fact that she's now like, stateless. And that in itself is a really, like, it's a really violent act. Because now she, you know, where does she go? It kind of instils the belief that none of us, you know, having been born and brought up in this country like, this is essentially my country, too. I am English, I'm British. And none of us are safe kind of feeling.

Amara: You don't really feel welcome in that sense, because it's like, you know, in comparison to someone else who supposedly on paper has the same rights as you, and you wouldn't be treated the same. And you're being told that it's, it's very, it's very overtly said, but not, obviously, in legislation. But yet, it's very clear that once you went to make that mistake, there's no room for you anymore. Like, it just kind of showed what people might already be thinking. Because there was no mention to the psychological trauma She must have gone through. There's no denying that the whole situation is difficult. And there's a lot more layers to it. But in general, just on a stance of the fact that she was 15 years old, there was no there was no real- I remember people debating whether she was remorseful in her eyes, but it's like no one's even looking at the fact that she's had a child, hasn't seen a family in ages, been around absolute sociopaths, like, no one's considering any of that. And it's just a very scary angle to take.



Imani: Yeah, in terms of like, what happened to her, as soon as she left this country, no one knows, like the trauma she's gone through. And I obviously know that doesn't excuse any of, you know, her actions. By the end of the day, she was 15 years old, she was a child, if that was, you know, an ordinary white child, it would be completely different in how it's handled, it would be about her safety. And it's kind of like a lot of the media completely ignores what was going on at the time, because at the end of the day, she was also a citizen of this country. And our government has completely failed her. Because why did it happen in the first place? On British soil, she was groomed, and she was able to go.

Amara: Yeah, and I think it's just blame placing thing. And there's not much responsibility taken in ways of preventing it because as a young girl, she's actually homeless, by herself. So the fact that people took the angle of 'we can't let her back in' without much reason. It's more just out of like just pure hatred. I think, what they describe her as.

RESEARCHER: That's interesting that you bring up the Shamima Begum example, especially when you talk about the media debate in about how she was feeling because I can kind of see parallels to the photograph, where placing judgement on what someone is feeling and the emotions behind what they're doing based on a video or a photograph of them. I think that's really interesting. And just going back to discussions around the media and how it represents around COVID as well. I think it'd be interesting to talk about the way Eid was handled during COVID compared to Christmas, because what Christmas, it was kind of this you know, free for all so I don't know if any of you want to speak about the differences the media reported on in terms of Eid and Christmas.

Yara: I think Boris was responsible for all of this when it came to response, he initially said, you know, everyone can meet up for Christmas, that's fine. In I think families of three, maybe something like that. So he did allow a leeway for that. And then he obviously changed his mind, you know, cases were rising, and all of this but he was very much more lenient when it came to Christmas. And it makes us feel like "Okay, are we not part of this

country?" type of thing, because in Eid it was just pretty much okay, lockdown, no one's gonna meet. No one's gonna you know have fun no one's going to do anything. Even in little families, little groups, little social bubbles, we weren't allowed any of that was much more stricter. When it came to Christmas before he announced, you know, his other lockdown rules. He allowed Christmas to happen, basically he was going to, and then he changed his mind. But people probably still do that, you know, I'm not sure.

RESEARCHER: I think the rules were still quite flexible around Christmas.

Amara: They were and it's not so much people being free on Christmas, but I think it's the reasonings behind Eid, the reasons behind Eid weren't described as- they're not going to say, "Oh, we don't want Muslims to gather". They're just gonna be like, "it's not safe to because of XYZ". So it's like, since EID, the cases had gone up, the situation was worse than the country. So it's just a bit- it was it was hypocritical, and his reasonings didn't align. And I think it genuinely just does come from a place of... it's a Christian country, I guess. And you're just not priority.

Yara: It wasn't really blamed on everyone who went and celebrated Christmas.

Amara: That's expected as well though.

Yara: Yeah. No one said anything about that we just moved on. And you know, it was fine, basically.

Amara: And other countries cancelled Christmas entirely like, I know, Canada said, "we're not having a Christmas, we can't have Christmas, we can't have EID, we can't have Hanukkah". That's at least consistent. Not saying they didn't have issues with Islamophobia

in their country. But in terms of explanations behind reasons for things and stuff like that, the narrative was consistent. So you can't really delve deeper. But it was pretty clear. Over here.

Imani: Yeah, I think there was a big lack of consistency. And, you know, EID was a very long time ago, in terms of it was back when COVID was still quite new, and they didn't know how bad it would affect things. But I think once, you know, Christmas was towards the end of the year, and they kind of knew the effect of things and how bad the COVID rates and death rates and all of that was. So it's very irresponsible to continue to just go ahead. I think it's also a different conversation in terms of that involves things like travelling because, you know, a lot of the students for example, would be going home. Whereas at EID it was a lot different. You don't necessarily always travel for EID. I work on the test site at university as well. And there was a lot of conversation about, you know, students going home and getting tested. And you know, that further spreads COVID, doesn't it? But that was kind of ignored, essentially. And like just as predicted, cases rose after that. And like you said, regardless of the lockdown, the rules were still very lenient about people going home. And again, it's expected because this is not a Muslim country, and I don't expect them to place so much importance on EID. Like Christmas is a big thing. Like it's not even Christmas, it's just the holiday period, you know, as a student, as a working person, anyone, like the holiday period is the holiday period, and that's fine. But I think it's still very clear that how that was handled in relation to EID was stereotypical, was based on stereotypes. And it set a good standard, it doesn't put any faith in people towards the government as well, because it was just all handled very poorly.

#### CONSEQUENCES OF ISLAMOPHOBIC DISINFORMATION

RESEARCHER: That's all that's all really interesting. I think that was a really, really good discussion. Thank you. I just want to finish off by asking about, again, looking back to the tweet that I showed you earlier, what the potential consequences of tweets like that might have. So, I'd like to firstly ask if you believe that a tweet like that has a social impact, and I'll start with Imani.

Imani: Yeah, it does, I think in terms of things like hate crimes and attacks, I'll give you an example of, I think it was the Manchester bombing, the Ariana Grande concert, and like the number of hate crimes there were to Muslim woman. And I think there'll be people who see those kinds of tweets and then become so angry in their heads because they see that rhetoric all the time. And it just becomes very normalised for things like hate crimes to happen like I heard so much about Muslim women being attacked and being followed and things like that. And it's from those images because you will see that image and to an ordinary person who like you know, or someone who is racist or Islamophobic, they will see you as one in the same. They will see that image they could go out later in the day, see me walking in exactly the same way, maybe dressed the same way, wearing my hijab and think "oh my god, like, she feels that way or she's a terrorist". And then, you know, it's hate crimes and attacks and bullying and all sorts. It definitely adds to that I think. Socially, it completely adds to that rhetoric and to racist and to all the hate comments and all the hate crimes. Definitely, definitely like, I don't think there's any kind of doubt that there isn't a negative impact there.

RESEARCHER: Ok thank you, and Yara do you feel the same? Do you think a tweet like that one has a negative social impact?

Yara: Yeah, I feel like people are just fed information that they're obviously going to believe at face value, especially if you're not as open minded and if you have that typical agenda in your head then you're going to find anything negative to associate with Muslims. I feel like no one's born a racist, so everyone's just influenced by what's around them and obviously we're in the technological age where everything is fed on social media and by certain people and certain powers. They're the ones that influence everything we read, not just Twitter but when it comes to the media, the *Daily Mail*, stuff like that, they always have a certain agenda to try and catch us out even though we're not necessarily doing anything wrong. So yeah, I definitely feel like it brainwashes people in that sense and then people are going to use that in their daily lives to have that negative stereotype of certain people.

RESEARCHER: Ok thank you. And the same question to you Amara. Do you think that a tweet like that one has some kind of social impact?

Amara: Yeah definitely, definitely. I think just the way the human brain works is quite interesting because human beings can feel something, but until they feel validated, they won't feel the same level of confidence to act on that. If someone's a bit reluctant that they're going to get into serious trouble doing something, then it might create more doubt. So its not that they don't feel something but when you go on social media and you see so many people agreeing with you it kind of fuels that hatred further and gives people the confidence to do what Imani suggested, which is to go out and look for someone to release this hatred on. Which is actually quite crazy to me because there's been so many attacks conducted why white people but I've never been able to paint white people with the same brush and be like "Oh, he looks like the guy who bombed Norway, let me go, you know", it's kind of crazy. I think the angle that these words and terminology use, like constantly seeing the word 'Muslim', constantly seeing the word 'Islam' put in the headlines. I feel like the media know exactly what they're doing with that because it's very much grouping a bunch of people and forcing people, who may have not initially looked at Muslims that way, are now going to sway in that direction if they don't know anything else about Islam, so it's very dangerous. And, just more on a personal level, I get really on edge when there's attacks because I don't know what's going to happen now. Obviously I'm visibly Muslim, I'm no different to any other girl that's had a hate attack happen to her, you don't know who these people are on the streets at the end of the day, everyone's a stranger. And you can sense tension after something's happened and I can understand how it would create anxiety in terms of the micro social impacts. And it reminded me, when I was talking about hatred, this isn't necessarily Islamophobic - do you remember that Liam Neeson interview, when he was like walking around for a while looking for a black person to-

Imani: Yeah, to take his anger out on.

Amara: Yeah, which is just insane. The fact that someone like Liam Neeson had the confidence to actually come out and admit it. I don't know if he was ashamed of himself, I don't know if he was coming out as a way of saying "Oh I've changed now". But the fact that that's an existing mentality of "I had the intention of going out and finding someone who looks a certain way just so I can"- it's just crazy to me.

RESEARCHER: Yeah I think he came out and-

Amara: Someone hurt a family member of his, right?

RESEARCHER: Yeah I think he was saying it with remorse, like acknowledging that that's how he used to feel, from what I remember.

Amara: Scary thing to admit though.

Imani: And such like a big figure as well. And as someone who is cultured and should know better, you'd think normal people who aren't surrounded by culture, and know things and haven't, for example, travelled, how do they feel? And is it going to be worse? Like that could be, anyone on the street could feel that exact same way. And I think if you look as well, not necessarily on the social impact on the racist and the bad people, but also on people like us, like young Muslims, going online and reading all of that stuff. It makes you want to live in fear, and it's not even a choice. For example when I go out, after the Manchester Bombing and my parents asking me so many questions when I was leaving, like where I was going, because everyone is worried and it's like well, I'm going out to do my job and I don't even have the privilege to be able to think I will be able to get their safely because you never know what's around the corner. I feel like that really has an impact on your self-worth and your self-esteem as well because it just really messes up your

confidence in being able to do things because you think, “You know what? If I do this or if I do XYZ, how is that going to impact how visible I am?” If I become more visible, if I go and do this, if I want to become someone in media or politics I’m going to be viewed as a target more so that I would be- it’s the same, I could be anyone on the street and I could still face an attack but being more visible, for example in media, then that puts me at further risk and it messes with your confidence, it messes with a lot of how you want to go about your life and that’s not nice. It’s living out of fear, and I think that’s something to think about as well, the social impact on those who are under fire, Muslim women and Muslim men and young Muslims as well.

RESEARCHER: That you for sharing that. I just have a final question now about how you would like to see content like that tweet addressed and combatted? Like whom you think should do it and how it should be done, whether that’s the platforms or the government or journalists? I’ll start with Imani.

Imani: In all honesty, I have absolutely no ideas because I feel like even people condemning that kind of speech it just doesn’t really mean anything to me. I’ll use the example again of the Meghan Markel thing, I dunno if anyone say the statement released by the Queen about the incident, saying Meghan and Harry and Archie and loved and blah blah blah. And it’s kind of like, well, what does this actually mean? Are you actually condemning this? I dunno the impact, like if it’s going to be journalists or- I dunno, at this point I feel like things are just too far gone. Who is now going to condemn this? And why would I believe it? So my answer is just: I have no idea. I have no idea who is going to be able to come out and say these things and everyone is just going to believe it.

RESEARCHER: No that’s fine, obviously issues like this have snowballed into something massive. Yara Do you have an idea of who you would like to combat or who should be in charge of removing content like that tweet?

Yara: I think Twitter itself, like obviously it's their platform, they have the power to take down anything that's inappropriate or anything that stimulates hate, making a negative perception of society. I feel like they've done it before with Katie Hopkins, they've removed her tweets because she's so racist, she doesn't have anything nice to say, ever. So they removed her tweets, I think they took down her Twitter account, they had that power to remove her negativity and make Twitter more of a peaceful place without her. So I feel like they can do that when it comes to irrelevant tweet like this which are just going to stimulate hate for us Muslims in particular.

RESEARCHER: And Amara the same question, who do you think should be in charge of combatting this kind of content on social media.

Amara: I don't think it should just be a one institution type thing. I think it needs to be- I don't think it can work with just Twitter deleting tweets. Because there are so many accounts and so many opinions, and I think it's more about changing the complete narrative and the way people think, make an actual shift in change. On a government level, there should be schemes where people are properly trained on how to see misinformation for what it is and- I remember during the US elections a lot of Trump's tweets were censored. That still allows freedom of speech; he can still tweet what he wants to tweet, but people who might be more susceptible to just believing whatever they read have now got a warning to show them that it's baseless and I think there needs to be more of that. I think that was pretty good. On an education level as well, people to understand people on a one-to-one level. Yeah it should be more in the education system. And in terms of publishing, journalism and stuff like that, there should be positions given to people to make sure that headlines aren't just for fearmongering and they need to be a bit more justified. Because I feel like companies have a bit too much leeway, like there's not as much responsibility put on them for the amount of viewers and readers they're going to have. I know a lot of people will probably argue that its censorship and not allowing people to speak properly, but if that means that people are going to be harmed, then and what cost is... do you know what I mean? I think there's a thin line between free speech and hate speech and that needs to



be monitored better, pretty much on all levels, from the media, to education, to social media companies, to law. Everything needs changing, pretty much.

Imani: Yeah, just to add to that, bottom line it needs to be institutional, and it needs to be systemic, and it needs to be a collaborative thing. It can't just be social media sites because the CEO decided "yeah, there's too much hate speech". It has to be everyone. It has to be a combined, collaborative, group effort otherwise it just falls flat, it doesn't mean anything. And it just runs the risk of looking like a gimmick, just not genuine, just to shut them up. What's the point of that really?

Amara: And I don't think it should be in a way where it's like "you're no longer allowed to say that". It should be genuine breakdowns on why and who it's affecting, and why it's going to be better this way. A lot of people are quick to be like, if it doesn't affect them, "Oh, everyone should have the right". But that's very easy to say when you've never had to live that life. You can't teach empathy but... the human rights already exist, its just not being implemented in modern society in a way that makes every single person safe. So, some societies are better at it than others. Like I remember, for example, New Zealand, do you guys remember that terrorist attack that happened? That was the first time in history that I saw a government properly help the Muslim community get through something and not turning a blind eye to the effects Islamophobia has.

Yara: Yeah that was that terrorist attack, he was white. Christchurch.

Amara: Yeah and he Facebook streamed it, it was difficult. But that was the first time there was an actual, step by step thing that the government did and actually took it on a personal level to make sure that as little damages were done and they were able to bounce back from it very quickly. I don't think the same thing- I don't want to picture what it would be like if it was here. There would be a lot of justifying, I'm sure. There would be a lot of turning a blind eye to his reasons. There would be a lot of focus on his mental health and what

drove him to get there. But yeah, on a government level I think a lot can be changed, just from using that example.

RESEARCHER: And just finally, Yara do you agree that it's not just one thing then, that it should be an institutional thing from the platforms, to education, to government?

Yara: Yeah definitely. I think initially where it's streamed, like on Facebook or Twitter or wherever, that should obviously be censored, but then the bigger picture would have to be the government, would have to be the bigger people who run everything that we're doing, really. So yeah I do agree, definitely.

Imani: I think for the sake of the people as well, explaining that, like Amara said, there is a really fine line between free speech and hate speech and it should be explained why. There should be resources and it should be accessible about, for example, why this isn't allowed, why this goes against our guidelines and our missions and our values, so people know what that means. Everyone who knows when things are racist or Islamophobic know that kind of rhetoric. It's the people who don't who need to be educated on that and unless they're properly education, if it just happens, if laws are put into place or rules are put into place, they're not going to believe in it and they're not going to adhere to it. So that education also needs to happen and it needs to be accessible and it needs to come from the top.

### FOCUS GROUP 3

#### RECALL AND RECOGNITION OF THE PHOTOGRAPH

RESEARCHER: So maybe if I start with if you recognise this picture? And where you might have seen it if you do recognise it?

Isaf: Yeah, um, yeah, I do recognise it. And I do remember it quite vividly. So, I remember that it happened during the London terrorist attack. And I remember seeing it on Twitter, because I remember I was quite active on Twitter at the time.

RESEARCHER: And where did you see it? Was it when it was already being used negatively?

Isaf: Yeah. 100% Yeah, I remember people's thoughts and feelings being attached to the picture. Like I don't remember just seeing the picture and scrolling past it. I remember seeing everyone's opinions about it, what they thought she was doing, adding their own context to a picture.

RESEARCHER: Yeah. Okay, cool. Thanks. And then the next person down for me is Maira. So the same question, do you recognise a photograph? And if you do, do you remember where you initially saw it from?

Maira: Honestly, I don't think I've ever seen this before. But obviously, I remember the attack and stuff. But looking at this photo, I can assume what people would have thought about what they would have said about it.

RESEARCHER: Okay, cool. And then, Anisha, the same question, do you recognise the picture? And if you do, do you remember where you saw it?

Anisha: I do recognise the picture. And I think I first saw it in like The Daily Mail or The Sun. And it had a very interesting title as well, you know, something like “the joys of like multiculturalism and diversity” or something like that. I saw it there first. And it was obviously quite saddening, and you know, the article and the comments underneath, they were very interesting. And they were very hurtful some of them. And then I think, this picture also became a meme as well. So people would write like, you know, “the joys of living in Britain” or, you know, something like that. So I, I did see it quite a lot at that time, and even a little bit later in that context and it was quite sad. I was in high school at that time. So it was something that a lot of girls were discussing.

RESEARCHER: That’s interesting. So your friendship group were all talking about it?

Anisha: Yeah. So most of them were Muslims. So of course, for them, it was like, you know, it's not a very nice picture. Whereas we did have some non-Muslim friends who were like, “well, we saw this picture, what is your opinion on it?” And we kind of like had to tell them that I don't think has anything to do with her religion necessarily. It's the whole trauma of what's happening. And that's why she's, you know, decided to react in this way.

RESEARCHER: Mm hmm. Yeah. Well, this is a press photograph and it was taken by a press photographer who just happened to be there during the attack. And he took about I think was about seven pictures of her like stepping forward. And in all the other ones you can see that she's like, she's looking up and she's looking forward and you can see the emotion on her face a lot better. Where was it that you saw it as a meme was on social media as well?

Anisha: Yeah, it was on social media. So I think it was on Twitter, which is like the worst place you know. I think it was on Twitter. And I saw not only one, but like a good couple of

memes. And they all had like different things. So I remember one was like, “the joys of like, diversity”, but diversity, it was spelt like D-I-E because people had, you know, died. And it was very sad. It was kind of like, it was very sickening as well. Like, in general as well, you know, it was an attack, which took some people's lives and people are here, you know, making a joke out of it.

#### RESPONSE TO THE PHOTOGRAPH AND TWEET

RESEARCHER: Yeah, that's, that's really interesting. That's an interesting range of like, where people have seen it, because it did, obviously started on social media, the way it started to be used to spread Islamophobic disinformation. But then the British news media picked up on it. And that's kind of when it exploded because it was like, I've tracked it on search on in the news. And it was like headline news for days. So yeah, I wanted to move onto, just looking at the picture on its own, I know we've kind of already discussed what the picture looks like. But just if you're presented with this picture, what do you think it shows? And I will I'll go back in the same order, if that's okay, start with Isaf. What do you think it shows?

Isaf: Yeah, well, for me, just shows a lot of people just reacting to a scene. And that's part of of the thing which really makes me upset, like, why out of all people is she the one that singled out and her reactions being, you know, analysed and looked into. There's like, how many other people five, six more people in the picture? It's just unfair, that she's the one being singled out. And so if I knew the context, like it was like a terrorist attack I would just think, “Oh, she's upset like everyone else”. Because, you know, I don't have that Islamophobic, you know, lens or tint. I just can't understand people adding their own narrative to her reaction. I don't have that. So yeah, we'll just assume a lot of people being upset. And she's reacting exactly how everyone else is reacting.

RESEARCHER: Mm hmm. Okay, cool. Interesting. And Maira, the same question, what would you interpret it as? What do you think it shows?

Maira: So obviously, it's like, you know, a distressing scene, you can see from a face, if you see the picture, like close up, you can see from her face, she's also distressed. But then you can see some people in the background who actually like, just like, watching, you know, like when something happens on the road, and people just, like, look at it, and just walk by. Like, there's a woman right behind, if you see her, she doesn't even look like she's looking down at the person either. So it's just like, you know, if I didn't know the context, it would just be that someone's collapse, and everyone's just reacting in their own different way. But then like, you can, you know, imagine what some people would be thinking about, like, "Oh, she's just walking by, like, you know, she's Muslim, and she's just walking by, she probably doesn't care about this and that", but there's, we have this concept in our religion, which is, for example, if you see someone in a situation, give them some excuses, in a sense. For example, this one, it's wrong to just immediately say, "She's ignoring the situation". So you have to see the best of the situation, if that makes sense. So for example, if I just had this photo, you could assume that she was helping the person initially and then she saw other people come, so she gave them a chance to help that person or like, you know, she could be in a rush and obviously, she looks distressed so she has reacted to what's been happening, but she could be late for something and she didn't have time to you know, because she can already see that people are helping and you know, someone's calling someone so you know, she's letting them do it. And, you know how people single out - like she's the only Muslim there you never know what you know, the other people could be Muslims. You don't know. You know, Islam isn't just a race. It's, you know, anyone could be Muslim so even I know that's kind of a stretch, still they're like singling her out just because she's Muslim. She's reacting this way. And yeah, the only reason they're targeting her is because of her hijab, or maybe because she's coloured.

RESEARCHER: Okay, cool. That's really interesting. And same question to Anisha, just this picture on its own, what do you interpret is showing?

Anisha: Well, for me, I was obviously thinking, you know, of course, she could be distressed because anybody would be in that situation. But it's also like, I'm sure when the attack happened, a lot of people were on the bridge. And imagine if there were lots of people recording and you know, the press got there very, very quickly, imagine if she was trying to hide her face from all those cameras, and all of that, because obviously, her hands placement isn't like, towards the person who's collapsed on the floor. It's, you know, towards the, you know, the outside, like the public. But then unfortunately, she's been, you know, put into the situation where her pictures have become viral. And I do feel very sorry for her because, you know, we don't know what situation she was in, and maybe the thing that she was protecting herself from, you know, she got caught up in that. Because sometimes these images, they are very scary, you know, if they were to get leaked, and you know, of course, she's a Muslim woman who was there at that site. And, you know, if she was to get accused, or, you know, she could have lost her job, or, you know, like, what was a Muslim woman doing at that time when it was so called Islamic terrorist attack? Yeah, and it's very sad. And of course, we don't really know what was going through her mind. And, you know, it could be something as simple as she just wants to get away as soon as possible, because there were too many people. It was a distressing scene in the press was there as well.

RESEARCHER: Yeah, So I want to now move on to this, which is the tweet that went viral., I don't know if you know, but this account was actually it's a Russian account. So its purpose is to spread disinformation in countries target certain things, like I said, at the beginning of the focus group, target these societal divisions, these events that can cause hatred towards marginalised groups, that sort of thing. So I don't know if you've any of us seen it in the context of this tweet? This is this is the tweet that turned this photo into a piece of Islamophobic disinformation. So now that you can see it with this caption, for after discussing what we think the picture looks like next, I wanted to ask how you respond to it now when it's been contextualised by this caption and what you think of this caption, so, again, I'll start with Isaf if that's okay.

Isaf: Yeah, that's fine. Um, I don't know if I've seen this specific tweet, but I remember seeing lots of tweets of like, this specific like rhetoric about her just walking past the man and I think I even saw people saying that she was like, hiding her smile by hide it putting her hand over the face. Obviously, it does really have big consequences, because you talked about it being in the news, because of what people have been saying about this picture. So that is one really big consequence. I also remember like, not to make it about myself, I remember myself being affected by this specific picture and what people were saying about the picture as well, because so I was like, only 17 At the time, and that was like maybe the height of my social media addiction, I would say. So I was obsessed with looking at what people were saying about this picture. And I really take it to heart because people were going in on her. So I remember it made me feel like really upset and maybe even anxious because I remember putting myself in her shoes and thinking if I was in this, like, if this happened to me if I was just walking in terrorist attack happen, what would I do? What would I do if my face was all over social media? And people were saying that I was just walking past the man or maybe I was even smiling, like, what would I do? So I just remember feeling bad for her and just putting myself in her shoes.

RESEARCHER: Yeah, that's, that's, that's really interesting. I mean, that the focus group is going to go into sort of deeper societal issues. So making it about yourself is fine. Like, that's part of the focus groups. So yeah, so the same question to Maira how do you respond to the way the photographs been captured now? In this way?

\*\*\* Maira has tech problems\*\*\*

RESEARCHER: Let me just come out of my screen sharing so I can see what's going on. I'm sorry, guys. Anisha, are you still there? Yeah, I'll go back into share my screen. Sorry about this everyone. How do you respond to the way the photographs been captioned in this way?



Anisha: Well, I kind of understood where they were coming from, because it kind of does look like- you know, when you just look at it on like, face value, I can kind of understand where they got that from. But the thing was, I was kind of disappointed in the general public and, you know, the general community and society as a whole, because it's like, if everybody was to try and place themselves in a situation like that. And of course, it's kind of like common knowledge that, you know, media the news, they do like to over exaggerate things. And they have been known to, you know, lie as well. So I was kind of upset at the general public who supported that. And spread it even more because even now, at the bottom, it says it's got 613 likes, and that's a lot of people when you think about it. And In the end, there were actually so many.

RESEARCHER: Well, actually, the account itself has been deleted. So this tweet doesn't exist anymore. So I don't actually know how many retweets and likes this got. But I think this this screenshot of the tweet was taken within an hour of it being published. So this is how much interaction and reach it received after only an hour. Yeah. So in terms of how much interactivity received overall, I imagine it got 1000s and 1000s and 1000s of likes and retweets.

Anisha: And last thing is because I think you always do expect people to hate and that's with anything even general, you always do have haters and you have keyboard warriors, and you have trolls. But the fact that the general public and society they entertained that even more, I think that that's what the sad thing was, is most people who do live in Britain, they know that Muslims aren't like that. And we're such a diverse community and you know, a diverse country. And it was kind of sad.

\*\*\* Maira comes back \*\*\*

RESEARCHER: so if you can, just quickly, just how do you respond to the photograph now that it's been captioned in this way with this tweet?

Maira: Yeah. So I think the main thing that comes to my head is that people always assume the religion of Islam with one thing with like, one image or one person, or like one assumption, for example, here. So that's why you know, the hashtag #banIslam. So just because what this person assumes is happening, they're just assuming that the whole religion is like this. And if you think about it, then now like, the actual event of the attack that's been, ignored, and the fact that it's this woman's reaction that's been more highlighted to everyone rather than, you know, what the attack was. So that's something that happens a lot they just focus on the wrong thing in the sense, like, because this is all assumptions of this woman, like, nobody actually knows what she's going through what she did was she didn't do. And the actual event has been, like, ignored in the sense.

#### MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS OF MUSLIMS

RESEARCHER: Yeah. Now, that's all super interesting. Thanks, guys. So I want to move on now to talk more about wider issues related to media representations of Muslims. Because there's a long history in the media of harmful representations of Muslims. And I believe that this piece of disinformation wouldn't have spread so widely if it wasn't underpinned by decades of the media presenting harmful and unrepresentative representations of Muslims. I was wanting to ask you all as Muslim women, what have been your experiences, or your opinions towards these kinds of media representations, whether it's in like the news media, or in television? That sort of stuff. So again, I'll start with Isaf if that's okay?

Isaf: That's fine. So if I think of Muslim representation in the media, and especially Muslim women, and then if we go further with that Muslim women wear a hijab, I feel like it's always negative. I feel like the only time people bring up Muslims in the news, when like, something negative happens, for example, if it's like, a terrorist attack, in this case, or it's like refugees. So yeah, even if I try and think I can't really think of any other times where I would see Muslims being mentioned in the media. There is with like Netflix and stuff. Sometimes there is representation within that. But even that is negative to a certain extent.

So for example, there's a series on Netflix called Elite, and one of the characters she's Muslim, and she wears a hijab, but then she takes it off when she ends up falling in love and stuff like that. It just really Peeves me off because it's like you're taking the only representation away from us and you're turning being Muslim woman with a hijab into a negative thing that you must get rid of if you want to, like integrate within society. So yeah, I feel like all representation with Muslim women and Muslims in general is negative in the media.

RESEARCHER: That's really interesting, especially if we bring up this this idea that in the show is that wearing the hijab is seen as negative and the only way that the character can- I've not seen the show, but like, maybe integrate or live a certain type of life. She has to remove that part of her identity.

Isaf: Yeah, yeah. And it is quite insulting as well. I feel like, if I was younger, maybe it would hit me even harder.

RESEARCHER: Would you also agree that the sort of representations that you talked about, did play a role in the circulation this photograph the fact that it went viral? And the media reported on it, that sort of stuff?

Isaf: Yeah. 100% Because I feel like a lot of people see wearing hijab as a negative thing. And even if she wasn't wearing hijab, maybe we wouldn't even be having this conversation. Because a hijab is often a tell-tale sign of being Muslim. And if someone's you know, person of colour, sometimes it's not easy to tell if they're Muslim or not. They might just think she's Asian or black. So yeah, we might not even be having this conversation.

RESEARCHER: Yes, that's all super interesting. Thank you. And I'll get the same order again. If that's okay to Maira? Again, as a Muslim woman, what are your experiences or responses to these types of wider media representations of Muslim?

Maira: So whenever something like this happens, obviously, there's a sense of, "oh, now everyone's gonna think negatively again", like sometimes it seems okay, and you feel alright, going out. But then sometimes when this stuff happens, then you're like, "oh, everyone's gonna have this negative connotation about hijab", and it's going to be stronger. But me personally, I feel like sometimes, like, I'm not trying to be rude or anything. Sometimes, Muslims become a bit too afraid. And a bit too, like, "oh, what they're gonna say?". What my mindset is normally is, I should try and be, you know, who I am and what Islam actually represents. And you know, all the morals of Islam, I should try and make sure I present that to everyone. Because I know there's like some people who have never interacted with Muslims and have only seen it in the media. And the media has such a really bad representation. Especially in like movies, or films, if there's like a main Muslim girl, she's always like, has to wear a hijab, she has restrictions at home, she's upset with her religion and she tries to find freedom, by like, things that are non-Islamic, when, in fact, this, like, I could go on a tangent about how Islam like gives, you know, so many rights to women and stuff like that. And I know, there's probably some people who have just seen these things in the media, so they just, it's not their fault that this is how they've been taught what Islam is. So that's why I think it's important for us Muslims - this is what I always think - is that I have to make sure that I'm really representing Islam properly, even though I'm not perfect Muslim, but at least do my best to show that, you know, I don't have to always be defensive of my religion. I don't always have to be like, afraid of like people. I have to be confident in who I am. No matter what people believe and stuff.

RESEARCHER: Yeah, that's, that's all super interesting. I just wanted to finish off by asking as well if you think that the things that you've discussed now played a role in that photograph becoming viral?

Maira: Like, I'm assuming that that profile picture is the person who's tweeting it? So as you can see, they're white. And so obviously, that's probably just his conception of Muslims. And it's probably not his fault directly, in a sense that this is what the media has been telling him. And that's just what the media has portrayed Islam to be, which is quite sad. Because if you actually meet a Muslim, even just like a moment of like, interacting with a Muslim, you'll immediately be able to tell that what the media says is definitely not who we are or what we represent or what our religion is.

RESEARCHER: Huh, yeah, that's super interesting. And then, to Anisha, all the things we've been talking about media representations of Muslims. As a Muslim woman What are your experiences of these representations? And how do you respond to them?

Anisha: So firstly, I don't know, I feel like, whenever it's something which isn't like Christianity, or it's something new, it's represented in sort of, like an exotic way. Because one thing I've realised is shows for example, like Citizen Khan on movies like East is East and things like that, they kind of make Islam to be comedic. And you know, it's not meant to be like that. And it's like they take it out of context. And that's not the real Islam. And I find that with a lot of shows the way how they represent Islam, or those who follow Islam, and that sort of like, a lot of the times like the South Asian community, they represent it in a way how it isn't actually in reality. And even like, in general, for example, I'm going to use the Great British Bake Off as an example. So last year, in 2020, we had that incident where there was this Muslim woman, and she knocks over this other guy's cakes. I don't know if you watch it or not. And I remember the comments, and everybody was like, "Oh, it's because she's Muslim". And you know, because she was wearing a headscarf as well, you know, you could tell she was Muslim. And they were really pinpointing that. And I was like, her religion has got nothing to do with this accident. And you know, it was an accident, you can clearly see it, and she was really apologetic. And you know, she was apologising. And she was like, I'm really sorry. And it was kind of sad, because even, you know, if there were some Muslims who wanted to, you know, be part of media, you know, want to present or things like that they're faced with these challenges. And they're under so much scrutiny.

And it's actually really sad. And another winner, Nadiya Hussain who won the Great British Bake Off. I don't know, a couple of years ago, when she won. I remember many people weren't happy with that, because they were like, she's a Muslim, the first ever, I think, Muslim, and brown person to win. And even now, I think a month ago, she was on The Graham Norton Show, with Lady Gaga and someone else. And people were like, "Well, why is a Muslim woman with a great icon in pop culture". And it was very sad, because it's like, even if we, as Muslim women, if we wanted to represent the Muslim community, it's very difficult for us to do that. Because of these challenges that we face and this harassment or this bullying. And so yeah, I don't think there's anyone else who I know, is like, representing Islam, and you know, Muslims, like as women. I don't think there's any other woman out there.

RESEARCHER: Yeah, I didn't watch the bake off but I know who Nadiya is.

Anisha: I think she's the only person who I know is like, really successful. And you know, she's got her own TV show now, as well, as she's done loads of things. Yeah, I think you should look at the incident that happened last year. I'm a real big bake off fan so that's why I'm mentioning it!

RESEARCHER: No, no, it's fine. Like I said, this, it's about like, wider media representations, the way Muslim women are represented in the media. So if you have examples, that's great. And just finally, do you think that the way that the UK media presents Muslim women contributed to this piece of disinformation becoming viral and people latching on to it so much?

Anisha: I think it definitely has. And it's sad, because just because of the way how a person dresses, you know, they're automatically you know, they're linked to like negative things. So for example, because that woman was wearing a headscarf, I really do believe because she was wearing a headscarf that's why she was attacked. And that's why it became so

viral. And if she maybe wasn't wearing a headscarf she wouldn't have gotten attacked as much as she has. And of course, because she was a woman as well, if that was like a man, she probably would have gotten less, you know, viral, but because she was a woman.

RESEARCHER: Yeah. I just I've seen that you've unmuted yourself Isaf? Is there something you want to say?

Isaf: Yeah, I feel like also what we're talking about now with like the hijab and stuff. I feel like a lot of people, they can't see past the hijab, like they feel like us wearing hijab is like our entire identity. They can't really see past that, and see us as people like, you know, I don't see myself different from the average British person like, we were all born here, we all like went to school and grew up together. But as soon as we grow up and wear the hijab, I feel like they can't see past that, and they make our entire identity and what Anisha was talking about with the cake incident, and how people thought that she did that on purpose, because you know, she's Muslim. Well, of course, they think that because they attach our entire identity to like, being Muslim and we're not really seen as people sometimes I feel like they always have to, you know, kind of interlinked this with us being Muslim or something like that. Yeah.

#### FURTHER ISLAMOPHOBIC DISINFORMATION

RESEARCHER: Yeah, no, that's great. And I appreciate that, you know, some of these things might be quite hard to talk about. And yeah, thank you for sharing this. So, I wanted to ask you all whether you've seen any other Islamophobic disinformation or fake news, like the tweet that I showed you, because even though it was four years ago, a lot has changed since then, like we've left the EU, we're in the middle of this pandemic. These, things change very quickly on the internet. For example, there's a lot of disinformation around COVID. So, I'd like to hear from you all, if you have encountered any other types of Islamophobic disinformation on the internet? And, and again, I'll start with Isaf if that's okay?

Isaf: Yeah, that's fine. Um, yeah, I see it all the time. And I think this was a really big reason why I had to get off Twitter, especially during the pandemic, I completely deleted all of my social media accounts apart from TikTok, I think TikTok is quite positive that's why I like it. But Twitter, I feel like it's just like, an echo chamber of negativity like 90% of the time. And I see disinformation towards Muslims towards immigrants, any marginalised group all the time. So, for example, you briefly mentioned COVID, like I remember, during the pandemic, we had Eid. And people made a really big deal out of people visiting each other during the lockdown, but then, a few weeks later it was Christmas, I think. And then I didn't see nearly the amount of conversations being had, even though it was the same thing, people visiting their families. And I remember just thinking, how unfair is this? Like, people just want an excuse to go in on Muslims. But when presented with the same opportunity to us, you know, white groups or British people they don't really take the same stance that they might have Muslims. So yeah, I see disinformation all the time. And that's why I often have to, you know, take a step away from Twitter most of the time, and yeah, but it's quite addictive Twitter. So I have a problem with you know, deleting the app and then coming back on.

RESEARCHER: Yeah, Twitter's like, my main social media, but I agree, it can be very toxic for a variety of different reasons. Cool. Thank you. Maira, are you back? Is everything okay? I don't know how much you missed what I was saying. But I was just talking about whether you might have seen other types of Islamophobic disinformation on social media, and maybe you could talk about them, like what they were in relation to and things like that.

Maira: Yeah. So I think one thing that came to your mind was during the pandemic, people, you know, when masks were first started to become a thing. There was a discussion where, like, I think people wouldn't allow, like the burqa, you know, face covering that Muslim women have. Yeah, they said that that is, I think it's in France that is you can't have it in some places, but you can wear masks, and it was just that made no sense whatsoever. And because I've heard, like arguments that people say about the burqa is like, negative arguments that people say against it. It's like, you can't tell who the person is. You don't



know who it could be this, this and that. But then like, the whole world is wearing masks. And they said, Oh, no, no, that's fine. That's fine. And it's just that contradiction about it, just because it's a religious thing. And for example if a Muslim woman wore a mask, they wouldn't say anything. But then when she covers her face a bit differently, then they make such a big deal about it. And that's just really contradicting. And also the whole France, being Islamophobic all those different rules- I think it's like minors can't wear a headscarf. I'm not sure if that rule passed, but that's what they're talking about in France, and it's just, it's such a weird rule. Like, so children are allowed to, like, you know, wear whatever they want, but they can't cover as much as they want. And that I just find it's just weird, if you just think about it, I don't understand any benefit, why anybody would do it other than the fact that they don't like Muslims, or like, they don't like the hijab. Other things I can think about is, for example, I think my sister pointed this out was in Aladdin, for example. The fact of making like Arabs, you know, bad and like mean, is that the main characters, like the good characters, for example, Jasmine, and Aladdin and stuff, they have American accents. But then like, you know, the, like Jafar, - well I'm not sure about Jafar, but like the other bad guys, who are like chasing Aladdin at the beginning, they all have Arab accents. And even though that's really minor, and I initially didn't recognise that, at first, like, properly, until somebody pointed that out, it's just that kind of thing, then when somebody, who doesn't have any experience with Muslims, if they hear somebody with an Arab accent, they probably would immediately think, Oh, this is someone bad or something, negative connotation towards them. So I think stuff like that. That can think of off the top of my head. Like, whenever you get this happens, I just know that our religion isn't changing, it's not going anywhere. And with all these negative things, it can't destroy our religion or anything. So I have that hope that Muslims and if we follow Islam properly, and stuff, that people will understand what Islam truly is. And because we're like such a multicultural society, there will be a point in everyone's life who they will interact with the Muslim, and they will see that, you know, the media is just rubbish when it comes to Muslims and how they represent it.

RESEARCHER: Yeah, I think that's really interesting. I'll go to Anisha with the same question just whether you have encountered any Islamophobic disinformation, maybe on social media or the wider media.

Anisha: So firstly, I totally agree with what Isaf & Maira said, I have seen that, I read about it this past year, you know, during Coronavirus, and all of that. There was also one other thing, it kind of links in with religion as well, because some people, you know how there was some reports and I'm not sure how scientifically accurate they are, that the BAME community is at more risk of developing Coronavirus. Yeah. And there were some reports that actually said that it's actually the BAME community which are spreading Coronavirus. More compared to the average person. And, and then, of course, you know, you always have people in the comments that are like, "oh, yeah, most Asian people, you know, most black people are actually Muslims, and, you know, they go to pray in the mosque, and you know, it's because of that, and it's because they're not educated, and they're ignorant". And it was comments like that, which were, which were really sad. And I remember reading about that, but I'm not sure how scientifically accurate they are. And you know, especially when you read things from like the Daily Mail or The Sun, you know, you kind of do think that yeah, they've probably added a couple of extra pieces of information. There was also one thing I'm not sure how old is exactly, but I remember reading about it. And there was a news article about this boy in school, he wrote, "I live in a terrorist house" when he was meant to write, "I live in a terraced house". And, of course, when the teachers read that, and you know, they, of course, told the authorities and all of that, I understand is like, it's a normal procedure. But was there a need to let the media know? You know, at the end of the day, it was a seven-year-old son, and when the investigation was done, and they realised, actually, no, it's not a terrorist house, you know, they scanned all the computers and did whatever. And it was really sad, because a young boy like that was exposed, even though of course, his identity was, you know, hidden, but still a very young boy, he was exposed to the general society, like, did the media need to know? Of course, somebody leaked this to the media. And it's very sad when you think about it like that, that even if a child was to make a genuine mistake, you know, it has to go to the media. And again, it's the whole of Muslims that get blamed for something. And,

you know, the things that people say that, you know, it's a child, and they're radicalising the child, when actually it was a genuine mistake. And the trauma that that family must have faced in the local community is actually very sad. And of course, there were many articles in the beginning, saying, you know, this boy has been caught, and this is what he's seeing at school. But then once it all got cleared, we only had a couple of articles, you know, clarifying what the actual what actually happens. I think that's one that I really remember.

## CONSEQUENCES OF ISLAMOPHOBIC DISINFORMATION

RESEARCHER: Yeah, they're all really interesting examples. Thank you so much. So we've got two minutes left. But I've got one final question, if that's okay for everyone. And if you don't mind stay a little bit longer. If you do need to go, just let me know. But I am, I wanted to ask whether you think disinformation like the tweet has genuine offline consequences for people who see it, like whether it might change people's behaviour or their opinions towards things? And I'll start with Isaf?

Isaf: I definitely think it does have real life consequences on both sides of the spectrum. So for example, I can give you my own personal experience. So I know it affects Muslim women because it affected me. Like I remember that was the first time where I actually had the thought, Oh, my God, like, this is something that could happen to me, I could be scapegoated, for you know, whatever agenda people might have, if I'm just walking on the street, and a terrorist attack happens. So it made me feel quite anxious. And, yeah, and depressed almost because I don't want to be on Twitter anymore. Like Twitter was a joke and something recreational for me. But then I ended up seeing all these people that you know, these negative thoughts and ideas, and it was kind of being pushed onto me almost. Yeah. So and then on the other side, it could also have real life consequences for people who might have not interacted with Muslim people before. So for example, if they live in a rural part, maybe not Manchester, but if they live in like a rural place where they've never interacted with a Muslim before. And this is the type of things that they always seem to hear about Muslim people, negative stuff in the media, then, of course, it's gonna shape how they view us because they've never met someone in real life. So they might have

negative feelings. And then if we really want to, you know, exaggerate things and like, think of full-scale consequences, what they actually end up hurting someone because they believe everything they read, and people do believe what they read, especially old people. So yeah, it can have very big, real-life consequences.

RESEARCHER: And just quickly, who do you think should be responsible for combating or taking down disinformation? whether you think it's the social media sites themselves or the government or the education system?

Isaf: We could definitely educate people, but I feel like some responsibilities on the government as well, because I feel like they react really quickly when a Muslim does something bad, which is good. Like, of course, they should react to terrorist attack quickly. But you know, hate crimes affect people a lot as well. And if they took hate crimes seriously, even if they were the ones online that can make a really big change, I think I hate The Daily Mail, I feel like it's responsible for so much. So I think they should have more people monitoring that website in particular and other websites, which, you know, draw in alt-right groups. And I like the thing Twitter does now when they mark something as misinformation, but I think they only do that with COVID. They could start doing that with other topics as well.

RESEARCHER: Mm hmm. That's, that's great. Thank you. So I'll go to Maira. Do you think that tweets like the tweet that I showed you and other similar types of stuff online, has offline consequences? And influences maybe people's opinions or their actions?

Maira: Yeah, so personally, it just makes me upset that I know, people won't think twice, they'll just immediately think, oh, it's her religion that's making her- so first they'll assume something bad about her. And then they go, Oh, it's her religion doing that. And then obviously, if somebody with that mindset interacts with me, their mindset would be something negative about me like so when I go out, I like cover my face. I wear the niqab

and stuff. So I know that people sometime would assume you know that I don't have manners that I'm probably like, you know, uneducated, or stuff like that, when I'm actually like, into science. I've done so many sports, I've done so many other activities as well, and things like that. And it's just, it's sometimes funny when I say all these things to them, and they look so surprised like, "somebody who dresses like you is like this?" It's kind of a funny reaction to me is like, you know, I don't expect people to react like that. I just say it casually. Like, I've done so many different sports I've done Netball for 10 years. I'm really into sciences, I'm into biology. And it's just, it's just to them. It's like, "oh, wow, I didn't know someone like you could do that". And then on the other side, obviously people who are only on social media and only get to see these negative reactions to Muslims would assume that, oh, since everybody's reacting to them this way. Probably that means it's right. Because some people have that mindset that if everyone's doing it, it's right. Where, you know, that's not necessarily true, obviously. So that obviously does affect- social media has a heavy impact on people's lives. Because since people on it so much as well. So yeah, I do think that it does change people's mindsets.

RESEARCHER: And what institutes do you think should be responsible for helping to combat disinformation? Again, whether you think it should be like a law from the government, it's a social media sites responsibility. People should be educated more? What's your opinion on that?

Maira: Yeah. So um, for example, on social media, I know that, you know, if you put something sensitive on it'll block it, or, for example, Instagram, it has that thing, right? It blurs it out and then it says, Would you like to view this photo? And for example, with like, COVID, and stuff, if you wrote something just to do with like vaccine or COVID, and stuff, that thing would automatically pop up, I don't know, if you've seen it, and it's like here are the guidelines to COVID or something like that. So, you can see that it is possible to, you know, filter out these things. So, for example, this was like, not even like, discreet, it was, like, clear cut that tweet, it said, Ban Islam and stuff like that, that could easily be, you know, taken down. But you know, it's just, it's just left there. So either, you know, there's

no, you know, restrictions on social media about Islamophobia, or that, you know, they intentionally leave it I don't know. So I think social media kind of does have the power to control what people put up and what can be seen to other people. Also, I think, in terms of education, sometimes it's like, 'wrong education'. So for example, I know that people they really want a good representation of Muslim in the media, for example, the movies or films, but I feel like you really can't, unless you have like, I don't know, because I feel like the people who do these Muslim representations only know Muslims- or aren't even Muslims who are doing it, if that makes sense. So like, it's going to be really hard to have a proper good representation of a Muslim who everyone will be happy with. Because what I've noticed is also they've also brought in a lot of South Asian culture into it, like, and some of our cultural things, they'll represent it as Islam. And so I feel like this learning from or like, for example, if you want to put in a Muslim character, just put them in, not put them in, like, you know, don't emphasise their whole- I remember this movie, it was the Liam Neeson movie, it was like on an airplane, I can't remember the film name, it was like on an aeroplane and there was like, one of the passengers was a Muslim man. He had the, you know, the Muslim cup, and he had like a beard and stuff. And he was just like a doctor I think somebody was, I don't know, injured or something. And he was a doctor. So his character was just, you know, him being a doctor. And you know, he, I don't know if he would say some Muslim phrase. I mean, Islamic words or Arabic words or something. But he was just like, you know, with an American accent stuff. He was just a citizen there. So if you want to do something like that, do that. But I feel like when people push, like, 'good' Muslim representation in film and stuff, I don't think it can ever happen properly, if that makes sense. I think just in general, I think social media and the news has the most impact, in terms of education. Everybody knows a lot of the basics of Islam anyway. So they know, like the rulings of Islam, like the basic ones, you know, but this, like, the way our morals are, that's very heavily influenced by social media, what the news tells everyone. So I feel like if that's kind of controlled a little bit that would impact and help a lot. And I know that is possible, because you can see it from other things that they do, censor stuff and, you know, put up things like that.

RESEARCHER: That's all really great. Thank you. And finally, just to Anisha, do you believe that tweets like the one that I showed you has offline influences on people's behaviour or attitudes?

Anisha: And yeah, definitely, I think for Muslims, men and women, it makes them more paranoid when they're outside, especially now in the time of social media, and everyone's got their phones out. And, you know, it's like, you see lots of videos on YouTube, where it looks as if people are filming people without their consent. And this is sort of like that, as well. And you know, for Muslims, when they do go outside, they feel like they have to be on like, their best behaviour, or they always need to keep that behaviour in check, or, you know, they have to make sure they sort of blend in or they hide within other people in society, because of fear of them being exposed or, you know, shown in a bad light like this has happened. And of course, what are the people who are like non-Muslims, I think it creates that divide, and that hate even more, or it confuses people, because I think, of course, you do have some people who are really against Islam, and you know, they just have hatred and you know, that racists and for them, of course, it fuels that ignites that even more, whereas there are some people who are genuine citizens who have maybe never met a Muslim person, and it confuses them even more, because the things that they've been told it goes totally against that so you know, if they've been told that Islam is all caring, and it's peaceful, and all of that, and when they see something like this, and it blows up, it confuses them, because they're like, what if it really is like this? And what is this? It's I think it affects everybody.

RESEARCHER: That's really interesting. And What would be your ideal way combating that kind of disinformation? Do you think it's like the social media sites responsibility, or it should go up to the government or education systems? What do you think?

Anisha: I think everything needs to change. I think there's improvement needed everywhere. And definitely social media needs to take more of a stance, and we can see

it's possible with Coronavirus, they really, you know, honed down on all the know, the fact checking and all of that. The conspiracy theorists, so it is possible. But the question is: Is social media ready to do that for a religion like Islam? Because the thing is, if social media was to, for example, like Facebook or Twitter if they were to support- because what people would see they would say that the social media that's supporting the Muslims, you know, they're not giving us free speech and all of that. But I think definitely social media can be a lot better. And you know, I really do pray and hope that they do. Because it always starts off with social media. And then of course, the government, I really do think there should be a law maybe not specifically for Islam, but other religions as well, that there's going to be no hatred, tolerated on social media apps like these, because it's igniting that hate, that fear into society even more, and it just caught cause antisocial behaviour on the roads and you know, things like that. I wouldn't be surprised if there have been incidents where Muslims have been attacked, and have been attacked really severely. Or, you know, if there was something very minor and it got blew out of perspective, just because it was a Muslim. So I definitely think the government needs to do something as well. Education at schools, I think that is important. But I do feel the younger generation are a lot better at understanding diversity, and, you know, understanding the differences and accepting that compared to the older generation. And lastly, I think it's everybody's own responsibility to think for themselves. Because it's like, we've all been given that ability to intellectually think about people and you know, think about other human beings because at the end of the day, we are all human. Just because our beliefs are different doesn't mean that you know, it's like, you need to hate that person. So I think it's everybody's individual responsibility as well.



## APPENDIX 5: THEMATIC FRAMEWORK (FOCUS GROUPS DATA)

Theme	Definition
Othering	The participants considered how and why the Westminster Bridge photograph was used and seemingly worked effectively as a piece of Islamophobic disinformation. This included discussions about the woman in the photograph's identity as a Muslim, her attire, and the role of social media in the photograph's spread. Moreover, participants overwhelmingly believed the effect of disinformation, like SouthLoneStar's tweet, to be negative. Conversations centred on the othering effects such disinformation might have on both Muslims and non-Muslims.
Lived experience	This centred on participants providing personal stories about their lives related to mis-/disinformation and media representations. Many of these stories were notably visceral and involved feelings of anxiety, paranoia, and experiencing harassment. That discussions about these experiences were brought up in the context of Islamophobic disinformation and media representations was particularly striking, and so it was deemed essential to highlight this finding from the focus groups.
Photographic veracity	This involves participants reflecting on the effect of using a photograph to spread Islamophobic disinformation. In general, this involved them arguing that it was difficult to ascertain what the Westminster Bridge photograph showed, and so SouthLoneStar's claims could not be supported by the contents of the photograph. There were also wider discussions about how photographs can be presented in a deceptive way to produce certain narratives.
Cynicism about the media	Participants overwhelmingly believed wider media representations of Muslims to be negative. Generally, this involved presenting Islam as oppressive and destructive, in particular, the act of Muslim women wearing religious attire like the hijab. Often, participants did not discuss Islamophobic disinformation exclusively in the context of social media but also in the belief that mainstream media, especially right-wing news media, shared similar content.

## APPENDIX 6: PREVIOUSLY PUBLISHED MATERIAL IN ADVANCE OF THE THESIS SUBMISSION

Faulkner, S., Guy, H. & Vis, F. (2021). 'Right-wing populism, visual disinformation, and Brexit'. In Tumber, H. & Waisbord, S. (eds). *The Routledge companion to media disinformation and populism*. (pp. 198-208). London: Routledge

Faulkner, S., Vis, F. & Guy, H. (2020). 'Verifying and questioning images'. In Silverman, C. (ed.), *Verification Handbook: Investigating disinformation and media manipulation*. Maastricht, Limburg: European Journalism Centre. [Online] <https://datajournalism.com/read/handbook/verification-3/investigating-actors-content/5-verifying-and-questioning-images>

Vis, F., Faulkner, S., Noble, S. U., & Guy, H. (2020). 'When Twitter Got #woke: Black Lives Matter, DeRay McKesson, Twitter, and the Appropriation of the Aesthetics of Protest'. In A. McGarry, I. Erhart, H. Eslen-Ziya, O. Jenzen, & U. Korkut (Eds.), *The Aesthetics of Global Protest: Visual Culture and Communication* (pp. 247–266). Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press. DOI: 10.2307/j.ctvswx8bm.18