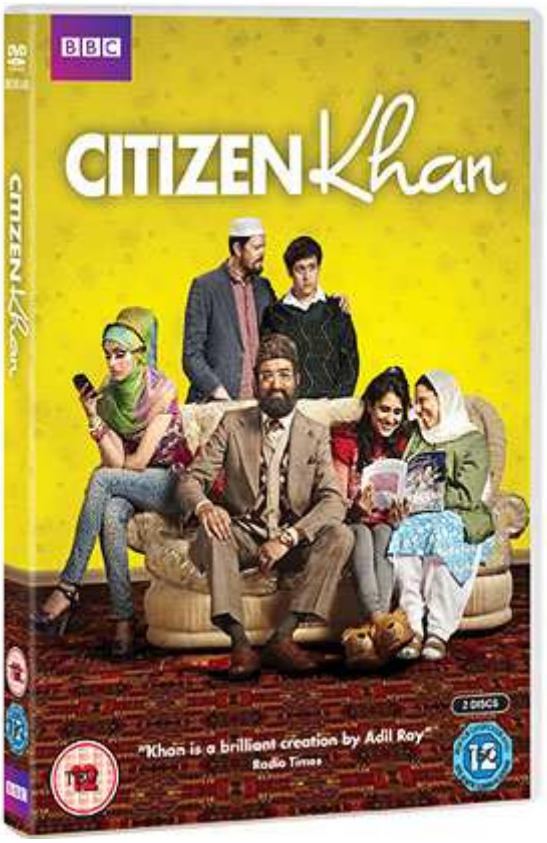

BRITISH MUSLIM PERCEPTIONS OF CITIZEN KHAN

ABSTRACT

In 2012 the BBC aired the first episode of its new sitcom, Citizen Khan. The programme was met with mixed reviews by both audiences and scholars, with some arguing that its depiction of Muslims was racist and that it contributed to Islamophobic discourse. Using qualitative interviewing, this research examines the opinions and responses of three British Muslim participants to an episode of Citizen Khan.

Natasha Tiley 0810780

MA Islam in Contemporary Britain

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Introduction

The 2001 National Census data revealed that the British Muslim population numbered 1.6 million, amounting to the second largest religious group in the UK.[1] Analysis of the Census data also hinted at a growing Muslim population, suggesting that British Muslim numbers had risen from approximately 21,000 in 1951 to 1.6 million in 2001.[2] Alongside a rise in the British Muslim population, the presence of Muslims in the British media has also increased in recent years.[3] Whilst the appearance of Muslims in the British media is nothing new, a number of geopolitical events, such as the Iranian Revolution, the Rushdie Affair, the first Gulf War, and the 9/11 and 7/7 attacks, have increasingly catapulted Muslims into public discourse.[4] Muslims have therefore occupied an increasingly central position and recent research has confirmed a growth in particular on the extent of reporting about British Muslims.[5] Reporting about Muslims has been shown to predominately frame Muslims negatively, and consequently contributes to Islamophobic discourse.[6] Whilst it is difficult to argue that the media directly cause such problematic thinking, 'contemporarily, the role of the media would appear to have become ever more important in communicating and disseminating ideas and meanings about Muslims and Islam'.[7]

Whilst examinations of both Islam in the media and Islamophobia and the media have tended to focus predominately on news reporting, British Muslims have also appeared in entertainment media. These include newspaper cartoons, television programmes such as *Goodness Gracious Me* and *Spooks,* movies such as *Four Lions,* and on the internet. Furthermore, there is an increasing amount of media that is produced by British Muslims themselves. An example of this being the popular YouTube video *Diary of a Badman* written

[1] Ceri Peach, 'Britain's Muslim Population: an Overview', in *Muslim Britain: Communities Under Pressure*, ed. by Tahir Abbas (London: Zed Books, 2005), pp.18-30 (pp.18-19).
[2] Ibid., p.23.
[3] Kerry Moore, Paul Mason and Justin Lewis, 'Images of Islam in the UK: the Representation of British Muslims in the National Print News Media 2000-2008', Cardiff School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies <http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/jomes/resources/08channel4-dispatches.pdf> [accessed 09/09/14] (p.9).
[4] Nabail Matar, 'Britons and Muslims in the Early Modern Period: from Prejudice to (a theory of) Toleration', in *Anti-Muslim Prejudice: Past and Present*, ed. by Maleiha Malik (UK: Routledge, 2010), pp.7-25; Chris Allen, *Islamophobia* (England: Ashgate Publishing, 2010), pp.39-46; Chris Allen, *Islamophobia* (England: Ashgate Publishing, 2010), pp.83-84.
[5] Moore et al, 'Images of Islam in the UK', p.9; See also John E. Richardson, 'Get Shot of the Lot of Them: Election Reporting of Muslims in British Newspapers', in *Anti-Muslim Prejudice: Past and Present,* ed. by Maleiha Malik (UK: Routledge, 2010), pp.146-168 (p.150).
[6] Allen, *Islamophobia*, p.96.
[7] Ibid., p.99.

by Humza Mohammed Arshad.[8] The question then arises as to whether their representation in these media forms differs from that of news media, especially considering the "entertainment" purpose of the former.

Setting the Scene

In August 2012, the BBC aired the first episode of the television programme entitled *Citizen Khan*. Created by Aadil Ray, himself a British Muslim, and written by Ray along with Anil Gupta and Richard Pinto, the show is the first British sitcom to focus primarily on a Muslim family.[9] The programme is described by the BBC as follows:

> The first in this new family-based sitcom set in the capital of British Pakistan - Sparkhill, Birmingham. Citizen Khan follows the trials and tribulations of loud-mouthed, tight-fisted, self-appointed community leader Mr Khan and his long-suffering family.[10]

Aired on a prime time slot and watched by approximately 3.6 million viewers, the show was met with both an excessive amount of column and cyberspace commentary.[11] Indeed it could be argued that the commentary surrounding *Citizen Khan* 'outweighed the show itself'.[12] The show was also met with a mixture of reviews. The first episode of *Citizen Khan* received 185 complaints after it was first broadcast.[13] However, not all responses to the programme were negative. Whilst some regarded it as racist and stereotypical, others viewed the show as a positive step arguing that Muslims need to learn to laugh at themselves.[14] Despite complaints by some viewers, the popularity of the programme continued and the show has just completed its third season on the BBC.[15]

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[8] Arshad Humza, *Diary of a Badman* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8DOlwLs9unA> [accessed 02/12/14].
[9] *Programme Information: Citizen Khan* <http://www.bbc.co.uk/mediacentre/proginfo/2012/35/citizen-khan.html> [accessed -3/12/14]; Abdul-Azim Ahmed, 'Faith in Comedy: Representations of Muslim Identity in British Comedy', *South Asian Popular Culture,* 11:1 (2013), 91-96 (p.91).
[10] *Citizen Khan* <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p00vh04w#programme-broadcasts> [accessed 02/12/14].
[11] Rupa Huq, Tahir Abbas and Rajiner Dudrah, 'Citizen Khan or Citizen Can't? Dossier on popular culture: Introduction', *South Asian Popular Culture,* 11:1 (2013), 75-76 (p.75).
[12] Ibid., p.75.
[13] *Sitcom Citizen Khan prompts 185 complaints to the BBC*, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-19395994> [accessed 02/12/14].
[14] Ibid.; Sabbiyah Pervez, *My community should stop being so defensive and learn to laugh at itself* <http://www.yorkshirepost.co.uk/news/debate/columnists/sabbiyah-pervez-my-community-should-stop-being-so-defensive-and-learn-to-laugh-at-itself-1-4915866> [accessed 02/12/14].
[15] *Citizen Khan Episode Guide* <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b03c8nd8/episodes/guide#b04n980r> [accessed 03/12/14].

High media coverage of the show also led to a number of scholarly contributions to the debate, which have also been divided in opinion. On the one hand it has been argued that through adopting a traditional British sitcom format, *Citizen Khan* has both managed to gain mainstream success and place itself squarely within the succession of sitcoms before it.[16] Through grounding itself in a characteristically British genre arguably, '*Citizen Khan* "transrupts" a nationalist discourse that paints Muslims as absolutely, irreconcilably different from British culture'.[17] Opposition to the show could therefore be explained by the fact that, in contrast to the dominant portrayal of Muslims as angry and protesting, the rare satirising of their own community is disconcerting.[18]

Alternatively, in response to the debate surrounding *Citizen Khan* Abdul-Azim Ahmed, argues that 'negative views regarding *Citizen Khan* were due to its failure to represent British Muslims'.[19] The portrayal of Mr Khan's character can be seen to portray anti-Semitic stereotypes recycled into Islamophobic ideas. Specifically, Mr Khan is portrayed as being cheap, racist, stupid and patriarchal. Ahmed argues that much like Jewish communities in the past, Mr Khan and therefore the wider Muslim community, are presented as having little or no allegiance to Britain. Instead, Mr Khan proudly projects his Pakistani identity. In contrast to this, how Mr Khan's identity is portrayed is completely inaccurate to how the majority of British Muslims consider their own identities. Consequently, through portraying Mr Khan in this way '*Citizen Kahn* adopts stereotyped narratives and reinforces them'.[20] In contrast to the recycled stereotypical tropes present in *Citizen Khan*, Ahmed offers a number of alternative programmes and comedians that he argues provide a more nuanced presentation of British Muslims and their identity. For example, the stand-up comedian Imran Yusuf uses his migrant identity for comedic purposes but rather 'subverts perceptions about British Muslims' and instead articulates 'new notions of what it means to be a British Muslim'.[21] Similarly, the YouTube programme *Diary of a Badman* can be seen to be a satire of the stereotypes regarding British Muslim identity. Consequently it challenges these stereotypes as opposed to *Citizen Khan* which reinforces them.

[16] Anamik Saha, 'Citizen Smith more than Citizen Kane? Genres-in-progress and the cultural politics of difference', *South Asian Popular Culture,* 11:1 (2013), 97-102 (p.99).
[17] Ibid., p.100.
[18] Ibid., p.100.
[19] Ahmed, 'Faith in Comedy', p.91.
[20] Ibid., p.92.
[21] Ibid., p.92.

As one of the first television programmes focusing mainly on a Muslim family, *Citizen Khan* had the opportunity to present new accounts of British Muslim life and British Muslim identity. Consequently, it could have helped to subvert racism and Islamophobia. Instead, Ahmed argues the programme frames British Muslims in much the same way as other media forms. Consequently, rather than subverting racist or Islamophobic discourse, it 'is focused on reinforcement of, rather than challenge to stereotypes about British Muslims'.[22]

Whilst Ahmed's article provides some interesting insights regarding *Citizen Khan* and its portrayal of British Muslims, it is not necessarily the case that all British Muslims would agree. Indeed, when the episode aired, support for the programme came from both non-Muslim *and* Muslim audiences.[23] Furthermore, whilst Ahmed's article was based on an analysis of the first episode of *Citizen Khan,* engagement with audience research was not undertaken. Considering that 'the audience is vital to any performance, but it is especially so when the performance is a humorous one', inclusion of audience perceptions of the programme seems vital.[24] It is therefore the purpose of this project to conduct this research in order to determine Muslim opinions of the programme and if/how far Muslim audiences agree with the sentiments expressed in Ahmed's article.

Literature Review

A substantial amount of research has been conducted regarding Islam/Muslims and the British media. Research in this area has primarily come from scholars working within Journalism studies, resulting in the majority of research focusing specifically on news coverage.[25] Some of it has focused on specific events such as the Iranian Revolution, the Rushdie Affair, or 9/11.[26] Other research has analysed the changing ways in which Muslims

[22] Ibid., p.91.
[23] Sabbiyah Pervez, *My community should stop being so defensive and learn to laugh at itself* <http://www.yorkshirepost.co.uk/news/debate/columnists/sabbiyah-pervez-my-community-should-stop-being-so-defensive-and-learn-to-laugh-at-itself-1-4915866> [accessed 02/12/14].
[24] Moira Smith, 'Humour, Unlaughter, and Boundary Maintenance', *Journal of American Folklore,* 122:484 (2009), 148-171 (p.152).
[25] Rusi Jaspal and Marco Cinnirella, 'Media Representations of British Muslims and Hybridised Threats to Identity', *Contemporary Islam,* 4:3 (2010), 289-310 (p.290).
[26] See for example, Edward Said, *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine how we see the Rest of the World* (New York: Pantheon, 1981); Bhikhu Parekh, 'The Rushdie affair and the British press: some salutary lessons', *Free Speech* (1990), 59-79; Fauzia Ahmed, 'British Muslim Perceptions and Opinions on News Coverage of September 11', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies,* 32:6 (2006), 961-982; Peter Morey and Amina Yaqin, *Framing Muslims: Stereotyping and Representation after 9/11,* (London: Harvard University Press, 2011).

are represented over time, identifying key trends.[27] Different strands of research have focused on different mediums of news reporting from television, broad sheet press, to tabloid papers. Research has also varied in its methods from quantitative studies which map the amount of coverage about Islam and Muslims through qualitative research which examines the ways in which Muslims are represented when they do appear. A number of different methods have also been used, from interviewing Muslims about their news consumption and perceptions of news coverage, through to content and discourse analysis.[28]

British Islam in the News.

Through examining these studies, a number of key findings emerge: Muslims are presented as monolithic, and Muslims are presented as a physical and cultural threat.

Monolithic Representation.

The fact remains that Muslims communities both in Britain and worldwide are incredibly diverse. They vary in terms of their nationality, languages, politics, and schools of religious thought to name a few.[29] However, this diversity is not reflected in media coverage.[30] In British news coverage regarding Muslims, research has shown that their Muslim identity or "Muslimness" is often emphasized over other aspects, such as profession or age.[31] Coverage of British Islam is also often linked to a global context. References to global events in articles on British Islam represent 'the idea to the public that all Muslims are one and the same'.[32] Consequently, Muslims are presented as a homogenous group with little or no diversity within it.

Additionally, research has indicated that the identification of a specifically Muslim identity occurs predominantly in negative reporting contexts.[33] In contrast to this, when examining less negative news reports, there is little or no emphasis on the Muslim identity of

[27] See for example, Moore et al 'Images of Islam in the UK'; Elizabeth Poole, *Reporting Islam: Media Representations of British Muslims,* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2002).
[28] Poole, *Reporting Islam*.
[29] Peach, 'Muslims in the UK', pp.21-26.
[30] Elizabeth Poole, 'Newspaper Coverage of Islam in the British Press', in *Islam and the West in the Mass Media: Fragmented Images in a Globalising World,* ed. by Kai Hafez (USA: Hampton Press, 2000), pp.157-180, (p.167).
[31] Moore et al, 'Images of Islam in the UK', p.4.
[32] Poole, 'Newspaper Coverage of Islam in the British Press', p.159; See also Poole, *Reporting Islam*, p.57.
[33] Jaspal and Cinnirella, 'Media Representations of British Muslims', p.304.

social actors.[34] Instead Muslims tend to be "individualised", possibly resulting in audiences not recognising any connections between 'the righteous individual and the ethno-religious identity category Muslim'.[35] This is supported by audience research. Participants in Fauzia Ahmed's study of news coverage after 9/11 noted that they felt that Islam and Muslims only came to the fore of news stories when '"bad news" stories were in the news'.[36] Therefore, negativity may come to be perceived as an inherent trait within Muslim communities.[37] As a result of the above, Muslims are monolithically presented as being 'inherently negative and […] possessing inherent and immutable characteristics, which, allegedly, are to be found among all Muslims'.[38]

Physical Threat

A significant amount of research has shown that the amount that British Muslims appear in the news has increased in recent years.[39] For example, research conducted on British news print media from 2000-2008 identified 352 stories relating to British Muslims in 2000. This rose to 3466 articles by 2008.[40] Alongside a rise in reporting, news articles tend to focus on a limited range of topics or themes which are framed in an equally limited way.[41] Moore et al identified three main news hooks in the coverage of British Islam: terrorism or the war on terror, religious and cultural issues, and Muslim extremism, with reporting on terrorism and Muslim extremism accounting for 47% of overall coverage.[42] Whilst the prominence of other news hooks has fluctuated, the focus on terrorism and extremism has remained consistently high and became particularly noticeable after the attacks in 2001 and 2005.[43] Indeed, participants in Shakintala Banaji and Ammar Al-Ghabban's research of television reporting after September 11 2001 noted that reporting on the attack of the Twin Towers was seen to dominate news stories on every channel, resulting in the exclusion of other world news

[34] John E. Richardson, *(Mis)Representing Islam: the Racism and Rhetoric of British Broadsheet Newspapers* (UK: John Benjamins Publishing, 2004), p.131.
[35] Jaspal and Cinnirella, 'Media Representations of British Muslims', p.304.
[36] Ahmed, 'British Muslim Perceptions', p.976.
[37] Jaspal and Cinnirella, 'Media Representations of British Muslims', p.304.
[38] Ibid., p.305.
[39] Moore et al, 'Images of Islam in the UK'; Richardson, 'Get Shot of the Lot of Them'; Gholam Khiabany and Milly Williamson, 'Veiled Bodies – Naked Racism: Culture, Politics and Race in the Sun', *Race and Class,* 50:2 (2008), 69-88; Brian Whittaker, *Islam and the British press after September 11* < http://www.al-bab.com/media/articles/bw020620.htm> [accessed 02/12/14].
[40] Moore et al, 'Images of Islam in the UK', p.3.
[41] Poole, *Reporting Islam*, pp.64-81.
[42] Moore et al, 'Images of Islam in the UK', p.10.
[43] Ibid., p.11.

reports.[44] Respondents in another study noted that news channels failed to frame reports within broader contexts and were often one-sided, pandered to anti-Muslim sensationalist reporting and did little to inform viewers.[45] Consequently Banaji and Al-Ghabban noted that such reporting served to reinforce pre-existing negative ideas about Muslims, leading to their being viewed with increasing suspicion and distrust.[46]

The association of Muslims and Islam with terrorism in the media has also been visually represented by British media. When news articles or television programmes discuss issues such as terrorism 'a news presenter inevitably stands in front of an image of a woman wearing the *burqa,* or a mosque, or of Muslim men at prayer'.[47] Additionally, news reports often used police mug shots or of Muslim men outside of law courts and police stations.[48] Commenting on the power of images, one participant in Banaji and Al-Ghabban's research mentioned the killing of an American Sikh. She maintained that as a result of news coverage which portrayed the Taliban as evil, 'all bearded and turbaned men suddenly began to look dangerous and suspect'.[49] In this way, those who simply looked like a terrorist, regardless of their religious, political or personal background, could easily become victims of abuse.[50]

Given the prominent visual and linguistic focus on terrorism and extremism when covering Islam and Muslims in Britain, the news media therefore create a link between Islamic 'religious piety and the threat of violence, which informs the view that any Muslim is a potential terrorist because the violence perpetuated by Muslims evolves out of something inherent in Islam'.[51] Consequently, 'it is likely that their respective social representations will converge' and that all British Muslims become associated with physical threats or problems.[52]

Cultural Threat

Whilst the number of reports concentrating on terrorism has remained consistently high, research has shown a marked increase in the focus on religious and cultural issues. In 2002,

[44] Shakuntala Banaji and Ammar Al-Ghabban, 'Neutrality Comes From Inside Us: British-Asian and Indian Perspectives on Television News after 11 September', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies,* 32:6 (2006), 1005-1026 (p.1013).
[45] Ahmed, 'British Muslim Perceptions', pp.965-966.
[46] Banaji and Al-Ghabban, 'Neutrality Comes From Inside Us', p.1019.
[47] Liz Fekete, 'The New McCarthyism in Europe', *Arches Quarterly,* 4:7 (2010), 64-68 (p.67).
[48] Moore et al, 'Images of Islam in the UK', pp.22-26.
[49] Banaji and Al-Ghabban, 'Neutrality Comes From Inside Us', p.1011.
[50] Ibid., p.1021.
[51] Nasar Meer, 'Less Equal Than Others? Thirty Years After the Race Relations Act', *Index on Censorship,* 36:2 (2007), 114-118 (p.117).
[52] Jaspal and Cinnirella, 'Media Representations of British Muslims', p.297.

stories focusing on terrorism were at 51%, whilst those focusing on religious and cultural issues lay at 8%. By 2008, 'the volume of stories about religious and cultural differences overtook terrorism related stories', with 27% of coverage focusing on terrorism and 32% on religious and cultural issues.[53] Topics such as veiling, marriage, Sharia Law, and the Danish Cartoon controversy, were all included within this. The limited range of topics along with an 'absence of "normal" stories in which Muslims appear […] results in a consistently narrow framework of representation'.[54] When discussing the way in which news articles are framed, research has shown that

> The values and beliefs of majority Britain (often Christian) were contrasted and in which their differences were pronounced, thereby creating problems for integration. Articles often referred to world affairs, reflecting Islam as a worldwide (possibly uniform) phenomenon. This association also promoted ideas of not belonging, allowing questions about loyalty to be raised and thus working to accentuate difference.[55]

In addition to this, Muslim differences are not depicted in terms of mere intercultural difference but rather as inherent, with Muslim values positioned as the antithesis of (non-Muslim) British ones. This is achieved through the representation of 'negative characteristics as inherent in the Muslim outgroup *vis-à-vis* the positive characteristics of the ethno-national ingroup'.[56] This effectively results in a focus on the negative ramifications of Islam and Muslims' presence in the UK and highlights the differences between 'British Muslims and other British people'. [57] As a result Islam is presented 'as an alien culture in opposition to a "Western" life'.[58]

For example, Khiabany and Williamson note that the veil is often constructed as an erosion of the majority "British way of life" and a refusal to accept "our values".[59] Additionally, it is presented as an aggressive sign that Muslim women have been 'granted too much agency by Western liberalism'.[60] Consequently, where Muslim women were previously presented as victims of extremism, they are now depicted as 'ungrateful subjects who not only have failed to assimilate' but who also threaten British freedoms.[61] Similarly, the Danish cartoon

[53] Moore et al, 'Images of Islam in the UK', p.11.
[54] Poole, *Reporting Islam,* p.99.
[55] Ibid., p.82.
[56] Jaspal and Cinnirella, 'Media Representations of British Muslims', p.294.
[57] Poole, *Reporting Islam,* pp.82-85; Moore et al, 'Images of Islam in the UK', p.10.
[58] Poole, *Reporting Islam*, p.82.
[59] Khiabany and Williamson, 'Veiled Bodies – Naked Racism', p.71.
[60] Ibid., p.77.
[61] Ibid., p.77.

controversy was covered in a way that presented Muslims as in opposition to "British" values. Focusing on the debate between freedom of speech and religious tolerance, Muslims were depicted in opposition to the secular West.[62] As such Muslims are perceived to possess 'irrational and antiquated' beliefs which are depicted as a threat to British democratic and liberal values.[63] Furthermore, with the ability to laugh at oneself being understood as an essential quality in Western civilization, a perceived lack of sense of humour on the part of Muslims further contributed to the idea of their not belonging.[64] Muslim differences are therefore

> defined as deviancy from the norm, with their cultural practices interpreted as backward and based on archaic beliefs. These beliefs and practices are made to look strange in relation to the majority culture, while the practices of the dominant groups are never discussed or challenged, but presupposed.[65]

This is achieved through focusing on a limited range of topics with a narrow frame of reporting. As such, Muslims are presented as a cultural threat, opposing "normal" British values in favour of their own outdated, backwards beliefs.

In response to the concentration on physical and cultural threats, research has shown that some broadsheets have tried to counteract limited stories by running supplements on Islam.[66] However, even within these supplements and stories, certain stereotypes were still not challenged, 'for instance, the spiritual dimension of Islam is often ignored'.[67] Consequently, despite attempts to contest stereotypes, efforts such as these were insufficient.[68] In fact, participants in Ahmed's research noted that they felt that stereotypes were still extremely prominent within news reports concerning Islam and Muslims. For example, one participant noted that 'the hijab, jihad, oppressed women, beards, "Western infidels" are the caricatures Islam is reduced to'.[69] The combined result of coverage as discussed above, in conjunction with a lack of or failed attempts to present an opposing view, therefore highlights that, with

[62] Smith, 'Humour, Unlaughter, and Boundary Maintenance', p.149.
[63] Poole, 'Newspaper Coverage of Islam in the British Press', p.165.
[64] Smith, 'Humour, Unlaughter, and Boundary Maintenance', p.166.
[65] Poole, *Reporting Islam*, p.85.
[66] Ahmed, 'British Muslim Perceptions', p.976.
[67] Ibid., p.976.
[68] Ibid., p.974.
[69] Ibid., p.977.

regards to news media, 'the kinds of stories told about Muslims […] are limited, negative and stereotypical'.[70]

Gaps in the field

Alongside news articles, there are other forms of media in which Muslims and Islam are present, such as in entertainment media. Examples of this include television, film, radio, and the Internet. There has been very little research into Islam and Muslims on British television, film and other entertainment media. This could be due to the fact that British Muslims have only recently begun to appear in an entertainment context. Similarly, research regarding media that is produced by British Muslims is almost entirely missing in academic work. Again, this may be due to the relatively small amount of media that has actually been produced in this category, or its generally low profile. Research into these areas also seems to be predominately dominated by content analysis techniques as opposed to audience research.

British Islam in Entertainment Television Media

Research that has been conducted on entertainment media, seems to highlight similar findings and ideas as research on the news media. An analysis of an episode of *Spooks* reveals strong imagery of terrorism. The episode, entitled "Nest of Angels", depicts young British Muslims being 'groomed as suicide bombers at the fictional Parkmount Mosque in Birmingham'.[71] Here, Muslims are again portrayed as a physical threat as the images link Islam and Muslims to terrorism. Additionally, the episode of *Spooks* 'shows a nation that is inclusive and multicultural and at the same time torn by anxieties and doubts'.[72] The character of Khaldun (the stranger who appears to work for MI5 and infiltrate the jihadist group) is

> emblematic of the position of all Muslims within Western nations post-9/11 […] when Muslim were called on directly to distance themselves from the actions and beliefs of the 9/11 terrorists, under pain of expulsion from the bosom of national membership.[73]

[70] Justin Lewis, Paul Mason and Kerry Moore, 'Images of Islam in the UK: the Representation of British Muslims in the National Press 2000-8' in *Pointing the Finger: Islam and Muslims in the British Media*, ed. by Julian Petley and Robin Richardson (UK: Oneworld Publications, 2011), pp.40-65 (p.41).
[71] Peter Morey and Amina Yaqin, *Framing Muslims: Stereotyping and Representation after 9/11,* (London: Harvard University Press, 2011), p.159.
[72] Ibid., p.162.
[73] Ibid., p.164.

Consequently, the episode acts as an allegory of the situation of Muslims in Britain in which they are suspect by the communities around them and 'always have to prove their fidelity'.[74] Furthermore, in portraying a Muslim character in the context of a security related issue, the episode reinforces the link between Islam and physical threat so often portrayed by the media.

The release of *Citizen Khan,* the first sitcom to focus on a British Muslim family, resulted in a number of articles examining its content and effect. Scholarly and indeed public opinion on the programme has generally been divided. Some have argued that the show failed to present a more contemporary and accurate image of British Muslims, instead portraying them much in the same way as other media forms.[75] For example, it has been argued that the programme reinforces the notion of Muslim patriarchal values.[76] This is particularly the case with regards to the character Aria who is shown 'wearing a headscarf […] and then literally unveiling when out of sight of her father'.[77] As such, *Citizen Khan* does not reflect the achievements and current situation of British Muslims or British Pakistanis.[78] Therefore, where the programme had the opportunity to simultaneously challenge racist discourse and showcase British Muslim talent, it failed to capitalise on this.

Islam on the Internet

Research in the area of Islam and Media is beginning to recognise the Internet as another important medium. In his research on British Muslim identities in Cyberspace, Gary Bunt noted that 'the Internet represents a significant communication tool for the expression of Islamic concepts and notions of identity'.[79] Through examining a number of websites he found that there are a number of different expressions online relating to Islam in Britain. These include organisational representation, such as the Muslim Council of Britain web page, Muslim media websites like *The Muslim News'* page, and personal "home pages" on Islam. In this way 'both Muslim and other surfers with the inclination to search the web can be exposed to diverse angles relating to Islamic expression and Muslim identity in the UK'.[80] Consequently, the

[74] Ibid., p.165.
[75] Ahmed, 'Faith in Comedy', p.95.
[76] Ibid., p.94; Tahir Abbas, 'Last of the Dinosaurs: Citizen Khan as Institutionalisation of Pakistani Stereotypes in British Television Comedy', *South Asian Popular Culture,* 11:1 (2013), 85-90 (pp.86-87).
[77] Ahmed, 'Faith in Comedy', p.94.
[78] Abbas, 'Last of the Dinosaurs', p.88.
[79] Gary R. Bunt, 'islam@britain.net: "British Muslim" identities in Cyberspace', in *Christian-Muslim Relations,* 10:3 (1999), 353-362 (p.353).
[80] Ibid., p.361.

internet can be seen as an alternative medium through which British Muslim organisations and individuals can express themselves and their (alternative) points of view. Therefore, the Internet could be(come) important in contributing to an alternative discourse than the one present in national newspapers. However, web sites may also publish '"Islamic" content, that may come from sources that are not recognised as "Islamic" by others – or indeed are fabricated by authors who may wish to satirise or denigrate Islam, or aspects of Muslim beliefs and practices'.[81]

Indeed this has been shown to be the case, with recent research indicating that the 'new information and communication technologies can be used to publish and spread anti-Islamic and anti-Muslim opinions'.[82] For example, an examination of the content of the webpage WikiIslam found that 'compared to "Muslim homepages," i.e. those set up by believing Muslims, WikiIslam contains only negative and critical' content about Islam'.[83] Consequently, due to the closed way in which the information is present, most of the material found on the website can be considered as 'expressions of Islamophobia'.[84]

Muslim media

Research into media produced by British Muslims is almost entirely missing from academic material examining Islam in British media. Almost all research in this area has therefore concentrated on media produced by non-Muslims, or secular institutions. Gary Bunt's research into Islam online, and the articles regarding *Citizen Khan* are all exceptions of this. Aside from these, only one other article could be located. Tahira Sameera Ahmed examined a number of news media produced by British Muslims.[85]

Combining content analysis with consumer/audience research, this research highlights that most of these newspapers or magazines tended to focus on a combination of current affairs and religious issues, with different publications reflecting a variety of organisations, opinions and perspectives of British Muslims. Whilst 'certain fundamental aspects of identifying oneself

[81] Ibid., p.354.
[82] Goran Larsson, 'Cyber-Islamophobia? The Case of WikiIslam', *Contemporary Islam,* 1:1 (2007), 53-67 (p.63).
[83] Ibid., p.59.
[84] Ibid., p.62.
[85] Tahira Sameera Ahmed, 'Reading between the lines: Muslims and the Media", in *Muslim Britain: Communities Under Pressure*, ed. by Tahir Abbas (London: Zed Books, 2005), pp.109-126.

with Islam are shared by almost all groups of Muslims, but there is also diversity, as in any other community' and this was reflected by news media produced by British Muslims.[86] When asking participants why they chose to read British Muslim media forms, the main reasons were so they could read about Muslim current affairs and gain religious knowledge. Furthermore, Muslim media was seen to be useful as it could 'counteract the negative portrayal of Islam and Muslims in the mainstream Western media'.[87] Consequently, Ahmed noted that these forms of media 'are becoming especially important in providing minority groups with their own voices and alternative sources of information'.[88]

Islamophobia

The importance of research conducted around Islam and Muslims in the British media lies in the impact that media portrayals can have on the way that non-Muslims understand Islam and Muslims. Alongside content analysis of newspaper articles, Elizabeth Poole also aimed to discover how far audiences shared the discourse presented in the press. Additionally she examined whether first-hand experience and familiarity with Muslims 'undermines negative stereotypes'.[89] Poole conducted focus groups which were divided into three sets: Muslim participants, non-Muslim participants who had frequent contact with Muslims, and non-Muslim participants who had no contact with Muslims. In contradiction to proximities theories, which state that regular contact with Muslims decreases the amount of prejudice felt towards them, Poole found that 'non-Muslims who have no contact with Muslims are more likely to discuss Muslims positively than those with contact'.[90] Furthermore, Poole noted that the non-Muslim group who had regular contact with Muslims viewed Islam as an antiquated religion and that this belief seemed to be mainly based on media representations. Poole concludes that 'the media appear to be an important resource on "public knowledge" of Islam and Muslims in the UK'.[91] Consequently it can be argued that

> Media coverage has emerged as one of our primary sources of knowledge about Islam and Muslims. More than just becoming a source of knowledge or being a medium of distributing knowledge about Islam and Muslims, the news media carry a heavyweight

[86] Ibid., p.113.
[87] Ibid., p.119.
[88] Ibid., p.109.
[89] Poole, *Reporting Islam*, p.188.
[90] Ibid., p.198.
[91] Ibid., p.238.

influence in terms of framing and shaping discourses on and attitudes towards Islam and Muslims.[92]

Therefore, whilst it is difficult to argue that the media directly causes Islamophobic expressions, that they contribute to such ideas seems logical. If Muslims and Islam are generally framed negatively by British media, this is likely to have an effect in how they are viewed and understood by the wider public. Consequently, the negative image portrayed in British media, combined with evidence which suggests that Islam is "known" through the media, has implications for research around Islamophobia.

Methodology

Philosophical Underpinnings

Accepting the premise that researching 'human behaviour is fundamentally different from studying the natural world', this research rejects "objective" scientific approaches to social research.[93] It rejects the notion that 'it is possible to determine the truth about society' and instead adopts an interpretive approach that 'social action can only be understood by interpreting the meanings and motives on which it is based'.[94] In contrast to physical matter, people have consciousness. Consequently 'they see, interpret and experience the world in terms of meanings' and actively construct their own social reality.[95] Therefore, meanings do not exist independently from social actors, and are 'not imposed by an external society that constrains members to act in certain ways. Instead they are constructed and reconstructed by actors in the course of social interaction'.[96] As such, media "representation" is understood not to be 'a transparent process of re-presenting an objective reality'.[97] Whilst to some extent it is apparent that the media reproduce dominant ideologies, the media are seen as constructing 'their own meanings (norms and values) through signifying practices'.[98]

Whilst the content of the media is undoubtedly important, this research focuses on audience reception, rather than media content itself. In line with the approach outlined above

[92] Gabriel Faimau, 'Naming Muslims as Partners', *Journalism Studies,* 12:4 (2011), 474-489 (p.474).
[93] Michael Haralambos and Martin Holborn, *Sociology: Themes and Perspectives 5edn* (London: HaperCollins Publishers, 2000), p.965.
[94] Ibid., p.971.
[95] Ibid., p.971.
[96] Ibid., p.971.
[97] Poole, *Reporting Islam*, p.23.
[98] Ibid., p.23.

that 'people do not react automatically to external stimuli […] instead they interpret the meaning of a stimulus before responding to it', this research moves away from so-called behaviourist "effect" models.[99] Instead it adopts the approach that 'while there may be "preferred meanings" embedded within a text, namely a dominant message or messages, the reading of the message(s) will be dependent on a number of variables'.[100] Consequently, meaning is not simply absorbed from media, rather it is produced in the 'meeting and interaction between text and audience'.[101] As such, social context becomes important in understanding audience reception of media content.

Social critique of comedy.

In interrogating the claims of Abdul-Azim Ahmed's article and examining how British Muslim audiences view the episode of Citizen Khan, this research adopts the approach that humour and comedy are not necessarily cohesive and can, in fact, be divisive. As such, Michael Billig's work on the social critique of humour has been influential in the analysis of the interview data. Billig notes that humour has a paradoxical nature and in particular identifies three paradoxes:

> The first paradox is that humour is both universal and particular. It is to be found in all societies, but not all humans find the same things funny. The second paradox is that humour is social and anti-social: it can bring people together in a bond of enjoyment, and, by mockery, it can exclude people. […] The third paradoxical feature is that humour appears mysterious and resistant to analysis, but it is also understandable and analysable.[102]

It is important to note that whilst humour can be considered universal, this in no way indicates that all humans share the same sense of humour. Whilst jokes and other humorous forms of communication are not merely stated, they need to be received, the reception cannot be guaranteed.[103] As such, 'even individuals within a culture do not share the same humour […]

[99] Haralambos and Holborn, *Sociology: Themes and Perspectives*, p.972.
[100] Poole, *Reporting Islam,* p.188.
[101] Ibid., p.188.
[102] Michael Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule: Towards a Social Critique of Humour* (London: Sage Publications, 2005), pp.175-176.
[103] Ibid., pp.178-179.

Indeed, the same person may not find the same things funny at all times'.[104] The paradoxical nature of humour can be in part explained by its rhetorical nature.

Laughter is often assumed to be a natural, biological reaction to 'inner emotions elicited by humour'.[105] However, Billig stresses that laughter, much like language, is rhetorical 'for it is typically used to communicate meaning to others, rather than being a reflex reaction following a particular inner state'.[106] Language can be seen to be paradoxical in that in can allow us to convey opposing ideas and actions: 'we can assert, because we can deny; we can question because we can answer; we can criticise because we can justify; and so on'.[107] In a similar way, whilst laughter can be used to convey amusement and appreciation, there is a way of communicating the opposite: unamusement and disapproval. As such, laughter possesses a rhetorical opposite, which Billig terms "unlaughter", which needs to be considered.[108]

The concept of unlaughter denotes more than when a person happens not to be laughing. The majority of the time people are not laughing as they conduct their day to day business. Instead unlaughter is a 'display of not laughing when laughter might otherwise be expected, hoped for or demanded'.[109] In these situations, Billig argues that silence can indicate criticism. Furthermore, laughter possesses multiple rhetorical meanings even within the context of humour as 'it can be the laughter of hostile ridicule, or the laughter of friendly appreciation: one can laugh *with* others and *at* others'.[110] Consequently, laughter can unite people, divide them, or can do both simultaneously as when people laugh together at others. However, it is not the laughter alone that accomplishes this but rather the 'wider rhetorical context of humour'.[111] It was with this theory in mind that the researcher approached the research data. In adopting this approach, this research therefore analyses *Citizen Khan* through examining the reception rather than the underlying structure of humorous occurrences.

Ethical Approval

[104] Ibid., p.186.
[105] Ibid., p.176.
[106] Ibid., p.189.
[107] Ibid., p.177.
[108] Ibid., p.177.
[109] Ibid., p.192.
[110] Ibid., p.194.
[111] Ibid., p.194.

Ethical approval was gained beforehand according to regulations by the School of History Archaeology and Religion at Cardiff University.[112] An information sheet was given to participants before agreeing consent. Furthermore, I met with each of the participants in order to discuss what the research was about and allow them to ask any questions or raise any concerns. Informed voluntary consent was gained prior to conducting fieldwork via a written consent form and through meeting the participants face to face beforehand. It was highlighted to the participants that all participation was voluntary and this could be withdrawn at any point. This was reiterated before conducting the interviews.[113] All data from the interview has been anonymised and audio recordings and interview transcripts, have been stored securely on an encrypted USB drive. The documents containing transcripts from the interview were also encrypted with passwords only being known by the researcher allowing for confidentiality. This allowed for minimal risk to participants.[114]

Methods

The field work for this research rested upon the collection of qualitative interview data from three British Muslim participants: two female and one male. The method of semi-structured interviewing was chosen due to both its flexibility in collecting data, and the detailed, in-depth data it would produce.[115] When preparing the interview schedule it was noted that what questions could be asked would depend on the initial responses of the participant. Semi-structured interviewing, therefore, would allow for a set number of questions to be asked with room for further exploration into certain areas depending on how the participant responded. Questions were therefore designed to be open-ended, allowing for participants to respond fully without guiding their responses.

Despite this, there were a few issues with the interview schedule. There was a considerable difference in the length of the interviews with the female participants than with the male participant, with the female interviews being twice the duration (37 and 42 minutes, as opposed to 17 with the male participant). I interviewed Hisham first and had expected the interview to last at least half an hour. After noticing the short duration of the interview I considered reworking the questions suspecting that I had made them too closed. For example, I initially asked Hisham whether he thought the episode focused more on culture or religion.

[112] <http://www.cf.ac.uk/share/research/ethics/index.html> [accessed 01/04/14].
[113] <http://www.cf.ac.uk/share/research/ethics/index.html> [accessed 01/04/14].
[114] Alan Bryman, *Social Research Methods,* 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) pp.509-514.
[115] Ibid., pp.320-321.

This question was too closed as it limited the participants 'response to fixed choices'.[116] Subsequently, the wording was changed to ask the participants what they thought the main focus of the episode was. This allowed the participants to respond more fully, and in their own terms. The differences in the wording of the questions undoubtedly affected the participant's responses, and this is reflected in the longer length of the successive interviews. As a result, the analysis has tended to focus more on the latter interviews as the responses were more detailed. Despite this, Hisham made a number of interesting points which have been included in the analyses.

Participants were asked to watch one episode of Citizen Khan before being interviewed. The episode was chosen by the researcher. Rather than using the first episode, which caused a significant amount of controversy, an episode from later in the first series was selected. This was chosen with the intention of reducing the impact of any preconceived ideas about the programme based on the controversy in the media. Participants were asked to watch the episode before the interview, rather than with the interviewer, as the latter approach could potentially affect how the participants responded to the interview questions.

In using interviews for this research, a Grounded Theory approach is adopted, by which the theoretical answer to the research question will be obtained through the analysis of the data.[117] In this way, the research adopts a so called "bottoms up" approach. The analysis was therefore based on coding the data and the recognition of themes. These have then been situated back into the wider literature in order to fulfil the research aims.

Access to participants for the research was gained through a gatekeeper using word of mouth and through the researcher's own personal networks. Due to difficulties in accessing participants (see Reflexive Considerations above), participants were not selected based on any particular characteristics other than that they are British and Muslim. All three participants were both born British and are Muslim, and most importantly, all three participants self-identified themselves as being British Muslim. The age range of the three participants was fairly limited, ranging from 21 to 28. Furthermore, all three participants were well educated, with two of them holding undergraduate and Master's degrees.

Considering the limited demographic of the participants, and the heterogeneity that exists within British Muslim communities, the findings in this research should be approached

[116] Haralambos and Holborn, *Sociology: Themes and Perspectives*, p.1005.
[117] Bryman, *Social Research Methods*, p.401.

with caution in not assuming them to be "representative" of all British Muslims.[118] Furthermore there is some contestation over the term "British Muslim" in terms of what it signifies and how the category is defined.[119] It is not the intent here to delve into debates surrounding the definitions and usefulness of this term. Instead there is an understanding that 'it is still meaningful to consider Muslims in Britain as constituting a distinctive social group, on the basis of a generally shared set of core religious beliefs'.[120] I believe it is reasonable that the research findings will provide useful insights that may be used to inform future research and ultimately have a wider impact.

Reflexive Considerations

Arguably, 'in terms of current practice [...] reflexivity, in its myriad forms, is now the defining feature of qualitative research' and most researchers will attempt to engage in reflexive thought during the research process.[121] Stemming from postmodernist and feminist critiques of the production of knowledge, reflexivity can be defined as 'the connotation that social researchers should be reflective about the implications of their methods, values, biases, and decisions for the knowledge of the social world they generate'.[122] Reflexivity can be undertaken within research in a multiplicity of ways. These can include identifying one's own personal biographical details and motivations, acknowledging power relations between researchers and researched, deconstructing meaning in language, and reflecting on the social embeddedness of the research process and the impact on knowledge production.[123] Throughout the research process, I have tried to continually reflect on the above mentioned. These reflections have allowed me to try to understand the research process more fully, and my impact upon it. In adopting this approach, this research departs from 'a model of social science as requiring detachment to ensure objectivity'.[124] Therefore, outlined below are some of the reflections on this research.

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[118] Basia Spalek, 'A Critical Reflection on Researching Black Muslim Women's Lives Post-September 11th', *International Journal of Social Research Methodology,* 8:5 (2005), 405-418 (p.416).
[119] Sophie Gilliat-Ray, *Muslims in Britain: an Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p.xii.
[120] Ibid., p.xii.
[121] Linda Finlay, "Negotiating the Swamp: the opportunity and challenge of reflexivity in research practice", *Qualitative Research,* 2:2 (2002), 209-230 (p.211).
[122] Bryman, *Social Research Methods,* p.500.
[123] Finlay, 'Negotiating the Swamp', pp.213-222; Karen Henwood, 'Qualitative Research, reflexivity and living with risk: Valuing and practicing epistemic reflexivity and centring marginality', *Qualitative Research in Pyschology,* 5:1 (2008), 45-55 (p.45).
[124] Jonathan Scourfield, Sophie Gilliat-Ray, Asma Khan and Sameh Otri, *Muslim Childhood: Religious Nurture in a European Context* (UK: Oxford University Press, 2013), p.61.

(Not) Accessing Participants

When trying to find participants for my research I encountered some difficulty. Through volunteering with an Islamic charity organisation in Cardiff, I had a very close acquaintance that I thought would be able to help in gaining access to potential participants. Despite enlisting her help as a gatekeeper, and her initially suggesting three people that she thought would participate, none agreed. I was not given the contact information of the three potential participants and so do not know the exact reasons for their refusal. I can therefore, only speculate as to the reasons. Refusal to participate may have been due to something simple, such as lack of time, however, reflections on my encounters with participants who *did* participate may be able to offer some other explanations.

When I initially met Aisha we went for a coffee in a local café. I explained what the research was about and discussed the practicalities of taking part. After asking if it was ok if I recorded the interview, she responded by saying that this was fine as long as I did not give the interview recording to the media. Whilst it seems that the comment was meant as a joke (she laughed when saying it), it highlights her possible nervousness about having her comments recorded, and about what I would potentially do with the recording. This seems to have been a reflection of her awareness of the prominent position of Islam in the media. During our first meeting we engaged in a lengthy discussion about Islam in the media, particularly on the situation and coverage of Iraq. She discussed the ways in which she thought that the media were possibly misrepresenting the group Islamic State (IS): portraying a very narrow, one-sided view by not exploring the complicated political situation that is present in the area.

Additionally, after meeting in the café and agreeing to take part, she took me to the Muslim primary school in which she works. She said that she thought it was important for people to see what goes on in the school so that it could be known that there was nothing untoward occurring. Previous to our meeting, there had been a number of stories appearing in the news regarding several Muslim primary schools in Birmingham. The schools had recently come under the spotlight for a so-called "Trojan Horse" plot.[125] Staff at some 21 schools were accused of attempting to oust head teachers in order to implement orthodox Islamic principles.[126] Aisha's offer to show me around the school in conjunction with her comments

[125] Imran Awan, 'Operation 'Trojan Horse': Islamophobia or Extremism?', *Political Insight,* 5:2 (2014), 38-39.
[126] Ibid., p.38; Phil Mackie, *"Islamic Takeover Plot" in Birmingham Schools Investigated* <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-birmingham-26482599> [accessed 10/08/14].

about the importance of openness can be seen as a direct response to this story in the media. Her comments highlight her awareness of the both the prominence and the negative context in which Muslims and Islam appear in the media. This was later reiterated in her interview in which she stated that the portrayal of Muslims in the British media is "very negative". Whilst she agreed to take part in the research, if other potential participants shared the same concerns, this could possibly explain their refusal in participating.

Additionally, when I first met with Aisha she questioned me extensively on a number of different areas including: what I was doing, what the research was for, why I had chosen to study this topic area, what I thought of Citizen Khan, what were my religious beliefs, what I thought about the situation in Iraq with the growing influence of IS, and my opinions on democracy and the British government. I felt that in some sense I was under scrutiny and there was a need to reveal information about myself in order to be able to be allowed to proceed with the interview. In this way, I felt that Aisha's line of questioning was an attempt to gain an understanding of my own character and motives before agreeing to be interviewed, highlighting her potential mistrust of me. This may have been further compounded by the biographical characteristics of the researcher: as a white, female, non-Muslim researcher, it is possible that I was positioned as an "outsider" and therefore approached with caution. I had hoped that my extensive work with a Muslim charity in Cardiff would have alleviated suspicions about me as an outsider, however this did not seem to be the case. Whilst being questioned in such a way initially proved to be a slightly uncomfortable, it became useful and effective in terms of both being granted access and rapport building, as she seemed to speak openly and honestly during the interview.[127]

It has been noted by several researchers that mistrust of researchers has meant that accessing participants has become challenging.[128] For example, Sophie Gilliat-Ray noted that, despite using a number of gatekeepers to try and gain access to the Deobandi *dar ul-uloom,* she had no success.[129] She hypothesises that 'clearly the events of 9/11 will have complicated the process of negotiating access'.[130] With increasing numbers of British Muslims becoming

[127] Scourfield et al, *Muslim Childhood*, p.65.
[128] See for example Marta Bolognani, 'Islam, Ethnography and Politics: Methodological Issues in Researching amongst West Yorkshire Pakistanis in 2005', *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 10:4 (2007), 279-293 (p.281); Gurchathen Sanghera and Suruchi Thapar-Bjoerket, 'Methodological Dilemmas: Gatekeepers and Positionality in Bradford', *Ethnic and Racial Studies,* 31:3 (2008), 543-562 (p.552).
[129] Sophie Gilliat-Ray, '(Not) Accessing Deobandi *dar ul-uloom* in Britain', *Fieldwork in Religion,* 1:1 (2005), 7-33 (p.20).
[130] Ibid., p.17.

"suspects" in an effort to "root out terrorism" in Britain, it is possible that the word "research" may be understood by potential participants as "investigation".[131] This can consequently result in difficulties when trying to recruit participants. It therefore needs to be recognised that 'in the post-9/11 and post-7/7 climate, the study of Islam and Muslims in Britain has been compounded by a number of local, national, and international factors'.[132] As highlighted by the examples above, it seems my own research has not been exempt from this. Indeed, Aisha's discussions with me about the situation in Iraq, and my opinions on democracy and the British government, in particular, highlights this.

Similarly, Marta Bolognani reflects how her research was affected by increasing amounts of Islamophobia.[133] This has had an impact on the way that researchers are able to engage with participants, leading to the need for a high level of involvement in order to defeat suspicions surrounding research.[134] Aside from Aisha, with whom I gained contact through my gatekeeper, the other two participants were known to me directly. I had previously met Hisham through my course at Cardiff University, and had previously worked with Naila at a local charity in Cardiff. The fact that I was only able to access these participants through my own personal networks further echoes Bolognani's sentiments of needing high involvement in order to defeat suspicions.

Findings

The initial question that the participants were asked was what their thoughts were about the episode. This was phrased in such a way as to allow the participants to respond in any way, discussing any aspect of the episode that they chose to. In response to this question, all three of the participants discussed the comedy in the episode. This is perhaps not surprising considering Citizen Khan is advertised as a sitcom, 'a genre defined by its comedic impetus'.[135] Although all three participants referred to the comedy in Citizen Khan, they all gave noticeably different opinions about whether they considered it funny or not.

> "I found it very racist to be honest […] they've kind of twisted it, and obviously they've made it into a comedy but it was quite, I found it quite disrespectful". (Aisha)

[131] Ibid., p.17.
[132] Tahir Abbas, 'Muslim-on-Muslim Social Research: Knowledge, Power and Religio-cultural Identities', *Social Epistemology,* 24:2 (2010), 123-136 (p.132).
[133] Bolognani, 'Islam, Ethnography and Politics', p.280.
[134] Ibid., p.282.
[135] Brett Mills, *The Sitcom* (UK: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), p.25; Ibid., pp.5-6.

> "I thought it was funny and hilarious but then someone came in and said well it is quite racist isn't it, and I thought of it and I thought actually she does have a point". (Naila)

> "I found it quite funny actually". (Hisham)

The differences in opinions can be determined when examining what they said when discussing the comedy and humour in the episode. This can be understood in particular through examining what each participant did or did not find funny and the reasons why.

Unlaughter and the Limit to Comedy

> "There's a limit to comedy and it was kind of too much". (Aisha)

> "I think they took it too far". (Naila)

> "You know you talk about drawing a line sometimes maybe that might have been slightly crossed there for some people". (Hisham)

Aisha often used the term "limit to comedy" when discussing the humour and comedy in *Citizen Khan*. This phrase was used in conjunction with three particular expressions: "too much", "too far" and "beyond the level", with the suggestion being that the episode had ventured beyond this "limit". In conjunction with her comment that she did not find the episode funny, this limit could therefore refer to the point at which a comedy stops being funny. As well as not being funny, the phrase "limit to comedy" can also be seen to denote the fact that it was actively disliked, or considered offensive. This can be evidenced by the fact that whilst discussing the "limit to comedy" she gave examples from the episode using descriptive terms such as "shocking" and "not very nice". For example, in reference to one part of the episode where Mr Khan, in an attempt to retrieve a television remote control, falls over and lands on top of a lady who is praying, Aisha stated "when he was getting the remote and he fell over that lady yeah that wasn't very nice". Although Hisham seemed to have a generally positive opinion of the episode, when he mentioned "drawing a line", he stated that "there are parts where other people might find it offensive". This provides further evidence that crossing "a line" with regards to the comedy in the episode refers to the point at which it stopped being funny and became offensive. Consequently, although stated in slightly different ways, all three participants noted that there is a point at which a comedy stops being funny and becomes offensive.

Michael Billig's notion of unlaughter is particularly helpful here. As a sitcom, *Citizen Khan* can be seen to sit within the realm of humorous discourse. Jokes and other humorous discourse require social actors to shift from one frame of understanding (the serious realm) to another (the non-serious).[136] Additionally, humorous discourse is interactive and relies on both performers and audiences to construct its meaning.[137] Therefore, 'the joker's unilateral switch into humour cannot stand alone; it represents an invitation to others – the joker's intended audiences – to join him or her in the humorous realm'.[138] Indeed, it can be argued all three participants recognised *Citizen Khan* as a humorous mode of discourse:

> "Obviously they've made it into a comedy". (Naila)
>
> "I mean I guess at the end of the day it is a comedy and they are trying to portray it in that way". (Aisha)
>
> "At the end of the day I know it's a comedy". (Aisha)
>
> "I mean it's a very light hearted comedy so I wouldn't want to read too much into it". (Hisham)

Whilst there may be an expectation for the audience to recognise the joker's humorous intent, they do not necessarily have to agree with or appreciate it. As such, laughter can be used by audience members to indicate an acceptance of the 'joker's invitation to join him or her in the humorous mode of discourse'.[139] Acceptance of this invitation can also be communicated using verbal statements, smiles and the like.[140] However, audiences may actively reject giving humour support, and this is where unlaughter can occur. As previously stated, unlaughter can be defined as 'a display of not laughing when laughter might otherwise be expected, hoped for or demanded'.[141] Considering the participants' recognition of the humorous intent of *Citizen Khan* as highlighted above, Naila and Aisha's statements that they did not find certain aspects of the episode funny can therefore be seen as an example of unlaughter. An unlaughing response can portray the message that 'the joke should not have happened at all and that the

[136] Simon Weaver, 'A rhetorical discourse analysis of online anti-Muslim and anti-Semitic jokes', *Ethnic and Racial Studies,* 36:3 (2013), 483-499 (p.487).
[137] Ibid., p.487.
[138] Smith, 'Humour, Unlaughter, and Boundary Maintenance', pp.152-153.
[139] Ibid., pp.152-153.
[140] Ibid., pp.152-153.
[141] Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule*, p.192.

laughter of the joker (and those who support him) is inappropriate, even immoral'.[142] As such, their unlaughter at these particular points in the episode can be seen to indicate disapproval.[143]

However, as previously noted, Hisham's response was noticeably different. In contrast to Naila and Aisha, Hisham's verbal confirmation that "I found it quite funny actually" would signify acceptance and appreciation of the humorous intent. Consequently it can be argued that he did not convey the same unlaughter. Through examining what in particular Naila and Aisha disliked in the episode, it is possible to determine the reasons for differences in opinion between the three participants. When asked if he found the episode of Citizen Khan offensive at all, Hisham stated that whilst personally he didn't, he thought that there "are parts where people may find it offensive". When he discussed the point at which a "line […] might have been slightly crossed", he further added that

> "I think that's where the parts about religion […] there was one part where he sort of was making funny noises and he was saying I'm getting ready to pray so for some people religion is quite personal". (Hisham)

Similarly, when discussing which parts in the episode went "too far" Naila commented that

> "the bit then when I start looking into it and thinking well it is racist and it was because then he's like talking down on erm Dave and he's talking down on the Somali guy and he's talking as if he's like quite superior to the others […] and it was just as though erm it's not it's not acceptable basically to ridicule the religion". (Naila)

In addition to the above statement, when asked which other parts Naila considered to be racist she discussed a particular scene in which Mr Khan falls on top of a woman who is praying. She also mentioned a scene in which the youngest daughter, Aria, falls on to the floor and pretends to pray when Mr Khan enters the room. At the points where the "limit to comedy" was mentioned, or where it was noted that *Citizen Khan* went "too far", all three participants discussed religious content in the episode. Consequently, that *Citizen Khan* went beyond the "limit" or went "too far" can be seen to be connected to using the subject of religion for comedic purposes. This can be further evidenced by the following quotations:

[142] Smith, 'Humour, Unlaughter, and Boundary Maintenance', p.156.
[143] Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule*, p.192.

> "It was more the religious parts that they disrespected that I thought you know they don't need to go that far you know it's like to get your audience you don't especially have to erm go against the religion". (Naila)

> "Whatever was to do with religion they kind of pushed it to the limit pushed it over the limit to be honest like especially when someone's like they portrayed in that episode that someone's mourning for her husband but they made a mockery out of that and then they had like obviously this prayer thing and the women were fighting over they weren't it seemed like they didn't even care about the deceased they were just fighting over erm like erm you name like you image kind of thing which does not really […] which is not really encouraged". (Aisha)

> "The other thing I did dislike about it is the girl the younger girl who's in it yeah Aria yeah the way she was portrayed on TV like yeah they're showing her that she's at home yeah but it was just the way she said aw I'm going clubbing and the parents let her out like her dad kind of let her out coz he wanted to watch the cricket match […] and obviously she's going clubbing and stuff and obviously she the way she's portrayed on TV like obviously with the tight clothes […] like it's not really an Islamic thing". (Aisha)

In each of the quotations above, either the religious content was specifically mentioned, as in the first two quotations ("it was more the religious parts" and "whatever was to do with the religion"), or phrases such as "it's not really an Islamic thing" denote that it was the religious content.

That *Citizen Khan* was seen to venture "beyond limit" due to the religious content can also be seen by examining what each of the participants *did* find funny. Whilst both Aisha and Naila clearly stated from the outset that they found the episode to be racist (although Naila's response was a little more uncertain), all three participants identified aspects of the episode that they enjoyed and even found funny.

> "There were certain bits which were funny […] like erm when the husband and wife were debating about what time he should come home". (Aisha)

When asked if there was anything that Aisha liked about the episode she identified a number of different parts that she did find funny. Her comments then that she thought the episode was racist and didn't find it funny therefore were not inclusive of the whole episode. In the scene

identified above, Mr and Mrs Khan are discussing the time at which Mr Khan should arrive home. Mrs Khan states that she wants him home at 5.30 pm, to which he refuses, saying he will return home when he pleases. She then prompts him to provide a time, to which he responds 5.45 pm. Another scene which she identified as being funny shows Mr Khan trying to persuade Amjad (Mr Khan's eldest daughter's fiancée) to help him manoeuvre the television set into the dining room so that he can watch the cricket. Amjad refuses as he is supposed to be attending the theatre with Shazia (his finacee, and Mr Khan's eldest daughter), to which Mr Khan replies that the theatre show has been cancelled. Shazia, thinking that Amjad has cancelled for no reason, then gets upset and calls off her engagement. She also identifies a scene between Mrs Khan and Mrs Malik in which Mrs Khan discusses talking to a friend in Asda. Mrs Malik responds with a disapproving comment about the fact that Mrs Khan shops in Asda, the suggestion being that shopping in Asda is in some way lower class and therefore beneath her.

When asked specifically why she found these particular sections funny, Aisha replied that "it's kind of like norm values that are portrayed which are like common between husband and wife, father and daughter". Her use of the phrase "norm values" suggests that these jokes could have been transported to, for example, a Jewish family, or a white family, and they still would have been amusing. This is due to their joking about something that is inherent in relationships between husband and wife, father and daughter, and between friends. In this way they can belong to any culture or religion, and therefore, are not specifically Muslim in nature. All the sections that Aisha identified as being amusing were scenes where she made no reference to the religious content or material. Aisha was clearly aware of this due to her comment that "I think I found it funny coz it wasn't to do with whatever was to do with religion".

When discussing the characters in the episode, Naila commented that she liked the Somali character as she "found him funny". When asked why this was the case she stated

> "I found how he just kind of like tags along and says whatever anyone else is saying like there's a point […] where Mr Khan is saying Pakistan Zindabad and that's quite a heaving thing in itself it's got quite a heavy weight to it. Basically Pakistan Zindabad means erm long live Pakistan or something like that yeah it's forever being mentioned since the partition between Pakistan and India […] when it's the cricket match Mr Khan's going Pakistan Zindabad that's what he's referring to. But then there's the

> Somali guy who's he obviously doesn't know the background behind it and he doesn't know what he's even saying because obviously he doesn't speak Urdu right […] but I liked how he just tags along and he just says Pakistan Zindabad and that's hilarious to fit in with the crowd".

Her comment that "I liked how he just tags along and he just says Pakistan Zindabad and that's hilarious to fit in with the crowd" highlights that it is the attempt of the Somali man to "fit in with the crowd" despite not really understanding what he is saying that makes this scene funny. As with Aisha, she did not make any reference to religious content or material when discussing parts of the episode she enjoyed. Furthermore, Naila stated that "I think it's more for me it's more like the cultural things that I find funny erm for example the way he pronounces certain things", highlighting that it is because of a focus on culture that made these scenes funny.

> "I found it quite funny actually especially Mr Khan, his mannerisms, and the way he thinks, his big headedness and erm I found parts about cricket and things like that quite funny". (Hisham)

Hisham's response, in terms of whether or not he found the episode funny, was markedly different from the other two participants. He seemed to have a much more positive opinion of the episode, generally finding it funny overall and finding it difficult to identify anything he disliked about it. Whenever Hisham discussed parts of the episode that he thought "might be offensive", these were always phrased in hypothetical terms such as "where people may find it offensive", "sometimes maybe that might have been slightly crossed for some people" or "maybe someone else would associate with religion". However, after making such statement he always returned to the same point: that he felt that the "jokes were based on culture" and that there was very little reference to Islam in the episode. This can be further evidenced by his statement that "I don't think there was much focus like specifics of religion in that episode it was a lot more about the culture". In contrast to this, both Aisha and Naila seemed to attribute the jokes to religion as well as other things such as culture and nationality. In response to the question regarding what the main focus of the episode was, Aisha stated that

> "I think it was very much based on nationality of the fact that he was obviously there was a cricket match and he was supporting Pakistan and you know and clearly to him the cricket match and his country meant more than his religion so I think it shows a lot in the way he went out of his way to get the TV in the way to disturb the women's prayer you know". (Aisha)

> "That's the main aspect is that the nationality wise that he loved his cricket you know more than his actual religion coz whoever passed away the deceased was obviously a male so he should have been more understanding towards the situation coz he was probably one of his friends". (Aisha)

Whilst she initially mentioned the Pakistani nationality as a focus, her stating "his country meant more than his religion", the "women's prayer" and "he loved his cricket you know more than his actual religion" highlights that she was also felt that there was a focus on the religion as well. When asked the same question Naila said she thought that it was ridiculing Mr Khan. When asked to elaborate she stated that

> "Yeah it's not Mr Khan himself, Mr Khan obviously is the character but a lot of people will probably think who don't have enough knowledge who are a little bit ignorant they may think that it's the typical normal erm Pakistani man even Muslim man even elderly Muslim man". (Naila)

The implication here is that it is the underlying religion and ethnicity of the character that is the comedic target as opposed to the individual, Mr Khan, himself. When asked if she felt that Mr Khan's character was ridiculed more as Pakistani man or a Muslim man, Naila stated that "I think it's half and half". She further stated that "I feel like it's giving everyone a right to laugh at the culture and the religion". The differences between the participants' reaction to the episode, particularly regarding whether they found it funny or not, can therefore be attributed to how they perceived the content in the episode and how prominent they felt the religious content was. Hisham's decidedly different opinion about the episode could therefore be explained by the fact that he considered the episode to focus more on cultural rather than religious aspects.

Therefore, it can be argued that the participants' laughter or unlaughter was connected to their understanding of what was being joked about in the episode. In trying to understand the participants' acceptance or rejection of the humour in *Citizen Khan,* it may be helpful to consider the parts that they did or did not find funny in terms of the butt of the joke. The butt of a joke, broadly speaking, is the object or person that is the subject of ridicule.[144] Whilst sitcoms can be defined as more than merely a collection of jokes, that they contain a number

[144] Annette Grinsted, 'Joking as a Strategy in Spanish and Danish Negotiations', in *The Language of Business: An International Perspective,* ed. by Francesca Bargiela-Chiappini and Sandra Harris (UK: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), pp.159-182 (p.162).

of jokes within seems impossible to deny.[145] However, each joke may not necessarily have the same subject or butt. Indeed within *Citizen Khan*, that the participants identified a number of different aspects, including religion, nationality and culture, highlights this. It seems that if or when Islam or Muslims were considered to be the butt of the joke, the participants did not find it funny. Why this was the case can be identified by examining why they felt that religion should not be used as a subject for comedy.

Mainstream Mockery

> "Religion and worship is something personal and erm if that is made erm a mockery out of then people will definitely find that offensive". (Hisham)
>
> "I don't find it humorous you know mocking somebody else's religion". (Naila)
>
> "Religion […] it's not something that should be mocked at basically". (Naila)
>
> "I mean […] there's comedy and you find it funny. I watch so many comedies like I watch stuff like Big Bang Theory I watch like Brooklyn 911 yeah and stuff like that and these things are funny it's really funny and they're not mocking religion and they're not mocking anything they're just being they're just funny". (Aisha)

There was a clear indication that mocking Islam and Muslims was considered to be offensive. Therefore, that the programme is a comedy was seen to be a problem for its portrayal of Muslims and Islam. Where other media depictions may be viewed as inaccurate, the portrayal of Islam and Muslims in a comedic genre may cause even more offense as 'the association with humour, however tenuous, inevitably ridicules and trivialises the subject'.[146] As previously noted, the participants seemed to find the episode offensive when it was felt that Islam or Muslims were used as the butt of the joke. When one is the butt of a joke 'the question always arises whether the laughter is sympathetic or mocking, inclusive or alienating. The butt must ask, "are they laughing with me or at me?"[147]

> "They've focused on a religion, they've focused on a cultural aspect and they make they've made a mockery out of it and it wasn't even funny that's what killed it it wasn't even funny". (Aisha)

[145] Mills, *The Sitcom*, p.25.
[146] Smith, 'Humour, Unlaughter, and Boundary Maintenance', pp.149-150.
[147] Ibid., pp.160-161.

"They're playing Muslims but they're mocking them at the same time". (Aisha)

What is highlighted above is that the participants felt that the episode actively mocks Islam and Muslims. Mocking can be defined as 'making fun of someone or something in a cruel way; derisive'.[148] As such, that the episode was considered to mock them, indicates that they felt they were being laughed *at* rather than *with*. Answering the question as to whether one is being laughed at or with cannot be determined from the content of the humorous discourse alone. Due to the ambiguity inherent in comedy and humour, 'jokers may choose to hide nefarious purposes behind that ambiguity. Indeed, Naila's comments regarding *Citizen Khan* on several occasions highlights this ambiguity and her uncertainty as to what the intent was:

> "I'm not too sure who directed it or you know came up with the idea, it all depends on what their agenda is, is it like for example have they put it together so that they are disrespecting erm the Muslims or Pakistanis". (Naila)
>
> "I'm not sure what the idea of the programme is". (Naila)
>
> "It's a bit like OTT just they've done it I don't know maybe I don't know why to tell you the truth what their reasons would be but basically I do know it doesn't help the stereotypes". (Naila)

As such 'joke targets must fall back on the social context in order to interpret the communication'.[149] The social context may be reliant on a number of factors 'including their relationship with the jokers and the way power is distributed between them'.[150] That the programme was aired on the BBC seemed to be an important factor when considering their opinions of *Citizen* Khan.

> "Because the episode is like mainstream and everything and erm expose you to it you get exposed to it I just feel like maybe it's giving everybody an opportunity to kind of like ridicule people". (Naila)
>
> "I think especially considering the society that we live in if that was an episode that was in let's say for example erm an Urdu, the Pakistani language and just Pakistanis were able to view it but because the whole of the world or the whole of the UK watches it

[148] http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/mocking?searchDictCode=all [accessed 23/12/14].
[149] Smith, 'Humour, Unlaughter, and Boundary Maintenance', pp.160-161.
[150] Ibid., p.163.

everyone then has a right to I feel like it's giving everyone the right to laugh at the culture and the religion it's like a license for everyone to take the mick". (Naila)

As the programme was aired on the BBC the participants seemed to be particularly concerned with who they felt may be watching *Citizen Khan.* For the participants, that the episode was aired on the BBC, meant that it would attract an audience from a variety of backgrounds. Naila and Aisha seemed to feel that the mainstream nature of the show would allow for the wider public to ridicule Muslims and Islam. Consequently, that the episode could be and most likely would be viewed by a non-Muslim audience was also seen to be a contributing factor to their unlaughter.

"It's just the way they've mixed the culture with the religion and made it and combined it into one when it's not the Pakistani or Bangladeshi or British culture is nothing to do with the religion". (Aisha)

"I think it ridicules the culture and religion both evenly". (Naila)

"I mean most of the stereotypes in the programme like I mentioned earlier is to do with culture but the problem that I think can happen is when these cultural aspects they're not separated from the religion so these cultural stereotypes that you find they're sort of associated with Islam". (Hisham)

The participants considered that the episode mixed religious and cultural aspects together. While each participant held a slightly different view about the prominence of religious and cultural content, with some placing more emphasis on culture, and others focusing more evenly on culture and religion, all three participants felt that the episode conflated the two. Initially, for Naila, that both jokes based on religion and culture were present didn't seem to cause a problem. When asked if it was possible to separate the jokes based on religion and those based on culture, Naila stated that "yeah it is that's why I was saying I find it funny". However, this statement was in regard to whether she herself could distinguish between the two.

"You have to be careful to make that erm make that distinction between the culture and religion and I think that that won't happen in the programme because when you watch it er you're you're just going to see that he's Muslim and erm obviously he's Pakistani". (Hisham)

"It ridicules the culture and religion both evenly it balances out […] but for someone who isn't part of the culture I think they'd probably it would erm they'd put it together

with the religion erm they'd get confused what's culture and what's religion and they might think it's all religion". (Naila)

"I think they portrayed more Asian culture than the religious aspect of it but like I said they've mixed it coz they've mixed it that's where the controversy is coz then people can't tell the difference between what's culture and what's religion and what's acceptable and what's not". (Aisha)

As highlighted above, when considering if it is possible for a non-Muslim, non-Pakistani audience to distinguish between the different jokes within *Citizen Khan* all three participants felt that this would be more difficult. Therefore, whilst the participants felt that mocking or joking about culture was fine, that the episode was seen to conflate religion and culture was seen to be a problem.

That the audience might not distinguish between the religious and cultural jokes in the episode was partly seen to be linked to *Citizen Khan* falling with the comedy genre. When asked if he felt that a non-Muslim viewer would be able to distinguish between the cultural and religious jokes Hisham stated that

"No I don't think so I don't think you can I mean you have to have because I don't know when you watch a programme like like it's light hearted comedy so so I don't think you think so deep in to it you just take what's given to you and you observe and you enjoy it". (Hisham).

Hisham's comment that "I don't think you think so deep you just take what's given to you" suggests that he feels that audiences will simply accept what they view in the episode without questioning it. Additionally, that a non-Muslim, non-Pakistani audience would not be able to distinguish between the cultural and religious jokes in the episode was also seen to be linked to a potential lack of knowledge and understanding of Islamic or Pakistani culture:

"It's to do with your audience […] like for example if you were Muslim and I was Muslim and we were talking about something and we both had a good understanding of Islam and you know I was just jokingly saying something to you which is fine coz you'll understand but other people won't understand". (Aisha)

Her statement that "if you were a Muslim and I was a Muslim" suggests that "other people" is in reference to non-Muslims. There is a clear concern that there is a lack of understanding of Islam and Muslims from "other people", i.e. the non-Muslim population. Furthermore, her

statement that "and you know I was just jokingly saying something to you which is fine" implies that a joke about Muslims, told by and directed towards another Muslim would not cause offense as there is understanding on both sides (the joke teller and receiver) about both the joke itself and Islam. However, this might not be the case when concerned with people who do not have knowledge or understanding of Islam or Muslims. Her statement that "other people won't understand" could mean that they would not understand the joke. However, her later statement that "for people who don't have the knowledge of our religion it's just like they look at it and they're gonna think that's part of the religion" shows that it is that people might perceive what is told in the joke as being "part of the religion" that is the problem.

> "A non-Muslims might be walking a young non-Muslim guy might be walking down the street and he sees a gentleman that looks like Mr Khan he probably has a hat on probably has a beard wears the clothes but he might not be anything like Mr Khan but that young gentleman might think that he probably has a lot in common with Mr Khan it's like stereotypes isn't it". (Naila)

This also had implications for the episode of *Citizen Khan*, and it was considered that information and opinions of Islam and Muslims might be derived from the episode. As such, that the participants felt the episode conflated religion and culture was not deemed acceptable due to the inaccurate image they felt it could portray.

Inaccurate portrayal of Islam and Muslims

> "I think erm religion is quite difficult territory I would say […] as Muslims there's no harm in having a joke […] but there's certain matters of the religion which should not be joked about." (Hisham)

> "Religion, it's divine, it's sacred, it's from God the almighty and it's not something that should be joked about or mocked." (Naila)

> "In terms of the religion wise it becomes a bit of a no no especially if it's to do with the women covering or to do with the Quran or to do with certain aspects of the religion like praying and things like that". (Aisha)

Whilst it is clear from Hisham that he feels that joking is not prohibited in Islam, his comments highlight that certain aspects of the religion can in some way be seen to be off limits when used for comedic subjects. He goes on to state that "things to do with worship and things like that you shouldn't mock those kind of aspects of the religion". This was also apparent with Naila

who stated that "like that moment where one of the sisters says oh Dad's coming she automatically jumps down to like erm the prayer […] I think that was a bit disrespectful". It can be argued that 'in orthodox Islam the sacred is generally considered to be incompatible with non-seriousness'.[151] Consequently, it could be suggested that using religion as a basis for comedy is seen as too far possibly due to the philosophical and spiritual significance for believers. In fact, all three participants noted that joking about specifically religious items – such as prayer, worship, or the Quran – should not occur. Naila further stated that "I don't find it humorous you know mocking somebody else's religion whatever religion it might be", highlighting perhaps that it is specifically religious content overall, rather than only Islamic content, that should be exempt as a comedic subject.

However, Hisham's comment that "certain aspects" should not be joked about might suggest that joking about the religion is not off limits completely. Indeed, Aisha gives an example of a comedian using the topic of prayer as a part of his stand-up routine. She states:

> "He was Muslim himself portraying […] how children pray you know coz they really rush it so he was showing them how they were going up and down going up and down and they're like not even concentrating". (Aisha)

Considering the comments that using religion for comedy is a "no no" and that religion shouldn't be joked about, particularly with aspects such as prayer, it would seem logical to assume that Aisha would also find this comedy routine to have gone "too far". However, her subsequent comment reveals the opposite to this. In reference to the stand-up routine, she stated that "that's ok coz that's true, they're children at the end of the day and that's what they do". The difference between her reaction to the stand-up routine as "fine" and *Citizen Khan* as "too much" can be partly revealed by her proclamation that "that's ok coz that's true".

Similar to Aisha's discussion of the Muslim comedian, Naila discussed the YouTube programme *Diary of a Badman*, which also uses religious and cultural material in a comedy genre. When asked how she thought Islam and Muslims were portrayed in the episode of Citizen Khan, she stated "well I don't think they did Muslims any favours […] there was nothing in there that made me feel like you've got a point there, for example with Diary of a Badman at least he has some good points in there". Considering her statement that religion

[151] Giselinde Kuipers, 'The politics of humour in the public sphere: Cartoons, power and modernity in the first transnational humour scandal', *European Journal of Cultural Studies,* 14:1 (2011), 63-80 (p.68).

should not be mocked or joked about, again it seems odd that *Diary of a Badman* is deemed acceptable as opposed to the episode of *Citizen Khan*. However, in reference to *Diary of a Badman*, Naila went on to state that

> "With Diary of a Badman, for example, at least he refers back and he'll although he might mock and joke, in the end he'll come back and he'll say well yeah actually, I'll give you an example he's quite disrespectful to his mother Diary of a Badman yeah and erm in the episode during the episode what he's doing he'll disrespect her and all of that and then towards the end he reflects on what he's done and then he'll come up with like an Islamic verse or something like that, Quranic verse to back what he how he's reflected and then he'll think well actually you know what I shouldn't be so disrespectful to my mother, she did this, Islamically you know we should do this, always backs it up, whereas with Citizen Khan he doesn't he just leaves it". (Naila)

When asked to expand on why she considered *Diary of a Badman* to be more acceptable she stated that "it gives you the true picture of Islam". Her statement that *Diary of a Badman* always returns to Islamic teachings, as opposed to *Citizen Khan* which "just leaves it" suggests that she felt the episode did little to include what she considered to be "accurate" Islamic teachings.[152] Consequently, she felt that the episode portrayed an inaccurate image of Islam. What this highlights again is that it is the inaccuracy of the portrayal of Islam and Muslims in the episode that caused Naila to consider it "too far".

When discussing the episode, both Naila and Aisha identified a number of parts that they felt portrayed an inaccurate depiction of Islam and Muslims:

> "When he went over the woman in the sexual position, highly unlikely to happen". (Naila)

> "And the same when the girl just started praying as soon as she heard her dad's voice everybody knows that Muslim's shouldn't pray like that you know". (Naila)

[152] It must be noted that the term "accurate" here relates to the participants own opinion about what is correct. It does not refer to a universal accuracy with regards to Islamic teachings, representation etc. that is accepted by all Muslims as correct. As such, whenever the terms "accurate" and "inaccurate" are used here, they should be read as if in quotation marks (") and understood as the personal perspectives of the participants, and not representative of all Muslims.

> "Then […] he was wearing all this gear saying that the shin pads were for praying and the bat was a Muslim artefact or something. It's just that's not, you can't do that". (Aisha)

> "The daughter Shazia, yeah, it's her fiancée but he's, they date and they're going out and they're doing things they're not married and it's not that's not how it is". (Aisha)

> "Especially when he fell on top of that lady like it was just like oh my God you didn't just do that that was you know for the remote and the positioning and the way they were like on the floor it was just didn't look right you know". (Aisha)

When discussing these scenes, often phrases such as "we're not meant to", "it's not the normal thing to do" and "highly unlikely to happen" were used. This provides further evidence that it is the perceived inaccuracy of the content in *Citizen Khan* that makes it "shocking", "too far" and "not funny", rather than specifically that it is Islamic subject matter altogether. This can also be seen through examining scenes that the participants did enjoy or find funny. When asked specifically what she liked about the episode, Naila noted that

> "You know funny enough I did actually like it because erm I moved from England and up North when I was growing up it was very much like what Mr Khan was doing and how he was behaving that was the typical life then and that was a typical Asian man for you […] for me personally it kind of takes me back to those days". (Naila)

Her comment that "it was very much like" suggests that, Naila relates to Mr Khan's character as it is something familiar that she has experienced. Similarly, in reference to the part of the episode where Mr and Mrs Khan are debating what time he should come home it was stated that

> "And he's saying that I'm my own man and that's how truthfully men like to have, like to be a man you know that was funny when he was saying I'll come back 5.30 and he goes no 5.45, that was funny". (Aisha)

Her comment that "that's how truthfully" again provides evidence that it was the inaccuracy of the jokes when related to Islam and Muslims that caused the episode to be considered as "too far".

Islamic Practice

> "It was the point you know when the women were praying and he went in and just kind of stood behind and started praying […] Islamically the men don't pray behind the women". (Naila)

> "Like the whole prayer thing they're doing a whole prayer session and it's meant to be women only but he keeps coming in and out". (Aisha)

In the scene discussed above, Mr Khan is trying to get the television set out of the room in which the women are conducting their prayers for a recently departed friend. Despite Mrs Khan reminding him that it is a women only event, Mr Khan enters the room. Similarly, Aisha and Naila also discussed the portrayal of Aria praying in the episode.

> "The moment where one of the sisters says oh Dad's coming she automatically jumps down to like erm the prayer […] that was a bit disrespectful because that's not how we should pray erm you know you've got to have modesty with her it was all her arms and backside and everything showing". (Naila)

> "The girl when she's meant to be covering and meant to be like erm you know no eyes are meant to be gazing on you and you're meant to be doing good deeds and helping your parents she like she's meant to be helping her mum but she's not interested in helping her mum […] she just wants to go out and party and do you know everything she's not meant to be doing". (Aisha)

In all of the above quotations, there was a distinct sense that the episode did not portray what the participants thought was correct Islamic practice. This can be highlighted by phrases such as "Islamically the men don't" and "that's not how we should pray".

> "When you do it in the actual obligatory worship a prayer you have to be decent in your clothes and you have to be quite modest". (Naila)

> "She's meant to be covering and you know like no eyes are meant to be gazing on you". (Aisha)

In contrast to the incorrect Islamic practice participants felt was displayed in *Citizen Khan,* the participants often commented on what should have been done instead. As such, the inaccuracy of the portrayal of Islam and Muslims that the participants perceived in the episode can be seen to be in part due to it depicting what participants considered to be incorrect Islamic practice.

> "It's quite one ended you know it's not really the whole picture". (Naila)

> "It doesn't actually take the mick out of them and then come back and reflect upon it and then you can work things out and all of that it doesn't do that it just takes the mick and leaves". (Naila)

Whilst they noted that the episode contained scenes of incorrect practice, they further commented that any scenes depicting correct practice were missing. Therefore, the episode was described as being inaccurate, one sided, and not offering a complete representation of the religion.

> "If they had then later and gone over and said oh or shown a clip where someone is praying properly the watcher the person who's watching would understand that oh she hasn't been doing it correctly or she was doing it differently to how it really should be done". (Naila)

> "They could have had like a boy or a girl in there who was very practicing but they didn't choose to do that […] they've portrayed everything against it and not anything for it it's kind of a complete imbalance to one side they should kind of balance it out". (Aisha)

> "If they were going to introduce Islam into it and Muslims then they should have put a bit more in there […] but the true picture of the religion". (Naila)

In contrast to this it was felt that the inaccurate, one-sided approach to the episode could have been balanced out by showing other more accurate images of correct practice. It was felt that this would allow for a more nuanced and accurate view of Islam and Muslims to be developed. As previously noted, research has tended to show that the media often ignores the spiritual and religious dimension to Islam.[153] That the participants noted that religious aspects, such as prayer, were present in the episode could provide evidence for *Citizen Khan* breaking away from this trend. However, that they understood the representation of such elements to be inaccurate and one-sided would tend to suggest that, whilst included, these did little to provide a more accurate image of Islam and Muslims.

Negative Portrayal

[153] Ahmed, 'British Muslim Perceptions', p.976.

> "Well I don't think they did Muslims any favours". (Naila)
>
> "I know they were praying and I know they were doing that but that wasn't positive there was always a negative in there". (Naila)

In addition to the religious content being portrayed as one-sided, when asked how they felt that Muslims were portrayed in the episode of Citizen Khan, there was also a clear indication that they felt they were portrayed in a negative way.

> "I don't think that's a normal situation again [...] because yes we have loads of reverts in Islam but they're never spoken to like that […] I've never come across anyone speaking to them like how Mr Khan speaks to em […] oh hello Dave that's like really cold you know like you're not one of me type of think it's not the normal thing to do"." (Naila)
>
> "Mr Khan's interactions with Dave the convert and how he treats him, so that was quite erm negative in the sense that erm of course I don't agree, I don't think that that is the case everywhere". (Hisham)

It was felt that the certain characters were not portrayed in a particularly positive manner. In particular negative characteristics were seen to be attributed to Mr Khan's character. For example, in the episode and throughout the series, when greeting the character of Dave (who is a white-British revert), rather than using the traditional Islamic greeting, Mr Khan simply says "hello Dave". Naila and Hisham seemed to find the way that Mr Khan greets Dave as quite disrespectful and thought that it was not a situation that would actually occur in a real life situation. Naila's and Hisham's comment that "that like really cold you know" and "that was negative" highlights their opinions that the interaction between Dave and Mr Khan is not considered a pleasant one. Furthermore, that Mr Khan is portrayed as "cold", is considered to be an inaccurate representation. Naila's subsequent statement that "if anything people quite value reverts and it's opposite so the out of their way so let's say for example it's all oh brother come to my house we'll have a cup of tea" highlights that she feels that in a real life situation, the interaction between Dave and Mr Khan would not happen as portrayed in the episode. Similarly, Aisha discussed the scene in which Mr Khan's neighbour offers to let Mr Khan watch the cricket in his house. However, Mr Khan refuses. In response to this scene Aisha stated

> "It's just the way they're portraying it, it's as if we're not nice to the neighbours or we're not meant to but we're really encouraged to be nice to the neighbours in Islam". (Aisha)

Her comment that "as if we're not nice to the neighbours" as opposed to stating that Mr Khan is not nice to his neighbours, highlights that she felt that the negative characteristics were not only attached to Mr Khan, but could subsequently come to be seen as a part of the Muslim community more widely.

What the above sections highlight is that participants were more likely to find the programme offensive if they felt that the jokes concentrated on Islam or Muslims. When this was the case, they felt that Islam and Muslims were not portrayed in an accurate manner. As such, it could be argued that they felt that the episode was not representative of British Muslims. However, that Aisha and Naila noted that there were parts that they found familiar or true would suggest that, whilst they felt the representation of Islam and Muslims was not accurate, there were elements of the episode that they could relate to.

In considering their responses it may be helpful to reflect on the role and function of stereotypes within comedy and sitcoms. A stereotype can be defined as 'a widely held but oversimplified idea of the typical characteristics of a person or thing'.[154] Stereotypes can arise from a variety of situations to fulfil a number of functions. From a media perspective, stereotypes are often used to 'quickly convey information about characters and to instill in audiences expectations about characters' actions'.[155] As comedies are mostly driven by plot driven, characterisation often becomes secondary.[156] This results in a need for quickly recognisable characters. Consequently, characterisation is 'more effectively realised with stereotypes and one-dimensional characters than anything approaching realistic portrayal of human emotions'.[157] Additionally, sitcoms are defined by their comedic impetus, with the intention to make the audience laugh.[158] Therefore, the use of stereotypes is also important as stereotypes also contribute to the humour.[159]

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[154] Oxford English Dictionary, Third Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).
[155] Ji Hoon Park, Nadine G. Gabbadon and Ariel R. Chernin, 'Naturalising Racial Differences Through Comedy: Asian, Black and White Views on Racial Stereotypes in *Rush Hour 2*', *Journal of Communication,* 56:1 (2006), 157-177, (p.158).
[156] Andrew Stott, *Comedy* (New York: Routledge, 2005), p.40.
[157] Ibid., p.40.
[158] Travis Linn, 'Media Methods that Lead to Stereotypes', in *Images that Injure: Pictorial Stereotypes in the Media,* ed. by Paul Martin Lester and Susan Dente Ross (UK: Greenwood Publishing, 2003), pp.23-28, (p.23).
[159] Park et al, 'Naturalising Racial Differences Through Comedy', p.158.

Consequently, Naila and Aisha's views on how they felt that the episode portrayed Islam and Muslims could be explained by the episode's use of stereotypes. The plot driven nature of sitcoms, combined with its use of stereotypical characters means there is little room for exploration of characters identity in an episode. As such, identity aspects such as religion, tend to become subordinate to the plot line. Therefore, this could explain why participants felt that the portrayal of Islam and Muslims was limited and inaccurate. Simultaneously, the widely held nature of stereotypes would explain why, despite finding the presentation of Islam and Muslims as inaccurate, Naila and Aisha found certain characters and situations in the episode familiar.

Situating Citizen Khan within the British Media Context

The participants were asked how they thought Islam and Muslims were portrayed in the British media more generally. This question was asked in order to try and compare their opinions on the episode of *Citizen Khan* with the wider media presentation and to determine if this had any impact on what the participants thought about the episode. In response to how she felt Islam and Muslims were portrayed in the British media more generally, Naila stated the following:

> "There's millions of Muslims in this country […] and you know they're not all terrorists you know they've got a lot to offer […] but it's not seen, like it's not that they do it to be seen but when you've got someone biting at you at the other end saying oh you know Muslims this all negative stuff about it, it does make you wonder like ok come on where's the positive". (Naila)

Naila's comments that "you know they've got a lot to offer […] but it's not seen" suggests that she feels that the media does not report on more positive stories regarding British Muslims and fixates on only negative stories. This is further evidenced by her statement that "it does make you wonder […] where's the positive".

> "The thing is ok maybe there are loads and loads of Muslims in the country and that's why they're in the media but then they highlight the one word Muslims Muslim Muslim […] Why can't they refer to them as you know let's say Mohammad something, why does it have a emphasize a Muslims male or a Muslim". (Naila)

Rather than focusing on other characteristics, for example identifying them only by their name, Naila also thought that when Muslims appear in the media, their Muslim identity is highlighted

instead. Consequently, in combination with the negative stories in the media, Naila felt that this causes negative opinions of Muslims to develop. This was evidenced by her statement that "then you know you can't stop people from saying anything because that's how the media has portrayed it". The opinion that Muslims are portrayed negatively in the media was also shared by Aisha:

> "In current situations it's extremely extremely very negative against the Muslims". (Aisha)

> "It's trying to show the image of Islam is wrong showing it as wrong it shouldn't be implemented anywhere erm we should bomb them kill them". (Aisha)

> "And they have this image that this is what it is and already the media have created an image of what Islam is when they don't have sufficient evidence, they don't have the sufficient views to say that this is what it is". (Aisha)

The statement that "they have this image" suggests that Aisha feels there is already in existence a perception by non-Muslims as to what Islam is and consequently what Muslims are. Her subsequent remarks that "the media have created an image of what Islam is" and that "they don't have sufficient evidence" to support this view highlights her perception that the image presented by the media is inaccurate. It's inaccuracy lies in the "image" not being based on "sufficient evidence".

> "A few Muslims who'd had their hijabs ripped off recently or their faces slashed with a knife erm all because of what the media are portraying all because of how they're twisting things". (Aisha)

That Muslims are portrayed negatively in the media was also seen to have a physical effect. In this way, the depiction of Islam and Muslims in the media was seen to cause actions against Muslims. That the media often adopts a negative approach in its portrayal of Islam and Muslims has been well documented.[160] That the participants were able to recognise this suggests that they had a thorough understanding of representations of British Muslims currently in British media. This knowledge then contributed to their opinions and understanding of *Citizen Khan.*

> "So for them to show a programme like that makes it worse especially at this time when everything is kind of is kind of blown out of proportion with Islam". (Aisha)

[160] See Literature Review.

> "So it kind of adds to this already this image that's already portrayed by the West about what Islam is about and Muslims are about". (Aisha)

In light of her comments that Islam is currently portrayed in the British media in a negative way, Aisha's comment that the programme would "make it worse" seems to suggest that she felt that the episode would add or contribute to this negative image of Islam and Muslims. This is further evidenced by her comment that the episode adds to the "image that's already portrayed".

> "I would say if it wasn't under the spotlight then may be it would have been ok coz it's under the spotlight it's very, anything you show kind of goes against it and just kind of goes against it". (Aisha)

Aisha's above comment that "if it wasn't under the spotlight […] it would have been ok" suggests that because of the prominent media image of Islam and Muslims that is already in circulation, the show cannot be viewed without this context in mind. Therefore, the one sided, inaccurate view that is presented only fuels this image further and does nothing to provide a counter-image. This is further evidenced by her later statement that

> "It's like maybe the only comedy that portrays Islam and obviously that culture so it's the only one out there and whatever's going on in the media right now it just doesn't portray a very good image of the religion if you know what I mean." (Aisha)

> "They have their stereotypes obviously because of the media they've gone and watched this programme and that's only going to add to their negative stereotypes so until they actually meet a Muslim that proves, unfortunately they have to prove, so until they have to prove themselves different then they're going to remain with those stereotypes". (Naila)

Again the comments that "whatever's going on in the media right now" and "because of the media" highlights that she felt that part of the problem with the way that Muslims and Islam are portrayed in *Citizen Khan* is related to the way that they are portrayed more generally in the media. Naila's comment also suggest that she felt that the episode did little to challenge current stereotypes of British Muslims. Consequently unless non-Muslim had regular contact with British Muslims, these stereotypes would continue to persist. That the depiction of Islam and Muslims in *Citizen Khan* went too far and was considered to be inaccurate and negative was therefore seen to create a negative image of Islam and Muslims. This was particularly

considered to be the case as the participants felt that Islam and Muslims are already portrayed in a particularly negative and inaccurate way. This led them to understand *Citizen Khan* as adding to this image and doing little or nothing to counteract it.

By concentrating on Naila and Aisha's responses, arguably, that they felt the episode "adds to" the negative image of Islam and Muslims in the media could provide evidence to support Ahmed's assertion that *Citizen Khan* frames Muslims much in the same problematic way as other media forms. This could also suggest that *Citizen Khan* reinforces rather than challenges negative stereotypes of Muslims and Islam. However, that Hisham did not appear to agree with these sentiments, and had a positive opinion about the episode overall, provides evidence to counter this. Indeed when asked if he felt there were any positive messages or images about Islam and Muslims in the episode he stated that

> "The fact that Mr Khan had all the people from the mosque round and they were all different from different backgrounds […] so there was the interaction with others so I think that was positive to show that people do work together […] and just showing the way Mr Khan is as a person it shows that not everything he does although he associates it with religion it's not just about his religion, it's about him as an individual as a person". (Hisham)

That Hisham identified a number of things that he felt portrayed Islam and Muslims in a positive light would provide evidence to counter the argument that the episode only presents Islam and Muslims in a negative, stereotypical light. In particular, his comment that the episode shows Mr Khan's actions to be personally rather than religiously motivated does not conform to current research that has shown that Muslim identity is emphasised only in negative contexts.[161]

Whilst this research has provided some evidence to support Ahmed's argument that negative attitudes towards the programme were due to it failing to represent British Muslims, it does not seem to support his argument that *Citizen Khan* portrays Islam and Muslims in the same manner as other media forms. Subsequently, it does not support his argument that *Citizen Khan* reinforces rather than challenges negative stereotypes of Muslims and Islam. In examining Muslim audience reactions, this could only have been argued if there was a unanimous opinions by all Muslim audience members that the programme presented Islam and

[161] Jaspal and Cinnirella, 'Media Representations of British Muslims', p.304.

Muslims much in the same way as other media forms and consequently added to an already negative image. Instead what is highlighted is that reactions to *Citizen Khan* vary amongst British Muslims. Additionally, that Naila and Aisha both found the episode to be funny in some respects, yet racist in others further highlights that reactions to the show can even vary even on an individual level. Considering both the diversity within Muslims communities, and also that humour is paradoxically both universal and particular, that humour responses both vary *within* the Muslim community and on an individual level is perhaps not surprising.

Concluding remarks

In considering the responses to *Citizen Khan* from a humour perspective, this research contributes to literature regarding comedy. In particular, by understanding responses to *Citizen Khan* as examples of unlaughter, this research contributes to a social critique of comedy. As such, it highlights that humour is not always a laughing matter. Additionally, in examining how Muslim audience members perceive the representation of Muslims in *Citizen Khan* this research both contributes to literature regarding Islam and Muslims in the British media, and Islamophobia. That Aisha and Naila both felt that *Citizen Khan* did little or nothing to challenge the negative image of Islam and Muslims in the British media might suggest that it can be seen to contribute towards Islamophobic discourse. However, that Hisham did not view the episode in the same way would arguably counter this. Therefore, it would seem that to label *Citizen Khan* as contributing to Islamophobic discourse is not a fair conclusion. In fact, it would seem impossible to label *Citizen Khan* as being one thing or another. What is highlighted instead is that reactions to the episode vary within the Muslim community and also on an individual level. Consequently, the findings discussed here do not necessarily support the sentiments expressed in Ahmed's article.

In considering the responses to *Citizen Khan*, it is certainly clear that researching humour is extremely complex. Participants held different opinions around whether or not the episode was funny, and these were considered for different reasons. Indeed, individual participants even seemed to be able to hold conflicting views, simultaneously maintaining that it is racist, yet stating that they found particular sections funny and recognisable. The complexity in analysing comedy can be attributed to both its ambiguity and the paradoxes inherent within it.[162]

[162] Michael Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule: Towards a Social Critique of Humour* (London: Sage Publications, 2005), pp.175-176.

Further research

As this research was only conducted with three British Muslim participants, it is fairly limited in scope. This research could therefore be extended through conducting further interviews with additional British Muslim participants. A more diverse sample would also be helpful in allowing for opinions to be compared across variables such as age, ethnic background and gender. Furthermore, there is a large body of the audience of *Citizen Khan* that is missing from this research: non-Muslim viewers. Therefore, the findings in this research could undoubtedly benefit from being combined with similar research into non-Muslim perceptions of *Citizen Khan.* It would also be particularly useful to interview a group of non-Muslim British Pakistanis in order to examine opinions around ethnic representation in *Citizen Khan.* Including a number of non-Muslim participants in this way would allow for opinions to be contrasted and compared across religious and cultural backgrounds.

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