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Young Muslims in Scotland: politics, racism, and the media

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Introduction

In 2017, we published a report about Muslim youth and political participation in Scotland (Finlay et al, 2017). Back then, we found that young Muslims engaged with a diversity of global issues, demonstrated an interest in and knowledge about Scottish politics, yet were concerned about media and political representations that projected a negative image of Islam and Muslims. We also found that the majority participated in politics in some form or another; for some young Muslims, this was about electoral politics where some young people were inspired by the SNP, by Scottish nationalism, and by the 2014 Independence Referendum.

For many of those who participated in this earlier research, their focus was about activism, volunteering, or charity work, including engaging with organisations locally and internationally. Muslim youth also identified several barriers and challenges when it came to their political engagement including concerns about everyday experiences of racism and Islamophobia, and negative media and political representations of Muslims. Worries were also expressed about government counter-terrorism policies stigmatising Muslims, about the reinforcing of gendered stereotypes, and a general lack of understanding amongst Muslim youth about mainstream politics and the policies of political parties.

Since the publication of this earlier study, we have experienced a global pandemic, the rise of Black Lives Matter (especially since 2020), a cost-of-living crisis, coupled with the outcomes of the Brexit vote. More recently too – and as we were writing up this report - we have witnessed a concerning period of far-right, Islamophobic violence and unrest in cities in Britain. Considering these changes, we explore the perspectives of young Muslims about their engagement with politics and political issues and the factors shaping this. We highlight how we did the research before presenting the key findings.

The full reference for this report is:
White, Joel, Finlay, Robin, and Hopkins, Peter, (2024) *Young Muslims in Scotland: politics, racism, and the media.* Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Newcastle University.

How we did the research?

Following a similar style to the previous study, we adopted an approach that enabled Muslim youth to discuss their experiences and explain their engagement with politics (or lack of interest in it) using their own words. Focus groups and individual interviews were therefore employed as the main methods of data collection.

We worked with 29 young Muslims aged 14-18 in focus groups and interviews. 11 young Muslim women and 18 young Muslim men participated. All the participants lived in Glasgow with the majority living in the southside neighbourhoods of Pollokshields, Govanhill and Shawlands. Nearly all were born in Glasgow aside from three who were born in England and three outside in the UK. We also interviewed one young woman who was not a Muslim but worked closely with the community and was well-informed about them given her work.

We invited young Muslims to participate in the research through initial contact with schools, colleges, and universities, as well as following up with those who participated in the earlier study. All participants openly consented to participate in the research. When we use direct quotes from participants, we do not use their real names to protect their confidentiality.

Local issues and Volunteering

Many participants were active in volunteering and fundraising, often through their local mosques, school, or community groups. Activities that people took part in ranged from litter picking and cake sales, to larger charity events. For example, Elena, had organised a cystic fibrosis fundraiser at school after a family member received a diagnosis, and Hassan, helped his dad with a large Sufi cultural event that raised money for earthquake relief in Syria and Turkey.

Hassan describes the event:

Hassan: It was a cultural event, different backgrounds, different people coming from everywhere. We just wanted to promote... People think of our religion as rigid, strict and stuff. We wanted to give the background about the Pakistani culture, like dancing, music, food.

Participants were keen to debate the degree to which such activities were deemed to be 'political'. In one group - who had been involved in charity work and Duke of Edinburgh schemes - this was felt to not be a useful framing as one of the participants said *"You say attending the mosque but that's not political is it. Volunteering at a café or something, that's not political."* In another focus group, three young women initially articulated a lack of interest in politics. Elena, who was in the group, framed this as such:

Elena: I'm not interested in politics, when I think of politics, what I associate with politics is Parliament, is law, is Modern Studies.

But these same three participants had been instrumental in organising the first 'Culture Day' at their school, as Elena went on to explain:

Elena: We wanted to do this thing called Culture Day because we've seen loads of other schools doing it. So we brought up the idea to the head of our school and they talked about it and why we should do it. Then we ended up having a Culture Day. Because the school is very diverse, loads of people are from different places and whatever, we had a whole Culture Day where people came in dressed up in their culture and they brought in flags, and we had stalls up in the assembly hall. It was very nice.

Framing such events through ideas of 'culture' and celebrating diversity was a common feature in many

interviews, with participants expressing shared experiences of migrant heritage and a desire to celebrate this. Simultaneously, other participants registered this in more overtly political language, as in the case of another participant, Anwar, who had been key in forming an anti-racist group at his school and organising a workshop at the same Culture Day, in which:

Anwar: [We discussed key concepts such as] white privilege, colonisation. But there were other words like POC, like people don't know that POC means a Person of Colour. There's also like types of racism. So, we talked about systematic racism, and we also talked about [...] micro aggressions.

Local action and awareness raising also included attempts at political education, encouraging personal reflection and change, alongside 'cultural' framings that allowed people to celebrate identities and experiences of diasporic belonging in ways not always understood as 'political' by those taking part.

School was not just a space for such events but also a key focus of political activity, with participants trying to organise responses to experiences of discrimination within school. Examples here included working to improve prayer room access during Ramadan and initiatives to tackle racist bullying. For Elena, such rhetoric around anti-racism and cultural diversity could also be 'all talk' when it comes to reporting and dealing with racist incidents:

Elena: They won't act on it, that's the thing. They'll tell you we're here for you, [but] they won't do anything, literally.

This frustration at a lack of action when concerns were raised also connected with a general sense that young Muslims were in a difficult position when it came to trying to participate in politics. Hassan, who had stood for election in leadership roles within the school, said:

Hassan: I wanted to say I'm Asian and I have the ability to do this [become an elected School Captain], [and when I do] more Asian boys will come forward. But if I do say that [they say] 'you're playing the race card.'

Hassan was clear in his view that it was important to have Muslim and Asian young people being supported to take on key roles within the school, as he had done himself. He felt that young Asian men were often excluded from such positions, despite being a key part of the school demographic. However, in articulating this position, Hassan had been accused of 'playing the race card' – whereby articulations of racism are met with derision on the basis that people are somehow 'using' questions of racism to gain prominence in bad faith - by other students and in one case through a 'joke' by a teacher. Even for those young people who went on to participate more extensively in political roles (such as through the Scottish Youth Parliament), barriers were also very present, particularly for young women, as a stakeholder who works with the community, Sara, articulated:

Sara: I was, I think, 17 when I started to be involved in a lot of this. For me it became very evident that just existing on social media as a young woman in politics was quite a toxic environment. It was something that felt quite, I think, sometimes a bit threatening and once I was finished with youth politics I immediately deleted all of my social media apps because they felt a level of vulnerability and exposure.

Despite such barriers, participants took on active roles in organising political and cultural events at the local level, alongside volunteering and charity work. Anti-racism, migrant rights, and resistance to Islamophobia were clearly a part of many of these activities, but not always expressed

in such overt terms. As the latter two examples illustrate however, many Muslim young people face difficulties when they do participate actively in political life, including attempts to undermine articulations of racism alongside hostility on social media. At a time of massive global instability and widespread apathy around electoral politics, local action, political education, and charitable volunteering were all key outlets for political participation for our participants.

Summary points

- Many participants were active in volunteering and fundraising, often through their local mosques, school, or community groups. The local actions and awareness raising by Muslim youth included attempts at political education and encouraging personal reflection and change.

- Schools were a key focus of such political activity with Muslim youth seeking to use their networks at school or organise politically.

- Some participants expressed frustration with a lack of action on issues and recognised that Muslim youth were often in a difficult position when it comes to participating in politics.

- Despite such barriers, some participants took on active roles in organising political and cultural events, volunteering and charity work, some of which focuses on anti-racism, migrant rights, and resistance to Islamophobia.

Global and National Politics

The research took place at a time of continued global instability and conflict, with young people expressing particular concern about the plight of Palestinian people in the wake of Israel's military campaign against Gaza following the October 7th Hamas attacks. Participants generally had a wide-ranging and informed understanding of global political events, often outlining critiques of mainstream media sources, instead getting information from TikTok, Instagram, Reddit, and other sources. In the case of Palestine, young people often referenced what they saw as a racist double standard in the British media response to this conflict and the ongoing war in Ukraine.

As Anwar put it:

Anwar: Well I would say [...] I that because Palestinians tend to be more like brown skinned and things and Israeli people are more lighter skinned, there's obviously the belief that white supremacy comes into it. And there's also saying that when Palestinians stand up for their rights, they're labelled terrorists, but when Ukrainians stood up for their rights, they were labelled as heroes and good people.

Ali, also drew connections to legacy of British colonialism:

Ali: One hundred years ago it was the British who colonised the area that is now Palestine and Israel, and the lines they drew and the way they left the place, the area and how they made a power vacuum. I think that's really the problem.

Several participants drew out such histories in explaining their personal engagement with global politics, including mentions of the partition of India and family stories of migration. As Owais, who had been active in youth politics in Scotland, outlined, such histories and personal connections often involved a reframing of what constitutes 'politics', as something that is infused into identity and everyday life:

Owais: It's something I've grown up with. It's something almost every Muslim has grown up with coming from a background that's faced colonialism. We've been exposed to the atrocities and we're just very familiar with politics.

Ali made similar points in connection to the experiences of his friend who had fled Syria to seek sanctuary in the UK:

Ali: I've heard the quote that one death is a tragedy, one million deaths is a statistic. When you see someone, you meet someone, like my friend here that's actually affected by the war, that's lived through it, you really see the humanity and the real side of it and not the statistics.

Global politics was therefore threaded into daily life for the young people we interviewed in multiple ways.

At the national level, participants were less animated about the question of Scottish independence than in our previous study, which took place in the aftermath of the 2014 Independence Referendum. Some felt that vote had been "unnecessary", or that "both sides were wrong"; some expressed support for Scotland becoming an independent country in the future, but many also felt they had been too young to fully understand the 2014 vote or did not feel informed enough to take a position. There was a range of views expressed about the impact of having Muslim politicians of Pakistani heritage in leading political roles in Holyrood, in particular Humza Yousaf as then SNP First Minister, and Anas Sarwar as leader of Scottish Labour. Generally, this weighed towards support and pride in having representation of this kind, particularly for people actively involved in Scottish Youth Parliament politics such as Owais:

Owais: I think it gives Muslims hope that that they could be somewhere, that they do have opportunities, and not everyone is going to shut you out.

Young people involved with formal politics also expressed how meeting and being able to contact such politicians had inspired and motivated them to continue participating in politics. This position was not shared by everyone however, with some young people expressing ambivalence or dislike of key figures. For example, when asked about Humza Yousaf, Zain said:

Zain: I'm not a fan of him. I just think he uses being a Muslim for votes. He came to a mosque to take a photo shoot [..] for Friday prayers. He's just the same as all the other politicians [...] They only come when there are elections.

Other participants expressed sentiments that such figures in Holyrood had "done nothing in the past five years", feeling that improvements made in areas such as anti-racism or public safety since 2014 had stagnated in more recent times. Comments were also made about not caring about the identity of political leaders as long as they "did a good job", whilst critiquing those who did not, including at Westminster. In Zain's words:

Zain: Rishi Sunak and them are just useless. They don't do anything. … people like Rishi Sunak, they've lived a pretty rich … from the start, a pretty affluent lifestyle so they don't get how day-to-day people live.

Zain: Jeremy Corbyn was good but aside from that there's no one else.

Generally, participants expressed a wariness or lack of belief in elections and protests to generate lasting change, but many also participated in the latter (particularly around Palestine) in the hope to "raise awareness" and show solidarity. Despite often beginning interviews by expressing a distance from or lack of interest in political life, young Muslims generally had a high level of awareness and engagement, particularly around Palestine but also other topics such as refugee rights, mental health, climate change, and feminism. While the interest in Scottish politics and independence had arguably waned since our last report, the wider sense of political engagement was still strong, particularly when participants spoke about action at the local and neighbourhood level.

Summary points:

- Although Muslim youth often claimed to be distant from, or disinterested in, politics, many exhibited a high level of awareness of and engagement with political issues.

- Participants generally had a wide-ranging and informed understanding of global political events, often outlining critiques of mainstream media sources.

- Muslim youth often referred to issues of family history and account of migration as informing their views about politics and the political.

- Global politics was threaded into daily life for the young people we interviewed in multiple ways.

- Muslim youth were less animated about the question of Scottish independence than in our previous study published in 2017.

Racism and Islamophobia

Issues related to race, racism, and Islamophobia were a concern for many of the participants in the research and featured in their daily lives. We note with concern that this will have been further heightened by the violence and unrest in cities across Britain in August 2024. The racial dynamics and religious freedoms experienced at school were of particular concern for most participants. Many expressed frustration around the scarcity of education about racism at school and the general lack of dialogue about such issues.

For instance, Elena, reflected on her schooling as such:

Elena: It's almost like racism is forgotten in primary, it's just left there. Because obviously in primary they do a whole topic about racism and then they introduce the concept to you and they're like, "This is bad, don't do that." You're like okay, I will not do that. Then you come to secondary and obviously there's loads of other minorities that unfortunately are discriminated against, homophobia, xenophobia, sexism, misogyny. But it's almost like racism is just put aside. They're like, "Okay, we've already taught you this. You should know that this isn't acceptable." But it's not spoken about anymore or it's not spoken about enough.

Concerns about how questions of racism were covered in the school curriculum overlapped with a lack of opportunity for students to discuss their opinions and experiences, as Farah, articulated:

Farah: Yes, there's this and there's that. In PSE we should be openly allowed to talk about it. We should have the chance to say what we want to say and then be told, "Okay, we'll talk about it and we'll bring it up in discussions and meetings or whatever but they don't. That's the thing, they don't think.

A topic that came up in many of the focus groups and interviews was religious freedom at school. Many participants discussed how they appreciated being provided with a prayer space at school during Ramadan but felt frustrated it was a temporary measure and had not developed into a permanent prayer space for students. This was something Elena returned to several times:

Elena: We ended up getting a prayer room and we'd go sit in there. Then [after a while] that prayer room just wasn't really a prayer room. It just turned into a room where teachers would have meetings. Whenever we'd go in there, they'd be told, "We're having a meeting, you can't come in right now. You can come in after." But after would be the times that we'd have classes so we couldn't go in there, we couldn't pray…So they just took that room from us. I don't think anyone uses that room now. I think it's just for meetings or just in general, but it was nice when it lasted. It was like loads of people were using it, like my siblings, my sister used to go in there with her friends and they'd pray for Eid and stuff.

At school, young Muslim women encounter specific limitations on their religious freedoms, alongside instances of gendered Islamophobia (Finlay & Hopkins, 2019). Several female participants expressed frustration that they were restricted from wearing certain religious clothing such as an Abayas. For example, Nawal stated:

Nawal: Our school has, well a couple of teachers pointed out that girls wearing Abayas should not wear that because it's inappropriate for school. But we see people coming in wearing whatever they want and that's not addressed. I mean I've never said anything about someone's uniform but for someone to make a comment on someone covering themselves because they feel like they want to, they feel comfortable like that, it's atrocious.... It's someone's religion and you should respect it. You don't have to support it. You don't have to follow it but always respect someone's religion because at the end of the day, that's what they feel comfortable in following and believing in. For someone to rip that freedom away from them is too far in my eyes. But yes, I think the school definitely do have a lot of things that they don't address, they don't try and help with. I think it actually encourages Islamophobia, these kind of things that happen.

Muslim women wearing religious clothing frequently attract hostility and discrimination due to the visibility of their Muslimness (Easat-Daas and Zempi, 2024). Indeed, many young Muslim women discussed experiences of Islamophobic bullying at school which was often related to religious clothing such as headscarves and hijabs. Elena and her friend Chitra commented:

Elena: One thing that I do remember growing up, I told you I wore this scarf a couple of times in primary. So, in P3 I had moved from rather racist primary school [to a new school]. I was P3, brand new and the school, as you may know, is quite diverse. It's quite mixed. So the thought behind it was you move to this from a racist school, from a very white school from this neighbourhood to this one. It's just much more welcoming, which it was except for this one guy who was in P4. He would pull my scarf off of my head from behind me. So that in itself was racist. Me being me, I went and told on him because I thought well what are you doing. That was not taken seriously.

Chitra: the same thing with the whole Hijab thing happened to me. When I was in, I think it was P3 I think, I started wearing the Hijab since I've started school, from a very young age. They'd come up to me, they'd pull on my hair or they'd take my hood off and be like, "You've got hair under there? I thought you were bald." They'd be like, "Is your hair curly? Is your hair thick? Can I see your hair," and they'd say things and they'd be like, "Why do you wear the Hijab?"

Gendered Islamophobia also shapes and impacts Muslim men in specific ways (Easat-Daas and Zempi, 2024). For instance, physical characteristics, such as beards, can attract hostility due to stereotypes about Muslims. As

Anwar, who had been instrumental in starting an anti-racist group in his school stated:

Anwar: One of my friends, I was talking to him yesterday because we were talking about the [Anti-racist group], and he said that because he's got a beard, or he used to have a long beard, people called him Osama bin Laden, or called him a terrorist.

For many of the participants, exposure to, and experiences of Islamophobia connect to broader geopolitical and global issues and debates. Many global and geopolitical events increase Islamophobic hostility, making young Muslims feel a level of insecurity in their everyday lives. The Israel-Palestine conflict was of particular concern, with its impacts being felt in the everyday lives of participants, as Zain outlined:

Zain: After the recent events in the Middle East, I felt people were staring at me way more. I'd never had as much in my life. This was the day it happened, 7th October. I went out, people were just staring at me. [...] People were just staring at me the entire time. It's kind of intimidating because my mum wears a Hijab, my sister wears a Hijab. I thought what if someone was doing something to attack them. That's top of your head all the time, isn't it, especially nowadays. You stay safe and be careful. It got worse, more worse than it was before because you felt the energy has changed. People were more angry than ever.

As this quote illustrates, participants felt that the Israel-Palestine conflict was impacting relations between Muslims and other communities, making them more vulnerable to hostility and abuse. Additionally, some participants viewed Israel's attacks on Gaza and the international reaction to this as indicative of a disregard for Muslim lives, thereby exposing them to further Islamophobia.

Political policies in France that ban the wearing of certain religious clothing in public spaces, alongside the rise of Islamophobic attacks in France, were a concern for many, particularly young Muslim women. This was something returned to by Nawal, whom we quoted earlier discussing school uniform policies:

Nawal: That France situation was really horrible because I've got family, well to be honest, coming from my background, I'm Algerian so there's already an Algerian conflict with France but just seeing that I've got family in France who wear Hijabs and Abayas, it's sad to see that they'd probably get hate crime on the street for following their religion and doing something for the sake of their religion.

Despite the varied ways issues to do with race, racism and Islamophobia were a concern for participants, some felt that they experienced less overt racism compared to previous generations, as articulated by a member of one of our focus groups:

It's much better than it was before because before, people's attitudes were different. Now people's attitudes have changed. You're not likely to find a racist person now but obviously, before you would have been able to. It is better now.

The examples we provide here are just some of those raised by our participants as sources of Islamophobia. Other examples include political rhetoric from British and international politicians, airport security, print and social media and far-right political activity.

Summary points

- Many participants expressed frustration around the scarcity of education and general dialogue about racism at school.

- Many participants discussed how they appreciated being provided with a prayer space at school during Ramadan but felt frustrated it was a temporary measure and had not developed into a permanent prayer space for students.

- Young Muslim women encounter specific experiences of gendered Islamophobia associated with their dress whilst men suffer from problematic stereotypes associated with their physical characteristics such as having a beard.

Social, print, and broadcast media

A lack of trust in the mainstream media was expressed by many participants, concurring with the findings in our previous research (Finlay, Hopkins & Sangera, 2017). Most participants felt that there was negative, unbalanced, and unsympathetic reporting of Muslims in mainstream media outlets. Many were increasingly concerned about the reporting of the situation in Gaza and the suffering of Muslims.

Many felt the reporting was biased and unbalanced, as highlighted by Owais:

Owais: There was a difference in terms use to describe the situation of both Israel and Palestine. Israelis were labelled as being murdered or killed, whereas Palestinians were just labelled as dead. Obviously see they both do mean the same thing, but one term is more impactful than the other, and again, it really just shock us because there have been over 8,000 victims now that have been killed in Palestine [at time of interview], and the way that the media is choosing to represent or present the Palestinians or Muslims in general, it's unbelievable.

Owais also went on to explain how the political organisation he was involved with had been similarly lacking in responses to the plight of Palestinian people, and that he had felt worried about the impact his advocacy for this cause would have on his future opportunities in politics and wider careers (see Harris, 2022).

Many participants felt that the mainstream media frequently represented Muslims in a negative light, often associating Muslims with terrorism, crime or other negative behaviours (Kundnani, 2014). Positive representations of Muslims were seen as infrequent, as pointed out by Zoe:

Zoe: I want the media to show the good side of Muslims. I'm done with them showing the bad side. We're not terrorists. We're not bombers [...] We're harmless. We're not harmful. I want them to actually see the better side.

Participants discussed using social media, such as TikTok, Instagram and Reddit as the main way to acquire news, information, and opinions. Social media provides alternative sources of news that many consider less biased than mainstream media reporting. Independent vloggers

were perceived as especially insightful, providing an understanding of lived experiences. In the case of the Israel-Palestine conflict, social media and independent vloggers were considered a more reliable source to understand the situation in Gaza and the wider region for many participants.

Owais: I normally follow verified pages and get my information from there, or I tend to get information from people who are actually living in the issue that they're facing. So there's a lot of Palestinian content creators at the moment, and they tend to be speaking up quite along the issue, and I just tend to see what they're saying and what their views are, and what's going on.

Despite participants crediting social media as a key resource for news and opinions, the majority equally voiced concern about social media. Many were critical of the trustworthiness of news and sources on social media platforms, as illustrated by Veronica:

Veronica: I don't really trust what I see on Tik Tok or whatever. I don't trust it if something comes up and it's like the numbers… I don't trust that. But if I go on a website and it's like a university study and they're like this has been proven to happen, then I'm like okay, I trust that a bit more.

The fact that young people have grown up with social media made them particularly equipped to recognise misinformation, as Owais went on to explain:

Owais: The younger generations are more vigilant or more able to recognise what's true and what's not, especially on social media, because we've been exposed to it since at a very young age, whereas the older generations are having to be a bit more accustomed to it.

Another concern was around the Islamophobia that participants encountered when using social media. As illustrated in our previous research (Finlay, Hopkins & Sangera, 2017), young Muslims often encounter Islamophobic comments and content on social media, leading to feelings of insecurity and fear in their daily lives. The young people once again expressed this point in this research:

Maram: There's a lot of Islamophobia on social media. I've seen a video of people burning Qurans and ripping them up and then they'll call that freedom of speech […]

Elena: I feel quite targeted. This person who showed me [the video], he wasn't showing me it because he was like, "Look, look." He was also Muslim. He was like, "This isn't very fair." But when I see them, you do feel attacked almost because when they do it, you don't do that by accident and then you record and post it. You do it with the intention—

Farah: To hurt someone.

The use of social media, then, has a paradoxical impact on young Muslims. On the one hand, it is an important source of alternative news, opinions, and education, while on the other hand, it is a space of misinformation and Islamophobic hostility as the recent violence in cities and towns in England demonstrates. It is also gendered with Muslim women being the targets of some of the most explicit forms of Islamophobia.

Summary points

- Muslim youth voiced a general lack of trust in the mainstream media with most finding it negative, unbalanced, and unsympathetic in its reporting of Muslims.

- Social media provides alternative sources of news that many consider less biased than mainstream media reporting. However, many were critical of the trustworthiness of news and other sources on social media platforms.

- The participants demonstrated an awareness that social media can provide an important source of alternative news, opinions, and education, whilst being aware that it is also a space of misinformation and Islamophobic hostility.
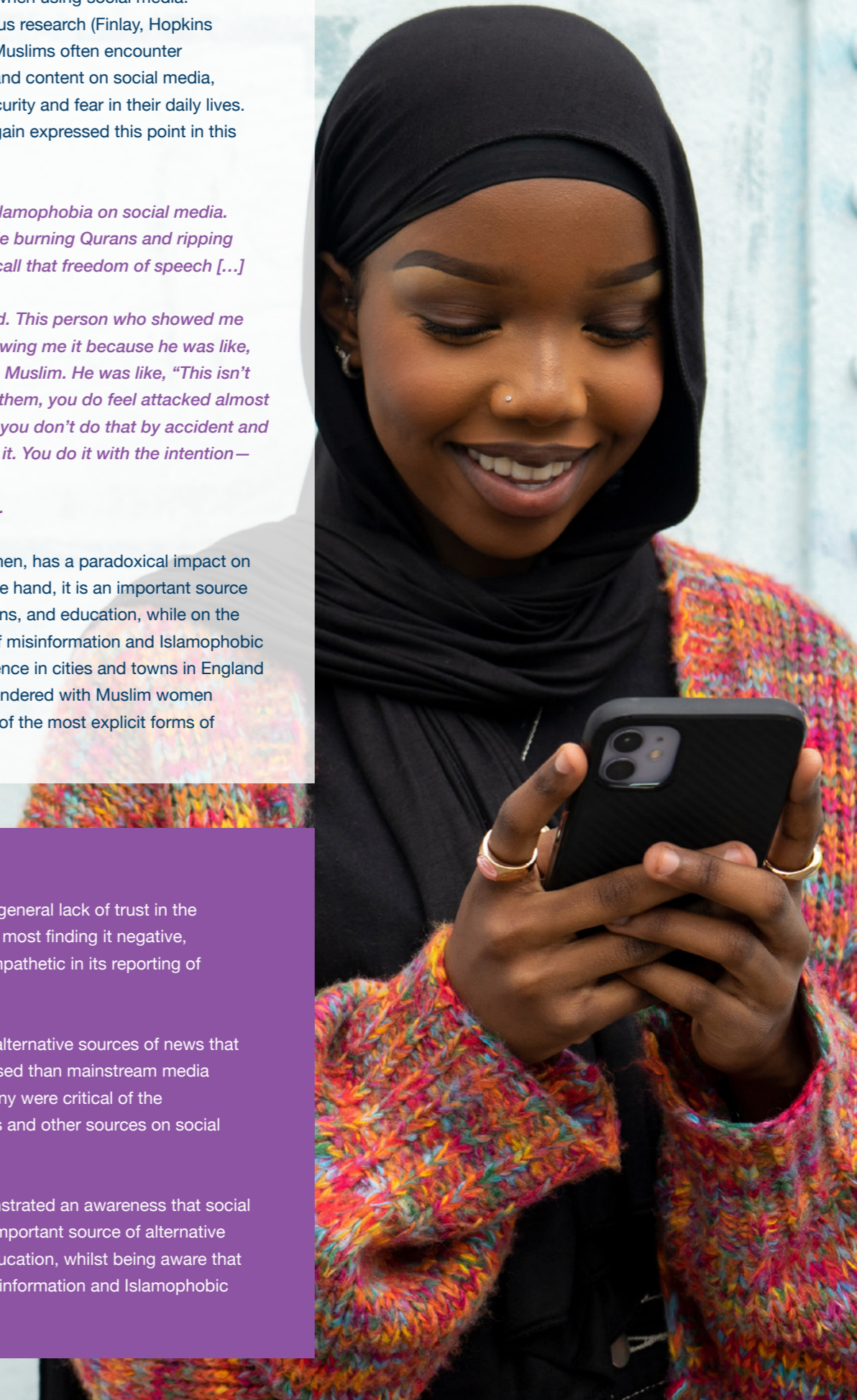
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