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## #WhatBritishMuslimsReallyThink

Negotiating Religious and National Identity on Twitter

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# #WhatBritishMuslimsReallyThink

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## Introduction

- 1 Online discourses and social media interactions have only recently emerged as a topic of interest when analyzing the ways social identity is negotiated and communicated digitally (cf. Barbu-Kleitsch 2016, 160). While religious scholars such as Lövheim (2013) have focused on the construction and negotiation of »religious« identity online and on social media platforms, there is of yet little research on religious identity formation on Twitter in particular. In this paper, my aim is to contribute to research concerned with the discursive construction of collective identity online, particularly of religious and national identity. In the face of growing global mobility of people migrating, vigorous discourses of belonging are emerging, in which national belonging may be denied to certain groups on the basis of their religiosity (cf. Yuval-Davis 2011, 39–41). Such discourses highlight the contested nature of national identity formations. The negotiation of Muslim identity and its intersection with specific national identity categories is of particular interest in today's Europe, in which the boundaries of individual nations are at times secured by applying a logic characteristic of Islamophobia<sup>1</sup> and cultural racism (cf. Weedon 2004, 157).
- 2 Twitter activity can potentially reach beyond Twitter itself and be taken up by other media entities (cf. Pfaffenberger 2016, 14). Used in such ways, Twitter becomes a means of »talking back« and has been used to contest social discrimination and marginalization (Konnolly 2015, 1). As the hashtag #WhatBritishMuslimsReallyThink was launched as a response to a rhetoric aimed at excluding Muslims from the British national body, I argue that reading the gathered Twitter data as a discourse of resistance can possibly identify the specific strategies that are employed to negotiate and contest negative identification. At the same time, Twitter may also provide marginalized members of society with a space for positive identification and unification (cf. Wills and Fecteau 2016). Therefore, the data gathered was further examined in order to analyze how Twitter users employ the hashtag

to identify and unify as members of the digital British Muslim community and hence construct and reinforce their collective identity.

- 3 In the following sections, the background knowledge necessary for understanding the case study as well as the specific approach used for the analysis are outlined. First, Twitter is conceptualized as a field of research and as a specific communicative space. Next, I will discuss the theoretical considerations on which the analysis is based. Here, theories on the discursive construction of identity in general and national identity in particular are of interest. In the next section, the data gathered and the methodological approach for its analysis will be outlined. Finally, the results of the analysis will be discussed. In this discussion, I wish to illustrate the contents and strategies of identification used in the tweets and hence outline along what lines British national and British Muslim identity are constructed in the data. Thereby, the ways in which the hashtag discourse and its constructions can be seen as resisting negative identifications of British Muslims that aim at excluding them from the British nation are discussed.

## Twitter as a Communicative Space

- 4 With over 250 million active users each day, Twitter is one of the most influential social media platforms worldwide (cf. Kumar, Morstatter, and Liu 2015, 21). Although there is no comprehensive demographic data on the entirety of Twitter users, studies suggest that the platform is used most frequently by young people, with percentages varying from 66% up to more than 93% of users aged 35 and younger (cf. Sloan et al. 2015, 14). Content on Twitter is user-generated in form of micro-posts (tweets) of 140 characters or less (cf. Zappavigna 2012, 2). In addition to being a tool for everyday communication (cf. Bruns 2011, 1), Twitter is also used as a backchannel for on-going discussions of (real-time) events, which are commented on and evaluated, reflecting »what Twitter thinks« (Bruns and Stieglitz 2012, 802).
- 5 In order to organize communication about a certain event or issue, Twitter users can use hashtags, which are textual markers consisting of keywords preceded by the hash symbol '#'. If such a hashtag is included anywhere in the tweet, it marks the tweet »as being relevant to a specific topic and make[s] it more easily discoverable to other users« (Bruns and Moe 2014, 17). This can be interpreted as signaling »a wish to take part in a wider communicative process, potentially with anyone interested in the same topic« (Bruns and Moe 2014, 17). In this way, ad hoc publics or hashtag communities form around topical hashtags »used to bundle together tweets on a unified, common topic« (Bruns and Burgess 2011, 5). It is this principle of affiliation in terms of »an emergent bonding around searchable topics« (Zappavigna 2012, 191) that Zappavigna sees at the heart of community building on Twitter. In this way, hashtags are understood as devices that allow Twitter users to communicate and (re)-assure their mutually shared affiliation and identity position (cf. Konnelly 2015, 11).

## Hashtag Discourse: #WhatBritishMuslimsReallyThink

- 6 In this study, communication around the hashtag #WhatBritishMuslimsReallyThink is analyzed. The hashtag was launched on April 10<sup>th</sup>, 2016 as a response to the magazine cover of the Sunday Times magazine with the headline »What do British Muslims really

think?» and the respective article, called »An Inconvenient Truth«, written by political and public figure Trevor Phillips (2016). The primary argument in the article is that British Muslims fundamentally differ from British people in general. Starting with a suggestive »they seemed no different from the rest of us« (Phillips 2016, 1), this argument is introduced and followed by excurses in which the internal boundaries of the British nation are drawn.

- 7 In this way, the article can be seen as part of a wider discourse on national identity within Europe in general and Britain in particular. In this discourse, religious identity, especially with regard to Islam, is instrumentalized in order to secure national boundaries and exclude Muslims from the national body. Scholars argue that, since the 1980s, and frequently in relation to immigration, Europe has increasingly experienced the appearance of what has been called »new racisms« (Stoler 1995, 24). Thereby, national identities are no longer overtly conceptualized in terms of blood and origin but more often with regard to cultural terminology (cf. Fassin 2010, 508–510). Such argumentation, hand in hand with the instrumentalization of sexuality and gender politics, are reality in many political discourses concerned with immigration (cf. Fassin 2010, 515). Indeed, scholars have argued that with references to gender equality and sexual liberation it is possible to provide »a modern justification to anti-immigration politics that could otherwise appear merely as reactionary xenophobia« (Fassin 2010, 2012). Based on a long history of depicting Islam as the inferior, barbaric and savage »other« to »the West« (cf. Weedon 2004, 142), Muslims living in the West must, as Asad argues, expect to »at the very least be regarded with suspicion« (1997, 186). This dualism is reinforced by limited and often stereotypical images of Muslims and Muslim society that deny complexity (cf. Weedon 2004, 143–144). Hence, the rising Islamophobia observable in contemporary Europe and »the West« is based on a long history of »othering« Muslims dating back to the Crusades (cf. Weedon 2004, 145). This complicates and impedes the »process of identifying with and belonging to mainstream Western societies« (Weedon 2004, 157) for Muslims.
- 8 Overall, within the tendency to conceptualize belonging no longer on origin and race but rather on the idea of clearly identifiable cultures with different value systems, Islam is represented as a cultural entity at odds with »Western« values, an incompatibility often comprehended in terms of attitudes towards gender and sexuality. In Britain, such a representation is observable not only in political projects of belonging (cf. Yuval-Davis 2011, 23–26), but also in British media and popular culture discourses (cf. Moore, Mason, and Lewis 2008, Weedon 2004). Thereby, stories most commonly highlight differences between British Muslims and other British people and are based on religious and cultural issues, such as freedom of speech, Sharia Law, forced marriages, or the veil (cf. Moore, Mason, and Lewis 2008, 10). As an expression of this overall discourse, the article »An Inconvenient Truth« draws a distinction between »us«, British people, and »them«, (British) Muslims and thereby exclude Muslims from the British Nation. The article specifically refers to issues such as the notion of »shared values«, especially with regard to attitudes towards women, homosexuality and sexual, as well as non-sexual violence (Phillips 2016), in order to distinguish between the two. In response to this article, the hashtag #WhatBritish-MuslimsReallyThink was introduced. This particular hashtag was intended to be used by members of the British Muslim online community to share their version of »what British Muslims really think« and thereby contest the negative portrayal

within the article. The following theoretical considerations are crucial for the analysis of the way British Muslim identity is negotiated in the hashtag discourse.

## Theoretical Considerations

- 9 The concepts of *identity* and *discourse* are central to the analysis of the way collective identity is negotiated in the hashtag discourse in question. On the one hand, scholarly interest in the study of identity has increased in anthropology and sociology, especially in sociocultural linguistics, as well as in humanities and the social sciences in general (cf. Bucholtz and Hall 2003, 373). Today, essentialist notions of identity categories as fixed and naturalized entities have been rebutted and there is, what Diaz-Bone calls, »a constructivist consensus« (2006, 255 my translation) in scholarship on identity. Hence, the social is seen as »constructed« and identity no longer as inevitable and natural, but rather as fluid and constructed in discourse (cf. Bucholtz and Hall 2003, 374). On the other hand, the term »discourse« has been used in a myriad of ways. In this paper, the term discourse is applied in its Foucaultian meaning of »a group of statements which provide a language for talking about – a way of representing the knowledge about – a particular topic at a particular historical moment« (Hall 2001, 72). This provision of »a language for talking about« determines what can be meaningfully said, as, although things and actions exist outside discourse, they only ever become meaningful within (cf. Diaz-Bone 2006, 252, Hall 2001, 73). As such, discourses define and at the same time produce the objects of knowledge (cf. Hall 2001, 72) and are thus termed productive (cf. Diaz-Bone 2006, 252, Hall 2001, 73). For the approach chosen to analyze the Twitter discourse around the hashtag #WhatBritishMuslimsReallyThink, three theoretical considerations are central.

### Identity as social process

- 10 First, identity is viewed as an on-going process situated in discourse. Thereby, discursive practices are always historically and locally specific and can never be understood without their specific context (cf. Hall 2001, 74). Indeed, what can be deemed as »true« is meaningful only within a definite discursive formation (cf. Hall 2001, 74).<sup>2</sup> This is further valid with regard to the range of subject-positions that are available for individuals to identify with within a specific local and historically embedded discourse (cf. Hall 2001, 80). It is this identification with particular subject-positions, this process of positioning, that shapes identity (cf. Bucholtz and Hall 2005, 591). Discursive formations always consist of competing discourses that, although related to one another through hierarchical power relations, potentially allow for resistance and subversion (cf. Weedon 2004, 18). In this paper, both the hashtag #WhatBritishMuslimsReallyThink and the article it responds to can be seen as discursive events that share the same object of reference (cf. Hall 2011, 73). Therefore, they are both analyzed as part of the same discursive formation.

### Discursive Construction of Identity: Strategies of Identification

- 11 Second, both national and religious identity is understood as social constructs. With regard to national identity, Anderson prominently conceptualized nations as *imagined communities* that are always constructed as *limited*, within »finite, if elastic, boundaries,

beyond which lie other nations« (Anderson 2006 (1983), 7). Scholars have further emphasized the importance of such boundaries in the construction of national identity, or of any identity for that matter. In this view, identities are always relational and exclusive, as well as inclusive (cf. Yuval-Davis 2011, 17), as the construction of identities depends not only on the construction of an essence of what one is but also on what one is not, on what is left outside (cf. Wodak et al. 2009, 7–8, Wodak and Meyer 2009, 3–4). The process of boundary making that operates within national identities has even been termed »the key element of the process of identification, [...] ways of delineating who and who does not belong to the nation, for battles over exclusion and inclusion are always on-going« (Edensor 2002, 25). It is important to notice that elements that determine inclusion or exclusion into belonging vary greatly depending on the specific context and perspective boundaries are drawn in (cf. Edensor 2002, 25, Yuval-Davis 2011, 20–21).

- 12 In addition to specific elements and contents important in demarcating certain identity categories, scholars have described strategies of identification that are central to identity formation. In this paper, the strategies identified by De Cillia, Reisigl, and Wodak (1999), and Wodak et al. (2009), who are interested in the construction of national identity conceived as specific forms of social identities, and Bucholtz and Hall (2003, 2005), who are concerned with identity in general, are taken into consideration. They outline that the strategies most frequently used to construct and establish identities »by promoting unification, identification and solidarity, as well as differentiation« (Wodak et al. 2009, 33) are the strategies of *adequation* and *distinction*. Thereby, the term *adequation* refers to »the pursuit of socially recognized sameness« (Bucholtz and Hall 2003, 383), thus, to strategies that downplay inter-group differences and emphasize what is viewed as salient similarities for a group to be understood as a cohesive entity (Bucholtz and Hall 2005, 599–600). The counterpart of the strategy of *adequation*, *distinction*, refers to the identity relation of differentiation, which emphasizes and constructs rather than erases difference (Bucholtz and Hall 2005, 600, 2003, 384). Frequently, distinction works by »establishing dichotomy between social identities constructed as oppositional [and] has a tendency to reduce complex social variability to a single dimension: us versus them« (Bucholtz and Hall 2003, 384). In addition to the strategies of *adequation* and *distinction*, there are strategies that do not construct but dismantle and destruct identity categories and their elements. Bucholtz and Hall identify two such strategies, namely the strategy of *illegitimation*, which aims at delegitimizing aspects of identity constructions by questioning their validity or the authority of their source, and the strategy of *denaturalization*, in which given identity constructions are shown to be falsely based on assumptions of homogeneity and generalization (cf. Bucholtz and Hall 2005, 602–605). In this study, the way such strategies have been used by Twitter users in response to the dichotomy between Muslims and Britain established in the article will be analyzed.

## Banal Nationalism

- 13 The third theoretical consideration is concerned with the way collective identities are discursively constructed not only in ideological and elite discourses but also in ordinary settings. Especially theories of nationalism and national identity have been criticized to have solely focused on the level of top-down, elitist discourses in the reproduction of national identity (cf. Özkirimli 2000, 195). In his influential work called *Banal Nationalism* (1995), Billig argues that far from only being constructed in spectacular displays or in

dominant discourses during crises, national identity is produced and reproduced in »everyday life« (cf. Edensor 2002, 11, Skey 2009, 334). Indeed, it has even been argued that it is in mundane and routine reproduction that assumptions of belonging are grounded (cf. Edensor 2002, 11). According to Antonsich, the everyday practices are crucial in the construction of shared identity, as »it is the mundane choreographies of ordinary people queuing at the bus stop, getting stuck in traffic jams on holiday trips to popular destinations, or sitting in front of the TV for the evening news which produce a common spatial-temporal matrix« (2016, 38). Therefore, it is important to take the discursive actions of ordinary people in everyday settings and mundane reference points into account in order to comprehend any construction of identity as a contested and multifaceted construct.

## Data and Method

- 14 In order to understand how national and religious identity was negotiated and constructed in the hashtag discourse, tweets were gathered by means of the web-based tool TAGS (Twitter Archiving Google Spreadsheet) that accesses Twitter's REST API and allows for both the compilation of the tweets as well as a number of statistical operations (cf. Gaffney and Puschmann 2014, 56). This method enables the researcher to gather individual tweets that contain a certain keyword or, in this case, hashtag. In order to obtain a data set as complete as possible, all data gathered was published no more than 48 hours prior to the data collection requests.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, given the yet unsolved question of how representative Twitter users are of the overall population, especially if their probable youth is taken into account, no such generalization will be attempted in this paper. All tweets containing the hashtag #WhatBritishMuslimsReallyThink have been tracked and extracted from Twitter after the emergence of the hashtag on the 10<sup>th</sup> of April, 2016. In order to ensure the integrity and the inclusion of all intra-conversation references necessary to understand any given tweet, the first 24 hours after the emergence of the hashtag have been chosen as a sample. This distinction of the data sample via a given time period (cf. Krippendorff 2004, 109) can, however, not account for possible changes in the Twitter discourse in terms of its participants and overall meaning over time. A total of 480 original tweets were included in the analysis<sup>4</sup>.
- 15 The compiled data was analyzed using a mixed method content analysis approach conceptualized on the basis of category development as a qualitative-interpretive act, following content-analytical rules expressed by scholars such as Mayring (2000, 2014). His model of Qualitative Content Analysis combines the qualitative step of assigning categories to text with the quantitative step of »working through many text passages and analyzing frequencies of categories« (2014, 10). In order to investigate the specific contents mentioned in the data, an inductive category development was applied, a process that lies at the basis of the grounded theory approach (cf. Mayring 2014, 79). Thereby, a close reading of each tweet was conducted and the tweet was coded for one (presence of the subject category) or zero (absence of the subject category). A single tweet may be coded for more than one content category. Overall, 10 main content categories were referred to in the 480 tweets (see table 1).

**Table 1. Frequency of Main Content Categories**

Content Category	Number of Tweets
Everyday Life	202
Religions and Islam	105
Discrimination	99
Popular Culture	85
Media	65
Politics	44
Twitter	27
British Nation	21
Shared Values	20
Race and Ethnicity	9

- 16 In a second step, the material at hand was examined with regard to the discursive strategies applied. Tweets were deductively coded for strategies of identification outlined above. In order to ensure the validity of the developed coding guideline, an inter-coder reliability test was conducted (cf. Mayring 2014, 111), whereby 50 tweets were independently coded by the researcher and an additional coder<sup>5</sup>. Thereby, acceptable agreement was determined according to Landis and Koch (1977, 165) at a Cohen's Kappa result of 0.61 and above. The results of the inter-rater reliability test indicate the agreement between the two coders to be sufficient for all variables possible to calculate (Cohen's Kappa  $\geq 0.61$ ). Finally, the correlation between content categories and the strategies was calculated according to Spearman using SPSS Statistics in order to identify the elements along which the boundaries of the identity categories were constructed.

## #WhatBritishMuslimsReallyThink: Hashtag Community

- 17 Hashtags do not only mark the topic of the tweet but may also serve as the target of appraisal and identification (cf. Zappavigna 2011, 799). Hence, in the case of #WhatBritishMuslimsReallyThink, the identity category of »British Muslims« is not only the topic discussed but further intended to serve as a possible marker of identification for Twitter users. In this way, the hashtag can be seen as creating »a space for the construction of the Muslim community« (Wills 2016, 2), in which British Muslims can communicate and share their experiences. Moreover, there are tweets in which the unification of British Muslims around the hashtag is made explicit. This is done by establishing a »we«-group via personal pronouns that imply one's own identity position



and simultaneously make presuppositions with regard to that of others (cf. Bucholtz and Hall 2005, 594). Tweets with statements such as »When will we stop having to prove our humanity? #WhatBritishMuslimsReallyThink« (T259) imply that the author of the tweet and the other participants in this particular hashtag discourse are part of a »we« attributed to the identity category of »British Muslim«. Indeed, in the data analysed, all Twitter users that refer to a »we«-group around this hashtag identify with the category of »British Muslims«. In this way, the hashtag #WhatBritishMuslimsReallyThink is established as a shared social space intended for people that identify as British Muslim to participate, share their experiences and contest the portrayal of British Muslims evident in the Sunday Times Magazine article.

## Strategies of identification

- 18 In the tweets analyzed, the category of British Muslims was negotiated and constructed in several ways: On the one hand, shared identity was established by »promoting unification, identification and solidarity, as well as differentiation« (Wodak et al. 2009, 33). Thereby, a shared identity is emphasized along the lines of shared sorrows, problems and worries, as well as common interests and activities. In the Twitter data gathered in this study, two similar but distinct strategies of constructing the identity of British Muslims were observed; 1) *Intra-national adequation*: the portrayal of British Muslims as a unified group with the intent to adequate and portray sameness between British Muslims and British people 2) *intra-group adequation*: the identification of British Muslims as a unified group with tweets that serve to unify and self-identify as British Muslims. On the other hand, the negative portrayal of British Muslim identity in the article was deconstructed and dismantled through strategies of 3) *illegitimation* and 4) *denaturalization*. While tweets that construct British Muslim identity can be seen as indirectly responding to the article and its exclusionary representation of British Muslims, the latter two strategies respond to the argumentation of the article in a more direct manner. The four strategies identified in the Twitter data analyzed are outlined and exemplified in the following sections.

### Intra-national Adequation

- 19 The first approach, which was included in 202 tweets (42%), pursues to portray sameness between British Muslims and British people in general. Thereby, an individual tweet identifies an aspect of British Muslim identity and explicitly or implicitly attributes it to the British identity in general, or vice versa. In this way, the construction of Muslims as different from British people, or even incompatible with »Western«, here British, values, is indirectly contested. In most tweets, such an alignment is implicit, however, there are instances where it is made explicit, as for example in the following tweet:
- »Living according to the stated 'British Values' is pretty easy as in many ways Islam requires the same of us #WhatBritishMuslimsReallyThink« (T334)
- 20 In this example, the content category referred to in order to pursue sameness was »shared values«.
- 21 Overall, sameness is constructed mostly along the lines of shared interests, activities, and reference points in terms of everyday worries as well as political issues of concern. Two content categories significantly correlate with the strategy of intra-national adequation:

The first category the strategy of intra-national adequation correlates with is »Popular Culture« ( $r=378$ ,  $p=0.000$ ), which includes references to the entertainment industry, music, TV-series, movies or sports:

»#WhatBritishMuslimsReallyThink I must reread @jk\_rowling's Harry Potter series and @AuthorDanBrown's books again. The best. #bibliophile« (T439)  
 »Leicester will win the League #WhatBritishMuslimsReallyThink« (T449)

- 22 In examples, such as the tweets above, similarity is emphasized in terms of same interests in popular culture, here in the Harry Potter book series. Moreover, references to British sports teams, such as to Leicester (tweet T449), can further be read in terms of emotional investment in the British nation. Indeed, interest in national sports team has been interpreted as a sign of belonging and emotional attachment to the British nation in nationalist projects, as for instance in the Cricket test introduced during Thatcher's government (cf. Yuval-Davis 2011, 22–23). In this test, migrated people were to watch a Cricket match between Britain and a team from the country of their origin and only if they cheered for Britain could they possibly »belong« to the British nation (cf. Yuval-Davis 2011, 22). The second content category that correlates with the strategy of intra-national adequation is »Everyday Life« ( $r=0.256$ ,  $p=0.000$ ). Here references to food, such as in »Nothing is complete without a good cuppa' tea #WhatBritishMuslimsReallyThink« (T428), or the weather, as in »It's raining again! British weather is so unpredictable #WhatBrishMuslimsReallyThink« (T373), and other everyday issues are included. In this way, both the more or less explicit Britishness as well as the ordinary character of the tweeting British Muslims is indicated. These correlations indicate that unity and sameness are constructed along the lines of a shared everyday worries and popular interests.

## Intra-group Adequation

- 23 In the 144 tweets (30%) included in this category, the identity of British Muslims is constructed via a combination of both the strategy of adequation and distinction. Firstly, shared characteristics, sorrows, interests, or activities that are mentioned in the tweet. Secondly, those mentioned entities are either explicitly or implicitly portrayed as particular to British Muslims. Overall, a distinct British Muslim identity is constructed mostly along the lines of shared interest in or worries related to Islam. Indeed, the strategy of *intra-group adequation* has been found to correlate strongly with the content category of 'Religion and Islam' ( $r=0.488$ ,  $p=0.000$ ). This subject category includes references to language, concepts, rituals, or clothes connected to Islam. This can be seen in the following tweet, where an interest in the fasting month Ramadan is expressed:
- »y does Ramadan have to come in June when the weather is peng?  
 #WhatBritishMuslimsReallyThink« (T66)
- 24 In this way, the hashtag is used to share distinct experiences with regard to religious activities, concepts, or religious dress. Some of those tweets are coded both for the subject category of »everyday life« as well as »Religion and Islam«, for example in the tweets »Is Pizza Express Chicken really halal?« (T348) or »Does my hijab match my dress?« (T155). This explains the weak yet significant correlation of the strategy of intra-group adequation with the content category of everyday life ( $r=0.179$ ,  $p=0.000$ ).

- 25 Another content category used in the strategy of intra-group adequation was »discrimination«. Here, shared worries about discrimination experienced by British Muslims are shared by Twitter users, as for instance in the following two tweets:
- »Am I going to get harassed because of my hijab? #WhatBritishMuslimsReallyThink« (T88)
- »#WhatBritishMuslimsReallyThink I hope some racist doesn't get me kicked off @easyJet for flying while Muslim in a couple of weeks.« (T223)
- 26 However, the correlation with the content category of »discrimination« is significant to a lesser extend ( $p=0.041$ ) and very weak ( $r=0.093$ ): This indicates that the unification of the identity group of British Muslims might be attempted more via everyday life and religious interests and activities than by referring to a shared worry with regard to being discriminated. Hence, the construction of British Muslims as a distinct »we«-group around the hashtag can be seen as offering Twitter users the possibility for positive identification.

## Illegitimation

- 27 In tweets coded for the strategy of *illegitimation*, negative portrayals and images of British Muslims are contested by questioning their validity or source of authority. With regard to the hashtag #WhatBritishMuslimsReallyThink, the primary source of exclusionary portrayal of British Muslims that is contested is the article »An Inconvenient Truth«, its author, Trevor Phillips, and the media institutions connected to it, such as the Sunday Times. In total, a substantial number of tweets (115) delegitimized one or more of the mentioned sources of authority and their methods. They were devalued and delegitimized primarily by using evaluative language, as can be seen in the following two tweets:
- »After ruining the Equality Human Rights Comm[issio]n, what an Islamophobic wazzock Trevor Phillips turned out to be. #WhatBritishMuslimsReallyThink« (T68)
- »Trevor Phillips, The Sunday Times and Channel 4 (home of Benefits Street) Toxic mix. #WhatBritishMuslimsReallyThink« (T279)
- 28 In addition to directly devaluing media sources, the scientific rigor of the poll presented in the article is questioned. In this way, the claimed scientific integrity of the results is delegitimized.
- 29 Overall, the strategy of illegitimation has been used most frequently in the data analyzed when Twitter users contest negative identity constructions they see as false and as being forced upon them. Thereby, the strategy of illegitimation strongly correlates with the content category of »Discrimination« ( $r=0.558$ ,  $p=0.000$ ). Such a correlation may be expected, as the accentuation of behaviors as discriminating can in itself already be seen as a delegitimizing judgment of said behavior. Similarly, a weak but significant correlation with the content category of »Race and Ethnicity« ( $r=0.102$ ,  $p=0.025$ ) could be shown. Thereby, most references to the content category of »Race and Ethnicity« were references to racism and overlapped with the content category of »Discrimination«. The weak correlation with regard to »Race and Ethnicity« might be due to the small sample size of the category. Furthermore, the correlation between the strategy of illegitimation and the content category of »Media« is significant and medium in strength ( $r=0.334$ ,  $p=0.000$ ). Hence, the statistical calculations support the suggestion that a significant part of tweets that aimed to delegitimize negative identity constructions of British Muslims

realized this by delegitimizing media entities, both those directly connected to the article and other media institutions.

## Denaturalization

- 30 The second strategy that serves to dismantle negative identity constructions of British Muslims is *denaturalization*. In 40 tweets this strategy is applied. The aim is to subvert and dismantle homogenizing and essentializing portrayals of British Muslim identity (cf. Bucholtz and Hall 2005, 602). This is achieved by emphasizing the problematic, fragmented, and socially constructed nature of the identity constructed. In the following tweets, for instance, the argumentation of the article and similar rhetoric are portrayed as false, as the religious identity category is itself deconstructed:

»Ask 3 Muslims a Question get 4 answers (aka we R not a monolith & we disagree all the time) #WhatBritishMuslimsReallyThink« (T296)

»Do people really know everything about what I think just by asking about my religion? Because I don't #WhatBritishMuslimsReallyThink« (T388)

- 31 While in the first tweet the identity group of British Muslims is portrayed as diverse and fragmented, the second tweet questions the reliance on the identity category of »religion« in order to make generalizable statements about people. In addition to denaturalizing identity categories per se, some tweets explicitly questioned the representativeness of the poll sample in terms of the authenticity of the people questioned or otherwise denaturalize the portrayal of British Muslims in the article.
- 32 Last but not least, there are tweets in which the denaturalization of negative identity constructions of British Muslims is achieved implicitly by violating certain expectations, for example:
- »I'm the one that's oppressed, I have to ask my wife for permission to go play football« my friend yesterday #WhatBritishMuslimsReallyThink« (T327)
- 33 Overall, Twitter users applied the strategy of denaturalization, same as illegitimation, mostly with reference to the content category of »Discrimination« ( $r=0.499$ ,  $p=0.000$ ) as well as to the content category of the »Media« ( $r=0.092$ ,  $p=0.043$ ) in order to contest and dismantle identifications of British Muslims by »others«.

## #WhatBritishMuslimsReallyThink: A Contested Space

- 34 While most tweets construct a positive identity position for British Muslims and negate negative portrayals, hashtags can be contested and disrupted by users that do not share the view of the overall »we«-group constructed in the hashtag discourse (cf. Wills 2016, 4). Those tweets aim at goals that are contrary to the ones of the majority of tweets in the hashtag conversation. In the sample analyzed, a minority of 25 tweets (5%) disrupted the overall intention of the hashtag. With regard to the hashtag #WhatBritishMuslimsReallyThink, disrupting tweets challenge the possibility for positive identification with (British) Muslim identity and re-affirm negative and exclusionary portrayals of British Muslims. In this way, the tweets are in line with the argumentation evident in the article »An Inconvenient Truth«, which reproduced the British national identity as necessarily distinct from Muslim identity. In such tweets, Muslim and British identity is actively differentiated and Islam and Muslimness are devaluated and vilified. Moreover, there are tweets that directly delegitimize the use of the hashtag

#WhatBritishMuslimsReallyThink in order to deny the possibility of assimilation present in the tweets and to counter the critique voiced in the hashtag discourse.

## Conclusion

- 35 In the data analyzed for this thesis, a contested and multifaceted portrayal of British national identity as well as British Muslim identity can be witnessed. Both identity categories are constructed and negotiated in relation to each other and via a variety of different elements that determine inclusion or exclusion from either group.
- 36 Overall, the »othering« experienced by British Muslims is disputed. This allows for a positive identification with both the British nation as well as with the distinct »we«-group of British Muslims that was built around the hashtag. Hence, the hashtag discourse can be seen not only as a way to contest and refuse negative portrayals but also as a space for unification and affirmative self-identification for British Muslims. Both the ability to »talk back« and have a voice as well as the process of identifying with an available subject-position are »a necessary condition for any notion of agency and subjectivity to exist« (Yuval-Davis 2011, 14). In this way, such a performative discourse enables marginalized people to negotiate existing and create novel identity positions (cf. Weedon 2004, 154). In conclusion, the hashtag #WhatBritishMuslimsReallyThink has enabled British Muslims to negotiate and resist negative and stereotypical identifications of themselves and was used as an instrument to appropriate and identify with the subject-position of British Muslims.
- 37 In today's discourses on belonging, especially since 9/11 and other attacks that have been represented in a similar light, national identity and belonging is grasped in increasingly conditional terms (cf. Yuval-Davis 2011, 40). Particularly with regard to the way religious and national identities are interrelated in many contemporary nationalist discourses and the rising Islamophobia Muslims in »Western« countries are faced with, such a conditionality and precariousness of belonging may aggravate the experienced disassociation and marginalization. Therefore, it is crucial to investigate discourses that negotiate national and religious belonging and to include not only institutionalized and elite discourses but also everyday constructions of identity and explore the integrative potential of such constructions in future research. This study illuminates the specific ways in which Twitter can be appropriated by socially marginalized people as an opportunity to resist exclusion and to employ strategies of identification that allow for a sense of belonging. Therefore, further investigation of Twitter as a site of religious and national identity construction may shed light on the contested nature of mediated discourses of belonging.

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## NOTES

1. The term Islamophobia refers to unfounded hostility towards Islam. It also refers to the practical consequences of such hostility in discrimination against Muslim individuals and communities, and to the exclusion of Muslims from mainstream political and social affairs (cf. Weedon 2004, 145).
2. According to Foucault, discursive formations are constituted by various discursive events, or rather individual representations or utterances that make up a meaningful unit, which, at the very least, share the same object of reference (cf. Hall 2011, 73).
3. The ephemeral nature of Twitter does not guarantee completeness when data is gathered in hindsight, as »data loosely falls off of the search system within a week of being posted« (Gaffney and Puschmann 2014, 56).
4. On account of the ethical concerns in using Twitter data for research purposes (cf. Pfaffenberger 2016, 117-118), the data used for this study is anonymized. The tweets quoted in

this paper are all taken from the set of 480 original tweets (T1-T480). For further insight into the data please contact the author.

5. I thank Yuvviki Dioh for her work as an inter-rater coder in this project.

## ABSTRACTS

In the discursive construction of intra-national sameness, religious identity is often a key criterion for inclusion or exclusion from the imagined national community. In today's Europe, the boundaries of individual nations are increasingly secured by applying a logic characteristic of Islamophobia and cultural racism. Therefore, the negotiation of Muslim identity and its intersection with the respective national identity category is of particular interest. In this study, the Twitter hashtag #WhatBritishMuslimsReallyThink was examined in order to analyze how members of the British Muslim digital community both construct and reinforce their collective identity as well as employ discursive strategies to negotiate British national identity and their national belonging in the face of exclusionary political rhetoric. Drawing on a corpus of 480 tweets containing the hashtag #WhatBritishMuslimsReallyThink, a mixed-method content analysis approach was employed to analyze the topics and strategies present in the hashtag discourse. Thereby, the issues addressed and the strategies of belonging employed in the Twitter conversation are embedded in a larger public discourse on British national identity and intra-national boundary making. This research investigates Twitter as a site of national and religious identity construction and sheds light on the contested nature of such identity categories.

In der diskursiven Konstruktion intranationaler Gleichheit spielt religiöse Identität oftmals eine entscheidende Rolle für den Einbezug in oder den Ausschluss aus einer imaginierten nationalen Gemeinschaft. Im heutigen Europa werden die ideellen Grenzen von Nationen zunehmend durch eine islamophobe Logik und kulturellen Rassismus gesichert. Daher ist insbesondere die Aushandlung muslimischer Identität und deren Überschneidung mit den jeweiligen nationalen Identitätsvorstellungen von Interesse. In dieser Studie wird der Twitter-Hashtag #WhatBritishMuslimsReallyThink daraufhin untersucht, wie die Mitglieder der digitalen britisch-muslimischen Gemeinschaft sowohl ihre kollektive Identität konstruieren und verfestigen als auch diskursive Strategien nutzen, um britische Identität und ihre nationale Zugehörigkeit angesichts ausschließender politischer Rhetorik auszuhandeln. Basierend auf einem Korpus von 480 Tweets mit dem Hashtag #WhatBritishMuslimsReallyThink wurde eine gemischt-methodische inhaltsanalytische Herangehensweise gewählt, um die Themen und Strategien im Hashtag-Diskurs zu analysieren. Dabei werden die in der Twitter-Diskussion angesprochenen Themen und angewendeten Zugehörigkeitsstrategien in einen breiteren öffentlichen Diskurs um britische Nationalidentität und intranationale Grenzziehung eingebettet. Die Studie untersucht somit Twitter als Plattform für nationale und religiöse Identitätskonstruktion und gibt Aufschluss über den umkämpften Charakter solcher Identitätskategorien.



## INDEX

**Schlüsselwörter:** Nationale Identität, Soziale Medien, Digitale Religion, Muslimische Identität, Diskurs

**Keywords:** National Identity, Social Media, Digital Religion, Muslim Identity, Discourse

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