



Title

Challenging negative stereotypes about Islam/Muslims, one hug at a time. A case study of the “Hug a Muslim” campaign and YouTube as a rhetorical public sphere.

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Abstract

Democracy posits that broadly based participation in deliberative processes will lead to laws and policies that are more inclusive and more just than the measures enacted by monarchs or powerful elites (Hauser 1999:5). Jurgen Habermas (1964) propounded the theoretical concept of the public sphere as a “domain of social life where public opinion is expressed by means of rational public discourse and debate” (Papacharissi, 2013:113). It is on such a platform that democracy is seen in action. Changes in socio-economic structures of states and advancements in communication technologies that have occurred in the last decades have facilitated a transformation in the character of the public spheres. The explosion of new media technologies has made it possible for average consumers to archive, annotate, appropriate, and recirculate media content in powerful new ways, thus fostering a participatory culture (Jenkins et al :2004). This research analyses the extent to which six videos categorized under the banner, “Hug a Muslim” campaign utilize YouTube as a platform for opinion sharing and for promoting public awareness of negative, stereotypical representations of Muslims. Such representations promote mistrust, suspicion, fear and other prejudices that associate Islam and Muslims with discourses of terrorism. Through critical discourse analysis, this research discusses power dynamics and discursive elements underlying the videos in the sample. Applying Gerard Hauser (1998) ’s rhetorical model of the public sphere, this research explores the extent to which online viewer comments accompanying the videos on YouTube adhere to the five rhetorical norms that determine their effectiveness as public sphere discourse, thus helping in establishing whether or not YouTube functions as an effective rhetorical public sphere in the context of the “Hug a Muslim” campaign. This study revealed that 58% of the analysed YouTube viewer comments on the campaign were compatible with the five rhetorical norms and thus reflecting YouTube’s function as a rhetorical public sphere in the context of the “Hug a Muslim” campaign. In an effort to further understand the motivations as well as underlying processes surrounding the creation and sharing of the videos, online questionnaires have been administered to the content producers of the videos under analysis in this research.

1 Introduction

1.1 Background

September 11, 2001, a live news broadcast by CNN, on my TV, reported that America was under attack. While motives and interpretations of the incident are wide and varied among media outlets, scholars, political analysts and terrorists alike, what is significant is that the incident has had some effect on how Islam became perceived in Western society in the years to follow. An article by O’Connor (2016), published in the HuffPost, confirms that many Muslim Americans testified that, September 11, marks the day their religion “went from something others found interesting and mysterious to something viewed as sinister”. The events of 9/11 along with other terrorist incidents perpetrated against America and Europe as well as their citizens and organizations abroad, have fueled suspicion and negativity on how Muslims and Islam are viewed in the West. Subsequently a wider usage of the term and concept, Islamophobia, defined in short by the Runnymede Trust (2017) as “anti-Muslim racism”, became apparent. This does not mean Islamophobia did not exist before September 11, “prejudice against Muslims in Western countries preceded the 9/11 attacks in the United States, but those events and other acts of violence by terrorists since that time have created a climate for increasing anti-Muslim attitudes in many countries”, (Amnesty International, 2012 in Ogan et al 2014). Muslims have been demonized and subjected to discrimination in various ways (Moosavi: 2015: 652).

Linked to the various forms of prejudice and negative stereotypes against Islam and Muslims, a series of diversely inspired user generated videos, shared on YouTube, documented what their creators referred to as, “social experiments”, seeking to find out public perceptions of Muslims, and measuring the level of “trust” that society has in Muslims. Responses in a questionnaire given to these video content producers in this study, defined a social experiment as a study that conducts how a person reacts to a certain scenario; a concept or idea that activates the audience’s mind to challenge their beliefs and a test to see what humans would do during a certain situation.

Categorizing these social experiments under the title, “Hug a Muslim” campaign, this research uses critical discourse analysis (CDA), to analyze discourses present in a sample of six videos, carefully selected from a total population of 59 that, I consider

thematically related to each other and thus characteristic of a campaign. The videos were all posted between the years 2015 and 2017 and set in 17 different countries across America, Europe and Asia. The 100 most recent viewer comments attached to each video (extracted on 26 April 2018), were analysed also, to trace the quality and nature of discussion that the videos elicit. A cross-cutting element in the videos from the entire population is a scenario where a Muslim, (man or woman), stands in a public space with a handwritten placard, asking for a hug as a symbol for the public’s trust for example or the public’s understanding that being Muslim doesn’t mean that one is a terrorist or threat.

My interest in this campaign started when I “stumbled” upon one video on YouTube showing a blindfolded Muslim man being hugged in Stockholm. Interest grew as I became aware that there were similar videos done in other parts of the world. My impression was that the campaign was bold, thought provoking and combining both simplicity (its execution) and complexity (its subject matter).

1.2 Key research Questions

The main questions guiding this research are: How has YouTube been utilized as a platform for countering negative stereotypes through the “Hug a Muslim” campaign? What can critical discourse analysis reveal about the various discourses entrenched in the videos analysed? To what extent can online viewer discussions, opinions and documented comments be said to reflect YouTube as a public sphere in light of Hauser (1998) ’s rhetorical model of the public sphere?

1.3 Research Design

The research design used in this study is a hybrid, combining both empirical research and secondary or desk research. The empirical research component is in the form of questionnaires designed and administered to gather primary data from the six YouTube video producers of the videos under analysis. This was done to help establish motives, as well as “behind-the-scenes” technical and strategic issues related to the creation and publication of the videos under analysis. Secondary or desk research was done through an extensive review of literature that included books, articles, online tutorials and existing research work in the subjects of public sphere theories, online public platforms, as well as the concept of Islamophobia, all aimed to function as a base for better

understanding the context of the videos as well as other underlying issues. As part of the secondary research also, an extensive application of CDA was used in analyzing the visual elements contained in the six sample videos. The analysis of the main research data used in this study, i.e. YouTube videos and comments, can be regarded as *unobtrusive research*¹ in the sense that the researcher takes advantage of already existing data as opposed to conducting some fieldwork to collect data directly from people. This method of research is ideal to me since my current family and work situation make room for worthwhile field work difficult. The challenges of summoning a comprehensive survey population contributed in me opting for desk-based research.

In an effort to broaden perspective, strengthen research and find answers to some central underlying questions that arise when exploring the research’s primary data (videos and comments), I conducted empirical research in the form of online questionnaires sent to the six YouTube channel owners that produced the six videos under analysis. The goal was to find out their motives for making and sharing the videos; what factors they considered in choosing filming locations, in choosing YouTube as a platform for publishing the campaign, in footage they chose to include or edit out of the videos as well as what their experiences and expectations were in doing the campaign, among other questions. These issues will be discussed in detail later in the paper when reporting findings from empirical data.

The research paper’s structure followed here, begins with this introduction section. Following it is the literature review, discussing the concept of Islamophobia in the context of America and Britain, where the majority of videos in this campaign were made. The literature section includes also an examination of YouTube as an online platform and what justifications there might be for launching the “Hug a Muslim” campaign there. After reviewing literature, a discussion of Hauser’s rhetorical model of the public sphere; and critical discourse analysis ensues as foreground to an analysis of the videos and comments of the campaign, this is done in the section on methodology and theory used in the study. This section is followed by the analysis of the research data, which includes videos, viewer comments and empirical findings gathered from content producers, reported and discussed to help paint a broader picture and understanding of the campaign. After the analysis and report of data comes the

¹ More information on unobtrusive research can be found on this link https://youtu.be/Y0_d1QsR04 extracted on 28 April 2018

concluding remarks, followed by recommendations for future research which are presented last.

1.4 Relevance of study to Communication for Development (ComDev)

This research is relevant to ComDev in that it represents how New Information and Communication Technologies (NICT) create possibilities for ordinary consumers to project their voices to a larger audience, something that was otherwise unlikely through traditional media where control of published content is regulated and governed by editorial policies and organizational philosophies. It represents a case of participatory efforts aimed at facilitating a change in human socio-political behavior. While it is difficult to prove that the efforts of the “Hug a Muslim” campaign can lead to social change or behavioral change, it can be implied that the efforts of the campaign are something akin to behavioral change communication (BCC). The study explores challenges of the top-down communication structure and brings to the fore questions on the bottom-up role of micro social relations in framing social structure and social reality. In such a case it outlines a development - from - below approach where exploitative discourses are challenged through grass-roots efforts of ordinary folks. This research explores ways in which communication functions at both personal and global level and how it is applied as a tool and also as a way of expressing processes of social change.

The “Hug a Muslim” Campaign can be viewed as an example of communication in effect within the context of globalization. The research also represents the challenging of ideologies, discourses, power dynamics and stereotypical representations of minorities in society, propagated through mainstream media (news, movies and literature among others). Literature from the ComDev courses that has especially been useful for me in this study include Philips and Jorgensen (2002) and van Dijk (2015), which were both instrumental in outlining the concepts of CDA. Chouliaraki’s (2013) writing on how citizens voices are remediated and intermediated, provided a refreshing perspective on the possibilities and benefits that New media technologies have in elevating the voices of ordinary citizens. Discussions of the public sphere in Fraser (2007) and Habermas (1964) were instrumental in helping formulate the background focus of this paper. Without distinctly naming the specific sections from this paper, other literature that has influenced my understanding of ComDev in general and

undeniably influencing , in the background, my writing or more as bibliography are Manyozo (2012), Martin (2014) and Hemer and Tufte (2012).

1.5 Limitations, weaknesses and strengths of the study

In this section I will discuss some of the limitations that might hinder or challenge this study from fully achieving what it set out to investigate or to attain a, “beyond reasonable doubt” stance in understanding outcomes from representations reflected in the videos. Such limitations include, among others, trustworthiness, viability and reliability of data packaged and represented within the video as well as methods chosen. Texts (including video) are regarded as polysemic, thus carrying multiple and varied meanings. This makes the analysis of the videos very subjective since two different researchers can analyse the same text differently and both being right since there is rarely a wrong interpretation. From that viewpoint, the research can be limited if it can only be appreciated by like-minded readers, at the expense of a wider research community. However, worthy of note is also that my analysis of the texts is not so unstable as to make the texts mean whatever. To avoid this, I have applied codes, justified viewpoints, adhered to analytical conventions of known methods such as CDA, and stayed true to genre of the text while viewing them from their social, cultural, historical, and ideological contexts, thus hopefully broadening the readability and relevance of the study.

- a) *Trustworthiness*: The data (videos), being studied in this research, might be regarded as being limited in as far as it treats the question of trustworthiness. This is apparent when one interrogates the scenario in which this data is collected. By referring to them as social “experiments”, the assumption is that they are scientifically executed to ensure that the most reliable outcomes are produced. This is problematic in situations where video recording takes place under the full awareness of participants. To illustrate this better, one might ask the question, “Would participants who are coming forward to hug the blindfolded Muslim, behave differently if they were not aware that this was being filmed and recorded. While this question is significant to the study, it impacts very little in influencing the study focus-which is how YouTube as a platform inspires people to discuss and engage in line with a rhetorical public sphere.

- b) *Viability*: Due to the magnitude of this campaign on social media and how wide spread it has been done: Is it possible that a totally unexposed target population would act differently to one that has already witnessed this “experiment” taking place in other geographical locations and shared on social media? In other words, could these “experiments” be done without bias and lead to independent results, especially considering that some of the video producers decided to do the “experiment” in their own city after having watched a video of it done somewhere else, could participants also have acted based on what they saw in a similar experiment online? As with point (b) above, the study focus is not impacted greatly by this supposition.
- c) *Reliability of visual data*: Having full editorial autonomy allows content producers and editors to tell the story as they want it, this include moving images around, unchronological, to ensure that the narrative presents a “happy ending”, thus affecting data reliability. In order to ascertain the degree of reliability that this sample data have, questionnaires administered to content producers had the function of giving more information regarding these technical issues. The small size of respondents or low response rate (3 out of 6) to the questionnaires may negatively impact the variety of perspectives presented. A larger survey population that includes other content producers outside the sample but within the population, would have benefited the research tremendously by providing a wider understanding of motives and strategies used by content producers under this campaign.
- d) The strength of the study is in its study focus, which reduces the impact of weaknesses in the reliability, viability and trustworthiness of the sample data. By focusing on the rhetorical functions of YouTube as a public sphere, the research deals more with how people interact more than the reliability, viability and trustworthiness of what they are interacting about.

2. Literature Review and Existing Research

The literature that will be reviewed in this section serves to help provide a holistic understanding of the socio-political context of the “Hug a Muslim” campaign, as well as the network of elements at play. In this section, theories that will be used to interpret the

campaign will be discussed at length. Various literature will be consulted, varying from journal articles, books, reports, other research works as well as video lectures and tutorials. A few notable existing research works have been taken into consideration and their findings are of significance to this study also.

2.1 Islamophobia as discourse.

In the verbal introduction to Video #3 -Toronto, the speaker explains the purpose of doing and sharing this video as wishing, “...to break down barriers and spread awareness about Islamophobia”. The word Islamophobia is often entangled in symbolic political struggles that lack analytical clarity. On the one hand, antiracist Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and liberal scholars use the term to mobilize sentiment against prejudice (Runnymede Trust, 1997). On the other hand, skeptics of various stripes challenge the usefulness of the term and claim that anti-Muslim attitudes and actions are rare (Malik, 2005 in Bleich and Maxwell, 2013). The Runnymede Trust (1997), defines Islamophobia as a set of closed attitudes toward Islam as a religion and toward Muslims as adherents of the Islamic faith (Bleich and Maxwell, 2013:39). According to Moosavi (2015:653), Islamophobia is “about demonizing Islam and/or Muslims by using stereotypes that are often historic such as that Islam/Muslims are violent, barbaric and oppressive [...it] shares the same logic as racism because it essentialises a constructed group of people as having inherent qualities that cast them as inferior”. In some of the videos under analysis, a placard reading, “*I am Muslim, I am not a terrorist, if you trust me hug me*”, was placed next to a Muslim with hands stretched out to receive hugs. This act is a reaction and rejection to these negative Islamophobic discourses that Muslims are presented in public platforms, especially after 9/11 for example, where the word “terrorism” has been cast as synonymous with Islam and calls forth mental images of a Muslim carrying bombs under his outfit or in a bag somewhere. Oxford English Dictionary defines Islamophobia as “intense dislike or fear of Islam, especially as a political force; hostility or prejudice towards Muslims”.

2.2 Islamophobia in Britain and the United States of America.

According to Bleich and Maxwell (2013: 41), in Britain, where two of the six videos under analysis were set, data suggests that Islamophobia is present, and has risen gradually over the past decade by some measures, and they go on to say, “*there is*

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overwhelming evidence that Muslims are considered the most disliked and discriminated group in Britain when compared to other religious groups[...]attitudes toward Muslims are significantly more negative than those toward Jews, who were very low on ethno-racial hierarchies throughout the twentieth century.” Is British Muslims’ extremism a response to extensive Islamophobia in mainstream society? Or is British Islamophobia a reaction to the fact that Muslims in their country are particularly radical? (ibid: 41)

While it is not easy to answer this question, one thing is apparent, that Multiple terrorist attacks by British Muslims throughout the 2000s have heightened fears that Muslims pose a grave security threat. (Ibid).

Findings from research by Ogan et al (2014:40) indicate that *“politically conservatives in the United States, France, Germany and Spain generally saw Muslims in a more negative light than liberals—an indication that perceptions of Muslims... and Islam are likely independent from religious beliefs and instead are driven much more by political viewpoints”*. Further findings from the research revealed that, U.S. journalism was clearly unbalanced in reporting issues related to Islam and Muslims, as a result, *“the U.S. media might have contributed to more negative perceptions of Muslims and Islam among American audiences in 2010”* (ibid: 41)

Be that as it may, despite the hate crimes and crimes against Muslims reported to have increased by 500% in one month alone in the UK in 2017, a UK legislation website (check footnotes) reveals that Islamophobia has been illegal in the UK since 2006 when the New Labor government introduced new laws under the Equality Act² and Race and Religious Hatred Act.³

In a research by the Public Religion Institute (2015), that shows that 62% of Americans have seldom or never conversed with a Muslim, 57% say they know little and 26% say they know nothing about Islam.

According to an Online presentation by the *Islamic Networks Group* (2018), Islamophobes assert that Muslims and Islam are the sole, at least the main, source of terrorism. In the USA, the years 2015 to 2017, a period where apparently most of the

² More information about the Equality Act: UK can be found on this page <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2006/3/contents> extracted 12 April 2018

³More information about the Race and religious hatred Act. UK can be found on this page <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2006/1/contents>: extracted 12 April 2018

“Hug a Muslim” campaigns based in the USA were conducted, an increase in hate crimes against mosques, characterized by vandalism, threats and arson was recorded, an average of 9 Mosques a month, (about two a week) were targeted (Coleman, N (2017)). In the mainstream media, 80% of ABC and CBS networks and 60% of FOX news coverage of Muslims has been negative (ADR, Harvard: 2013). An article by Lee Bowman (2015), reported on research findings that revealed that, while 81% of domestic terrorism suspects are identified as Muslims in national news, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) reports that only 6% of terrorism suspects are Muslims. Given this background and context, the “Hug a Muslim” campaign serves as an alternative voice and a way for these YouTube content producers to speak out that not all Muslims should be viewed as terrorists, because of the actions of a few. This sentiment was expressed by Rambo FYI (Video #2) and Life of Bako, (Video #1) in response to an online questionnaire administered in this study. Rambo FYI and Life of Bako are the two YouTube content producers, that produced two of the “Hug a Muslim” videos under analysis which were set in Britain. While possible motives for the campaign may be to challenge negative stereotypical representations of Muslims and Islam, one would ask, what it is about YouTube that makes it the ideal platform for the content producers to launch their campaign. Questionnaire responses by three content producers revealed reasons such as that “YouTube is the leader in videos”; “it reaches out to the whole world” and “[...] every person can see it”. While YouTube is evidently a platform that many people have access to, both as viewers and as content producers, the question that is central to this study is whether YouTube can be described as a rhetorical public sphere, a space where diverse views can be expressed freely by a diverse public, if so then to what extent does YouTube promote a rhetorical public sphere function.

2.3 YouTube as a Rhetorical Public Sphere

From the nineteenth century coffee houses in Europe and *indabas*⁴ held under Southern African *Muonde* trees; to the editorial columns and comments sections in newspapers- on and offline, humans have created platforms where deliberation, the possibility to express opinions publicly on issues that affect them in one way or another, can take

⁴ *Indabas* are gatherings/meetings where important issues affecting the community are discussed) *Muonde* (Shona word for a Sycamore tree), because of its huge size and the shade it provides, it is a common meeting place for village or other meetings.

place. The internet can be considered compatible with the public sphere in that it allows the possibility of reaching a diverse audience and allow them to create and post content, receive feedback and comments about the content, directly, and respond back (Edgerly et al 2010).

One such platform is YouTube, an internet-based video sharing platform that gives users the possibility to share, view and comment on content at internet speed, serving 88 countries in 76 languages (or 95% of all internet users). Statistics⁵ updated on 24 January 2017, reveal that over 50 million users had created and shared content on YouTube, amounting to over 5 billion shared videos (Omnicores:2018). By 24 January 2018, more than 5 billion YouTube videos were being watched daily with over 30 million daily active users on the platform (ibid.) One of the reasons owed to YouTube’s popularity is that it has a ‘low barrier of entry’ that allows users to produce and publish content easier compared to radio or television that hinder independent individual expression (Hacker & Dijk: 2000 in Edgerly et al: 2010). In other words, a user does not need special permissions to publish their content on YouTube. Unlike with traditional media platforms like TV and newspapers, uploading videos to YouTube means events and commentary can be presented from an ‘insider’ perspective and circulated globally without editorial intervention. (Arthurs, et al: 2018).

Evidently, the technical properties of YouTube promote mass distribution of user generated content and feedback within short timespans, but that alone does not define a public sphere. How does YouTube function as a public sphere in general and a rhetorical public sphere in particular?

Habermas’ (1964) model of the public sphere, defines it as a sphere which mediates between society and state, a vehicle for marshalling public opinion as a political force, and where publicity is supposed to hold officials accountable and assure that the actions of the state express the will of the citizenry (Fraser 2007). In a research on YouTube as a public sphere, Edgerly et al (2010:7), supports the claim that YouTube is a public sphere in that first, it offers a wide range of videos that appeal to a large and diverse audience, second, by granting users the ability to comment on videos, the possibility for

⁵ For a more detailed look at Statistics on YouTube taken from Omnicores.org agency -a social media usage statistics bureau follow this link <https://www.omnicoresagency.com/youtube-statistics/> extracted 16 May 2018

opinion and information sharing emerges. The ‘comments feature’ affords the opportunity to critique and applaud video content or to reply to other comments. Because of emphasizing on a bourgeois public and a platform limited to national boundaries and a national language, Habermas’s (1964) concept of the public sphere fails to incorporate YouTube-with its diversity of audience and its global reach, among other things, as fitting a public sphere description. Hauser (1999:61), however, introduces his discourse centered model, the rhetorical model of the public sphere, defined as "a discursive space in which individuals and groups associate to discuss matters of mutual interest and, where possible, to reach a common judgment about them". If one is to consider that, put together, the six videos selected for analysis in this research attracted about 14 497 comments and were viewed 5 158 068 times, jointly, on YouTube (on the date of extraction), the matters that the “Hug a Muslim” campaign addresses can be viewed as being of ‘mutual interest’ to some individuals or groups. Hauser’s (1998) model puts emphasis on the dialogue rather than the group engaged in it. He explains that rhetorical public spheres are formed by a public that is interested in engaging on a particular issue and thus are characterized by their discourse. The rhetorical model presupposes that active members of society who lack official status may form as publics through their participation in rhetorical encounters that define a public sphere. An active public is important for this model since it is this public who set the terms for true public opinion instead of survey researchers or public spokespersons (Ibid).

Since the rhetorical public sphere puts more emphasis on the discussions rather than on who is doing them, it fits better than Habermas’s (1964) bourgeois centered model in incorporating YouTube as a public sphere in the context of the “Hug a Muslim” campaign, since on YouTube, socio-economic and class identities of participants are undefined. A rhetorical model relies on society's active members rather than survey researchers or public spokespersons to set the terms for public opinion (Hauser (1998:86). What draws this public to the sphere is their interest in what issues are being discussed rather than the demographic make-up of the public. Discussion is initiated by mutual interest in a topic that has some important ambiguity (Hauser 1999:70).

Debates on the nature of a public sphere have touched on what counts as a public to begin with. This research can benefit from a brief scan on what kinds of publics fill up

the YouTube space, and the nature of their behavior. What can be learned about their engagement on this space?

2.4 Trolls, Lurkers and the Active users: a look at online publics

The shrinkage of time and distance brought about by the internet, allows people from diverse cultural, ethnic and religious backgrounds as well as diverse levels of education, income, and ideological perspective, to find themselves together in a digital space. Spaces that can be defined as ‘public’ by virtue of the possible heterogeneity of those who visit (Stromer-Galley 2003). Does reading through comments and posting comments on YouTube define me as a public, in the context of the rhetorical public sphere? Hauser (1999:32) defines public as “the interdependent members of society who hold different opinions about a mutual problem and who seek to influence its resolution through discourse. The composition of audiences and users meeting on YouTube is quite varied, which implies also a strong possibility in their opinions and personalities being varied. Personal experience has showed me that on YouTube, it is not uncommon to read comments that are not much more than a barrage of insults, cursing and outright abuse, commonly referred to as “trolling”. The term “troll”, a common expression used by people who participate in online discussion, refers to people who come to the discussion simply to disrupt it (ibid). In a research on Computer mediated communication and the public sphere, Dahlberg, L (2006), explains that trolling, often done for amusement, is sometimes driven by more ‘serious’ motives including political goals and may have the effect of causing other online participants to decide to be silent or withdraw from discussions, thus damaging online deliberations and threatening its public sphere function. Apart from trolls, another kind of public is identified, the lurkers. In a research by Khan (2017), on what motivates user participation and consumption on YouTube, passive users, also known as lurkers, are said to make up 90% of many online communities and are defined as users who read but do not post messages (or comments). These can be differentiated from the active users who participate actively by posting comments, sharing videos and liking or disliking. As varied as they may be, all these publics engage with the content they are exposed to. In the same study, Khan (2017) defines engagement as involving behavioral aspects or click-based interactions (participation) as well as simple content viewing and reading (consumption). In this sense, ordinary people who place comments on YouTube,

assume the role of active members in society and it is these who set the terms of public opinion as opposed to the “public opinion” that researchers’ surveys or the media refer to. The concept of the rhetorical model, fits well with deliberations that result from active participants commenting on YouTube, in that it “*orients toward the discourses of the people (including, but not privileging, those of their spokespersons) as the barometer of their own opinions and, thereby, emphasizes dialogic characteristics of discourse*”, (Hauser 1998:86).

In a research on diversity of political conversation on the internet, Stromer - Galley (2003) posits two perspectives governing online behavior, *the diversity perspective*- that people from diverse backgrounds converge online to share information and opinions and to argue with one another and *the homophily perspective*- that people come online to find people with shared interests, these can tend to become more radical, due to associations with their like-minded others. The research also reveals that in offline platforms, people tend to associate with like-minded people and when differences in opinions emerge, these are not likely to be expressed so interaction continues with an “*illusion of sameness*”, as a result some who visit internet forums seek to compensate for this restricted possibility of expressing their opinions fully in offline settings, by engaging in online discussions, thus ‘they are able to use the Internet as a channel into public discussion forums they either do not seek or cannot find in their offline lives’(ibid). Consequently, this use of the internet as a platform for discussion on public issues, promotes its function as a rhetorical public sphere.

Having discussed the theme (Islamophobia), the platform (YouTube), the participants (trolls, lurkers and active users), one more important element is the quality of deliberations or the possible outcome of these deliberations done through the rhetorical public sphere. How do we know if YouTube viewer comments on the “Hug a Muslim” campaign, help in projecting YouTube as a public sphere in the context of the rhetorical model? Hauser (1999), identifies five rhetorical norms that can be used to determine the effectiveness of the public sphere under the rhetorical model. These are:

Permeable boundaries, Activity, Contextualized language, Believable appearance and Tolerance. To avoid repetition, these will be explained in more detail and illustrated in the analysis of comments section. My analysis of the comments from the chosen video

samples will be gauged and measured using these five norms to determine their conformity to the rhetorical public sphere model.

Considering the diverse nature of the publics engaging on this platform, opinions would differ, and this is to be expected if a public sphere is to be legitimate, one would argue. Hauser’s (1999) view of the rhetorical space is that, “*productive discussion does not require that its participants reach consensus, though they may [...] People may disagree and still make sense to one another, provided their differences are part of a common projection of possibilities for human relations and actions*”. Given this assertion, value is placed more on the willingness to engage and express one’s opinions, rather than on whether consensus is reached or not. In the videos selected as a sample for this study, online viewer comments to the campaign are a mixture of deep reflective contemplations and outright trolling; negative and positive and as such form elements that are reflective of a rhetorical public sphere.

3. Methodology and Theory

The research is a combination of desk-based research and empirical research conducted in the form of six online questionnaires sent to content producers of the works being analysed. The desk-based component of the research can be characterized as unobtrusive research, since data is collected from existing sources, in this case YouTube videos and comments available online, as opposed to gathering fresh data from fieldwork and subjects. This type of research fitted well with my job and family situation that demanded my constant presence. As part of the desk-based research, CDA is used extensively to analyse the visual data contained in the six sample videos. So, how did this research focus come about? The research topic came through my interest in “social experiments” on YouTube. Through consultations I narrowed down my research focus from dealing with anti-discrimination themed videos (homelessness, disability, religion, racism and so on), to focusing exclusively on anti-Islamophobia, in particular the “Hug a Muslim” campaign, among other similar efforts on YouTube. There exist, for example, diverse campaigns showing videos of Muslims fighting Islamophobia and demystifying it to the public through a range of actions, for example holding placards inviting public members to “Meet a Muslim” or “Come talk to a Muslim” or inviting non-Muslim women to “Try on a hijab”. Though these were highly

interesting interventions, the short timeframe and length of this research, necessitated that I exclude these and only focus on the “Hug a Muslim” sample.

3.1 Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

The “Hug a Muslim” campaign is unique in that it plays both on the social level - how Muslims view themselves and are viewed by others in society, and the political level- legislations, political discourses and legal frameworks that set Muslims apart, for example, the Muslim ban in USA. These features made it ideal for me to use critical discourse analysis (CDA), as an analytical tool for the videos, a discourse analytical research that primarily studies the way social-power abuse and inequality are enacted, reproduced, legitimated, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context. CDA is ideal for this study since the campaign under analysis involves the efforts of individuals in challenging the oppressive discourse and social power abuse and inequality that manifests itself through the creation and maintaining of negative stereotypes of Muslims on some socio-political platforms. This assertion is supported by questionnaire responses identifying negative stereotyping of Muslims in media and Islamophobia as the driving forces in producing and sharing the videos. In CDA, it is claimed that discursive practices contribute to the creation and reproduction of unequal power relations between social groups – for example, between social classes, women and men, ethnic minorities and the majority. These effects are understood as ideological effects (Jorgensen and Philips, 2002: 64). This concept of ideology is thus used to theorize the subjugation of one social group to other social groups.

Critical discourse analysts, take an explicit position and thus want to understand, expose, and ultimately challenge social inequality (Van Dijk (2015 495). Given the interplay between the social and political nature of the “Hug a Muslim” campaign, issues of inequality and power relations become central, thus making CDA ideal as both theory and analytical tool.

The research focus of critical discourse analysis is , accordingly, both the discursive practices which construct representations of the world, social subjects and social relations, including power- relations, and the role that these discursive practices play in furthering the interests of particular social groups (Philips and Jorgensen 2002). In the context of Islamophobia, discursive practices, in the form of political speeches, movies

and other public media have helped construct representations of Muslims/Islam that discriminate and cause negative stereotypes against that community. Mainstream media is, in most cases controlled by, what Van Dijk (2015) termed, the symbolic elites, - members of more powerful social groups and institutions, who have more or less exclusive access to, and control over, one or more types of public discourse, examples of these include politicians. *“If we are able to influence people’s minds – for example, their knowledge, attitudes, or ideologies – we indirectly may control (some of) their actions, as we know from persuasion and manipulation [...] this means that, those groups who control most influential discourse, also have more chances to indirectly control the minds and actions of others”* (Van Dijk 2015:470).

The “Hug a Muslim” campaign is an example of how platforms like YouTube, through their diverse public, wide reach and popularity as well as user friendly formats and terms of usage, can empower, those ordinary consumers who have limited influence on mainstream media to channel and voice their concerns this way instead, as an alternative platform to reach out to an audience.

3.2 The Rhetorical public sphere model as theory

To answer some of the major research questions, Gerard Hauser’s (1998) rhetorical model of the public sphere was applied, to explore the extent to which the model can qualify YouTube as a rhetorical public sphere, using the “Hug a Muslim” campaign as a reference. Unlike Habermas’s classical model of the public sphere that puts focus on a bourgeois public and distinguishes between what issues are classified as private and public to be deliberated on this sphere, Hauser’s rhetoric public sphere is discourse based [and]relinquishes the class-based apparatus associated with the bourgeois public sphere (Hauser 1999:61). The model, through its five rhetoric norms functioned in investigating the quality and nature of YouTube viewer comments attached to the six “Hug a Muslim” campaign videos under analysis and to evaluate the extent to which the comments serve in portraying YouTube as a rhetorical public sphere.

The six videos came with a combined total of 14 497 comments on the date of extraction. Analysing these was meant to help measure how the public engages with these videos and what they think about them. Searching through other research works to

find out best ways of analysing huge amounts of comments on social media, led me to many failed attempts with *SentStrength*⁶, a sentiment analysis program and *TubeKit*⁷ a crawler creation program - both which required coding and programming skills I did not have. *Tube Buddy*, a YouTube extension, was limited in that it extracts only comments made to videos that I would have shared and not anyone else’s. I finally discovered *YouTube Comment Scraper*⁸, which only required a video’s URL to retrieve comments and other information from YouTube. After exporting comments from YouTube using the YouTube Comment Scraper, they were saved as a csv file and later converted to a plain text document. Plain text is compatible with *Nvivo* and *Wordle* that were used for illustration through word clouds and word trees.

Nvivo software allowed me to create word trees and word clouds from the comments, without upgrading to a premium version, but this only served in establishing frequently used words as well as linking words to content. While these were useful in presenting some data from the comments, it did not bring me closer to understanding the quality of these comments and how well they might portray YouTube as a public sphere. Further research led me to learn about Hauser’s (1999) five norms of the rhetorical public sphere. This allowed me to measure the quality and level of engagement in YouTube comments as well as how well they portray YouTube as a rhetorical public sphere according to rhetorical model. Since the comments were still too many to all be analyzed in the time-span of this research, the first 100 most recently posted comments for each video were considered as the sample. These were categorized into four distinct colour-coded groups, as follows:

Yellow: for comments that were written in any language other than English which I could not understand as well as comments that were spam or totally unrelated to the video content, for example:

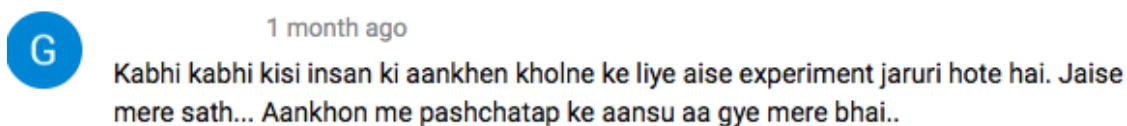


Fig. 1: A screenshot showing an example of a Yellow-coded online viewer comment.

⁶ I While I could install the program, I could not get it to analyse more than one comment at a time, which meant a lot of time would be needed. More information on how Sentistrength functions can be found on this link <http://sentistrength.wlv.ac.uk> extracted 26 April 2018

⁷ The installation was hard for me since it required coding and programming skills I did not have. Information on how to code and use TubeKit can be found on this link <http://tubekit.org> extracted 16 April 2018

⁸ Note that YouTube Comments Scraper does not work on the Safari Browser but needs one to have Firefox or Chrome browsers scraper- a program used for - <http://ytcomments.klostermann.ca/> extracted 03 May 2018

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Orange: for comments that I considered to be trolling, containing a lot of swear words, abuse and insults, without expressing much else, an example is given below.

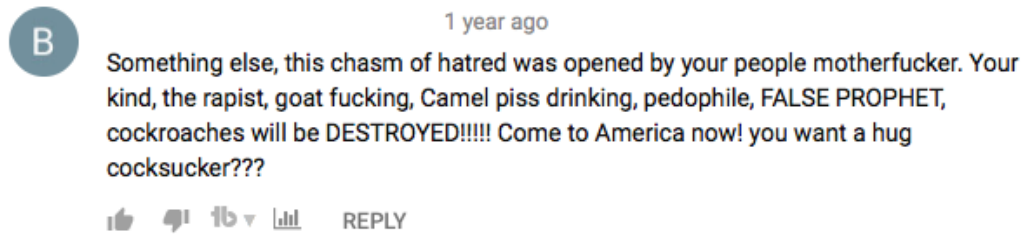


Fig. 2: A screenshot showing an example of an Orange- coded online viewer comment.

Green: for comments that express opinion, promoting discussion and adhere to the norms propounded by Hauser (1999) as characteristic of the rhetorical public sphere, (illustrated below).



Fig. 3: A screenshot showing an example of a Green coded online viewer comment.

Noteworthy is that, some while containing emotional outbursts characterized with cursing or sarcasm, some comments instead of categorized as orange or blue, were counted as green, valid discussions of opinions due to their overall relevance to the issues under discussion, as illustrated below:

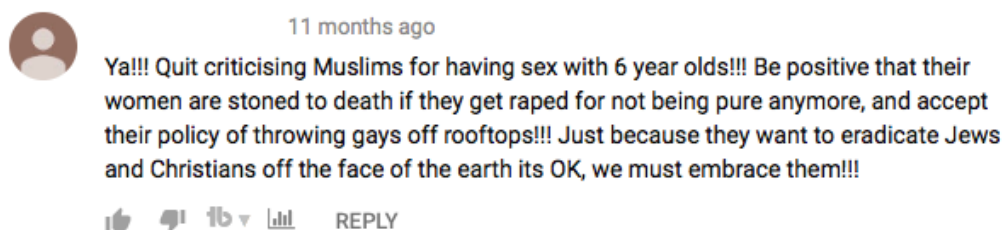


Fig 4: A screenshot showing an example of a Green-coded online viewer comment containing curses and sarcasm.

Blue: comments too brief to consider as discussion for example “nice” or “cute” or a list of emojis and comments that were also sarcastic or jokes or whose meaning was not clear, as illustrated below.

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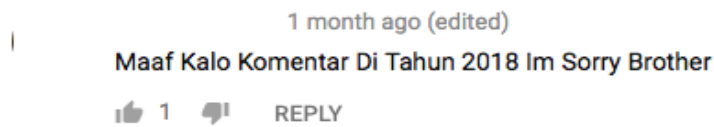


Fig: 5: A screenshot showing an example of a Blue- coded online viewer comment.

A count of the comments in each category would reveal the quality of the discussions and give a picture as to the extent YouTube, through the “Hug a Muslim” campaign, serves as a rhetorical public sphere.

To increase the validity of the research, I incorporated an empirical research method that involved administering online questionnaires to the YouTube channel owners and producers of the six videos under analysis. This was aimed to answer vital questions that sought to validate the motives, reliability and trustworthiness of the video content they had shared. Questions ranged from inquiring what their motives were to inquiring about how exactly they selected their locations and how long the original video footage was, before editing and what choices influenced what was edited out of the videos and what was chosen to stay. It was vital for me to have these questions answered so that I could ascertain how trustworthy this sample was. A complete list of questions on the questionnaire is provided in the Appendices section of this research.

A 50% response rate to the questionnaire was established, that means three of the six questionnaires were responded to, so that is, in a way, a limitation to the study. The data gathered is limited also in that women are under-represented in both the sample of videos selected and the responses to the questionnaires, this was based more on the fact that very few women had YouTube channels in this genre or in carrying out these activities. There might be other ways they have used YouTube to challenge Islamophobia, but in the contexts of the “Hug a Muslim” campaign videos sample, women are under-represented. I sought to increase research validity, by applying different theoretical approaches to different sections of the research, with an aim to use the best suited approach. Hauser’s rhetorical model of the public sphere appeared to be more suited to this study because rather than focusing on the social positions of participants of the public sphere, it focused on the discourse, thus presenting a version of a public sphere that is more inclusive compared to Habermas’ (1964) model. Fraser

(1990) identifies subaltern counter-publics or subaltern public spheres as parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinate social groups invent and circulate counter discourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs. These subaltern public spheres could also have applied well for this research in characterizing YouTube in the context of the “Hug a Muslim” campaign, but Hauser’s (1999) model appeared to be better in that it, through its five rhetorical norms presented me with the theoretical framework to analyse the YouTube comments also.

3.3 Research Sample: Videos and Comments

The “Hug a Muslim” social experiment has been conducted in a wide range of settings across a broad spectrum of geographical locations, but there are some basic elements that are consistent in the majority of the videos published. These basic elements, acting as threads, tie these videos together into a unified genre of content. Examples of such elements include, a person/s identified as Muslim standing in public places with a placard asking for a hug, as a symbol of trust. In a majority of the videos, the Muslim person is blindfolded, and has arms open to receive hugs. On a majority of the placards, a difference between being Muslim and being terrorist is referred to. It is these basic elements that have allowed me to identify and gather videos that would be considered a research population from which to choose my sample. The total population comprised of videos whose title and theme captures these following keywords or variations of them, “*Muslim blind trust social experiment*”, “*Hug a Muslim social experiment*”, “*I am a Muslim, do you trust me?*”, “*Blind Muslim Trust Experiment*” or “*Would you trust a Muslim for a hug?*”. These keywords have also functioned in the gathering of relevant videos through conducting a search on the YouTube search bar. Additional videos were identified through a YouTube function that displays /suggests a list of “related/similar videos” that one could watch, leading to a wider and broader web to select from. A different researcher might have used a different approach and most likely came up with a different population and study sample even, so this research is by no means conclusive and results might vary depending on the sample.

All relevant videos I found were saved in a watchlist on my YouTube profile. Once I discovered that basically every suggestion and search I conducted, brought up videos already on my watchlist, I settled for those 59 “Hug a Muslim” videos as my research

population. The video aggregation according to location was; (Sweden (3 videos); Britain (8); Canada (6); USA (11), India (7); Australia, Germany, Portugal, Spain, Italy and France (2 videos each) and then Norway, Denmark, Finland, Mexico, Japan, and Hong Kong (1 video each). This was followed by a coding mechanism (annexed), where I entered information in an Excel documented capturing the videos’ title, year of publication (the aim being to have a sample that included videos from all the years 2015, 2016 and 2017), geographical location (aimed to avoid including videos set in the same country under the same year, as much as was possible), finally, a video’s uniqueness was considered, that which made it different from the other in the population (to avoid having dozens of videos that showed one hug after another from start to finish, without much to tell them apart). In other words, while variation and difference were considered, the sample did not lose its thread as a genre and its thematic focus.

As with selecting the population, using a different sampling method might result in a different sample. Videos in my sample were separated from the entire population because of variations like, for example, how the placard was placed, for example, on the ground or being held; what clothes the Muslim was wearing (ordinary or religious garments); was the person blindfolded or not; what context was the video recorded in, this included year and setting-for example a “Hug a Muslim” video being done a few days after a terror bombing in the same city, other elements included also roles of culture, and visual effects in the videos. After going through a number of possible analytical methods that included visual ethnography, visual analysis, content analysis and discourse analysis, I settled on using critical discourse analysis as my analytical framework for the videos, mainly because it incorporates elements that I could relate to immediately when watching the videos. Critical discourse analysis is a discourse analytical approach that primarily studies the way social-power abuse and inequality are enacted, reproduced, legitimated, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context (Van Dijk, 2015:495). One has to consider also that the word “text” here encompasses written texts, images and video. CDA’s focus on power relations and inequalities and the way these are reproduced, legitimated (via mainstream media and political platforms, for example) as well as how they are resisted by text (these videos, for example), seemed to align well with motivations collected from the content

producers in the questionnaires, as their justification for producing and sharing their videos.

Online questionnaires were administered as a way to help the research give a better understanding of the contexts and issues at play behind the “Hug a Muslim” campaign. This empirical data served as an opportunity for the reader to understand the campaign from the perspectives of the content producers. Of the six questionnaires sent, only three were responded to, which is a limitation to the range and variety of responses.

4. Analysis of the data

One controversial issue related to any analysis of texts, whether as images, visual, written or verbal is that there is no fixed interpretation or method that allows different analysts from analyzing the same text in exactly the same way and get the same results. Texts are polysemic—they have multiple and varied meanings. However, this semantic instability does not mean that readers can make a text mean whatever they wish it to mean. Meaning is derived from the codes, conventions, and genre of the text and its social, cultural, historical, and ideological context—which can work together to convey a preferred reading of the text (Pälli et al 2010). It is through this perspective that I present my analysis of the six videos posted on YouTube on different channels but portraying a similar theme, that of countering Islamophobia through staging the “Hug a Muslim” campaign.

Analysing the “Hug a Muslim” videos

Analysis of the six “Hug a Muslim” campaign videos was conducted through the analytical framework of CDA. While acknowledging that reference to the “public” is two-fold, since there exists both an offline public - those that were physically witnessing or participating in the events as they unfolded and an online public – those watching the filmed and edited version on YouTube, my analysis will focus exclusively on the online public, of which I am a part of. To allow for easier, unrepentive and systematic analysis of the six videos, various discursive elements that were common across all the videos were identified and analysed under one heading. Other elements

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that are unique to specific videos and thus deserve separate analysis are treated accordingly and analysed separately.

Video Code	Location	Video Length	Title (hyperlinked)	Date Published	Name of Channel	Total times viewed (by 22 Feb 2018)	Total Comments (by 28 April 2018)
# 1	Manchester-Britain	14.50	I'm Muslim & I trust you. Do you trust me enough for a hug? Manchester	27 May 2017	The Life of Bako	917 277	7 320
# 2	London-Britain	02.39	I am Muslim. I want to spread Love & Peace	23 Nov. 2015	Rambo FYI	63 473	294
# 3	Toronto - Canada	02.57	Blind Trust Project	31 Jan. 2015	AsoOmii Jay	2 767 983	2 427
# 4	India (Undefined city)	06.18	No one wants to hug a Muslim- Social Experiment-Independence Day special India	15- Aug. 2016	Frank Pranks	824 209	2 713
# 5	Montreal-Canada	07.29	Would you trust a blind Muslim for a hug? (social experiment)	08 Jan. 2017	MTLCIN EMA	8 666	20
# 6	New York-USA	05.35	I'm Muslim. trust me? Experiment in Trump Tower	01 May 2017	Sarujen Sivakumar	576 460	1 708

Table 1: Showing the Log of Videos under analysis

4.1.1 “Hug” and “Trust” as discourse.

The “Hug a Muslim” campaign involves hugging a Muslim person to show trust and, as acknowledgement, in some cases, that being Muslim does not mean one is a terrorist. But, what is the significance of a hug and why has this campaign used a hug as an iconic symbol apart from other actions. The Cambridge Oxford online dictionary (2018), defines a hug as “to hold someone close to your body with your arms, usually to show that you like, love, or value them”.

Like most discursive practices, hugging is understood differently in different social, historical and cultural contexts. According to Fairclough and Wodak (1997) in (Philips and Jorgensen (2010), discourse constitutes society and culture. In some cultures where close body contact is restricted between different individuals, hugging might not be regarded as it does in cultures that are contrary. A good example is in the context of India, where Video # 4 was done. Passersby stop or turn to read the placard that asks for hugs and they walk away without hugging, this happens in, at least, the first 27 cases

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shown or 2:04 minutes (a third of the video’s length). While this can undoubtedly be a video editing gimmick of beginning the video with no hugs and then ending with a lot of hugs, (as was revealed in data collected from questionnaires in this study), some online viewer comments expressed that hugging strangers in India is uncommon and governed by such boundaries as age, gender, class and relationship.

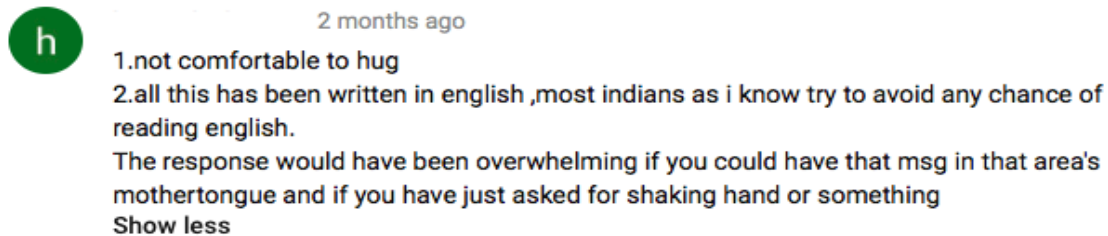


Figure 5: A screenshot of a comment made by one of the viewers of the Video #4, "Hug a Muslim" campaign in India.

Several viewer comments, like the one above, in addition to stressing the important role of local culture and language, suggest that handshaking would have worked better, and rightfully so, those in the video who showed their support, either only shook the hand, patted on the shoulder or first shook hands and then gave a hug that looked more like a slight knocking of shoulders. In the Western setting, where five of the six videos under analysis are produced, while hugging is a closer and more affectionate form of greeting, than is handshaking, it also has its place as a display of empathy and/or gratitude (Forsell and Åström, 1993).

In USA, 21 January is officially a national hugging day, an annual holiday to promote more public performance of emotion among people. Kevin Zaborney, who created the day, had a belief based on his own observations that one positive effect of hugging was the facilitation of human communication. Hugging people produces an impression of friendship and openness, which sometimes maybe reciprocated by more controlled individuals. These effects may be “*further enhanced if combined with a smile and verbal greetings [...] after the encounter, thoughts of the hugging may stimulate and put the individual in a more positive mood*”. (Ibid:5). In other words, while being hugged can make someone feel good, the one hugging feels good from it also.

A hug has been used symbolically and has functioned as a discourse in the “Hug a Muslim” campaign. Apart from it being used to symbolize national identity in Video # 4, as is evidenced by the Indian man’s placard reading, “*I am a Muslim. This does not*

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mean that I'm a terrorist holding a bomb...I am true Indian just like you... If you think the same! Hug me”, or to symbolize humanity as in the case of Video # 5 where the placard reads, *“I am Muslim, I am human, hug me if you agree”,* it has been used to symbolize trust, as in the case of Video #1, Video #3 and Video #6.

The messages of the placards are written in direct speech, meaning they directly address the reader as if engaged in conversation. The title of Video #1 reads, *“I'm Muslim and I trust you”*. This declaration sets a platform where the producer has offered his identity and his feelings towards the reader. The Cambridge online dictionary (2018), defines “Trust”, as to believe that someone is good and honest and will not harm you, or that something is safe and reliable. In cases where the placard poses a question to the viewer, as in Video # 1 *“Do you trust me enough for a hug?”*; Video #3 *-Do you trust me? -Give me a hug*, Video #5 *Would you trust a blind Muslim for a hug? Or Video #6 Do you trust me? If so...Hug me!*”, the discourse of “trust” is at the centre of the campaign.

When the young Muslim man in video#1, whom I will refer to from here onwards as Bako, (since his channel is called “Life of Bako”), stands blindfolded in Manchester less than a week after a terrorist bombing that was described in the media as “devastating”, carrying a placard that identifies him as Muslim- just as the bomber was identified in the news as Muslim, the discourse of trust is challenged. For Bako, like the other blindfolded Muslims in the other videos, to stand there blindfolded, is to exercise trust in the passersby, that none will harm them, similarly by identifying themselves as Muslim they ask the passersby to exercise their trust in Muslims, trust symbolized by hugging the Muslims. To “trust” a Muslim, using the dictionary definition, means to believe that s/he is good and honest and will not harm other members of society. Ogan et al (2014:20) refer to an analysis by Charles Kurzman on “acts of terrorism” that reveals that fewer than one percent of Muslims around the world have been involved in any militant movement in the last 25 years (2011). *“U.S. respondents who paid more attention to the media[...]were more likely to think that Islam is a religion of violence, and that Muslims should not have the same rights as other religious groups”* (Ogan et al 2014 :41).

In their response to a question on what they felt was the toughest thing while doing the experiment, Bako replied, “being in the open, exposed to any sort of hate or harm”.

Angel, from Video #4 , who got his placard ripped apart from his chest by an aggressive

passerby, identifies that as the toughest moment for him, as was summing up the courage to repair the placard and go back on the streets as he did. Goffman (1983: 4), explains;

“once in one another's immediate presence, individuals will necessarily be faced with personal-territory contingencies. By definition, we can participate in social situations only if we bring our bodies and their accoutrements along with us, and this equipment is vulnerable by virtue of the instrumentalities that others bring along with their bodies... We become vulnerable to physical assault, sexual molestation, kidnapping, robbery and obstruction of movement” This vulnerability comes also through others’ words and gestures”.

Which Power dynamics are at play, can be viewed from many angles depending on whose perspective that is. One perspective can be that the Muslim standing and asking for hugs and trust, assumes the position of vulnerability- physically (being blindfolded and open to assault) and emotionally (being blindfolded and anticipating a hug to dispel a feeling of being held in suspicion within this society. Another perspective of power in use can be when one takes the claim made in Video # 1, in a closing speech, that media’s power reflects in its coverage of terror incidents that tend to promote negative stereotypes that result in an entire community getting blamed for the actions of one individual. This view point supports a power shift where Muslims risk being regarded as a threat, not as victims, as in the former case, thus in such a scenario, the passersby assume the role of open and exposed citizens vulnerable to terror attacks. As a result, the discourses of trust in the video are related also to these power dynamics, the shifting roles of ‘the victim’ and ‘the threat’ as well as the conflicting representations of Muslims in formal political spaces and mainstream media against representations in alternative media platforms and user generated content like YouTube and the “Hug a Muslim” campaign respectively.

4.1.2 The Placard: In the videos, each Muslim has a placard, mostly, a cut out cardboard box sheet written with markers. It is from these, that the public makes sense of what is taking place and are informed of the event’s function and significance, the placard thus becomes a shared discursive element. Hand written cardboard signs, when viewed as discourse, can bear a socio-cultural significance. The material might suggest

low cost, immediacy and easily disposable, but also rigid to not fold against wind. Handwritten cardboard signs could be viewed as the individual’s own version of a street ad. A classic example that one could view as cultural, if not universal, is how homeless people, beggars or other needy individuals might use handwritten cardboard signs to inform passersby of their need. In such a discursive situation, the sign might be viewed as a platform in itself. Van Dijk (2015), speaks of mental models as, the mental images that one associates with specific discourses by virtue of one being a member of the same epistemic community, a community that attaches the same understandings to different phenomena or shares the same social codes. An assumption can be that a handwritten cardboard sign might, to a passerby, suggest mental models that point to the beholder of the sign as being in need of some form of assistance.

The placards used had, in several cases, specific words written in different ink colour, usually red, possibly as a way of highlighting and emphasizing specific words. Example of such emphasized words include ‘Muslim’, ‘hug’, ‘trust’ or ‘terrorist’. Another form of emphasis used is using bold or uppercase letters. Across the range of video samples, the placards are positioned differently at the location of the experiment, for example, having it worn around the neck, holding it across the chest, placing it on the ground or, when they are two, placing them on the ground on either side of the focus person (the Muslim).

4.1.3 Demography of participants: Across the videos, different people, in regard to gender, physical ability, age, race and religion among other categories were seen hugging the Muslims in focus. Responding on how they chose what to edit out or what to include in the final video shared on YouTube, one questionnaire respondent gave the reason that the main aim during the editing, was to get as much footage showing people with different skin colours, different religions, different heights, different sizes, different ages and so on. This would show that it's not a single community that has faith in him but people from all sorts of backgrounds and circumstances. Another variation included arranging the video so that not one demographic group would be overrepresented, for example limiting scenes showing the 18-30 age group, which made up the majority captured in the original recording, (Video # 2). Questionnaire results revealed also that hugs in the videos were also strategically placed, ensuring that a video would have a “happy ending”, characterized by plenty of hugs towards the end. Original

footage that was edited out showed passersby ignoring. One producer pointed out that the aim was to create a video that was positive and hopeful. To some degree, this distortion can be seen as a manipulation of the perceptions of the online public. When “discursive control over the mental models of recipients is in the best interests of the speakers or writers and against the best interests of the recipients, we have an instance of discursive power abuse usually called manipulation” (van Dijk 2006 in Van Dijk 2015).

4.1.4 What’s in a title?

Approximately 20% of users on YouTube, will leave a video if it hasn’t hooked them in the first 10 seconds (Omnicores:2018). Part of the attraction of a video comes in its title. The titles for videos under analyses show varied strategies of engaging with and capturing audience attention, such as posing questions, using uppercase letters or thought-provoking statements. Three of the video titles are written in the form of a question, asking if the viewer trusts a Muslim. The linguistic function of a question is to engage with the subject and invite feedback.

The title of Video # 1: *I’m Muslim, trust me? Experiment in Trump Tower*: The discourse associated with the phrase, “I’m a Muslim, trust me?”, is an appeal for trust and at the same time a question on whether one can bring themselves to trust a Muslim, given the stereotypical representations Muslims have been subjected to in the media as well as discourses of violence, barbarism and oppression (Moosavi: 2015), that Islam is attributed to in the media. The second half of the title says, “*Experiment in Trump Tower*”, Van Dijk (2015: 472) refers to mental models as the subjective representation of the events, action, or situation that a discourse is about. In other words, if one hears the word “bomb”, the mental models one has are images of explosions, rubble, death, or a loud “boom!”, for example. The words, “Trump” and “Trump Tower”, are also forms of discourse. I attribute to them mental models of “mistrust/ suspicion in-”, dislike and hatred of- Muslims and Islam. The title of the video bids the audience to watch, as if expecting to see what happens when this protesting Muslim man enters Trump Tower. The video has been watched more than half a million times and gathered more than one and a half thousand comments, on the day of extraction.

4.1.5 Appearances

In Videos # 5 and # 6, the Muslim man wears a Muslim religious outfit. In Video # 1, Video # 3, Video # 5 and Video # 6, the Muslims in focus were blindfolded, which can be taken to signify a show of trust in the passersby, in exchange for a hug as a return of trust. Wearing a religious outfit and having a blindfold could also be taken to mean unanimity, “facelessness”, an unidentified “one” or “collectivity”-like a uniform perhaps standing as an embodiment of a Muslim community instead of as an individual. On the placards, the Muslim in focus is identified as “Muslim” and not by name, thus signifying community. These symbolisms displaying the fluidity of boundaries between individual and community, provoke questions on the extent to which the actions of the individual can be assigned to the good or ill of the community. In Video # 1, Bako addresses passersby verbally speaking against letting the actions of one person/ bomber represent an entire community. Can it be considered ironic that the “Hug a Muslim” campaign, while standing against taking one Muslim extremist’s action of terror as representing the whole community, takes the peaceful actions of one “blindfolded hugger” as representing trust and affection of the whole community? Or rather can this be viewed as a double-edged ideology that can function for good or ill?

The arms- wide -open posture assumed by the Muslim in Video #1 as he anticipates hugs, with shoulders out-stretched, broad and his chest lifted, is a posture that signifies control and confidence, a “welcome”, to those that will hug. Similar religious images of Jesus (*Fig. 7 below*), including the stature in Rio da Janeiro exude the great power of the man who conquered discrimination, hate and even death, and through that, stands with arms wide open, not as a victim, but a savior - not for himself but as representative of all mankind, according to Christianity.

The same symbolism can be applied for this young Muslim man in a similar pose, the hugs being received by him (and given to him) are not for himself but are symbolic representations of “trust” of Muslims in this society.



Fig 7: Symbolic power of the religious image and posture of arms stretched. Photo: (Left) Video 6, screenshot, (middle) Jesus image: The Kingdom of God is within you: Greg Olsen. (Right) Christ the redeemer statue- Rio da Janeiro: Vignette

4.1.6 Visual Effects

The videos use various visual effects designed to appeal to the online viewers and engage with them, perhaps to insure they like the video or that the message gets across. These effects include the use of background music; making personal speeches that directly address the viewing audience; the use of online text or subtitles as well as embedding borrowed media content from other platforms, for example, screenshots of newspaper headlines; politicians making speeches; or clips of Tv news bulletins being read. Background music, while enhancing the viewer experience can also impact on mood and emotion. In Video #2, a pop song is heard playing in the background, “See you again” by Wiz Khalifa which speaks about showing true colors which is also in line with the verbal introduction given with the video on how the experiment is meant to see London’s true colours on the question of segregation of minorities. Pop culture, according to Jenkins (2016), offers shared references and resources participants use to help frame their messages and provides platforms through which they can stage their hopes and fears about the world and thus start to exercise the civic imagination. *“Popular culture performs bonding functions within the group and also bridging functions toward a broader public and facilitates shared affective investments that bond members together.”* (Ibid)

By using a slow slideshow of compact informative text written across the screen, Video #1, allows the reader to read, follow, wonder and at the end, reflect on the message, calmly and without rush. It is not unreasonable to assume that by having the viewers

read the message for themselves compared to having someone say it out, the viewer might engage more with the words and allow them room in his/her psyche.

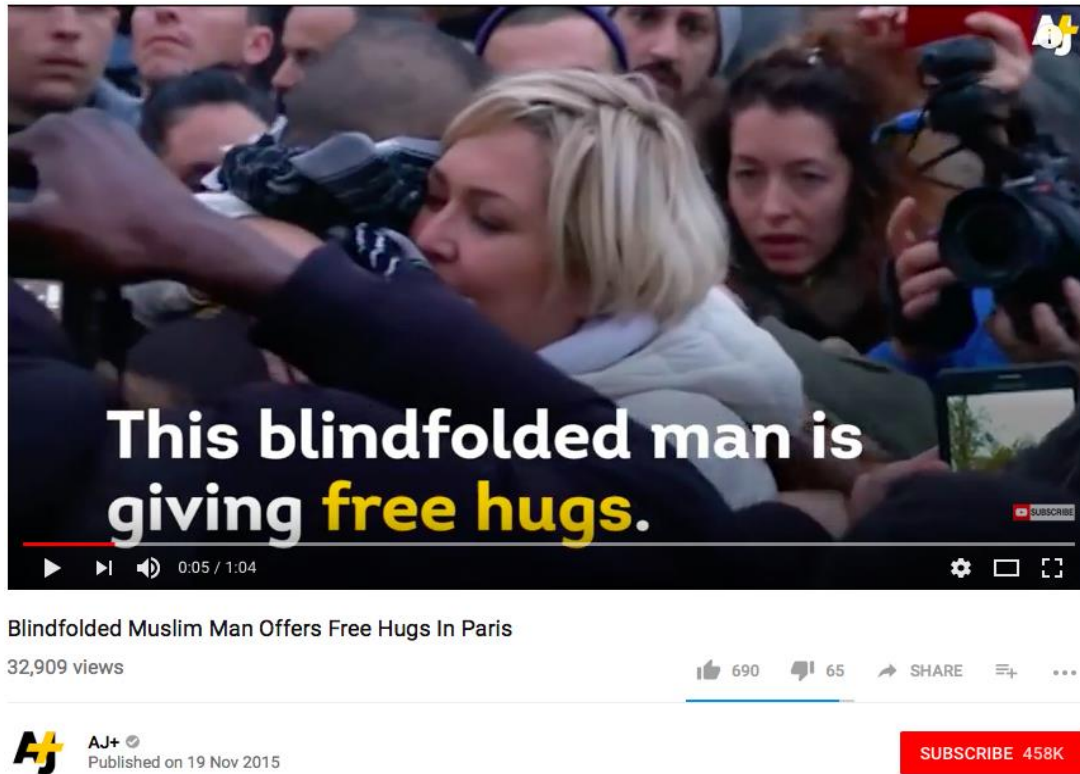
Embedded in the video are short news clips from top news agencies, Abc world news, BBC, Fox News and Al Jazeera, giving different information about the Manchester bombing as well as newspaper headlines about increase in hate crimes and assaults on Muslims and their Mosques in Britain. These effects, together with other examples such as introductory speeches, serve to provide context and guide and engage with the viewer. In such instances, the producer is exercising power aimed at influencing the viewers. According to van Dijk (2015) Controlling the communicative situation involves control over discourses and discourse genres attached to it. For example, just as a professor assumes control over students in a lecture room, the video producer in this context uses various discourses and visual elements to exert his influence on the audience and achieve a desirable outcome. *“If we are able to influence people’s minds – for example, their knowledge, attitudes, or ideologies – we indirectly may control (some of) their actions, as we know from persuasion and manipulation [...]this means that those groups who control most influential discourse also have more chances to indirectly control the minds and actions of others.* (van Dijk 2015:470)

4.1.7 The concepts of Re-mediation and Inter-mediation

Chouliaraki (2013), introduced the concept of the three dimensions of mediation, two of these can be applied here as illustration. On almost all the videos in the sample, people witnessing, can be seen taking photos of the Muslim, of other people hugging, or in some cases, getting pictures taken or selfies with the Muslim in focus. In Video # 1, mediated screenshots of an Instagram shared photo capturing scenes of the campaign, are displayed in the video. This becomes a next level of reach for the campaign as it crosses platforms. A similar video⁹, not included in this sample, of a Muslim man in Paris, with a placard *“I am a Muslim and they’re saying I am a terrorist. I trust you. And you, do you trust me? If yes, hug me.”*, is re-mediated into three news channels, NBC Nightly, Ruptly TV and Al -Jazeera (refer to Fig. 8 & 9 below).

⁹ The News agency videos of Paris Muslim hugging mourners can be found on the following links **Al-Jazeera news agency** <https://youtu.be/8p9qebOcl4U> **NBC Nightly News** https://youtu.be/iw9LScAs_v8 and on **Ruptly video channel** <https://youtu.be/q2UcAlfJgUU>

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*Fig. 8 (above) – Al-Jazeera and Fig. 9 (below) – NBC News
Are Both screenshots illustrating how the “Hug a Muslim” campaign became
inter-mediated and picked up by big news agencies*



Chouliaraki (2013) refers to this as re-mediation when ordinary voices are projected through communicative platforms onto major news networks such as those named above.

When Al-Jazeera, in their coverage of the footage of the “Hug a Muslim” campaign showed also screenshots of tweets and comments from online publics about the incident, that becomes inter-mediation. This context illustrates the potential magnitude and reach that events happening offline have, once mediated onto online platforms. In the questionnaire responses of the study, it was revealed that Video # 1 was re-mediated onto a news bulletin in Australia.

4.2 Empirical Data: Responses from the online questionnaires

In this section I will summarize, in bullet form, some of the responses that were submitted, that have not by now been referred to already elsewhere in this paper.

- In explaining **how they choose what issues to experiment on**, responses included choosing issues that affect one personally most; issues that support the positive movement of the Islamic religion as much as possible and issues that create a positive message while testing how people respond.
- Respondents had between 1 and 3 years’ **experience of doing and sharing social experiment** videos on YouTube
- In justifying why using **social experiments as a means** to put their message across, respondents remarked that, it is pointless to write messages on social media platforms like Facebook, since it becomes a back and forth conversation that will never end, instead, a social experiment, if done correctly can get the message across efficiently. It gives the audience an option instead of pushing it in their face and forcing people to listen.



Fig. 10: A word cloud showing respondents’ description of social experiment



Fig. 12: A word cloud illustrating the offline public's reactions to the campaign.

- In regard to **deciding which location to stage the experiment**, one response was that the place was central and every single person from every different type of background walks through there, thus ideal for long filming. Another replied it was the closest spot to the parking lot they had found downtown. In Manchester where a bombing had just happened four days earlier, the location of the experiment was at St Ann's Square where people were laying down flowers, also a location the respondent had shot previous videos before. According to the respondent, the impact the video had had was dependent on the location, doing this video somewhere else would not have had the same effect.
- The **cameraman was not hidden** from the offline public, so people can know it's being recorded and might be shared- some who requested to not be filmed got their wish.
- Original **recorded footage before editing** ranged from 40 minutes to as much as 6 hours.
- On whether they had ever personally **witnessed any discrimination against Muslims** /a Muslim: one response was that he'd been called many negative things throughout his life, been in a football team where people have referred to him as 'Muzzy' and 'Turbanator' so yeah, it happens all the time.



Fig. 13: A word cloud illustration showing how respondents would personally describe the results of the campaign.

- On answering the extent to which they would say **Islamophobia is part of today’s society** where they live: One respondent stated, it exists of course, not so much in London where he lives , but places like Liverpool, Newcastle, Kent - it definitely exists on a larger scale also in other places in England or America, Islamophobia exists behind bars, people that may come across as normal beings with no hate or bad intent may actually have some parts to them that they only discuss with like-minded people or keep to themselves. This sentiment echoes what Stromer-Galley (2003), termed the “*illusion of sameness*” explained earlier which denotes that in their offline interactions with like-minded people, most people either avoid controversial discussions or are quick to damp it down and create this” illusion”, not willing to let other people know their full opinions, especially if they are contrary to each other.
- **Final comments about Islamophobia:** It should be stopped; not all Muslims are bad! It will never go away - some people are too easily offended, and others offend people without thinking what they're saying - Islamophobia isn't just a thought – it’s a belief put in place by the media - until the media stop pushing hate towards Islam - it won't go away. This stance is echoed in the research by Ogan et al (2014), who conclude that since negative stereotypical views about Muslims and Islam “are not openly admitted in the media or elsewhere,

deconstructing and then exposing the roots of Islamophobic ideas will not be easy”. Another responded that, if people educated their children better about the world, if people hung out with positive, like-minded people that understand that we are all human beings, then the world would be a better place today.

4.3 Analysis of Online comments

The analysis of the comments has been done principally using Hauser’s (1999) five rhetorical norms that measure and determine the effectiveness of YouTube as a public sphere under the rhetorical model. When evident and applicable in a given platform, the five norms: *permeable boundaries*, *activity*, *contextualized language*, *believable appearances* and *tolerance*, are significant in measuring whether the platform functions as a public sphere, in adherence to the rhetorical model. The 100 most recent viewer comments on each video (extracted on 26 April 2018), were collected for analysis and a colour coded categorization conducted. The comments classified as green adhere to the five rhetorical norms propounded by Hauser and these are explained in detail below and illustrated using screenshots of viewer comments taken from comments sample gathered for this study. Profile names and photos have been erased for identity security. Other categories: orange, blue and yellow are documented also to show the nature of other comments that were not compatible with the rhetorical norms and are thus, because of their nature, a drawback to the argument of YouTube functioning as a

Video log	Green: consistent with Rhetorical model of Public sphere	Orange: Trolling, insults, verbal abuse, and vulgar language	Blue: vague, indistinct unclear, sarcasm, jokes and puns	Yellow: Spam , foreign language or content unrelated to videos
#1. Manchester	64	0	34	2
#2. London	65	12	20	3
#3. Toronto	59	7	23	11
#4. India (unnamed city)	45	1	20	34
#5. Montreal **	12	1	4	3
#6. New York	58	8	30	4
Total	303	29	131	57

Table showing the most recent 100 comments of the six videos categorised according to their nature. Extracted 26 April 2018.

** Video # 5 Montreal only had 20 comments in total on the date of extraction.

rhetorical public sphere in the context of the “Hug a Muslim” campaign. The result of this analysis showed that 303 out of 520 (58%) comments, were compatible with the five rhetorical norms and thus reflect YouTube’s function as a rhetorical public sphere in the context of the “Hug a Muslim” campaign.

4.3.1 Hauser’s Five Rhetorical Norms.

A workable democracy requires that we trust our neighbours to be reasonable and fair when given a chance (Hauser 1999: 1). This can be reflected in the comments and considerations shown during deliberations at public platforms. The comments that were colour-coded green, in my categorization of the 100 most recent comments for each video, are taken to be in compliance with five norms of the rhetorical model of the public sphere. Below is an outline of the five norms together with an illustration of screenshot of some of the comments found in the sample. These examples are meant to function as illustrations for each of the norms.

1. **Permeable boundaries:** This implies that instead of shutting out unlike-minded people from a discussion, it should be possible for virtually anyone to participate in order for issues to be resolvable. Discussions should incorporate diverse observers who show unique perspectives.

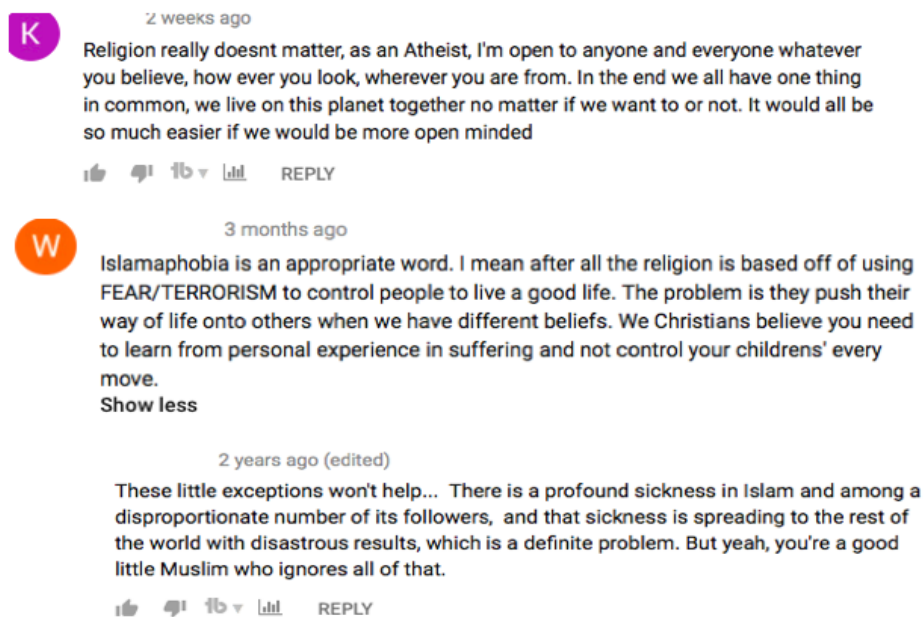


Fig.14 shows A screenshot showing examples of YouTube viewer comments regarded as illustrating the rhetorical norm of Permeable boundaries.

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- 2. Activity:** An active public that expresses diverse view points and opinions freely rather than a passive one that is only there to applaud and be asked to buy things should make up the rhetorical public. “An active society hears and speaks to manifold interest that converge on any issue.” (Ibid:71)



Fig.15: A screenshot showing examples of YouTube viewer comments regarded as illustrating the rhetorical norm of Activity

- 3. Contextualized language:** A well-functioning public sphere requires that its discursive arenas contextualize public problems in ways that foster clear apprehension of the issues. (Ibid71) If the language is contextualized, participants can relate better to each other and understand one another’s experiences.
- 4. Believable appearance:** To the outside public as well as participants within, this sphere should be seen as believable. For social actors, Believability is essential to establishing an awareness of themselves as a public and an understanding of their potential as social actors. (ibid)

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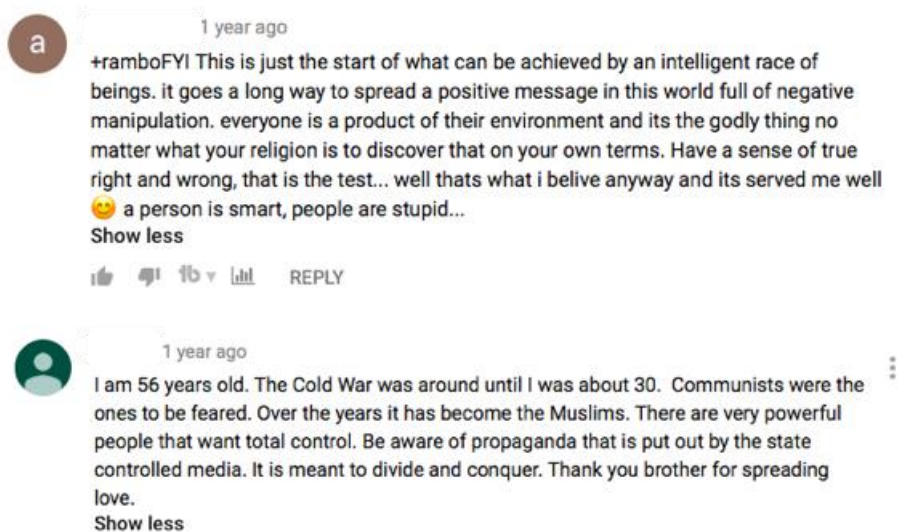


Fig. 16: A screenshot showing examples of YouTube viewer comments regarded as illustrating the rhetorical norm of Contextualized language.

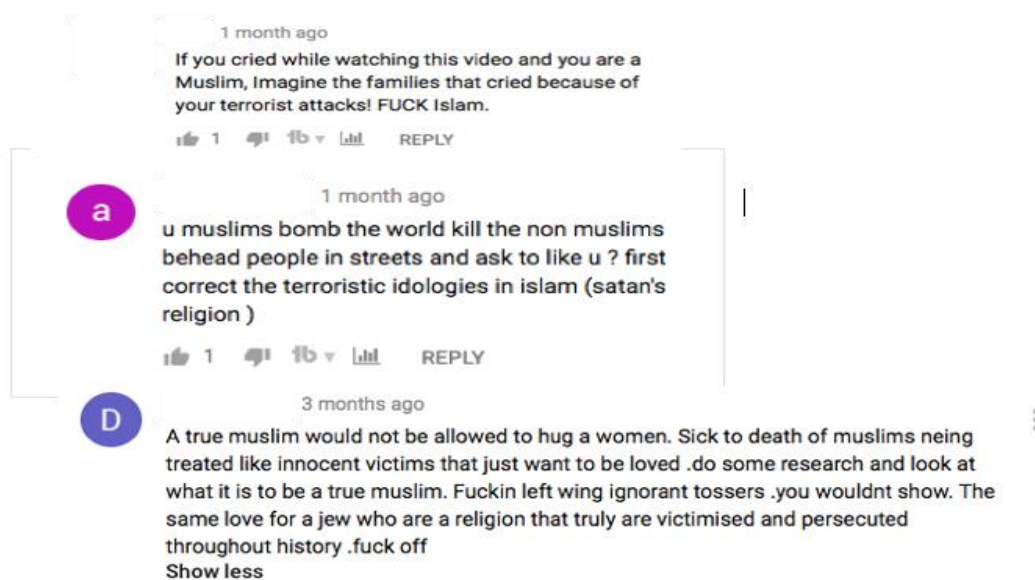
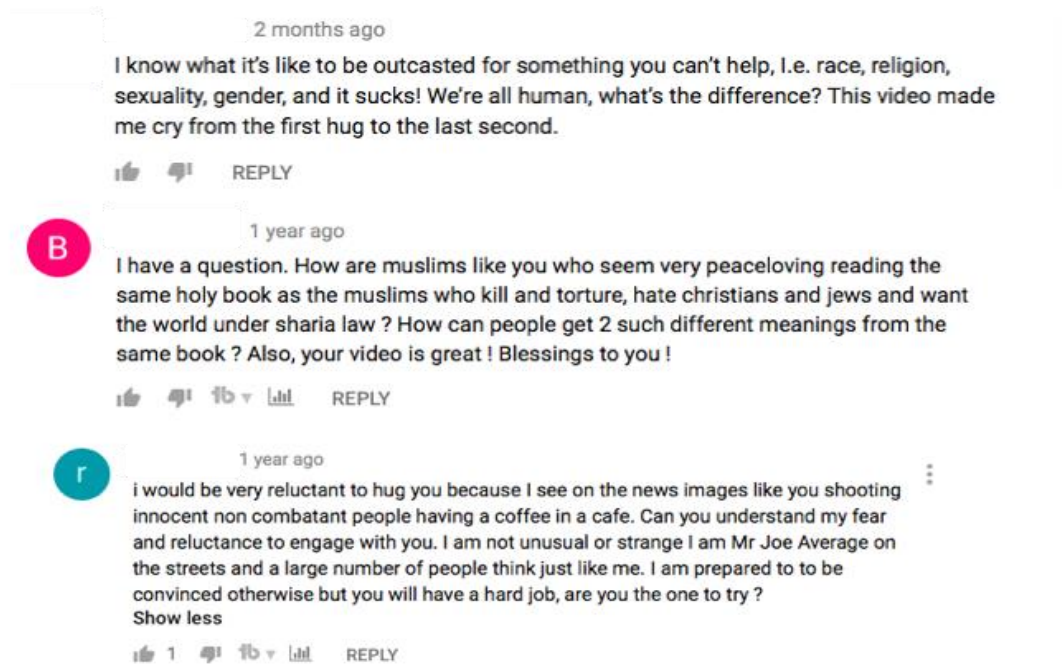


Fig.17: A screenshot showing examples of YouTube viewer comments regarded as illustrating the rhetorical norm of Believable appearances.

- 5. Tolerance:** For a diverse public it is almost inevitable to share diverse views and opinions about issues. To be tolerant ensures that the sphere is vibrant, and this improves its discursive capacity.

Fig.18 (below): A screenshot showing examples of YouTube viewer comments regarded as illustrating the rhetorical norm of Tolerance

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5. Conclusion

While taking into consideration the controversy related to issues about Islamophobia and the varying perspectives put forward about its existence, nature and functioning mechanisms in different societies, the study was able to provide reference to efforts being made at grassroots, to project Islam and Muslims as worthy of trust and not suspicion and mistrust. The study traced the way YouTube, as a platform, through its far-reaching characteristics, was utilized to magnify and project these efforts to reach a wider audience. Through the study, a journey into understanding the motives, wishes, hopes and aspirations of the YouTube content producers of some “Hug a Muslim” campaign videos was embarked on. The underlying significance and discursive properties were explored using critical discourse analysis and Hauser’s rhetorical model of the public sphere.

The research has outlined how YouTube has been utilized by individual content producers who expressed their will and motive to change the way that people consider and view Muslims and Islam, through the content that have created and have shared on YouTube. Given the background of Islamophobia in the West, in

general and in Britain and USA specifically-leading to an increase in negative stereotypical representation of Muslims, the nature of content contained in the “Hug a Muslim” campaign, is seen as a counter discourse to these negative stereotypes and seen as an effort at reimagining Islam and Muslims through these YouTube “social experiments”. In their justifications to using YouTube, mention was made by content producers on how the platform has a wide reach and can appeal to people from different backgrounds across the world. Apart from these responses, the research has also showed how YouTube’s low barrier of entry and its user-friendly interface promotes easy usage, which has promoted its use both in uploading content and viewing content. By presenting video images where a lot of ordinary members of the offline public are acknowledging their trust in Muslims, symbolized by hugging them and saying positive comments, the videos, capitalizing on YouTube’s wide reach, paint a narrative that there is a sizable section of society who trust Muslims and do not consider them terrorists just by virtue of them being Muslim. Images of physical aggression offline are also captured, together with very negative, insulting and abusive comments from online viewers, showing that while the videos paint an ideal positive picture, the issue is still a sensitive and emotionally charged one.

Through critical discourse analysis, the research has revealed underlying elements of power struggles, and joint efforts of minorities in challenging ideologies of inequality and social injustice. The individual videos have employed various symbolic representations that have been interpreted through a critical discourse analytical perspective, these include, how on-screen text was used to engage and influence audiences; how dressing, appearance and posture have contributed in drawing trust from the online and offline audience. Through critical discourse analysis, the cultural significance of using pop music as background music was viewed as a group binding factor and appealing to online audiences.

What can be learned from the reactions of online viewers who have commented on these videos on YouTube? Online viewers’ comments displayed that they are predominantly relevant to the thematical issues of the campaign and have promoted discussion in some instances. The result of this analysis showed that 303 out of 520 (58%) comments were compatible with the five rhetorical norms of the rhetorical public

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sphere, and thus reflect YouTube’s function as a rhetorical public sphere in the context of the “Hug a Muslim” campaign. While there existed evidence of trolling and spamming (which can threaten online discussion and opinion sharing), the majority of online comments, through the five rhetorical norms, have displayed that YouTube, through the “Hug a Muslim” campaign, functions as a rhetorical public sphere and adheres to its norms.

5.1 Recommendations of further studies

Using this study as a reference point, recommendations that can be given for further research can be to widen the research focus and sample to include other campaigns aimed at redefining the public face of Islam/Muslims online such as the “Try a Hijab” or “Meet a Muslim” campaigns on YouTube. These campaigns have a larger representation of Muslim women also, which dispels the suspicion that only Muslim men are actively doing pro-Islam/Muslim campaigns, as the “Hug a Muslim” campaign might lead one to believe.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Video Coding sheet Information.

1. Name of the channel.
2. Title of video/experiment
3. Length of video
4. Number of times viewed by retrieval date
5. Number of comments made by retrieval date
6. Country/city video was recorded
7. Description of the Setting of the video
8. Summary description of Events in the video
9. What makes the video unique
10. When did the channels begin publishing videos?

APPENDIX 2: Questions from the Online questionnaire administered to the six YouTube video makers.

1. What would you say a social experiment is?
2. How do you select what issues to experiment on?
3. How long have you been doing and sharing social experiments on YouTube?
4. What message did you wish to put across through the “Hug a Muslim” social experiment?
5. You chose social experiments as a means to put your message across. Why social experiments?
6. What’s the reason why you chose YouTube as the platform to put your message across?
7. What expectations did you have when you recorded and shared the “Hug a Muslim” social experiment on YouTube?
8. How would you describe the general reaction of the public to your "Hug a Muslim" experiment?
9. What made you choose the location where you shot the "Hug a Muslim" experiment video?
10. During the recording of the experiment, was the cameraman hidden from the public?
11. What were your reasons for having the cameraman hidden or not hidden from the public?
12. What would you say was the toughest thing about doing the "Hug a Muslim" social experiment?

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13. What was the duration of the entire, original (non-edited) video footage material you recorded for the "Hug a Muslim" social experiment?
14. If your editing involved removing some footage from the original recording, how did you choose what to edit out and what to include in the "Hug a Muslim" video version you shared on YouTube?
15. Did you have any unexpected outcome while recording the experiment?
16. If "Yes", can you describe it?
17. How would you personally describe the results of your "Hug a Muslim" experiment?
18. How many people were involved in making and recording the experiment?
19. Have you ever personally, witnessed anything you would describe as discrimination against Muslims / a Muslim?
20. If "Yes" or "Maybe", please give details.
21. To what extent would you say that Islamophobia is a part of today's society where you live?
22. Please give examples to explain your answer
23. Any final comments about Islamophobia?

APPENDIX 3: Colour coding sheet for categorizing Online Viewer Comments

List of 100 most recent comments	Spam or foreign language	Trolling	Compatible with the five rhetorical norms	OTHER-joke, sarcasm, vague, indistinct
2:19 Elmo and miny mouse				
The disliker probaly a kafir				
Huyai mounz zaakuuta vanhu vaye				
He is wearing arab dress. Is there a reason why Muslims choose when to wear or not to wear the dress???				

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