‘I feel like this was testing me, whether I could just stay quiet and get offended, or get destroyed’: immediate reaction to religious hate crime incidents

Flax, Maya (2026) ‘I feel like this was testing me, whether I could just stay quiet and get offended, or get destroyed’: immediate reaction to religious hate crime incidents. Journal of Victimology and Victim Justice. ISSN 2516-6069

https://doi.org/10.1177/25166069251412967

Original Article

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Journal of Victimology and Victim Justice
1–20


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DOI: 10.1177/25166069251412967
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Abstract

This article explores hate crime targeting three specific religious groups in the United Kingdom: Muslims, Jews and Hindus. Drawing on qualitative interviews with victims, the research considers both hate crimes and noncriminal incidents such as bias and discrimination. The central aim is to examine how individuals from these groups perceive and respond to their experiences of victimization. The article presents data from interviews with 30 participants and three focus groups, focusing particularly on the participants’ immediate reactions to incidents of hate crime. The research identifies both similarities and differences in how each group responded at the time of the incident. Participants described their immediate reactions in one of four ways: inaction (outwardly not reacting), seeking some form of recourse, verbally confronting the perpetrator or retaliating with violence. Notably, none of the Jewish or Hindu participants reported responding with verbal confrontation, retaliation or physical aggression; their typical response was inaction. In contrast, Muslim participants exhibited a broader range of immediate responses, including verbal confrontation, physical retaliation and seeking recourse. This article is the first to offer insight into the varied immediate responses to hate crime among these religious communities in the United Kingdom.

Keywords

Justice, law and legal, participation, victimization

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Introduction

Hate crime, as a concept, initially developed around racially motivated offences, especially after the Stephen Lawrence case in the 1990s, which highlighted institutional failures in addressing racist attacks. The Crime and Disorder Act 1998 created specific racially aggravated offences, but at that time, religion was not included. Concerns grew in the early 2000s about the rise in hostility towards faith groups, especially in the wake of 9/11 and later the 7/7 London bombings (2005), when anti-Muslim incidents sharply increased. In response, the Anti-Terrorism, Crime and Security Act 2001 extended racially aggravated offences to include religion. This was a landmark moment, formally recognizing religiously motivated hate crime in law. The Criminal Justice Act 2003 reinforced this, requiring judges to impose tougher sentences where offences were motivated by hostility towards the victim's religion (or perceived religion). From April 2016, the Home Office required police forces to collect data on the *perceived religion* of victims of religious hate crime. This was meant to improve understanding of which groups were most targeted (e.g., Muslim, Jewish, Christian, Sikh, Hindu, no faith). Data are now published annually by the Office for National Statistics (ONS), showing trends and patterns. Religious hate crime remains one of the most commonly reported categories, with spikes often following international or domestic events (e.g., terrorist attacks and geopolitical conflicts).

Religious hate crimes are emerging as a critical issue within the UK, affecting public safety and community well-being. The pattern of hate crimes in England and Wales is unsettling, particularly concerning religious hate crimes. Even though overall hate crime incidents decreased for the first time in a decade, religious hate crimes experienced a 9% rise. An unprecedented 9,387 religious hate crimes were reported by March 2023 (ONS), a striking figure given the broader decline in other categories of hate crime. Certain religious groups are markedly vulnerable, with Muslims making up 39% (3,452 offences) and Jews 17% (1,510 offences) of the religious hate crime victims and Hindus at 3% (291 offences). Startlingly, these statistics reveal a disproportionate number of hate crimes against Jews, who constitute less than 1% of the UK population but are victims of one in six religious hate crimes.

This research examined the immediate response which these incidents of hate crime had on participants: the way respondents reacted immediately following the incident. Any subsequent long-term lifestyle response, such as avoiding certain places or negotiating their identity, will be considered in another article on coping mechanisms which were adopted by these participants. In the immediacy of the incidents, participants described reacting in one of four ways: inaction (outwardly not reacting in any way), insisting on some form of recourse, being verbally confrontational to the perpetrator or retaliating with violence.

This article builds on a previous article titled 'Victims of religious hate crime; victimization of Muslims, Jews and Hindus compared' (Flax & Shannon, 2024). That article describes the various types of hate crimes experienced by the same religious groups. It discusses notions of collective

responsibility, marked visibility and the sense of safety in being with members of their respective community.

Hate Crim Statistics

Hate crime targeting is prevalent against these three groups. In the last decade, there has been a doubling of recorded anti-Muslim hate crime incidents (Tell MAMA, 2023). The Muslim communities are often subjected to abusive comments such as being told to 'go back home' and referred to as 'terrorists' and 'bombers' (Awan & Zempi, 2016). These abusive comments can often lead to physical assault, including incidences of punching, kicking and having their religious clothing removed (Ab Halim et al., 2022; Allen et al., 2013). These stereotypes are often replicated at school and universities where Muslim students are subject to bullying, such as name calling and physical violence (Alizai, 2021; Farooqui & Kaushik, 2021). Visible Muslims often face difficulty during job applications and are often discriminated against (Di Stasio et al., 2021). Anti-Muslim language is often used on social media to threaten, abuse and ostracize Muslims (Wiedlitzka et al., 2023).

The Jewish community faces the highest rate of targeting in accordance with their population size, with antisemitism being on the rise over the years (Hodge & Boddie, 2021). Hate crime statistics gathered in the first half of 2023 in the United Kingdom by the Community Security Trust (2023) shows that there have been 803 antisemitic incidents recorded by the CST. Seventy-four of these incidents were assaults, which included throwing eggs, stones, bricks, bottles and other objects at the victims, as well as throwing objects while driving by. Other hate crime targeting included punching, kicking, being spat at and their religious clothing or accessories being removed. In some incidents, a weapon was used, and in two cases, a vehicle was used to endanger the victim (CST, 2023).

The research on Hindu hate crimes is limited. Hindus are a small minority in the United Kingdom, and they are seen often as 'outsiders' (Long, 2017). However, since 2017, Hindu hate crime has risen by 400%, according to the government's hate crime statistics (ONS, 2023). Littlewood (2023), who conducted research on 988 students on anti-Hindu hate crimes in schools, found that 51% of students experienced anti-Hindu hate, with fewer than 1% reporting the incident. The types of incidents included negative references to idol worship and religious practices. In more extreme cases, pupils were often subject to requests to convert to Islam. Additionally, insults were made towards the colour of their skin as well as being subject to racist slurs. Hindu temples are often targeted, vandalized and destroyed, as seen in the Leicester attacks in 2022 (Paleri, 2022).

Existing research relating to all three religious groups extenuates the pervasiveness of targeting against each of these religious groups. This project moves beyond the individual studies of religious hate crime and extends the scope of the studies to amalgamate the way these religious groups immediately respond to the hate crime incident directly after the incident occurs.

Literature Review

Defining Hate Crime

Defining hate crime is not a straightforward task. Hamm (1998) suggests that there is no global consensus on a definition of hate crime. Lawrence (1999) puts that down to differences in culture, social norms and political agenda. Perry (2001) states that it is not simple to define hate crime as this concept 'is dynamic and in a state of constant movement and change, rather than static and fixed' (Bowling, 1993, p. 238). Perry recognizes that hate crime is a dynamic, social process involving 'context, structure and agency' (Chakraborti, 2015, p. 16). It is not a stagnant phenomenon that takes place in 'a cultural or social vacuum' (Chakraborti, 2015, p. 5).

Hate crime varies according to cultural and societal expectations as well as changes in time. Therefore, what we regard as a hate crime in the twenty-first-century United Kingdom may have been regarded elsewhere and at another time as standard accepted behaviour. Perry (2001) defines hate crime as acts of violence and intimidation, usually directed towards already stigmatized and marginalized groups. As such, it is a mechanism of power and oppression, intended to reaffirm the precarious hierarchies that characterize a given social order. It attempts to re-create simultaneously the threatened (real or imagined) hegemony of the perpetrator's group and the 'appropriate' subordinate identity of the victim's group. It is a means of marking both the Self and the Other in such a way as to re-establish their 'proper' relative positions, as given and reproduced by broader ideologies and patterns of social and political inequality (2001, p. 10). Whilst the police and the Home Office have embraced the term 'hate crime', legislators within the United Kingdom have chosen not to use the word 'hate' in defining racially aggravated offences. Subsequently, 'hate crime has no legal status in the UK' (Iganski, 2008, p. 1). Rather, in the 1998 Crime and Disorder Act, the word 'hostility' was chosen.

In the United Kingdom, the term hate crime was first defined by the Association of Chief Police Officers (2005) as 'any hate incident which constitutes a criminal offence, perceived by the victim or any other person as being motivated by prejudice or hate' (ACPO, 2005, paragraph 2.2.1). This definition was updated by the College of Policing (2014), with the only distinction being in the motivating factors as 'hostility or prejudice' rather than 'prejudice or hate', which are seen as motivating factors in the new guidance (College of Policing, 2014, p. 3). The CPS has agreed this to be the common definition. Thus, the agreed working definition of hate crime is 'any criminal offence which is perceived, by the victim or any other person, to be motivated by a hostility or prejudice' (College of Policing, 2014). With the motivating factor changing to 'hostility or prejudice', the offence is much simpler to prove, as it necessitates much less emotion.

Critics of hate crime legislation (Gerstensfeld, 1992) have argued the impossibility of measuring 'hate', 'prejudice', 'hostility' or 'bias' and that within the definition lies the flaw. Gerstenfeld (2013, p. 11) claims that there is a misconception that hate crimes are not crimes where the offender is required to hate the victim. For Gerstenfeld (2013), hate crimes do not need to be motivated by hatred

at all. The term is rather deceptive as it inaccurately suggests that hatred is unvaryingly a unique feature of this type of crime.

Theories of Hate Crime

Societies tend to enshrine hierarchies of race, religion, gender and sexuality. Power and domination permeate our society, which results in marginalization and exclusion (Perry, 2001). Societies have prevailing notions about the way individuals should conduct themselves, and those who do not conform to these expectations can find themselves victims of hate crime (Chakraborti et al., 2014). Omi and Winant (1994) state that:

> Everyone learns some combination, some version of the rules of racial classification, and of her own racial identity, often without obvious teaching or conscious inculcation. Thus, we are inserted in a comprehensively racialized social structure. Race becomes 'common sense' – a way of comprehending, explaining and being in the world. (1994, p. 60)

According to Perry (2001, p. 46), this system of classifying one's identity presumes 'mutually exclusive categories of belonging. Perry elaborates by commenting that everyone is forced to choose 'a side' (2001, p. 47). One is a man or a woman, a Jew, Christian or Muslim, Black or White. Positioning oneself (and others) establishes boundaries, creates classification and forms identity. However, according to Perry (2001, p. 47), it also allows for negativity. By positioning oneself favourably, others are judged unfavourably and even 'aberrant, deviant, inferior' (2001, p. 47). Construction of difference has the effect of assigning an external group as inferior and subordinate.

Perry coined the term 'doing difference' to the ideological structures of society which have 'deeply embedded notions of difference' (2001, p. 46). According to Perry, humans construct their identity in accordance with these existing structures of domination. The construction of this identity is a dynamic interactive process whereby individuals test their race, gender and religion with a view to determine how this 'difference' will be interpreted by others. Those who are outside the parameters of society's construction of identity are seen as 'different' (Perry, 2001). Hate crimes are the 'attempts to suppress 'difference' as resulting from the threat posed by others to dominant norms' (Walters, 2011, p. 7).

Individuals test whether their behaviour will be accepted as standard behaviour. 'Whenever we 'do difference'—we leave ourselves open to reward or censure' (Perry, 2001, p. 54). For instance, 'where subordinate groups attempt to redefine their difference, they may become vulnerable to attack' (Perry, 2001, p. 54), as they are no longer conforming to normative conceptions of the group's identity construct. Perry (2001) provides the example of a subordinate group who step out of the normative characteristics of the group and develops intelligence, initiative and assertiveness. The dominant group, according to Perry, will seek to repress the subordinate group as they 'did difference' inappropriately.

Chakraborti (2015) comments that Perry's conceptual framework has been possibly the most significant within academic literature. Perry's framework has broadened the subject of hate crime to be considered in the context of sociopolitical and psychological backdrops and to acknowledge that hate crimes are part of a process of recurring victimization moulded by context, structure and agency (Bowling, 1993). In summation, society is rooted with difference. Hierarchies, power and domination are rife in society. However, whilst many may hold prejudicial beliefs and hierarchical ideologies, it is only when these thoughts are acted upon that it becomes a hate crime.

Method

The research took the form of a qualitative study based on semi-structured interviews with victims of religious hate crime. A qualitative approach was thus adopted in order to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of religious hate crime victims. This research makes use of an interpretivist paradigm, allowing the researcher to examine the reality as it presents itself from the perspective of participants, built from their subjective experiences and drawing meaning from these individuals engaging in social interaction. To guarantee high ethical standards, the research received ethical approval from the School of Human and Social Sciences Ethics Panel of the University of West London.

Participants

Participants were recruited using a combination of homogeneous and snowball sampling techniques to ensure both relevance and depth in relation to the study's focus on religious hate crime victimization. Homogeneous sampling enabled the intentional selection of individuals who all met the central criterion of having experienced a religiously motivated hate crime, ensuring that the sample remained closely aligned with the core phenomenon under investigation. Snowball sampling was then used to reach additional victims who were not easily accessible through formal recruitment channels, recognizing that many individuals affected by such incidents may be reluctant to come forward or may belong to close-knit communities where trust is essential for engagement.

Specifically, the research included 10 individual interviews and one focus group from each of the three religious groups (making a total of 30 semi-structured interviews and three focus groups). The data gathered from the focus groups have a different status to data gathered in interviews, in that the respondents of the focus group have a more official status. The focus group participants are mostly powerful people who are representatives of the community. They have vision and a sense of agency. It is useful to hear from the voices of those who lead the community as it provides an additional perspective. Participation in the research was voluntary.

Table 1. Age Group.

	Respondents	Muslims	Jewish	Hindu
18–29	27%	30%	10%	40%
30–49	57%	60%	60%	50%
50–64	13%	10%	20%	10%
65+	3%	0%	10%	0%

Prospective participants were identified through local religious organizations and hate crime groups which stamp out religious hate crimes. Participants unaffiliated to any local religious organization were also recruited through snowball sampling. Data saturation was monitored throughout analysis and was considered achieved when successive interviews no longer generated new themes, insights or variations in participants' accounts (Guest et al., 2006). This point signalled that additional data collection was unlikely to enhance conceptual depth.

Of the 30 participants, 53% of participants were male, and 47% were female. Their ages ranged from 21 to 60. They varied in ethnic, religious, economic and educational backgrounds. Respondents ranged in age from 18 to 66. The median age of respondents is 35 (see Table 1).

The median age for Hindus (34) and Muslims (32) was similar. However, the Jewish respondents were older, with a median age of 39. Table 1 presents the focus group participants with some elementary information about each of them.

All participants were visible as religious members of their respective religious group, but not with certainty. The Muslim female participants who were visible wear a Hijab or a Niqab, their male counterparts wear an Imama and would often have a beard. But the other 50% of interviewees dressed in Western attire. The Jewish male participants wore a kapple or a black hat and would often have a beard. Their female counterparts are less obvious to some and would not wear trousers, but instead only wear a skirt/dress and would be covering their natural hair with a wig. The Hindu participants are the least identifiable religious group herein. They all have a darker complexion, but could be of multiple origins.

While this research aimed to focus on religiously motivated hate crimes, it was not feasible to entirely avoid interviewing participants of colour due to the demographics of the targeted religious groups. Racial and religiously motivated hate crimes are frequently interlinked, with perpetrators often conflating racial and religious identities, and individuals are targeted not solely based on their religious affiliation but also on their racial appearance.

Materials and Procedure

Semi-structured face-to-face or videoconferencing interviews were conducted with participants who were victims of religious hate crime in the UK. Interviewees were reminded of their right to withdraw at any time and that confidentiality and

anonymity would be adhered to. Interviews lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. Following the interviews, all participants were given a verbal and written debrief.

Given the sensitive nature of the research topic, particular care was taken to ensure the well-being of all participants throughout the interview process. At the conclusion of each interview, participants were reminded that they could withdraw at any time and were provided with information about relevant support services. This included signposting to professional counselling organizations, helplines and local support networks that support hate crime victims. Participants were encouraged to seek assistance should they experience any emotional discomfort or distress as a result of their involvement. These measures formed an essential component of the ethical protocol, ensuring that participants had access to appropriate resources beyond the research setting.

Analytic Plan

The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. Thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke (2022) was used to analyse the data. Thematic analysis reports the 'experiences, meanings and realities' of the participants (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 81). The data analysis was conducted with the aim of uncovering the underlying patterns and themes that emerge from the data. Thematic analysis is a method used to identify, analyse and report patterns/themes within a data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Therefore, the researchers positioned themselves to be open to discovering new insights and perspectives that were not initially anticipated. Identifying common themes across the interviews offers insight into this phenomenon. This approach contributed to a deeper understanding of the experiences and perceptions endured by victims of religious hate crime.

The interviews were transcribed by a transcription company, which was followed by the development of themes. All transcripts, notes and themes adduced from the analysis were collated throughout the research in order to ensure reliability and so to provide an audit trail (Shaw, 2010).

Findings

Muslims

The Muslim participants were the only religious group to immediately respond in various ways to the victimization. Eleven out of 23 participants chose various degrees of action by either insisting on an apology or verbally or physically retaliating. Slightly over half of the respondents chose not to express an outward reaction.

Category 1: Inaction

In 57% of Islamophobic incidents, the Muslim participants responded by inaction—choosing not to outwardly react. For example, when airport staff were

taking one-too-many precautionary measures to ensure that R10 (Muslim male, 32) was unarmed, he did not verbalize his frustration of being viewed as matching the profile of a terrorist. He was raised with a mentality of overlooking things wherever possible:

> When people say these things, the best thing to do is just don't engage, just walk away … my parents have always said that if anyone tries to be funny with us or tries to be aggressive or anything like that, the best thing to do is walk away. That's why they've always told me. (R10, Muslim male, 32)

R9 (Muslim female, 29) was surrounded by five white EDL protestors who were taunting her about the wearing of her hijab, and her response in that instance was to flee as fast as she could. Faced with high risk, the most sensible option was not to confront, but to escape.

Some respondents justified their inaction due to the incident taking place in non-familiar territory. R17, who was travelling with friends in Cumbria, was verbally insulted for being Muslim:

> I don't want to cause a scene because it's not our area. If I was in my own surroundings, I might have been a bit more comfortable at challenging …. Just being outside of my kind of normal comfort zone and being in an area which I'm not too familiar with, which appeared a bit hostile, I just felt that maybe it's not best for me to say something. (R17, Muslim male, 33)

Certain instances involve a deliberate decision not to respond, while other cases of inaction revolve around an immediate prioritization of one's safety. Additionally, numerous instances of victimization occurred in the presence of passive bystanders. Despite the high-risk nature of the situations and the outnumbering of individuals, the apparent apathy of these bystanders served as a confirmation to Muslim participants that these incidents should be downplayed, deeming them unworthy of public intervention. The bystanders' failure to intervene subtly reinforced the notion that such incidents did not warrant public intervention.

Category 2: Retaliation with Violence/Attempt to Retaliate with Violence

While some Muslim participants hesitated to display physical aggression and emphasized the significance of setting a positive example, others chose to respond through physical retaliation, accounting for 17% of instances involving Islamophobia. The inclination towards physical retaliation or the expression of a threat of physical retaliation was unique to the Muslim participants.

Whilst R9 was working in a Superdrug store, she was confronted by a Black man in his 40s who was becoming impatient as he wanted her immediate assistance:

> He was huffing and puffing and getting really agitated and the only thing I heard was 'I'm going to rip your hijab off your head,' and I was literally in a state of shock…so I went up to him we were literally face-to-face and I said to him: 'Do it then, take it off' I was ready to literally attack this guy…. I just saw red. I was just super angry. I was ready to just go for this guy. (R9, Muslim female, 29)

In broad daylight, R3 had a piece of ham thrown at him by six or seven-suit wearing white men in their 30s whilst walking in his neighbourhood. R3 walked up to them shouting:

> You lot probably have a 9–5 job in the city. What the f** are you doing? why the f** would you chuck that? They were shouting racial slurs, calling me a terrorist, calling me a paedo... saying you lot groomed young girls. (R3, Muslim male, 25)

R3 was very confrontational, challenging his perpetrators, seeking an explanation. He then initiated a physical altercation, which resulted in a bruised lip and pain all over his body. When asked whether it was an option to walk away, R3's response was 'Oh, hell no … they threw a piece of meat at me' (R3, Muslim male 25). Even though R3 was not a strictly-halal-eating Muslim man, throwing a piece of ham at him was perceived as an offensive provocative act. R3 felt that retribution was necessary and that they should be 'put in their place'.

Islamophobic targeting was experienced during employment by R8, who was working at a very-high-paying job. He was being persistently targeted by a colleague as well as the manager, initially by them making subtle racial comments, but in time they became full-blown racial comments. Whilst R8 was reluctant to challenge his manager, R8 decided to physically threaten his colleague:

> One day I just lost it with my colleague and said: 'Let's go on a break and he's like, Why? And we went to the car park and I said: What have you got against me? If you've got a problem, sort it out here man to man' Honestly, I'd had enough. He started crying. (R8, Muslim male, 32)

R8 faced persistent bullying at work. Continuous exposure to microaggressions and overt racism can lead to saturation points where individuals feel compelled to react physically. This is seen in R8's case, where persistent bullying led to an eventual confrontation.

The participants' choices to confront their aggressors rather than ignoring or avoiding the situation illustrate their active engagement with the problem. This indicates a preference for taking matters into their own hands, reflecting their sense of personal agency. These participants decided to engage in behavioural shifts, such as changing patterns of social interaction. Instead of expressing inaction, they responded with threats or actual physical attacks.

Category 3: Seeking Some Form of Recourse

In certain cases (13% of instances involving Islamophobia), respondents' initial reaction was to demand an apology or pursue some form of redress. In three instances, Muslim participants explicitly sought an apology for the hate crimes they endured. The act of seeking an apology was directed towards obtaining some form of restitution and an acknowledgement of remorse.

For example, R1 (Muslim male, 41), who was refused to be served in Halfords for being a Muslim, demanded an apology for the way he was treated. R1 also sought recourse when he was verbally abused by a work colleague who said to him: 'Here comes ISIS, here comes the terrorist'. Receiving an apology in both of

these instances was of paramount importance to R1, as it would act as an admission and an acknowledgement that the victim was wronged in some way. Seeking apologies can be seen as a form of restitution, where the victim feels that the aggressor's remorse partially compensates for the harm inflicted.

Whilst in high school, R3 (Muslim male, 25) was in a music lesson when the music teacher said to the class, which consisted of predominantly Muslim students: 'You guys come to the country and you guys' bomb stuff and leave. You guys are going to get nowhere in life'. R3 escalated this to the head teacher, with the aim of seeking an admission of guilt.

The examples which fell under this category revealed active steps which participants pursued which were less violent, but yet assertive in 'correcting' the wrong which has been done. By insisting on apologies, victims help set precedents for accountability, making it clear that discriminatory behaviour will be challenged and must be addressed.

Category 4: Verbally Confrontational

Some participants decided to retaliate verbally (13% of Islamophobic instances). For example, soon after the 9/11 attacks, when R20 was 17 years old, he was called a terrorist and a dirty P*ki by a white English boy of similar age. In response, R20 shouted back, 'You don't even have a belief to stand on. You are just a milk boy' (R20, Muslim male, 31). R20 explains, 'I mean me calling him a milk boy I felt satisfied too. I was young too'.

During university lectures, R20's university professor used to make terrorist jokes, 'saying about bombs, don't throw bombs at me'. R20 vocally responded to the professor:

> I won't throw a bomb at you, but I will definitely throw my pen at you. And he would just there quietly. And I think you're supposed to teach me – teach everyone, you're wasting everyone's time making a silly joke. (R20, Muslim male, 31)

R20 explains his reason for being vocal:

> I feel like this was testing me, whether I could just stay quiet and get offended, or get destroyed. Or I could speak about it and actually they could learn from it and realise all their thoughts and beliefs were just wrong or stupid. Or complete lies. (R20, Muslim male, 31)

R9, who was threatened to have her hijab removed by a customer in Superdrug, aggressively challenged this customer. She explains the reason for her being very confrontational in her response:

> I feel like people that target hijabs, they have this thing in their head like: if I'm going to say something to a hijab, she's not going to respond back. She's going to put her head down and start crying and get scared…. I wanted to put a stop to that. (R9, Muslim female, 29)

Among the data, there was a gender differentiation among the Muslim participants' extent of retaliation. Most incidents of inaction were exercised by Muslim

women. R9, who was the only female Muslim who retaliated, refused to be part of the gender stereotypes assumed against Muslim women, said: 'Standing up for oneself is not that common, especially for young Muslim women. The Muslim men do stand up for themselves and for their Muslim sisters but Muslim women are much more super timid, fragile, and scared' (R9, Muslim woman, 29). This gender difference is in line with previous research which shows that Muslim men are more likely to stand up to their attackers in order to teach them a lesson, whereas Muslim women choose to overlook the incident out of fear of escalating the situation (Zempi, 2020).

Confronting the perpetrator verbally enabled participants to assert themselves, correct the narrative that such incidents would not be ignored, and regain a sense of control. Utilizing the moment of victimization to confront and challenge oppression conveys a profound message. It specifically communicates to the oppressor that affected communities are unwilling to passively accept their assigned roles but are determined to advocate for a redefined understanding of their place. Furthermore, this resistance serves as a compelling declaration of strength and unity within the minority community itself.

In summary, the responses of Muslim participants to Islamophobia demonstrate a complex interplay of personal agency, cultural influences and situational factors. These themes reveal a community that, while often choosing inaction for safety, also shows a significant proportion of individuals willing to assert themselves through various means, from seeking apologies to engaging in verbal and physical confrontations.

The data indicate that Muslims are more inclined to take initiative and are even likely to retaliate, influenced by messages ingrained in family and societal contexts. The cultural emphasis on standing up for oneself is deeply embedded, conveying implicit messages within the Muslim community against adopting a passive victim stance and encouraging individuals to remain outspoken.

Jews

Among the Jewish participants, there was a consistent pattern of inaction in response to antisemitic incidents. None of the respondents chose to retaliate; they refrained from confronting their perpetrators, shouting back, standing up for themselves or lashing out in any way. By way of example, when someone came up behind R22 (Jewish woman, 34) and said I wish Hitler could have killed all of them, R22 did not even say:

> Sorry, what did you say?! 'I wasn't really interested in confronting someone who said something really threatening to me'…. I'm more non-confrontational, so I would just rather let it slide, which isn't the best thing to do at all…'. (R22, Jewish woman, 34)

Some respondents responded mildly, but none were outwardly confrontational: One participant questioned: 'Sorry, did you just call me an effing Jews?' (R23, Jewish woman, 37). Another participant questioned: 'Are you refusing to

give me a haircut because I am Jewish?' (R28, Jewish man, 39). R28 (Jewish man, 38) also shouted at two youths to return his black hat when they took it off his head and started playing frisbee with it. Another participant asked his students to engage in a conversation after they said to him, 'Free Palestine' (R29, Jewish man, 38). By not challenging their perpetrators, they seemed to express idleness and dormancy. By way of example, R26 (Jewish man, 26) was racially abused by two young men at the top of a double-decker bus, before they singed his hair with a lighter. R26 did not react, respond, shout at the boys, nor even stand up and go to the bottom of the bus. Upon reflection R26 describes:

> I think maybe, rightly or wrongly, but I think I should've been more confrontational. I think that's a bad thing…. I shouldn't have been so passive. I shouldn't have been so passive. I should stand up for myself. These people are insulting me. I should stand up for myself.

FG4 explains this seeming inertness:

> Jews are much more passive than lots of other communities…. We take it on the chin…. It's something we've lived with for time immemorial. We've always been victims. We've always been the oppressed, going back to the times of the Egyptians … the majority don't stand up for themselves. (FG4)

FG4 continues:

> Jews in this area have got some link to the holocaust; they're either a survivor or a son of a survivor, they had family…. And, therefore, they've got a bit of a hard/coarse mentality that they'll just try and take it, won't really complain too much and try and get away with it. (FG4)

The Holocaust and the historical context of antisemitism have played a central role in framing both personal perceptions and gauging the extent of the phenomenon today. Interviewees interpreted current antisemitism against the backdrop of the Holocaust and repeatedly made reference to the Holocaust in assessing contemporary antisemitism. Many participants normalized the abuse within the historical backdrops. The historical roots of endless persecutions against the Jews spanning over hundreds of years appeared to reinforce the conception within the interviewees that some level of antisemitism was unavoidable.

Gerstenfeld (2013) explains that Jewish communities have always been minorities in their lived countries and have always held an 'outsider' status, reinforced by different customs, dress, language and religion. Gerstenfeld (2013) provides various explanations to describe the anti-Jewish views that are rooted within the cultural fabric of many societies. Gerstenfeld (2013) details the entrenched religious distrust between Jews and other religious groups, antipathy of the seeming socio-economic status enjoyed by Jewish communities in the West and a lack of separation between anti-Zionism and antisemitism (2013, pp. 187–189).

In a similar way to avoiding confronting the perpetrators, some respondents responded with humour in an attempt to diffuse the situation. For example, when

R29 and his wife were shouted at the park: 'You killed Jesus', R29's response was to laugh it off:

> What do you do with such a person, you laugh it off. I mean I could have very capably run after him and started an argument and even defended myself if the fellow got physical, but what's the point? For me, especially with my wife and primarily with the baby, there's no point, I don't need to prove myself physically in front of anyone…. I wasn't going to chase after him and find a policeman, so we just got on with our day. (R29, Jewish man, 38)

In furtherance of trivializing the hate, a number of participants dismissed them as being insignificant: 'They're kids. They don't know anything. What do they even know?' (R22, Jewish woman, 34). R26 stated:

> I was definitely giving them the benefit of the doubt, in my mind, they (the boys on the bus who singed R26's hair) are just kids, and they're just trying to show off to one another. I don't think they're actual, real antisemites. (R26, Jewish man, 26)

R28, despite being targeted five times in the last couple of years, went as far as saying: 'You know all these things are isolated incidents and generally we don't come across this…. They are both the exceptions rather than the rule' (R28, Jewish man, 39).

Questioning the tendency to downplay abuse, view it as a source of amusement or confine its use as originating from those who are ignorant is imperative. It raises doubts about whether the normalization of such incidents is authentic or if individuals employ these responses as a coping mechanism to sidestep confronting their genuine emotions and endure the challenges at hand. One could argue that these reactions serve as a camouflage, concealing their deeper feelings of fear and apprehension triggered by the occurrences. Participants have utilized their agency to normalize these occurrences, possibly to sidestep confronting their genuine emotions.

These reactions illustrate the seemingly casual manner in which certain incidents were shrugged off and downplayed. Dismissing these occurrences as inconsequential serves as a rationale for their lack of action. Through the avoidance of confronting those responsible, the use of humour and diminishing their importance, the respondents permitted themselves to reclaim a sense of control over their lives.

Hindus

The sole reaction observed among Hindu respondents was also one of non-action. In every case of hate crime directed towards Hindus, there was no retaliation, confrontation, challenge or discernible reaction from the respondents.

For instance, R16, who worked for an international airline for 8 years, was accepted in the company while she occupied a subordinate role. This acceptance halted when she applied for a managerial role, and she was refused promotion.

Despite being overqualified for the managerial role, R16 never questioned the airlines as to why she was refused the managerial position. She explains: 'I would rather avoid any problems. Have a smooth life, have a nice life, be happy, wake up, and this pressure and everything I don't want it' (R16, Hindu female, 38).

Similarly, R19, who signed a contract with another Hindu friend to rent a flat and paid the deposit, had the contract withdrawn once the landlord met them in person. R19 did not question it:

> There was no point in arguing because the property was already gone…. OK, the flat is gone. If I sit there and argue with him, nothing is going to change, so what's the next best step that I can take?… I was like either I can just waste my time complaining, which is not going to do anything, or I can just actually do the work and then rant about it later. (R19, Hindu male, 19)

Another instance was R14, who, whilst on holiday in Lisbon, booked a place in a Bar and was refused entry. Whereas her Hindu friends who were of lighter complexion were allowed entry, as R14 was of darker complexion, she was refused entry. Similar to R17 (Muslim male, 33), she explained her inaction as a result of this taking place in non-familiar territory:

> I wanted to shout but because I wasn't in my own country I didn't know what would happen. You have to be very careful what you say to them. But you don't want to come across quite aggressive. (R14, Hindu female, 26)

Being cognisant of not reacting was very apparent among the Hindu victims.

> I often get thrown at me 'you P*ki', kind of thing, and I try not to react to situations because I'm the type of person to just stay out of trouble, I don't like confrontation. I just don't want it to impact me any wider than it needs to kind of thing. I don't want to make a scene when I'm out and about. (R13, Hindu male, 23)

This tendency to avoid reacting was explained by R13: 'I try to be the better person, the bigger person…. I've always been told by my mum not to react and just let things be to avoid any conflict'. According to R13, the notion to avoid conflict at any cost was one of the key messages for him growing up:

> When the partitioning was happening in India and everyone was sort of getting their freedom, we sort of get told and we get made out to be how hard it was for everyone else. And when my parents come, just trying to keep peace, not only within yourself but always knowing that there are other solutions to fixing an issue. (R13, Hindu male, 23)

Additionally, power imbalances played a significant role in these experiences. Many Hindu participants faced discrimination from older men (R7, Hindu male, 50), bouncers refusing entry into clubs and pubs (R14 and R19), and landlords refusing to rent property (R19) because of their Hindu identity. This often led to a quiet acceptance of the discrimination, opting to leave the premises without protest.

The inaction by the Hindu participants is explained by them as stemming from cultural teachings. One focus group participant explained it:

> Our culture says that you should be part of the solution rather than be part of the problem…. We should keep low profile. I would say that Hindus are low profile, they're not vocal…. In our families we teach our children to be very obedient, disciplined … we do not revolt publicly for anything. We try to be as much as friendly as possible with everybody. When you see there is a danger or anything, we move out of it…. In the faith itself, we say that it is a strength to walk away. (FG1)

Choosing not to reciprocate also stems from religious teaching:

> If you look at Mahatma Gandhi, he used to say if somebody slaps you on the cheek, offer them the other. Now, many people might not agree with that, but what I'm trying to say to you is that to give the other one requires more strength than to retaliate back. It's easy to retaliate back. (FG2)

> They would be innovative in finding a way around it. The example is like a river comes down to the mountain, if it finds an obstacle, it goes around it. So Indians are very innovative in finding around…So, getting angry is not the answer. Getting mad is not the answer. Getting smart is the answer. So, I would say that be smart, we try to become smarter to avoid conflict. (FG3)

In summary, the overarching theme among Hindu respondents was one of non-action in the face of discrimination and hate crimes. This inaction was influenced by several interconnected factors, including a quiet acceptance of discrimination, fear of confrontation in unfamiliar territory, and deep-rooted cultural and familial teachings that emphasize conflict avoidance. Furthermore, religious teachings advocating non-retaliation and innovative strategies to avoid conflict reinforced this tendency. Power imbalances exacerbated these experiences, leading to a pattern of quietly accepting discrimination and opting to leave the premises without protest. Collectively, these themes illustrate a complex interplay of cultural, familial, and religious influences that shape the responses of Hindu individuals to discriminatory acts, underscoring a broader narrative of resilience and conflict avoidance ingrained within the community.

Conclusion

The data on the responses to discrimination among Muslim, Jewish and Hindu participants reveal critical insights into the varied responses of different religious communities. This article has highlighted the divergence in the immediacy of responses among the three religious groups. The immediate reactions recounted by respondents varied significantly, ranging from complete inaction to aggressive responses. It is noteworthy that the severity of the incident did not consistently correlate with the immediate reaction. Some participants facing more severe incidents displayed less reactivity, and vice versa. This inconsistency suggests that the

decision to react or remain passive is influenced by other factors, rather than solely by the incident's severity.

Muslims displayed a broad spectrum of reactions, from inaction to verbal and physical retaliation, underscoring a cultural emphasis on standing up against injustice. Jewish participants, on the other hand, predominantly chose non-confrontation, a tendency deeply rooted in historical and cultural experiences of enduring persecution. Hindu participants also exhibited a strong preference for non-action, influenced by cultural and religious teachings that advocate conflict avoidance and non-retaliation. These patterns highlight the significant role that cultural, historical and familial influences play in shaping the responses to discrimination and victimization within these communities.

While Jewish and Hindu participants uniformly opted for non-reaction or response to hate, certain Muslim participants chose alternative courses of action. Those from the Jewish and Hindu communities, as well as Muslim participants who opted for inaction, exhibited what may appear as indifference towards both subtle and overt forms of abuse. Within the Jewish community, the choice of inaction stemmed from normalization. The seemingly effortless dismissal of certain incidents should be understood within the broader framework of their perceptions, where antisemitism is regarded as inevitable. Consequently, reacting is seen as a futile endeavour. The Hindu community attributes their inaction to an ingrained cultural and religious ethos that emphasizes being part of the solution rather than the problem. Hindu participants have been taught not to be vocal and to steer clear of conflicts.

A theoretical lens that illuminates the responses of Muslim, Jewish and Hindu participants is social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and its later development in identity threat and stigma-management theory (Branscombe et al., 1999; Major & O'Brien, 2005). These frameworks posit that when individuals experience hostility linked to a core social identity—such as religion—they interpret and respond to the incident through strategies designed to protect the self, preserve group identity or minimize further harm. Because religious identity carries different historical, cultural and situational meanings for each group, the same underlying identity threat can produce markedly different behavioural responses.

For some Muslim participants, visible markers of religious identity and messages within family or cultural contexts reinforced assertive or confrontational strategies as a means of resisting stigma and restoring agency. Jewish participants, shaped by collective memory, intergenerational trauma and longstanding awareness of vulnerability, often engaged in avoidance or minimization, aimed at reducing risk and maintaining personal safety. Hindu participants similarly adopted conflict-avoidant responses, influenced by cultural norms emphasizing harmony, non-retaliation and strategic disengagement. Across all three groups, then, religious identity serves as both a target of hate and a resource that guides coping: individuals draw on culturally embedded scripts—whether assertive, passive or conciliatory—to navigate identity-based threat in ways that feel protective and socially meaningful within their communities.

Certain limitations of this study should be acknowledged. Firstly, the sample primarily targeted participants who were visibly identified as religious members

within their respective religious groups. Exploring perspectives from individuals who are less conspicuous within the same religious groups might yield divergent results. Secondly, the generalisability of the findings could be impacted by the relatively small size and non-random composition of the sample. Future research would benefit from expanding the study to encompass a larger sample that includes both visible and less visible religious members.

Another limitation of this study is the potential for inaccuracies in participants' recall of traumatic events. Research indicates that memories of negative experiences are particularly vulnerable to distortion (Schacter et al., 2011), largely due to the brain's unique processing of trauma (Nahleen et al., 2021). One phenomenon linked to this is 'memory amplification', where individuals recall more trauma than they actually experienced (Strange & Takarangi, 2015). This can occur through discussions with others, intrusive mental imagery and personal perceptions of the event (Kensinger & Ford, 2020). However, this does not imply that participants' memories are wholly inaccurate but rather that they may be subject to certain biases and distortions. Despite this, the study's focus remains on understanding how participants interpret these events and their responses to them.

In summary, the findings have important implications for law enforcement and policy development. Understanding these community-specific responses is crucial for law enforcement agencies to tailor their approaches to effectively support victims of hate crimes. For instance, the proactive stance of many Muslim participants suggests that policies encouraging reporting and facilitating safe channels for complaints could be beneficial. On the other hand, the passive responses observed among Jewish and Hindu participants indicate a need for outreach programmes that build trust and encourage these communities to report incidents without fear of escalation or retribution. Training law enforcement personnel to recognize these cultural nuances can improve their interactions with victims and ensure more effective support.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article: The author would like to acknowledge her gratitude to the Anti-Defamation League for funding this research.

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