Life in the UK as a LGBTQI+ Muslim

Hidayah LGBTQI+

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Introduction

03

Britain is home to over 3 million Muslims and is described as '[...] the most diverse Muslim community on Earth' (The Muslim Council of Britain 2021). Despite this, little attention has been given to the experiences and lives of UK LGBTQI+* Muslims in academic research, government policy and representative Muslim organisations.

While The Muslim Council of Britain displays a myriad of different projects on their online directory, ranging from elderly care, sustainability in climate change to women in Mosques, there is no focus on LGBTQI+ Muslims. Although the Office for National Statistics (2018) reports that there are 3.37 million Muslims in the UK, no details concerning minority genders and sexuality are provided, further veiling the LGBTQI+ Muslim population at a national level.

LGBTQI+ Muslims face the 'double jeopardy' (Ferraro et al. 1996) of belonging to religious and sexual minority groups, thereby increasing their risk of minority stress.

Minority stress describes the prejudice and discrimination minority groups are more likely to experience when compared with other social groups (Balsam, et al. 2011). Consequently, this report positions LGBTQI+ Muslims as a vulnerable group demanding further attention and access to appropriate supports to counteract the negative impact of social stigma.

In 2017 the UK government carried out the National LGBT Survey (Government Equalities Office 2018a), aiming to provide insights into the experiences of LGBT people across the UK. Although **108,000 LGBTQ respondents are indicated**, religion is not reported, making it impossible to know how many LGBTQI+ Muslims UK citizens responded. Given Britain's Muslim community stands at over 3 million (The Muslim Council of Britain 2021), this survey fails to represent our target population in focus, muting the unique needs and experiences of this hidden population at a national level.

**Throughout this report the acronym 'LGBTQI+' is used to refer to lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer and intersex identities and experiences.*

Despite this shortfall, the UK government used this survey as the foundations for The LGBT Action Plan (2018b), resulting in a skewed policy paper.

Arguably, this policy actively constructs unconscious bias towards LGBTQI+ Muslims who experience their own unique set of challenges. The mechanism of this policy construction fails to adhere to the Equality Act 2010, as little effort has been made to reach and represent an already hidden population. This work has an elevated importance and relevance in leveraging the voices of UK LGBTQI+ Muslims.

Internationally, the lives of LGBTQI+ Muslims in the UK largely remain hidden, raising questions of social justice, equality and inclusion (Alvi & Zaidi 2019). Despite the UK Equality Act 2010, LGBTQI+ Muslims remain hidden populations, with exploratory studies seeking to shed light on this hidden population in the UK remaining limited, if not non-existent. Indeed, the first Muslim Pride festival was planned to take place in late 2019 (Walawalkar 2019) but was postponed due to COVID-19. Despite the postponement, this suggests that LGBTQI+ Muslims are largely concealed in the UK.

In recent years, research focusing on this section of the community in the UK has revealed challenges, ranging from experiences of hate crime fuelled by prejudiced attitudes, to religious marginalisation and exclusion from faith communities. In their 2019 Health and Inclusion report, Switchboard stated that 46% of LGBTQI+ community members experienced prejudice from their own faith community, leading 43% to reduce their participation in faith groups. Understanding the experiences and support needs of LGBTQI+ UK Muslims is therefore integral to upholding societal cohesion, inclusion and the individual's wellbeing.

Whilst UK research is failing to keep pace, the limited availability of international research reveals a concerning discourse of a continual oppressed expression of identity (Alvi & Zaidi 2019; Lim et al. 2020). LGBTQI+ Muslims can feel a dissonance between their identities, religious and family values. When Stonewall conducted a survey of 5,000 LGBTQI+ people in the UK (2018), 32% of participants that reported belonging to a faith group stated that they were not open with anyone within their faith community about their sexual orientation. This worryingly suggests a residual personal identity suppression and, ultimately, identity displacement within faith communities, giving rise to a risk of poor wellbeing.

Methodology

05

The survey ‘Life in the UK as an LGBTQI+ Muslim’ was created by Hidayah and circulated to members of the organisation through Hidayah’s email system. The survey was also promoted in Hidayah’s monthly meetups and via their social media channels.

All responses were received between February 2018 and November 2019; Hidayah received **167 responses** to its survey. Once the results were collected, Hidayah recruited a small group of volunteers to analyse the data. We looked for themes within the answers to structure the results around. The survey itself focused on questions of identity and how LGBTQI+ Muslims interact with the wider Islamic and LGBTQI+ community.

At a research meeting, we decided to divide the report into three sections based on demographics: one section dedicated to age, one to gender and sexuality and one to ethnicity.

We hoped that this would highlight any gaps within Hidayah’s research and provide more targeted support for those marginalised within the LGBTQI+ Muslim community. Within each section, we analysed how participants responded to ideas of their own identities, their communities and the support that is available to the LGBTQI+ Muslim community.

Age

06

The World Health Organization (WHO) identifies an older person as someone aged 60 years and over, however this definition is fluid dependent on context. In Wales and England, an older person is identified as anyone who is 50 years and over (Welsh Government 2013; Centre for Ageing Better 2020). Our survey included a 45-54 age category which, for the purposes of this report, we consider to be older LGBTQI+ Muslims.

Older people identifying as LGBTQI+ are poorly represented in research, the media and policy, leading to a socially constructed concealment and invisibility of this population (Westwood 2018). Any research aiming to shed light on the invisibility of hidden populations is consequently invaluable in weaving together a foundation knowledge base for future exploratory work.

Results

Within the 167 respondents who participated in the survey, there is a strong bias towards younger LGBQTI+ Muslims: 77% respondents were under 35 years of age, with only 22% respondents aged 35 years or over, showcasing virtually no representation of respondents from older age groups and thereby indicating age bias. Gender dispersion across age groups was unequal across age groups, as only 14% respondents identified as non binary and were predominantly situated in the 18-34 age categories.

Younger age groups (34<) identified as bisexual (20%), or gay (31%). 14% of respondents in older age groups (35>) identified as gay. Other sexual orientations had low report rates across all age groups: lesbian (11%); pansexual (6%) and queer (6%).

81% of respondents reported their gender identity was the same as assigned at birth; 64% of respondents aged 34< and 17% of respondents aged 35> respectively. 9% of respondents aged 34< and 3% of respondents aged 35> reported their gender identity was not the same as at birth. Gender fluid respondents were a minority group (2%) and only appeared in younger age groups, possibly indicating an acceptance of a new identity across LGBTQI+ Muslims.

Across all age groups, 78% of respondents described themselves as LGBTQI+ Muslims; 57% were aged 34< years old, compared with 17% of respondents aged 35> years old. 16% of respondents gave a neutral response and 7% of respondents aged 34< disagreed (See Appendix B).

Living Arrangements

Generally, respondents live with family or with friends (34%), with very few reporting to live with a spouse/partner (11%), supporting the notion of concealed expression of sexuality in mainstream society. 47% of respondents aged 34< live with their families, while those aged 35> tended to live with friends, with few older respondents living with family (5%). Younger respondents were more likely to live with a spouse/partner (6%) compared with older respondents (5%). This difference is marginal, positing LGBTQI+ couples are less likely to cohabit freely.

36% of respondents had come out to their families, namely 26% of younger respondents and 10% of older respondents. In total, 52% of all respondents live at home with their families, and from those living with family only 22% of participants had 'come out': broadly suggesting, young Muslims are more likely to conceal their identity and sexuality.

Supporting this notion, 51% of younger participants (aged 18-34 years) had not 'come out' to their families, possibly reflecting the sense of duty to comply with familial or religious expectations, in combination with potential personal conflict associated with LGBTQI+ identity (see Appendices A and C).

LGBTQI+ acceptance in the Muslim community

Heteronormative discourse is pervasive in mainstream Muslim spaces, forcing an ambiguity around the acceptance of LGBTQI+ Muslims within the Muslim community.

Across all age groups, 49% of respondents disagreed that LGBTQI+ identities are incompatible with being muslim. 23% of respondents chose a 'Neutral' response, 17% of which were younger age respondents, <34 years of age). 22% of the same age cohort agreed with the statement: 'The identities of Muslim and LGBQTI+ are incompatible'. Only 4% of older respondents (35> years of age) agreed with the statement and 13% disagreed, generally reflecting an emerging shift towards an acceptance of LGBTQI+ Muslims within Muslim communities.

There is still more work to be done before every LGBTQI+ Muslim can feel comfortable and free to express their true selves. This highlights the crucial role Hidayah plays in providing LGBTQI+ Muslims access to support and a safe space for individual freedom of self-expression.

Socialising and accessing support

47% of respondents reported accessing LGBTQI+ events in person; 12% reported attending bars/clubs, 13% attended LGBTQI+ groups/organisations and 13% attended non-Muslim support groups. 28% of younger respondents (aged <34 years) reported accessing social opportunities with other LGBTQI+ members online, compared with 1% of older participants.

Older Muslims predominantly accessed non-Muslim support groups (2%) and online groups (2%) with only 1% accessing specific LGBTQI+ groups. 19% of respondents, all of whom were aged 34 and under, reported not having any contact with the LGBTQI+ community. Moreover, 1% reported meeting LGBTQI+ individuals in a Mosque, which is telling and indicative of the fact that older LGBTQI+ Muslims may be more hesitant to socialise with other LGBTQI+ Muslims and are likely to suppress their identity within the wider Muslim community.

24% of younger respondents (aged <34 years old) reported finding out about groups through friends, followed by websites (16%), Facebook (8%) and word of mouth (5%). Older respondents (>35 years old) tended to access groups through websites (7%) and social media platforms (1%). Overall, very few respondents found out about support groups through advertising outside of in-person and online communication channels (7%) (See Appendices D and E).

Sense of belonging in LGBQTI+ communities

33% of younger respondents (aged 34<) tended to agree they felt welcomed by the LGBTQI+ community, yet 22% reported feeling unwelcome. 29% of all respondents reported a 'neutral' response, suggesting a possible discomfort expressing their views. Older respondents (aged 35>) generally disagreed (8%) with the statement 'I feel welcomed by the LGBTQI+ community', suggesting more work is needed to reach out to and support older LGBTQI+ Muslims. Since respondents tended to engage more with digital platforms, increasing the scope of existing online LGBQTI+ groups may help reach this demographic.

Older and younger respondents (44%) felt that the LGBTQI+ community was not understanding of the difficulties faced by those who identify as LGBTQI+ Muslims. This is in stark contrast with the 29% of Muslims who felt other LGBTQI+ members were understanding and the 25% of respondents who responded neutrally.

52% of younger respondents (aged 34<) agreed that there is no support for LGBTQI+ Muslims within Muslim communities, a finding echoed by older respondents (40%), suggesting little movement towards a more inclusive, supportive community for LGBTQI+ individuals.

It should also be noted, in survey questions where respondents are asked to select a response from a Likert Scale (e.g. Strongly agree, Agree, Neutral, etc.), most respondents tended to select 'Neutral'. This may be symptomatic of responders' forced repression, coupled with poor social opportunities to express their views as LGBTQI+ Muslims, something even reflected in an anonymous survey.

Despite the lack of understanding respondents felt the LGBTQI+ community showed towards their identity, 47% of all respondents felt supported by LGBTQI+ non-Muslims. Across all age groups there was consensus on this view, suggesting LGBTQI+ Muslims may be finding more acceptance and support within the LGBTQI+ wider population (See Appendix F).

Closing Remarks

This section of our report highlights a need to reach out to both younger and older LGBTQI+ Muslims who often feel unsupported and misunderstood by the LGBTQI+ community. Surprisingly, 52% of younger LGBQTI+ Muslims reported feeling there is no support for them within Muslim communities, positioning LGBQTI+ groups, such as Hidayah, as a beacon of hope and refuge.

Moreover, there is still a discomforting social environment engendered within the family unit, driving LGBTQI+ Muslims to conceal their identities. This alludes to a limited number of social environments and spaces LGBTQI+ Muslims can be themselves uninhibited, outside of social expectations and norms across Muslim communities. Older respondents tended to report accessing support groups via digital social platforms, stressing the importance of Hidayah's continued digital presence and evolution of digital support.

Given the current pandemic conditions that society is operating in, culminating in reduced in-person interactions, LGBTQI+ Muslims are at an increased risk of isolation and developing mental health illness. LGBTQI+ Muslims may feel distant from meaningful social support, polarising the impact of dysfunctional relationships within their own Muslim communities. Adopting strategies and digital presence to increase Hidayah's reach could assist in improving a sense of isolation and loneliness.

Initiating information sessions to educate and make other non-Muslim LGBTQI+ groups aware of the challenges Muslim LGBTQI+ can experience could begin developing sources of support to drive improved external social spaces outside of exclusive LGBTQI+ Muslim groups.

Finally, the survey fails to really provide any insights into older LGBTQI+ Muslims, i.e. those 50+, and more work should be conducted around this age group to ensure Hidayah is a universally understood and accessible service. It is possible older LGBQTI+ Muslims may feel isolated and excluded from social support groups, further forcing them to live concealed lives.

As a final statement, this survey suggests some movement towards acceptance by the wider Muslim community of different, or perceived unconventional, identities. Yet, it is clear more work is needed to assist non LGBTQI+ Muslims to better understand the LGBTQI+ identity to help create fully supportive and accepting social environments for LGBTQI+ Muslims to thrive across all age cohorts.

Gender & Sexuality

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Gender and sexuality shape the ways LGBTQI+ Muslims navigate their identities and access support services. The survey Hidayah has conducted reveals how LGBTQI+ Muslims feel towards their identities, their communities and where they feel comfortable seeking support.

As marginalised members in both queer communities and Islamic communities in the United Kingdom, this report aims to shed light on the intersectional oppression LGBTQI+ Muslims confront within the context of modern Britain.

Often represented as discrete categories, LGBTQI+ and Muslim identities are typically considered sites of conflict. This report presents accounts of LGBTQI+ Muslim attitudes towards aspects of life in the U.K., aiming to promote the voices of LGBTQI+ Muslims.

Literature Background

We live in a context which has positioned LGBTQI+ Muslim identities as ideological battlegrounds due to the simultaneous creation of post-9/11 **'War on Terror'** logics and the advancement of the LGBTQI+ liberation movement(s) in the early 2000s. **'Homonationalism'** refers to the adoption of LGBTQI+ rights by nation states like Britain, whilst increasingly targeting Muslims nationally and internationally, which has created a binarized understanding of the queer and the Muslim identity categories which 'must never converge' (Puar, 2007).

In part, this tension has arisen due to the **'universalisation'** of the gay rights movement, or the **'Gay International'**, which often neglects the complexities of Middle Eastern sexualities, further marginalising LGBT+ Muslims in countries like the United Kingdom (Massad, 2007). Looking at the U.K. context specifically, 'the formation of the queer Muslim racialized subjectivity is a spatialized one', which marginalises queer Muslims on the peripheries of 'gay (white) spaces' (DaGupta et al, 2018).

Studies have also been done regarding individual stories of members of the LGBTQI+ Muslim community, but these offer individual accounts of LGBTQI+ Muslim life in the UK rather than a broader picture (Siraj 2016, Shah 2018).
Against this contextual backdrop, Hidayah aims to re-centre the lived experiences of LGBTQI+ Muslims living in the UK to understand the current struggles they face negotiating their identities, their communities, and the support they access.

Participants:

Most participants in the survey were cisgender, with 136/160 (85%) participants answering that they identify as the same gender they were assigned at birth. From the remaining 15%, only 2 participants identified as transgender, and 22 participants identified as non-binary.

In terms of sexuality, of the participants who answered, 76/167 (45%) identified as gay, 41/167 (26%) as bisexual, 20/167 as lesbian and 10 as Pansexual or Queer, with just 0.6% identifying as questioning. We therefore wish to continue emphasising the difficulties of such a study to encompass the true diversity of the LGBTQI+ Muslim community.

These results reflect clear areas for further research to take place, particularly focusing on lived experiences which are harder to reach.

Gender, Sexuality and Identity

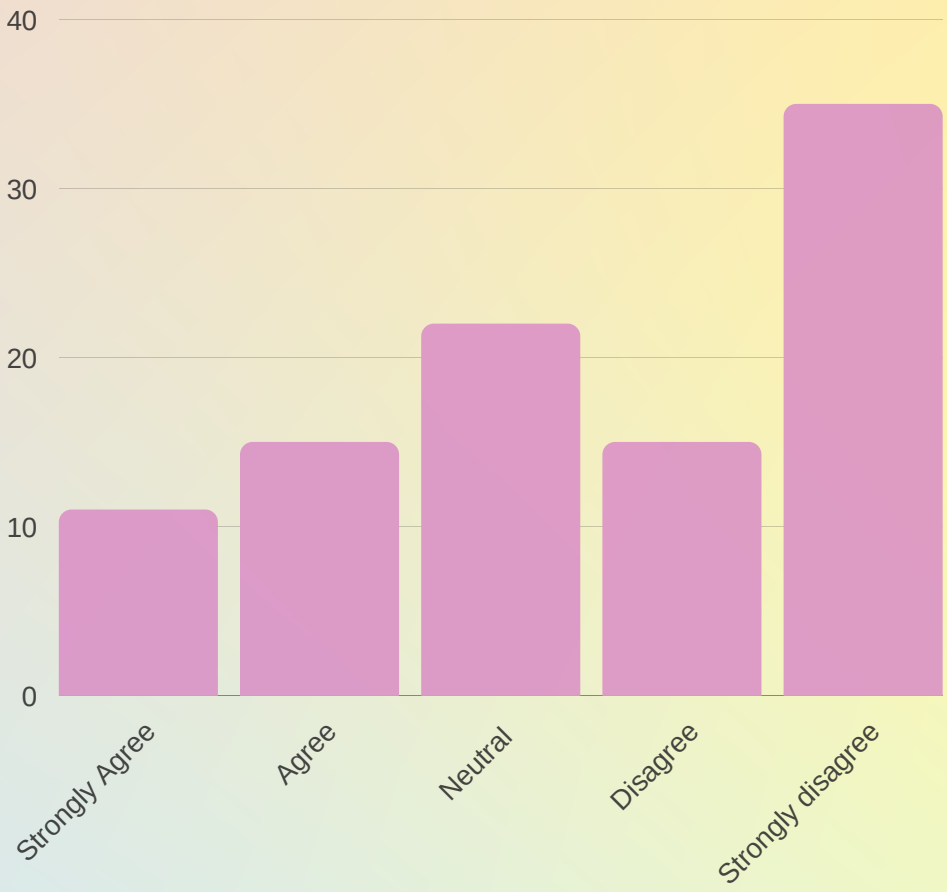
In the context of **Islamophobia, transphobia and homophobia**, LGBTQI+ Muslims face intersectional oppressions which pivot on identifications of race, religion, gender and sexuality amongst other identifications such as ethnicity and nationality (Minwalla et al, 2005). Hidayah's study asked LGBTQI+ Muslims to consider their attitude towards their own identity formation. In general, most LGBTQI+ Muslims see no conflict between their religious identity and their sexual or gender identity. Half the participants either strongly disagreed (35%) or disagreed (15%) with the statement 'The identities of Muslim and LGBTQI+ people are incompatible', with 22% of participants responding neutrally, 15% agreeing and 11% strongly agreeing.

The proportional responses of agreeing and disagreeing were similar amongst the LGBTQI+ categories, except for those who identify as 'questioning' perceiving the two identity categories as incompatible, and those who identify as 'queer' or as a gender other than the one they were assigned at birth much less likely to perceive the categories as incompatible.

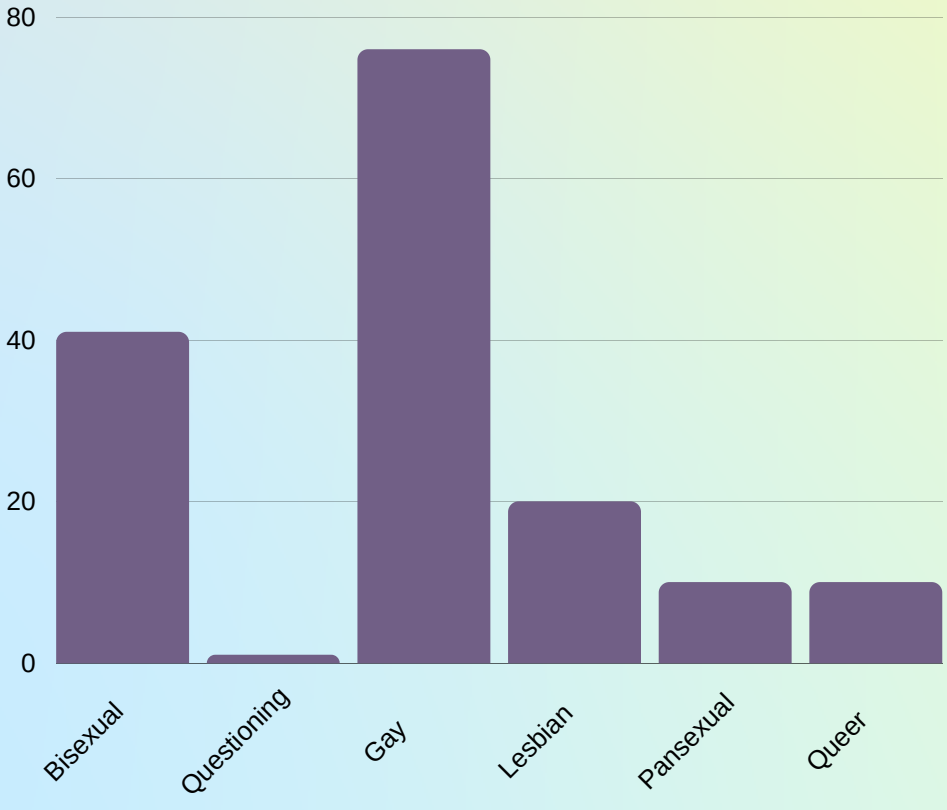
Those who identified as gay had a larger proportion of neutral responses than other categories.

This provides a complex picture of LGBTQI+ Muslim identifications with their intersectional realities,
as they face varying degrees of oppression in addition to the constant representation of both parts of their identities as discrete categories opposed to one another.

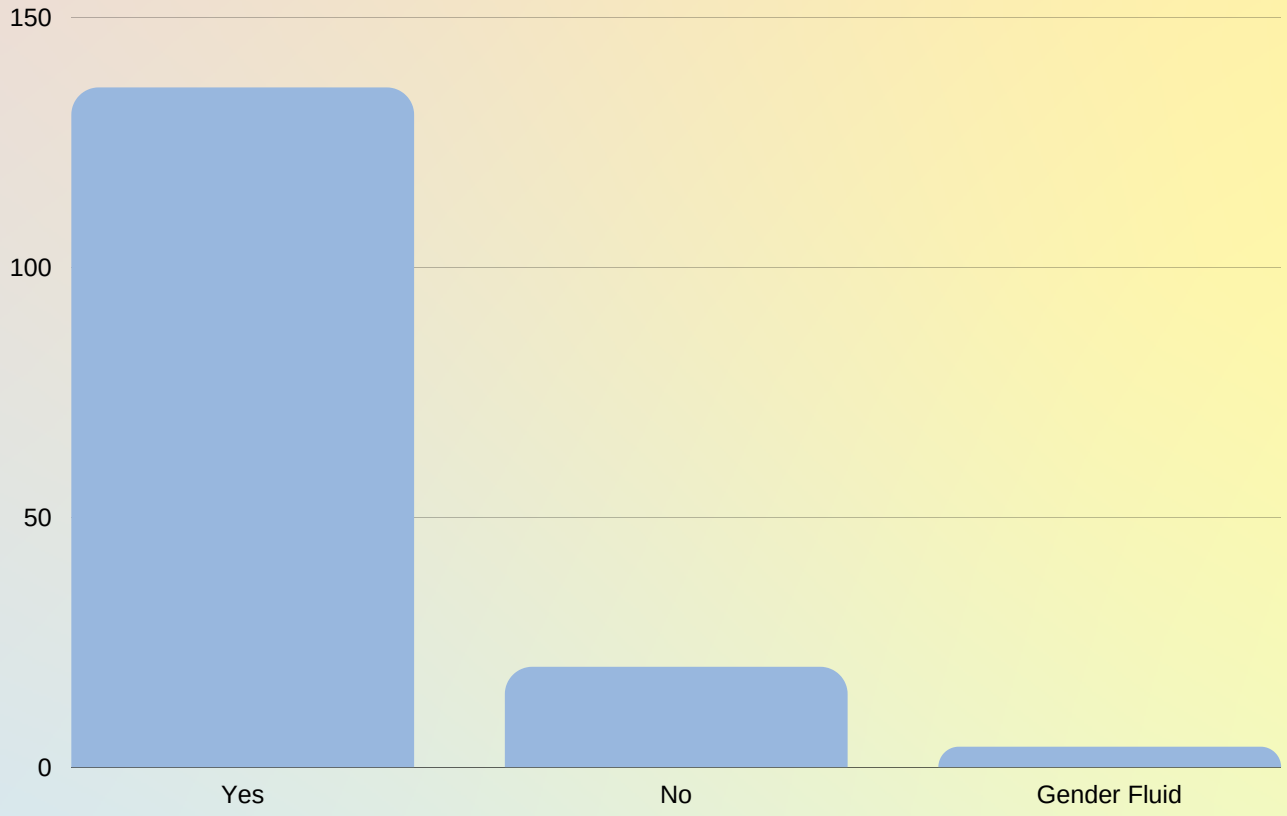
Identities of Muslim and LGBTQIA+ are incompatible



How do you self identify



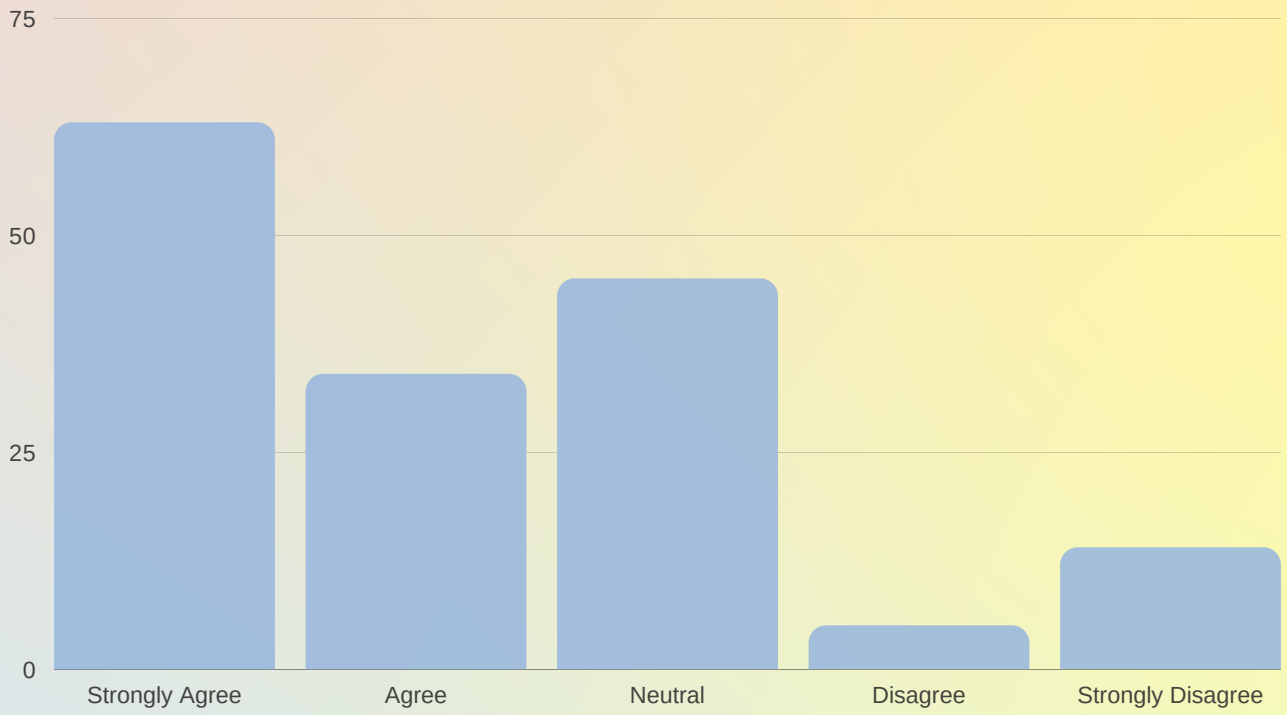
Do you identify as the gender you were assigned at birth



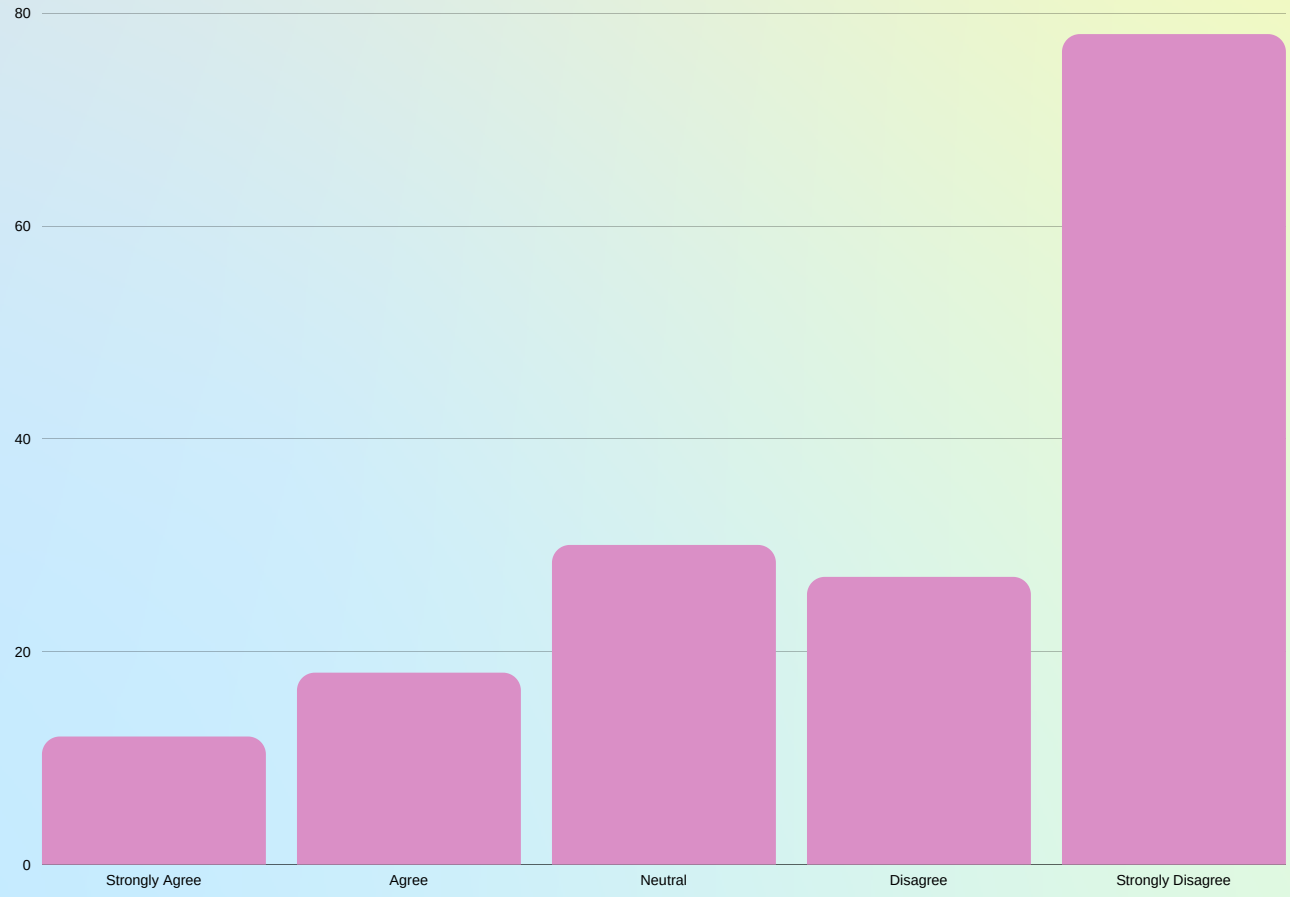
It is also clear from the responses to Hidayah's survey that feelings of pride and shame towards their LGBTQI+ identifications are not inherent in their lived experiences. When asked if participants agreed with the statement **'I feel proud of myself for being LGBT+'**, 39% answered that they strongly agree, 21% agreed and 28% were neutral. Only 3% disagreed and 8% strongly disagreed. This attitude towards pride is not dissimilar to the wider LGBTQI+ community in the U.K. (Government Equality Office, 2018). For the statement **'I feel ashamed of myself for being LGBT+'** 47% of participants strongly disagreed, 16% of participants disagreed and 18% answered neutrally. There were still a sizeable minority (10%) who agreed with the statement and a further 7% who strongly agreed.

This shows that although there is a perception of shame inherent in the LGBTQI+ Muslim community, LGBTQI+ Muslims themselves attach shame in varying degrees to their identities and mostly see their sexual and gender identities as a source of pride, which is more indicative of British LGBTQI+ attitudes more generally.

I feel proud of myself for being LGBTQI+



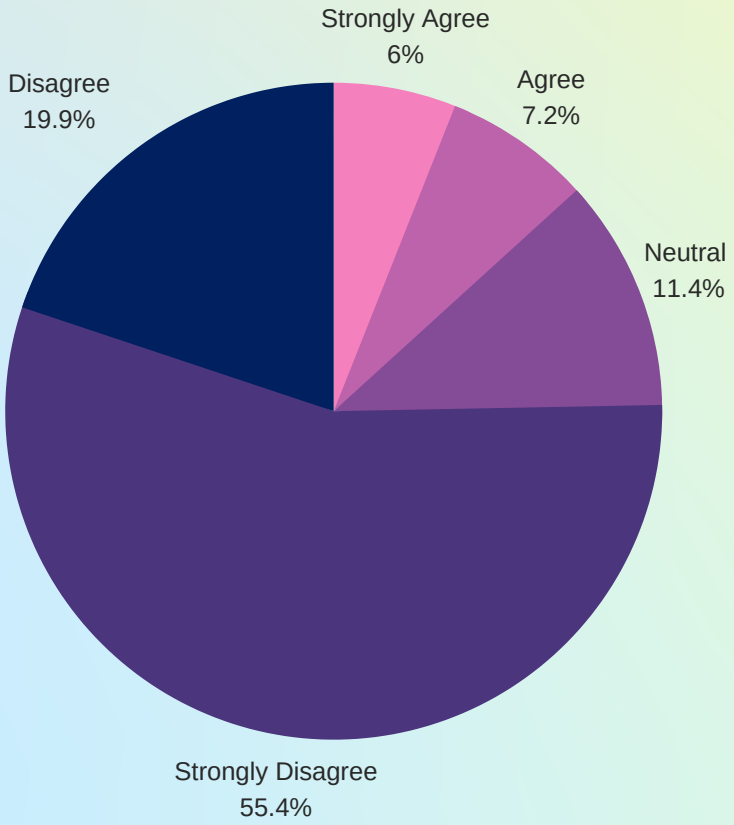
I feel ashamed of myself for being LGBTQI+



Community

Hidayah's survey also considered how LGBTQI+ Muslims felt towards the communities they identify with, namely the LGBTQI+ community and the Muslim community. The survey shows that LGBTQI+ Muslims often feel a lack of belonging within both the Muslim community and the wider LGBTQI+ community. The survey reveals that LGBTQI+ Muslims are uncomfortable being their authentic selves in Islamic contexts and face a lack of understanding from LGBTQI+ groups which they engage with.

'I am open about my sexuality and gender identity with people in the wider Islamic community'



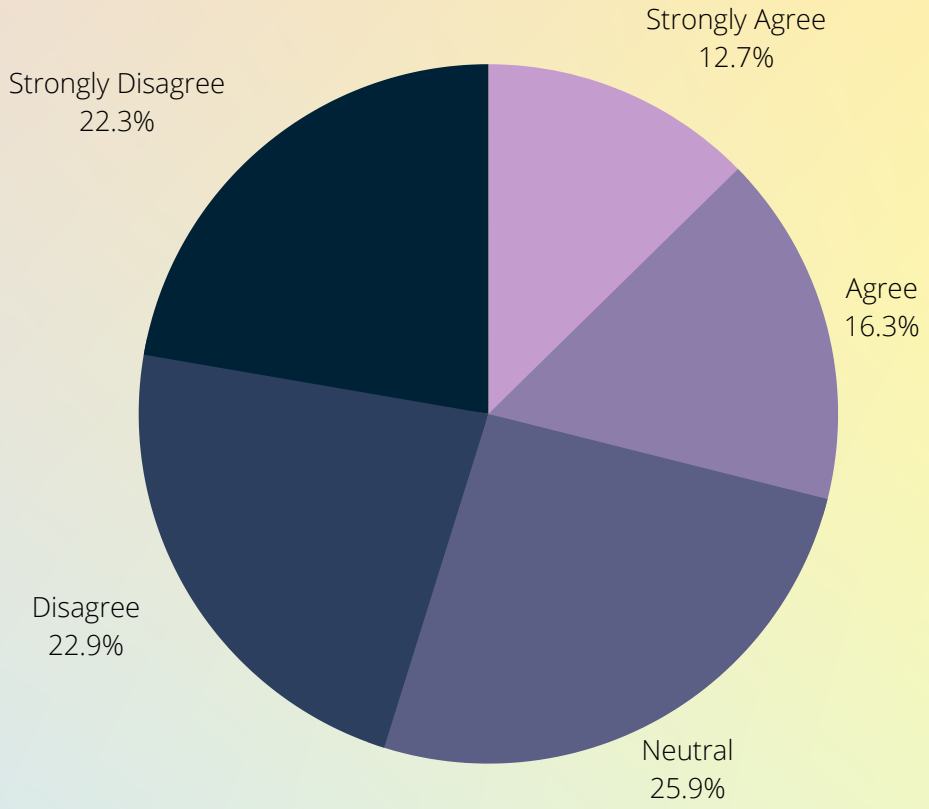
To the statement ‘I am open about my sexuality and gender identity with people in the wider Islamic community’, most participants answered that they strongly disagree or disagree, with few participants answering that they were open about their sexual or gender identity with the wider Islamic community. 55% of the participants stated that they strongly disagree with the statement and 20% answered that they disagreed. 11% of the participants stated that they were neutral towards the statement, whilst 7% agreed and 6% strongly agreed. Although a minority can feel open about their identification as LGBTQI+, this is not the case for the majority of participants. Although LGBTQI+ Muslims feel no difficulties understanding themselves in an Islamic context, they are aware that these are not the mainstream views of the wider Islamic community. The conflict between two important parts of their identity arises from the difficulties of expressing their sexual or gender identit(ies) and Muslim identit(ies) simultaneously.

Moreover, when asked to respond to the statement ‘The LGBTQI+ community are understanding of the difficulties faced by LGBTQI+ Muslims’, the results indicate the challenges LGBTQI+ Muslim face when interacting with LGBTQI+ communities, despite these instances being overall more positive than within Muslim communities. 22% of applicants strongly disagreed with the statement and 23% disagreed with the statement. A further 26% selected the neutral option, with 16% agreeing and 13% strongly agreeing.

Although this presents a generally more positive landscape, it also shows that more understanding is needed in the LGBTQI+ community to understand the complex circumstances LGBTQI+ Muslims face

It is arguably due to the work of LGBTQI+ Muslim organisations such as Hidayah that the LGBTQI+ sector has benefited from further understanding of the lives of LGBTQI+ Muslims, whereas there has been less engagement from Muslim communities. However, these results suggest that further work is needed both within LGBTQI+ communities and Muslim communities, to allow LGBTQI+ Muslims to feel a sense of communal belonging.

Those in the LGBTQIA+ community are understanding to the difficulties faced by a LGBTQIA+ Muslim



Support

It is therefore useful to understand how LGBTQI+ Muslims access support in the absence of feeling strong and stable ties to the communities they identify with. This also shows the best ways we can provide support for LGBTQI+ Muslims, as we can consider the types of services that are available to Hidayah's members and how we can provide more of the initiatives that work. In addition, results from the survey reveal that LGBTQI+ Muslims are not receiving as much support as they need and that allies continue to be an important source of support in their struggle against intersectional forms of oppression.

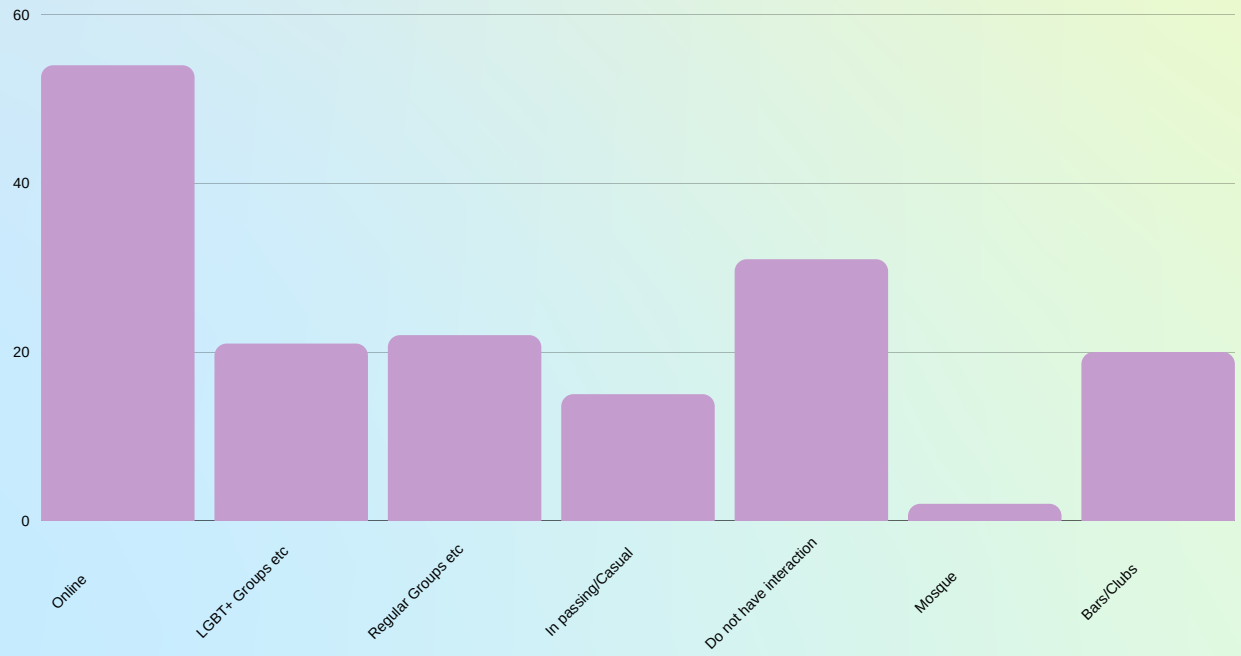
Hidayah's survey asked participants to respond to the statement 'There is no support for Muslim people who are LGBTQIA+ in Muslim communities', with 41.6% strongly agreeing with the statement, 25.3% agreeing, 19.3% neutral, 7.8% disagreeing and 6% strongly disagreeing. This shows the vast amount of work needed to be done with the Islamic community in order to provide support for its members who are LGBTQI+.

In addition, the survey asked participants to respond to the statement ‘I receive a great deal of support from other LGBT+ members who are non-Muslim’ with 20% strongly agreeing, 27.7% agreeing, 28% neutral, 13.9% disagreeing and 10% strongly disagreeing. This shows that although some support exists for LGBTQI+ Muslims, especially within the LGBTQI+ community, most LGBTQI+ Muslims surveyed have faced challenges when interacting with their communities.

Hidayah’s survey also asked participants ‘Where or how do you interact with others like yourself?’, to which the majority (32.5%) of participants answered online. 18.7% of participants said that they have no interaction with other members of the LGBTQI+ community, with just 1% answering that they interact with others at their mosque. 13% say they interact with other LGBTQI+ groups and 12.7% responded that they interact with LGBTQI+ Muslim groups like Hidayah. 12.7% also responded that they interact with others in bars and clubs, with 9% answering that they interact through casual meet ups.

This shows that more support is needed, but that there is some support available particularly through LGBTQI+ groups. It also shows that the internet is the most popular method of interaction amongst participants, perhaps due to the anonymity it provides those who fear for their true identities to be revealed to those around them.

Where or how do you interacte with others like yourself?



Closing Statement

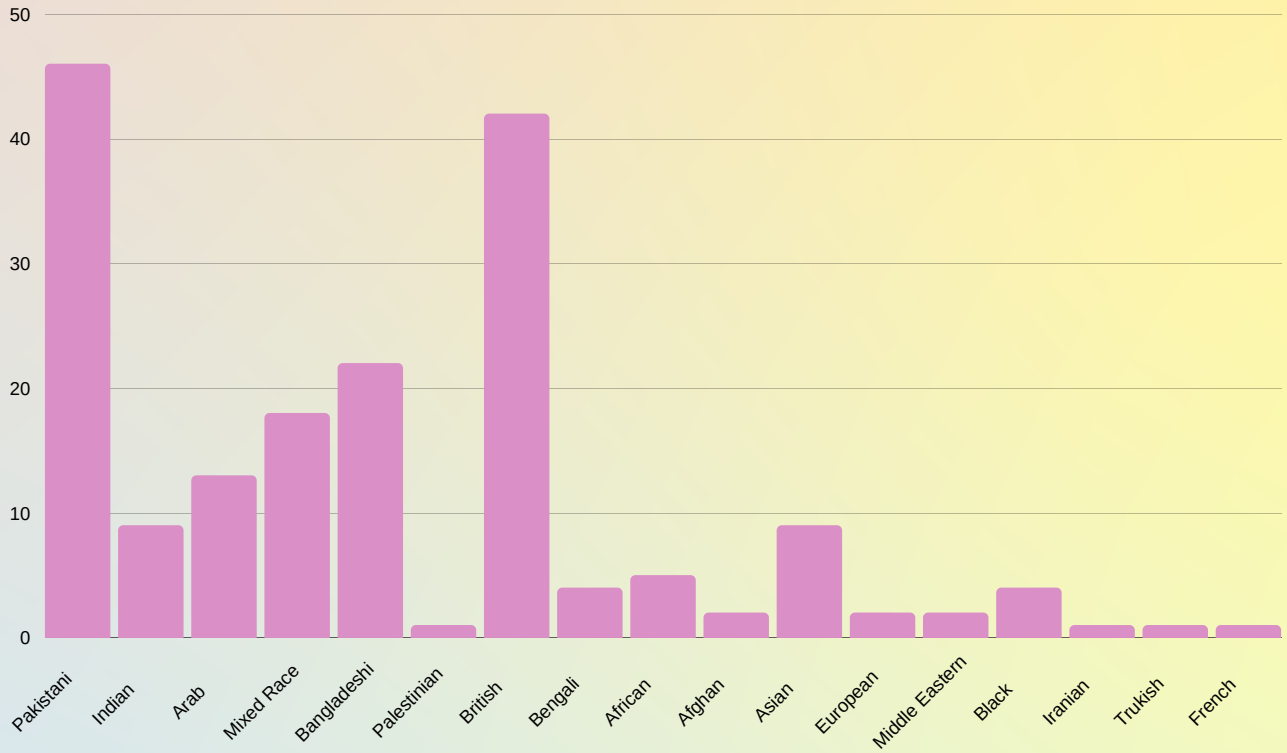
This research indicates the need for further study into the diverse ways that LGBTQI+ people who also identify as Muslims negotiate their identities, their communities and seek support when needed. Overall, this research suggests that the majority of the participants saw no conflict between their sexual/gender identity and their faith, although this attitude was not perceived to be shared by the LGBTQI+ community or the Muslim community. More importantly, the research indicates that more support is required and indicates that having online access to these networks is vital for reaching those vulnerable.

Ethnicity

23

Hidayah LGBTQI+ engaged with a range of people from culturally diverse backgrounds. As seen in the bar chart below, the most common ethnic groups participating in the survey were from the following backgrounds: Pakistani 46/167 (28.7%), British 42/167 (26.3%) and Arab 13/167 (8.1%). Although we asked participants to self-identify their ethnicity, we recognise that due to the sheer amount listed, in the future we will have pre-determined categories. Overall, we engaged with **167 individuals** who covered a broad range of demographics, which we believe is particularly good when engaging with seldom heard communities on sensitive and under-researched topics. Although we believe this data is beneficial in understanding the challenges faced by LGBTQ+ Muslims, we do not believe this to be wholly representative. For instance, we engaged with a small number of LGBTQ+ Muslims from African and Turkish backgrounds. We understand this small minority does not reflect the culturally diverse makeup of Britain. We would welcome the opportunity to conduct broader research on ethnicity in future if additional resources become available. The qualitative and quantitative data analysis on ethnicity resulted in three main themes of interest which include **Identity & Coming Out, Support and Wider Society.**

Figure 1: What do you identify your ethnic identity as?



Identity and coming out

During the engagement, Hidayah LGBTQI+ asked participants to share both positive and negative experiences of coming from an LGBTQI+ background. The questions covered experiences around identity and support. We believe it is important to highlight the issues faced by different ethnic communities as part of intelligence which can be used by our organisation as well as others for learning and improvement of services. One common theme declared by participants was the **inability to disclose sexual orientation to family** members or the wider Islamic community due to cultural homophobia.

When it comes to disclosing LGBTQI+ identity, most participants (62.3%) declared that they had not disclosed their sexual orientation or gender identity to their family. Only 37.7% of respondents stated they have shared their LGBTQI+ identity with members of their family. Similarly, most respondents were not open about their gender identity or sexuality with people within the wider Islamic community. Answering the statement in Figure 2, 55.4% strongly disagreed, 19.9% disagreed, 11.4% were neutral, 7.2% agreed and 6.0% strongly agreed.

People may conceal their LGBTQI+ identity for several reasons, namely due to the shame placed on LGBTQI+ Muslims. They may face strong opposition from fellow Muslims and within their own families. However, concealing one's sexual orientation leads to mental stress, low self-esteem and social isolation, which has been linked to increased risk of mental health issues, substance misuse, suicide and high-risk behaviours (Ghabrial, 2016).

Figure 2: I am open about my sexuality and gender identity with the wider Islamic community

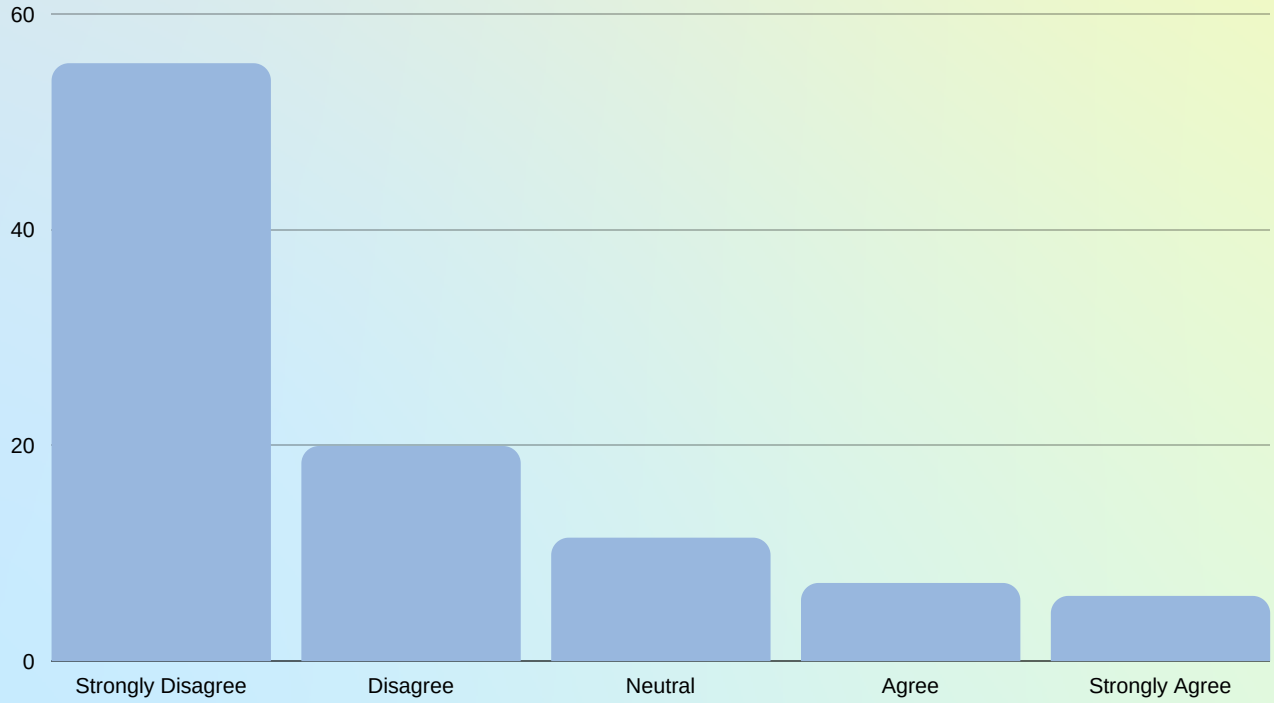
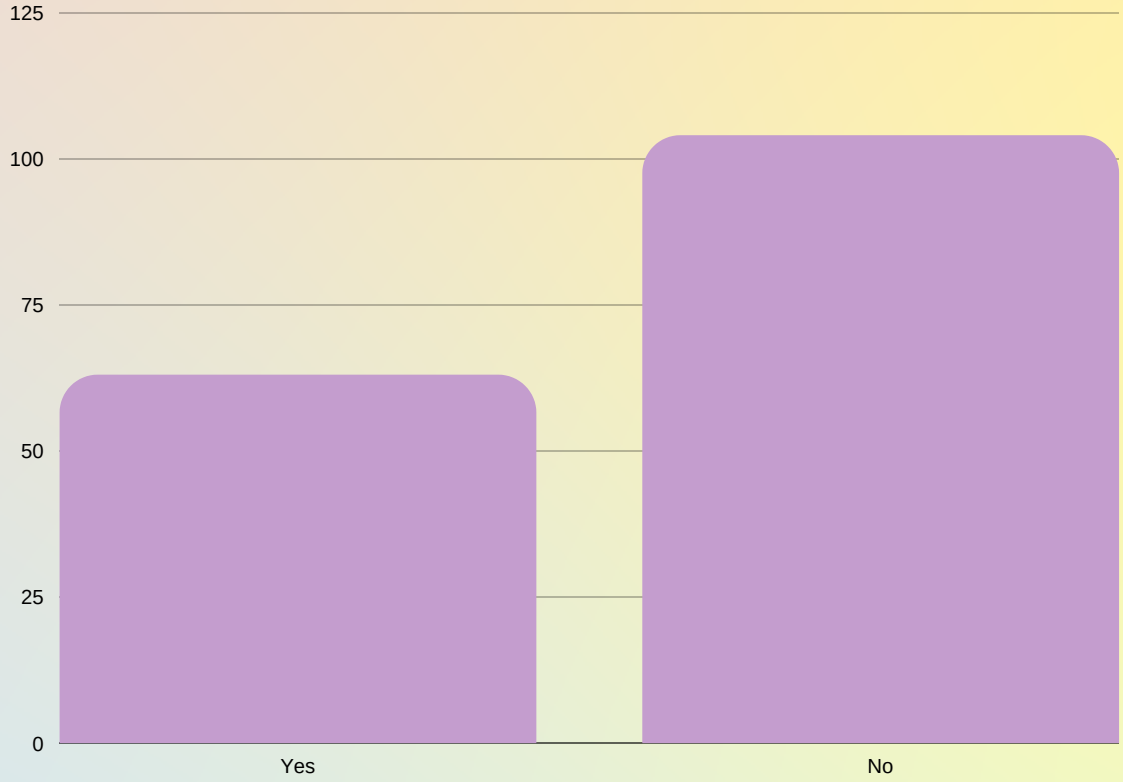


Figure 3: Have you 'come out' to your family if you are gay/bisexual/lesbian or if your gender identity is different from that assigned at birth



Case Processing Summary

	Cases					
	Valid		Missing		Total	
	N	Percent	N	Percent	N	Percent
What do you identify your ethnicity as? * I cannot act like myself around my family	99	59.3%	68	40.7%	167	100.0%

What do you identify your ethnicity as? * I cannot act like myself around my family Crosstabulation

Count

		I cannot act like myself around my family					
		Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Total
What do you identify your ethnicity as?	Pakistani	18	5	4	4	1	32
	Indian	2	5	0	0	0	7
	Arab	3	3	2	0	1	9
	Mixed race	1	2	4	0	0	7
	Bangladeshi	5	0	1	0	1	7
	Palestinian	0	1	0	0	0	1
	British	3	3	3	2	4	15
	Bengali	1	1	0	0	0	2
	African	4	0	0	0	0	4
	Afghan	0	2	0	0	0	2
	Asian	3	0	2	0	1	6
	Middle Eastern	0	0	0	0	1	1
	Black	3	0	1	0	0	4
	Turkish	0	0	1	0	0	1
	French	0	1	0	0	0	1
Total		43	23	18	6	9	99

A majority of respondents (65.1%) strongly agreed or agreed with the statement in Figure 4. LGBTQI+ individuals from a Muslim background are forced to confront religious dogma, which advocates for the punishment of those not conforming to gender identity or heterosexual orientation, leading them to repress and deny their sexuality or gender. Such condemnation in Islam along with social and cultural stigma means that individuals who identify as Muslims and LGBTQI+ remain ‘in the closet’ (Siraj, 2016). LGBTQI+ Muslims are regularly exposed to unique, intersectional and simultaneous forms of prejudice and discrimination.

To better understand the experiences of such disadvantaged individuals, we asked a series of open-ended questions to examine how participants describe their identities, communities and experiences as an LGBTQI+ Muslim. To give further context we promoted for additional comments about the daily challenges queer Muslims face and 93/167 respondents used this opportunity to explain issues in regards to their LGBTQI+ identity, their family and the wider Islamic community.

Generally, those who agreed with the statements in Figure 4 gave explanations based on fear of negative reactions or hostile treatments and the effects this may have on them.

People told us the daily challenges they face are:

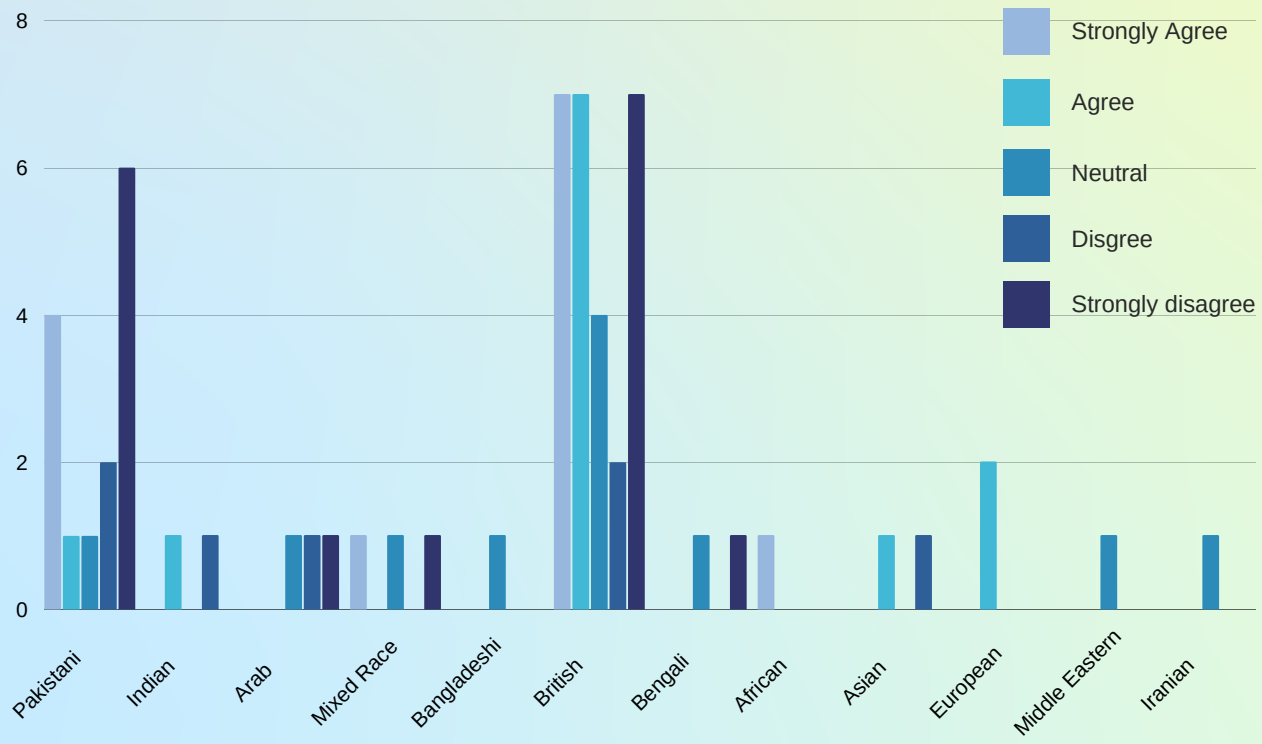
- 'Being accepted as gay and Muslim'
- 'Having to hide my sexual identity when I’m around other Muslims'
- 'Constant Lies to family. Living a double life'
- 'Not being able to openly express myself, having to hide the real me around family and most of my friends, pressure to get married to someone of the opposite sex'
- 'Just to accept myself and to believe that those around me can learn to accept me as me rather than my sexuality'
- 'Conflict between a faith I love and people and love and be being happy with expressing myself how I am often can never do the latter part of that comment'
- 'Conflicting identity, having to hide my true self around my community, fear of rejection. Having to deal with the fact I will one day have to marry someone of the opposite sex who I don't love'
- 'Cultural clashes with my sexuality'
- 'Discrimination from Muslims'

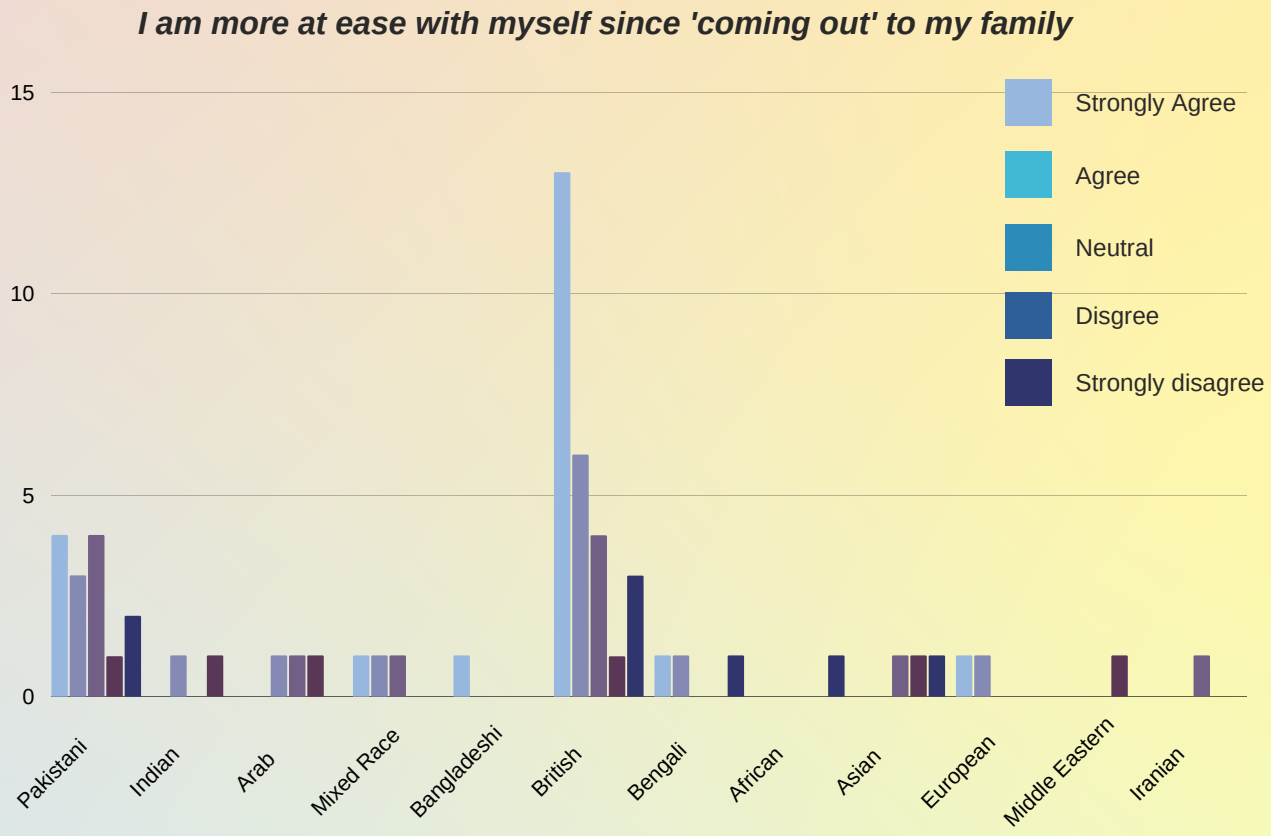
Ethnicity and Support

60 participants answered both statements in the charts below. 24/60 (39.7%) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement in the first chart. 36/60 (60.3%) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement in the second chart. Although this seems fairly positive, it is important to note that a significant number of people (85.0%) stated that their gender identity is the same as that assigned at birth. Only 12.5% stated their gender identity wasn't the same assigned at birth and 2.5% of participants declared themselves as gender-fluid.

We recognise the lack of engagement with people whose gender identity is not the same as assigned at birth, including non-binary, gender-fluid and transgender people, as well as people with variations in sex characteristics. As a result, we weren't able to fully obtain data on the lived experiences and struggles of such groups in comparison to the data we obtained about sexuality.

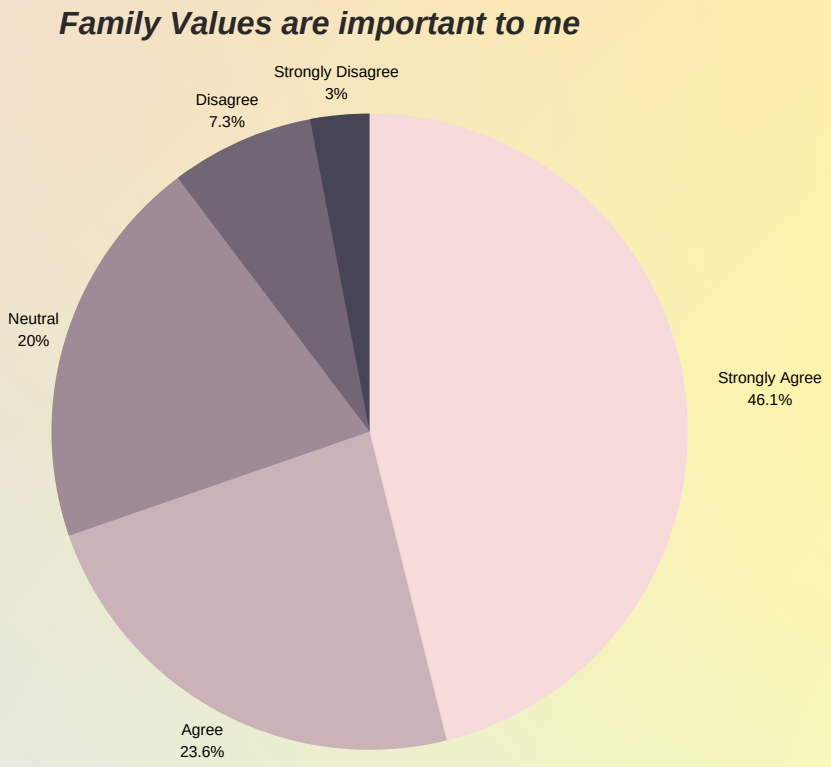
My family have been supportive of my coming out





The ethnicity breakdown of the **25 individuals** who declared their gender identity wasn't the same as assigned at birth or they were gender fluid is as follows:

- *4/24 Pakistani*
- *1/24 Indian*
- *2/24 Arab*
- *2/24 Mixed Race*
- *1/24 Bangladeshi*
- *8/24) British*
- *1/24 African*
- *3/24 Asian*
- *1/24 European*
- *1/24 Black*



A majority of participants highlighted that family values were important to them with 46.1% strongly agreeing, 23.6% agreeing, 20.0% neutral, 7.3% disagreeing and 3.0% strongly disagreeing. Coming from a cultural identity or having a bicultural identity can cause implications for LGBTQI+ Muslims individuals as they can find themselves in a diasporic space.

In Britain, there are LGBTQI+ Muslims activists who argue that traditional values damage LGBTQI+ Muslims who are ostracised by their families or communities, forced into marriages, or who suffer from depression and suicidal tendencies because of their struggles with gender and sexual identity (Roberts 2014). There is a need to embrace gender and sexual diversity within an Islamic framework.

The experiences of **LGBTQI+ Muslims may be influenced by ethnic and cultural norms,** such as the value of heteronormativity and heterosexuality and religious-value systems, e.g. Islamic values in all types of ethnic communities (Nadal et al, 2015).

Wider society and moving forward

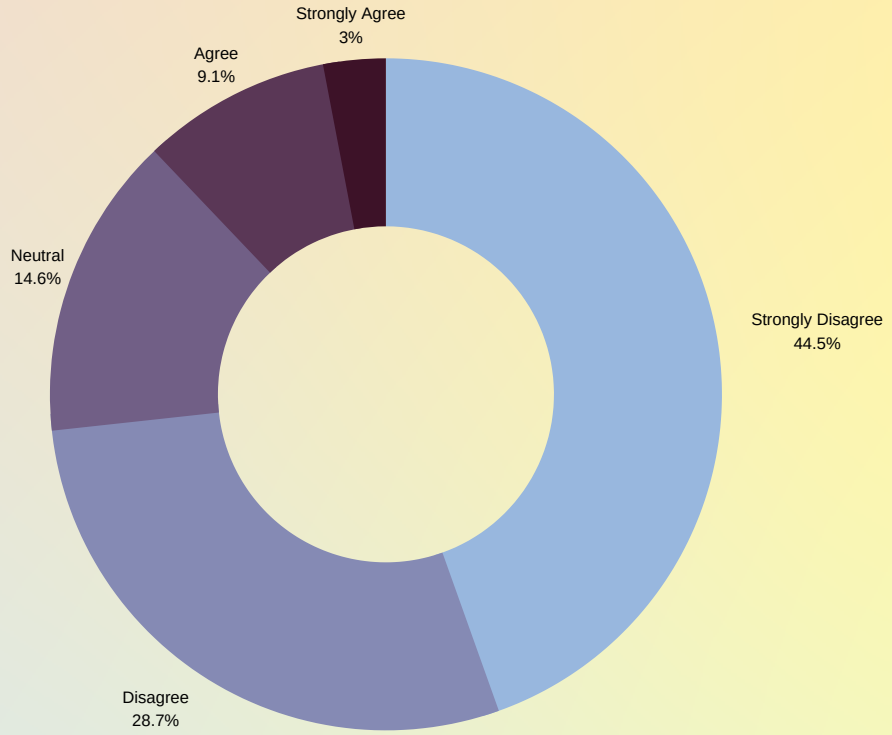
72/159 disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement in the chart below. Interestingly, a majority of respondents highlighted that there were **no role models for them as a LGBTQI+ Muslim**. 3.0% strongly agree, 9.1% agree, 14.6% were neutral, 28.7% disagree and 44.5% strongly disagree. Furthermore, disappointingly, a majority of participants declared that there is **no support for LGBTQI+ Muslims in Muslim communities** with 41.6% strongly agreeing, 25.3% agreeing, 19.3% claiming to be neutral, 7.8% disagreeing and 6.0% strongly disagreeing.

What do you identify your ethnicity as? * Those in the LGBTQIA+ community are understanding to the difficulties faced by a LGBTQIA+ Muslim Crosstabulation

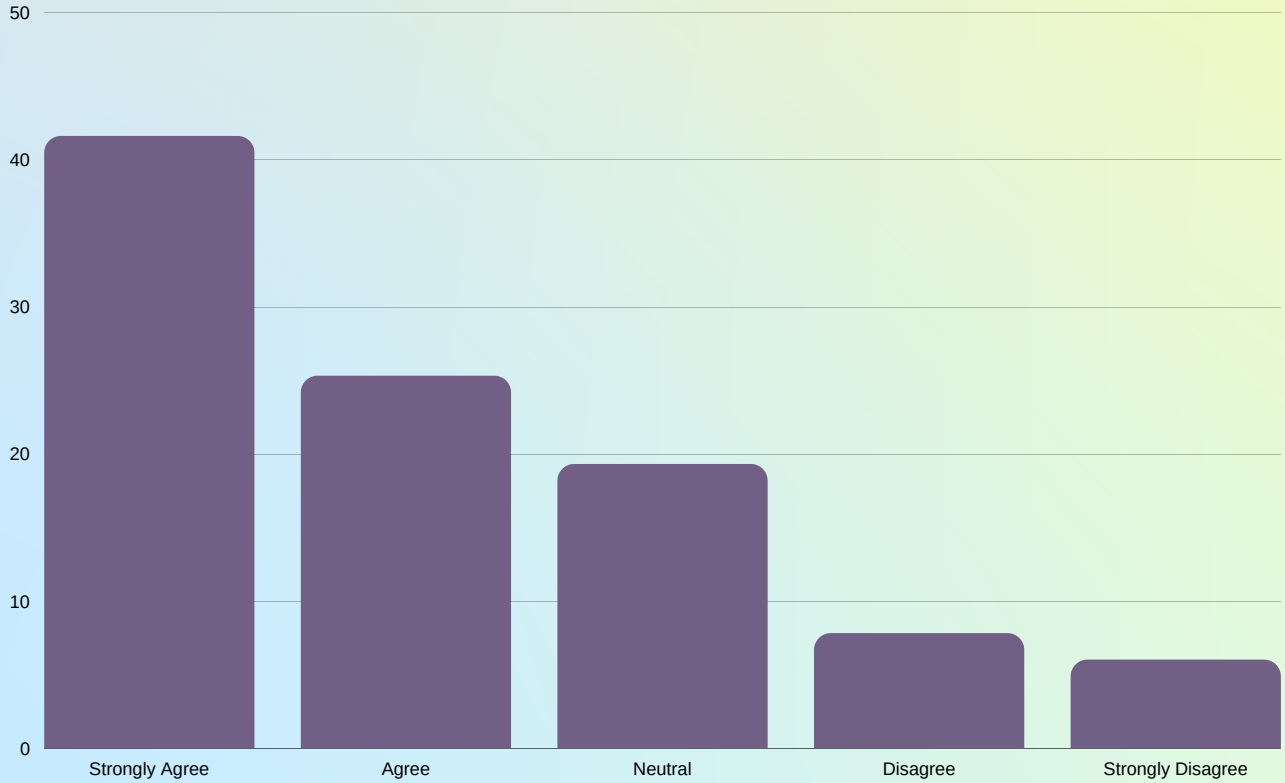
Count

		Those in the LGBTQIA+ community are understanding to the difficulties faced by a LGBTQIA+ Muslim					
		Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Total
What do you identify your ethnicity as?	Pakistani	6	7	13	9	11	46
	Indian	0	0	3	5	1	9
	Arab	1	3	3	3	2	12
	Mixed race	0	4	2	3	1	10
	Bangladeshi	0	2	3	1	2	8
	Palestinian	0	1	0	0	0	1
	British	5	5	11	13	8	42
	Bengali	2	0	1	0	1	4
	African	3	0	2	0	0	5
	Afghan	0	0	1	1	0	2
	Asian	1	3	1	0	4	9
	European	1	0	0	1	0	2
	Middle Eastern	0	0	1	0	1	2
	Black	0	1	0	2	1	4
	Iranian	0	0	0	0	1	1
	Turkish	0	0	0	0	1	1
	French	1	0	0	0	0	1
Total		20	26	41	38	34	159

There a lot of role models for me as a LGBTQI+ Muslim



There is no support for LGBTQI+ Muslims in the Muslim Communities



A large number of people disagreed or strongly disagreed with statements about Muslim communities and wider LGBTQI+ organisations being able to respond to their specific needs as an LGBTQI+ person, their ethnicity and their religion.

Some organisations and/or services are not competent in supporting their intersectional LGBTQI+ identities. Factors which may affect whether an LGBTQI+ Muslim can receive sufficient support can include an educated understanding of LGBTQI+ issues, an educated understanding of Islam and appropriate use of language and pronouns.

The misuse of language and lack of knowledge and understanding can be seen as barriers. This demonstrates the **importance of professionals and services** being particularly supportive and understanding of LGBTQI+ Muslim identities and issues and highlights the significance of knowledge, recognition, inclusion and understanding. Some participants also reported feeling disconnected from the LGBTQI+ community due to their identity as a racial/ethnic minority. These individuals reflected that they do not always feel like a part of the larger British LGBTQI+ community, due to experiences of racism and exclusion and marginalized identities. This suggests that finding a connection or bond to their ethnicity is important.

Answers from the open-ended question 'What changes need to happen in order for LGBTQI+ Muslims to become more supported and understood in the UK?' demonstrated that queer culture is not always harmonious with ethnic cultures. We had a total of 90/167 responses to this question, where people gave us recommendations on how they believe services and organisations can be improved to more effectively serve the LGBTQI+ Muslim community.

Many of the comments reflected the need for more role models, awareness/education and support within the wider LGBTQI+ community. Selected comments from this section included:

- 'More positive role models, more discussions, religious leaders to promote equality'
- 'Awareness within Muslim community'
- 'More visibility in mainstream media and better laws and government services specifically for queer people in religious communities and families'
- ‘More events among conservative cis straight Muslims to bridge the two together’
- 'Teaching the Muslim community about LGBTQIA+ and what to do if their child is LGBTQIA+'
- 'Awareness and open constructive conversations'
- 'Visible role models and showing the non-Muslim LGBTQI our struggles and ensuring empathy is felt'
- 'Specific mental health support for this population. People willing to hear us out without prejudice'
- 'More support outside the community, and more inclusive spaces & figures within the community'

• 'There needs to be a lot more queer Muslim representation, not only to help queer Muslims feel more understood and accepted but to normalise the idea of queer Muslims within the LGBTQ+ community too. Non-Muslim LGBTQ+ people need to be more openly supportive of queer Muslims and to make the community more inclusive and inviting to us'

• 'Funding of LGBT Muslim organisations, LGBT positive policies in schools and media programming to help the next generation to empathise with us'

Conclusion

35

The findings of our cross-sectional survey contribute to a gap in the literature on LGBTQI+ Muslims.

Intersectionality is a huge concept which underpins this report and analysis. We spoke with many LGBTQI+ Muslims from different cultural backgrounds living in Britain.

This work and analysis provides an important snapshot into the lives of LGBTQI+ Muslims and should inspire and challenge us all to do more work in addressing inequalities and challenges within this community.

The data presented here, **from almost 200 LGBTQI+ Muslims with hybrid identities,** provides an important insight into the complex set of struggles they face.

The project was a first step in understanding the views and experiences of some of the LGBTQI+ Muslim community. While our findings are limited to a sample of those predominantly from an Asian background, the conclusions from this study draw attention to areas where there is cause for further investigation and future work should be focused.

Respondents have provided us with a clearer insight into what matters to them the most. A number of trends were highlighted, including:

- lack of awareness and understanding
- discriminatory attitudes
- complications in feeling a sense of belonging; and
- the persistence of cultural norms and the difficulty of reconciling LGBTQ+ identity and religion.

The research indicates simple measures are needed to improve awareness of, and support for LGBTQI+ Muslims.

Globally, Muslims make up the second-largest religious group, with 1.8 billion people or 24% of the world's population (Pew Research Centre, 2017), and is arguably the fastest-growing religion worldwide. Despite this, there is evidently a lack of data and research regarding the lived experiences of LGBTQI+ Muslims.

In Britain today, negative attitudes towards the LGBTQI+ community are rapidly shrinking, with prejudiced views continuing to decline as the population increasingly demonstrates accepting attitudes (NatCen, 2019).

Just under 200 individuals engaged with us, providing both quantitative and qualitative data thereby bringing unheard and valuable stories and experiences to the forefront. As the study suggests, **LGBTQI+ Muslims are keen to reconcile their LGBTQI+ identity with their religion**. As such, our research provides evidence against the perceived incompatibility of gender and sexual diversity within Islam.

Although many factors are at play when it comes to discrimination and prejudice against the LGBTQI+ community, our study demonstrates that religious and cultural attitudes are especially important in shaping belief systems.

This study highlights the struggles LGBTQI+ Muslims face when it comes to their **identities, sexualities, relationships, communities and accessing support services**. As many of us in modern British society attempt to put LGBTQI+ identities on the agenda, we must be aware and recognise the complications of cross-cultural and cross-religious differences and intersectional identities (Rahman, 2015).

We hope our findings may help inform efforts to decrease LGBTQI+ discrimination and increase awareness, advocacy and support services available, as well as future research within Islamic and LGBTQI+ communities.

All participants were keen that their voices were heard and wanted to contribute to shaping services and raising awareness. We value the feedback gathered - however, this was a small sample of people and further work is needed to contact groups that are still under-represented (see recommendations).

Thank you to everyone who participated in this research study

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