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Challenges to identity integration amongst sexual minority British Muslim South Asian men

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Abstract

Since the Stonewall uprisings, there has been greater social acceptance of homosexuality within Western contexts. Nevertheless, those who are at the intersection of more than one minority identity continue to face prejudice and discrimination, including homophobia and racism. Though there has been increasing work regarding the experiences of sexual minority people of colour (POC), a lacuna remains regarding the experiences of sexual minority British Muslim South Asian men and the integration of sexual minority and religious identities, particularly within a context of increased societal acceptance towards sexual minorities and societal Islamophobia. In this study, 38 sexual minority British Muslim South Asian men were recruited via snowball sampling and interviewed. Data were examined via reflexive thematic analysis. Five themes were identified: degrees of "outness", hegemonic Whiteness and the LGBTQ+ community, internalisation of White hegemony, distancing from the sexual minority religio-cultural ingroup, and attempting to reconcile potential identity conflict between sexual orientation identity and religious and cultural identities. Respondents' experiences highlighted substantial social exclusion due to

intersectional disadvantage as well as a lack of intra-community social support, suggesting substantial isolation, psychological implications and a general eschewing of identity affiliation based on sexual attraction. This has implications on services predicated on identity affiliation which may potentially exclude the needs of hidden and intersectionally disadvantaged populations.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Since the Stonewall riots in the US and the decriminalisation of homosexuality in the UK a half-century ago, there has been gradual societal acceptance of homosexuality (Curtice, Clery, Perry, Phillips, & Rahim, 2019) in Western contexts. This has been enshrined in UK legislation with the Civil Partnership Act 2004, Equalities Act 2010, and Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013. Nevertheless, this wider societal acceptance may not be reflected in the lives of all sexual minorities nor within socially marginalised communities.

In the National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles (NATSAL-3), 11.5% of British women and 8% of British men reported having a same-sex sexual experience (Mercer et al., 2013), yet only approximately 2% of the UK population self-identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual (Office for National Statistics, 2018a). This difference highlights a distinction between sexual orientation, sexual attraction, sexual identity, and sexual behaviour. One potential explanation might be perceived negative consequences of "coming-out", e.g. family rejection, detrimental impacts on family reputation or, in extreme cases, honour-based violence (Khan & Lowe, 2020; Kumpasoğlu, Hasdemir, & Canel-Çınarbaş, 2020). This distinction between behaviour and identity may be particularly felt by ethnic and religious minorities (Balaji et al., 2012; Carrillo & Hoffman, 2016). Accordingly, it is important to understand potential challenges to positive identity integration amongst minorities at the intersection of sexual, religious, and ethnic identities.

1.1 | Theoretical frameworks

Social identity theories offer an analytical lens to understand how individuals conceptualise and affiliate with different identities. Tajfel and Turner (1979) proposed that individuals are psychologically motivated to hold positive social identities. Furthermore, social group memberships can positively impact well-being through providing a sense of belonging, comfort, meaning, and purpose (Jetten, Haslam, & Haslam, 2015; Mitha & Adatia, 2016). Nevertheless, identifying with groups perceived less positively in society can have harmful social and well-being outcomes (DeMarco & Newheiser, 2019). An individual's group memberships may not always be compatible with one another, and potential conflict can inhibit identification, social connection, and support from either or both groups (Hamblin & Gross, 2013).

Intersectionality theory, therefore, recognises the complexity of minority identities and proposes that individuals may face multiple levels of oppression and discrimination (Crenshaw, 1991). Collins (2004) notes "race, class, gender, sexuality, [and] ethnicity [are] mutually constructing systems of power…[and] untangling their effects in any given

situation…remains difficult" (11). Moreover, identity is complex and fluid, with multiple overlapping realities that coexist and impact upon how one's identity is visible and perceived by others, which can influence experienced prejudice. Even if an individual may feel their identities to be compatible, this may not be how they are perceived by others (e.g., Hopkins & Greenwood, 2013). Individuals who experience social oppression may consequently change their behaviour to de-emphasise aspects of their identity, use strategies such as performativity to consolidate or reinforce their membership to the ingroup, or opt to create their own social ingroups as an identity enhancement strategy (Branscombe, Schmitt, & Harvey, 1999; Koc, Sahin, & Anderson, 2021).

Intersectionality and identity theories are crucial to understanding the experiences of sexual minority people of colour (POC). The mainstream LGBTQ+ community, though portrayed as inclusive, may actually create an unwelcoming space for sexual minority POC due to its hegemonic Whiteness and occurrences of racism (Han, 2007; Jaspal, 2017; Jones, 2016). Indeed, the movement to add black and brown stripes to the Pride flag in the UK, as a gesture of inclusivity, was met with some backlash (Baggs, 2019). Sexual minority POC may feel pressured to "come out" and "assimilate" into the "scene", which may not be appropriate or viable options for them (Jivraj, Tauqir, & de Jong, 2003; Kehl, 2020). Moreover, sexual minority POC may struggle with reconciling social representations of LGBTQ+ culture with views from within their religious, ethnic, and cultural communities. They may experience internal and external homophobia and discrimination (Cyrus, 2017), leading them to question just in which community they belong (Bagci et al., 2020; Ghabrial, 2017), which can have psychological implications.

1.2 | Sexual minority identity construction

Some research has explored the experiences of minority LGBTQ+ people (i.e., non-White, non-middle class). Barrett and Pollack (2005) discuss the hegemonic construction of mainstream LGBTQ+ spaces within the context of working-class men in America, finding class distinctions rendered a distancing from "gay" identity and "community" due to feelings of non-belonging. Additional complexities are seen when considering racialisation. Finlinson, Colón, Robles, and Soto (2006) found a distancing regarding a "gay identity" amongst Puerto Rican working-class men who have sex with men (MSM), where masculinity was constructed depending on one's sexual role. Thing (2010) noted elements of hybridity amongst self-identified gay men in Los Angeles where identities were dependent on sexual role and social class. The phenomenon of heterosexual identification despite homosexual behaviour has been discussed in the literature in relation to the "down-low", which has predominantly been examined within African-American and Latino communities in America (e.g., Martinez & Hosek, 2005). Whilst some work has examined same-sex behaviour within Muslim communities globally (e.g., Murray & Roscoe, 1997), extant work on British Muslims has tended to frame "coming out" as an identity-affirming strategy, not critically interrogating reasons why this may not be desirable or possible. Indeed, some scholars of colour dispute binaries of "outness" versus "closeted", recognising these dichotomies may exclude sexual minority POC (Boussalem, 2020).

Whilst there has been increased media visibility of sexual minority British Muslim South Asians, shedding light onto an oft-hidden population, many within this group may not find affinity with these representations or feel comfortable rendering visible their sexual orientation, opting for more "discreet" lives, feeling it safer to move amongst hidden communities (Kesvani, 2019). Accordingly, we aim to examine identity processes among these sexual minority British South Asian Muslim men.

1.3 | Muslims in Britain

Muslims comprise approximately 5% of the UK population (Office for National Statistics, 2018b), with nearly half born in the UK and two-thirds being of South Asian descent (Muslim Council of Britain, 2015). As a community, they experience multiple social disadvantage including poorer attainment in educational settings, lower levels of

employment, poorer health, and largely live in deprived and disadvantaged geographies (Muslim Council of Britain, 2015). The British media has positioned British Muslims as a threat *vis-à-vis* the White British majority, for example, framing Muslim men in the context of "Asian sex gangs", being overly patriarchal and misogynistic to women, being involved in criminal gangs and as a "fifth column" whose values are positioned as anathema to "British values" (e.g., Frondigoun et al., 2007; Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2010). This juxtaposition is particularly seen in discourse on inclusion and tolerance, positioning Muslim views *vis-à-vis* LGBTQ+ rights. Puar (2013) argues that LGBTQ+ rights are framed within a discourse of "progressiveness" and thus adopted as part of "national values" regarding equality. Religious and ethnic minority communities who do not adopt this approach are therefore portrayed as being against "progressive national values". This type of framing was seen in the UK context during the Birmingham LGBTQ+ teaching controversy, prompted by proposed changes to the English relationships and sex education curriculum which were to include teaching about LGBTQ+ relationships. There were protests at schools in Birmingham by members of Muslim, Jewish, and Christian religious conservative groups. When reporting on this controversy, however, the media portrayal was largely framed as "Muslim groups opposing equal rights". This narrative, however, ignored concerns from other religious minorities, and the curriculum itself being linked to controversial counter-terrorism measures placing young Muslims under scrutiny. Moreover, this type of polarised discourse, seen in a number of countries and contexts, replicates Orientalist and assimilationist thinking, in that non-Western cultures are viewed as lacking Western ideas about sexual orientation identity and visibility, with religious communities viewed as not "progressive", and with sexual minorities within religious communities pressed to "come out" and be "liberated" (Heimer, 2020; Massad, 2007). This also erases identities which do not use Western conceptualisations regarding visibility of sexual orientation identity. Overall, these social representations can increase feelings of marginalisation amongst those at the intersection of multiple minority groups.

1.4 | Sexual minority Muslims

For sexual minority Muslims, the salience of religious identity along with stigma attached to non-heterosexuality within their religio-cultural community may present an internal conflict in reconciling religious and cultural identities with a sexual orientation identity (Koc et al., 2021). Traditional interpretations of Islamic religious scripture view sex outwith the confines of heterosexual marriage to be sinful and/or forbidden (Siraj, 2011). That said, as with adherents of other religious traditions, what is religiously prescriptive may not reflect practice in reality. As with other sexual minority POC, living on the "down-low" may facilitate reconciling sexual orientation with living within patriarchal cultures with prescriptive roles on gender and masculinity (Eslen-Ziya & Koc, 2016) and may help with avoiding prejudice or negative social consequences. While alternative interpretations regarding homosexuality and Islam have emerged (e.g., Kugle, 2010), these are not representative of mainstream Muslim views (Gallup, 2009; Ipsos MORI, 2018; Siraj, 2009) where sexual mores are conservative and adherence to collective kinship trumps individual identity (Siraj, 2009; Yip, 2004). Extant research (e.g., Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2010) suggests that amongst sexual minority British Muslims potential identity conflicts may exist regarding religious and sexual orientation identity, and various strategies and processes may be employed to navigate these. This may include performativity of heterosexual identity (Jaspal & Siraj, 2011) or selective disclosure of sexual orientation identity (Siraj, 2011). Additionally, self-stigma, internalised homophobia, and feelings of shame often are seen with respondents viewing their homosexuality as a "test" or punishment requiring penance (Afzal, 2014).

1.5 | Aims of the present study

Since the seminal works regarding British Muslim non-heterosexuals (Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2010; Siraj, 2009; Yip, 2004), there have been broader societal changes regarding inclusion of sexual minorities in mainstream British

society. Contemporaneously, social stigmatisation towards Muslims has increased, alongside a dearth of dedicated support groups for sexual minority British Muslims (i.e., Bassi, 2008). This leads to a lacuna of research investigating how sexual minority British South Asian Muslims have responded to increasing societal sexual minority visibility on the one hand and increased Islamophobia on the other, thus having different manifestations of their selves pitted against each other in the public discourse. This study, therefore, aims to examine identity construction amongst sexual minority British Muslim South Asian men within this context, using an intersectional approach which has largely been missing from the literature.

2 | METHODS

2.1 | Participants

Thirty-eight self-identified British Muslim men of South Asian heritage were recruited from London (79%) and Scotland (21%). Participants' ages ranged from 18–37 (M: 26.5, SD: 4.3) and participants' ethnic backgrounds were Pakistani (71%), Bangladeshi (13%), and other South Asian (16%). Just over a quarter of participants were students, with another quarter in professional occupations; the remainder were in low-paid/low-skilled jobs or chose not to disclose their occupation.

2.2 | Recruitment

British Muslim South Asian men were recruited to discuss their experiences being Muslim and attracted to the same-sex, being mindful of negative connotations regarding sexual orientation labels within the community (Siraj, 2009), and thus facilitated obtaining respondents who may not necessarily have adhered to a sexual orientation identity, in contrast to previous work in the area (e.g., Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2010). The study employed a qualitative methodology, following the approach established by previous authors (e.g., Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2010; Kesvani, 2019), recruiting participants through snowball sampling via gatekeepers and their social networks (Koc, 2016).

2.3 | Procedure

As "outing" was a concern for many respondents, interviews were conducted in a manner most amenable for them, for example, in-person, telephone, or online. These approaches have been previously established in research with similar populations (McKeown, Nelson, Anderson, Lowd, & Elford, 2010; Siraj, 2016). This decision was pragmatic due to some respondents' reluctance to meet in-person (due to fear of being recognised by someone they knew) and the greater degree of anonymity afforded by telephone/online interviews to discuss sensitive topics (McKeown et al., 2010). Respondents were assured their identities would remain anonymous; therefore, pseudonyms are used.

The interviewer was male and from a similar religio-cultural background to respondents. The implications of researchers holding insider/outsider perspectives have been explored previously (e.g., Abbas, 2010; Siraj, 2012b). In this study, the shared religio-cultural background may have been beneficial in the interviewing process, for example, in terms of shared knowledge and understanding of religio-cultural terminology and social norms/behaviours. That said, many respondents were guarded in their responses, possibly fearing disclosure within their communities. Indeed, those who were not interviewed in-person seemed more open and forthright, suggesting a greater degree of candour facilitated by degrees of anonymity afforded by the alternative interviewing modalities.

Interviews lasted between one to two hours and were unstructured, loosely based around a broad topic guide centred around the following topics: awareness of sexual attraction, experiences in developing social support

networks, religion, sexuality and religio-cultural expectations. Respondents preferred not to be audio-recorded, reflecting their fear of potential disclosure, thus transcripts were developed from field notes. While this study is not meant to generalise to all sexual minority Muslims, it gives greater insight into a population group who may experience intersectional disadvantage (Rahman, 2010) and may not necessarily engage with gay-affirmative spaces (Siraj, 2011).

2.4 | Analysis

Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis, as outlined in Jaspal (2020) and Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019). Analysis was iterative, and all authors were involved in the coding process. An intersectional lens was used as a framework to understand respondents' lived experiences. The authors used a reflexive approach, examining their own positionality with respect to the data. Codes were collated to generate the themes. Presented quotes are participants' own words, with clarification added in square brackets.

3 | FINDINGS

Analysis of respondents' narratives revealed the complexities in identity construction and integration. Their sexual identity was situated against their socio-cultural context and participants often conflated religion and culture. The main themes are discussed below.

3.1 | Degrees of "Outness"

Respondents' experiences of being "out", or public in their sexual orientation identity, varied with age. There was a tendency for younger respondents to mention greater degrees of outness – to themselves, friends or family – while older respondents were less likely to disclose to others. Participants reflected on the potential benefits or disadvantages of "coming out" while also negotiating their relationships to their communities and their reputation; indeed, while older participants may have internalised and acknowledged their sexual orientation, they largely noted no positive benefit disclosing it to others. One factor influencing "outness" was whether or not respondents lived independently, which influenced whether they felt they had to conceal their sexual orientation to protect against perceived judgement, ostracisation, and familial reputational damage within the community. Perzad (mid-20s), describing his use of gay dating apps, stated:

> ...as if I would use it back home....I'd be too shit scared to use it in [hometown], in case I knew someone there. If you thought the aunties didn't have anything to talk about already!

Being geographically distanced from his community, by living away from his family and community, facilitated being able to explore his sexuality without fear or judgement from others, such as "aunties", that is, older women in the community who are felt to have a tendency to gossip and be disparaging about others within the community. Respondents who lived nearer to their families were selective to whom they disclosed their sexual orientation, if at all. From an identity perspective, this reflects an element of selecting one's own ingroup – developing a network of individuals to whom disclosure helps affirm one's identity. For many, community social reputation was paramount in the decision regarding disclosure:

> Being out affects your reputation so I chicken out when I think about it. It takes guts. It's not very common .... It's just being scared of reputation, innit? People over-simplify [coming out] but it ain't easy (Haroon, early 30s).

Others felt they had no choice but to conceal their sexual orientation identity as the social cost of "coming out" was too high. Ibrahim (mid-20s) commented:

> I'm not out because I'm afraid. I'm afraid of losing my family if they find out. It's not about finance, it's about belonging and love.

Thus, the potential loss of social support and belonging from one's family warranted being selective about the disclosure of their sexual orientation identity. Similar issues regarding non-disclosure of culturally taboo experiences due to perceived loss of familial support have been explored in the literature (e.g., Jaspal, 2014a; Mirza, 2017).

Some respondents were protective of their individual choice regarding disclosure:

> "It's a personal matter...I don't have to explain it to anyone". (Chihangeer; mid-20s).

In this sense, choosing *not* to disclose may have been empowering. Framing disclosure as a personal choice, and not feeling the need to justify it, may have given a sense of agency and control. Unfortunately, for some, the choice regarding disclosure had been taken away from them and this had negative repercussions. Sadru (mid-30s) reported a family member had discovered his non-heterosexuality and "*I was going to be disowned...*", articulating the risks many felt they faced, of abandonment by their friends and family. Others who chose to tell their family also experienced negative reactions:

> My family didn't deal with it all that great but I think it's getting better... My mother is quite in denial about the whole situation. She's still convinced that I'm not fully gay (Parvez, early 20s).

Some respondents noted that concealing their sexual orientation identity enabled them to meet expectations placed on them (i.e., heterosexual marriage):

> Coming out would hurt my parents. Why would I hurt them? Maybe I'm hurting my wife and kids more [by engaging in clandestine sexual encounters with men] but I see no need to come out (Reyhan, late 30s).

Although engaging in same-sex sexual activity while married to an opposite-sex partner was viewed negatively by some respondents, there was also a recognition of marriage being a religio-cultural obligation. For example, Faheem (late 20s), who identified as a gay Muslim, stated: "*Of course I have to get married [to a woman], it's just a matter of when*". There was an inherent conflict in this because it required explicitly or privately acknowledging their sexual orientation *vis-à-vis* religio-cultural expectations. Opposite-sex marriage was seen as inevitable, tied to the Islamic concept of "*din*" (i.e., an Arabic term generally understood to refer to an Islamic religious "way of life", character, morals, etc., which a Muslim person will be accountable for in the afterlife):

> I need to complete my din *and get married [to a woman]... My mother feels that she has to fulfil her obligation to get her sons married...I [will] feel a failure if I don't get married. Well, everyone will [feel they failed and that I'm a failure].... And when they [family] present the info of: good girl, Muslim, good family, live[s] in [the] UK with a good job, then I have no excuse but to see how it goes ... I do feel part of my duty to follow through [with marrying a woman]* (Zaf, early 30s).

Zaf notes the substantial pressure he faces – internally, through his own desire to meet his perceived religious obligations, and externally, through the anticipated reactions of his family if he did not meet these obligations. This was spoken of in terms of collective shame, where his failure to get married would bring shame upon his family. The

importance of keeping family and community reputation above individual wants and to avoid collective shame was noted by other respondents. For instance, Shahid (mid 20s) notes:

> *As long as I can keep my parents happy, I'm happy to live the way I'm living. My [own] happiness doesn't matter.*

As per Zaf's account, opposite-sex marriage was viewed in terms of a "match" based on the socio-demographics of a prospective spouse, with no mention of sexual or romantic attraction. Rather, marriage was viewed by respondents as a duty based on the Islamic concept of *sunnah* (i.e., traditional Islamic practices and customs as outlined/exemplified by the Prophet Muhammad).

This dilemma between religio-cultural obligations and individual sexual preference was noted by many respondents and echoes previous findings by Jaspal (2012, 2014a). Respondents here used various adaptation strategies; for example, getting married to women and then getting divorced, entering into marriages of convenience, or getting married to women while continuing to engage in clandestine sexual encounters with men. Interestingly, the religious implications of committing *zina* (sexual activity outwith marriage) were not raised by respondents. Therefore, it seems the identity threat created by marriage was not really rooted in religion as such, but intertwined with ethnic identity pressures and a desire to be seen to publicly adhere to religio-cultural expectations, that is, religious performativity, due to cultural concepts of *izzat*, that is, the concept of collective honour/prestige/reputation in South Asian and Muslim cultures.

It is worth noting for many respondents "being out" did not necessarily mean being public with their sexual orientation identity, but self-acknowledging their sexual orientation – thus they could be "out" to themselves but not others. Cheah and Singaravelu (2017) noted "coming-out" starts with self-acceptance, followed by selective disclosure and concealment, though some of their participants saw homosexuality in behavioural terms which did not necessitate public disclosure. Therefore, for some, varying one's degree of "outness" may not always be indicative of internalised sexual prejudice (Wilkerson, Smolenski, Brady, & Rosser, 2012) but might be a protective identity management strategy (Cheah & Singaravelu, 2017). The social value placed on family reputation management and its influence on disclosure reflects cultural norms of reputation within honour-based cultures (Cross et al., 2014; Mirza, 2017).

Overall, it seemed that choosing one's degree of outness was a protective identity management strategy. Participants' performance, visibility and identification of their sexual orientation were done within a context of being cognisant of perceptions of others within their religio-cultural ingroup. That said, intergroup processes also played a role, as will be discussed in the next theme.

3.2 | Hegemonic Whiteness and the LGBTQ+ community

Respondents largely felt socially excluded from LGBTQ+ spaces. For example, Behrooz (early 20s) commented: "*the gay scene in general is mostly focused on White people*". Respondents related experiences of discrimination, for example, Hafiz (late teens), despite being British-born and having a distinct regional accent, noted when entering LGBTQ+ spaces:

> *When they see my face it's like they expect me to speak with an Indian accent or something. Nothing wrong with it if I did, but I don't.*

Abbas (mid-20s) noted experiences of being "Other-ed" and implicit (and explicit) racism in LGBTQ+ spaces: "*...here people are racist, they are implicitly racist. They just look at you and you know. You feel out of place*".

This racial stereotyping and subsequent lack of belonging is a common experience amongst POC sexual minorities (Jivraj et al., 2003; Jones, 2016; Kehl, 2020). This experienced lack of belonging may have been internalised and fostered an element of distancing. For instance, some respondents noted feeling discomfort when entering mainstream gay-affirmative spaces:

> White guys are too open. That's good for them but I'm not really interested in what they do. If I see gay or lesbian people holding hands or being affectionate in public I think it's sweet for them to feel comfortable with each other in public whereas I'd feel uncomfortable displaying any PDA [public display of affection] in [the] public eye… I do go to Soho sometimes with mates but I'm definitely not comfortable going to the bars there. I go, then I'm out shortly after. It's too full on for my liking, with go-go dancers and tight spaces. Pride is definitely not for me. Definitely have a phobia, if you call it, of the out and proud lot (Zaf, early 30s).

This quote suggests societal changes which have enabled people within the mainstream LGBTQ+ community to be comfortable and confident in the visibility of their sexual orientation identity do not necessarily apply to sexual minority POC, who may not have the privilege to do so. Zaf's quote highlights a lack of belonging in these spaces for sexual minority POC, but also a distinct feeling of discomfort or fear about being visibly "out", which may be linked with social costs associated with disclosure. This felt exclusion was reflected in respondents' negative perceptions of gay-affirmative spaces, with Shahid (mid 20s) referring to them as "*scatty places*" based on what was perceived as social norms regarding promiscuity in "gay culture". Hafiz (late teens) stated "*White guys are total slags*". Riaz (early 20s) stated:

> Gays may be slutty and gross but that doesn't mean they are incapable of being in love or settling down and starting a family etc. It's just a cultural norm.

Thus, while Riaz acknowledged promiscuity as an embedded cultural marker within the "gay community", he also noted a possibility of adhering to heteronormative expectations (e.g., "settling down and starting a family") but with a same-sex partner. Riaz's point is particularly striking when contrasted to other respondents – he was one of the few respondents to acknowledge a sexual orientation identity but was from a middle-class background and thus his experiences ran in stark contrast to other respondents from working-class backgrounds. His account therefore reflects how privilege influences acknowledging and engaging with a "gay identity".

Respondents also noted negative experiences when trying to develop friendships and romantic relationships with White sexual minority men. Abbas (mid-20s) recounted:

> If you meet a [White] guy, most of the time if you give a name they'd be like "don't give me a name, I don't want to know". A name makes a person real. And there's no real people in this game. You're just a number, a body: body 1, body 2, body 3. It's all about getting f***ed as much as you can.

He also felt that in "gay culture", monogamous relationships, a social norm within his religio-cultural community, were largely absent.

When interpreted via the perspective of social identity theory, participants seemed to distance themselves from the mainstream, highlighting their distinctiveness, perhaps as a response to social exclusion. Experiences of not being felt to conform to the "gay ideal" (i.e., White, tall, tanned, muscular) also influenced perceptions of belonging, through experiences of social rejection which impacted self-esteem. For example, Nadeem (early 20s) notes:

> Guys aren't as interested in me as I'm chubby and [do] not [have] the perfect body [type] the gay world likes to idolise (Nadeem, early 20s).

Here, Nadeem notes not adhering to the "idealised gay body", and being "chubby" and South Asian he felt would not be seen as attractive by other gay men. Thus, social exclusion from the mainstream LGBTQ+ "community" was based on his non-conformance to the dominant social representation of what a gay man "should" look like. Whilst most of the research in relation to body image and belonging to the gay "scene" has focused on White LGBTQ+ people, lack of belonging due to body image has also been found to occur amongst sexual minority POC who experience additional stressors based on social representations of masculinity and social desirability (Brennan et al., 2013; Bhambhani, Flynn, Kellum, & Wilson, 2019), as will be discussed in the following theme.

3.3 | Internalisation of White hegemony

As explored in the previous theme, participants noted social devaluation of their ethnic and religious background by the mainstream LGBTQ+ community. As South Asian sexual minority Muslim men, they were a visible "Other" in LGBTQ+ spaces and therefore held less social and cultural capital compared to White LGBTQ+ individuals. Nevertheless, the manifestation of Whiteness as superior may have been internalised which affected how respondents interacted with other sexual minority men. Some respondents stated their sexual preference for White partners and a lack of attraction to others from their ethnic group, being quite pejorative of those from their own ethno-cultural ingroup.

Some respondents took this a step further by self-identifying as another ethnic group more proximal to Whiteness, by identifying as "mixed race" or claiming they were from another ethnic group. When prompted further, it seemed they were appropriating another ethnic/racial identity or purposely conflating their ethnic group with their nationality (which would be perceived as "White", such as Scottish). For example, Rahim (early 20s) stated: "*I'd classify myself as mixed. I'm half White, half Arab*" but later revealed "*I'm actually Pakistani. Everyone wants to be Arab. I really want to*". Rahim's claim of being "*mixed...half White, half Arab*" when he was really Pakistani demonstrates an internalisation of sexual discrimination and racialised hierarchies in desirability. South Asians claiming to be "mixed" or Arab, as more proximal to Whiteness, may render them as being more desirable and afford greater levels of privilege within the LGBTQ+ community. The use of these strategies is not surprising considering Whiteness is held as the "standard" within the LGBTQ+ community (Daroya, 2018; Han, 2007). These comments also reflect race-based sexual stereotypes and views of masculinity and desirability manifested hierarchically, with some ethnicities portrayed as more desirable than others. For example, in LGBTQ+ spaces Arabs tend to be viewed as hyper-masculine and the active sexual partner, with Asians viewed as effeminate and passive. Therefore, respondents choosing to identify as Middle Eastern or Arab could reflect a desire to portray themselves in a more sexually desirable manner and render distance from racialised stereotypes of their own ethnic ingroup. Issues around sexual racism and fetishisation have been explored previously (e.g., Callander, Newman, & Holt, 2015; Han, 2007).

Interestingly, while Babak (early 20s) identified as: "*half Arab, half White*", he later admitted "*okay, I'm really Pakistani but I do not say I'm South Asian because I'm discreet and because there are other [South] Asians [around] so I just say I'm Middle Eastern*". Here, Babak appeared to appropriate a different ethnic identity to ensure another layer of discretion that would protect him from identification by ethnic ingroup members.

Overall, it was paradoxical that respondents seemed to portray themselves in greater proximity to Whiteness, while also being disparaging about White gay culture and heightening their distinctiveness from that social group using derogatory language. In terms of identity management, if an individual does not feel included or accepted by a group, self-group distancing might be viewed as a useful coping strategy because the individual does not need to deal with negative stereotypes of the ingroup or rejection. However, this may result in isolation (Jetten et al., 2015) and undermine group belonging and other benefits ingroup identification provides (Bourguignon et al., 2020).

3.4 | Distancing from the sexual minority religio-cultural ingroup

While it might be anticipated that negative experiences and exclusion from the mainstream LGBTQ+ community would result in respondents seeking greater affiliation amongst sexual minorities within their own religio-cultural ingroup, this was not apparent across all respondents. Changez (late 20s) felt interacting with people from his ingroup was "*safer*" than those from the mainstream LGBTQ+ community who he viewed as more promiscuous and open about their sexual orientation identity.

Others seemed to suggest a sense of superiority over those who were not visible about their sexual orientation identity. Rustam (mid-20s) referred to the "*backward culture*" and "*lack of education*" amongst those within his ingroup, which, in his view, caused people to hide their sexual orientation and marry opposite-sex partners. Others, such as Wafi (mid 20s), noted "*it's a problem with their mentality...their parents came from villages, so...they have not developed as much as they should have*". These views suggest a degree of internalised assimilationist prejudice and distancing from their own ingroup and implied superiority due to adherence to "progressive" Western values, in this case that one should be visible in their sexual orientation identity.

This view, however, was a minority. In contrast, many respondents made surprisingly derogatory comments about visible sexual minorities from their religio-cultural ingroup, which may have been based on unpleasant socialisation experiences. Nadeem (early 20s) notes "*a vibe I cannot explain*" due to his perception of sexual minorities from his religio-cultural ingroup as being "*freaky, or slaggy or bitchy*". Yassin, late 20s, commented:

> "*I can't deny Asians are slaggy. They're very licentious. You see with Asians, mainly [ethnic ingroup descriptor], this life is a journey. You just gotta s*** as much c*** as possible then got to get married so no one finds out you're gay, but secretly they shag their wives like they're [their wife is] a man or just lie as if it was a phase and flick a switch and pretend to be straight*".

Respondents referred to visible (i.e., "out") gay Muslims pejoratively, calling them "*fools*", "*freaks*" or "*thirsty queens*" who "*just want attention*". Thus, visibility of sexual orientation identity was not seen as palatable or acceptable amongst many respondents, who were put off by those who were "out". As Zaf (early 30s) notes, this precluded his ability to develop social support with ingroup sexual minorities as he "*found them too 'out'*" and found their adherence to social norms within "gay culture", such as the "hook-up" culture, which was focused on casual sexual encounters, off-putting:

> *A lot of...Gaysians [slang portmanteau of the words gay and Asian] ... act all camp and promiscuous... It was getting to a point where I thought I was an outlier, not being part of the one-night stand cult... Rarely I meet someone who challenges me mentally, not in an arrogant way...[but] I have class, I don't go for trash.... I've not been to any of the Gaysian nights where you'll find the weirdos in Soho dressed in sarees.*

Zaf's comments imply a sense of superiority over people who are visible in their sexual orientation identity, which may be an attempt to distance himself from people within his ingroup who did not fit his perceived norms of performing sexual orientation identity in a "discreet" manner.

Others seemed to suggest acceptance and visibility based on sexual orientation identity was limited to "freshies", (i.e., a pejorative slang term referring to recent immigrants from South Asia) and not an option for British-born ingroup members. Sadru (early 30s) suggests this is due to belief in an idealised media representation of homosexual relationships and not reflective of what he felt was the reality of "gay culture". He explains,

> *Only freshies want relationships - it's just about NSA [no strings attached; slang term referring to casual sexual encounters] ...No one is really after friends. It's so hard finding mates ... All my friends have left me and that is typical of how Gaysians are. (Sadru, early 30s).*

Here, he outlines an unwritten social rule within his ingroup that interaction with sexual minority men was limited to fleeting sexual encounters – with the implication that British-born South Asian Muslim men understood relationships with men are not possible due to both religio-cultural norms and the cultural norms of the "hook-up culture" within the mainstream LGBTQ+ community, and only "freshies", who may be ignorant of these unwritten socio-contextual rules, looked for something substantive. Indeed, respondents' experiences with other ingroup members were not that of support but complexly layered based on "acceptable" levels of discretion. The hidden and stigmatised nature of same-sex attraction led to an unspoken view that this was simply to be understood as transitory behaviour, not an identity and not a characteristic from which to develop a network of peers.

Respondents related substantial difficulties establishing peer networks and social support from their sexual minority ingroup. Wasim (mid-20s) commented: "*I avoid Asians... most Asian guys are pure effort because of not being out*". Saif (mid-20s) described his experiences trying to form friendships with other sexual minority ingroup members:

> It would be nice to find other guys that get it, who are at the same point ... I've had people yell at me as to why I'm looking for a boyfriend when it won't last, and Islam forbids it... if you are talking to Asian guys on [dating app] ... they make threats...to out you.

Saif's quote raises two issues: firstly, that despite seeking ingroup members in a similar position to himself for networking and peer support, he instead received hostility and moralistic judgement from others even though they were looking for casual sexual encounters with other men; and secondly, sexual minority ingroup members have threatened to "out" him. The former seemed almost paradoxical – with religion used as a reason against establishing same-sex romantic relationships, yet there was no discussion of religion in relation to same-sex sexual activity or sex outwith marriage, again suggesting use of "religious prohibition" and mores was selective and used as a means to "explain" ethnic identity and cultural norms. The finding that sexual minority religio-cultural ingroup members attempted to "out" others was a shocking finding and was corroborated by other respondents, such as Zeeshan (early 30s) who related experiences of being "catfished" by other British South Asian Muslim men, that is, the phenomenon of using other people's photographs or identity on social media or dating websites to falsely represent the person's own identity:

> I'm done with [Asian ethnic group] ... They wonder why people do not like them. They are so f***ing arrogant it's unbelievable. They are d***heads, w***er rude boys who give the hypocrisy of being ultra-religious. They say one thing but [they are] really after sex. They collect and use pictures (of other people). If you ever agree to meet one, you best believe that more often than not it's going to be with someone else than [the person shown in] the picture.

Zeeshan expressed substantial frustration with the phenomenon of religious performativity. In his view, the behaviour of sexual minority British Muslim South Asian men he encountered are incompatible with what he understands as pious behaviour, and thus he perceives their strategic performativity of religious identity as hypocritical. Issues regarding performance and visibility of religious identity have been explored previously (Hopkins & Greenwood, 2013).

The pejorative language participants used to describe their ingroup was striking. Through the lens of social identity theory, it is possible this may have been driven by fear, lack of trust, or frustration, which caused people to distance themselves from their ingroup, due to fear of being "outed". This could also be due to the *black sheep effect* – engaging in denigration towards socially undesirable ingroup members (Marques & Paez, 1994). These ingroup members are perceived to contribute to social identity negatively therefore denigration towards them helps achieve positive distinctiveness. Such self-group distancing might be useful because the individual does not need to deal with

negative stereotypes of the ingroup. However, this also undermines group belonging and other benefits that ingroup identification provides (Bourguignon et al., 2020).

Overall, for many participants, the taboo nature of their sexual orientation in their religio-cultural context, coupled with their negative experiences relating to others within and outwith their ingroup, led to feelings of isolation and left them with limited safe spaces to discuss their experiences and gain social support – all of which are associated with lower well-being (Jetten et al., 2015). Given respondents' negative experiences, it was unsurprising to hear responses such as that from Riaz (early 20s): "*It means so much to be able to talk to someone about this*".

3.5 | Identity integration – Reflecting on religion and sexual orientation

Given negative social interactions respondents faced from their religio-cultural ingroup and the "mainstream" LGBTQ+ community, it was important to understand how they attempted to reconcile their sexual and religious identities into a coherent sense of self.

When discussing their sexual encounters with men, respondents noted negative feelings such as self-disgust and regret, feeling "*sick*", "*feeling like shit*" and a sense of shock – as Hafiz (late teens) puts it "*what the f*** did I just do?*" Abbas (mid-20s) stated: "*I feel guilty and empty after sex. Maybe being gay is wrong and weird*". These negative emotions were strongly tied to how they viewed their sexual orientation within a religious framework. In line with findings of previous studies (Afzal, 2014; Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2010; Siraj, 2012a), several respondents were adamant that their sexuality was not accepted within their religion, with many interpreting their same-sex activity as evidence of immorality. Other respondents felt their sexual orientation must be a "test" from God:

> I believe it is a test in life I'm failing at. But I believe my Lord is the Most Merciful and He has made me and will understand. God wouldn't put pork or alcohol on this planet if it wasn't a test. Everyone has their own test... Acting on this is my choice. I probably won't pass. Not every test is [meant] to be passed (Benayoon, mid-20s).

Some respondents tried to contest this negative view, noting homosexuality was similarly censured in other Abrahamic traditions, yet those religious communities have now begun to accept homosexuality. Others noted other Islamic prohibitions (e.g., gambling, usury, alcohol consumption) which others engage in yet face far less societal condemnation. Some felt religious views on homosexuality were simply misinterpretations and that "*When I have feelings for a guy that is the most natural emotion that I can feel romantically. Doesn't mean that I should go to hell*" (Riaz, early 20s). Many respondents critiqued this view, however, for example Chihangeer (mid-20s):

> I know that [being] gay isn't a choice. It's also not permitted [religiously]. There are a lot of BBCDs [British-born confused Desis; pejorative slang term referring to South Asians who are felt to have assimilated to British culture] who think it is but ... I know I'm doing a sin.

Some respondents developed their own strategies to deal with identity threat, such as Sadru (early 30s) who reported: "*I can't wait for the sun do go down [during Ramadan] so I can hook up*" – implying that while he adhered to religious prescriptions during Ramadan, such as abstaining from food, water and sex during sunlight hours, he engaged in same-sex sexual encounters at night. Others adopted a "hyper-religious" perspective by taking on additional Islamic duties, such additional fasting, prayers and charitable work with secular and Islamic organisations, ostensibly to offset engaging in what they felt to be sinful behaviour.

Respondents varied in how they self-identified, with many rejecting LGBTQ+ identity labels. Many rejected identifying as gay, instead framing their same-sex attraction and behaviour as "*having fun*". It was notable how many respondents sought to emphasize their perceived heterosexual masculinity, framing

same-sex encounters in behavioural terms based on sexual availability. Samir (late 20s) stated: "*Girls don't s*** so I go on apps to find guys for that…*" while emphasizing: "*I'm not gay*". Hamza (early 30s), who had a girlfriend, stated he was the active partner in sexual relations with men and noted: "*I'm not gay… I just look for guys to feed my fantasy*".

The label "gay" was largely rejected and often pathologised. Prior research has shown that being feminine or "not masculine enough" was associated with negative societal stereotypes, internalised among sexual minority men (Eslen-Ziya & Koc, 2016). This was observed where Arif (late 20s) placed emphasis on his having physical attributes he felt made him attractive to gay men. He stated a sexual preference for women, emphasizing his prior sexual experience with them, but felt they required additional preferences in a prospective partner beyond physical attractiveness, such as "*money, car, a job, someone with their own place to live*". He saw sex as more available with men because "*men aren't so fussy*". Some respondents rejected labels to avoid negative associations. Alim (mid-20s) stated "*I don't class myself as gay, because that makes you sound you are not normal…*". As explored in other themes, there was a distinction between respondents' positioning of their own orientation and identity against those more visible in the mainstream:

> *My sexuality is really none of anyone else's business. Those who are out and proud are a bit of a turn-off* (Zeeshan, early 30s).

These negative perceptions by respondents explains the view by Parvez (early 20s) that "*it's kinda rare to be a gay Muslim*".

As a form of identity negotiation, some respondents acknowledged their sexual orientation comprised a part of them but rejected the idea of it being a component of their overall sense of identity:

> "*Being gay isn't who I am, but a part of me. Being gay is about who I go to bed with at night, not a life-style*" (Nadeem, early 20s).

Studies with Jewish and Muslim samples have shown that when there is identity conflict, gay men may use several strategies such as strengthening identification with religion, trying to keep sexuality and religion compartmentalised, trying to integrate the two, or giving up their religion altogether (Kumpasoğlu et al., 2020; Schnoor, 2006). However, the latter has not been common amongst sexual minority British Muslims, showing instead hyper-affiliation to the religious ingroup (Jaspal, 2014b). As seen in this study, strengthening identification with one identity might require distancing from another one with negative consequences for well-being. However, identity integration literature suggests identities can be blended and harmonised which is linked to positive outcomes (Benet-Martínez, Leu, Lee, & Morris, 2002; Koc & Vignoles, 2016, 2018). For instance, gay-Christian identity integration attenuated negative effects of religious identity on guilt and shame among gay-Christians (Anderson & Koc, 2020). Therefore, it is important to understand the nature of the conflict and try to reduce it for psychological well-being.

In this study, respondents' attempts at reconciliation often did not lead to resolution but instead involved a process of internal acceptance of their same-sex attraction and recognition that rejection on multiple fronts – from the mainstream LGBTQ+ community, their own religious ingroup, and mainstream society – precluded visible manifestation of this intersectional identity. The quote below epitomises feelings of isolation many respondents faced:

> *There's going to be a point in your life where you're going to be feeling so shit about something, but you can't tell anyone because of the people around you. I really hope this happens in your life just so you know the feeling of what I may be going through…. I do have to live like this. I don't have a choice. I can't be me. This world won't let me be me* (Shahid, mid-20s).

4 | LIMITATIONS

While this study had interesting findings, it is important to note potential limitations. Findings suggested differences in approaches to identity integration amongst younger and older respondents – suggesting younger respondents may internalise wider societal acceptance towards sexual minorities. Education may also play a role - many respondents who noted some degree of outness were students, and it may be at university settings they are exposed to greater diversity and discourse regarding sexual minority identities. It is striking, however, that many of the older, professionally employed respondents held negative views regarding sexual identity visibility suggesting views may not be class dependent. The demographic mix of the respondents could indicate an element of sampling bias – respondents would have had to be comfortable to some extent with acknowledging their sexual orientation and be willing to participate in a study examining it. Given that the British Muslim population is largely economically deprived and disadvantaged, the sample therefore might not reflect the wider British Muslim community for whom traditional attitudes likely still hold, as alluded to by the older participants. Finally, we acknowledge South Asian and Muslim communities are not homogeneous, and that there are different geopolitical and colonial histories which may affect individuals' lived experience.

5 | CONCLUSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The findings of this study suggested that wider societal acceptance of homosexuality was not necessarily reflected in the everyday experiences of British Muslim South Asian sexual minority men. Adherence to a "gay identity" was predicated on various inter- and intra-group external influences. Depending on the relative privilege held in a particular context, respondents used a number of identity management strategies to manage identity threat as well as threat of disclosure. Attempts to engage with the mainstream LGBTQ+ community left them feeling excluded and Other-ed, with some even going so far as to re-label their ethnic identity to fit in with hierarchies of desirability within LGBTQ+ communities. Within their ethno-religious communities, heteronormativity made them feel like they did not belong, and in some cases, being open about their sexual orientation identity often came with a risk, therefore they had to assess this potential risk when deciding whether to disclose to others. Despite a desire to connect with other sexual minority ingroup members, respondent's experiences were not that of support but instead layered in different levels of "acceptable" degrees of discretion, with negative experiences and ingroup shaming a common occurrence. Respondents who had internalised a same-sex attracted identity often adopted assimilationist and homonationalist biases, leading them to denigrate others from their religio-cultural ingroup. Overall, respondents' accounts highlighted an isolating and psychologically vulnerable experience.

It is important to note respondents largely eschewed sexual orientation identity labels. This accords with previous research with sexual minority Muslim communities (Boussalem, 2020), which notes that non-disclosure actually was seen to be empowering and identity enhancing, facilitating belonging in a collective community. Given respondents largely viewed themselves as "straight" and found no support from within mainstream or ingroup LGBTQ+ organisations - this has implications regarding service delivery and understanding how sexual minority identities are played out amongst communities of colour. Whilst some support groups exist, utilisation of them may vary depending on "acceptable levels of discretion" and thus only cater to a select group, based on levels of personal privilege. An intersectional lens is critical here – respondents who appeared at ease in their degrees of outness of their sexual orientation identity were middle-class, which does not reflect the mainstream British Muslim community. Thus, service planning predicated on sexual identity may not be suitable for communities which are socially disadvantaged.

Sexual minority British Muslim South Asians may be reluctant to affiliate outwith discreet online communities (Kesvani, 2019) and known circles due to the anonymity they provide and the maintenance of *izzat* within their religio-cultural ingroup. The latter point cannot be emphasised enough. Respondents tended to conflate religion with

cultural influences, for instance in noting religious expectations to marry an opposite-sex partner and perceived prohibitions against same-sex romantic relationships. Yet, if religious concerns did matter, one might also have expected discussion regarding religious prohibition of *zina* or even perceived prohibitions regarding same-sex sexual activity, and while that emerged to some extent with some respondents feeling their sexual orientation was a "test" or noting experiencing feelings of guilt or shame when engaging in same-sex sexual encounters, what seemed to matter most for many was religio-cultural performativity. Being "out" or having a same-sex romantic partner would make sexuality, a culturally private practice, public and potentially induce feelings of collective shame to the individual and family. Thus, *izzat* mattered. By denying a sexual orientation identity, and relegating same-sex sexual activity to behavioural terms and engaging largely in discreet casual sexual encounters, respondents could be publically perceived to be pious, viewed as adhering to cultural norms, and maintain "face" within their community. This was echoed by several respondents who noted the importance of maintaining collective honour and familial happiness over their own.

Finally, and importantly, respondents' experiences of social exclusion when attempting to enter mainstream LGBTQ+ spaces has implications regarding the rhetoric of inclusion within the LGBTQ+ "community". Despite attempts to engage in mainstream LGBTQ+ spaces, experiences of racism and Other-ing led respondents to further distance themselves from these spaces and appeared to even foster elements of discrimination towards the LGBTQ+ community by whom they felt excluded. An intersectional lens is crucial here – a minority group gaining societal acceptance via a discourse of inclusion cannot then employ exclusionary and discriminatory attitudes towards other minoritised groups who do not "fit" a narrow, hegemonic mould. In a climate where sexual minority British South Asian Muslims feel excluded based on their religious identity and ethnicity, developing cultural and religious competency is crucial to encourage and support multiply marginalised individuals, to create truly safe and inclusive spaces, and not further disadvantage and perpetuate inequalities within these "inclusive" spaces.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

ETHICS STATEMENT

Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Edinburgh.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Due to the sensitive nature of the data, and the fact that it contains potentially identifiable information about human participants, it is not possible for these data to be openly shared.

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