Media representations of Islam and international Muslim student well-being

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

This paper presents findings from a qualitative study of British media representations of Islam. It offers a contribution to the literature on the international student sojourn by focusing on the unique experiences of the Muslim segment of that student body. International Muslim students perceived Muslim countries to be portrayed by the media as: (1) sympathetic to terrorism; (2) economically backward; (3) conservative. They believed that these representations led Muslims to be viewed by members of the host community with suspicion. This carried consequences for students' self-esteem and sense of cultural identity. In order to correct misrepresentations portrayed by the media, some students took on the role of ambassador to promote the true face of Islam.

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1. Introduction

International students make an important contribution to the financial health of higher education institutions. Their recruitment is therefore fiercely competitive among the key providers of the UK, the US, Australia, Canada and New Zealand (Brown & Stephan, 2013). As international student numbers have grown, so the research into the international student experience has also steadily grown. Studies have focused on the stressors found in the new culture, which can deleteriously affect international student adjustment. These include loneliness, homesickness, racism, identity conflict, food shock and language difficulties (Brown & Holloway, 2008).

Research by Brown (2009) and Brown and Jones (2013) has shown that international Muslim students are particularly vulnerable to distress, caused by their encounter with unexpected representations of their faith, and to verbal or physical abuse. This research has alluded to the powerful role performed by the news media in creating misrepresentations and in fuelling prejudice. The findings presented in this paper derive from a research project whose aim was to explore international Muslim student perceptions of media representations of Islam. The focus is on Muslim students in a non-Muslim country. Very little previous research has been done on the topic, either from the student perspective or from the perspective of other categories of sojourner, such as migrants, refugees and long-stay tourists. The focus in this paper is on the implications of the misrepresentations of Islam for collective identity and the well-being of international Muslim students.

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2. Literature review

This is an inductive exploratory study on a topic that has received scant academic attention. As such, the relevant literature will be covered not only below, but it will also be tied to the emergent themes (see Jones, Brown, & Holloway, 2012). The international sojourn is defined by Ward, Bochner, and Furnham (2001) as a temporary stay in a new culture. Brown and Holloway (2008, p. 33) argue that 'the move to a new environment is one of the most traumatic events in a person's life and in most sojourners some degree of culture shock is inevitable'. Culture shock is characterised by anxiety that derives from losing the familiar signs and symbols associated with home, and their substitution by other cues that are alien to the visitor (Brown & Holloway, 2008).

Over many years, researchers have documented the symptoms associated with culture shock. These have been found to undermine sojourner well-being (Brown & Holloway, 2008). More recent research points to the threat to well-being posed by the move to a new culture (Brown & Brown, 2013; Yakunina, Weigold, & McCarthy, 2011). Indeed, Inman, Ngoubene-Atioky, Ladany, and Mack (2009) argue that cultural transition can result in substance abuse, suicide, family conflict and identity development problems.

Identity conflict is cast in the literature on transition as one of the main symptoms of culture shock (see Brown & Brown, 2013), capable of undermining sojourner well-being and triggering feelings of sadness, low self-esteem, anger and defensiveness (e.g. Kim, 2001; Ward et al., 2001). Ward et al. (2001) state that cultural identification involves feelings of affirmation and pride, as well as differentiation from other groups. The move to a new culture can provoke identity conflict in sojourners, who confront not only unfamiliar cultural norms, but also unexpected and often disturbing images of their own national culture and negative judgement of their cultural mores (Gudykunst, 1998; Hofstede, 2001; Ward et al., 2001).

Collective identity is intrinsic to an individual's self-definition and self-evaluation (Branscombe & Wann, 1994; Crocker & Luhtanen, 1990; Goulbourne, 1991). Indeed, Ward et al. (2001) state that positive self-perception and positive image of the national group are intertwined. They observe that perceived attacks on national identity can provoke strong emotion. This was reflected in Brown and Brown's (2013) research into international postgraduate students in the UK. This study revealed that the emotional impact of perceived misrepresentations of their national group was intense, and impacted on behaviour and well-being.

Bauman (2000) explains that group identity offers reinforcement of the self. Thus, challenges to what makes up that identity can be disturbing. Ward et al. (2001) argue further that sojourners tend to resist the redefinition of their national identity because of the temporary nature of their sojourn. This is a factor that allows them to retain a stronger identity with their culture of origin. This study contributes to the literature on the international sojourn by recording how media representations of Islam can pose an attack on collective self-identity and, in consequence, on well-being.

This study did not explicitly ask participants about their well-being and/or mental health. However, the way in which their well-being was compromised emerged as an important theme during analysis. Mental health is defined by the World Health Organisation, 2014 as a state of well-being, in which the individual realises his or her abilities, can cope with the normal stressors of life, can work productively and peacefully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community. Well-being is defined by the UK Mental Health Strategy (Department of Health, 2011) as feeling safe, able to cope, and connected to people, the community and the wider environment.

Participants in this study did not always feel safe or connected to people in their new environment. The WHO (2014) recognises that persistent socio-economic, civil and cultural pressures pose a risk to mental health. Indeed, the WHO 2013–2020 Mental Health Action Plan gives particular emphasis to the protection and promotion of human rights and the strengthening and empowerment of civil society (WHO, 2014). This is because it is recognised that mental health and well-being can only flourish in a context of basic civil, political, socio-economic and cultural rights (see WHO2014). We are not suggesting that our participants had mental health 'disorders', but rather we are pointing to the way in which their well-being and mental health was potentially jeopardised by their perceptions of media content.

The concern of this paper is with these perceptions of media content and their impact, rather than with the media content itself. The question of media content on Islam and Muslims is dealt with in another paper emerging from the same research project (Richards & Brown, 2014). In that paper, we review the extensive literature on the representations of Islam in the UK media (e.g. Baker, Gabrielatos, & McEnery, 2013; Flood, Hutchings, Miazhevich, & Nickels, 2012, to cite two of the most recent and important studies). We observe that there is a tradition of hostile stereotyping and a tendency to represent Islam as a single, homogenous entity. The image of Islam suffers from continual associations in the news with fundamentalism and violent extremism. However, it is emphasised by the authors that this is not attributed to a malicious and comprehensive misrepresentation.

3. Methodology

A qualitative approach to collecting data was chosen as the most appropriate way to access participants' thoughts and feelings about media representations of Islam. It is also the approach most suited to exploratory investigation into a subject about which little is known (Denzin & Lincoln, 2010). Qualitative studies share some common characteristics, which Holloway and Wheeler (2010) describe as follows: