

# Missing & Maligned: The Reality of Muslims in Popular Global Movies

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**USC** Annenberg  
*Inclusion Initiative*

Riz  
Ahmed / **LEFT  
HANDED**

 **FORDFOUNDATION**

 **pillars**

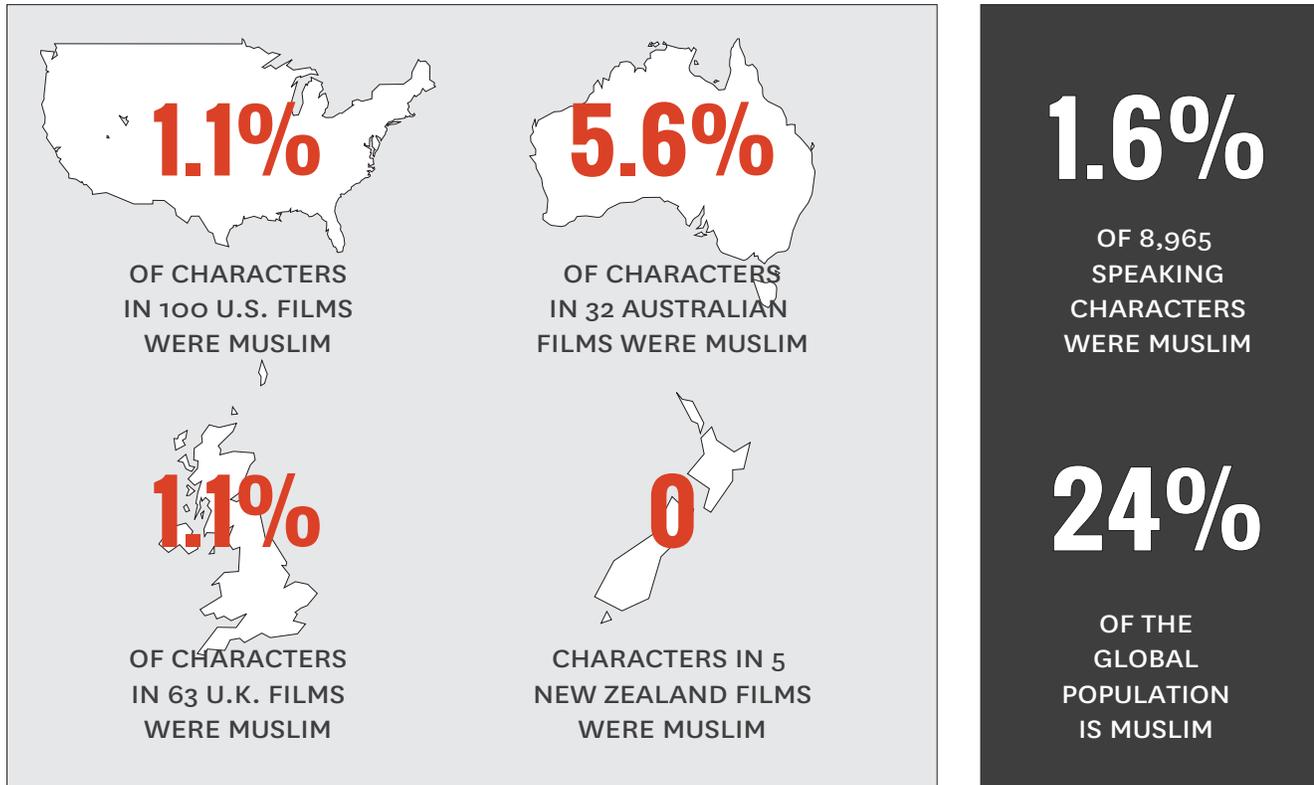
# MISSING & MALIGNED: THE REALITY OF MUSLIMS IN POPULAR GLOBAL MOVIES

USC ANNEBERG INCLUSION INITIATIVE



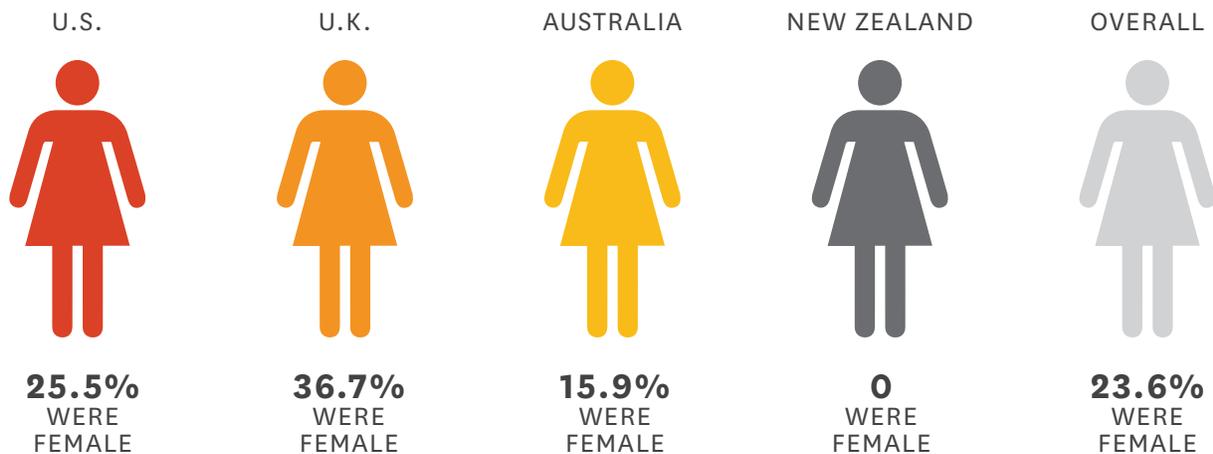
## MUSLIM CHARACTERS ARE MISSING IN POPULAR FILM

Percentage of Muslim characters across 200 popular films, 2017-2019



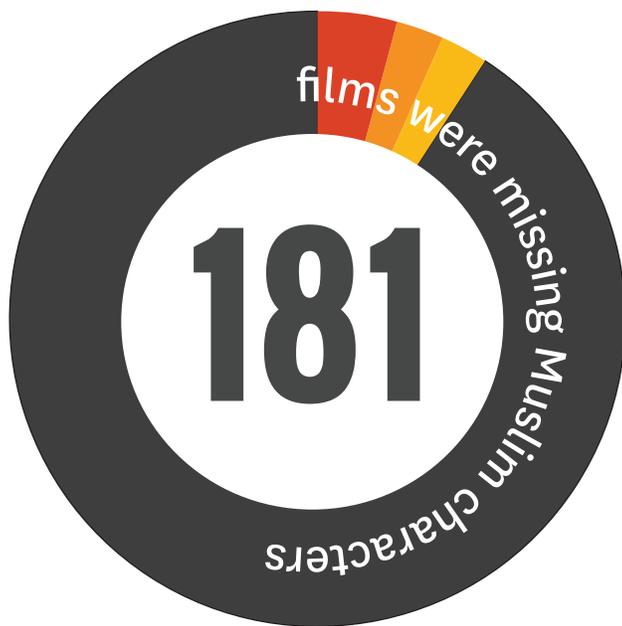
## AN ON SCREEN POPULATION CRISIS FOR MUSLIM GIRLS & WOMEN

Percentage of Muslim female characters across 200 popular films by country, 2017-2019



# THE EPIDEMIC OF INVISIBILITY FACES MUSLIM CHARACTERS

Number and percentage of 200 films missing Muslim characters, 2017-2019



**90.5% OF 200 FILMS**

DID NOT FEATURE

**EVEN ONE**

MUSLIM SPEAKING  
CHARACTER

84.4% OF 32 AUSTRALIAN FILMS

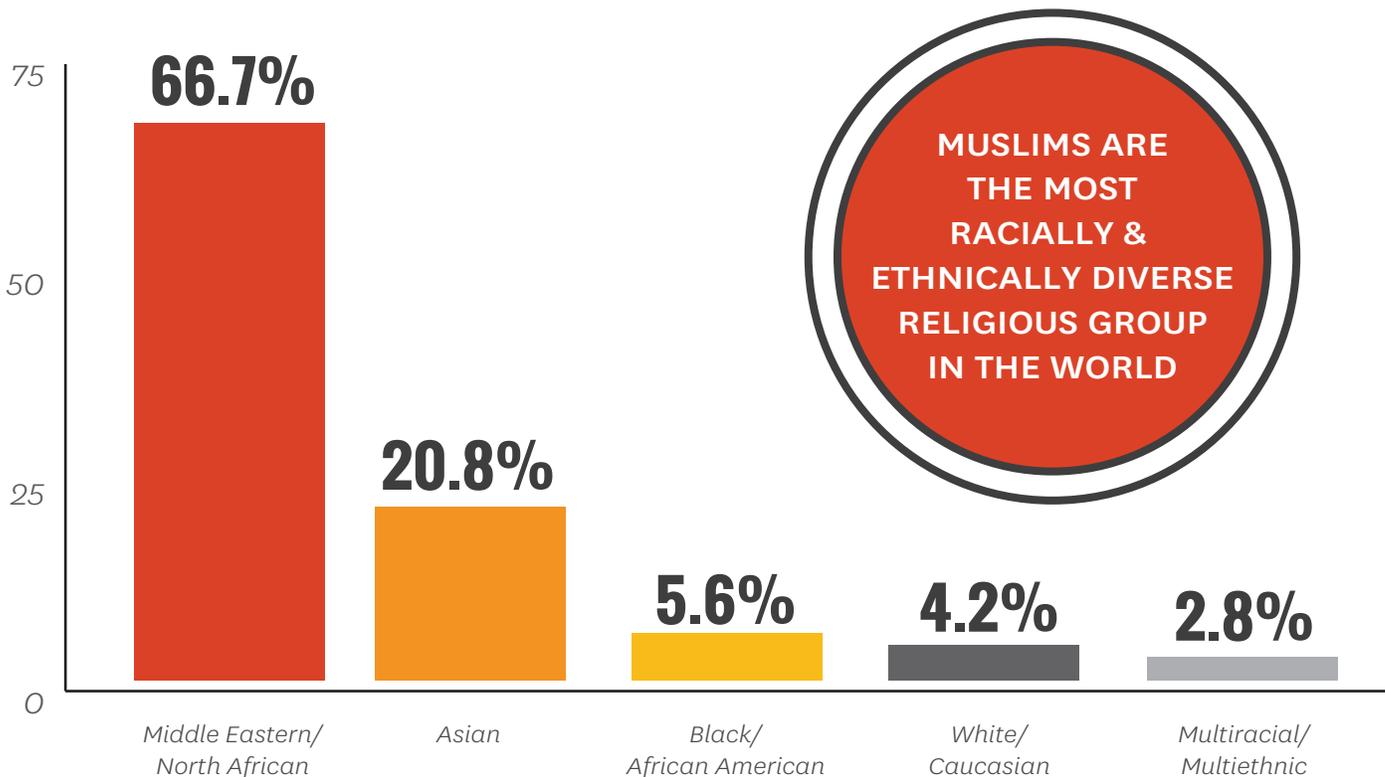
91% OF 100 U.S. FILMS

92.1% OF 63 U.K. FILMS

100% OF NEW ZEALAND FILMS

## MUSLIM CHARACTERS ARE RACIALLY PROFILED IN FILM

Race/ethnicity of Muslim characters across 200 films, 2017-2019

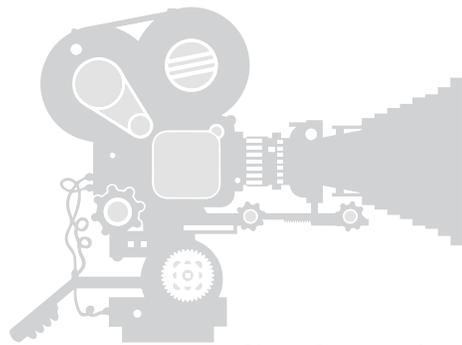


MUSLIMS ARE  
THE MOST  
RACIALLY &  
ETHNICALLY DIVERSE  
RELIGIOUS GROUP  
IN THE WORLD

## MUSLIM LEADS ARE LEFT OUT OF FILMS

Films with Muslim lead/co lead or ensemble lead characters

Across 200 films from 2017 to 2019...



films featured a Muslim character in a solo, duo, or ensemble lead role  
3 leads were Middle Eastern/North African; 2 were Asian; 1 was White

And of those 6 films...

**5** Films had a **Muslim man** in a lead/co lead role. All were young adults and teens.

**1** Film had a **Muslim woman** in an ensemble lead role, which was shared with 2 men

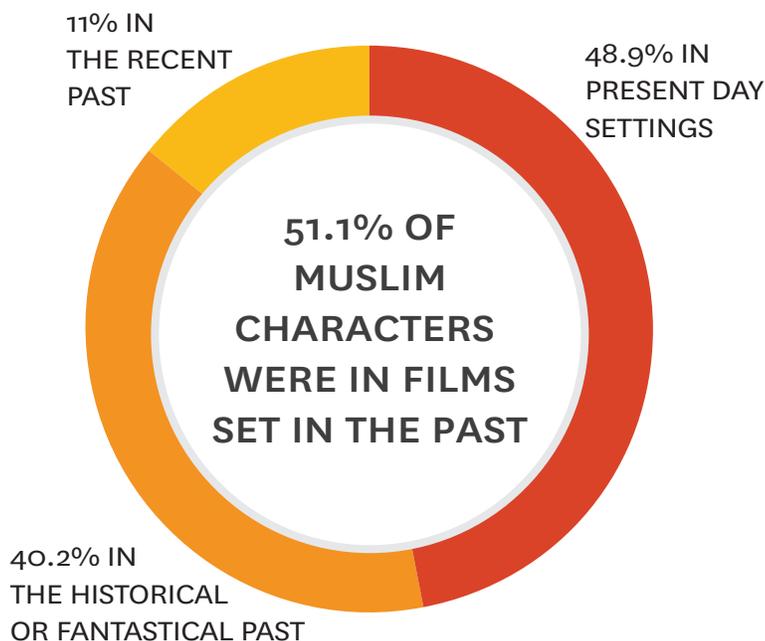
## MUSLIM GIRLS AND WOMEN MAKE FEW APPEARANCES IN FILM

THE RATIO OF MALE CHARACTERS TO MUSLIM FEMALE CHARACTERS ACROSS 200 FILMS IS

**175 TO 1**

## MODERN DAY MUSLIM CHARACTERS ARE RARE

Percentage of Muslim characters by time period of a film's setting



**73.1% OF THE MUSLIM CHARACTERS SHOWN IN PRESENT-DAY CONTEXTS APPEARED IN JUST 2 FILMS**

**5 OF 6 LEAD MUSLIM CHARACTERS WERE SHOWN IN FILMS SET IN THE PAST**

## MUSLIM PORTRAYALS ARE ROOTED IN OTHER PLACES

Percentage of Muslim characters by location of a film's setting

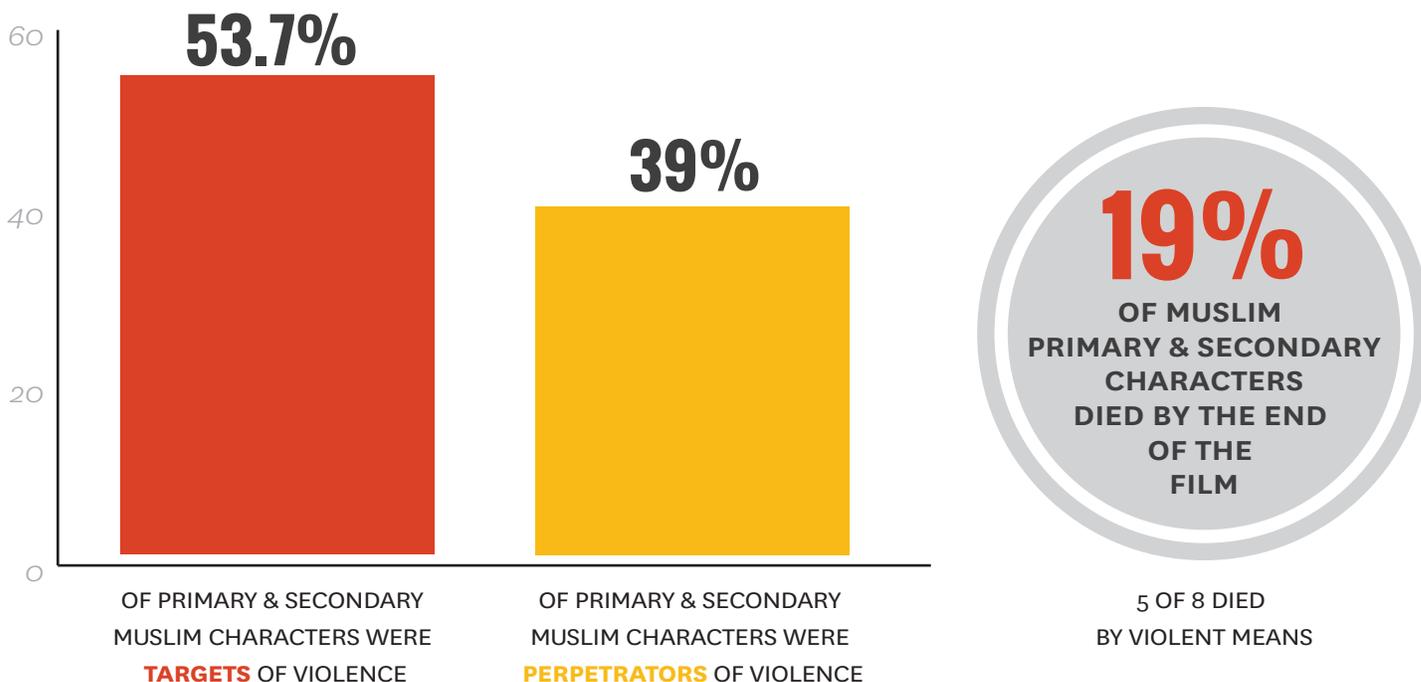
**ONE**  
FLEETING  
PORTRAYAL  
OF A MUSLIM  
CHARACTER  
OCCURRED  
IN A U.S.  
SETTING



MIDDLE EAST/NORTH AFRICA	46%
AUSTRALIA	19%
U.K.	11%
INDIA	11%
EUROPE	6.6%
AFRICA	5.8%
U.S.	<1%

## MUSLIM CHARACTERS ARE LINKED TO VIOLENCE

Percentage of 41 Muslim primary and secondary characters involved with violence



## YOUNG AUDIENCES WILL FIND FEW MUSLIM CHARACTERS IN FILM

Age of Muslim characters and film genre across 200 top movies, 2017-2019

**OF 23 ANIMATED FILMS,  
NOT ONE DEPICTED A MUSLIM CHARACTER**

**ACROSS 8,965 SPEAKING CHARACTERS IN 200 TOP FILMS,  
ONLY 7 WERE MUSLIM CHILDREN**

## MUSLIM CHARACTERS DO NOT REFLECT A DIVERSE COMMUNITY

Muslim characters shown as part of the LGBTQ community or with a disability across 200 films

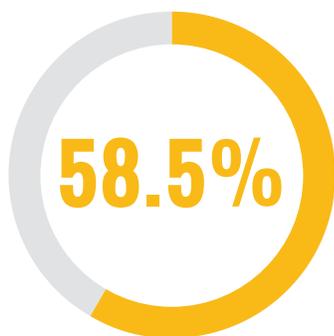
OUT OF 200 FILMS & 8,965 CHARACTERS  
**ONE MUSLIM MAN**  
**WAS LGBTQ**

**ONE MUSLIM MAN**  
WAS DEPICTED WITH  
**A DISABILITY**  
OUT OF 200 FILMS & 8,965 CHARACTERS

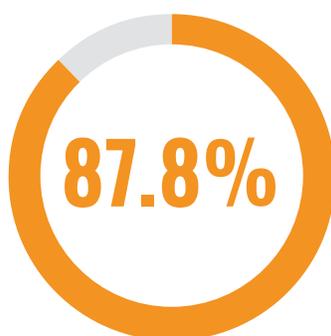
## MUSLIM CHARACTERS ARE RENDERED 'FOREIGN' BY FILMS

Results from a qualitative analysis of 41 primary and secondary Muslim characters

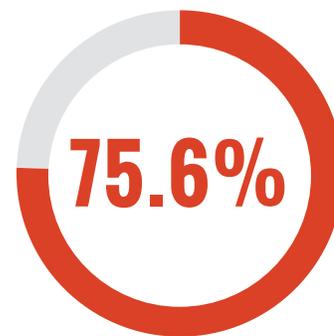
OF 41 PRIMARY AND SECONDARY MUSLIM CHARACTERS...



WERE IMMIGRANTS,  
MIGRANTS,  
OR REFUGEES



SPOKE NO ENGLISH  
OR SPOKE WITH  
AN ACCENT



WORE CLOTHES  
RELATED TO  
THEIR FAITH

## MUSLIM CHARACTERS ARE STILL SHOWN AS SUBSERVIENT

Results from a qualitative analysis of 41 primary and secondary Muslim characters

MUSLIM WOMEN WERE  
PRIMARILY SHOWN AS  
ROMANTIC PARTNERS  
& FAMILY MEMBERS



MUSLIM CHARACTERS  
WERE DEPICTED IN  
SECONDARY ROLES THAT  
SERVED WHITE LEADS

## DISPARAGEMENT IS DIRECTED AT MUSLIM CHARACTERS

Words and phrases used to disparage 41 primary & secondary Muslim characters...

**PEASANTS**

**'REFO'**

**POX-RIDDEN**

**SEND THEM BACK**

**ISN'T IT AGAINST YOUR RELIGION?**

**PIECE OF SHIT**

**PAKI**

**TERRORIST**

**FUNDAMENTALIST**

**HANG AROUND WITH ISIS**

**FUCK YOUR PRAYERS THAT'S WHAT STARTED THIS SHIT**

**'HE'S PROBABLY GOT A BOMB STRAPPED TO HIS BODY'**

**ARE YOU CALLING ME A TERRORIST?**

**LEARN THE LANGUAGE**

## **Missing & Maligned: The Reality of Muslims in Popular Global Movies**

Annenberg Inclusion Initiative

The purpose of the present study was to explore the prevalence and portrayal of Muslim characters in popular film. The study includes both a quantitative and qualitative analysis of 200 top-grossing movies released between 2017 and 2019 across four countries: the U.S., U.K., Australia, and New Zealand. In the quantitative analysis, every speaking character was identified across the sample of movies, and these characters were assessed for a variety of demographic and social factors (e.g., gender, race/ethnicity, age, LGBTQ identification, disability). We examined whether each speaking character was Muslim, using a set of indicators that included verbal (e.g., direct statements, other characters' comments) and non-verbal cues (e.g., apparel, setting, artifacts, etc.). The qualitative analysis examined specific stereotypes and aspects of Muslim portrayals.

### **Key Findings**

#### ***Prevalence of Muslim Characters***

A total of 8,965 speaking characters were identified across 200 top-grossing films released between 2017 and 2019 from the U.S., U.K., Australia, and New Zealand. Of these, 1.6% were Muslim and 98.4% were not Muslim. This is a ratio of 60.3 non-Muslim characters to every 1 Muslim character on screen.

There were 100 films from the U.S., 63 from the U.K., 32 from Australia, and 5 from New Zealand included in the analysis. No differences by country emerged: 5.6% of speaking characters in the Australian sample were Muslim, as were 1.1% of U.S., and 1.1% of U.K. characters. There were no characters in the New Zealand sample who were identified as Muslim.

Examining the distribution of Muslim characters across country samples revealed that Australia had the highest percentage of Muslim characters, as 43.8% of Muslim characters appeared across the country's 32 movies. U.S. movies presented 35.4% of all Muslim characters across the sample. Finally, roughly one-fifth of Muslim characters (20.8%) appeared in U.K. films.

There were no differences by year. In 2017, only 1.7% of all speaking characters were Muslim, as were 1.2% in 2018 and 2% in 2019.

Of the 200 films in the sample, 9.5% or 19 had at least 1 Muslim character on screen. In other words, *181 out of 200 films presented no Muslim characters who spoke one or more words across the plot.*

This varied slightly by country. Muslim characters appeared in only 5 Australian films (15.6%). In other words, 27 of the 32 Australian films studied did not feature even one Muslim speaking character. Nine (9%) of 100 U.S. movies sampled had at least 1 Muslim speaking character, while 91 were devoid of any Muslim representation. Finally, 5 of the 63 U.K. films (7.9%) included 1 or more Muslim speaking characters while 58 had no Muslim characters. As noted earlier, none of the 5 New Zealand movies examined had any Muslim characters.

Muslim characters comprised 2% of all characters in action and adventure films across the full 200-movie sample. In comedy films, 2.5% of all speaking characters were Muslim. Several genres comprised

the “other” category, including those classified as drama or horror films. Few (1.5%) characters in those films were identified as Muslim. Lastly, no Muslim characters were in the 23 animated movies across the full sample.

### **Portrayal of Muslim Characters**

**Gender.** Across all 200 films, of the 144 Muslim characters, 76.4% were male and 23.6% were identified as female. None were gender non-binary/non-conforming. This is a ratio of 3.2 male Muslim characters to every 1 female Muslim character.

There was a significant difference in the percentage of female Muslim characters identified over time. Muslim girls/women were most likely to appear on screen in 2019 (29.3%), followed by 2017 (22%), and 2018 (16.7%).

Overall, Muslim girls/women were outnumbered by male Muslim characters across each sample, and barely surpassed one-third of all Muslim characters. In the U.K., Muslim female characters were 36.7% of all Muslim characters on screen and were 25.5% of Muslim characters in U.S. films. Finally, Australia had the lowest percentage of female Muslim characters on screen, with 15.9%.

A total of 15 films (7.5%) had at least 1 female Muslim speaking character on screen. In other words, *185 films did not include any Muslim girls or women who spoke one or more words on screen*. To break this down by country, 94 films from the U.S., 58 U.K. movies, and 28 Australian films did not feature a single Muslim female speaking character on screen. Put differently, Muslim girls and women appeared in 6 U.S. films, 5 U.K. films, and 4 Australian movies.

**Race/Ethnicity.** Of the 144 Muslim characters across the sample, 66.7% were Middle Eastern/North African (MENA), 20.8% were Asian, 5.6% were Black/African American, 4.2% were White, and 2.8% were Multiracial/Multiethnic. No Muslim characters were Hispanic/Latino, American Indian/Alaska Native, or Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander.

MENA Muslim characters comprised the majority of Muslim characters across all three years (2017=70%; 2018=75%; 2019=58.6%). Similarly, Asian Muslim characters were the second highest group in 2017 (30%) and 2019 (25.9%), but did not appear at all in 2018. Black Muslim characters only appeared in 2018 (22.2%), and White Muslim characters were only seen in films from 2019 (10.3%). Multiracial/Multiethnic characters appeared in 2018 (2.8%) and 2019 (5.2%).

Did the racial/ethnic composition of Muslim characters in the U.S., U.K., or Australia differ? Yes. In Australia (88.9%) and the U.S. (76.5%), Muslim characters were most likely to be MENA compared to 3.3% in the U.K. However, in the U.K., 76.7% of Muslim characters were Asian. Only 11.1% of Australian Muslim characters were Asian. The U.S. had no Asian Muslim characters, but was the only sample to feature Black Muslim characters (15.7%) or Multiracial/Multiethnic Muslims (7.8%). The U.K. was the only country to feature White Muslim characters (20%).

70% of male Muslim characters were MENA, while 19.1% were Asian, 6.4% were Black, and fewer than 10% of all male Muslim characters were White (3.6%) or Multiracial/Multiethnic (<1%).

More than half of female Muslim characters were MENA (55.9%), while just over a quarter (26.5%) were Asian. Fewer than 10% of female Muslim characters were: Multiracial/Multiethnic (8.8%), White (5.9%), or Black/African American (2.9%).

**Age.** The majority of Muslim characters on screen were in young adults (48.9%). Roughly one-third of Muslim characters (34.3%) were middle-aged, while 5.8% were teens, 5.8% were elderly and 5.1% were children.

**LGBTQ and Characters with Disabilities.** Across all 200 films in the sample, there was only 1 Muslim character identified as LGBTQ. Similarly, there was one Muslim character shown with a disability across the sample.

**Role.** Only 4.4% of Muslim characters, or 6 characters across all 200 films, filled primary roles. One of these primary roles went to a Muslim character who was part of a leading ensemble—this character was the only MENA Muslim woman to hold a primary role. The rest were lead/co lead roles held alone or with one other character. In contrast, 25.5% of Muslim characters were in secondary and 70.1% were in tertiary roles. Two lead/co lead roles were held by MENA men, two by Asian men, and one by a White man.

### Qualitative Analysis

*Muslim characters are rooted in times and places that promote the idea of Muslims as “foreign” or “other.”* 40.2% of all 137 Muslim characters appeared in seven films that took place in the real or fantastical past (e.g., *Aladdin* was set in a fictional world without modern conveniences). Few (11%) Muslim characters were in three movies set in the recent past (2000-2010). Slightly less than half (48.9%) of all Muslim characters appeared in nine films set in the present day.

The majority (61%) of 41 primary and secondary Muslim characters, including 5 of 6 lead characters, appeared in movies set in the historical or recent past. This included 39% of Muslim characters appearing in 6 films set in a real or fantastical historic context and 22% shown in the recent past across 3 movies. In contrast, 39% of all primary and secondary Muslim characters appeared in 3 movies which took place in present-day Australia. Most ( $n=13$ ) of these characters—including the only present-day Muslim lead—appeared in one movie: *Ali’s Wedding*.

The location where Muslim characters appeared was scrutinized. Of all 137 Muslim characters, 45.6% were shown in Middle Eastern/North African countries or cities, 19% were shown in Australia, 11% in the U.K., and 11% in India. Nine (6.6%) characters were in Europe, while eight (5.8%) were shown in Africa. Finally, only one Muslim character appeared fleetingly in a scene set in the U.S.

Leading Muslim characters were in settings that spanned the globe, with one in Australia, one in India, and two primarily in the U.K. One appeared in Paris, and the other in the fictional Middle Eastern city of Agrabah. Secondary characters were most likely to appear in Australia (34.3%), India (22.9%), the Middle East/North Africa (22.9%), the U.K. (14.3%) and Europe (5.7%).

*Language, citizenship, and clothing signify Muslims as “different.”* Out of the 41 primary and secondary characters evaluated, 75.6% were depicted in clothing related to their faith during the film.

Nearly half of the primary and secondary characters evaluated spoke with an accent that was reflective of a non-native English speaker (regardless of U.S., British, or Australian accent). Moreover, 39% of the primary and secondary Muslim characters did not speak English *at all* in their stories. Thus, 87.8% of primary and secondary Muslim characters were shown as outsiders based on the language and accents they used.

More than half (58.5%) of Muslim primary and secondary characters were shown as immigrants, migrants, or refugees. Only 4 Muslim primary and secondary characters were portrayed as U.K. or Australian natives. That is, a fraction of major Muslim characters could be identified as being born and raised in these countries.

*Muslims are linked to violence.* 39% of Muslim primary and secondary characters were shown as perpetrators of violence, though it was primarily secondary characters (41.7% of all 36 secondary characters) who were responsible for these acts of aggression. When we examined the 96 tertiary characters for this metric, we found that 30.2% of the tertiary characters were perpetrators of violence. Thus, overall, nearly one-third of all 137 Muslim characters (32.8%) instigated violence across the plot. However, more than half (53.7%) of primary and secondary Muslim characters were targeted by violence.

Across all 41 primary and secondary characters, 70.7% experienced disparagement. Specifically, 62% of primary and secondary Muslim characters were targeted with racist and/or religious slurs or undertones.

19% of Muslim primary and secondary characters died by the end of their respective films. Of these, 5 perished as a result of violence.

*Muslim stories are “personal.”* Of the 6 stories centered on a Muslim protagonist, three centered on young adult Muslim men, and are, at their core, films about relationships. In each, the protagonist’s story includes a heterosexual romantic relationship. In two, the character must confront the expectations of his family of origin while in the third the character forms and frustrates a family-like cast of close allies. Although these stories are engaging and important to have told, they do perpetuate mythologizing about the stories that “fit” underrepresented communities. These stories do not put Muslim characters at the forefront of narratives that are mythic in scope, that involve a Muslim character saving the world or confronting an obstacle that threatens humanity. Instead, these stories focus on personal obstacles that affect the future of the character but may have little impact on others.

*Muslim women are submissive and stereotyped.* Muslim women in secondary roles were predominantly supportive to the main and typically male protagonist in the film and/or presented as their potential romantic partners. Stories of Muslim women are still undermined by a focus on their desirability to potential romantic partners, or by character portrayals centered on meek and submissive personalities. The exclusion and minimization of Muslim women in top movies is even more egregious when considering the many Muslim women who have made and continued to make contributions to public life, alongside the various traits and talents of Muslim women off-screen.

*Muslim characters are shown as “subservient.”* Across 6 of the films with Muslim secondary (and at least one primary) characters, Muslim characters were shown in relation to a leading White character in roles that served the goals of the White lead. The result is that Muslim characters are shown not as independent, equal, or in relation to White leads, but in roles that render them subservient.

## **Missing & Maligned: The Reality of Muslims in Popular Global Movies**

Annenberg Inclusion Initiative  
USC

Within the U.S. and other countries, 2020 brought not only a global pandemic but also a renewed focus on racial justice. In addition to the discrimination and hate faced by communities based on race/ethnicity, faith-based prejudice and violence continue to remain concerning. By one estimate, the number of potential anti-Islam attacks in 2019 exceeded 500 in the U.S.<sup>1</sup> That same year, nearly half, 47%, of all hate crimes in England and Wales were targeted against Muslims.<sup>2</sup> In March 2019, 51 individuals were killed and more were injured in a shooting at a mosque in Christchurch, New Zealand.<sup>3</sup> The violence against Muslims—online and offline—demonstrates dangerous biases in the population and real threats to individuals in this community.

While the causes of such violence are complex, one arena that may exacerbate biased views of the Muslim community is the mass media. In the absence of direct contact, entertainment may provide individuals with information about different groups. For example, recent polls in the U.S. indicate that many individuals seldom (26%) or never (36%) have conversations with a Muslim person.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, as the entertainment industry increases the percentage of leading characters from underrepresented racial/ethnic groups, it is important to understand whether humanizing and inclusive portrayals of Muslim characters are part of this emphasis on inclusion.

Thus, the purpose of the present study was to explore Muslim representation in popular film. Specifically, the research seeks to identify the prevalence of Muslim characters and assess portrayals of these characters on screen. To accomplish these goals, the study includes both a quantitative and qualitative analysis of 200 top-grossing movies released between 2017 and 2019 across four countries: the U.S., U.K., Australia, and New Zealand.<sup>5</sup>

The quantitative analysis includes every speaking character identified within the sample of movies. These characters were assessed for a variety of demographic and social factors (e.g., gender, race/ethnicity, age, LGBTQ identification, disability) using our Annenberg Inclusion Initiative methodology.<sup>6</sup> We further examined whether or not each speaking character was Muslim, using a definition developed for the study. Muslim characters were identified using a set of indicators that included verbal (e.g., direct statements, other characters' comments) and non-verbal cues (e.g., apparel, setting, artifacts, etc.).<sup>7</sup>

The qualitative analysis examines specific stereotypes and aspects of Muslim portrayals. Drawing on research from other scholars, we developed a set of questions that were evaluated for each Muslim character in the films examined.<sup>8</sup> A group of 8 research assistants who were familiar with Muslim practices and offered cultural insights into the process examined Muslim characters across the sample.

Below, we first present the results from the quantitative study, followed by the qualitative analysis, and conclude with overall results and identify pathways for change. As in all our reports, to minimize drawing attention to trivial deviations due to either large or small sample sizes, only differences of 5 percentage points or more are discussed.

## Quantitative Analysis

A total of 8,965 speaking characters were identified across 200 top-grossing films released between 2017 and 2019 from the U.S., U.K., Australia, and New Zealand. Of these, 1.6% ( $n=144$ ) were Muslim and 98.4% ( $n=8,678$ ) were not Muslim.<sup>9</sup> This is a ratio of 60.3 non-Muslim characters to every 1 Muslim character on screen.

Differences by *country* sample were explored. There were 100 films from the U.S., 63 from the U.K., 32 from Australia, and 5 from New Zealand included in the analysis. As shown in Table 1, 5.6% ( $n=63$ ) of speaking characters in the Australian sample were Muslim, as were 1.1% of U.S. ( $n=51$ ), and U.K. characters ( $n=30$ ). There were no characters in the New Zealand sample who were identified as Muslim. Additionally, these statistics were compared to the real-world Muslim populations in each of these countries. For instance, Australia's Muslim population was 2.6% in 2016, whereas in the U.K. it was 6.3%, and in the U.S. 1.1%. New Zealand has the smallest Muslim population of these countries, with an estimate of 1% to 2% of residents identifying as Muslim.<sup>10</sup> Thus, in two countries (U.K., Australia), top films fail to reach proportional representation with the population.

**Table 1**  
**Percentage of Muslim Characters by Country**

Measure	U.S.	U.K.	Australia	New Zealand	Total
<b>Muslim Characters</b>	1.1% ( $n=51$ )	1.1% ( $n=30$ )	5.6% ( $n=63$ )	0	1.6% ( $n=144$ )
<b>Non-Muslim Characters</b>	98.9% ( $n=4,802$ )	98.9% ( $n=2,616$ )	94.4% ( $n=1,059$ )	100% ( $n=201$ )	98.4% ( $n=8,678$ )
<b>Total Characters</b>	4,853	2,646	1,122	201	8,822

*Note.* 143 speaking characters were not applicable in the analysis of Muslim identification (e.g., animals, etc.) A total of 8,822 speaking characters were evaluated for this measure.

Another way to interpret the prevalence of Muslim characters was by exploring how Muslim characters were distributed by country. Australia had the highest percentage of Muslim characters across all samples, as 43.8% ( $n=63$ ) of Muslim characters appeared across the country's 32 movies. U.S. movies presented 35.4% ( $n=51$ ) of all Muslim characters across the sample. Finally, roughly one-fifth of Muslim characters (20.8%,  $n=30$ ) appeared in U.K. films.

To help illustrate whether Muslim representation on screen has evolved over time, we examined the prevalence of Muslim characters across the sample time frame. There were no differences by year. In 2017, only 1.7% ( $n=50$ ) of all speaking characters were Muslim, as were 1.2% ( $n=36$ ) in 2018 and 2% ( $n=58$ ) in 2019.

The overall prevalence of Muslim characters tells us little about how those characters distributed across films. Thus, we explored the *erasure* of Muslim characters across the sample. Of the 200 top-grossing films, 9.5% ( $n=19$ ) had at least 1 Muslim character on screen. In other words, **181 out of 200 films presented no Muslim characters who spoke one or more words across the plot.** To further understand this metric, we analyzed each region individually. Although Australian movies featured the largest percentage of all Muslim characters, these characters appeared in only 5 films (15.6%). In other words, 27 of the 32 Australian films studied did not feature even one Muslim speaking character. Nine (9%) of

100 U.S. movies sampled had at least 1 Muslim speaking character. Finally, 5 of the 63 U.K. films (7.9%) included 1 or more Muslim speaking characters. As noted earlier, none of the 5 New Zealand movies examined had any Muslim characters.

**Film genre** was also examined.<sup>11</sup> Muslim characters comprised 2% ( $n=52$ ) of all characters in action and adventure films across the full 200-movie sample. In comedy films, 2.5% ( $n=44$ ) of all speaking characters were Muslim. Several genres comprised the “other” category, including those classified as drama or horror films. Few (1.5%,  $n=48$ ) characters in those films were identified as Muslim. Lastly, no Muslim characters were in the 23 animated movies across the full sample.

We evaluated genre in two additional ways. As above, we were curious about the distribution of Muslim characters across genres. As shown in Table 2, Muslim characters were more likely to appear in action films (36.1%,  $n=52$ ) compared to comedy (30.6%,  $n=44$ ), while films in Other genres (33.3%,  $n=48$ ) held a middle position between the two.

Next, this metric was evaluated by country. We explored the distribution of Muslim characters by genre and within country. Beginning with U.S. films, as seen in Table 2, 88.2% ( $n=45$ ) of Muslim characters were in action films, with few Muslim characters in Other (9.8%,  $n=5$ ) or comedy (2%,  $n=1$ ). In the U.K., Muslim characters appeared primarily in Other films (70%,  $n=21$ ), followed by comedies (30%,  $n=9$ ). Finally, Australian comedy films had the highest prevalence of Muslim characters (54%,  $n=34$ ), followed by Other genres (34.9%,  $n=22$ ), while 11.1% ( $n=7$ ) of Muslim characters appeared in action films.

**Table 2**  
**Percentage of Muslim Characters by Genre and Country**

Genre	U.S.	U.K.	Australia	New Zealand	Total
Action	88.2% ( $n=45$ )	0	11.1% ( $n=7$ )	0	36.1% ( $n=52$ )
Comedy	2% ( $n=1$ )	30% ( $n=9$ )	54% ( $n=34$ )	0	30.6% ( $n=44$ )
Other	9.8% ( $n=5$ )	70% ( $n=21$ )	34.9% ( $n=22$ )	0	33.3% ( $n=48$ )
Total	35.4% ( $n=51$ )	20.8% ( $n=30$ )	43.8% ( $n=63$ )	0	100% ( $n=144$ )

Summing up, these findings reveal the erasure of Muslim characters in storytelling. Specifically, we found a significant underrepresentation of Muslims across films and countries. Although Muslims make up 24% of people<sup>12</sup> worldwide, only 1.6% of characters in some of the most successful international movies reflect this community. In the next section, we begin to explore the portrayal of Muslim characters on screen.

### *On-Screen Portrayal*

Understanding how Muslim characters are depicted on screen begins with examining demographic factors. Below, we assess gender, race/ethnicity, LGBTQ+ identification, characters with disabilities, and age. Further, we assess Muslim character’s role within a film. These analyses provide an understanding of how central Muslim characters are to the unfolding narrative.

**Gender.** Across all 200 films, of the 144 Muslim characters, 76.4% ( $n=110$ ) were male and 23.6% ( $n=34$ ) were identified as female. None were gender non-binary/non-conforming. This is a ratio of 3.2 male Muslim characters to every 1 female Muslim character. To evaluate this statistic further, the gender of Muslim characters was analyzed by year and country.

There was a significant difference in the percentage of female Muslim characters identified over time. Muslim girls/women were most likely to appear on screen in 2019 (29.3%,  $n=17$ ), followed by 2017 (22%,  $n=11$ ), and 2018 (16.7%,  $n=6$ ).

Understanding the prevalence of female Muslim characters in each country was also important. As seen in Table 3, there were significant percentage differences in the prevalence of female Muslim characters by country. However, the numerical deviations between Muslim girls/women in each sample were small. Overall, Muslim girls/women were the minority of Muslim characters across each sample and barely surpassed one-third of all Muslim characters. In the U.K., Muslim female characters were 36.7% ( $n=11$ ) of all Muslim characters on screen and were 25.5% ( $n=13$ ) of U.S. Muslim characters. Finally, Australia had the lowest percentage of female Muslim characters on screen, with 15.9% ( $n=10$ ).

**Table 3**  
**Percentage of Muslim Characters by Gender & Country**

Gender	U.S.	U.K.	Australia	Total
Male	74.5% ( $n=38$ )	63.3% ( $n=19$ )	84.1% ( $n=53$ )	76.4% ( $n=110$ )
Female	25.5% ( $n=13$ )	36.7% ( $n=11$ )	15.9% ( $n=10$ )	23.6% ( $n=34$ )

The last set of analyses related to gender explored how many films rendered Muslim girls/women invisible. A total of 15 films (7.5%) had at least 1 female Muslim speaking character on screen. In other words, **185 films did not include any Muslim girls or women who spoke one or more words on screen.** To break this down by country, 94 films from the U.S., 58 U.K. movies, and 28 Australian films did not feature a single Muslim female speaking character on screen. Put differently, Muslim girls and women appeared in 6 U.S. films, 5 U.K. films, and 4 Australian movies.

**Race/Ethnicity.** The race/ethnicity of all characters across the sample was evaluated<sup>13</sup> and the breakdown was as follows: 74.4% White ( $n=5,700$ ), 9.8% Black/African American ( $n=748$ ), 3.1% Hispanic/Latino ( $n=237$ ), 6.4% Asian ( $n=492$ ), <1% American Indian/Alaska Native ( $n=10$ ), 1.1% Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander ( $n=83$ ), 1.9% Middle Eastern/North African ( $n=146$ ), and 3.1% Multiracial/Multiethnic ( $n=241$ ).

We then evaluated the apparent race/ethnicity of each Muslim character. Of the 144 Muslim characters across the sample, 66.7% ( $n=96$ ) were Middle Eastern/North African, 20.8% ( $n=30$ ) were Asian, 5.6% ( $n=8$ ) were Black/African American, 4.2% were White ( $n=6$ ), and 2.8% ( $n=4$ ) were Multiracial/Multiethnic. No Muslim characters were Hispanic/Latino, American Indian/Alaska Native, or Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander.

Another way to look at this data is to ask what percentage of characters from each racial/ethnic group were Muslim? Nearly two-thirds (65.8%,  $n=96$ ) of all MENA characters across the sample were Muslim, while 6.1% ( $n=30$ ) of Asian characters were. In contrast, 1.1% ( $n=8$ ) of all Black characters were Muslim, as were 1.7% ( $n=4$ ) of Multiracial/Multiethnic characters. Less than 1% ( $n=6$ ) of all White characters were Muslim. This analysis reveals that the image content creators hold of Muslim characters is one that is primarily Middle Eastern in nature and may overlook the breadth of racial/ethnic diversity across this community. For instance, in the U.S., 20% of Muslims are Black, making up the largest percentage of Muslims in the country.<sup>14</sup> Yet on screen, Black Muslims made up only 5.6% of Muslim characters across the entire sample.

**Table 4**  
**Percentage of Muslim Characters by Race and Ethnicity**

	<b>Middle Eastern/ North African</b>	<b>Asian</b>	<b>Black</b>	<b>White</b>	<b>Multiracial/ Multiethnic</b>
<b>% of Muslim Characters</b>	66.7% ( $n=96$ )	20.8% ( $n=30$ )	5.6% ( $n=8$ )	4.2% ( $n=6$ )	2.8% ( $n=4$ )
<b>% of all Characters</b>	1.9% ( $n=146$ )	6.4% ( $n=492$ )	9.8% ( $n=748$ )	74.4% ( $n=5,700$ )	3.1% ( $n=241$ )

The race/ethnicity of Muslim characters was also analyzed by year. In line with the findings above, MENA Muslim characters comprised the majority of Muslim characters across all three years (2017=70%; 2018=75%; 2019=58.6%). Similarly, Asian Muslim characters were the second highest group in 2017 and 2019, but did not appear at all in 2018 (2017=30%; 2019=25.9%). Black Muslim characters only appeared in 2018 (22.2%), and White Muslim characters were only seen in films from 2019 (10.3%). Multiracial/Multiethnic characters appeared in 2018 (2.8%) and 2019 (5.2%).

Another way to evaluate the racial/ethnic distribution of Muslim characters is by sample. In other words, did the racial/ethnic composition of Muslim characters in the U.S., U.K., or Australia differ? The answer is yes. In Australia (88.9%,  $n=56$ ) and the U.S. (76.5%,  $n=39$ ), Muslim characters were most likely to be MENA compared to 3.3% ( $n=1$ ) in the U.K. However, in the U.K., three-quarters (76.7%,  $n=23$ ) of Muslim characters were Asian. Only 11.1% ( $n=7$ ) of Australian Muslim characters were Asian. The U.S. had no Asian Muslim characters, but was the only sample to feature Black Muslim characters (15.7%,  $n=8$ ) or Multiracial/Multiethnic Muslims (7.8%,  $n=4$ ). The U.K. was the only country to feature White Muslim characters (20%,  $n=6$ ).

**Table 5**  
**Percentage of Muslim Characters by Race and Ethnicity and Country**

Country	MENA	Asian	Black	White	Multiracial/ Multiethnic
U.S.	76.5% (n=39)	0	15.7% (n=8)	0	7.8% (n=4)
U.K.	3.3% (n=1)	76.7% (n=23)	0	20% (n=6)	0
Australia	88.9% (n=56)	11.1% (n=7)	0	0	0
Total	66.7% (n=96)	20.8% (n=30)	5.6% (n=8)	4.2% (n=6)	2.8% (n=4)

It was also important to examine the intersection of race/ethnicity and gender. For this analysis, we first looked at the racial/ethnic identities of male Muslim characters across the sample. Seventy percent ( $n=77$ ) of male Muslim characters were Middle Eastern/North African, while 19.1% ( $n=21$ ) were Asian, 6.4% ( $n=7$ ) of male Muslim characters were Black, and fewer than 10% of all male Muslim characters were White (3.6%,  $n=4$ ) or Multiracial/Multiethnic (<1%,  $n=1$ ).

Turning to female Muslim characters, the results varied slightly. More than half were MENA (55.9%,  $n=19$ ), while just over a quarter (26.5%,  $n=9$ ) were Asian. Fewer than 10% of female Muslim characters were depicted as being identified with any of the remaining racial/ethnic groups: Multiracial/Multiethnic (8.8%,  $n=3$ ), White (5.9%,  $n=2$ ), or Black/African American (2.9%,  $n=1$ ).

**Table 6**  
**Race/Ethnicity and Gender of Muslim Characters Overall**

Gender	MENA	Asian	Black	White	Multiracial/ Multiethnic
Males	70% (n=77)	19.1% (n=21)	6.4% (n=7)	3.6% (n=4)	<1% (n=1)
Females	55.9% (n=19)	26.5% (n=9)	2.9% (n=1)	5.9% (n=2)	8.8% (n=3)

*Note:* Cells contain the percentage of male or female Muslim characters identified with each racial/ethnic group as a percentage of all male or female Muslim characters. The breakdown of gender within racial/ethnic grouping can be obtained using column  $n$ 's.

**Age.** One important demographic factor to explore regarding Muslim characters was age.<sup>15</sup> Table 7 reflects the age breakdown of all Muslim characters identified across the sample whose age could be ascertained. The majority of Muslim characters on screen were in young adults (48.9%,  $n=67$ ). Roughly one-third of Muslim characters (34.3%,  $n=47$ ) were middle-aged, while 5.8% ( $n=8$ ) were teens, 5.8% ( $n=8$ ) were elderly, and 5.1% ( $n=7$ ) were children. The age of 4.9% ( $n=7$ ) of Muslim characters was not able to be determined. These findings were in line with the overall distribution of age across all characters in the sample, of which 44.2% ( $n=3,645$ ) were young adults and 42.1% ( $n=3,469$ ) were 40 years of age or older.

**Table 7**  
**Percentage of Muslim Characters by Age**

	Children	Teen	Young Adult	Middle Aged	Elderly
<b>Muslim Characters</b>	5.1% (n=7)	5.8% (n=8)	48.9% (n=67)	34.3% (n=47)	5.8% (n=8)

Note: 7 Muslim characters were not able to be categorized according to their age, but their portrayal provided enough information to code them as Muslim.

The trends overall for age were mirrored by year, though we collapsed the middle age and elderly characters into a single category that reflects characters age 40 and older. In 2019, 51.8% of all Muslim characters were young adults ( $n=29$ ), which was similar to 2017 (49%,  $n=24$ ) and significantly higher than 2018 (43.9%,  $n=14$ ). Middle-aged Muslim characters were more prevalent in 2018 (53.1%,  $n=17$ ) than 2017 (38.8%,  $n=19$ ) or 2019 (33.9%,  $n=19$ ), but these reflect small numerical fluctuations rather than meaningful differences. No Muslim teen characters appeared on screen in 2018, while 8.2% ( $n=4$ ) in 2017 and 7.1% ( $n=4$ ) in 2019 were adolescents. Few children appeared across the sample, with no variance by year (2017=4.1%,  $n=2$ ; 2018=3.1%,  $n=1$ ; 2019=7.1%,  $n=4$ ).

Similarly, as shown in Table 9, Muslim characters across each country sample were most likely to be young adults. Roughly half of Muslim characters in the U.S. and Australia were Muslim, as were 37.9% of Muslim characters in U.K. movies.

**Table 8**  
**Percentage of Muslim Characters by Age and Country**

	Elementary Age	Teen	Young Adult	Middle Aged & Elderly
<b>U.S.</b>	6.7% (n=3)	2.2% (n=1)	55.6% (n=25)	35.6% (n=16)
<b>U.K.</b>	10.3% (n=3)	10.3% (n=3)	37.9% (n=11)	41.4% (n=12)
<b>Australia</b>	1.6% (n=1)	6.3% (n=4)	49.2% (n=31)	42.9% (n=27)
<b>Total</b>	5.1% (n=7)	5.8% (n=8)	48.9% (n=67)	40.1% (n=55)

**LGBTQ and Characters with Disabilities.** Two other identity groups were assessed.<sup>16</sup> Across all 200 films in the sample, there was only 1 Muslim character identified as LGBTQ. This character, Rudolf Nureyev, appeared in the 2019 U.K. biopic, *The White Crow*, was shown exploring his sexuality and relationships with men.<sup>17</sup> While his religious beliefs were never showcased, the film makes clear who Rudolf is as a historical figure.

Similarly, there was one Muslim character shown with a disability across the sample. Ali Rahim Noor, from the 2017 U.K. film *Viceroy's House*, was a blind, middle aged, Asian male and single parent who served as a tertiary role in the story.

**Role.** In addition to the above demographic factors, Muslim characters were also analyzed according to their role, or importance in the storyline.<sup>18</sup> Specifically, Muslim characters were categorized across 3 roles: primary, or lead roles; secondary, or supporting roles; and tertiary, or minor roles. For this variable, we removed 7 instances when characters were shown at different ages (e.g., demographic changes) that resulted in a character being included more than once in our data. This reduced the total sample size of Muslim characters to 137. The data showed that only 4.4% ( $n=6$ ) of Muslim characters across all 200 films filled primary roles. In other words, Muslim characters filled only 6 primary roles across the entire sample. One of these primary roles went to a Muslim character who was part of a leading ensemble. The rest were lead/co lead roles held alone or with one other character. In contrast, 25.5% ( $n=35$ ) and 70.1% ( $n=96$ ) of Muslim characters were in secondary and tertiary roles, respectively.

We examined demographic factors in relation to the character's role in the story. As seen in Table 10, of the 34 female Muslim characters identified on screen, 64.7% ( $n=22$ ) were in tertiary roles. Nearly one-third (32.4%,  $n=11$ ) served as secondary characters and only 1 woman held a primary role in one of the movies in the sample (*Hotel Mumbai*), where she was part of the leading ensemble with two non-Muslim male characters.

**Table 9**  
**Percentage of Muslim Characters by Gender and Role**

	Primary	Secondary	Tertiary	Total
<b>Male</b>	4.9% ( $n=5$ )	23.3% ( $n=24$ )	71.8% ( $n=74$ )	75.2% ( $n=103$ )
<b>Female</b>	2.9% ( $n=1$ )	32.4% ( $n=11$ )	64.7% ( $n=22$ )	24.8% ( $n=34$ )

Another metric to explore was the roles of Muslim characters by race/ethnicity. Beginning with primary roles, 25% of these characters were White ( $n=1$ ), 33.3% ( $n=2$ ) were Asian, and 50% ( $n=3$ ) were Middle Eastern/North African. No Black Muslim or Multiracial/Multiethnic Muslim characters appeared in primary roles. Put differently, two lead/co lead roles were held by MENA men, two by Asian men, and one by a White man. As noted earlier, the leading ensemble role went to a Middle Eastern woman.

Turning to secondary roles, 2.9% ( $n=1$ ) were held by White Muslim characters, with 34.3% ( $n=12$ ) who were Asian, 60% ( $n=21$ ) who were Middle Eastern/North African, and 2.9% ( $n=1$ ) who were Multiracial/Multiethnic.

Tertiary or minor characters had a similar distribution, as shown in Table 10. Few (2.1%,  $n=2$ ) were White, 8.3% ( $n=8$ ) were Black/African American, 14.6% ( $n=14$ ) were Asian, 71.9% ( $n=69$ ) were Middle Eastern/North African, and 3.1% ( $n=3$ ) were Multiracial/Multiethnic.

Another way to investigate how roles varied by race/ethnicity was to examine what percentage of Muslim characters from each racial/ethnic group were minor or inconsequential to the plot (e.g., tertiary). This was important to examine, as 100% of the Black Muslim characters ( $n=8$ ) in the sample filled tertiary or minor roles. Of the remaining groups, 71.9% ( $n=69$ ) of MENA Muslim characters were tertiary, as were 75% ( $n=3$ ) of the Multiracial/Multiethnic characters, 50% ( $n=14$ ) of Asian Muslim characters, and 50% ( $n=2$ ) of White Muslim characters.

**Table 10**  
**Percentage of Muslim Characters by Roles and Race and Ethnicity**

Race/Ethnicity	Primary	Secondary	Tertiary
White	16.7% (n=1)	2.9% (n=1)	2.1% (n=2)
Black	0	0	8.3% (n=8)
Asian	33.3% (n=2)	34.3% (n=12)	14.6% (n=14)
Middle Eastern	50% (n=3)	60% (n=21)	71.9% (n=69)
Mixed Race/Other	0	2.9% (n=1)	3.1% (n=3)
Total	4.4% (n=6)	25.5% (n=35)	70.1% (n=96)

The goal of the quantitative analysis was to investigate the prevalence and on-screen demographics of Muslim characters in popular films from the U.S., U.K., Australia, and New Zealand. As reflected by the data, Muslim characters were underrepresented on screen across the entire sample. Moreover, Muslim characters were marginalized across all demographic groups, but in particular as members of the LGBTQ community and as characters with disabilities. Roughly a quarter of all Muslim characters were girls/women, and most Muslim characters were Middle Eastern/North African. It is crucial to understand these metrics as a reflection of the continued erasure of Muslims and Muslim characters in storytelling, both on-screen and off-screen. Without an accurate representation of Muslims, especially on-screen in some of the world's biggest movies, there is no platform or opportunity for Muslims and non-Muslims alike to see the countless experiences and stories of the most diverse community in the world.

### Qualitative Analysis

In addition to collecting quantitative data on the prevalence of Muslim characters in film, we conducted a qualitative analysis on 41 primary and secondary Muslim characters across the sample, including tertiary (or minor) characters for some analyses where relevant. These 41 characters appeared in 12 movies (3 U.S., 5 U.K., 4 Australia) across the sample. This analysis examined a series of questions related to how Muslim characters might be depicted— their association to violence, how often they were shown with religious artifacts, and the nature of their relationships to other characters—in order to understand the stereotypes and tropes that may be present in popular films.<sup>19</sup> In this section we review the most notable trends that emerged across the films examined and how they speak to the larger view of Muslims in entertainment.

#### *Setting and Place: Muslims are the “Other”*

As we noted earlier, 1.8 billion people living today are Muslim. These people live all over the world in nearly every country on earth. Yet, as we examined some of the most popular movies distributed around the globe, Muslim characters were limited in the places and settings they occupied.

We first analyzed the historical setting of films featuring all Muslim characters.<sup>20</sup> Slightly less than half (48.9%,  $n=67$ ) of all 137 Muslim characters appeared in nine films set in the present day. Most of those characters (73.1%,  $n=49$ ) appeared in just two films (*Ali's Wedding*; *Jirga*). Few (11%,  $n=15$ ) Muslim characters were in three movies set in the recent past (2000-2010). The remaining 40.2% ( $n=55$ ) of characters appeared in seven films that took place in the real or fantastical past (e.g., *Aladdin* was set in a fictional world without modern conveniences).

When we focused only on primary and secondary characters, these results came into sharper relief. The majority (61%,  $n=25$ ) of primary and secondary Muslim characters, including 5 of 6 lead characters, appeared in movies set in the historical or recent past. This included 39% ( $n=16$ ) of Muslim characters appearing in 6 films set in a real or fantastical historic context and 22% ( $n=9$ ) shown in the recent past across 3 movies. In contrast, 39% ( $n=16$ ) of all primary and secondary Muslim characters appeared in 3 movies which took place in present-day Australia. Most ( $n=13$ ) of these characters—including the only present-day Muslim lead—appeared in one movie: *Ali's Wedding*.

While incorporating characters from diverse racial/ethnic and religious backgrounds into historical films is a critical component of broadening inclusion efforts, the example of Muslim characters in this sample points to an important limitation of this approach. The majority of Muslim primary and secondary characters appeared in films that relegated these characters to a time gone by or one that immersed them in key past events (e.g., Mumbai hotel bombing, onset of the war in Iraq, end of British colonial rule in India, World War I). Only 3 movies—all of them set in Australia—made it clear to audiences that Muslim characters are active participants in modern societies and cultures.

In addition to the time when films were set, we also explored the geographic setting of these movies.<sup>21</sup> In this analysis, we examined the locations where Muslim characters appeared, beginning with all 137 Muslim characters in the full sample. Three films featured Muslim characters set primarily in the U.K. and accounted for 11% ( $n=15$ ) of all Muslim characters. Roughly a fifth (19%,  $n=26$ ) of all Muslim characters were shown in Australia, across three movies. This included 21 characters who appeared in *Ali's Wedding*. A sizeable portion (45.6%,  $n=63$ ) of Muslim characters were shown in Middle Eastern/North African countries or cities (e.g., Afghanistan, Morocco, fictional Agrabah, and Jerusalem).<sup>22</sup> Few (11%,  $n=15$ ) Muslim characters were primarily shown in India. Nine (6.6%) characters were in Europe,<sup>23</sup> while eight (5.8%) were shown in Africa. Finally, only one Muslim character appeared in a scene set in the U.S. This portrayal—a cameo from notable individual identified as Muslim (e.g., Gigi Hadid) due to off screen identification—appeared for a fleeting moment.

The world narrowed for primary and secondary Muslim characters. Leading Muslim characters were in settings that spanned the globe, with one in Australia, one in India, and two primarily in the U.K. One appeared in Paris, and the other in the fictional Middle Eastern city of Agrabah. Secondary characters were most likely to appear in Australia (34.3%,  $n=12$ ), India (22.9%,  $n=8$ ), the Middle East/North Africa (22.9%,  $n=8$ ), the U.K. (14.3%,  $n=5$ ), and Europe (5.7%,  $n=2$ ).

The results of this analysis extend what we noted above—***Muslim characters are rooted in times and places that promote the idea of the Muslim faith as “foreign” or “other.”*** While there was not one major Muslim character who appeared in a present-day U.S. setting, this perspective is not only true of U.S. films. Likewise, only a handful of Muslim characters appeared in a modern U.K. locale. Yet, Muslims in both the U.S. and U.K. are notable business owners (e.g., Adeem Younis, Jawed Karim), political leaders (e.g., Ilhan Omar, Rashida Tlaib), and community members grappling with current challenges and joys. These experiences find little space in the top movies in our sample.

### *Language, Citizenship, and Clothing: Signifiers of Muslim "Difference"*

Unlike other aspects of identity, such as race/ethnicity or gender, faith is one that need not have any outward signifiers. Yet, for Muslim characters in popular films across our sample, faith is made salient through not only a character's dialogue, but via overt cues that render Muslim characters outsiders and "different" from the communities in which they live and work. By using these outward signs of a character's inward belief system, these portrayals reinforce the trends described above that communicate to audiences that Muslims belong to other places rather than in neighborhoods, businesses, and yes, even in films.

Making Muslim characters distinct begins before these characters even say a word. Out of the 41 primary and secondary characters evaluated, 75.6% ( $n=31$ ) were depicted in clothing related to their faith during the film.<sup>24</sup> This included women wearing hijabs, shalwar kameez, and dupattas and men wearing topis, kurtas, and turbans. Even when we restricted the analysis to characters who were primarily portrayed in settings across the U.K. and Australia, of the 11 characters, this figure remained high. The issue with consistently depicting Muslim characters in clothing that signifies their faith is not the clothing itself. It is the choices of directors, costumers, and others involved with the production to render religion something that is worn outwardly and that communicates otherness or difference.

A second way in which Muslim characters are rendered distinct from others is through language. Nearly half ( $n=20$ ) of the primary and secondary characters evaluated spoke with an accent that was reflective of a non-native English speaker (regardless of U.S., British, or Australian accent).<sup>25</sup> Moreover, 39% of the primary and secondary Muslim characters ( $n=16$ ) did not speak English *at all* in the story. Thus, 87.8% of primary and secondary Muslim characters were shown as outsiders based on the language and accent they use. Here again, it is not the presence of an accent that is problematic. Instead, it is the choices of content creators to require characters to speak with an accent that sets a dangerous precedent. These choices reinforce the view that Muslims are people from *outside* the U.S., U.K., or Australia.

Language and accented speech serve to underpin another aspect of Muslim portrayals. More than half (58.5%,  $n=24$ ) of Muslim primary and secondary characters were shown as immigrants, migrants, or refugees. Once again, the image of Muslim characters is one of people who bring faith and religion with them from other places rather than as people who have local ties. Ten characters were shown as immigrants who moved to a new country permanently (e.g., *Ali's Wedding* and *Blinded by the Light*). Ten were shown as migrants or tourists who temporarily visited or moved to other countries for a period of time (e.g., Abdul Kareem, *Victoria & Abdul*; Zahra, *Hotel Mumbai*; and Sameer, *Wonder Woman*). Finally, 4 characters (e.g., Rudolf Nureyev, *The White Crow*; Sheikh Mahdi, *Ali's Wedding*; Sayyid, *The Merger*; Yasar Gun, *Official Secrets*) were depicted as refugees who moved to a new country as a means of escaping political violence or religious persecution. Only 4 Muslim primary and secondary characters were portrayed as U.K. or Australian natives. That is, a fraction of major Muslim characters could be identified as being born and raised in these countries.

Finally, Muslim secondary characters were depicted as part of a community of Muslim characters. More than three-quarters (91.4%,  $n=32$ ) of the secondary Muslim characters were shown interacting with other Muslim community members. This was the case in movies like *Ali's Wedding*, and *Aladdin* which were set in Muslim communities, but also in movies like *Jirga* and *Hotel Mumbai*. While it is important not to isolate Muslim characters on screen, it is also important to use caution when depicting Muslim characters in tight communities that are impenetrable to non-Muslims.

This is particularly important as it links to how Muslim faith is represented on screen. Films used religious artifacts (e.g., prayer mat, Quran, prayer beads, etc.) as a way to identify Muslim characters on screen.<sup>26</sup> Seventeen primary and secondary characters were presented with religious artifacts that were linked to Islam. Specifically, two of the characters shown with religious artifacts were in primary roles, whereas 15 were in secondary roles. Interestingly, however, 76.5% of the primary and secondary characters who were shown with religious artifacts were from Muslim-dominated films (e.g., *Ali's Wedding*, *Jirga*, *Aladdin*). Thus, Muslim characters who are presented outside of Muslim communities may not be depicted with faith-based behaviors, whereas the rituals and artifacts associated with the Muslim faith are linked to community membership in ways that may suggest that this is inaccessible to non-Muslim characters.

The historical and geographic setting of films may communicate to audiences that Muslims were rarely contemporary members of U.S., U.K., or Australian societies. However, the choices described in this section not only reinforce but expand upon that message. Three-quarters of Muslim characters were shown in clothing that outwardly signified their faith. More than half of the primary and secondary Muslim characters were shown as immigrants, migrants, or refugees. Nearly half of Muslim primary and secondary characters spoke with accented English—if they were shown speaking English at all. This is not to say that depictions of Muslims should avoid very real portrayals of the challenges facing Muslim characters who immigrate (e.g., *Blinded by the Light*). Rather, pairing the consistent message of “foreignness” with the few portrayals of Muslim characters can convey to audiences that this is the *only* experience of Muslims.

Why does the setting and portrayal of Muslim characters matter? Because the mass media and storytelling in particular may be a vehicle for identification with Muslims that can serve as a form of interpersonal contact. With greater contact—even via media interaction—audience members may have greater empathy for and less prejudice towards Muslim individuals off-screen.<sup>27</sup> This is in line with research on other groups, such as the LGBTQ community.<sup>28</sup> When content creators facilitate a depiction of Muslim characters that shows them interacting with non-Muslims in contemporary settings, this may provide audiences with the opportunity to experience such interpersonal contact vicariously, with potential positive implications for non-Muslim audiences.

#### *Violence and Disparagement: Muslims as “Violent”*

Muslims, both on screen and off, have been constrained to a narrative that normalizes them as violent and positions their faith as related to extremism. This is not surprising, as it aligns with previous research on film, television, and news coverage.<sup>29</sup> While this sample of movies did not feature a significant percentage of films with narratives focused on war or terrorism, a notable percentage of Muslim characters were depicted in ways that perpetuate a view of Muslims as violent.

There were several ways that we explored how Muslim characters could be linked with violence and terror. First, we examined whether primary and secondary Muslim characters were shown as affiliated with groups or organizations that could be classified as “extremist.” A total of 17.1% ( $n=7$ ) of primary and secondary characters were shown as part of groups that used violent means to achieve the goals of their organization. For example, *Hotel Mumbai*, presented 6 characters as being part of a terrorist group from Pakistan and *Jirga* showed 1 character as a member of the Taliban. Although this percentage overall is small, because there are few portrayals of Muslim characters across popular movies, more

potent or distinct portrayals may have an outsize effect on audience perceptions and attitudes toward Muslims.<sup>30</sup>

Another way to evaluate how Muslim primary and secondary characters might be shown in ways that pair Muslims with aggression is to determine whether Muslim characters are shown as either perpetrators or targets of violence.<sup>31</sup> While slightly more than one-third (39%,  $n=16$ ) of Muslim primary and secondary characters were shown as perpetrators of violence, it was primarily secondary characters ( $n=15$ , 42.9% of all 35 secondary characters) who were responsible for these acts of aggression. This finding is important, as it reflects the way that Muslim secondary characters may be positioned as villains or antagonists to lead characters. This was the case in movies such as *Hotel Mumbai*, where secondary characters who were perpetrators of violence were aligned with or were the key antagonist in the plot. These characters were also likely to use firearms (53.3%) or bombs (26.7%) to accomplish violent acts. Furthermore, 50% ( $n=8$ ) of the 16 characters who were perpetrators of violence were involved with violence that was a mass event. When we examined the 96 tertiary characters for this metric, we found that 30.2% ( $n=29$ ) of the tertiary characters were perpetrators of violence. Thus, overall, nearly one-third of all 137 Muslim characters (32.8%,  $n=45$ ) instigated violence across the plot.

Importantly, Muslim characters were not only affiliated with violence as perpetrators, but were also targets of violent actions. More than half (53.7%,  $n=22$ ) of primary and secondary Muslim characters were targeted by violence. Presenting Muslims as the victims of violence raises two areas of concern. First, it reinforces the notion of Muslims as violent by pairing Muslim characters with aggressive actions, even in victim roles. Second, it implies that Muslims are deserving of violence, even when they serve as heroes or are supportive of the main hero in the film. The data showed that 63.6% ( $n=14$ ) of Muslim characters who were the targets of violence were protagonists or supportive of the protagonists in the film. While villains and antagonists rarely receive humanizing treatment, filmmakers may be motivated to do so with Muslim characters to avoid criticism of perpetuating terrorist tropes. Yet, according to Dr. Evelyn Alsultany, a common way in which films promote empathy with Muslim characters, especially antagonists or villains, is providing back stories or “plot twists,” around the character and their motives.<sup>32</sup> However, these instances are almost always near the end of the film. The placement of these stories is critical to shaping how the audience may empathize with the character. For instance, when moments of humanity and empathy are shown in the last few scenes of the film, they may have little impact in opposing the violence and cruelty in the narrative as a whole. If these stories were shown earlier in the film, there could be more humanization of Muslim characters.

An example of this can be seen from the Australian movie, *Hotel Mumbai*. For the entirety of the film, Imran and others are shown carrying out terrorist attacks in Mumbai, however, only in the final 45 minutes of the film does the audience learn that Imran had joined the group as a way to earn money and send it back to his family. He is shown crying to his father and telling him how much he loves his family right before his inevitable death. This attempt to cultivate audience empathy towards the character may actually justify and legitimate the aggression in ways that reinforce a perception that violence toward Muslims is justified.<sup>33</sup> This moment for Imran may not provide sufficient empathy to counter the perceptions and attitudes audiences may have already formed about his character, and more importantly, real-world Muslim individuals.

Another way that Muslim characters may be targeted with aggression is verbally. Across all 41 primary and secondary characters, 70.7% ( $n=29$ ) experienced disparagement.<sup>34</sup> Specifically, 62% ( $n=18$ ) of primary and secondary Muslim characters were targeted with racist and/or religious slurs or undertones. These included statements such as: “Listen you pox ridden Indian piece of shit, why don't

you bloody leave her alone?," "I wouldn't stand that close to the 'refo,' he's probably got a bomb strapped to his body," and were referred to as "Muslim fundamentalists," and asked disparaging questions like, "Isn't it against your religion?" and "Can't you guys have, like, 72 wives or some shit?" These comments both belittle Muslim characters and their faith and further the association of Muslims with violence.

Finally, 19% ( $n=8$ ) of Muslim primary and secondary characters died by the end of their respective films. Of these, 5 perished as a result of violence. The message that Muslim lives are expendable is one that must be countered by media. This is particularly true in an environment in which (at least in the U.S.) violence toward Asians and Pacific Islanders-- including South Asians-- remains concerning.

#### *Love and Relationships: Muslim Stories as "Personal"*

As reported in the quantitative section, action films were most likely to feature Muslim characters, though the genre breakdown for Muslim lead characters spanned action ( $n=2$ ), comedy ( $n=2$ ) and drama ( $n=2$ ) in equal measure. Thus, while the overall picture may be one in which Muslim characters are shown in films that are fast-paced, suspenseful, or action-oriented, stories that center on Muslim characters are far different. This is especially true of three films in the sample—one each from the U.S., U.K., and Australia—that centered on young adult, male, Muslim leads.

These stories each depict young Muslim men coming of age and grappling with their futures. Javed, the teenage protagonist in *Blinded by the Light* is shown in a working-class English city in the 1980s, grappling with his identity and culture. Ali, a twenty-something medical school applicant and the lead in the eponymous *Ali's Wedding* seeks to please his family, but hides his failures and desire to marry while immersed in his Muslim community. Finally, Aladdin, the title character in the film of the same name, struggles to make himself acceptable to the woman he loves while encountering enemies along the way.

Each of these stories provides important depictions of Muslim family and community, in two films spotlighting the stereotypes and biases facing Muslim characters in non-Muslim majority countries (i.e., *Blinded by the Light*; *Ali's Wedding*). The third, *Aladdin*, is a major studio release that draws on myth and fairy tale to tell a Muslim-centered story. But there is another commonality to these films that must be acknowledged.

The stories focused on young Muslim men are, at their core, films about relationships. In each, the protagonist's story includes a heterosexual romantic relationship. In two, the character must confront the expectations of his family of origin while in the third the character forms and frustrates a family-like cast of close allies. Although these stories are engaging and important to have told, they do perpetuate mythologizing about the stories that "fit" underrepresented communities. These stories do not put Muslim characters at the forefront of narratives that are mythic in scope, that involve a Muslim character saving the world or confronting an obstacle that threatens humanity. Instead, these stories focus on personal obstacles that affect the future of the character, but have little impact on others.

#### *Submissive and Stereotyped: Muslim Women on Screen*

In stark contrast to Muslim men on screen, the presence of Muslim girls and women in film is one that emphasizes invisibility and centers on predictable tropes. Only 1 Muslim woman was cast as a lead in a film—one in which her character is a victim of devastating loss and violent attack. Muslim women in secondary roles, however, were predominantly in roles that were supportive to the main and typically

male protagonist in the film and/or presented as their potential romantic partners. For example, Jasmine and Dalia from *Aladdin*, Dianne from *Ali's Wedding*, and Aalia from *Viceroy's House* each were the love interest of the male lead. Moreover, secondary characters Shazia and Noor from *Blinded by the Light* and Zahra from *Ali's Wedding* already had romantic relationships. This finding is interesting in that it shows how Muslim women on screen are defined by their familial and romantic relationships, while men have independence and agency to seek out these ties. This image presents a clear contrast to the powerful and notable Muslim women around the world, such as Ibtihaj Muhammad, Malala Yousafzai, and Dalia Mogahed, whose work has little to do with their personal lives and relationships. Studios and industry leaders must remember that Muslim women cannot be limited to two-dimensional storylines about love or acting in submissive roles. Muslim girls and women are entrepreneurs, activists, politicians, directors, writers, artists, and much more. Their stories are worthy of the spotlight.

Furthermore, even when Muslim women on screen were presented with autonomy, these portrayals still emphasized submissive characteristics. For instance, Noor in the 1980's-set *Blinded by the Light*, was obedient and submissive to her husband, Malik. Money that she earned as a seamstress was given to her husband, she supported him emotionally, and ultimately followed his orders to increase her workload. Although she had moments where she asserted her own opinions or desires, Noor still was emotionally and financially submissive to her husband in ways that furthered an unequal power dynamic between them. Another example is the film *Ali's Wedding*, where Dianne is presented as primarily reserved and submissive to her dad's authority. Despite being accepted into medical school, she accepted that her father would not let her attend these postgraduate studies. At least, not until the male lead, Ali, stepped in to help. Dianne was also obedient to her father's demands, even when they were intended to keep her from studying medicine, and she even provided emotional comfort to her father when he sent her away to Lebanon. Her character, despite having a moment of combativeness to Ali when upset, is still constrained to a submissive narrative. These depictions illuminate how writers and content creators perceive the lives of Muslim women and offer a limited view of Muslim women's agency and character.

Even when some effort is made to show Muslim women as independent and free thinkers (e.g., momentary depictions of Noor and Dianne), the overall portrait of Muslim women is one that is still mired in stereotypes. Stories of Muslim women are still undermined by a focus on their desirability to potential romantic partners, or by character portrayals centered on meek and submissive personalities. The exclusion and minimization of Muslim women in top movies is even more egregious when considering the many Muslim women who have made and continued to make contributions to public life, alongside the various traits and talents of Muslim women off-screen.

#### *Relationships to Leading Characters: Muslims as "Subservient"*

Since the Annenberg Inclusion Initiative began evaluating top-grossing U.S. movies in 2007, leading and co-leading roles have primarily gone to White actors—and in particular, White male actors.<sup>35</sup> Thus, it was not surprising that few leading roles across the current study went to actors who were both from underrepresented racial/ethnic groups and identified as Muslim. Additionally, the nature of most film-based storytelling is to center the action on a single character (occasionally two characters or a small ensemble) who encounter friends and foes on their journey through the plot. The Muslim characters in secondary roles across the films evaluated in this study often filled this "friend/foe" dichotomy.

Yet, a deeper trend emerged as we examined the ways in which Muslim characters were shown on screen. Across 5 of the films with a Muslim secondary (and at least one primary) character, Muslim

characters were explicitly shown in relation to a leading White character in roles that served the goals of the White lead. The result is that Muslim characters are shown not as independent, equal, or in relation to White leads, but in roles that render them subservient.

Two clear examples of this occur in the U.K. historical dramas *Victoria & Abdul* and *Viceroy's House*, in which the Muslim characters are *actual* servants to White characters. Although he holds a co-lead role in the story, Abdul is depicted first as a footman to Queen Victoria. Then, upon his indication that he is “not a servant” his status is upgraded to teacher. Yet other characters throughout the movie continue to refer to Abdul as a servant, and his position is a result of Victoria’s patronage and interest. Similarly, the character Aalia in *Viceroy's House* works as an assistant and translator to Pamela Mountbatten, the daughter of the Viceroy (and lead character).

Even films set in modern times perpetuate a view of Muslim characters as essential to fulfilling the narrative goals of a White lead character. The Australian film *Jirga* tells the story of a White lead, Mike, who travels to Kandahar Province in Afghanistan to beg forgiveness and atone for his actions during a violent raid on a village. Despite being cautioned by Muslim characters about the danger he is in, Mike does not heed their warnings and requires the aid of several Muslim secondary and tertiary characters to reach his ultimate goal. For example, the character only referred to as “Taxi Driver,” is persuaded to deliver Mike to his destination when Mike offers him a considerable sum of money to risk a dangerous route. Another character, Amir Talibani, plays the voice of reason and is the most diplomatic to Mike while his group holds Mike hostage. Amir even leads a group that assists Mike in reaching his destination: the village of the man he had killed during a raid. Ultimately, even the minor Muslim characters in the film serve as a means to educate Mike on the consequences of war and must provide the personal atonement he seeks. What may have been designed as a film to spotlight the visually stunning landscape of Afghanistan and provide a lesson to White audiences, instead is sets up Muslim characters to provide what a White character needs rather than giving voice to Muslims affected by war, grief, and loss on their own terms and from a Muslim point of view.

Other films cast Muslim characters in subservient roles more subtly. In the Australian film *The Merger*, the White lead character recruits Sayyid, a Syrian refugee, to revive a struggling football team. Sayyid encounters racism and disparagement on the team, which makes his integration into the team and community difficult. However, his story ends up being overshadowed by how his White counterparts were able to rescue his character and use him as the means to unite a broken team. This theme, one that is not uncommon, perpetuates the narrow use of Muslim characters as serving goals set by White leads. One research assistant referred to Sayyid’s character as being a part of, “...another White savior story” in their analysis. Even in the U.S. film, *Wonder Woman*, the lone Muslim character, Sameer, is paid to support Steve and Diana’s mission at personal risk. He presents as submissive, obedient, and loyal to what is asked of him, regardless of danger to himself. Interestingly, Sameer provides a moment of ‘meta’ explanation of the challenges facing Muslim actors. He tells Diana that his dream to pursue an acting career was impossible due to the color of his skin. This commentary, though it attempts to draw audience attention to the lack of opportunity for underrepresented actors, falls somewhat flat when Sameer himself remains minimized when on screen with his White counterpart.

These examples provide insight into how writers and content creators, under the guise of plot and story, render Muslim characters not only secondary but subservient to the needs and desires of White lead characters. The remedy here is two-fold: first, Muslim characters must be in positions for their stories and voices to be distinct and self-determined. This means telling more stories with Muslim leading characters. Second, writers must scrutinize the depictions of Muslim supporting characters to

understand how these portrayals may position them as second-class instruments to accomplish a goal, as well as work to ensure that even depictions that render Muslim characters as allies to leading characters, they are still equals.

The goal of this section was to explore how Muslim characters are portrayed on screen. The trends illuminated in this section reveal the extent to which Muslims are relegated to supporting roles that minimize their importance and profile. Moreover, the attributes of Muslim characters are often those aligned with outdated stereotypes that present Muslims both as members of outdated and nostalgic worlds, while also emphasizing violence and subservience.

### Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to investigate the prevalence and portrayal of Muslim characters in popular films. To that end, 200 top movies between 2017 to 2019 from the U.S., U.K., Australia, and New Zealand were evaluated. The quantitative analysis examined the overall prevalence of Muslim characters and demographic factors related to their depiction. The qualitative analysis assessed several attributes of Muslim characters and films, and how those related to overarching messages and themes across movies. Below, key conclusions from the report are discussed.

#### *Muslim Characters are Erased in Top Movies*

Less than 2% of the more than 8,000 speaking characters evaluated in top movies were Muslim. This is aligned with other marginalized groups (e.g., LGBTQ+, Latinx, people with disabilities, etc.) who are underrepresented, or continue to be misrepresented, in storytelling. The overall percentage of Muslim speaking characters differed little by country or by year, suggesting that Muslim characters are minimized in popular English-language films from across the globe. It is important to note that across all countries examined in this study, the data showed Australia as the only region to over perform its Muslim population statistic on screen. However, the U.K. and New Zealand failed to reach proportional representation. These findings are particularly notable given that Islam is the fastest growing religion in the world.<sup>36</sup> Yet, films and the companies and studios that create them are failing to catch up with this reality.

Beyond the few Muslim characters depicted on screen was how these characters distributed across the sample of films. Muslim characters appeared in less than 20% of these top movies. In other words, more than 80% of the top films evaluated in this report did not have even one Muslim speaking character on screen. The erasure of Muslim characters from these popular narratives serves to minimize and limit the way audiences may perceive the role of Muslims off-screen and in public life.

#### *Muslim Women are Invisible in Top Movies*

If Muslim characters are underrepresented, Muslim women are rendered invisible on screen. Only a quarter of all Muslim characters were girls/women. This is less than one percent of *all* speaking characters across the sample. Moreover, Muslim women appeared in only 15 movies across the 200 examined.

Beyond overall characters, Muslim girls and women were also far less likely to hold leading or secondary roles in films. Only one Muslim woman was a primary character, in the ensemble-led *Hotel Mumbai*, where she faced perilous circumstances. The other Muslim women in secondary roles were often

characters who existed to support the film's protagonist and/or presented as their potential romantic partners. As we noted above, these roles fail to capture the contributions and complexities of the lives of Muslim women in real life.

### *Muslim Characters are Primarily Middle Eastern/North African*

Although Muslims are the most racial and ethnically diverse religious group in the world,<sup>37</sup> the average film viewer in the U.K., U.S., Australia, or New Zealand might not be aware of this fact. This is because the majority of Muslim roles went to characters who were identified as Middle Eastern/North African. Only in the U.K. sample were there a significant percentage of South Asian Muslim characters.

The emphasis on Muslims from only one part of the world and one racial/ethnic group provides a narrow view of the diversity of this community. Moreover, it links the idea of Muslim identity with a particular racial/ethnic group in the minds of audiences. Particularly in the U.S., where a sizeable proportion of Muslims identify as Black/African American, the lack of greater racial/ethnic inclusion fails to represent a notable share of this community.

### *Muslim Characters Face Stereotyping in Storytelling*

While several studies have focused on particular character tropes related to the depiction of Muslims,<sup>38</sup> this study built upon prior analyses and examined several thematic elements across storytelling that relate to the way Muslim characters may be perceived by audiences. Several findings emerged, with the overarching trend that Muslim portrayals in popular films render the characters as outsiders. This occurs by rooting stories about Muslim characters in historical settings, outside the U.S./U.K./Australia, and by making Muslim characters distinct through their clothing, faith rituals, and communities.

Paired with this outsider status are two competing visions of Muslim characters. One is of Muslims as violent and aggressive while the other is of Muslims as subservient to the needs of White characters. Across all of these characterizations, Muslim characters are disparaged and targeted with racist and religious slurs. While others have written about specific tropes that align with these portrayals, the overarching impact of such portrayals may be that Muslim characters are set apart from other groups in ways that may legitimate violence or position their existence as secondary and unequal.

### *Limitations*

There are a few limitations associated with this study. First, the sampling process was designed to ensure that films from four countries were evaluated. While we would have liked to include more films from Australia and New Zealand in the analysis, as we identified films released within the time frame of the study, there were few films with comparable levels of popularity to some of the highest-grossing U.S. and U.K. movies. We chose not to include these films as they do not reflect popular content. Additionally, we did not include films released solely via streaming services (Netflix, Amazon Prime, etc.) which may have similar viewership as box office and thus may be important to consider. However, understanding the popularity of these movies requires obtaining these metrics from non-public sources. It is important to extend this investigation by looking to not only streaming platforms but episodic content more broadly to understand if these trends are consistent. The Annenberg Inclusion Initiative plans to undertake such an analysis. A second limitation relates to the means of identifying Muslim characters. Although every effort was made to identify Muslim characters using the implicit and explicit cues revealed in the story, directorial intent or cues from outside the story were not used for decision-

making. Thus, another analysis using a different definition might find a slightly different percentage of Muslim characters.

### *Final Takeaways*

The goal of this report was to build on previous scholarship and provide a rigorous investigation of how recent, popular movies depict Muslim characters. The results demonstrate how rarely these characters appear on screen and suggest that there are core biases that content creators still hold about the Muslim community. Fundamentally, the lack of imagination on behalf of creatives curtails both the overall number of Muslim characters on screen and the roles these characters fill. Yet, Muslims are a globally diverse, vibrant community that includes political leaders, business owners, classmates, and neighbors. The narrow view that top films provide of the Muslim community is one that must shift and grow to ensure that Muslims are not only represented on screen, but that their stories can connect with and inspire audiences around the world.

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## Footnotes

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  5. Using Box Office Mojo and The Numbers, we examined the theatrical box office gross across films released in 2017 to 2019 across each country in the sample. Movies were affiliated with only one country in the sample (e.g., no duplicates occurred across countries). To determine whether a film should be affiliated with a particular country, we relied on several pieces of information: film country of origin, production companies, and nationality of the Director, Writer, Producer, and principal cast associated with each film. To obtain this information, we relied upon IMDbPro, Gracenote's StudioSystem platform, and VarietyInsight. Films that were produced or co-produced in more than one of the countries were included in only one country sample based on the information described above. After determining country of origin for each film, theatrical box office gross receipts were compared and those with the highest total within the year across the three years of the study were selected. The final sample included 100 U.S. films and 100 films representing a combination of movies from the U.K., Australia, and New Zealand, distributed based on the proportion of their global receipts.
  6. As the majority of the films in this study were included as a secondary analysis, full methodology for identifying speaking characters and evaluating variables is specified across the Inequality in Film reports from the Annenberg Inclusion Initiative. In brief, there are two primary units of analysis across the investigations: the speaking character and the film. Speaking characters are animate beings who utter one or more words independently or are named across the plot. Unitizing agreement among coders was high; across four quartiles the percentage of agreement was 100%-87.76% (Q1, films 1-50); 87.76% to 81.89% (Q2, films 51-100); 81.82% to 75% (Q3, films 101 to 150); 74.68% to 50% (Q4, films 151 to 200). Twenty-six films had unitizing reliability below 70% and four were below 60%. One challenge in identifying independent speaking characters occurs when identical characters speak sequentially and distinguishing independence is impossible. In those instances, characters are unitized as a group and evaluated. However, these groups are excluded from analysis. In the current investigation a total of 13 groups appeared and were not analyzed.
- A series of variables were evaluated for each speaking character identified in a film. For each variable, we report reliability coefficients. Reliability was calculated across coders per variable and per film using the Potter & Levine-Donnerstein's (1999) formula. Median, mean, and range of reliability coefficients per variable are reported across 200 movies in the sample. The medians were: form 1.0 (Mean=1.0, range=1.0), type 1.0 (Mean=0.99, range=.64-1), sex 1.0 (Mean=1.0, range=1.0), race/ethnicity 1.0 (Mean=0.99, range=.65-1.0), age 1.0 (Mean=.91, range=.65-1.0), parental 1.0 (Mean=.97, range=.64-1.0), role 1.0 (Mean=.97, range=.63-1.0), apparent sexuality 1.0 (Mean=.99, range=.63-1.0), transgender 1.0 (Mean=.99, range=.61-1.0), disability 1.0 (Mean=.99, range=.61-1.0).
7. Speaking characters were analyzed using a set of verbal and nonverbal cues to determine whether the character was presented as Muslim. These cues were categorized as either explicit (i.e., indicators that are overt in nature and the presence of at least one can render an accurate judgement of the character's faith) or implicit (i.e.,

indicators that were more latent and would require other cues, as well as more insight to render a judgment). Explicit cues included verbal statements made by the character or others, organizational memberships, and religious behaviors. Implicit cues were reflected through clothing, language, country of origin, artifacts, and setting. Student research workers were trained in identifying these cues and understanding them in context to determine if the character was Muslim. A total of 143 were deemed not applicable for this measure. These characters were primarily animals and supernatural creatures.

8. Muslim characters in primary and secondary roles were evaluated according to 16 questions: Religious Affiliation; Language; Occupation; Social Class; Disparagement; Violence, including Role in Story; Criminality; Death; Temperament; Intelligence; Education; Immigration, including Refugee and Citizenship statuses; Devoutness; Conversion; Romantic Attitudes; and Relationships, including family, friends, and romantic partners. The purposes of these measures are two-fold. First, these questions allow the data to reflect any and all instances of stereotyped portrayals. Second, evaluations of the responses to these questions provide an understanding of specific trends that may exist across all Muslim characters, as well as within each demographic cohort.

9. The 144 Muslim speaking characters identified in our sample included characters that were considered as demographic changes. Per All's methodology, demographic change characters are characters who are versions of the main character (e.g., supernatural, old or young age, magical powers, etc.). An example of this is in the film, *The White Crow*. The main character, Rudolf, had 2 additional demographic changes in the film: his 8 year old and 16 year old self. Thus, all 3 characters were counted as Muslim in this statistic.

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11. The Annenberg inclusion Initiative regularly relies upon several sources of information to determine genre distinctions: Variety Insight, IMDbpro, and Box Office Mojo.

12. Pew Research Center (2017). *The Changing global religious landscape*. Retrieved June 4th, 2021. <https://www.pewforum.org/2017/04/05/the-changing-global-religious-landscape/#global-population-projections-2015-to-2060>

13. The methodological details related to determining race/ethnicity of speaking characters can be found in our previous reports at the Annenberg Inclusion Initiative website: <https://annenberg.usc.edu/research/aii>. For this variable, race/ethnicity includes White/Caucasian, Hispanic/Latino, Black/African American, American Indian/Alaskan Native, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, Asian, Middle Eastern/North African, and Mixed Race/Other. For films in this study, we also evaluated Aboriginal Australian as a separate variable. 30 characters across the sample of Australian films were Aboriginal Australian. None were Muslim characters.

14. Pew Research Center (2019). *Black Muslims account for a fifth of all U.S. Muslims, and about half are converts to Islam*. Retrieved May 23rd, 2021 from <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/01/17/black-muslims-account-for-a-fifth-of-all-u-s-muslims-and-about-half-are-converts-to-islam/>.

15. Characters were coded into 5 age categories, including young child, elementary school, adolescent/teen, younger adult, middle aged, and elderly. However, for the purpose of our analysis, we collapsed these categories into 4 groups (elementary age, teen, young adult, and middle aged & elderly), which were included in the report. Age was determined for each speaking character through verbal and non-verbal cues (e.g., references, statements, physical attributes and ailments, etc.). In the study, the age of 4.9% (n=7) characters was not able to be

determined (e.g., faces were obscured, insufficient cues present, etc.) These characters were not included in the age analysis. More details of our methodology (sample, units of analysis, measures) can be found in our previous reports at the Annenberg Inclusion Initiative website: <https://annenberg.usc.edu/research/aii>.

16. Apparent sexuality is first measured for each speaking character based on all relevant information depicted across the plot. Dialogue spoken about attraction, sexual activity, and/or romantic partnerships, as well as self- or other- disclosed identification provided evidence to evaluate characters as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or not lesbian, gay, or bisexual. Across our studies, characters are evaluated for their transgender identity separately from sexual orientation. See Smith, S.L., Choueiti, M., Pieper, K., Yao, K., & Case, A. (2019). Inequality in 1,200 popular films: Examining portrayals of gender, race/ethnicity, LGBTQ & disability from 2007 to 2018. Annenberg Inclusion Initiative. <https://assets.uscannenberg.org/docs/aii-inequality-report-2019-09-03.pdf>.

17. Included in our U.K. sample was the film, *The White Crow*, a biopic of the Russian ballet dancer, Rudolf Nureyev. Rudolf was considered a historical figure, thus all information pertaining to his real life was taken into account, including his religious affiliation. In his life, Rudolf and his parents were Tartar, Mongolian Muslims at the time. However, in his biography, it was known that Rudolf had converted to Christianity at some point in his life. For the purpose of our analysis, we counted Rudolf as Muslim due to our Muslim definition, which specified that any affiliation to Islam (e.g., raised in the religion or being Muslim for any amount of time) will count the character as Muslim. See Campbell, K. (2007). 'Nureyev': A life as dramatic as his art. *Boston*. Retrieved on June 4th, 2021 from [http://archive.boston.com/ae/books/articles/2007/12/17/nureyev\\_a\\_life\\_as\\_dramatic\\_as\\_his\\_art/](http://archive.boston.com/ae/books/articles/2007/12/17/nureyev_a_life_as_dramatic_as_his_art/). Glasser, J. (2018, September 25). An ambitious documentary about Rudolph Nureyev, marred by confusing editing and a weak dramatic narrative. *Mature Times*. Retrieved on June 4th, 2021 from <https://www.maturetimes.co.uk/joyce-glasser-reviews-nureyev/>.

18. Consistent with AII's methodology, all speaking characters were also evaluated for role, which was measured by the importance and centrality of the character with regard to the narrative structure and purpose of the plot. Protagonists and main characters are those trying to achieve the narrative's purpose and are the central figure in the plot. Characters that are recognizable, referred to by name, recurring in appearance, and/or have a somewhat significant relationship with the main character are counted in supporting roles. Lastly, characters with little importance to the plot or who were inconsequential were categorized as tertiary. In situations where characters underwent demographic transformations (e.g., transforming into a supernatural entity or aging upward/downward), their role was applied across all iterations of the character. Furthermore, if several characters were presented as leads, this constituted an ensemble cast. For additional details on definitions and analyses, please see Annenberg Inclusion Initiative reports.

19. Muslim characters were qualitatively assessed according to a set of variables related to their portrayals on screen. These variables were developed in two stages. First, previous literature was explored to understand the context and narratives of Muslims onscreen and off. This included violence, attitudes towards education and occupations, wealth status, temperament, etc. We also created additional measures that would reflect novel attributes of presentation. This included relationship dynamics, language, devoutness, death, etc. Two student researchers were assigned to evaluate each character and a discussion took place to finalize judgments. During our analysis, the frequency and percentage of primary and secondary characters exhibiting each trait were assessed, and where necessary this included tertiary characters (e.g., location, setting, violence). Additionally, Muslim characters were evaluated in the context of other characters, as well as the entire film to understand the relevant stereotypes and tropes in storytelling, especially those related to Muslims in other marginalized groups (e.g., women, disability, and LGBTQ+).

20. We examined several markers: clothing (e.g., no women in trousers, men in traditional turbans), language (e.g., certain words and phrases), modern technology or artifacts (e.g., no phones, computers, presence of horse-drawn carriages, etc.), and events (e.g., Mumbai bombing, Mughal empire) These cues were used to determine the time period in which a film was set. When assigning time periods for each film, the following designations were applied: Past (anything prior to 2000); Recent Past (2000-2010); Present Day (2011 to present).

21. When Muslim characters were evaluated by geographic setting, we specifically looked two variables: location and Immigration. First, Muslim characters were scrutinized on whether they lived in a Muslim dominated community or country, using verbal and non-verbal cues (e.g., language, clothing, interactions with other characters, signs, etc.) to make the decision. Then, characters were analyzed according to their native or immigration status. Specifically, Muslim characters were identified as native to where the film is set, or as immigrants, migrants, or refugees/seeking asylum. In some instances, characters may be shown in multiple regions (e.g., UK and India, Victoria & Abdul). For these cases, the geographic area that takes the largest portion of the film takes priority. Additionally, characters may have several statuses within a film, therefore each movement by the character is accounted for.

22. Although the categorization of Afghanistan as Middle Eastern or Central Asian is debated, based on the race/ethnicity of the characters and the context of the storyline, for the purpose of our analysis, we identified Afghanistan as a Middle Eastern region.

23. Given it's geographic location, Turkey may be considered both European or Middle Eastern for the purposes of categorization. In this analysis, we classified Turkey as a European country.

24. Muslim characters shown in culturally or religiously relevant garments were recorded via a screenshot of the attire, including a short description and timecodes. According to our definition, religious and cultural attire included kurtas, topis, eagles, and thobes for males, and hijabs, burqas, shalwar kameez, and dupattas for females.

25. Included in the *Language* measure from the qualitative questionnaire, students were instructed to utilize a film's subtitle feature in identifying languages spoken throughout the storyline. If a character was determined as a non-native English speaker, students then used auditory and other verbal cues to assess whether or not the character spoke with a non-native English accent. Non-native English speaking accents were defined as any accent that is not native to the country's language. Specifically, Australian, New Zealand, British, and U.S. accents did not count in this measure. However, accents that were indicative of the character not being a native English speaker, were scrutinized. Based on our evaluation, 21 primary and secondary characters spoke English with an accent.

26. Religious artifacts were those considered as objects that have to have a strong affiliation to Islam, such as a Quran or a prayer mat. When present, students took records of these items by taking a screengrab of the artifact and including a short description and timecode. Since our research workers have a strong familiarity with Islam, they were able to recognize religious artifacts with nuance and subtlety. For example, understanding Arabic text written on objects, small prayer beads, and certain items that are used in rituals and other traditions (e.g., holding a wrapped Quran above a bride's head, *Blinded by the Light*).

27. Pettigrew, T. F. (1998). Intergroup contact theory. *Annual review of psychology*, 49(1), 65-85. Moyer-Gusé, E., Dale, K.R., & Ortiz, M. (2018). Reducing Prejudice Through Narratives: An Examination of the Mechanisms of Vicarious Intergroup Contact. *Journal of Media Psychology: Theories, Methods, and Applications*, Advance online publication.

28. Schiappa, E., Gregg, P. B., & Hewes, D. E. (2006). Can one TV show make a difference? A Will & Grace and the parasocial contact hypothesis. *Journal of homosexuality*, 51(4), 15-37.

29. See Alhassen, M. (2018). Haqq & Hollywood. Pop Culture Collaborative. [www.haqqandhollywood.org](http://www.haqqandhollywood.org). [website]., Islam, M. (2007). Imaging Indian Muslims: Looking Through the Lens of Bollywood Cinema. *Indian Journal of Human Development*. [website]., Khan, M. A. & Bokhari, S. Z. (2011). Portrayal of Muslims in Indian cinema: A content analysis of movies during (2002-8). *Pakistan Journal of Islamic Research*. [website]., and Shaheen, J. G. (2003). Reel bad Arabs: How Hollywood vilifies a people. *The Annals of the American Academy*. [website]. As expected, these perceptions were not just limited to on screen portrayals, but were largely seen in the real world as surveyed by Melhem, S. & Punyanunt-Carter, N. M. (2019). Using cultivation theory to understand American college students' perceptions of Arabs in the media. *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/13602004.2019.1625258> and reported by Akbarzadeh, S. & Smith, B. (2005). The Representation of Islam and Muslims in the Media (The Age and Herald Sun Newspapers). [website].

30. See Melhem, S. & Punyanunt-Carter, N. M. (2019). Using Cultivation Theory to Understand American College Students' Perceptions of Arabs in the Media. *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/13602004.2019.1625258> and reported by Akbarzadeh, S. & Smith, B. (2005). The representation of Islam and Muslims in the media (the Age and Herald Sun newspapers). [website]. Terman, R. (2017). Islamophobia and media portrayals of Muslim women: A Computational Text Analysis of US News Coverage. *International Studies Quarterly*. [website]. Ward, L.M. (2004). Wading through the stereotypes: positive and negative associations between media use and black adolescents' conceptions of self. *Developmental Psychology*, 40(2), 284.

31. Derived from (Smith et al., 1998), violence was defined as any "Overt, credible threat of physical force or the actual use of such force with the intention to physically hurt, damage, or kill." Additionally, contextual cues were assessed, drawing on definitions included in Smith et al., 1998 and Wilson et al., 2002. First, Muslim characters were identified as perpetrators of violence (i.e., carrying out the acts of violence) or targets of violence (i.e. being a victim of violence). Specific questions about to being either a perpetrator or target of violence were included, as well as general information about the violence. For example, the character's role in the overall storyline (e.g., protagonist, antagonist, or supporting either), violent means (e.g., firearm, bomb, unconventional non-fire arm, etc.), motivation (e.g., religious beliefs, retaliation, political gain, etc.), scale (e.g. interpersonal, intrapersonal, or mass event) and whether the violence was justified or unjustified were all evaluated. Smith, S.L. et al. (1998) National Television Violence Study 3. Center for communication and social policy (Santa Barbara, Calif). Sage. Wilson, B.J., Smith, S.L., Potter, W.J., Kunkel, D., Linz, D., Colvin, C.M., & Donnerstein, E. (2002). Violence in children's television programming: Assessing the risks. *Journal of Communication*, 52(1), 5-35.

32. Personal communication with Dr. Evelyn Alsultany, Associate Professor at the University of Southern California. Alsultany, E. (2012). *Arabs and Muslims in the media: Race and representation after 9/11*. NYU Press. 23-24, 24-26.

33. National Television Violence Study. (1997). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

34. Disparagement was defined as speaking about or treating characters with disdain or prejudice. For this measure, verbal and non-verbal disparagement could be directed towards the character's religion, as well as their gender, race/ethnicity, sexuality, and/or disability. Derogatory comments or question explicitly related to Islam or the character being Muslim that are insulting, inaccurate, or intended to be humorous were considered disparaging. Additionally, disdainful comments about specific parts of the character's faith or negative generalizations that are made will also count as disparagement. Examples of slang or colloquial phrases that indicate disparagement were found in previous research, these included terms like, "Radical," "Extremist," "Terrorist," "Oil-rich dimwits," and "Muslim fanatics." See Melhem, S. & Punyanunt-Carter, N. M. (2019). Using Cultivation Theory to Understand American College Students' Perceptions of Arabs in the Media. *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13602004.2019.1625258>. Akbarzadeh, S. & Smith, B. (2005). The Representation of Islam and Muslims in the Media (The Age and Herald Sun Newspapers). [website].

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