

# Moral panic in contemporary society: islamophobia

[Experience](#), [Human Nature](#)



This essay argues that Moral Panic in the contemporary context has evolved from the historical context. Moral panic, in essence, is defined as an ephemeral but recurring condition or people stereotypically portrayed as a threat to societal values and interests by mass media (Cohen cited in Marsh & Melville, 2011). This essay will use the recent ‘ anti-halal hysteria’ as a case study to illustrate the contemporary moral panic of Islamophobia. Among the components discussed are the differences between historical and contemporary issues of moral panic and Cohen’s Moral Panic framework. As a start, this essay deconstructs Cohen’s definition of moral panic with reference to Islamophobia. Islamophobia is a transient but dormant issue that has recently been ‘ reawakened’ in relations to the issue of halal meat circulating in the United Kingdom. It is a term used in the UK around the 1980s to 1990s as a signal rejection of and discrimination against the Muslim population due to issues of immigrations (Allen cited in Lòpez, 2011) and recently is described as a religious intolerance due to the growing presence of the Islamic religion in the “ West” (Lòpez, 2011).

First of all, this essay argues that there is a nuance shift in the issues of historical moral panic compared to contemporary moral panic. As Critcher (2002) posits, modern moral panics have altered focus. Hughes et al. (2011) further support that moral panic is now being applied to a growing range of examples by deviating from issues back in the 1960s and 1970s. Historical moral panics often focus on the issue of youths and subcultures, like the work of Stanley Cohen in the 1970s on the rockers and mods (Marsh & Melville, 2011), Young’s research on the drug use of hippies in the 1960s (ibid, 2011) and Ainley (ibid, 2011)’s research on the ‘ hoodies’. Meanwhile,

contemporary moral panic has expanded to encompass issues of racism instead of dwelling on youth-related topics, for example, the present case study of ‘ anti-halal hysteria’, ‘ Islamic infiltration plot in Birmingham schools’ (McNamara, 2014) and the ‘ association of crimes to Muslim women with headscarves’ (Duell, 2014). However, one may refer to Hall’s work on racism and resistance (Procter, 2004) to argue that ‘ racism’ is a moral panic dated back to the 1970s. As such, this essay posits that “ Islamophobia” is a contemporary moral panic that evolves from historical moral panic on xenophobia.

Even though contemporary issues on moral panic have digressed from youth issues, Hughes et al. (2011) noted that ‘ moral panic’ is still regularly being used in the media revolving around issues on social problems, controversies and capitalizes on people’s fear and anxiety. Islamophobia bears resemblance to the historical moral panic which exploits on people’s fear in maintaining their social status (Young cited in Hughes, et al., 2011) as Islamophobia capitalises on Britons’ fear of losing their national identity. As such, this statement underpins Richardson (2009)’s articulation that Muslims have now become the latest incarnations of folk devils.

In addition, this essay argues that contemporary moral panic deviates from some of Cohen’s moral panic framework which is constructed by a linear six stages namely ‘ crisis happen’, sensification, witch hunt, amplification, panic and counter-action. In the context of the anti-halal hysteria, this essay argues that the current issue does not conform to Cohen’s first stage of ‘ crisis happening’ as there is apparently no actual crisis in Subway’s decision

to offer halal meat in some of its stores in the first place. Instead, it is the *Daily Mail*'s exaggerated reporting that deliberately frames Subway's commercial decision as a result of being 'strongly demanded' by the Muslims customers (Poutler, 2014). Subway on the other hand justifies their decision as purely a matter of weighing financial losses and profits as the stores are situated within heavily populated Muslim vicinities (Allen, 2014). Failing to see this as a commercial decision, the *Daily Mail* over-reacted and reignited the food debate protest on halal meat that was dated back in 2012, headed by British National Party (BNP)'s leader Nick Griffin (Engage, 2012).

In order to explain this manipulation of media, this essay agrees with Schlesinger (cited in Critcher, 2002) that in contemporary moral panic, the media has assumed the role of primary definers as opposed to being secondary definers. According to Procter (2004), primary definers refer to the way media first look to authoritative figures particularly politicians in structuring news. Very often, original theory of moral panics posits that media's Ideological role is tie to that of the government's hegemony ideology (McRobbie & Thornton). Contrastingly, in the context of the recent Islamophobia, the press, specifically the *Daily Mail* acts as the primary definer, dictating the news agenda. This shows that contemporary media does not adhere to Gramsci's theory of hegemony (Procter, 2004). This inference contradicts with Cohen (2002)'s assertion that the media is important in reproducing and sustaining the dominant ideology instead of being transmitters or campaigners of moral panics. However, based on McRobbie and Thornton (cited in Cohen, 1999)'s assertion and in view of this latest issue, contemporary media actually sets their own agenda by

instigating ordinary issues that may be contradictory to government's policies. Therefore, demonstrating that contemporary moral panic has evolved from a historical model.

Moving on, this essay recognizes that contemporary moral panic adheres to the second stage of Cohen's model- sensitization. Soon after the article on Subway is published, it is inferred that the public become sensitive to the issue of Muslim allegedly invading the local food industry. This is because according to Hughes et al. (2011), people are sensitive to issues that 'hit the sore spot', in this context, referring to the fear of a foreign power- the Muslims. Besides that, as the issue of halal is intentionally highlighted in the news, it increases the possibility of public in becoming aware of the said issue. On top of that, the media further saturates the public sphere with inflammatory risk discourses (Here cited in Critcher, 2008) and headlines such as "Millions are eating halal food without knowing it". This I infer is the media's attempt to frame public's negative perception towards Muslims as a means to make them aware of homegrown Islamic extremism (Allen, 2007).

Nevertheless, the essay argues that the current issue does not fit into Cohen's third stage- 'witch hunt'. This may be attributed to the origins and structure of the news itself in which *Daily Mail's* reporting on Subway's decision is very much biased and sensationalized. Media, as Cohen (2002) points out, often stereotypes and misrepresents deviance. As such, this essay argues that the process of 'witch hunting' for folk devils is omitted in the case study as the *Daily Mail* has, at the very beginning, embedded the stereotypical notion of "Islamophobia", misrepresenting and accusing the

Muslims for exerting pressure onto Subway. The Muslims are not 'found' to be the folk devil, but they are 'framed' to be one in a contemporary context. On top of that, such stereotypical reporting may also be explained as a journalist goal to attune to the popularity of human interest stories (McRobbie & Thornton, 1995) so as to gain public readership by capitalizing on moral panics. Richardson (2009) contends news about Muslims is often presented with a hint of menace, thus suggesting the possibility of unethical journalism practice in local tabloid.

Although stage three of Cohen's model is omitted in the context of contemporary case study, the case study still conforms to Cohen's 'amplification' stage as presses such as *the Sun* and *BBC* join in to amplify the initially non-existent crisis. For instance, *The Sun*'s overly sensationalized the news of Pizza Express using halal meat (Jones, 2014) while the BBC reported that five leading UK supermarkets are selling halal meat (BBC News, 2014). Adding on to the fuel, the *Daily Mail* goes on to exaggerate that Muslims are 'stealthily taking over Britain's supermarket' (Poutler et al., 2014). The role of media as Luce (2013) posit is supposedly to help maintain stability in a society. However, in this context, the presses are seen to be disrupting the social order of the society. This is because it was the presses who initiate the 'hate crime' with alarmist reporting that agitate the issue of local food store chains and supermarkets selling halal meat without the consent or knowledge of customers. As such, this essay inferred that the tabloid media is trying to drive a rift between races.

As a result of this amplification spiral, the initial issue on commercialized industry selling halal meat has escalated into a wider spectrum involving pressure groups such as RSPCA, National Secular Society (NSS) and British Veterinary Association (BVA). These associations are outraged by the animal slaughtering method of Muslim abattoirs following a CCTV still released by *Daily Mail* with the caption 'more than 100 sheep appeared to writhe in agony after being ritually killed' (Allen, 2014). The term 'halal' which literally means 'permissible' or 'lawful' under Islamic Law (Henley, 2013; Poutler, 2014) stated that animals must be ritually killed when it is conscious. This disparity in method of animal slaughtering has once again flared up the long-enduring heated between the pressure groups whom advocate pre-stunning before slaughtering and the deviants (the Muslims)'s ritual slaughtering. Consequently, the press has now shifted its attention from the original issue on Subway's commercial decision to the slaughtering method of animals, thus causing the 'original problem' to be obscured while this 'deviance issue' to escalate. Media employ highly emotive and rhetorical language (McRobbie & Thornton, 1999) to distinguish 'us' and 'them' by idealizing us and demonizing (Richardson, 2009) the Muslims that they do not care about how animals are slaughtered. The press further reveals that as thousands of Britons are consuming halal food, insinuating that they have been 'Islamized' (Poutler, 2001). Even though the focus of issues has shifted, the underlying notion remains that of 'Islamophobia' (Allen, 2014).

From the repercussion of the above amplification, this causes panic among the animal welfare advocates as well as the general public of the growing power of Islam. Revelation that halal meat is widely circulated and the '

inhumane' ritual slaughtering method of the Muslims, the term ' anti-halal hysteria' emerges, signifying a new wave of moral panic associated with Islamophobia. A fraction of public are explicitly showing contempt towards the Muslims by boycotting the list of stores selling halal meat while pressure groups petition for banning ritual slaughtering method. Even though this essay argues that the original problem is non-existence, the deviance issues still escalate.

Last but not least, the sixth stage of Cohen's model, counter-actions is, as this essay argues, not entirely applicable in contemporary moral panic. The notion of ' something should be done' is evident here but this essay finds it ironic that there is not a problem in the first place as it is simply a misrepresentation of a commercial decision by the media. Counter action in Cohen's model refers to legislative attempt in subduing the deviants (Cohen, 2002). However, this essay argues that there is no counter action in the case study as local government retains their position in the issue of anti-halal hysteria by upholding the law of allowing religious slaughter method even though pressure groups are fervently petitioning to label and impose regulations on the sources and method of slaughtering poultry. In this context, counter-action is not taken by the government but rather a compromise position is negotiated. This is Britain's attempt to assimilate the minorities by offering them the freedom of religion (Castle & Freytas-Tamura, 2014).

As a matter of fact, this essay recognizes that contemporary moral panic does not conform to Cohen's linear static process as first of all, crisis did not



happen, there is no 'witch hunting' process and there is no relative counter-action. As such, this essay argues that contemporary model panic is best described using attributes instead of a static process. Hence, the essay suggests looking to Goode and Ben-Yehuda's five attributes of moral panic (concern, hostility, consensus, disproportionality and volatility) as a preferable model. Firstly, concerns over Islamophobia have always been long existed in the UK. Secondly, the term 'anti-halal hysteria' is a signifier of hostility towards the Muslims. Thirdly, there is consensus among the presses and pressure group that accepting that Muslim poses threats economically but also societal values. Disproportionality is demonstrated through the actions of pressure group in calling for the ban of halal meat as it does not resolve the issue of Islamophobia. Lastly, contemporary moral panic fits the characteristics of being volatile as the following issue dominating local news on Islamophobia is the British National Party protesting over the plans for a new mosque in Hemel Hempstead (Pitt, 2014) once again showing that moral panic is on-going.

As a conclusion, the utility of moral panic is no doubt necessary in enhancing our understanding of new cases to which it has been extended (Hughes et al., 2011). Studies on moral panic is not static (Hughes, et al., 2011) as it is constantly revised, extended and developed (ibid, 2011). Moral panics are 'not just one-off events but it is their reappearance that confirms their status as moral disturbances of any significant order' (Young cited in Marsh & Melville, 2011). This essay argues that media do not report facts but rather conjectures about Subway's decision. Even though stages of establishing moral panic is not static and may overlap occasionally, some attributes of

moral panic is still very much identifiable (Jewkes cited in Marsh & Melville, 2011). Islamophobia has been infused into the everyday life of modern Britain (Allen, 200&) and will always be an on-going issue but just that the focus on issue shifts and even sometimes incorporates or bring other issues into the picture.