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## Automatic transmission: ethnicity, racialization and the car

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## **Automatic transmission: ethnicity, racialization and the car**

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### **Abstract**

This article is based on ethnographic research carried out in Bradford, an ethnically diverse city situated in the north of England. The sample of over 60 participants mostly comprises males of British Pakistani Muslim heritage but varies in terms other markers of identity such as social class, profession and residential/working locale. The article analyses the cultural value and meaning of cars within a multicultural context and how a consumer object can feed into the processes which refine and embed racialized identities. Small cases studies reveal the concrete and discursive ways through which ideas around identity and ethnicity are transmitted and how, in particular, racialization continues to feature as a live, active and recognisable process in everyday experience.

**Keywords:** Automobility, cars, ethnicity, Muslim, Pakistani, racialization

## **Introduction**

By exploring racialization, ethnic identity and consumption, this paper offers distinctive insights into the transmission of racialized identities within a contemporary multi-ethnic city such as Bradford. Given the current debates around masculinity, faith and ethnicity, this is especially significant and forms a counter to some of the dominant, essentialised and often homogenous readings of British Muslim identity. Through situating the study of identity within the context of the car, I demonstrate how racialization operates through a material object and feeds back on itself in a more discursive, taken for granted and normative rehearsing of problematised ethnic identities. This article, therefore, is positioned within the landscape of ethnic relations and the representation of young British Muslim males in particular. The performance and reading of individuality through spectacular and banal car cultural practices reveals the centrality of the car as a key site of the problematic difference for the majority society and as a means of creative cultural resistance to this marginalisation by segments of the Bradford Pakistani community. The data reveal that racialization is routinely encountered as ethnic identity is linked with 'ethnic behaviour'. The car thus becomes a focal point for the rehearsal of racialised encounters including those resting on 'inter' and 'intra' racial/ethnic distinction.

I begin by exploring the context of a city defined by an ethnic relations narrative; this context heavily informs the methodological approach. Subsequently, I offer some thoughts around the concepts of race and racialization before introducing the multiple ways in which the car becomes inserted into these processes, thereby opening up its utility as an object through which racialization can be rehearsed and further embedded. This leads to situating owners and drivers as actively scripting identity onto the car through practices which vary according to distinctions in taste, practices which are contingent upon the tributaries of class and ethnicity. As such, the ways in which the car enables formations of

race to materialise are developed further. Throughout the latter sections, empirical data from a small selection of the sample is used to elicit texture, insight and depth.

### **Place, race and methodology**

Bradford has an estimated population of 524,600 with 20.41% being of Pakistani heritage (Bradford Observatory 2016). Much of Bradford's 'ethnic' narrative has gained traction through a few key 'race' moments. In 1984, for example, Ray Honeyford, the headmaster of an ethnically diverse school in the Manningham neighbourhood, published an article in *The Salisbury Review*, discussing the deficits of some minority ethnic cultures, specifically referencing impacts on educational attainment (McLoughlin, 2006). 'The Honeyford Affair' became a cause celebre in which the city, and some of its people, were talked about in the frames of race and racism as well as liberal tolerance and the freedom of expression.

In the late 1980s, following the publication of *The Satanic Verses*, a group of Bradford's Muslims burnt a copy of the novel in the city centre: a trigger point through which a distinctive, faith based paradigm of race and racialization developed. Islam and Muslims became seen as more distinctive and, over time, more peculiar, more divisive and more problematic (McLoughlin 2006, 130; Modood 1990). More pages were added to the city's 'ethnic' biography with civil/violent disturbances in 1995 (Bradford Commission 1996) and 2001 (Bagguley and Hussain 2008), with the latter 'Northern riots' contributing to a policy rejection of multiculturalism and acceptance of 'community cohesion' as a model of managing ethnic diversity (Husband and Alam 2011).

The cohesion model of ethnic relations continues to resonate within political, academic and public spheres and is aided by the potency of identity deficit: 'insular' communities live 'self-segregating' and 'parallel' lives with notions of 'citizenship', 'loyalty' and 'belonging' being critically applied to British Muslims with specific political force (Husband and Alam 2011) More recently, global events and conflicts have crept

further into mainstream consciousness with the news that young, British born males and females are prepared to travel to conflict zones in the Middle East, seemingly to support whichever ideological nemesis is presently a threat. Here at home, a banal, everyday and unproblematic British Muslim presence may be relatively normative (Alam 2006; Phillips 2009), but forced marriage, veiling/dress, terrorism, grooming and notions of self-segregation continue feeding narratives which define British Muslim identity as problematic and at odds with 'Britishness' (Morey and Yaqin 2011) Readings of Muslims and Islam are frequently voiced through assertive, essentialist conceptions of majority and minority identities couched within xeno-racism (Fekete 2009) and shaped by processes of racialization (Rattansi 2005). Despite the robust and cogent counters to such narratives (Alexander 2013; Husband and Alam 2011; Alexander 2004), a persistent assimilationist, ethno-nationalist, ideological disposition continues to drive the direction and intensity of policy (Lantin and Titley 2011).

While this may be relevant when exploring a range of issues and impacts (social policy, equality, discrimination, and so on), this context also helps frame research in Bradford. The city self-evidently continues to be a site of interest. The list of academic publications explicitly linked to the city and ethnicity is diverse and extensive (Alam 2015, 88) and while such research is not necessarily problematic, some of Bradford's communities have been conceptualised within a frame in which research aims to cover/explain/remedy 'ethnic issues'. Drawing on Mac an Ghail and Haywood's 'alternative representational space' approach to explore the 'racialization of religion' is therefore worthwhile (2015, 98). The starting point for the research underpinning this present article was not the identification of an 'ethnic' problem or issue, but rather, a curiosity around a particular aspect of social life: the car. The temptation to problematise the research area through the lens of ethnicity,

while present, was mitigated against by the use of an open and flexible methodology, ethnography.

Ethnography has within it both rigidity and looseness; there has to be some degree of concreteness and routinisation – especially in the analysis of data, for example – but this is tempered by the need for the ethnographer to be adaptive and reflective (Madden 2010). Research subjects can become more than mere carriers of data, especially if there exist lines of empathy linked with gender, class, ethnicity; or even if connections are subcultural in nature. Rather than viewing a field according to what the researcher views as most significant, the emic<sup>1</sup> approach deployed in this research was concerned with attending to the processes, thoughts and meanings which the sample held as priorities. Maintaining neutrality was therefore countered with involvement, belonging and empathy, all of which were communicated through various levels of insiderness: ethnicity, gender, language/argot and, most significantly, car interest (Alam 2015, 99-102). Furthermore, the approach taken here appreciates the extent to which the study of identities in multi-ethnic urban contexts has been successfully elicited through ethnographic accounts of lived experience (Eade 1997).

Since 2012, 60 individuals have been directly engaged with through a combination of snowballing, purposive and opportunistic modes of sampling. More generally, the fieldwork combined participant/non-participant observation as well as semi-structured and unstructured interviews ranging from 10 minutes to over an hour in duration. Some of the interviews were opportunistic and one offs, while many participants were engaged with repeatedly over several months.

The sample is mainly of Bradfordian Pakistani heritage, male, under 50 years of age and includes car enthusiasts, car retailers, those who repair/modify cars and individuals who claim no significant car interest. The decision to focus principally on recruiting males largely hinged on practical reasons. As a male researcher, it is perhaps

easier to engage with other males, regardless of the topic under investigation. Furthermore, the majority of those who work in and around various strands of the car's economy – as mechanics, delivery drivers and car accessory retailers – happen to be men. Of course, the road and the car are highly gendered and sexualized spaces but a gender filter enabled greater focus and decreased risk of potential harm or offense: a further consideration was being sensitive to Muslim cultural practices, norms and values around male-female relations. That said, the relatively few interviews with women did yield valuable insights demonstrating the extent to which British born Pakistanis are active and engaged consumers, and citizens.

### **Race and racialization: static but mobile**

Through foregrounding the value of lived experience when exploring racialization (see Noble 2009, 877), it becomes clear that the materiality of race does not always fall into easily recognisable, or widely accepted forms whereby racism is clearly in play. In the context of the car, the connectivity with and signification of race is therefore important: much of the data in this research suggest individuals are aware that their relationships with their cars are loaded with the potential energy of racialized 'immanence' (Saldanha 2006), either for themselves or onlookers.

In practice, racialization operates at various levels and takes diverse forms. Fox et al (2012) conceptualise Eastern European migration into the UK as a racialized problematic framed around various dimensions including criminality and cultural deficiency. They note that both immigration policy and tabloid print:

have contributed to the whitening and darkening of Hungarian and Romanian migrants... Immigration policy whitened Hungarian migrants; the tabloid media darkened Romanian migrants. 'Race' is not an essential trait of the migrants but the ongoing contingent outcome of these dynamic processes of racialization. (2012, 692)

The mechanics of identity formation link clearly with ascribed and asserted facets, both forces operating seamlessly to form stable, often unyielding and coherent patterns of meaning. Immigration discourse is not isolated to the UK, and, indeed, the identity of a non-national, non-indigenous ethnic/racial ‘other’, is also regularly subject to being defined, rehearsed and made, to all intents and purposes, *essentially* real (see Sayyid and Vakil 2011). While in the British context the racialization of Muslims has functioned through highlighting cultural and religious difference, Muslims have also been rendered problematic and undesirable (Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1993). This context has been further shored up through what’s purported to be distinctively ‘ethnic’ behaviour (riot, ‘grooming’), cultural/religious practice (arranged/forced marriage, Halal slaughter) and through calling into question notions of loyalty (British, terrorist sympathiser). The potency of embedded, normative and racialised Muslim identity is arguably such that any one of those elements connotes Islam/Muslim. Mac an Ghail and Haywood (2015) argue the identity marker of ‘Muslim’, while neither incidental nor irrelevant, is contingent. Indeed, like everyone else, Muslims are rendered subject to the influence of local, national, cultural, gendered and economic processes. While their sample recognizes Islamophobia, it is the racialization of Muslims that is more concretely felt.

For Mac an Ghail and Haywood’s sample of young British Pakistani and Bangladeshi Muslim males, it is the extent of the overlapping, cascading and mingling of ideas, viewpoints and attitudes toward themselves, their heritage (ethnic and local) and British society more generally that permeates the text. As the following segment from a group interview demonstrates, the concept and utilisation of Islamophobia may also obscure structural deficiencies:

Farooq: Lots of people talk about the us and them around religion and segregation and tension and everything. But no-one talks about, like in this city, people from around here, even our white mates, we’d never go to a posh area. They’d think we’re aliens.

Shoaib: An' the posh areas have got posher and posher and the poor areas are getting really poor every day, more people out of work and kids leave schools and no jobs.

Javed: My uncle, he reckons that Asians, Bangladeshi people are really looked down upon much more now than before when he came here because they are poor. And that's the Asian middle-class people doing that. They're doing it as well. (2015, 109)

This segment makes concrete the linkages between place and identity and illustrates the extent to which social class and economic deprivation impacts lived experience but also contradicts hegemonic, and racialized, discourses in which spaces are deemed (ethnically) segregated or insular. With the car, there is the capacity to travel with, make mobile and carry aspects of what are racialised, and often fixed, spaces. As such, the car and the road are sites in which racialization gains remarkable traction: no longer is the ethnic identity problematic isolated to specific zones, but becomes visible, and arguably hyper visible, elsewhere.

Cars often hold clues as to the nature of the people who inhabit them. A very crude, but often effective mode of projecting something of oneself is a bumper sticker. As Noble and Baldwin note,

The placement of stickers on cars has become a widespread practice. Stickers, or decals, have long been popular as a way of marking taste – indicating clothing brands, radio stations and car companies – and political and cultural allegiances – to the politics of the left and right, to an environmental or religious ethic, to your football club, and so on. (2001, 79)

It's not uncommon to see an array of stickers even on one car which can indicate taste as well as markers of identity. Even without such minor modifications, the shape, colour and even the car's sound can all be important dimensions which reflect something of the owner's taste. Indeed, when speaking with car retailers and modifiers especially, 'taste' was central: not only colour and shape but the manufacturer/brand of car were all key considerations in whether or not a car was deemed to be desirable and therefore marketable. As I discuss below, there appear to be some cars which are simply not desirable for the especially

younger members of the sample and while this suggests consumption amongst ethnic minority populations is becoming an important aspect of social life, desirability is formed through distinctions in taste, itself rooted to ethnicity and class.

Even without visible and perhaps idiosyncratic signifiers of taste, there exist broad, often stereotypical expectations/understandings around the behaviour and nature of some car-driver hybrids (Urry 2004): Audi drivers are aggressive, Alfa Romeo drivers are by default car enthusiasts, Toyota drivers are boring whereas most of us have some understanding of the stereotypical 'white van man'. The nature of stereotypes is not to elicit some essential truth, but they hold the capacity to resolve complex realities into simple yet coherent patterns of expectation. And it is here that the salience of race comes into play. In multi-ethnic spaces, ethnic identity is not only a given, it elicits rich and often stereotypical meaning which can be acted upon. The process, therefore, operates in a cyclical manner: the more of a particular event we encounter, the more opportunities for layering racialized explanations are enabled, thus deepening the relevance and normativeness underpinning the stereotype. Perhaps surprisingly, this is especially the case with those who are subjected to the stereotype in the first place. As discussed below, those who happen to own and drive cars which elicit strong and problematic readings (vis criminality or driving behaviour) are themselves likely to own the language and system of racialized thinking.

Swanton's (2010) work clearly exposes the performance and utility of racism through the car, especially when anger needs be rationalised or justified. Situating the road as a 'contact zone', he demonstrates how various types of cars (taxis and 'flash' cars, for example) are interpreted and responded to. In an interesting segment from an interview, a respondent recalls:

...I came to an emergency stop once down this busy road and this man, he was parked and I was doing 40 mile an hour down here, so he did a U-turn in front of me. And I rammed on horn and as he's gonna up the other way, I

remember shouting through the window: “I hope Allah makes you impotent.”  
(Swanton 2010, 447)

As Swanton notes, ‘the push of race surfaces in the rapid play of sense making... And so a misjudged manoeuvre slips into a characterisation of the Other’. For Swanton, the road is a catalyst; cars, people, debates around ethnicity, faith, cohesion and multiculturalism combine to produce seemingly rational and coherent explanations and solutions. Swanton reduces Jan’s story to an equation: ‘Car X location + flesh + U-turn = ‘Paki!’ “I hope Allah makes you impotent!”’ (2010, 448). Modifications of this equation can be applied when framing similar encounters in which race features, especially when combined with class and gender identity.

### **Ownership and identity**

SJ is a British born, post graduate educated, late thirties, married male. He lives in a middle class area and works at a senior level in the family business. He drives a fairly new and reasonably high/sports specification Range Rover, which, apart from a private registration number, is unadulterated. Despite professing ambivalence toward cars, as the interview gathered momentum, he talked at some length about owning various large cars, including his Range Rover:

...the best car I’ve had so far... it gives you that feeling of driving a big car because you deserve it and because you’ve earned it. And power: it’s a very powerful engine. It really does roar; it’s the Sports Special so it’s got the vroom factor in it. It gives you the power, the height, the looks, it gives you the wow factor and people notice you.

While acknowledging his car’s presence and what it might suggest to others, he valued its practical benefits. Here, he explained what the car did for him and his business: how clients and suppliers perceive and interpret his car feeds into their perceptions of him and his work: ‘What I’ve found is the cars are a kind of a symbol... that you’re dealing with somebody

who's doing well.' To some extent, this chimes with the appropriation of prestige ('white') cars by African Americans as a means of challenging and resisting (whilst also maintaining) racial, and racist, hierarchies (Gilroy 2001). The car being a mobile and readily deployable indicator of wealth and success was a recurring theme throughout the sample, but SJ's analysis also recognises its symbolic power as a shortcut to instilling confidence and respect. Various aspects of the car combine to produce either a high or low value commodity: manufacturer, model and the presence of modifications form a car's identity which reflects the identity of the driver/owner. For SJ, the specificity of 'business' offsets the negative weighting of ethnic identity: *Range Rover + Bradford + Asian driver + class (middle/business) = (legitimate) respect*. This symbiosis between consumer and object is of course not restricted to the realm of car alone; but cars are public and private, static and in motion. With visibility pronounced, multiple opportunities for the identity of both driver and car to be performed and interpreted in a diversity of ways emerge. As SJ notes, his car has a widely held negative association:

In Bradford, it [the Range Rover model] does have that gangster image so a few people have said to me 'Why you driving a gangster car for? You should have a respectable car.' I mean, what is a respectable car? The gangsters have them all! Everything what you drive in Bradford, above a certain price tag, it's a gangster car.

During this moment, the bind is acknowledged: he drives a 'gangster' car but he is an exception. This resonates with aspects of Noble's work in Australia with Arabic-speaking participants: 'the Greeks and the Lebanese... always drive really good-looking cars'. Noble foregrounds this sentiment by noting that 'none of the participants make any reference to their [own] ethnic background.' (2009, 880) Others in the Noble's focus group distance themselves, sometimes in a contradictory manner, from the practice of 'cruising': they may like showing off, or have boyfriends who 'cruise', but they themselves, at the moment of utterance/interaction, are not like those who 'have emerged as a contemporary folk devil in

moral panics about youth, ethnicity and anti-social behaviour, including crime and car-related activities'. (Noble 209, 880.) While this reveals contradictions and corresponding compromises that individuals adopt when aiming to fall outside of stereotypes, there is also a personal deployment of them.

Similarly, there is a relatively common experience of being subject to racialized codes and stereotypes for members of the sample in this present research. Some recounted their experiences with the police when being stopped at 'random' because the ethnicity and car combination elicited suspicion. This is not a novel finding (see Bowling and Philips 2007) but there is an experientially informed awareness that the same standards through which status and respectability are evaluated do not apply to them when compared with white drivers. And yet, as illustrated by SJ above, they have bought into the prevailing equation: *nice car + Bradford + Asian driver = something illegal*. Ownership of this logic also feeds into the process of racialization and is not, more generally, uncommon for those being marginalised (Omi and Winant 1986).

AB was approached as a research participant during his late twenties. He was born and brought up in an inner city locale with a large and increasingly diverse ethnic minority population. He left school at sixteen, worked various jobs before settling as a delivery driver. AB is married with children but unlike SJ, he is a keen car enthusiast, favouring especially German (VW and Audi) or Japanese (Subaru) makes. He is not a trained mechanic but has friends and motor trade contacts who give advice, assist and offer inexpensive labour. Once sourced, a car is gradually modified over the duration of ownership. While AB considers himself to be moderate in terms of expense, redesign and modification, his car has various upgrades: wheels, suspension, exhaust, audio equipment, lighting and minor/subtle changes to paintwork/exterior. Despite relatively modest upgrades, his practice falls within the context of 'car customisation': practices which produce aesthetics made all

the more distinctive when the distinction itself becomes a marker of identity, whether linked with social class, gender, and/or ethnicity. The American ‘lowrider’ aesthetic, for example, is aligned closely with Mexican American identity and, as Chappell notes, ‘Since lowriders are associated in particular with urban, working-class Mexican Americans, the appearance of lowriders has the capacity to inscribe a site as a “barrio” place’ (2010, 27). Even when such cars, loaded with class and ethnic inscriptions, find themselves outside of their ‘natural’ habitats, this attributional weight can be carried with the car. Equally, the inverse is also possible. As noted in earlier research

Driving through the ‘working-class’ backstreets of Manningham, there is something counterintuitive about seeing an Aston Martin Vanquish parked at the kerbside; or... to have two Ferraris pass by in the matter of a few minutes presents a sharp challenge to stereotypical expectations.’ (Alam 2014, 186-7)

The distinctiveness of AB’s car therefore makes it noticeable in general but also, in specific contexts: by other car enthusiasts (including ‘haters’), those who find his car to be out of place or suspicious, in particular, the police. When asked whether it was the car or him that that elicited such interest, he replied:

Both, really. You know what it is, yeah – what happens is, they see this car: big wheels, nice paint, loud exhaust, dropped low and that. So they think, you know, *typical sort of thug car*. And then they see an Asian driving, and I bet they think to themselves: *knew it. Knew it’d be a paki, probably dealing drugs* and all that shit. So they might stop you, they might not. If they do, it’s usual story: *routine stop* sorta thing.

AB gives his car attention because doing so is fulfilling in ways that are closely bound to the construction and performance of his identity. AB is also aware of the racial codes at play: that his ethnic identity is firstly problematic, but rendered doubly so when combined with the aesthetics of his car. While his car has no literal sign indicating anything about his identity, ethnic or otherwise, it is ethnicity – and its associations, often with crime/criminality – that becomes the most forceful reading. As with SJ, there is a

compromise: the projection of taste and identity is worth the risk of being ‘hated’ by competitors and, especially, being stopped on the grounds of suspected illegal activity.

OH, one of the younger (aged 19 when first encountered) members of the sample, is presently studying for a university degree. He is also British born but lives in a relatively affluent, middle class part of the city. He owns a fifteen year old Vauxhall upon which he lavishes a lot of time and attention; he has various decals and stickers, uprated (second hand) alloy wheels, and, most expensive of all, a loud stereo system. OH seemed to take a great deal of pleasure talking about his present car, but anticipated owning something ‘better’ once he was older, more economically secure and, importantly, when insurance for a more expensive car became affordable. OH also discussed his earliest memories of cars: that he was given them as toys, that he enjoyed watching films/media centring on cars and how his parents, but especially his father, were unintentionally instrumental in nurturing this interest:

My dad... he went through loads of bangers... one after the other. He could never get what you'd call a good car – always crappy Toyotas or Nissans and that... And I remember I used to think that when I grow up, I'll get a good car, you know, a really good car – like an Audi or a Merc or a Beemer or something like that. Something with style and performance.

During this period, when OH was still very young, he noted that his father's cars were ‘kind of embarrassing’. It wasn't until his father became more financially stable that things changed:

And then one day..., I'm playing outside, and this car pulls up. It's big and it's black and it's polished and it looks... it looks fucking awesome, I tell you. I'm drooling over this thing and then the engine switches off. The door opens and my dad steps out. The smile on my face, you should have seen it.

This car, a luxury Lexus saloon, made him feel more respected and important and reinforced his aspirations to own a car that could command respect and acknowledgment of success from others, something his present car doesn't quite manage.

OH: I get a lot of looks about it. People sometimes give me a horn and that.

Interviewer: You mean, sort of aggressively?

OH: No, no. Sort of out of respect, you know – *nice car, mate*.

Interviewer: Really?

OH: (laughing) What? You trying to say my car's shit or something?

Interviewer: No. I mean, it's a Corsa, right?

OH: Yeah, but it's what I've done to it – some people like it. Usually people who've got same sort of car, or have done stuff to theirs. It's like, you know, *respect, bro*, kind of thing.

During this phase of the interview, negative feedback was also explored. Given the previous direction of travel in the conversation, his experiences were surprising but relevant:

People see my car and they might think, *who the fuck's he think he is, I'll fucking show him*, and they'll try racing me. I'm driving a 1.2 car, they're in a 2.0 turbo or something and they line up next to me at [traffic] lights, or they go right up my arse, or start flashing me. Just being knobs, really... I don't do anything: can't afford to – anything happens, my insurance is gone. So I just, you know, ignore it. Well, try to.

In this conversation, the relevance of race explicitly surfaced only once and revealed insights into the complexities of racialized encounters: 'All sorts of racist stuff – *paki this, Muslim that, piss off back home*. Standard shit... Sometimes it's older people... sort of your [interviewer's] age people driving nice cars, looking smart and all that and they start giving you shit'. Unsurprisingly, OH expressed some ambiguity about the motivations underlying aggressive behaviour from other individuals who were, ethnically speaking, like him: 'Well, it's like they see me, driving a car like this... and I've got a beard and they get sort of offended by that. Like all because I've got a beard, I should be driving a simple car kind of thing.'

OH then reinforced this analysis by drawing on the experiences of his female family members, in particular his sister, who drives a 'nice' but standard, unadulterated car and has experienced regular and negative feedback from men and women, regardless of their ethnicity. In part this may be linked with visible signifiers of faith identity and the prevailing salience of gendered power, which is anything but excluded from the road:

She thinks she gets grief because she wears a headscarf, even from Asian girls – girls who don't wear it. She thinks that they think *who's she think she is, wearing a headscarf and driving around in a nice car? Who's she think she is?* kind of thing. She thinks she gets that from men as well, especially Asians. And because she might be driving a nicer car than they are, they get uptight about it even more. Swear man, people, their heads are mashed sometimes.

While such experiences underscore the salience of emotion (Sheller 2004) and rage (Katz 1999), they also point to triggers for such moments being contingent upon but rooted in the performance and reception of identity, thus reaching into the dimensions of race, gender and class. What's highly relevant here is the extent to which faith and gender especially produce particular outcomes on the road: *nice car + Bradford + Muslim female driver = hostility*. Furthermore, the complications which arise when the further dimension of intra ethnic distinction is taken into account are similarly noteworthy. In this case, and in the examples that follow, racialization is supported through rehearsing the very same stereotypical tropes and codes that are used when asserting and ascribing aspects of Muslim/Pakistani identity. The salience of beard, headscarf and, as noted by OH above, even the mere presence of Muslim identities throws up opportunities for reactions and behaviours which would not otherwise occur. Thus, the complex fluidity of intersectional identities (Yuval-Davis 2006) are routinely visible and negotiated within the dynamics of racialization in specific contexts.

ZA, a 22 year old female, was one of the few drivers who disliked her 'boring', dull and 'tinny' car. She was 'sort of convinced' by her father that an eight year old Toyota Yaris would be an ideal first car. When probed further, ZA – like many others – felt Toyotas hold a certain stigma and lack some of the qualities she finds appealing in other brands/manufacturers:

Well, they're typical Asian cars if you know what I mean. Corollas, Auris, Yaris and all that – they're just too Asian. Pakistani, more than Asian... the Japanese are like that but even like some others that aren't Japanese as well. You know, like BM's, VWs, Audis and all that – our lot, we drive everything now but there's some cars that *only* we will drive and those are some of the Japanese ones. Like I never see a white person driving in an old Corolla. They might have like a new, a brand new Auris

or Yaris or that Hybrid one or something like that, but you hardly ever see white people driving older Japanese cars.

ZA reveals sensibilities toward the car cut across gender identity but also overlap with Miller's (2012) discussion around the historicism of ethnic heritage and how it continues to manifest in present day Trinidad in the form of 'taste; ethnic groups have their own 'ethnic tastes' which influence, for example, soft drink preferences. Similarly, 'taste' in cars appears to align with ethnicity: some are read as typically 'Asian' cars, and some not. What is more important to note here is that a mass produced material object has the capacity to all but represent an ethnic identity; there is, therefore, a clear demonstration of the relationship between objects and bodies and, perhaps just as importantly, that these relationships are meaningful and acted upon.

One other female participant, 22 year old MK, said she preferred high specification Audi hatchbacks and a range of other, almost exclusively German, brands but was aware of their expense and reputation as 'boy racer cars'. When asked about the option of buying a Japanese car instead, her reaction was quick and forceful: 'Never a Yaris or a Nissan Micra. They're like TP<sup>2</sup> cars.' And if she had no choice but a Micra or Yaris?

I'd rather not drive! It's about your identity: you can't be driving a crap car like that. It's not about them being beneath you, but you have to have something more acceptable. If you can't afford it, then take a taxi or use public transport!

While the number of female participants was small, they were as attached, interested and reflective of their connections with automobility as their male peers, a point reinforced through Lumsden's (2010) work around young female drivers. With ZA, MK and many of the male sample members, strong references to ethnic taste emerged, as well as how class and wealth help form taste distinctions. When asked what white people typically drove, ZA replied:

ZA: White people? Well, depends on sort of how rich they are, I suppose. For poorer people, it'll be like Fords and Vauxhalls. They're more common and so are Citroens and Peugeots and Renaults. If you're poorer and white, you'll drive one of them cars but poorer and Asian, you might be driving something Japanese.

Interviewer: And if you're not poor? If you're rich?

ZA: Doesn't matter if you're rich, you'll buy whatever you like, whatever takes your fancy. Doesn't matter what colour you are then.

There was a reasonably well shared idea of what constituted 'good' taste in cars, and that realising such taste was also linked with economic power. MK's interpretation of taste had a strong ethnic dimension, with qualifiers around ethnicity being stark: cars that were perceived to be typically Asian, 'TP', or Pakistani were problematic because they emitted particular messages about the driver. However, this was not a desire to 'whiten' identity, or to assimilate and become white. Rather, the taste differential between what are couched to be typical/non-typical Asian cars is linked with the strong notions of self-identity: 'TP' cars can only usually belong to immigrant generations (including recent arrivals) rather than those who see themselves as having British/western taste as well as corresponding cultural and economic capital. As documented elsewhere (Alam and Husband 2006; Simpson 2007) and reinforced here, a proportion of Bradford's Pakistanis have shown signs of upward economic mobility and migration into more affluent areas: this is accompanied by a discernible and varied growth in conspicuous consumption. Making implicit reference to Anwar's *Myth of Return* (1979) and also pointing to changed attitudes toward and practice with the car, one older participant stated:

...they were thinking of moving back [to Pakistan] you know at some point. The big thing was these big buildings, you know mansions they're building in Pakistan, they're sitting there doing nothing now because people don't want to go back there. So the parents have decided we can't invest in that kind of thing. The kid wants a car and just to make him happy he's gone into education like we said, and he's got married where we wanted to, so let's buy him a car. (JP, 47 year old male)

What perhaps lies underneath the viewpoints around 'ethnic taste' is the significance of consumption, and the economic power and capital that enables it. Young, economically active, British born, English speaking Pakistanis are not immune to the forces of capitalism and consumerism so their car located practice falls within broader schemes through which taste is defined, evolves and is realised through consumption. It's worth noting that there is no singular, or even series of tastes, accompanying aesthetics and car cultural practices which can be recognised by differences according to gender, class and generation; to argue there is would also mean there must be distinctions according to political belief, religious school of thought or even according to specific *biraderi* networks (see Anwar 1979). However, car culture does reflect the diversity to be found within multi-ethnic spaces: at subcultural levels, and across ethnic groups, car culture thrives as a means of enhancing the object itself, but this in turn projects, or at least aspires to project, individual taste and thus, individual identity. That said, many of these projections, despite claiming individuality, seem to follow similar lines and, indeed, can be found in other contexts such as, for example, Carter and Duncan's (2016) discussion around the individuality but sameness of wedding aesthetics. However, rather than being viewed as a carrier of creativity (see Warren and Gibson 2011), individuality and labour/work, the car often further embodies and reasserts already prevalent stereotypes.

Cultural objects do not necessarily have fixed meaning, despite producers instilling coherent and usually consistent ideas, attributes and associations which conflate with brand identity (Springer 2009). Cars can be reinvented and sit at odds with their original identities and markets. Some shifts in identity are organic, changing over time through mainstream usage while others are rapid and radical, aided through subcultural appropriation, innovation and bricolage. For some in the sample, up to date knowledge about modifications, repairs and maintenance is important but may be relatively superficial

(awareness of cost, increases in BHP, the impact of aesthetic/cosmetic changes). For others, however, a more in depth, technical knowledge along with aesthetic sensibility feeds into the process and speaks of personal identity also. To some extent, this fusing of the self and the car forms a rounded car-driver hybrid (Urry 2004) through which identity is not only carried, but reinforced and developed.

## **Conclusion**

Exploring the everyday and relatively benign stuff of social fabric is useful, not only as a counter to the monolithic and fear inspired/inducing scripting of Muslims in the West, but also as a means to suggest explorations of cultural practice can focus on mainstream objects and activities. Of course, the car is today a global artefact and has a multitude of uses and, importantly, meanings. While some confer high status, others render us invisible. At the same time, cars have the capacity to carry attributes deemed deviant or dangerous. The variable of race influences readings and sense making processes to the extent that rehearsals of what would otherwise be deemed racialised logic barely provoke a counter.

Race is real in terms of consequence and impact; it is encountered, made meaningful and, in the process of being acted upon, cast back out. The road is no different to wider social spaces in this respect. However, what makes the road arguably a more interesting, and perhaps a more vibrant space is that it is a fluid 'contact zone' and therefore offers a diversity and concentration of possible encounters, perceptions and feelings. Upon such discursive spaces, race is operationalised to become racialization.

Class, gender and neighbourhood/locale are relevant when exploring how identities are performed and received, with each having shifting levels of weight and significance depending on the specific context in which encounters are framed. Indeed, the symbolic power of the car is such that it can be readily deployed as a means of aiding biased

or stereotypical responses, leading to corresponding tropes of often negative difference: the Black or Asian male behind the wheel of an expensive car *must* be dealing drugs or engaging in some other illegal activity. Meanwhile, the young white male driving the customised hatchback is problematised within what is deemed normative ‘chav’ behaviour; the make/model of car, its aesthetics/aurality (amplified exhaust and music) help define identities with corresponding pathologies of behaviour and meaning. Any positive aspects of car ownership and the sometimes close to emotional relationships some develop with their vehicles are overlooked even though they may be extensions, or reflections, of identity and creativity.

Perhaps common to all these aspects of car culture is the notion of taste. At a superficial level, taste becomes manifest through aesthetics and brands, preferences for which appear to be informed by class, gender as well as ethnicity. However, this is only a partial analysis. Taste, to repeat ZA’s point, is also subject to economic power: ‘Doesn’t matter if you’re rich, you’ll buy whatever you like, whatever takes your fancy. Doesn’t matter what colour you are then.’ Across the sample, taste (good or bad) was a key feature. Younger participants envisaged owning cars that commanded respect and connoted success; for them, taste was something yet to be fully realised. Conversely, those who owned cars which had a ‘gangster’ or ‘thug’ identity were prepared to risk the cost of their taste. Taste, however, was also understood as a more refined good/bad binary: typical and non typical Asian. Drivers of especially older Japanese cars were conceptualised as having practically no taste, possibly even negative taste: as MK remarked when asked if she had to drive a small Japanese car: ‘I’d rather not drive!’

Despite being taken for granted, the car is a deep well of myth and meaning making. In the context of ethnic identity, the projected problematics of race especially are given opportunity to be articulated. In the specific context of Bradford the car becomes a

highly flexible signifier of identity and difference, and while it plays a hyper visible role in the manufacture of banal and not so banal multi-ethnic coexistence, it enables the performance of race thinking to become embodied; and further processes of racialization to operate.

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### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> The researcher/author is a Bradford born male of Pakistani, Muslim heritage who has a shared cultural repertoire with many of the participants. This emic status has been previously employed in a range of projects exploring young, Muslim male identity. See, for example Alam 2011; 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Pronounced 'tee-pee', this term has been a long established, informal usage short hand, principally used by British born Pakistanis as a derogatory term against non British born Pakistanis but it has various applications which connect with signifiers of non British Pakistani taste including dress/fashion, and, in this context, cars.

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