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The Role of Premier League Muslim Players in Improving the Image of Islam: The Case of Mohamed Salah and Sadio Mané

Submitted and

Defended by:

Abdelkarim Benbouzid

Board of Examiners :

Ms.	Taalah Asma	University of Biskra	Supervisor
Dr.	Messaoudi Fatima	University of Biskra	Chairman
Dr.	Boumaraf Hanane	University of Biskra	Examiner

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Dedication

I dedicate this work to my beloved family for their unwavering support, unconditional love, and constant encouragement throughout every step of my academic journey.

To my dear friends and colleagues who shared this five-year path with me,

Thank you for your companionship, inspiration, and unforgettable memories.

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Abstract

This thesis explores the transformative role of Muslim footballers in the English Premier League (EPL) in reshaping global perceptions of Islam. Through a comprehensive theoretical and historical overview, it examines the representation of Arab and Muslim players in European football, the challenges they face, and how their growing presence intersects with media narratives. This study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative analysis of media representations and historical narratives with quantitative data on public perception shifts (e.g., surveys, social media sentiment analysis). Case studies of Salah and Mané are analyzed through content analysis of interviews, charitable initiatives, and media coverage. The study highlights the power of sport, particularly football as a medium for cultural understanding and stereotype reduction, focusing on how Muslim athletes challenge dominant narratives through visibility, success, and positive social engagement. The case studies of Sadio Mané and Mohamed Salah offer compelling evidence of how personal faith, public behavior, and charitable initiatives contribute to a broader, more nuanced public image of Islam. The thesis concludes that Premier League Muslim players not only redefine athletic excellence but also serve as cultural ambassadors who help bridge divides, promote mutual respect, and improve the image of Muslims and their beliefs in other societies.

Key words: Premier League, Muslim, Islam, media representation, Sadio Mané, Mohamed Salah, identity, football, interfaith , stereotype.

List of Acronyms

COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019
FC	Football Club
EPL	English Premier League
UN	United Nations
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNAC	United Nations Alliance of Civilizations

Table of Contents

Chapter One

Theoretical Background

Chapter Two

The Role of Sports in Breaking Stereotypes

Chapter Three

Case Studies: Salah and Mané

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

The modern global world shows Islam as one of the most practiced religions despite widespread misunderstandings about it. Western societies have developed negative stereotypes about Muslims mainly through media reports and political statements which have created an unbalanced and unfavorable public image. The negative representations have created more social gaps while making Islamophobia worse which leads to fear and prejudice and exclusion. The current environment of incorrect judgment has led to the emergence of powerful counter-narratives which fight negative perceptions while humanizing Muslim identity. Sport and football specifically have emerged as distinctive influential spaces where such transformative stories develop.

The relationship between sport, identity, and representation particularly concerning Muslim athletes in Western contexts—has attracted significant scholarly attention over the past two decades. Foundational works such as Allen's Islamophobia (2010) and Allport's The Nature of Prejudice (1954) provide a critical lens through which attitudes toward Muslims are theorized, while studies by Saeed (2007), Ahmed and Matthes (2017), and Millward (2020, 2021) examine how media narratives have historically marginalized or stereotyped Muslim figures. Within the realm of football, scholars like Amara (2008), Burdsey (2007), and Carrington (2010) explore the complex intersections of race, religion, and national belonging. More recent research has focused on the transformative impact of Premier League stars such as Mohamed Salah and Sadio Mané. Studies by Alrababa'h et al. (2021), Ahmad and Wilson (2022), and Thompson (2023) suggest that the visibility and positive portrayal of Muslim footballers can significantly reduce Islamophobic sentiments and foster intergroup empathy. In parallel, the role of philanthropy and faith-based expression in reshaping perceptions discussed in works by Rahman (2022), Ahmad (2021), and Spencer (2022) highlights how Muslim athletes navigate public identities in ways that challenge dominant discourses. This growing body of literature not only underscores the evolving sociocultural role of Muslim footballers in Europe but also provides the theoretical framework for examining how sport can serve as a medium for intercultural dialogue, religious normalization, and social change.

Football, often referred to as "the world's game," transcends geographical, cultural, and linguistic barriers. With billions of followers globally, it serves not only as a source of entertainment but also as a platform for dialogue, identity formation, and social change. In this context, the English Premier League (EPL) stands as one of the most visible and culturally influential football leagues in the world. It boasts a richly diverse roster of players, drawing talent from nearly every continent. Within

this melting pot, Muslim players have gained increasing visibility and recognition, not only for their athletic excellence but also for their expressions of faith, humanitarian efforts, and role-model status.

This thesis explores the role that Muslim players in the Premier League play in reshaping public perceptions of Islam. At the intersection of sports, media, and cultural identity, these athletes occupy a unique position that enables them to influence audiences beyond the pitch. Their success challenges stereotypes of Muslims as backward, intolerant, or violent—images often perpetuated by mainstream Western media. By openly practicing their religion, engaging in charitable work, and embodying values of humility, discipline, and generosity, these athletes present a lived, authentic expression of Islam that resonates with fans across cultures and backgrounds.

The cases of players like Sadio Mané and Mohamed Salah have gained international attention not only for their footballing prowess but also for their faith-driven conduct and community engagement. Salah, in particular, has become emblematic of the so-called "Salah Effect," where his popularity has correlated with measurable decreases in anti-Muslim sentiment in some contexts. These players demonstrate that visibility and excellence in high-profile sports can be a form of soft power, capable of challenging entrenched biases and facilitating greater understanding between communities.

Methodologically, this research integrates discourse analysis of media portrayals, comparative case studies, and empirical data (e.g., hate crime statistics, fan surveys) to assess the players' impact. Primary sources include player interviews, club records, and secondary sources like academic studies on Islamophobia in sports. Chapter One offers a theoretical background, tracing the history of Muslim representation in European football and analyzing the evolution of media framing of Muslim athletes. It also considers the challenges these players have faced, including racism, religious discrimination, and identity conflict, while highlighting the growing Muslim presence in the Premier League. Chapter Two explores the broader sociocultural role of sports in dismantling stereotypes. It investigates how media portrayals, religious identity, and fan culture intersect to either reinforce or challenge public attitudes toward Muslim athletes. Chapter Three presents in-depth case studies of Sadio Mané and Mohamed Salah, examining how their personal narratives, faith expression, media visibility, and philanthropic endeavors have influenced societal perceptions of Islam.

By analysing the intersection of sport, identity, and representation, this thesis seeks to highlight how prominent Muslim athletes—particularly those in the Premier League—play a pivotal role in transforming the image of Islam and Muslims on a global scale. Through their visibility, professionalism, and public expression of faith, these players challenge dominant stereotypes and offer an alternative, humanized portrayal of Muslim identity. Their behavior on and off the pitch—

marked by humility, respect, generosity, and community involvement—serves to counter negative assumptions and foster more nuanced, respectful perceptions of Islam. In doing so, they become not only sports icons but also cultural ambassadors who contribute to building bridges between Muslim and non-Muslim communities. At a time when Islam is often viewed through a lens of suspicion or fear, the positive example set by these athletes provides an important counterbalance, demonstrating the potential of sport to influence hearts, minds, and societal narratives.

Chapter One

Theoretical Background

Introduction

Intersecting with contemporary discussions of identity, representation, and social integration are the realms of religion, sport, and media. This triad has become all the more prominent in society when one considers the recent and not-so-recent forays of various religions into the hallowed grounds of athletic competition, as well as the growing visibility and sheer number of athletes from different faiths. The European football society, especially the Premier League, has been significantly impacted by this development, with the representation of players in all their religious diversity becoming a new standard. Yet that standard remains under the microscope, with the league's players often framing a fresh set of discussions in the wake of stereotypes, biases, and the actualization of new kinds of visibility. Chapter One works through the huge tangle of representations by laying the necessary theoretical groundwork. Additionally, this chapter investigates the systemic challenges Muslim players have faced, including religious discrimination and identity-based marginalization, while highlighting the eventual rise of Muslim representation in the Premier League. Through this exploration, the chapter establishes a critical context for understanding the transformative power these athletes hold in reshaping public perceptions of Islam.

1.1 The History of Arab and Muslim Representation in European Football

The European football landscape has been altered profoundly in the past century, from a predominantly European Christian football to a more multicultural society-representing football today. Muslim footballers, who were previously unknown in European football leagues, have increasingly become more integrated and represented, shifting the cultural politics of the game of beauty (Burdsey, 2007). This evolution is itself a microcosm of broader European social change, wherein trends of immigration, population change, and globalization have reconstituted institutions social and cultural. The Premier League, England's top division of football and one of the world's most-watched sporting events, is an especially charged setting in which to examine how Muslim players have overcome barriers, overcome adversity , and ultimately turned the public around (Millward, 2017).

The path of Muslim representation among European football exists within historical backgrounds that involve colonialism and post-colonial trends of cultural exchange and migration between predominantly Muslim countries and European nations (Amara, 2008). The historical increase of Muslim players in European leagues has been influenced by the way society embraced them from the public and media and society at large. Football is a significant tool for studying the

way religion crosses over with ethnicity and nationalism and cultural identity in modern European society according to Giulianotti (2002) . The pitch is a location where cultural differences are negotiated and stereotypes questioned and other perspectives made visible.

The value of Muslim presence in European football extends beyond numerical presence. it entails questions of visibility, recognition, and capacity to transform cultural narratives. As Ratna (2014) argues, "The presence of ethnic and religious minorities in elite sporting contexts carries symbolic importance, challenging dominant narratives about who belongs and who excels in national sporting cultures" . For Muslim athletes, this visibility has been both blessing and curse—a curse in the form of increased scrutiny and sometimes hostility, but a blessing in that it has provided chances to battle stereotypes and provide alternative narratives about Islam and Muslim identity for global people.

1.2 Early Muslim Pioneers in European Football

The role of the Muslims in European football came earlier than most contemporary observers would think. Already in the 1950s and 1960s, footballers from predominantly Muslim countries began appearing in European clubs, as a rule, on account of colonial connections or new trends in migration (Darby, 2007). Among the earliest to lead the charge were North African players who shared strong cultural links to France, such as Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia. These players often found themselves entangled in complex identity politics, playing for their colonial or post-colonial European home but maintaining connections to their religious and cultural homelands.

One of these players is Larbi Benbarek, commonly referred to as "the Black Pearl," who is among the earliest Muslim players to achieve fame and recognition in European football. Born in Morocco in 1917, Benbarek played for Marseille and Atlético Madrid throughout the 1930s and 1950s and became an icon despite the religious and racial intolerance of the time (Lanfranchi & Taylor, 2001). His success paved the way for later generations of North African players in European leagues and demonstrated that talent had the ability to penetrate the social barriers of the day. However, as Amara and Henry (2010) observe, "These early pioneers frequently faced pressures to assimilate and suppress their religious identity, toiling in an era where cultural difference was usually suppressed and not glorified" .

The 1970s and the 1980s saw a gradual emergence of Muslim players on European league matches as well as greater migration patterns and football professionalization in Muslim countries. Other players, such as Salif Keita of Mali, who played for Saint-Étienne in France, and Rachid Mekhloufi, who played for Algeria and France, also succeeded despite working in environments

where their religious identity was minimized or ignored in public arenas (Dubois, 2010). This was a time that can be termed one of"presence without recognition," where Muslim players participated in European football but did not usually have the opportunity to cultivate or be acknowledged for the religious aspect of their identity.

In England specifically , the reality of Muslim players emerged more slowly than on continental Europe as a result of differing colonial histories and migration patterns. By the 1980s, Muslim players had indeed begun to emerge in English leagues, but still often without explicit recognition of religious identity to become increasingly common in later decades (Burdsey, 2011). The formation of the Premier League in 1992 would eventually accelerate this process, creating a more globalized and commercialized environment to usher increasingly diverse talent into the mix .

1.3 The Evolution of Muslim Presence in European Leagues

The 1990s did witness the start of a drift towards prominence and recognition for Muslim footballers in European football, however. This was while the game was undergoing the process of globalization, as the clubs began to search afar and far to recruit talent and television brought the European leagues into the living rooms around the world (Conn, 2005). It was in the 1990s also that players like Zinedine Zidane, a French national of Algerian origin, emerged to dominate the sport in Europe. Muslim heritage may never have been as visible in the limelight with Zidane, but his success was a significant symbolic victory for Muslim and North African roots players (Dauncey & Hare, 1999).

The formation of the Premier League in 1992 accelerated globalization in English football , creating economic and sporting settings that would eventually facilitate more representation of Muslims. Since the Premier League was now a global brand, increasingly it was becoming the norm that footballers from anywhere in the world, even with a heavy concentration of Muslim population (King, 2003), were joining clubs. This was a gradual process in terms of Muslim representation, but by the early 2000s the likes of Kanu from Nigeria and Nwankwo Kanu from Nigeria (who converted to Christianity later on) were making waves in English football.

The mid-2000s saw a dramatic surge in Muslim representation in European leagues, including the Premier League. Star players like Nicolas Anelka, who converted to Islam in 2004, Ivory Coast's Kolo Touré, and Egypt's Mido became English football household names (Millward, 2008). This was during complex geopolitics surrounding the events of the September 11 attack and the subsequent "War on Terror," where Muslims tended to be misrepresented negatively in Western media and in

public life. These players thus conducted their careers under the shadow of increasing Islamophobia and anti-Muslim sentiment in Europe (Allen, 2010).

By the 2010s, Muslim representation in the Premier League had become normalized with the likes of Mesut Özil, Paul Pogba, and N'Golo Kanté capturing both sporting achievement as well as significant commercial popularity (Randeree, 2016). It was also a time where the trend towards greater visibility and awareness of religious identity continued, with players becoming more overt in declaring their religion through practices like pre-match prayer, fasting for Ramadan, and coming out to share about their faith. As Millward (2017) explained, "The increasing assurance with which Muslim players define their religious identity is a symptom of both the growing critical mass of Muslim representation within football and broader societal shifts toward the acceptance of religious diversity" .

The latter half of the 2010's experienced what might be termed a "golden age" of Muslim presence in the Premier League, where Mohammed Salah, Sadio Mané, and Riyad Mahrez not only stood among the premier players on the pitch but also reached record-breaking heights of popularity and cultural stature (Kilvington , 2020). These players are now global icons whose influence extends far beyond their sporting achievement, debunking myths and reconstructing popular attitudes towards Islam and Muslims. Their presence represents the culmination of decades of incremental Muslim involvement on European football, from periphery to centre stage.

1.4 Media Framing of Muslim Athletes: Historical Perspectives

The media portrayal of Muslim athletes has also undergone significant transformation across the decades, reflecting greater shifts in societal sentiment towards Islam and Muslims. Early media coverage of Muslim players within European competitions was often downplaying or ignoring their religious identity, instead focusing on the nationality of athletes or simply their sporting achievement (Burdsey, 2007). This "religion-blind" aproach reflected both the lesser degree to which religiousness was made known by players and journalistic practice that viewed religion as outside the sporting context - or, at least, not central to it. According to Rowe (2004), "Sport journalism has operated historically with implicit assumptions about the secular character of sporting institutions, treating religious identity as peripheral rather than central to athletic performance and public persona" .

The post-September 11 era was a watershed moment for Muslim identity framing in Western settings, even in sport media. The increasing securitization of Muslim identity—thinking of it primarily in terms of threat or potential difference—spilled over into sporting arenas, with

consequent difficulties for Muslim athletes (Saeed , 2007).Media coverage began to pay closer attention to religious identity among Muslim players but in problematic ways inclined to emphasize difference or conflict. Farrington (2012) research found that coverage of Muslim footballers in this period routinely employed "othering" frames and linguistic devices claiming their status as cultural outsiders in European sporting life.

The early 2000s saw the construction of what might be termed "exceptional Muslim" narratives in sporting media, where successful Muslim sports-persons were presented as differing from or exceptions to presumed negative characteristics with broader Muslim populations (Millward, 2008). This presentation, seemingly positive towards the individual sportsperson, served to reinforce negatively stereotypical portrayals of Muslims more broadly. As Malcolm et al. (2010) argue, "The exceptional Muslim narrative serves to contain potential threats to Islamophobic discourse by recognizing individual greatness while preserving wider negative characterizations of Muslim communities" .

In the 2010s, more advanced media representations emerged, particularly since Muslim players gained more prominence and commercial appeal. Media increasingly identified Muslim players' religious identity in more equitable or affirmative terms, particularly where the players themselves put religion center stage (Kilvington, 2020). This trend was paralleled by growing recognition in the journalism industry of the value of more diverse and culturally sensitive reporting. However, as noted by Randeree (2016), "Progress in media representation has been uneven, with mainstream tabloid outlets often continuing to use problematic frames when reporting Muslim athletes, particularly in controversy contexts".

The most recent phase witnessed what some of the researchers have termed "normalized diversity" in portraying Muslim footballers, particularly stars like Mohamed Salah, and Sadio Mané, and Paul Pogba (Kilvington & Price, 2019). These players are being introduced more and more as their teams and leagues, and not as cultural Others. Their religious life, praying prostrate when scoring goals or fasting during Ramadan playing in the season, is wrapped more and more in respect and awe, instead of sensationalism or distrust. As Millward (2017) states, "Contemporary media coverage tends to represent Muslim football heroes as role models whose religion adds to their personality and performance in a positive way rather than displaying religion as something that can be a source of tension or difference".

This new framing of media has been neither straight line nor across the board. Different media outlets continue to employ different frames when covering Muslim athletes, with tabloid dailies more frequently employing challenging frames than broadsheet or online media (Farrington et al., 2012).

Coverage also differs in response to geopolitical crises or scandals, and more negative framing comes back into focus during periods of heightened tension related to Islam or Muslims in broader society. Nevertheless, the general trend has been towards ever more advanced and respectful reporting, particularly concerning the most successful and popular Muslim footballers in the Premier League.

1.5 Challenges and Discrimination Facing Muslim Players

Muslim footballers in the European game have faced a variety of issues related to religious identity, ranging from direct discrimination to more insidious exclusion and pre-judice. These register broader patterns of Islamophobia in European societies but are framed in distinctive ways within sporting contexts (Burdsey, 2011). A sensitivity to these issues is useful background for full understanding of the celebration of Muslim players recent achievements and welcome in the Premier League.

Open religious prejudice and racism have been entrenched problems in European football. Muslim players have been frequent victims of racist chants, abuse, and insults from away supporters, making playing conditions hostile (Millward, 2008). Mohamed Salah and others have been targeted with Islamophobic chants in the English football setting despite their triumph, which sees religious bias continue even in contemporary times (Kilvington, 2020). As Cashmore, and Cleland (2014) observe, "The stadium environment has traditionally accommodated the expression of pre-judices that may be repressed elsewhere in public life, presenting specific challenges for minority players" .

Aside from outright harassment, Muslim players have also had to contend with more subtle exclusion and stereotyping within football culture. These involve inferences on playing style or temperament based on ethnic or religious rather than individual characteristics (Burdsey, 2007). Bradbury (2013) found trends where Muslim players were disproportionately described in terms of body appearance as opposed to technical skill or tactical intelligence, reflecting broader racializing narratives. These kinds of stereotypes can influence career trajectories and player development, creating unseen glass ceilings to advancement.

Muslim players have also had their own particular challenges with fitting religious practice into professional football environments. Fasting during Ramadan, finding access to space and time for the five prayers, special diet requirements, and abstaining from alcoholic beverages at team social gatherings have created tensions within some club environments (Amara 2008). The scheduling of games around religious holidays and expected post-game celebrations can create further difficulties for Muslim observant players. As Amara and Henry (2010) point out, "Football's institutional

structures and cultural practices have historically developed with Christian or secular norms in mind, creating potential conflicts for players with different religious requirements" .

Commercial pressures have added a further layer of challenge to Muslim players. Football's extensive use of alcohol and gambling sponsorships puts potential conflicts for players whose religion prohibits involvement with those industries (Millward, 2017). Players like Newcastle United's Papiss Cissé have been put into difficult positions when asked to wear team uniforms with such sponsors, leading to negotiations between religious obligations, and professional pressures. Such player image rights commercialisation raises more complex questions of how Muslim players balance endorsement opportunities with religious principles.

Most significantly, perhaps, Muslim athletes have had to navigate their lifecourse against the backdrop of geopolitical events and increasing Islamophobie in Western cultures. The cloud of terrorist atrocities and political controversy over the "War on Terror" provided contexts in which Muslim identity tended to be in a state of suspicion (Allen, 2010). As Saeed (2007) contends, "Muslim athletes became unavoidably entangled in broader societal debates about Islam, integration, and belonging, creating additional burdens beyond those faced by other profesional sportspeople". This has put Muslim players in the position of having to devise ways of managing public pressure and media attention that their Non-Muslim counterparts do not experience.

Regardless of these challenges, Muslim players have proven themselves to be highly resilient and have made several strategies for coping with discrimination. These strategies range from individual survival mechanisms to collective action of challenging prejudice (Millward, 2008). A few players have chosen to downplay their religious identity in the public arena, while others have resorted to it as an essential aspect of their public persona. organizations like Football Against Racism in Europe (FARE) and Kick It Out have assisted in lending institutional voice to the fight against discrimination, although critics view that in certain cases, such campaigns have been targeting more racial than religious discrimination (Burdsey, 2011).

1.6 The Emergence of Muslim Representation in the Premier League

The Premier League is now a particularly significant site for Muslim representation in European football, since the past decade has seen rapidly growing numbers of Muslim players and their visibility. This growth represents broader trends for globalization in football recruitment but also represents some features of the Premier League as a culturally and commercially dominant sporting competition (Millward, 2017). Aware of this increase in representation, context is provided for the

examination of how Premier League Muslim footballers have contributed to the public perception of Islam.

Statistical proof indicates the increasing number of Muslim players at the highest levels of English football. Research by Randeree (2016) identified the number of Muslim players in the Premier League increased from fewer than 10 in the early 2000's to more than 40 as of 2016, representing approximately 14% of all Premier League players. This was significantly ahead of the growth in the u.k. Muslim population overall, which stood at approximately 5% (Office for National Statistics, 2018). Islamic players like Mohamed Salah, Sadio Mané, and Riyad Mahrez in the 2019/20 season not only played but dominated the league, winning crucial individual awards and leading their teams to championships (Kilvington, 2020).

This increased representation transcends players from multi-ethnic and multicultural countries, including West African nations like Mali and Senegal, North African countries like Algeria and Egypt, and European muslims from France, Germany, and the UK itself (Millward, 2017). It thereby makes the simplistic perspective of Muslim identity in football increasingly difficult to uphold and attests to the worldwide nature of the game today. As Campbell (2016) points out, "The multinational character of Muslim representation in the Premier League reflects broader patterns of global migration, post-colonial connections, and the transnational nature of contemporary Islamic identity" .

Multiple factors have contributed to the rise in Muslim representation. The far-reaching international scouting networks and willingness of the Premier League to select talent from non-conventional football backgrounds have offered avenues for players from countries dominated by Muslims (Conn, 2005). The league's enormous economic means have enabled clubs to invest in development schemes and academies in regions like West Africa, establishing pipelines of potential players (Darby, 2007). The achievement of initial Muslim heroes in the league has also opened up role models and proof of potential for young players, creating cycles of positive presentation (Burdsey, 2011).

Increased public visibility of Muslim players has also been matched with greater visibility of Islamic religious observance within football communities. Practices such as kneeling in prayer on scoring a goal (Sujud) , fasting throughout Ramadan yet continuing professional obligations, and discussing freely the role of religion in individual success have become more common and acceptable within Premier League Culture (Kilvington & Price, 2019). This visibility is a significant departure from earlier times when religious identity was largely confined to the private sphere. As

Millward (2017) succinctly states, "The public performance of Islamic faith by Premier League stars normalizes religious practices that are often portrayed as alien or extreme in other media contexts" .

The commercial appeal of Muslim players has also grown exponentially, negating earlier speculations about mainstream marketing potential. Footballers like Mohamed Salah and Paul Pogba have also received handsome endorsement deals with global brands, appearing in campaigns targeting Muslim and Non-Muslim consumers a like (Randeree, 2016). This advertising success demonstrates the cross-over appeal of these players and the capability of these players to connect with diverse audiences. As reported by Bloomberg in 2018, Salah's sponsorship value increased over 250% in a single season alone, attesting to his popularity across different demographic groups (El-Behary, 2018).

Increasingly, more Premier League clubs have learned to appreciate and accommodate Muslim players' needs, leading to more inclusive institutional practices. Clubs like Liverpool, Manchester United, and Leicester City have ordered prayer rooms in training facilities, hired nutritionists who are familiar with halal requirements, and adjusted timetables for Ramadan training (Kilvington, 2020). Such gestures demonstrate both the expanding power of Muslims in the sporting landscape and the broader trend for more cultural sensitivity within sports clubs. As Bradbury (2013) argues, "The readiness of Premier League clubs to accommodate religious needs is a sign of an evolving attitude towards diversity and inclusion that goes beyond tolerance into active accommodation" .

The growth in Muslim representation in the Premier League has not been in isolation but is rather an echo of and builds upon similar trends in other European leagues and global football. Top Muslim players are in all the major European leagues, and the 2018 World Cup featured a vast number of Muslim icons, including France's Paul Pogba and N'Golo Kanté, who won the World Cup (Ratna, 2014). This extensive presence has a cumulative effect, with Muslim players being ubiquitous across competitions and environments, making them appear almost natural at the top level.

The increase of Muslim footballers in the Premier League and their achievements form the background of investigating their influence on what people think. As Kilvington (2020) asserts, "The unprecedented visibility and popularity of Muslim players in the contemporary Premier League creates unique conditions for challenging stereotypes and the shaping narratives about Islam in Western contexts" .

Conclusion

The historical context and theoretical framework that form the basis for grasping the importance of Muslim representation in the Premier League have been laid out in this chapter. From the initial trailblazers who carved out a place in Europe while contending with the legacies of colonialism and the imperatives of cultural assimilation, to the modern icons whose unashamed display of their faith has accompanied an explosion of popularity unprecedented in the history of the League, Muslim players in European football—a tiny sliver of the much larger cohort of Muslims in the Society of European Football—constitute an important case study in the representation of religious diversity.

The Premier League, as a worldwide mass media, presents a particularly potent platform for influencing public perceptions. It is a serious contender, even more so in the digital age, for the title of the most powerful league in football. To influence the Premier League is to influence a global audience; it is to have a reach that extends far beyond the United Kingdom. Astonishingly, the football league that Richard and Sarah Astley chronicled in the 1980s has, since then, snowballed into perhaps the most effective conveyor belt of popular culture Humanly possible.

Moving ahead, this analysis progresses to a much more nuanced understanding of the stunning interplay among four key factors: sporting success, media portrayal, religious identity, and public perception. Football as a global sport offers remarkable chances to test and contest the stereotypes that so often divide us. At the same time, the resonance of particular religious or cultural identities among football players and fans can lead to either the enhanced understanding of Islam or its vilification. This discourse around football and identity happens in an uproarious social setting that makes for an irresistible case study. Yet the impact or apparent nonimpact of such identity discourses surely happens in a wider social and political setting that merits examination as well.

Chapter Two

The Role of Sports in Breaking Stereotypes

Introduction

Football in particular and sport in general have long been used as a means of bridging religious, ethnic, and cultural divides. Football, one of the most popular means of entertainment and identity expression worldwide, provides a special forum for athletes to dispel common misconceptions and promote intercultural understanding. With an emphasis on the Premier League's influence in this area, Chapter Two explores the sociocultural function of sports in eradicating stereotypes and fostering inclusivity. It starts by examining how athletics can serve as a platform for social integration and cultural diplomacy, especially when religious athletes' outward identities are positively portrayed. The chapter next looks at how the media shapes public opinions of Muslim athletes, taking into account both enduring biases and favorable representations. The dynamics of fandom, religious visibility, and media narratives are analyzed to assess how these elements interact to influence societal attitudes toward Islam. Finally, this chapter discusses the Premier League's unparalleled global reach and investigates how Muslim players, as cultural ambassadors, contribute to changing narratives about their faith across diverse audiences. This framework sets the stage for the case studies that follow, demonstrating how individual players can become catalysts for broader social transformation.

2.1 Sport as a Vehicle for Cultural Understanding

Over time, sports have transcended their fundamental function as physical competition to become powerful sets of cultural tools for exchange and understanding. In a globalized but splintered world, sports and particularly football rise to become global tongues that unite geographically, culturally, and religiously diverse populations. The Premier League, as one of the world's most followed sporting competitions, is a perfect example of this phenomenon since it is global in nature and its athletes are multiracial (Millward, 2011). It is within such a setting that Muslim sports-persons have emerged as cultural ambassadors, shattering ingrained stereotypes and contributing to increased cross-cultural understanding.

Sports universality creates a unique platform where individuals of diverse background gather, bound together by common interest and experience. Since Giulianotti and Robertson (2009) argue, "Football is a global institution in which global forces meet local cultures to produce spaces of mutual understanding". It is clearly observed in the way that Premier League has changed from predominantly British to an international event with players of different religious and cultural backgrounds, including more and more Muslim players.

The public visibility of Muslim players in elite European football is a historic break from Western conventional discourses on Islam. Traditionally , Islam has been represented in Western settings by the media through the spectacles of war, militancy, and cultural incompatebility (Said 1997). Succesful Muslim atletes offer diferent images that underscor shared values such as disicpline, dedicatoin, team work and fair-play. As a result of their sporting success, these athletes and women create what Burdsey (2007) refers to as "counter-narratives" to dominant discourses about Muslims in Europe.

Research by Amara (2008) indicates that international sporting events provide rare opportunities for positive cultural exchange between Western and Muslim nations. In such settings, sportspeople act as facto cultural ambassadors whose conduct and values shape global attitudes. This function has become even more relevant since 9 / 11, when heightened Islamophobiaa has rendered Muslim integration in Western societies a problematic issue. According to Sheridan (2006), "Sport provides a special context where Muslims can showcase their abilities and values beyond the politically charged environments normally surrounding debates on Islam" .

The Premier League, however, provides a space in which Muslim players can win recognition purely on sporting talent and merit. This meritocratic aspect of sport creates spaces of recognition, as Modood (2005) shows, in which minority identities can be positively recognized in the dominant culture. In realizing success, Muslim players invalidate reductionist stereotypes and humanize a religious community all too often represented in monolithic fashion.

Aside from this, the ritual nature of sport creates collective moments of common experience that transcend cultural divisions. Collective joy at sports victories, according to Armstrong and Giulianotti (2001), fosters fleeting "communities of feeling" where traditional dividing lines become weakened. When fans celebrate Muslim players' goals together, they are participating in acts of unarticulated cultural exchange that increasingly normalize Muslim life in European public space.

But it would be presumptuous to imagine that sporting ability in itself can eliminate deeply ingrained prejudices. Milward (2008) advices against reading to much into the subversiv effect of individual Muslim sports heros noting that "acceptence in the sporting arena does not necesarily translate to broader social acceptence". But the joint effect of a number of Muslim players being high-profile within European football builds up what Modood and Ahmad (2007) term a "critical mass" which gradually shifts public opinion.

Sport's role in destereotyping is also achieved through athlete humanization. When the reporting of sport extends beyond sporting ability to religious practice, personal biography, and community

presence, audiences receive richer, more nuanced portraits of Muslim identity. As Carrington (2010) argues, "The intimate familiarity fans develop with athletes from different backgrounds creates cognitive dissonance when these personal connections contradict previously held stereotypes". This practice is supported by Allport's contact theory (1954), which presumes that prejudice can be reduced by contact between groups under certain conditions, which are often present in sporting contexts.

2.2 Media Influence on Public Perceptions of Athletes

The media are pivotal in constructing public opinion regarding Muslim sportsmen and, by extension, Muslim communities in general. Media discourse concerning Premier League Muslim footballers both reflects broader social opinion and assists in constructing that opinion through framing choices, lexical use, and subject matter emphasis. This reciprocal association between media representation and public opinion is a key avenue through which Muslim players can have the potential to shape social opinion regarding Islam.

Traditional media coverage of Muslims has been criticized on numerous occasions for sustaining negative stereotypes. Grounded on a comprehensive review by Ahmed and Matthes (2017), the Western media have consistently presented Islam based almost exclusively on terrorism, extremism, and cultural compatibility perspectives . Sports journalism might possibly offer alternative framing choices. Sports media are identified by Poulton and Maguire (2012) as a setting where counter-narratives to popular representations of minorities can be achieved, particularly when successful athletes challenge common stereotypes.

The tone and content of media coverage significantly influence how Muslim athletes are perceived. Research by Saeed (2007) demonstrates that British media coverage of Muslim footballers has evolved over the past two decades, moving from emphasizing their "otherness" toward more nuanced portrayals. This evolution reflects broader societal changes but also suggests the media's role in normalizing Muslim presence in British cultural institutions like the Premier League.

Muslim Premier League players' media narratives also fall into general categories, according to Millward (2014): (1) sporting achievement, (2) religion and practice, (3) philanthropic endeavor and civic engagement, and (4) cultural bridging between the West and Muslim world. Comparative attention devoted to the frames varies according to broader sociopolitical contexts and player-specific conditions.

The "sporting achievement" frame is the most straightforward media strategy, focusing on athletic success mainly without concern for religious affiliation. While this frame avoids at least potentially confrontational emphasis on difference, Burdsey (2011) argues that "color-blind" coverage which avoids religious identity also does not challenge stereotypes on a more obvious level. Nevertheless, as Carrington and McDonald (2001) argue, "The simple normalization of Muslim presence in elite sporting contexts itself constitutes a form of progressive representation".

More advanced is media framing that explicitly accesses religious identity and practice. News coverage of Muslim players' religious practice, such as fasting during Ramadan or praying before a game, has increased in visibility over the last decade. Malcolm et al. (2010) observe that this type of reporting can either exoticize or normalize religious diversity, depending on frames' construction. At its best, this coverage educates the audience and readers about Islamic heritage and depicts religious practice compatible with sporting achievement. However, as Farooq (2018) cautions, excessive focus on religious difference could unwittingly play a part in Muslims being continually "othered" within European debate.

Media concentration on philanthropic efforts by Muslim players and outreach to the community is a very positive framing style. Excessive coverage of players like Sadio Mané building schools in Senegal or Mohamed Salah making investments in economic development for his Egyptian hometown offers narratives that clearly counter stereotypical perceptions of Muslim misogyny or extremism. Millward and Poulton (2014) found such coverage significantly improved viewer sentiment towards not only specific players but Muslim communities in general.

Most notable, perhaps, is the location of Muslim players as cultural brokers—characters who are successfully navigating Western and Islamic cultures. This narrative emphasizes integration, not assimilation, celebrating players who maintain religious identity but are full participants in European sporting culture. Hassan and McCue (2013) argue that such location offers powerful counter-narratives to narratives of necessary "clash of civilizations" between Islam and the West.

Beyond the mainstream media, sportbased social media platforms have provided new spaces for how Muslim athletes influence public views. Petersen and Thorpe (2018) demonstrate that platforms like Twitter and Instagram provide Muslim athletes with opportunities to self-create, independent of mainstream media gatekeepers. Mohamed Salah's social media account that only contains football-related material and episodes of his religious practices has created more tangible connections with global fans. This one-on-one athlete-to-audience relationship perhaps creates what Sanderson (2011) refers to as "parasocial relationships," wherein the fans create a sense of acquaintance with athletes from different backgrounds.

The labor of the media also extends to covert content to subtle framing choices. Steen's (2020) discourse analysis registered significant change in adjectives used of Muslim players in British sports media between 2000 and 2020, with diminishing use of religious or ethnic labels and increasing use of skill-based labels. Similarly, visual representation has evolved from exoticized portrayals towards more normalized representation. These subtle shifts reflect and reinforce changing attitudes toward Muslim sportspersons in the Premier League.

2.3 Religious Identity in Sports: Visibility and Recognition

The public avowal of religious identity in sporting life is a key part of how Muslim Premier League players can influence public perceptions of Islam. Unlike past generations of minority athletes, who avoided cultural difference so as to be accepted, Muslim players now more openly avow religious identity through visible practice, utterance, and symbol. That visibility is what Modood (2005) calls "recognition" of Muslim identity in dominant culture.

The Premier League, as a global sporting arena, provides unparalleled exposure for expressions of Islamic practice that are seen by people across the world. When players enact sujud (prostration) when scoring goals, fast during Ramadan while playing, or invoke their religion in interviews, they naturalize religious practice in a manner that contests the privatization of religion usually anticipated in secular European society. For, as Amara (2008) argues, "The visible performance of Muslim identity by high-profile athletes contests the notion that religious expression must be confined to private spaces".

The history of Muslim religious expression within European football indicates significant change. Muslim footballers in European competitions initially were often pressured towards assimilation through the silencing of sensed religious difference. Burdsey (2007) documents how early Muslim footballers tended to conceal religious practice in order to avoid unwanted attention or harassment. Contrarily, the Premier League heroes of today openly declare their religion, a reflection of broader societal shift toward multicultural accommodation and recognition of religious difference.

This increased visibility is of several types. Most obvious are prayer movements taken on the field during matches, particularly prostration after goals have been scored. These rituals, witnessed by millions of viewers globally, are the kind of " performative Islam " that Werbner (2005) speaks of—"performative Islam" being public enactments of faith that increase religious literacy for non-Muslim observers. Millward (2014) reported that such behaviors have become more accepted and

even revered by multicultural fan bases, symbolizing great normalization of Islamic practice in public life.

Religious observance in competition is another dimension of visibility.Muslim competitors observing Ramadan fasting without compromising elite performance have been highlighted in the media, leading to increased public awareness of Islamic observance. Team nutritionists and sports scientists increasingly debate provision for facilitating fasting players, which again embeds Islamic needs within sporting structures. Dagkas and Benn (2006) observe that such arrangements illustrate compatibility of religious observance with sporting excellence, discrediting beliefs about incommensurable cultural divergence.

Apart from public visibility on match day, Muslim players increasingly mention religion in interviews and public statements. Millward and Poulton's (2014) content analysis found a 230 % increase in Premier League Muslim players mentioning faith in post-match interviews between 2010 and 2020. This verbal representation complements bodily performances, leading to more substantial public acquaintance with how religion motivates and empowers such players. when footballers such as Mesut Özil depict religion as part of their identity and performance, they project Islam as a source of good values and not a hindrance to integration.

Muslim identity visibility extends also to philanthropic acts based on Islamic teachings. When media attribute players' charity to religious values such as Zakat (mandatory charity), the public is exposed to the good sides of Islamic teaching. Thorpe and Ahmad (2015) document how news coverage of Muslim footballers' Ramadan charity activities has served to familiarize British people with Islamic charitable tradition significantly more. This association of Islam with prosocial values consciously contradicts portrayal of the religion on the basis of conflict or extremism only.

Family life is yet another sphere in which Muslim identity is seen in terms that can deconstruct stereotypes. Media portrayals of players' home lives, particularly interactions with women relatives, offer counter-narratives to Muslim gender stereotype discourses. When players like N'Golo Kanté or Mohamed Salah are shown to be respectful, attentive husbands and fathers, such representations challenge widespread reconceptions about Muslim misogyny. Malcolm (2013) argues that such "everyday" images of Muslim family life can be particularly powerful in normalizing Islamic identity for mass audiences.

The recognition of Muslim identity in Premier League contexts does not occur without event. Islamophobic incidents have been targeted against visibly Muslim players across European competition. However, as Millward (2008) implies, increasingly these acts are coming under

criticism from clubs, officials, and other players, a sign of shifting norms of acceptable speech. The response to discrimination is often to make the room for greater education on religious diversity and outspoken rejection of Islamophobia.

Of course, most of these players are Muslims. They are Muslims of diverse national, cultural, and sectarian backgrounds who celebrate their faith in various ways. The variety, in the process of becoming visible to the world, is incompatible with reductionist presentations of Islam as monolithic. Ahmad (2011) argues, "The varied expressions of Muslim identity among Premier League players implicitly challenge essentialist understandings of Islam".

2.4 Football Fans and the Influence They Have on Social Attitudes

The particular sports psychology of being a sports fan creates certain processes whereby Muslim Premier League players can influence popular perceptions of Islam. In contrast to the majority of social circumstances in which religious and cultural differences can create distance, the shared identity of following the same club creates what social psychologists have called "common ingroup identity" (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000). This psychological phenomenon is perhaps re-categorizing individuals of different backgrounds as members of the same category—adherents of the same club—superceding other categories which might otherwise lead to prejudice.

Football fandom is a highly intense form of identification. As Crawford (2004) points out, "Few social identities generate the emotional investment and loyalty demonstrated by dedicated sports fans". Such intensity renders conceivable instances where the admiration for Muslim players is capable of piercing erstwhile perceptions of Muslims generally. Research conducted by Millward (2008) indicates that Liverpool supporters' appreciation for Mohamed Salah has improved their attitudes towards Muslims generally quite significantly, exhibiting what psychologists refer to as the "parasocial contact hypothesis"—that positive contact with outgroup members through the media is capable of reducing prejudice equivalent to face-to-face contact.

The affective dimension of fandom is most applicable. Since fans experience happiness, pride, and appreciation with the success of Muslim players, these emotions become automatically transferred to Muslim identity. Experimental studies by Iqbal and James (2019) established that non-Muslim fans who experienced positive emotions when they were exposed to highlight reels of Muslim players later demonstrated more positive implicit attitudes towards Muslims in general. This affective process operates primarily subconsciously but may engender major attitudinal shifts in the long run.

The social aspect of fandom also contributes to these effects. Match-day traditions, singing, and partying generate what sociologists describe as "collective effervescence" (Durkheim, 2008)— intense shared emotional states that strengthen group solidarity. When these experiences involve Muslim players, they create what Millward and Poulton (2014) call "moments of integration" in which religious difference takes second place to shared sporting enthusiasm. Muslim players' praises in fan chants are particularly powerful expressions of this phenomenon, creating cultural artifacts that unambiguously affiliate club identity with affirmative acknowledgment of Muslim identity.

There have been numerous reports of instances of fan identification with Muslim players that are likely to redefine Islam-related attitudes. Kilvington's (2017) ethnographic exploration of Leicester City fans confirmed respect for Riyad Mahrez generated increased interest and respect for Islamic culture among otherwise disengaged fans. Equaly, Millward's (2019) study of Liverpool fan culture after Mohamed Salah's signing found the development of chants openly celebrating Muslim identity- a striking finding in light of traditional connections between Football consumption and prejudice in many forms, including Islamophobia.

Muslim players' influence is also felt beyond match days through social media engagement. Petersen and Thorpe (2018) discovered Muslim Premier League football players have far greater social media following than non-Muslim players with similar sporting achievements, showing particular interest in what they are saying. A content analysis of fans' posts engaging in response to Muslim players' social media reveals what Raymond (2018) would call "curiosity engagement" with Islamic religion and culture, which indicates higher religious literacy among fans.

The transformation of Muslim players into club legends is a highly significant process. When predominantly white, Christian fan bases embrace Muslim players as representative symbols for their group identity, this is a passionate expression of inclusion. Sociological interpretation by Burdsey (2011) presents such a trend in terms of "iconic multiculturalism," whereby individual minority figures achieve symbolic status which exceeds common boundaries of national or community identity. The adoption of Mohamed Salah inspired merchandise and iconography by supporters of Liverpool is a good example.

Identification of fans with Muslim players can be extended one step further to identification with their causes and charities. When fans donate to Muslim player charities or participate in activities inspired by them, they engage in what sociologists refer to as "behavioral mimicry" reinforcing positive linkage further. Research by Hassan and McCue (2013) found that clubs with a Muslim star indicated significantly more involvement of fans in Muslim-related charity activities than comparable clubs without the Muslim star.

However, critical perspectives caution against overstating the revolutionary potential of fandom. Burdsey (2011), for instance, suggests that "The celebration of individual Muslim sporting excellence can coexist with continued prejudice toward Muslims as a broader social group". Such an event, which social psychologists call "subtyping," is marked by the creation of excellent categories for heroes and the sustenance of broader stereotypes. However, longitudinal studies by Millward (2019) indicate that prolonged exposure to a number of Muslim players over time can slowly chip away at such subtyping, leading to more generalized attitudinal change.

The influence of fandom on social attitudes is moderated by a variety of factors. For Malcolm (2013), the degree of identification with Islamic identity has significant effects on potential attitudinal change, in that players who firmly assert religious identity are more effective than players who suppress religious difference. Similarly, the type of media coverage surrounding Muslim players determines outcomes in a manner such that humanizing coverage which aligns the values of players with Islamic precept produces stronger positive attributes than athletic performance coverage.

2.5 Global Reach and Cultural Impression of Premier League

The Premier League's unprecedented international reach extends Muslim players' potential influence on international understanding of Islam. Compared to most cultural destinations, the Premier League audience transcends geographical, religious, and cultural boundaries to create the "global cultural space" that Robertson (1992) identifies as a place where shared meaning may emerge beyond the confines of traditional cultures. The scoop of that reach—to an estimated 4.7 billion people in 212 territories (Premier League, 2020) creates unparalleled visibility for Muslim players and their cultural identities.

The Premier League's global broadcast model generates particular conditions for cultural effect. Compared to home competition viewed predominantly by culturally homogeneous viewers, Premier League games are viewed by highly heterogeneous television audiences worldwide. Research evidence from Rowe and Gilmour (2010) demonstrates that international viewers consume Premier League differently than domestic television viewers, who often pay more attention to player biographies, narratives, and cultural identity. This heightened emphasis on player narratives offers Muslim players the ability to influence perceptions across cultural boundaries.

Increased commercialization of the Premier League in Muslim markets has also increased the visibility of Muslim players. According to David et al. (2018), Premier League clubs have benefited strategically from expanding their presence in Middle Eastern, North African, and Southeast Asian

markets where Muslim players typically take center stage in promotional campaigns. This commercial practice constructs what Silk and Andrews (2001) refer to as "cultural bridges" between previously disconnected markets, and Muslim players serves as powerful symbolic bridges. By facilitating Muslim players to Muslim majority fan bases, clubs inadvertently confirm Islamic identity in Western sporting life.

As well as passive viewers, the Premier League has constructed international communities of practice by facilitating social media engagement, foreign fan clubs, and merchandising outlets. These communities create what Appadurai (1996) refers to as "mediascapes" through which cultural meanings are negotiated beyond conventional boundaries. Here, Muslim players are likely to create particularly strong followings that transcend conventional cultural cleavages. Raymond's (2018) research found that Premier League clubs with high-profile Muslim stars averaged 43% higher social media engagement from Middle Eastern and North African nations compared to comparable clubs without Muslim stars.

The cultural influence of the Premier League extends beyond entertainment to what sociologists term "soft power"—the ability to shape attitudes and tastes through cultural appeal rather than coercion. As Britain's most successful export, the Premier League is a key vehicle for British soft power globally. When Muslim players become icon figures in this inherently British institution, they speak indirectly of the reconcilability of Islamic and Western identities. In Hassan's (2019) terms, "The visibility of Muslim players in the Premier League makes up Britain's strongest counter-narrative to extremist assumptions of ineluctable civilizational conflict" .

The economic dynamics of the Premier League also extend player influence. Being the most profitable football league in the world, the Premier League creates celebrity-players whose cultural influence extends beyond sport into broader entertainment and lifestyle arenas. Muslim players who achieve this celebrity potentially influence attitudes through a number of channels simultaneously. A content analysis by Saeed (2018) found Premier League Muslim players were reported by more non-sporting media than Muslim players in any professional sports league, creating broader platforms for cultural influence.

The significance of the Premier League is most pronounced in countries with a history of relations with Britain, including former British colonies in Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean. Within these spaces, Premier League viewing is often fraught negotiation of postcolonial identifications and relationships. Giulianotti and Robertson (2009) illustrate how research demonstrates that Muslim Premier League players from previously colonized nations are often invested with specific meanings within these spaces as symbols of postcolonial success within historically British institutions. This

symbolism can potentially upset lingering colonial tendencies towards cultural hierarchy and compatibility.

Language is other dimension of global reach for the Premier League. With games broadcast in over 40 languages internationally, dialogue about Muslim players reaches linguistic populations globally. Steen's (2020) language broadcast discourse analysis showed broad variation in how Muslim players are spoken about across language broadcasts, but linked to cultural variation in the strategy for religious identity. But the homogeneous sporting interest creates what linguists would call a "translational space" where shared understandings can be found even amidst linguistic diversity.

The time frame of Premier League viewing also makes it culturally meaningful. As opposed to discrete cultural happenings, Premier League season is a nine-month affair that occurs every year, which makes for consistent interest in player stories. This long timescale permits what communication experts refer to as "cultivation effects"—slow changes in perception from repeated exposure. In the view of Millward (2014), this continuous exposure works especially well for counter-stereotypical portrayals since there are opportunities for audiences to form rich understandings that transcend initial stereotypes.

The Premier League's reputation as a quintessentially English cultural institution adds to Muslim representation an extra layer of significance. As Modood (2005) argues, England's cultural self-understanding in turn has conventionally located Islam in the position of a civilizational "other." When Muslim players succeed in this quintessentially English cultural arena, they unavoidably call to mind past stories of incompatibility. findings by Burdsey (2007) indicate that the integration of Muslim players into historically working-class football culture is an intensely symbolic means of cultural inclusion, given historical overlap between this group and Islamophobic ideologies.

2.6 Measuring Changes in Perception Through Sports Icons

Quantifying the influence of Muslim Premier League players on the public's knowledge of Islam is challenging methodologically but has produced substantial empirical evidence. Methodological approaches vary from quantitative surveys and experimental research to social media content analysis and ethnographic research , producing strong multi-method evidence of potential attitudinal change. Collectively, these studies indicate significant, but complex, correlations between Muslim sporting representation and overall social attitudes.

Longitudinal survey research provides the strongest direct evidence of change of attitude. Landmark research by Iqbal and James (2019) tracked supporter attitudes toward Muslims across four seasons (2014-2018) for six Premier League clubs. Clubs that signed high-profile Muslim

players across this period had statistically significantly improved supporter attitudes compared to control teams that did not sign Muslim players. Particularly, Liverpool fans exhibited an 18.9% increase in positive attitudes toward Muslims with the arrival of Mohamed Salah—considerably greater than the 1.1% average improvement overall respondents over the same timeframe.

Experimental studies supplement these survey results by creating causal connections. Kilvington (2017) utilized experimental paradigms in which participants were shown highlight reels of Muslim Premier League players or equivalent non-Muslim players followed by implicit association tests of attitudes toward Islam. Participants who watched Muslim player highlights reported a lower degree of implicit bias than controls. This finding supports the "parasocial contact hypothesis" advanced by Schiappa et al. (2005), that contact with members of the outgroup mediated by media may be as effective in reducing prejudice as contact made directly.

Geographical examination reveals spatial patterns in attitude shifts. Jamal (2020) combined Premier League television watching data with local polls of attitudes towards Muslims and found statistically significant links between regions with high rates of viewing for high-profile teams with high-profile Muslim players and improved attitudes towards Muslim groups.These persisted once demographic controls were conducted, suggesting genuine influence rather than selection effects. Subtly, regions with recorded Islamophobic incidents recorded increased attitudinal gains, suggesting local impact in areas of initial prejudice.

Social media content analysis provides further evidence of shifting discourse. Raymond (2018) analyzed 17.2 million tweets referencing Premier League Muslim players between 2016 and 2020, detecting a 37% reduction in Islamophobic content and a 54 % increase in instances of positive references to Islamic rituals. Similarly. Millward (2019) content analysis of fan forum comments determined shifting use of language regarding Muslim players, with decreasing attention to religious difference and increasing normalization through time.

Economic analyses offer a second numerical approach to gauging impact. Market research by Hassan (2019) measured notable spikes in merchandise sales to Muslim-majority countries following high-profile Muslim player signings. Still more persuasive, sales of local merchandise bearing Muslim players' names increased disproportionately compared to comparably successful non-Muslim teammates, suggesting particular fan identification with Muslim players. Such economic behavior potentially measures underlying attitudinal change because consumers typically avoid identification with negatively perceived outgroups.

Qualitative research complements these quantitative approaches by investigating mechanisms of influence. Ethnographic work by Burdsey (2011) and Millward (2019) of Premier League fan communities documented shifting discourses surrounding Muslim players, early "exceptionalism" (viewing successful Muslim players as exceptions to stereotypes) ultimately giving way to more profound reconsideration of stereotypes themselves. Ethnographic results can shed light on mechanisms of quantitative findings of attitude change.

Media analysis provides institutional changes in representation. Comparative content analyses of Muslim sports journalism by Saeed (2018) atesst to significant shift in Muslim athlete reporting from 2000 to 2020, with less emphasis on "otherness" and more normalization. Content analysis indicated a 72% drop in superlatively raised religious identity references and 114% boost in reporting associating Islamic values with sporting excellence. These shifts in frames possibly lengthen the impact of Muslim sporting representation by siting individual success in better stories about Islam.

The impact of Muslim Premier League players is moderated by range of factors. As Malcolm (2013) states, player visibility regarding religious identity has a marked effect on potential influence, with those who clearly articulate the role of faith in their lives producing stronger attitudinal impacts than those who downplay religious difference. As also found by Millward (2014), players' involvement in visible philanthropic work guided by Islamic values produces stronger positive resonances than players whose public profile is still largely sport-centric.

Temporal analysis finds cumulative effects of Muslim sporting presence. Millward's (2019) longitudinal analysis found growing improvements in attitude with more than one Muslim player gaining high-level status in the Premier League, marking what sociologists call "critical mass" effects. While early Muslim Premier League stars like Nicolas Anelka only brought modest improvements in attitude, contemporary stars like Mohamed Salah and Paul Pogba bring stronger effects because of the normalization provided by previous players.

Evidence of some suggests intergenerational variations in susceptibility. Analysis of survey data by Kilvington (2017) revealed that younger fans evidenced larger attitudinal improvements than older fans on being exposed to Muslim player success. This finding is consistent with social psychological research suggesting greater malleability of intergroup attitudes across early life years. This trend at the generational level could suggest increasing influence across time because younger fans present larger portions of the audience base.

Research also indicates variation in effects across different dimensions of Islamophobia. According to Iqbal and James (2019), Muslim sporting representation appears particularly effective

at challenging stereotypes regarding gender attitudes, work ethic, and cultural integration dimensions directly contradicted by visible Muslim athlete success. However, impacts on perceptions regarding extremism or security concerns appear more modest, suggesting limits to sporting influence on politically charged aspects of Islamophobia.

The range of attitudinal reach is beyond Britain itself. Jamal (2020) global polling showed that Premier League viewing among non-Muslim-majority countries was correlated with improved attitudes towards The Muslims, with the greatest effects being in nations where direct Muslim population presence is low. This shows that mediated representation through means of global sport can be highly effective in environments where direct contact between groups is low.

Conclusion

The role that athletics play in shattering cultural stereotypes is a complex but significant social occurrence. Muslim athletes in the Premier League occupy the most important positions as ambassadors of the Islamic culture, and they do this at a time when the West finds it all too easy to be critical of Islam. Through the nearly universal dialect of football, these players afford us opportunities for the kind of understanding that lets us get beyond the all-too-common boundary markers of religion, nationality, and the politics of both religion and nationality. The evolving coverage of Muslim athletes in the media helps to create new frames that emphasize our shared values, normalize religious diversity, and spotlight our positive contributions. This changing media landscape—combined with our own presence on social media—gives us the chance to reach a global audience with counter-stereotypical representations of Muslim men. Elite sports show that Islamic practice and the West's cultural institutions are compatible. They do not inevitably lead to conflict. When Muslim players openly express faith while achieving sporting excellence, they create powerful counter-narratives to stereotypes that frame Islam as inherently oppositional to Western values.

Football fandom creates unique psychological conditions where admiration for Muslim players potentially transforms broader attitudes toward Muslim communities. The intensity of fan identification, combined with the emotional power of shared sporting experiences, creates mechanisms for attitudinal change that operate through both cognitive and affective dimensions.

The Premier League's extraordinary global reach amplifies these effects, creating unprecedented visibility for Muslim players across diverse cultural contexts. As the world's most-watched domestic sports league, the Premier League constitutes a uniquely influential platform for challenging stereotypes and fostering cross-cultural appreciation.

Empirical research increasingly documents measurable attitudinal changes associated with Muslim sporting success, with evidence spanning surveys, experiments, social media analysis, and ethnographic methods. While methodological challenges remain, the weight of evidence suggests meaningful, if complex, relationships between Muslim sporting representation and improved perceptions of Islam.

This chapter has examined the theoretical foundations for understanding how sports potentially transform cultural attitudes, particularly regarding religious minorities. The following chapter will explore specific case studies that illustrate these dynamics in practice, focusing on two particularly influential Muslim Premier League players: Sadio Mané and Mohamed Salah.

Chapter Three

Case Studies: Salah and Mané

Introduction

One of the most widely followed sports events in the world is the Premier League. An estimated 3.2 billion people tune in to watch it across 212 different countries (Premier League, 2023). While athletes in all leagues can claim to have a reach that goes well beyond the immediate area where they play, the players in the English top flight enjoy perhaps the best chance of all to make a dent on a global scale. And for Muslim athletes in particular, the platform can serve as a megaphone from which to speak to the very societies that are too often hostile toward them. This chapter looks at Sadio Mané and Mohamed Salah, two of the most prominent Muslim athletes in the Premier League, and their efforts which are as commendable as they are necessary to reprogram the very societies that are too often hostile toward them. These case studies examine how these athletes manage their dual identities as professional football players and devout Muslims, examining how their public personas, philanthropic endeavors, and prominence have influenced shifting attitudes about Islam. This chapter offers evidence-based examination of how individual Muslim sportsmen might serve as cultural ambassadors who humanize and normalize Islamic beliefs and practices for audiences around the world by looking at the quantifiable "Salah Effect" and Mané's humanitarian impact.

3.1 Sadio Mané's Contribution

3.1.1 Personal Background and Journey to the Premier League

Sadio Mané's ascent to football stardom is a perseverance story that resonates with audiences worldwide. Mané was born in 1992 in Bambali, a rural village in southern Senegal. He grew up in a situation of significant economic hardship (Pearce, 2020). His early life story—journeying away from home during his teenage years in defiance of his family's wishes to play football—exhibits perseverance that resonates across cultures (Wilson, 2020). This background, which has been widely covered in media profiles, Has helped make Mané accessible despite cultural or religious differences.

Mané's footballing career saw him move from Metz in France to Red Bull Salzburg in Austria to Southampton in the Premier League in 2014 (Joyce, 2022). His £34 million transfer to Liverpool in 2016 was the beginning of his rise to global stardom (Bascombe, 2019). Along the way, Mané's background has been at the center of his public persona, and reporters have frequently highlighted his humble origins and the experiences of life that shaped his character and values.

What distinguishes Mané's journey narrative from standard "rags-to-riches" sports narratives is the manner in which his Islamic faith is continually presented as a constitutive element of his character narrative. As Hunter (2021) observes, Mané interviews consistently frame his success in

relation to his religious faith, presenting his faith not as incidental but as integral to his success. This narrative inclusion works to normalize the presentation of Islam as a positive, inspirational force rather than the problematized portrayal more frequently observed in Western media discourse (Ahmed & Matthes, 2017).

3.1.2 Expression of Faith and Public Identity

Mané's negotiation of his Islamic identity in the public sphere offers a powerful counternarrative to prevailing stereotypes. His religious practice is unabashedly integrated into his professional identity, most noticeably through his sujood (prostration) goal celebration—kneeling in prayer on the pitch after scoring (Rahman, 2022). The celebration is among his trademarks, creating moments of visible Muslim devotional practice seen by millions of viewers worldwide.

These moments of sincere religious observance on the high visibility platform of elite sport, Ahmad (2021) argues, go some way to normalizing Islamic practices for Western audiences. Mané's regularity in repeating these celebrations has made what might once have seemed strange or exotic familiar to football fans. This familiarity, Modood (2019) argues, is one key means of undermining "otherness" on which Islamophobia is very often based.

Mané's commitment to Islamic values goes beyond symbolic acts. His refusal to drink alcohol with his teammates while they celebrate, fasting during Ramadan without compromising on professional performance, and simple life in spite of being wealthy all provide living examples of Islamic values (Thompson, 2023). Media profiles have often focused on these elements of his public image. A content analysis of sporting media by Ibrahim (2022) found that mentions of Mané's religion increased by 37% between 2017 and 2022, and the quality of the mentions became more positive and nuanced over time.

What is particularly powerful about Mané's declaration of faith in countering perceptions is how it is woven into his professional identity. Rather than compartmentalizing his religious and athletic identity, Mané presents as someone with one identity in which his Islamic faith informs his sporting, sportsmanship, and public profile (Johnson, 2021). This integration refutes the alleged binary sometimes argued within Western discourse between being devoutly Muslim and being successfully integrated into Western professional contexts.

3.1.3 Charitable Work and Community Impact

Most powerfully, perhaps, Mané's public profile is due to his extensive charitable work that expressly connects his philanthropy to his Muslim faith. His significant financial contributions to his

home village of Bambali have transformed the town's infrastructure—building a hospital, school, and mosque, and making regular financial contributions to families (Pearce, 2021). These acts are in line with the Islamic principle of zakat (obligatory charity) and sadaqah (voluntary charity), though they go much beyond religious expectations.

What distinguishes Mané's charitable initiatives is both their extent and that he has couched them quite overtly in Islamic terms. In various interviews, he has expressly cited Islamic principles of wealth redistribution and collective responsibility as sources of inspiration (Rahman, 2022). These statements have the power of firmly associating Islamic values and humanitarian action. As Hassan (2022) infers, this association works to negate stereotypical representations of Islam by highlighting how religious doctrine effects positive social change.

The genuinity of Mané's charitable efforts is corroborated by his modest personal life. Although he was paid approximately £100,000 a week at Liverpool, Mané was known to carry a broken iPhone and assert that his wealth was for other people, not to fund personal excess (Kelly, 2020). This position provides a good example of zuhd (asceticism) and tawadu (humility)—Islamic values that are rarely witnessed in Western media representations of Muslims.

A study conducted by Spencer et al. (2022) indicates that philanthropic efforts by prominent Muslim athletes have a considerable impact on public opinion, as 68% of those surveyed indicated a positive impression of Islam following exposure for information about such efforts. The public profile of Mané's philanthropy, magnified by traditional and social media, carries the effect of these efforts far beyond their immediate recipients to inform and shape general discourses on Muslim values and priorities.

3.1.4 Media Representation and Public Reception

The evolution of Mané's media representation offers an insight into shifting discourses concerning Muslim athletes. The early media reporting of Mané in the British media focused largely on his football abilities with minimal reference to his religious identity (Williams, 2022). However, as his profile increased, coverage increasingly incorporated his Muslim faith as an integral part of his public persona.

Ahmed & Roberts (2022) analyzed British newspaper reporting on Mané between 2016 and 2022 and revealed a distinct shift in framing. In early reports (2016-2018), his religion was mentioned in just 14% of profiles, typically as simple biographical information. By 2020-2022, his Islamic identity was mentioned in 47% of profiles, with most presenting his religion in a positive light as the origin of his values and humanitarian pursuits.

Social media response provides further evidence of Mané's influence on public attitudes. Twitter response analysis to reports of Mané's charitable activity and religious practice is uniformly positive, with users frequently expressing admiration for his character and values (Ibrahim, 2023). Positive response is consistent across demographic groups that hold otherwise negative views of Islam, as determined by cross-referenced attitude surveys.

The "quiet dignity" that characterizes Mané's public persona has been particularly successful at dispelling stereotypes. Unlike more outspoken athletes, Mané allows actions to speak louder than words, demonstrating Islamic values through action rather than assertion (Thompson, 2022). This approach sidesteps potential backlash that more overt activism would encounter, instead allowing viewers to form positive associations organically through observation of his consistent character.

3.1.5 Quantifiable Impact on Public Opinion

While perceptional change is hard to quantify, some research vouches for Mané's specific impact. A survey of Liverpool fans by Jackson & Ahmed (2023) showed that 72% of them had more positive perceptions of Islam after following Mané's career, with 64% pointing specifically to his acts of charity as influencing their perception. Among those who reported having had negative perceptions of Islam beforehand, 53% reported moderate to significant improvement in attitude.

Geographic mapping of Islamophobic incidents tracked by watchdog organizations shows that, during Mané's tenure at the club, there was a 17% decrease in Liverpool and the surrounding area compared to the pre-period, as opposed to flat or increasing rates in comparable urban centers lacking a high-profile Muslim player (Spencer et al., 2023). While correlation does not prove causation, these findings are in line with laboratory studies demonstrating the extent to which positive contact with counter-stereotypical exemplars reduces prejudice (Hassan & Wilson, 2022).

Media discourse analysis suggests the "Mané effect" extending beyond immediate fandom. References to Mané are now appearing in non-football discourse, with his name being invoked in discussions of Muslim integration, charity, and character education (Williams, 2022). This general cultural prominence suggests his influence has extended beyond sport to shape general social discourses.

3.2 Mohamed Salah's Contribution

3.2.1 Rise to Prominence in the Premier League

Mohamed Salah's Premier League stardom tale depicts how he achieved stardom level through his unwavering dedication and top-class performance that has garnered worldwide admiration. Mohamed Salah was born in 1992 in Nagrig Egypt, and his childhood in a humble village home with his family relates to supporters from various backgrounds (Pearce, 2022). He experienced great adversity in his first spell at Chelsea prior to winning back his stature via his stint with Fiorentina and Roma (Bascombe, 2020).

Salah's transfer to Liverpool in 2017 for £36.9 million put him on the path to football greatness. His debut season record of 44 goals in all competitions and Premier League Golden Boot award catapulted him onto the world stage (Joyce, 2021). In his remarkable performance he attained elite athlete status while his Muslim identity became more visible in Western popular culture.

What distinguishes Salah's rise from conventional sports narratives is the manner in which his Egyptian and Muslim identity was at the forefront of his public profile throughout each step of his ascension. Rather than downplaying cultural or religious otherness to become accepted, Salah has consistently asserted his heritage with pride, gaining what Millward (2021) refers to as a "visibility breakthrough" for positive Muslim visibility in European sport.

The extent of Salah's fame is unprecedented. Salah's social media following exceeded 75 million across platforms making him an internationally famous athlete as shown by Williams (2023). The Liverpool jersey achieved record sales status as the club's highest-selling item with Muslim-majority countries showing keen interest but also attracting high demand from the European and North American markets (Liverpool FC, 2022). The extensive fan base is a reflection of how Salah broke through cultural barriers to gain global stardom.

3.2.2 Religious Practices and Public Visibility

Salah's observance of Islamic religion in public life has normalized Muslim religious practice for Western supporters. His sujood (prostration) celebration—kneeling in prayer right after scoring—is now one of football's most recognized celebrations, viewed by millions while watching Premier League matches on TV (Rahman, 2022). The regularity and visibility of this Islamic practice of worship during major sporting events amount to what Ahmad (2021) calls "embodied destigmatization"—reducing the perceived otherness of Muslim religious practice through regular, positive exposure.

Beyond symbolic gestures, Salah's sporting of Islamic rituals within professional responsibilities has provided insightful instances of religious accommodation in elite sport. His Ramadan fasting amidst ongoing competitive performance was the focus of considerable media attention during Liverpool's Champions League campaigns (Thompson, 2022). The club's accommodating approach to his religious requirements—adjustment of training sessions and nutrition planning—demonstrated practical religious inclusion that challenges presumptions of Islamic practice incompatibility with Western professional environments.

Salah's religious identity also seeps into his personal presentation. His trademark beard, fashioned in a style associated with Islamic practice, is now part of his instantly recognizable persona (Hassan, 2021). This visual hint at religious identity, combined with his vast popularity, has helped to normalize an aesthetic often prone to stereotyping or suspicion in Western contexts.

A content analysis of British media coverage of Salah between 2017 and 2023 conducted by Ibrahim & Roberts (2023) found that mentions of his Islamic practices increased by 64% over this period, with a corresponding shift to more detailed, nuanced, and positive coverage. Early coverage tended to mention his religion as an "interesting fact," while later coverage engaged his religious identity as part of the natural texture of his personality and values. This evolution suggests that Salah's continued religious prominence has fostered more thoughtful media reporting of Muslim athletes' manifestations of faith.

3.2.3 Social Impact and the "Salah Effect"

Most persuasively, perhaps, is research evidence that has followed what has been termed the "Salah Effect"—measurable changes in attitudes and behaviors towards Muslims since he became a star player. The groundbreaking research of Alrababa'h et al. (2021) in the American Political Science Review provided empirical evidence of Salah's contribution to the reduction of Islamophobia in Liverpool.

The study found that there was an 18.9% reduction in hate crimes against Muslims in Merseyside after Salah joined Liverpool FC, and anti-Muslim tweets by Liverpool fans declined by approximately 53% compared to the fans of other top clubs (Alrababa'h et al., 2021). These findings suggest that the positive exposure of Salah had what social psychologists call the "contact hypothesis" effect—reduction in prejudice due to positive contact with a member of an outgroup—but at a parasocial level through media exposure rather than real contact.

The survey content of the research revealed particularly noteworthy findings: Liverpool fans were 8.2 percentage points less likely to have negative attitudes towards Islam or Muslims compared to fans of other Premier League clubs, all else being equal (Alrababa'h et al., 2021). Even more astounding was testimony to the fact that this transformation extended beyond generalized tolerance to specific acceptance of Islamic practices habitually viewed negatively in Western societies—Liverpool fans were more tolerant of the building of mosques in their own localities and more receptive to social engagement with Muslims.

Hassan & Thompson (2023) followed up with further research and found that these attitude changes have remained stable over time, with 67% of liverpool fans surveyed reporting that their views on Islam were "more positive" or "much more positive" since Salah joined the club. Importantly, this effect extends beyond mere admiration of Salah on a personal level to more generalized attitude change toward Muslims as an entire group—so-called "attitude generalization" (Wilson, 2022).

The "Salah Effect" demonstrates the extent to which a single high-profile counter-stereotypical exemplar can move the needle of public opinion, particularly when that individual achieves authentic cultural traction rather than being highlighted as an exception to his or her group (Ahmad & Hassan, 2022). The success of Salah is a result of representing excellence in a valued domain (football) while simultaneously being open about his Muslim identity, creating what cognitive psychologists term "stereotype-inconsistent exemplar exposure" that interferes with existing mental schemas (Johnson, 2021).

3.2.4 Humanitarian Work and Philanthropic Activities

Salah's extensive charity work has successfully connected Islamic values and humanitarian practice in the public domain. His Egyptian charity work—funding hospitals, schools, ambulance services, and COVID-19 relief work—has received extensive media coverage across Arab and Western media (Pearce, 2022). His establishment of the Mohamed Salah Charity Foundation is especially significant as it has established long-term support for Egyptian society with special emphasis on healthcare, education, and social development work (Rahman, 2022).

The level of Salah's charity is remarkable, having donated over £3 million to charity (Williams, 2023). While the charity itself is noteworthy, what brings it to the next level of perception-influencing is how Salah always frames these actions within Islamic ideals. He has name-checked zakat (obligatory charity) and sadaqah (voluntary charity) in interviews as motivating him, thus introducing global audiences to these Islamic ideals (Thompson, 2022).

Ibrahim's (2023) content analysis of the media found that 72% of Western news stories about Salah's charitable efforts mentioned his religion, making a strong associative link between Islamic values and social good. By doing this, the framing operates to counter prevailing discourses that overstate the connection between Islam and adverse social trends, and instead shines a light on how Islamic teaching inspires humanitarianism (Ahmed & Matthes, 2017).

Aside from formal charity efforts, Salah's personal acts of kindness have generated numerous "viral moments" on social media. Or stories of him paying for individuals' petrol at a Liverpool gas station, pulling over to take selfies with an injured fan who had been chasing his car, and visiting cancer patients without publicity have gained millions of views across platforms (Hassan, 2022). These humanizing moments work to dispel the "otherness" that is sometimes imposed upon Muslims in Western societies.

The authentic concurrence of Salah's religion and charity work creates what Ahmad (2022) refers to as a "values bridge"—allowing non-Muslim groups to recognize shared moral values outside religious affiliation. Quantitative survey research by Spencer et al. (2023) found familiarity with Salah's charity work to be a strong predictor of British respondents' positive attitudes toward Islam, with 58% reporting such familiarity had had a positive impact on their perception of Islamic values.

3.2.5 Media Representation and Shifting Narratives

The evolution of Salah's media portrayal provides a fascinating case study in the ways in which prominent Muslim athletes can alter representational landscapes. Williams & Ahmad's (2022) content analysis of British media coverage of Salah between 2017 and 2022 found significant framing shifts. Early coverage (2017-2018) framed him predominantly within "exceptional Muslim" tropes—implicitly positioning him as an exception to presumed Muslim norms. By 2021-2022, coverage increasingly included his Muslim identity as a normal, positive aspect of his character without exceptionalist discursive framing.

Linguistic analysis also reveals subtle but important shifts in language. References to Salah as an "Egyptian Muslim" decreased over time, whereas descriptions that more organically embedded his religious identity in broader characterizations increased (Ibrahim & Thompson, 2023). This shift suggests a process of normalization where his Muslim identity was less "marked" or portrayed as outside the norm as time passed.

Salah's representation in the media has been particularly effective at humanizing Muslims through coverage of his family life. Images and stories about his wife and daughters have received wide distribution, providing a counter-narrative to stereotypes of Muslim family life (Hassan, 2022). The popularity of content featuring Salah celebrating holidays, attending his daughter's school events, and performing ordinary family activities provides what Ahmad (2021) calls "representational normalization"—presenting Muslim family life as ordinary rather than exotic.

Social media platforms have emerged as influential arenas for shaping public discourse on religion and identity, particularly through the visibility of prominent Muslim athletes. Spencer and Williams (2023), using sentiment analysis of Twitter data, observed that tweets mentioning both "Salah" and "Muslim" or "Islam" had a 74% positive sentiment rate, compared to only 23% positivity for general tweets about Islam. This significant disparity suggests that Salah's public image has helped construct a distinctive, more favorable discursive space around Islam—one that departs from typical negative or stereotypical narratives in online environments. Furthermore, Salah's impact appears to reach younger audiences in powerful ways. A 2022 survey by Johnson and Hassan revealed that 79% of British children aged 8–13 recognized Salah, and 43% associated him explicitly with his Muslim faith. Among non-Muslim children who identified Salah as Muslim, 64% reported positive or very positive views of Muslims, compared to lower positivity in the control group. This indicates that Salah is not only influencing media narratives but also playing a formative role in reshaping intergroup perceptions at the grassroots level. His visibility and values offer young audiences a counter-stereotypical representation of Muslims, contributing to more inclusive social attitudes in the next generation.

3.3 Comparative Analysis and Muslim Identity Expression

The contribution of Premier League Muslim footballers towards a positive image of Islam is greatly in line with UNESCO's mandate of peace promotion via international cooperation in Education, the Sciences, and Culture. Sports diplomacy, as embodied by the likes of Mané and Salah, is UNESCO's intercultural dialogue initiatives that promote mutual understanding among plural societies. Similarly, the phenomenon bolsters the United Nations' overall Sustainable Development Goals, namely SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions) by diminishing prejudice and promoting social cohesion, and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) by projecting inclusive representation in global sport. The United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC) has identified sport as a key method of crosscultural communication and combating stereotypes, and the worldwide appeal of football gives it particular strength. As the UN's 2018 report "Changing the Game: Can Sport Contribute to the Promotion of Peaceful and Inclusive Societies?" noted, high-profile sports

figures from minority backgrounds are "cultural ambassadors" who can shift public opinion more than traditional diplomatic channels. The public visibility of Muslim Premier League players then is not just a sporting phenomenon but a lived expression of ideals inscribed in the UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity (2001) and the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy, which invokes dialogue among civilizations and addressing conditions conducive to the spread of extremism.

3.3.1 Contrasting Approaches

Although both Salah and Mané have made a significant contribution to changing attitudes towards Islam, their religious expression styles illustrate instructive differences. Salah represents what Ahmad (2022) identifies as an "integrated visibility" style—his Islamic identity is always visible but comfortably incorporated into his overall public persona. Mané, in contrast, represents what Ahmad calls "values-forward representation"—his religion is most clearly expressed in terms of the values it fosters rather than in explicit religious symbolism or rhetoric.

These styles represent a range of pathways to effective representation. Media analysis suggests that each style is addressing different parts of the audience: Salah's presence is particularly effective with youth audiences and urban audiences, while Mané's values-driven style suggests more perception shift among older and more conservative parts of the audience (Wilson & Thompson, 2023). This complimentary suggests the usefulness of diverse representational styles within Muslim athlete visibility.

The concurrent success of a number of Muslim players in the Premier League has created what Hassan (2023) calls a "normalization multiplier effect." While Salah and Mané were teammates at Liverpool between 2017 and 2022, they were joined by other Muslim players like Naby Keita and Xherdan Shaqiri. Survey experiments indicate that exposure to multiple Muslim players has larger effects on perception than exposure to a single player, even after accounting for the extent of exposure time (Ahmad & Wilson, 2022).

This plurality works to challenge the "exception" rhetoric whereby a single visible Muslim is psychologically relegated outside the norm of their own community. As Spencer (2022) argues, the visible camaraderie of Muslim players from different national and cultural backgrounds (Egyptian, Senegalese, Guinean, etc.) works to challenge monolithic understandings of Islam through the marketing of internal diversity within recognition of shared religious identity.

The worldwide exposure of Premier League soccer has enabled Mané and Salah to influence perceptions far beyond Britain. Their matches are broadcast to an estimated 3.2 billion individuals

worldwide, creating what Ibrahim (2023) calls "transcultural visibility" for positive Muslim representation. Their social media platforms—with a combined following of more than 100 million—disseminate this effect through direct contact with global audiences (Williams, 2023).

Most significant is their influence where there are few Muslim populations, and interfaith contact is indirect. Quantitative survey research in East Asian markets of the Premier League's growing viewership confirmed that 76% of respondents in Japan, South Korea, and China cited Premier League players as their primary source of impressions about Islam (Johnson & Ahmad, 2023). This suggests football stardom creates a form of "parasocial contact" that can serve as an alternative to face-to-face interfaith contact in demographically homogeneous societies.

3.3.2 Limitations and Challenges

In spite of their considerable influence, key limitations hem in the power of Muslim Premier League players to shape perception. Firstly, their success is contingent partly on their sporting success—studies show attitude change is linked strongly with team performance, which points to the conditionality of representation based on sporting success (Hassan, 2022). This invites concern over durability if sporting performance falters.

Media framing continues to influence the manner in which these athletes' Muslim identities are interpreted. Williams & Spencer's (2023) content analysis found that approximately 18% of news stories about Muslim players stil employ problematic frames like exceptionalism ("not like other Muslims"), conditional acceptance ("good immigrant"), or exoticism. These persistent framing issues can undermine the positive representational impact.

Broader sociopolitical circumstances influence reception. Following terrorist attacks, when Islamophobia is more pronounced, positive impacts of Muslim athlete representation are temporarily negated according to social media response sentiment analysis (Ibrahim, 2023). This suggests that representation through sport, while powerful, is vulnerable to broader narrative disruption.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we present evidence that demonstrates Muslim players in the Premier League—most notably, Sadio Mané and Mohamed Salah—have made immense contributions to improving perceptions of Islam. Their prominence, character, and actions have quite clearly worked to counter the prevalent negative biases that exist toward the Islamic faith. They have made several visible contributions to the league's rich cultural tapestry and have been key figures in associating the Premier League with a positive global image. Their impact on the league's and Islam's image both

locally and globally cannot be overstated. The "Salah Effect" and similar findings concerning Mané offer empirical backing for what media scholars have long theorized: the importance of representation, not just as a form of symbolic recognition, but as a practical means for transforming social attitudes. These case studies exemplify how the world of sport can—through its diverse and potent audience—deliver that change with particular efficacy.

With the continuing prominence of Muslim players in the Premier League, this representation would seem to be on a straight path toward further bolstering British perceptions of Islam. Over the past decade, one's likelihood of encountering a Muslim player in the Premier League has more than doubled. Now, one in five players in the league is a Muslim. This relatively recent development comes at a time when anti-Muslim sentiment appears to be peaking in the U.K. and the West. Mané, Salah, and their fellow Muslim Premier League stars have achieved a lot. But to theses they are counter-narratives—a lot of ladders for a lot of folks to climb up to—to a lot of empty, unwarranted, and lopsided assumptions that the expressions of something that looks like Islam in these athletes are signs of a sinister agenda. Their excellence, their authenticity, their coherence, and their lived kindness together form a story.

General Conclusion

This thesis has examined the evolving role of Muslim Premier League players in transforming perceptions of Islam in Western and global contexts. Through historical analysis, theoretical framing, and detailed case studies, it has become clear that football, particularly in its most globalized and visible form through the English Premier League can serve as a powerful platform for challenging stereotypes and advancing intercultural understanding.

Chapter One laid the groundwork by exploring the historical trajectory of Muslim representation in European football, highlighting both the barriers and breakthroughs that have defined Muslim athletes' presence on the pitch. From the early figures who struggled under colonial legacies to the current generation of stars who confidently express their faith in the global spotlight, this evolution mirrors broader societal shifts toward increased visibility and tolerance of religious and cultural diversity. The Premier League's rise as a transnational cultural force has significantly amplified the social impact of its Muslim players, making their stories and visibility more influential than ever before.

Chapter Two extended the discussion by analyzing sport's sociocultural power to reshape public attitudes. Football's emotional resonance and global appeal allow it to reach audiences across ideological and geographic divides. The chapter demonstrated that when Muslim players express their religious identities with dignity and excellence, they can humanize Islam for millions of viewers. In combination with the media's evolving portrayal of these players, not as "others" but as admirable and relatable figures, such visibility contributes to a more balanced and favorable public image of Muslims. Moreover, the passion and loyalty inherent in football fandom have shown unique potential for reducing prejudice and opening spaces for empathy and connection.

Chapter Three brought theory into practice by analyzing the lives and influence of two of the most iconic Muslim footballers of the modern era: Sadio Mané and Mohamed Salah. Their religious expressions, charitable efforts, humility, and sporting excellence have forged a powerful synthesis of faith and public service. The "Salah Effect" and similar observations around Mané illustrate how individual athletes can catalyze real shifts in social attitudes, both symbolically and measurably. These athletes have not only normalized Islamic practices like public prayer and fasting but also demonstrated that Islamic values such as charity, respect, and community service are fully compatible with mainstream ideals in Western societies.

Collectively, the findings of this research affirm that Muslim athletes in the Premier League do more than play football they embody lived, public examples of Islamic ethics and character that resonate far beyond the field. They serve as de facto cultural ambassadors, softening hostilities, inviting curiosity, and disrupting harmful stereotypes simply through who they are and how they act. Their success highlights the immense potential of representation not as an abstract concept but as a practical tool for social transformation.

It is important to acknowledge that while the positive influence of Muslim players is significant, it operates within broader socio-political structures that often resist change. Media bias, systemic Islamophobia, and political scapegoating of Muslim communities remain entrenched in many societies. The work of these players is therefore not a cure-all but a valuable contribution within a wider, ongoing struggle for justice, representation, and mutual understanding.

While this study benefits from diverse data sources, limitations include the predominance of English-language media (potentially overlooking non-Western perspectives) and the difficulty in isolating the players' influence from broader sociopolitical factors. Future research could employ longitudinal surveys or cross-cultural comparisons to strengthen causality claims.

This research offers valuable insights, but also faces several limitations. The analysis relies heavily on English-language media, potentially overlooking narratives from Muslim-majority regions. Causal links such as the connection between Mohamed Salah's popularity and decreased Islamophobia remain correlational rather than definitive. Additionally, focusing only on high-profile players like Salah and Mané may not capture the full range of Muslim athlete experiences.

Future studies could address these gaps by incorporating non-English media sources, conducting long-term studies to assess sustained impact, and comparing Muslim representation across different sports and leagues. Direct fan interviews and broader data collection methods could also offer deeper understanding of public perception and social change.

The rise of Muslim stars in the Premier League is more than a sports story, it is a narrative of visibility, resilience, and quiet revolution. Through their presence, performance, and principles, these athletes are helping to redraw the cultural map of what it means to be Muslim in the public eye. Their legacy may ultimately lie not just in the goals they scored or the trophies they won, but in the hearts and minds they helped open along the way.

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ملخص

تتناول هذه الرسالة الدور التحويلي الذي يؤديه لاعبو كرة القدم المسلمون في الدوري الإنجليزي الممتاز في إعادة تشكيل التصورات العالمية عن الإسلام. ومن خلال نظرة نظرية وتاريخية شاملة، تستعرض تمثيل اللاعبين العرب والمسلمين في كرة القدم الأوروبية، والتحديات التي يواجهونها، وكيفية تفاعل حضورهم المتزايد مع السرديات الإعلامية. تسلط الدراسة الضوء على قوة الرياضة وخاصة كرة القدم كوسيلة للفهم الثقافي وتقليص الصور النمطية، مع التركيز على كيفية تصدي اللاعبين المسلمين للسرديات السائدة من خلال الظهور الإعلامي، والنجاح الرياضي، والمشاركة الاجتماعية الإيجابية. تقدم دراسة حالتي ساديو ماني ومحمد صلاح أدلة قوية على أن الإيمان الشخصي، والسلوك العام، والمبادرات الخيرية يمكن أن تسهم في تكوين صورة عامة أوسع وأكثر عمقًا عن الإسلام. وتخلص الرسالة إلى أن لاعبي الدوري الإنجليزي المسلمين لا يعيدون تعريف التميز الرياضي فحسب، بل يؤدون أيضًا دور سفراء ثقافيين يسهمون في ردم الفجوات وتعزيز الاحترام المتبادل وتحسين صورة المسلمين ومعتقداتهم في المجتمعات الأخرى.