

1. Executive summary

This report was commissioned to explore the identity profile and cultural experiences of young Pakistani and Bangladeshi people aged 16 to 25 in Birmingham, UK. While there is significant overlap and correlation between them, this research intended to draw attention to three main conversations; how young Pakistani and Bangladeshi people identify (to form an identity profile), how they feel about their inherited culture, and how they feel about the culture in Birmingham – with particular reference to the arts. The findings are to be used to inform the audience development plan for Transforming Narratives, and help shape the project in how it engages with young people and contemporary cultural practices going forward. It is worth noting that there were limitations on the research, which in turn have impacted the breadth of the findings. Most significantly, the research time frame coincided with Ramadhan, a religious month in Islam involving fasting and general withdrawal from non-essential day to day activities to prioritise worship and spiritual practice. Much of the Pakistani and Bangladeshi community within Birmingham are Muslim and were observing this month, severely limiting both initial recruitment, and then how available participants were to be involved. Likewise, the time frame coincided with exam term and/or the end of the academic year at most educational institutions, reducing avenues of outreach within these settings. Recommendations on how to expand on this research with reduced limitations will be provided in the methodology section (2).

Within the findings, the concept of an identity profile proved difficult to conclude due to the huge diversity amongst the sample group, as well as the ways in which participants conceptualised and understood what identity meant to them. However, there were some fundamental commonalities amongst young people across the board. These include:

- Their country of origin being regarded as 'home' or 'back home' regardless of how often they had visited
- A duality to their identity; all participants referred to themselves as some variation of British-Asian and this served as a broader motif throughout discussions where people reported to have grown up 'between two cultures' or find themselves navigating feeling a mixture of both and/or neither
- Their mother tongue being seen as a vital part of their identity, with a profound sense of loss where it has been both entirely or partially replaced with English
- Feelings of poor representation in Birmingham (and wider British) arts and culture; many felt they were only represented through stereotypes in the few instances that they are
- A desire for 'every day' representations of people from their community 'living their lives', emphasis on the ordinary as opposed to much of the hyperbole seen either via comical stereotypes or negative tropes
- A strong desire for historical and educational narratives on Pakistan and Bangladesh
- An overarching want to be culturally visible, in an accurately representative way that doesn't 'Other' them, but instead for the dual purpose of allowing others to relate to them, and for them to inform their own sense of self
- There is a severe deficit of trust in external organisations and institutions and their capacity, ability and desire to deliver any of the above

Although the findings provide information for many of the specifics of the brief, participants (and lack thereof) also organically raised many points that challenged the direction of the research, and this has been included within this report on the basis that it is invaluable to the aims and outcomes specified. Primarily, the lack of interest in the project and associated research provides huge insight into the nature of attitudes amongst young Pakistani and Bangladeshi people in regards to engaging with specific projects, particularly those attempting to explore identity and culture. Informal discussions with those from the sample demographic who did not wish to participate, plus wider conversations, researcher observations, and secondary research have been used to expand on how and why understanding non-participation is critical to the project going forward. Recommendations on how to incorporate this research in to developing the project are provided at the end of the report.

2. Methodology

While accessibility was considered from the very initial point of carrying out the research, upon identifying the time scale and non-participation limitations to participant recruitment and engagement, the formats of collecting data were broadened to essentially allow any form of sharing stories and opinions, with the intention of gathering as much data as possible. Calls for participants were made on Instagram and shared amongst/by contacts on other social media platforms

such as Twitter and Facebook. Various personal and professional contacts were made aware of the project and research, via email and in person, with details being shared and distributed amongst their networks in turn. Islamic, Pakistan and Bangladesh societies were contacted at several universities within Birmingham, however only one of these chose to cascade the information down to their members.

An online survey was created with a combination of tick box and open questions, allowing for both quantitative and qualitative data. Two focus groups were also recruited, however, turnout was lower than anticipated with many people cancelling at short notice. One focus group was held with 10 participants, and lasted around two hours. It provided much of the broader discussion material, and substantiated wider researcher observations on current trends and approaches to reshaping narratives. The option of personal interviews, either face to face or via email or voice notes, was also offered to all those who showed interest in participating in a focus group – while several agreed to participate, and despite prompts and reminders, only three returned results. These provided very in-depth insights into personal experiences with culture, and although not done so in this report, could also form the basis of case studies if necessary.

Ongoing researcher observation and awareness of mainstream discourse in the target sample group have also been drawn on in the analysis of the data, particularly due to the low levels of engagement and lack of trust in the research and project. These deductions and hypotheses will be addressed in the observation section (5).

As a recommendation, it would be advised to recruit some form of focus or steering group of young people for the duration of the project if there is the capacity to do so: they are very much at the forefront of conversations on narratives and will be the most likely to bring forward radical and transformative ideas due to the speed at which they are experiencing social change. Alternatively, ongoing research that correlates with seasons where most participation is likely – during the academic year for example - would allow for much more representative data and a potentially higher turnout of people willing to engage. The lack of awareness and sensitivity to the time frame and concurrence with other priorities was specifically noted by many of the potential and actual participants.

3. Findings

a. Profile

All participants identified as some variation of British Asian; British Pakistani, British Bangladeshi, British South Asian. One person identified as Punjabi and one person identified as Muslim, but later expanded on this as his internal identity as opposed to his 'external' British Asian identity. Participants explained that the British comes first linguistically, as they were born here and so this takes precedence over the label of being Asian. Participants came from varying backgrounds and geographical locations both here in Birmingham and in regards to their countries of origin. In addition to this, during the conversations around identity, participants engaged in debate over what it means to have an identity in the first place. A range of views were discussed, primarily focusing on whether identity is an expression of how we feel about our self, or how other people perceive and label us. This fluidity in understanding identity reflects wider conversations that many young people are having in negotiating what it means to exist individually and within society, regarding identity as much more dynamic and in flux, than static or fixed. Different forms of these conflicted feelings and understandings about identity underpinned much of the research findings.

b. Themes, points of interest and contemporary culture

Conflicted identity featured as a point of interest in many participants' answers. Many reported that they felt they "lived double lives", either in the familial sense of family and/or cultural expectations conflicting with Western values, or in the form of code switching between their inherited culture and the wider Western culture. Identity was often connected to the social and/or political climate, both in regards to belonging to British society and Asian communities, and the respective attitudes and values. One participant reported that she doesn't always "feel necessarily connected or part of the Asian community". Other participants echoed this not only within their own South Asian communities, but also in wider British society and examples that were given for this related back to representation. Many of the young male participants referenced the narratives of themselves that often portray brown men as 'groomers or terrorists' in the news, and how the media often casts them in similar roles. Lack of trust and interest in external attempts at addressing narratives was prevalent in discussions, both within the research and in more informal conversations. As a direct response to this, it can be observed that self-created spaces and works, as well as the creation of networks with peers, are

increasingly appearing to create the narratives young people wish to see. There are three main themes that were highlighted within the research, and are also often demonstrated in the work currently being created and shared by young people:

- **Visibility and networking.** All participants want to see relatable narratives, not only to feel connected to the different aspects of their identity, but also to help form them.
- **Diversity in narratives.** Seeing different stories of people living their lives rather than relying on tropes and stereotypes.
- **Accurate historical and educational representation,** especially in regards to the role Britain has played in South Asia, and the experience of migration.

There is also a desire for more participatory events, like (food) festivals and workshops, to celebrate different cultures, as well as allowing for networking and addressing core issues that young people face in regards to narratives around and about them.

c. Explore their relationship with the traditional cultures in their background and their feelings around those inherited cultures

- I. Whilst all participants reported that they appreciated the diversity and multiculturalism in the population of Birmingham, it was felt this was not represented in the culture. Most participants cited that there wasn't much going on culturally in Birmingham, or that if there was, they weren't aware of it.
- II. All participants connected their relationship to the culture of their country of origin, with their sense of self, particularly their 'roots'/where they came from, and how they connect to their family. They repeatedly referred to their country of origin as home, however it was evident that perceptions of Pakistan or Bangladesh are not necessarily rooted in factual or accurate information. Instead, it appears that a dissociated and often romanticised imagination of the country is frequently used, particularly to contextualize and compare issues believed to be prevalent in or unique to Britain, furthering the dichotomy between British/Asian identity. It is important to note that these imaginations are often very far removed from the realities of the country, particularly in cases where young people had not visited but still felt they had inherited an understanding of 'the culture' – minimal distinction is made between this experience of South Asian culture in Britain and how it may be vastly different in form and movement to that within the country of origin. Some relate their relationship to the culture of Pakistan or Bangladesh to an appreciation for what their ancestors and/or parents went through in order for them to have the lives they have now. One participant suggested that seeing examples of this facilitates an ability to cope with the erasure of identity that she felt came with growing up within the diaspora: "I love seeing representations from back home, and acknowledgement of the roots we've come from and our mothers and grandmothers and our fathers and grandfathers and our brothers and our sisters, and that acknowledgement of where we've come from... whereas a lot of growing up has been trying to erase that and be as white as possible because it wasn't cool to be anything but white".
- III. All participants felt there was nothing on offer in Birmingham; some acknowledged it may be that they didn't know if things were on, and also that the things that are offered potentially don't appeal to them. Some participants said they would like to experience more of the imagery and visual representation of their 'homeland' i.e, photographic exhibitions of nature. Archives are very popular at the moment (as measured by social media activity) which connects back to identity and narrative formation outside of the imposed and internalized ones many British diasporas are exposed to growing up. Many participants suggested that they would like to share their culture with others, especially through the aspects they derive joy from (food, festivities and fashion etc.).
- IV. Most people very much enjoy the diversity in Birmingham. Reference was made to how there are often large groups of minority ethnicities, and participants reported feeling safe growing up, and protected from the direct racism they have experienced elsewhere as they got older. However, this also provided the basis for what they often disliked about Birmingham too, with the insular and unintegrated aspects creating a sense of 'people being in each other's business' – particularly in the case of young Pakistani and Bangladeshi women who were disproportionately aware of and/or affected by judgement from their wider communities. One participant who is currently studying in another city stated that "I don't think I would live [in Birmingham] now because I feel like I live a double life and I feel like I

have certain liberties and freedoms and things I can do with my time when I'm not living in my parents' house... but I also love going back to my parents' house, living that life, living the life that they want me to live and being that type of daughter who's always there, I think it's beautiful and I love doing it for a short time but I don't think it's good for my mental health". This conflict in values appeared to manifest in different forms throughout the data, both in regards to inherited culture and that of being British.

d. Engagement in and with arts and culture

i. Due to the lack of interest demonstrated via answer and non-participation, it appears that to explore what drives the demand for cultural attendance and appreciation, it must be first understood why there is such little drive at present. An inherited cultural relationship to the arts, combined with restrictions and limitations particularly in regards to how accessible they are institutionally as well as socially, featured prominently in participants' explanations of why they don't engage very much in and with the arts and culture. One participant shared that she had been estranged from her parents due to pursuing arts and not conforming to a 'more worthwhile path', and another said that she "just can't really justify or legitimize" her creative career to her parents. In unpacking wider sociopolitical contexts, through observations and secondary research, there is a recognition that the arts are often considered a low priority due to the focus on immediate needs of security and safety in immigrant communities, tying in to intracultural conversations and the pressures of capitalism and austerity; many participants just said they often have "better or more important things to do". However, several participants also suggested that these attitudes could begin to be challenged directly through the arts and narratives portrayed by them, if done sensitively and correctly.

ii. Despite the low levels of engagement in and within arts and culture in Birmingham, participants expressed a keen interest in various cultural forms. The most popular ways of engaging with South Asian culture included movies and TV (82%), melas (70%) and music (64%). The most common way of engaging with the above / contemporary culture in general, is through social media (Instagram, Twitter and Youtube) as it is considered accessible and easy to navigate and curate individual interests.

iii. In conclusion, obstacles to engaging with culture appeared to be much more conceptual than physical. i.e., cultural discourse around the arts amongst South Asian communities, as well as perceiving projects such as these as having 'agendas' against the communities they target, and/or focused attention from larger institutions correlating to a sense of suspicion and surveillance. There is also a lack of trust in how enjoyable or representative the project programming will be, usually due to an expectation of subtle racism, unrelatable narratives, stereotyping, portraying biased views, representation of community as a monolith etc. Most participants also stated not knowing what is going on or when within Birmingham. The trust deficit only furthers this as it reduces motivation to seek things out independently.

4. Identify and explore where there are points of difference

Much of the points of difference appear to occur between genders. Young women were both more concerned about the lack of representation they felt in the arts, and also relayed being the most personally affected by it – many emphasised the need for visibility of other South Asian women doing the things they felt were sometimes unaccepted or discouraged in their communities, in order to envision and empower themselves to pursue success or independence in a similar way. They also said that they hoped the arts could be used to address intracultural social issues they experience, "to address the negative connotations and attitudes" that they face from their own communities. Young men alternatively, whilst having some awareness of social issues, spoke of representation as more closely related to entertainment than of significant personal purpose. It can be hypothesised that this is a reflection of and response to general cultural attitudes within the Pakistani and Bangladeshi diaspora, particularly in regards to freedoms afforded to the respective genders. It had been anticipated that educational background may impact the expectations from external narratives due to what young people had been exposed to in terms of analysis frameworks, however this was not supported by the research. There were similar levels of academic knowledge and insight into the pre-existing and changing narratives across the participant groups, most likely due to the social activist presence and vast dissemination of information on social media.

5. Observations (through work of facilitators)

There are several key things that have been observed both through the research, and through non-participation and the conversations that arise from that. Front and centre is the issue of lack of trust in institutional projects because of poor /

stereotypical representation and narratives around Pakistani and Bangladeshi people thus far. Self and peer created outlets have emerged as a direct response to the mistrust of external sources of representation, as well as the inaccessibility in the arts and culture sector that often leaves young people of colour feeling excluded or alienated from it. Projects such as Transforming Narratives, which have many high profile partners, are often a cause for suspicion based on young people's experiences (combined with the wealth of information they have which gives them frameworks in which to contextualise it in a highly sophisticated way). The result is either rejecting the project, or actively and publicly criticising it to 'make an example' of it – this can be seen in cases such as the Bradford Literary Festival which recently had several headliners publicly withdraw from performing and 'calling out' organisers following revelations that some of the funding was connected to counter-extremism measures – policies which many young Muslims feel criminalises them by default in the eyes of society, and paints a discriminatory picture that is not representative of the ordinary Muslim. This parallels attitudes that several participants demonstrated in regards to how they feel they are often unfairly culturally represented.

Again, much of this contributes to the understanding of identity and culture as a very fluid concept undergoing constant changes due to being a migrant diaspora in the rise of social media, and the increasing accessibility of discourse. Many young people are still establishing what it means for them to exist in this space and time. Current discourse amongst young people is very much focused on decolonising their experiences and the world around them. Based on the accessibility of academic information on social media, many young people are very well informed on history and also the ways in which social structures have/do work. Because of this, there is much more enthusiasm for peers' projects and ground-up representation than large scale projects by institutions (who are often perceived as being complicit in oppressive narratives). Contemporary cultural practices amongst young people, then, tend to revolve around accessible spaces such as social media where they can control and contribute to the narratives they wish to see instead, and organise ways to carry this through into 'real life' together. Strong examples of this phenomenon include Instagram pages such as BrownHistory, South Asia Archive, South Asia Art, Sacred Footsteps, or art critics such as The White Pube - all of whom have nuanced and transformative approaches to narratives told through open curation of visual art forms, or criticisms of the arts and culture they are otherwise excluded from. All have also accumulated very large followings, often of over hundreds of thousands of people, highlighting the appetite for such content.

6. Recommendations

To conclude, in order for the project to achieve its desired outcomes in regards to engaging the Pakistani and Bangladeshi diaspora in Birmingham, based on the findings detailed in this report, it is recommended to:

- Collaborate with projects and pre-existing attempts at transforming and capturing narratives. More investment in ground up representation.
- Don't rely on previous operational models. Young people are creating radical and sophisticated new movements, definitions, platforms and narratives often with little to no support or funding – this is inherent to the experience of immigrant and diaspora communities – and they are now expecting the same from those attempting to engage them.
- Social media presence is vital, to elicit 'hype', provide insight to the audience, and generate incentive to attend things that are going on. The most popular platforms for generating relevance is currently Instagram and Twitter. A personalised and active presence on these would help towards building relationships with key figures and groups who can introduce Transforming Narratives to wider audiences.
- Transparency and active listening is the key to building trust.
- Young people are creating their own spaces and this needs to be respected and appreciated. Being aware of the conversations around representation, decolonising, and diversifying the arts is a crucial aspect of audience development and fulfilling the outcome of 'transforming narratives'.
- Without trust building and listening to what communities want and need, engagement can be expected to stay low.
- Be open to the idea that even with the best intentions, projects originating from or involving large institutions with a history of excluding marginalised voices, are likely to be mistrusted until they can actively demonstrate integrity and commitment to the claims they make.