

Negative social representations of Islam and Muslims among Czech lower-secondary pupils: Constructing the Muslim “other”

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ABSTRACT

This article examines negative social representations of Islam among lower-secondary school pupils in Prague, Czechia, drawing on Edward Said's concept of Orientalism. Despite growing research on media representations of Islam and the teaching of controversial issues, research examining how lower-secondary pupils in Central and Eastern Europe construct understandings of Islam remains limited. The study investigates whether Islam is perceived through Orientalist narratives that construct it as a cultural “Other” and explores the factors shaping pupils' perceptions. Data were collected from 88 pupils aged 11–15 through mind maps, drawings, a short questionnaire, and follow-up group discussions. The materials were analysed using qualitative thematic coding informed by negative social representations. The findings reveal negative social representations associating Islam with terrorism, violence, the oppression of women, and cultural backwardness. References to 9/11 and gender inequalities were particularly prominent. Pupils contrasted a modern and progressive West with a culturally different Muslim world, reproducing Orientalist dichotomies. While television, school, and social media emerged as the main sources of information about Islam, direct contact with Muslims was associated with more nuanced and positive perceptions. The study contributes to understanding how pupils in a Central European context construct negative social representations of Islam and religious difference.

KEYWORDS

negative social representation; Islam; Orientalism; secondary school; mind map

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1. Introduction

Across Europe, Islam has increasingly been framed as a socially and politically sensitive topic in educational settings, particularly following the 9/11 attacks, the European refugee crisis, and the growing visibility of right-wing populist movements (Cesari 2013; Kumar 2012). Research conducted in European schools suggests that discussions surrounding Islam, Muslim identities, migration, and religious diversity are often perceived by teachers as controversial topics associated with classroom tensions, parental criticism, and broader political polarisation (Baltacı and Kayacan 2019; Jackson 2014). Recent studies suggest that schools can inadvertently reproduce Islamophobic negative social representations through classroom discourse and institutional practices (Abbas 2025). At the same time, young people are increasingly exposed through social media to simplified and emotionally charged portrayals of Muslims and Islam, reinforcing fear-based narratives and misinformation (Sharevski and Vander Loop 2024; Vidgen and Yasseri 2020).

Within this broader European context, Czechia represents an informative case. Despite Muslims comprising less than 0.5% of the Czech population and historically being a marginal group, the European refugee crisis brought the topic of Islam in Czech society from relative obscurity to the forefront of political and public discourse. Rather than generating widespread humanitarian support, the crisis fuelled the rise of right-wing parties and newly emerging extremist movements, accompanied by the spread of Islamophobic narratives (Strapáčová and Hloušek 2018; Bonansinga 2025). Similar to developments in Western Europe, political and media discourse increasingly framed Islam through themes of security, migration, terrorism, and cultural incompatibility (Cesari 2014; Bleich 2011). However, unlike many Western European countries with large Muslim populations and extensive intercultural contact, Czech society has relatively limited everyday interaction with Muslims. As a result, some people's understandings of Islam are likely to be informed less by personal experience and more through media representations, political narratives, and socially shared narratives.

In a 2017 interview, former Czech Minister of Education Kateřina Valachová stated that *"Islam does not belong in our schools. It should be treated only as a topic for social sciences as we are a secular state"* (Šimáček 2017). Her statement reflected broader public tensions surrounding the teaching of Islam and migration-related topics in schools. Similar debates concerning secularism, national identity, religious visibility, and the perceived compatibility of Islam with European values have emerged across numerous European educational systems, particularly in France, Austria, Germany, and the United Kingdom (Jackson 2014; Meer and Modood 2012). In these contexts, Islam is increasingly positioned not merely

as a religion but as a politically and culturally contested subject.

Such discourses contribute to the construction of a binary opposition between Czechs and Muslims, portraying the latter as dangerous foreigners threatening societal homogeneity (Prokūpková 2018). Contemporary studies indicate that these discourses continue to influence public perceptions across Europe, particularly through media representations that disproportionately associate Muslims with extremism, violence, gender oppression, and social conflict (Abbas 2025; Bleich and van der Veen 2021). Educational research similarly indicates that some teachers feel insufficiently prepared to address Islam critically and often avoid the topic altogether due to fears of politicisation, controversy, or accusations of bias (Baltacı and Kayacan 2019).

Previous research has primarily examined media representations of Islam and the challenges of teaching Islam and religious diversity in schools (Abbas 2025; Bleich and van der Veen 2021; Baltacı and Kayacan 2019; Jackson 2014). Research exploring pupils' own understandings of Islam has been conducted mainly in Western European contexts (e.g., Quartermaine 2019), while comparable evidence from Central and Eastern Europe remains limited. Drawing on postcolonial scholarship, especially Edward Said (1998, 1997, 1979), this study focuses on negative social representations because they occupy a central place in Orientalist constructions of Islam and Muslims as the cultural "Other", while acknowledging that pupils' understandings also include descriptive, non-evaluative associations.

This study explores how Czech pupils aged 11–15 perceive Islam and Muslims, examining the social, cultural, and informational contexts that shape these understandings. It also examines whether, and to what extent, pupils' social representations correspond to Orientalist portrayals of Islam identified in postcolonial scholarship and broader media discourse. Specifically, the research addresses two key questions:

- 1) *What negative social representations about Islam and Muslims are most prevalent among Czech pupils, and how do these perceptions reflect and reproduce Orientalist dichotomies that construct Islam as the cultural "other" in relation to the West?*
- 2) *What factors influence pupils' perceptions towards Islam and Muslims?*

2. Theoretical background

2.1 The image of Islam in contemporary Europe

Some strands of European public discourse portray Islam as incompatible with Western values, culture, and progress, reinforcing a binary opposition between "us" (the West) and "them" (Muslims). This portrayal has deep historical roots: Orientalist

thinking has shaped the Western discourse on Islam since at least the late 18th century. As Edward Said (1979) argued, Orientalism divides the world into two unequal parts: the rational, progressive Occident and the exotic, backwards Orient. This framing has been argued to influence contemporary narratives, particularly in media representations.

Following 9/11 and the subsequent Western-led “war on terror,” anti-Muslim sentiments became more prominent in parts of Europe, fuelled by political discourse and conventional media (TV and newspapers and radio, and both state and private owned media) coverage. Public debates have been characterised by portrayals of Islam as a monolithic threat, emphasising its perceived incompatibility with Western values (Korteweg and Yurdakul 2021). The conventional media portrayals of Islam have been characterised by fragmented and sensationalised images, linking it to extremism, violence, and oppressive practices (Li and Zhang 2022). It has been criticised for reducing complex geopolitical conflicts in places like Palestine, Afghanistan, Syria/Iraq and Libya to a single negative portrayal of Islam as a whole (Rane et al. 2014). In doing so, critical scholars (Husband and Alam 2012; Erdenir 2010), argue that these narratives reinforce Western imperial agendas by casting Muslim societies as sites requiring external control or intervention.

European public discourse has tended to elevate figures such as Ayatollah Khomeini and Muammar Gaddafi, and certain militant groups, to be emblematic of Islam, reinforcing Islamophobic social representations of gender oppression and irrational violence. These representations contrast starkly with the treatment of Western-friendly Muslim dictators and of other religious groups. A study by Bleich and van der Veen (2021) analysing media coverage over two decades found that articles about Muslims were more negative than those about any other religion. This persistent framing of Islam, even in academic discourse, as an existential threat may contribute to shaping public perception and policy decisions across Europe. Dominique Moïsi, in the *Geopolitics of Emotions* (2009), describes the Islamic world as a “culture of humiliation,” rooted in a collective sense of historical decline and a perceived loss of control over its own destiny. On the other end of the spectrum, political theorist Samuel Huntington, in his theory of the Clash of Civilizations (1996), posits that Islam is inherently prone to conflict with Western civilisation. He characterises Islamic civilisation as militarised and predisposed to violence, rendering it, in his view, fundamentally incompatible with political secularism (Saiya 2025). Taken together, perspectives like those of Huntington and Moïsi (both now regarded within critical geopolitics as outdated civilizational narrative) risk reinforcing predominantly negative depictions of the Islamic world under the guise of scholarly analysis, lending scientific authority to narratives that essentialise Muslim societies.

The conventional media and academic framing have been associated with perceptions among parts of the Czech public that Islam is inherently violent, oppressive, and incompatible with Western values, framing Muslims as a threat to democracy and freedom (Topinka 2016). This perception is rooted in essentialist views of religion and culture, portraying Islamic societies as inferior to so-called Western civilisation (Bukhari et al. 2019; Bunzl 2007). Another theme identified in the literature is Muslimophobia, which targets not only Islamic beliefs but also the cultures, lifestyles, and physical appearances of Muslims (Erdenir 2010). Within this framework, Muslims and Arabs are conflated, and the rich diversity of their geographical, social, and cultural backgrounds is overlooked. These representations contribute to the racialisation of Muslim identity, associating it with visible markers like religious clothing or names, leading to discrimination and exclusion. Studies such as Bukhari et al. (2019), Cesari (2014), Cohen et al. (2013), and Awan (2012) show that this fear is deeply ingrained in Western societies.

2.2 Social representations

The existence of Islamophobia and Muslimophobia in Western societies provides a cultural landscape for the formation of negative social representations of Islam among young people (Sharevski and Vander Loop 2024; Vidgen and Yasseri 2020). Serge Moscovici, the founder of social representation theory, introduced the concept to describe how individuals and groups make sense of everyday life through socially and culturally situated thinking (Haas et al. 2025; Moliner and Piermattéo 2025). He defined social representations as a “system of values, ideas, and practices” with a twofold function: they establish a consensual order that enables individuals to orient themselves and master their material and social world, and they provide a shared code for naming and classifying the various aspects of their history and reality (Moscovici 2008). Essentially, social representations are “ways of world making” designed to make an unfamiliar or threatening phenomenon familiar, comprehensible, and communicable (Duveen 2007; Voelklein and Howarth 2005).

Beyond the information acquired at school, children are exposed to messages from parents and social media, where simplified narratives may circulate. However, such narratives should not be viewed as individual cognitive errors. Instead, they constitute collective efforts at symbolic coping, generated through the socio-cognitive processes of anchoring and objectification (Novikova et al. 2024; Sammut et al. 2015). Pupils may anchor the unknown concept of Islam by classifying it into familiar, often negative, historical or cultural frames, such as “threat”, or “otherness”. They then objectify these abstract fears into concrete images or “figures”, such as the “terrorist”,

which transforms an abstract religion into a tangible, albeit stereotyped, social reality (Haas et al. 2025; Strapáčová and Hloušek 2018; Löfdahl and Hägglund 2006).

One explanation for the persistence of these perceptions lies in the structure of social representations themselves, which consist of a stable central core and a more flexible peripheral system (Moliner and Piermattéo 2025; Novikova et al. 2024). The central core is rooted in cultural values and collective memory, providing meaning and stability, while the peripheral system allows the representation to adapt to new situations without altering its fundamental assumptions (Haas et al. 2025). When pupils encounter threatening content on social media, they often share and discuss these emotions with others. This process can reactivate uncertainty and encourage individuals to seek confirmation from their peers, helping them make sense of the information. As a result, the representation may become further reinforced and stabilized within the group's shared understanding, or what social representation theory describes as the "consensual universe" (Moliner and Piermattéo 2025; Sammut et al. 2015; Duveen 2007).

Social media platforms driven by engagement-focused algorithms have been shown to amplify misinformation and contribute to the circulation and reinforcement of social representations (Edelson et al. 2024; Sharevski and Vander Loop 2024). Research indicates that children and adolescents are vulnerable to misinformation on social media, as they may have fewer opportunities or less experience to critically evaluate online information. For instance, children encounter deepfakes, political and social memes, or political propaganda, which some may accept as accurate without thorough verification (Sharevski and Vander Loop 2024; Feijoo et al. 2023). Social media host influential content creators, some of whom disseminate sensational or misleading information about topics such as Islam to attract attention and increase their audience (Ekinci et al. 2025; Klüser and Hoes 2024).

Parents and other family members play an important role in the formation of children's social representations by transmitting beliefs and assumptions that may become taken-for-granted understandings of the social world. Because of this, young people may encounter competing interpretations of social reality at the same time. On the one hand, they learn in school from teachers. On the other, they absorb emotionally powerful beliefs from family and community that help them feel connected to their social group (Remmerswaal et al. 2016; Duveen 2007). In many countries, public broadcasters face distrust, whereas privately owned and often partisan outlets, typically offering limited critical reporting, remain highly popular (Aksoy and Sreepada 2021). As a result, some families may find it difficult to distinguish credible information from misinformation. This confusion

reduces their ability to guide their children effectively, thereby increasing young people's vulnerability to misleading narratives (Feijoo et al. 2023). Research suggests that parents and teachers with misinformation-based beliefs are more likely to pass them on to their children, often unintentionally (Remmerswaal et al. 2016).

2.3 Pre-identified negative social representations about Islam or Muslims

Drawing on postcolonial scholarship, five recurring negative social representations of Islam in Western news media, political discourse, and to a lesser extent, social media can be identified that may shape how Czech pupils aged 11 to 15 perceive Muslims and Islam. The categories presented below summarise these negative social representations rather than describing Islam or Muslim communities themselves.

A prominent negative social representation is that **Islam is a threat, either through terrorism or immigration**. The post-9/11 narrative has contributed to the association of Islam to terrorism, creating fear and distrust, with studies showing that a part of Western populations perceives Islam as a societal threat, even if they cannot specify why (Bukhari et al. 2019; Dunn et al. 2007). This is reinforced by news coverage that disproportionately focuses on extremism while ignoring peaceful Muslim communities (Awan 2012). The European refugee crisis has further amplified fears that Islam threatens Western identity and values. Political rhetoric has linked Muslim immigration to security concerns, economic instability, and cultural erosion (Bleich and Van der Veen 2021).

Another negative social representation is that **Islam is a monolithic and war-torn religion**. Western media have been criticised for oversimplifying Islam, presenting it as a rigid and unchanging ideology, in which all Muslims think, act, and practice their faith in the same way. This disregards Islam's vast cultural, theological, and historical diversity (Said 1997). Events in Palestine, Afghanistan, Libya, Syria/Iraq or Iran shape Western perceptions of the entire Muslim world, as media coverage of conflict zones may give rise to the perception that all Muslim-majority countries are unstable, violent, and embroiled in war (Husband and Alam 2012).

Based on this oversimplification, Western narratives have contributed to portrayals of Muslims to extremists, leading to the negative social representation that **Muslims are either terrorists or wealthy oil magnates**. As Said (1979) points out, Muslims in Western discourse are often portrayed as either violent extremists or as extraordinarily wealthy elites. This oversimplified duality obscures the reality of ordinary Muslims, whose social and economic conditions vary widely.

A further negative social representation is that **Muslims are incapable of integrating into Western**

societies. Islam is often perceived as fundamentally incompatible with democracy and human rights, an idea rooted in colonial-era narratives that framed Islam as a barrier to Western progress. The belief that Muslims refuse to assimilate may reinforce xenophobic attitudes while ignoring the contributions of Muslim communities to Western societies. Additionally, it disregards the structural barriers that often hinder integration. Instead of recognising economic challenges, systemic discrimination, or exclusionary policies, the burden of integration is placed disproportionately on Muslims, reinforcing the notion that they remain outsiders (Erdenir 2010; Bunzl 2007).

Lastly, a recurring negative social representation portrays **Islam as oppressive, conservative and anti-modern.** Islam has become associated with outdated traditions, gender oppression, and resistance to progress or a failure to adapt to globalization, in contrast with the apparent success of Western and Asian nations (Moisi 2009). Representations of Muslim women typically emphasise role of oppressed victims or as figures resisting Islam, reducing their experiences to simplistic narratives. These portrayals overlook the complexity of gender roles in Muslim societies and disregard the agency of Muslim women in shaping their own lives and communities, as well as the active role many Muslim women play in education, their professions, and in civil society (Green 2015).

3. Materials and methods

This study adopts a three-step, visually anchored qualitative methodology designed to identify and analyse the social representations that Czech lower-secondary pupils hold about Islam. It combines mind maps, structured drawings, and follow-up group discussions to access both cognitive and affective layers of pupil understanding, to trace the origins of dominant narratives, and most importantly, to uncover the pupils’ social representations related to Islam.

Analysing visual representations, such as structured drawings or mind maps, has gained traction as a valid qualitative method in educational research,

particularly in studies that explore individual perceptions, emotional responses, misconceptions and social representations (e.g., Kwon et al. 2010). Visual methodologies allow researchers to access a layer of meaning that is often inaccessible through traditional verbal or written responses, particularly among children and adolescents. Several studies highlight the richness and advantages of drawings in facilitating communication, fostering reflective thinking, and expressing complex or sensitive ideas (e.g., Jellema et al. 2022; Köse 2008). It is acknowledged that visual methods have limitations, particularly regarding the subjective interpretation of drawings and the influence of participants’ artistic abilities. Moreover, visual representations may simplify complex beliefs and therefore require cautious interpretation (Rose 2016). Nevertheless, they remain a valuable means of accessing pupils’ perceptions and understandings.

Drawings, mind maps, and other related visual tools have also been recognised as powerful instruments in diagnosing pupil perceptions, understandings, and meaning-making processes. Many academic research studies demonstrate how pupil-generated visual representations can effectively uncover a range of social representations and reveal gaps and distortions in conceptual understanding that might otherwise remain hidden. This approach has been widely applied in science education (e.g. Fančovičová and Prokop 2019), mathematics (e.g. Faradiba et al. 2024), chemistry (e.g. Rahayu et al. 2024), biology (e.g. Arroita et al. 2022; Çuçin et al. 2020) and also in geography education, particularly through mental maps that explore pupils’ spatial thinking, geographical knowledge, place perceptions, and regional identities (Novotná et al. 2017; Bagoly-Simó et al. 2016; Bláha and Pastuchová Nováková 2013).

3.1 Research design

The entire data collection phase was methodologically guided by Brailas’ (2020) “pre-interview approach” (Fig. 1). The first phase invited pupils to produce a mind map centred on the term “Islam”. Before the activity, pupils were briefly reminded of the basic

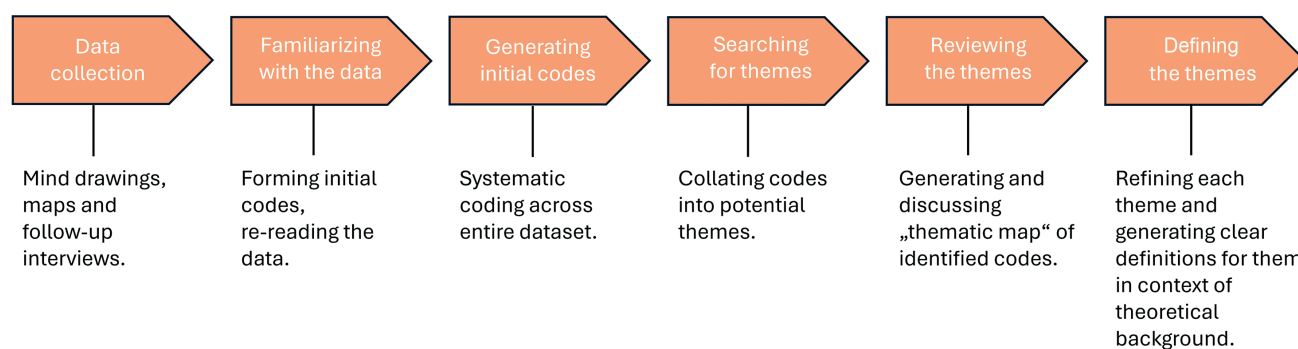


Fig. 1 Schematic overview of the data collection phases based on Brailas’ (2020) “pre-interview approach”.

principles of mind-map construction. No further assistance was provided during the task in order to minimise researcher influence on the content of the maps. According to their teachers, pupils at the participating school had been regularly working with mind maps since approximately Grade 4 and were therefore familiar with this form of visual representation.

This task was chosen to elicit both cognitive and emotional immediate associations and to uncover dominant narratives linked to the term without prompting from the researcher. Pupils were asked to write or draw any thoughts, symbols, or ideas that came to mind when they heard the word “Islam” and to link related concepts. The exact instructions in the classroom were: Put the word “Islam” in the middle of the paper and create a mind map of everything which you think is connected to Islam. The open-ended nature of the mind map encourages personal interpretation and taps into prior knowledge, which is often shaped by media exposure, family attitudes, and limited curricular engagement. The method is minimally intrusive and provides a diagnostic overview of the participants’ conceptual landscapes (Capella et al. 2018).

In the second phase, pupils completed a series of three drawing tasks provided in a worksheet: (1) a depiction of a Muslim, (2) a place where a Muslim person lives, and (3) a typical activity or behaviour associated with Muslims. These prompts were deliberately broad to allow pupils to express their own interpretations and associations while ensuring that the follow-up discussions addressed the study’s research questions. The rationale behind this phase was to explore pupils’ social representations of Islam through drawings, which can reveal implicit associations and meanings that may remain hidden in verbal or written responses. The entire process was conducted in accordance with the methodological instructions provided in Cheung et al. (2016). To enhance the interpretability of the drawings, pupils were encouraged to add brief captions or explanations clarifying who or what they had drawn and why. This helped capture pupils’ intended meanings and reduced the risk of over-interpreting visual elements.

Following the mind-map and drawing activities, pupils completed a short-written questionnaire. The questionnaire asked them to indicate the sources from which they obtained information about Islam (television, social media, online news media, YouTube, school, friends, family, books/journals), with the possibility of selecting multiple responses. Pupils were also asked whether they had visited a predominantly Muslim country or personally knew any Muslims. Finally, 10-point rating scale was included, measuring their overall emotional response towards Islam (1 = very negative, 10 = very positive). Emotional response is understood as the affective component of pupils’ social representations of Islam, reflecting the positive or negative feelings associated with the concept.

To validate our interpretations of the visual data and to allow the pupils to reflect on their thinking, the final third phase involved follow-up group discussion with selected groups of pupils. These semi-structured follow-up group discussions were used to clarify the meaning behind specific drawings or associations and to probe further into the pupils’ sources of information. Together, these three phases created a layered and triangulated data collection process that captures both surface-level associations and deeper interpretive insights.

Follow-up group discussions were conducted with selected groups of pupils from each participating class. There were 5 groups in total, each consisting of 3–5 pupils and selected based on the diversity of their visual responses and willingness to participate in the follow-up group discussion. They lasted approximately 20 minutes and focused on clarifying the meaning behind drawings and mind map associations, pupils’ perceptions towards Islam, and the perceived sources of their information. The core guiding questions focused on how pupils explained their drawings and associations, where they believed their ideas and perceptions of Islam originated from, how they perceived Islam and Muslims, and how they viewed the role of Islam in Czech society. These questions served as the main thematic framework of the follow-up group discussions, while the conversations themselves developed flexibly in response to pupils’ answers and emerging topics (e.g., knowledge of extremist groups), in line with the principles of semi-structured interviewing. The follow-up group discussions were documented through detailed field notes taken during and immediately after the sessions rather than audio recordings, due to the school setting and ethical considerations.

3.2 Research setting and participants

Data collection was conducted in March and April 2025 during geography classes. The first author was employed as a teacher at the participating school at the time of data collection. This insider position facilitated access to the school context and allowed research to be conducted in a familiar educational environment. At the same time, the first author’s dual role as both teacher and researcher may have influenced pupils’ responses, as some participants could have perceived the researcher as an authority figure. To reduce this potential experimenter bias, the tasks were designed as open-ended activities, no evaluative feedback was provided during data collection, and pupils were encouraged to express their own associations, drawings, and explanations freely.

Data were collected at a public lower-secondary school located in an upper-income neighborhood of Prague. The school was selected through convenience sampling. Therefore, the findings should be interpreted as reflecting social representations within a

Tab. 1 Basic demographical information about participants.

Grade	N	(%)	Typical age	Girls	Boys	(% of girls)
6th graders	26	29.5%	11–12	14	12	53.8%
8th graders	21	23.9%	13–14	11	10	52.4%
9th graders	41	46.6%	14–15	25	16	61.0%
Total	88	100%		50	38	56.8%

specific educational context rather than as representative of Czech pupils as a whole. The study involved 88 pupils from the 6th, 8th, and 9th grades with relative majority of girls (for further demographical information refer to Tab. 1)

Regarding prior exposure to Muslim-majority countries, 24 pupils reported having visited at least one such country, including Turkey, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Egypt, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Jordan, Qatar, Tunisia, Syria, and Oman, while the remaining 64 pupils had no such travel experience. Additionally, 35 pupils indicated that they knew someone who is a Muslim, and 26 reported having a Muslim friend. Notably, one class had a Muslim pupil of Syrian origin, which likely influenced the responses in this class as all of her classmates described her as a Muslim friend.

3.3 Data analysis

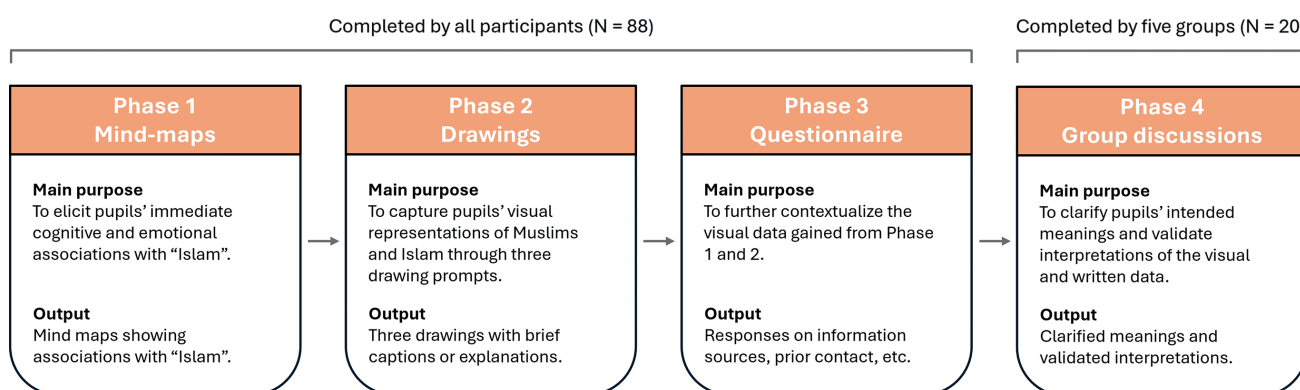
The collected data were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006), a flexible method that has since been successfully adapted for use with multimodal datasets, including visual materials such as drawings and mind maps (e.g. King and Waibel 2016). To ensure methodological rigour, the analysis followed Braun and Clarke’s six-phase framework as shown in Fig. 2.

The coding process combined both deductive elements, based on pre-existing categories of negative social representations identified in the theoretical part of this paper, and inductive coding, which allowed for the emergence of novel or context-specific themes. More specifically, the initial coding framework was

informed deductively by the categories of negative social representations identified in the theoretical section of the paper: a) Islam is a monolithic and war-torn religion; b) Islam is a threat and Muslims are terrorists; c) Muslims are wealthy oil magnates; d) Islam is oppressive, conservative and anti-modern; e) Muslims are incapable of integrating into Western societies. During the coding process, additional inductive themes emerging directly from the visual and verbal data were added. These consisted predominantly of descriptive associations (e.g., environmental features, historical references, and clothing), whereas all categories of negative social representations corresponded to those identified in the theoretical framework. Codes were first assigned to individual visual and textual elements and subsequently grouped into broader thematic categories.

Each visual artefact (drawing or mind map) was first treated as a narrative unit and analysed in combination with its accompanying written or verbal explanation. The visual datasets were analysed using a modified visual thematic approach – key features coded included the recurring motifs and pre-identified negative social representation. The mind maps were also examined using basic concept mapping principles (Novak and Gowin 2012), such as the number and type of associations linked to the central concept “Islam” and, most importantly, the presence of dominant thematic clusters based on the pre-identified social representations.

Visual elements were coded together with pupils’ captions and explanations in order to minimise over-interpretation. Items such as “mosque”, “Allah”, “hijab”, or references to geographical regions were classified as descriptive associations when they did not contain an explicit negative evaluation. In contrast, visual or textual elements carrying a clearly negative evaluative meaning were coded as negative social representations. For example, drawings depicting weapons, explosions, or references to the Twin Towers were coded under the category “Islam is a threat and Muslims are terrorists”. Similarly, drawings of crying veiled women accompanied by references to

**Fig. 2** Process of thematic analysis based on Braun and Clarke (2006).

inequality, strict rules, or male dominance were coded under the category “Islam is oppressive, conservative and anti-modern”.

To ensure the credibility and validity of the analysis, triangulation was conducted across the three data sources: mind maps, drawings, and follow-up group discussion transcripts. This allowed for cross-validation of themes and strengthened the interpretative depth of the findings (Carter et al. 2014). This visual-verbal triangulation is essential for ensuring accurate interpretation and for reducing the limitations of the researcher’s individual projection or over-interpretation. In addition, the coding process incorporated inter-coder agreement procedures. The initial coding was conducted by the first author, after which the second author independently reviewed and discussed the coding structure and category assignments. Differences in interpretation were subsequently discussed by both authors until mutual agreement on the final coding scheme was reached. To further strengthen the trustworthiness of the analysis, peer debriefing was conducted with an external expert in geography education affiliated with the department, who holds a doctoral degree in geography didactics and has professional experience as both a secondary

school teacher and school principal. The external review focused on the coherence of the coding framework, the interpretation of visual materials, and the consistency between the data and the resulting thematic categories. Still the distinction between descriptive associations and negative social representations was occasionally open to interpretation. Some visual or verbal associations could reasonably be coded in either category depending on their context and accompanying explanations. To minimise this ambiguity, the coding drew on pupils’ written captions and follow-up group discussions wherever possible.

3.4 Ethical statement

This is a non-interventional study. Participation was approved by the school management, and all responses were collected anonymously. No personal identifiers were recorded, and there is no risk that participation could affect pupils’ school performance or future educational opportunities. Given the potentially sensitive nature of the topic, particular attention was paid to creating a respectful classroom environment. Discussions concerning cultural and religious diversity had already formed part of the school’s Personal

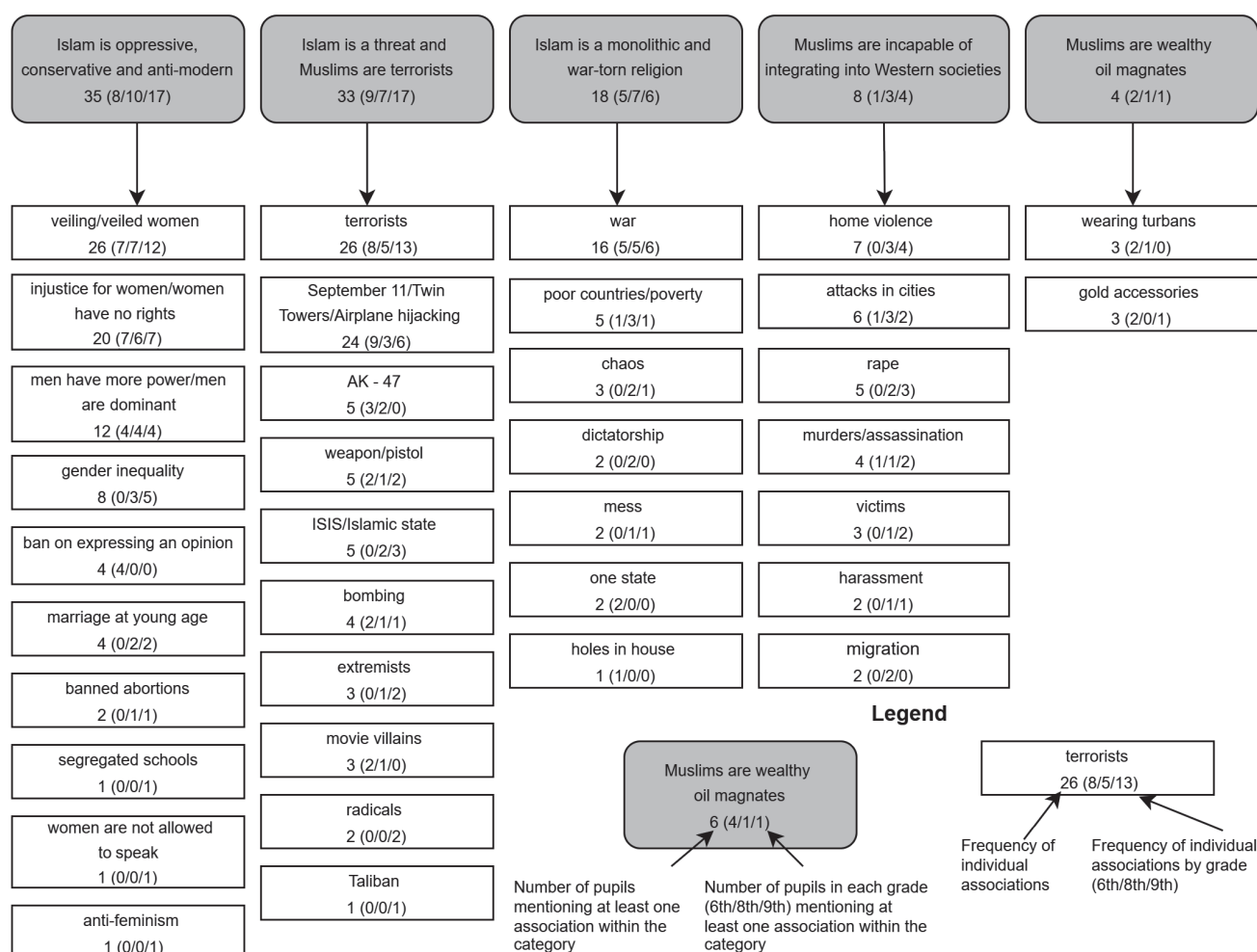


Fig. 3 Negative social representations of Islam and Muslims and their frequencies identified in pupils’ mind maps.

and Social Development (OSV) curriculum for several years, which reduced the risk of stigmatisation or discomfort among participants, including pupils with a Muslim background.

4. Results

The results are presented in accordance with the two research questions. The first part identifies the dominant descriptive associations and negative social representations of Islam and Muslims emerging from pupils’ mind maps then examines how these representations were visually expressed in the drawings and the extent to which they reflect Orientalist dichotomies. The second part focuses on the factors shaping pupils’ perceptions towards Islam, drawing on questionnaire data and follow-up group discussions to explore the role of media, school, family, peers, and personal experience.

The first stage of the analysis focused on pupils’ mind maps, which revealed two broad types of associations with Islam: descriptive associations and negative social representations. The categories of descriptive associations included Religious Concepts and Practices (e.g., Allah, Mohammed, Mecca, mosque), Islamic Clothing and Gendered Symbols (e.g., hijab, burqa, veil), Geographical and Regional Associations (e.g., Middle East, Syria, Iraq, Turkey), historical figures (e.g., Nikephoros II), or related to food (e.g., spicy food). These terms reflected a basic awareness of Islamic beliefs, practices, and regions commonly associated with Muslims, without overt prejudice. Religious concepts were equally common among all ages and sexes (in total 35% of all associations), while Islamic clothing was frequently

mentioned among 9th graders (40% of 9th grade respondents mentioned it), especially girls (75%). Hijab was the top-mentioned word among girls aged 14–15 (20 times). Geographical and regional connotations were mentioned more often by 8th graders and to a lesser extent by 9th graders. In general, 64% of all the associations in the mind maps were descriptive associations.

4.1 Negative social representations of Islam and Muslims

While all five categories were identified in the data, they varied considerably in frequency. Representations portraying Islam as oppressive, conservative and anti-modern and associated with gender inequality were the most common (35 pupils mentioned at least one association coded under this category), closely followed by negative social representation Islam is a threat and Muslims are terrorists (33). In contrast, representation of Islam as a monolithic and war-torn religion was less common (18), even more rare were negative social representations Muslims as unable to integrate into Western societies (8) and Muslims are wealthy oil magnates (6) as seen in Fig. 3.

4.1.1 Islam is oppressive, conservative and anti-modern

This theme emerged prominently in the mind maps where pupils used terms such as *veiling/veiled women* (26 association), *injustice for women/women has no rights* (20 associations), *men have more power/men are dominant* (12 associations). Notably, this perception displayed a strong sex dimension: girls were five times more likely than male pupils to articulate this view, and 9th grade pupils referenced these themes



Fig. 4 Muslim women wearing abaya by two 9th grade girls.

Note: Text translated from Czech: “Muslim woman” (Muslimka; top left of the left drawing), and “woman – everything covered” (žena – všechno schované; right drawing).

almost twice as frequently as their younger peers (as seen in Fig. 3).

These findings were further corroborated by the drawings. In the first drawing, where pupils were asked to depict a Muslim, it is notable that Muslim women appeared three times as often as men. When men were included, they were often drawn alongside women. Pupils emphasised Islamic clothing and gender-specific symbols, as over 85% of the depicted Muslim women were shown wearing some form of veiling (Fig. 4).

A total of 35 pupils depicted women wearing an abaya, 17 illustrated women in hijab or niqab, 9 portrayed women in a full-body robe, and 5 added a simple headscarf. Several drawings depicted veiled women with facial expressions suggesting sadness or with visible tears. Additionally, pupils included comments criticising the perceived male control over the practice of veiling, describing it as unfair. These associations were further confirmed during the follow-up group discussions, in which several pupils explicitly framed veiling as a manifestation of gender inequality and the unequal position of women in some Muslim societies. One ninth-grade girl explained that she perceived veiling as unfair because, in her view, women were expected to cover themselves while men were not. A few pupils also referenced the film *Persepolis* as an influence, particularly its portrayal of a young woman's experience under the Iranian regime, which further reinforces these associations.

When depicting typical occupation of Muslims, eleven pupils depicted women confined to domestic roles, caring for the family, while men were portrayed as being away from home, sometimes even being pampered and engaging in no labour at all, as seen

in Fig. 5. Two girls drew particularly emotive scenes, including one where a man was shown physically abusing his wife.

The average portrayal of a Muslim man or woman typically involved praying on a carpet, either kneeling or with hands folded, and often looking upward toward the sky (Fig. 6). These drawings reduced Muslim identities to roles defined by conservative religious practice.

4.1.2 Islam is a threat and Muslims are terrorists

A second prominent negative social representation emerging from both the mind maps and drawings was the perception of Islam as a threat, primarily through its association with Muslim being *terrorists* (26 associations). Combined references to *September 11*, *Twin Towers*, *Airplane hijacking* constituted the third most frequent association overall and the most frequent negative social representation of 6th grade pupils. Likewise, the drawing of Muslim men flying planes into the Twin Towers ranked as the third most common occupation of a Muslims in the drawing exercise. Several pupils also included terms connected with weapons such as a *weapon* (5 associations), *AK-47*

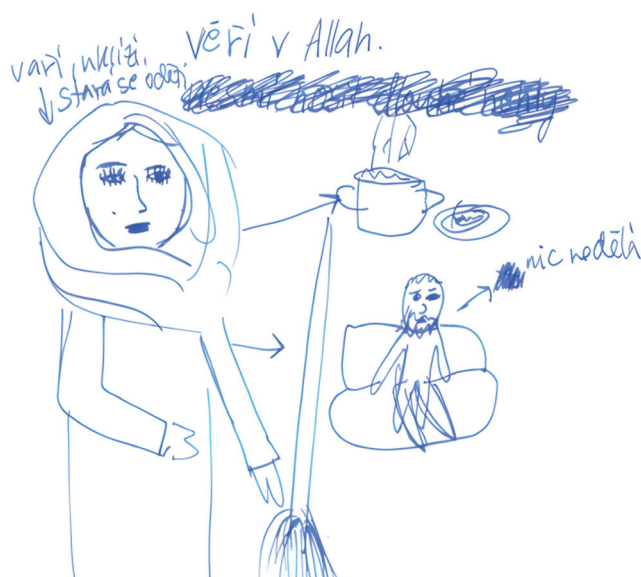


Fig. 5 The role of women and men in the home by a 9th-grade girl. Note: Text translated from Czech: žena vaří, uklízí, stará se o děti, věří v Alláha ("woman cooks, cleans, takes care of the children, believes in Allah"); muž nedělá nic ("man does nothing").



Fig. 6 Muslim praying by 9th and 6th grade pupil.

Chudší domy muslimů

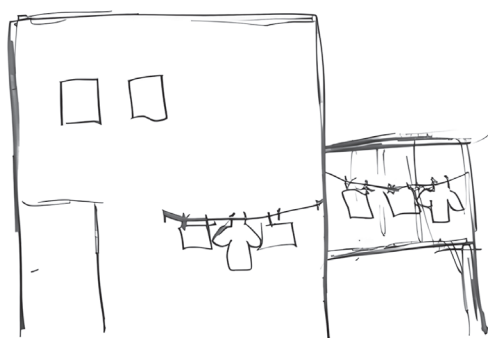


Fig. 9 Flat-roof desert house (North Africa/West Asia) by 8th grade pupil.

Note: Text translated from Czech: chudší domy muslimů ("poorer Muslim houses").

is a monolithic and war-torn religion appeared 18 times among pupils. The word *war* was mentioned 16 times across the data together with other terms, such as *poverty/poor countries* (5 associations), *chaos* (3 associations), *dictatorship* (2 associations) or *mess* (2 associations). During the follow-up group discussions, two ninth-grade boys explained that they perceived Islam as the cause of continuous wars and suffering, arguing that religion was responsible for chaos and poverty in Muslim-majority countries. However, this view was not shared by most other pupils, who either expressed no opinion or disagreed with it. Only two pupils directly equated Islam with a single state and a single cultural identity. Beyond these isolated examples, more pupils associated Islam with the Middle East, and desert climates. The sun was among the top five most frequently drawn symbols in illustrations of Muslim homes, and more than ten pupils depicted houses with flat roofs of Middle East and North Africa architecture. Although this category included a number of negative social representations (e.g., Fig. 8 house without roof), geographical references emerging from the drawings and mind maps, including the *Middle East*, *desert environments*,

flat-roofed houses, *palm trees*, *camels*, and *cacti* were coded as descriptive associations.

At the same time, approximately 20% of pupils depicted poor or modest housing (Fig. 9). In contrast, many pupils drew detached family houses or three- to four-storey residential buildings resembling those found in Europe. During the follow-up group discussions, these pupils stated that they did not perceive major differences between the living conditions of Muslims and their own.

The negative social representation that **Muslims are incapable of integrating into Western societies**, was relatively rare accounting for only eight associations (less than 10% of all negative associations). The most common references concerned *domestic violence* (7 associations) and *attacks in cities* (6 associations), while more explicit terms such as *rape* (5 associations), *murder* (4), and *harassment* (2) occurred only occasionally. During the follow-up group discussions, pupils demonstrated only limited awareness of integration debates or social conflicts involving Muslim communities in countries such as Sweden, Germany, or France. However

The least frequent negative social representation portrayed **Muslims as wealthy oil magnates**. Only four pupils referred to sheikhs or extreme wealth in their mind maps. In contrast, nine pupils, all girls, depicted Muslims surrounded skyscrapers, luxury cars, and traditional Arab clothing (Fig. 10). During the follow-up group discussions, the two girls who had previously visited Dubai explained that this experience had strongly influenced their perception of Muslims as exceptionally wealthy oil sheikhs living lives of luxury.

4.2 Factors influencing perception of Islam and Muslims

Several factors appeared to shape pupils' perceptions of Islam and Muslims, including the sources from which they obtained information, their personal experiences, and, to a lesser extent, the breadth of their associations with the concept of Islam.



Fig. 10 Sheikhs' life in Dubai, as seen by a 9th grade pupil.

Note: Burj Khalifa (left drawing). Text translated from Czech: zlato ("gold") (right drawing).

Pupils identified television as main source of information about Islam ($n = 55$), followed by school ($n = 48$) and social media ($n = 47$). Online media were identified by 42 pupils, while family members ($n = 39$) and friends ($n = 34$) also played a role. YouTube was selected by 30 pupils, and books or magazines represented the least frequently cited source ($n = 25$). As respondents could select multiple options, these figures reflect the frequency of source selection rather than mutually exclusive categories.

The follow-up group discussions suggested that personal experience also influenced pupils' perceptions. The eighth-grade pupils, who shared a classroom with a Syrian classmate, described Muslims as a normal part of Czech society and expressed more positive perception than pupils in the other grades. Several pupils explicitly attributed these views to their personal contact with their classmate. This pattern was also reflected in the questionnaire, where eighth-grade pupils reported the most positive feelings towards Islam (mean = 5.2; on a ten-point scale), compared with an overall average of 4.7 across all pupils. Similarly, pupils who had visited predominantly Muslim countries often referred to these experiences when explaining their perceptions, although these experiences did not always lead to more nuanced representations.

The numbers of connections ranged widely from 0 up to 17, the average was 6.5 words across all pupils. Interestingly, 6th graders produced slightly more associations (7.1) than 9th graders (6.7) and more than 8th graders (5.6), suggesting that the number of associations does not increase with age. Pupils who reported visiting a predominantly Muslim country produced the highest average number of associations (7.4), followed by those identifying parents (7.2) and school (7.0) as sources of information. This finding suggests that the quantity of associations alone is not a reliable indicator of the complexity or valence of pupils' perceptions as 8th grade pupils produced fewer associations on average than others, they expressed the most positive perception towards Muslims during the follow-up group discussions and questionnaire.

5. Discussion

The social representations identified in this study are consistent with earlier findings showing that Islam and Muslims are portrayed through the lenses of violence, oppression, and cultural difference (Bunzl 2007). These patterns also closely resemble the Orientalist framing of Muslim societies described by Said (1979), in which Muslim societies are constructed as culturally different from the West. Rather than simply reflecting a lack of knowledge about Islam, pupils evaluated Muslim societies through values that are central to contemporary Czech society, particularly gender equality and individual freedom. As result, Islam was

often positioned as culturally different and less modern than the West. These interpretations are consistent with broader Western media narratives that portray Muslim women primarily through images of oppression and restriction (Green 2015), suggesting that pupils' understandings were shaped not only by personal experience but also by wider cultural discourses.

These findings are also consistent with broader media portrayals that associate Muslims with global terrorism and the rise of violence worldwide, while Muslim women are depicted as burdened by conservative and often “backwards” traditions. The strong emphasis on 9/11 observed among Czech pupils resembles findings from studies of British and Taiwanese pupils, for whom the attacks also remain a prominent reference point (Ching et al. 2021; Quartermaine 2019; Apple 2002). However, compared to the British and Taiwanese pupils described by Ching et al. (2021) and Quartermaine (2019), and Czech pupils demonstrated more limited knowledge beyond the events of 9/11. The research participants predominantly conceptualised Muslims through the lens of religious identity, associating them with visible markers such as specific forms of clothing and physical appearance. The predominance of religious rather than ethnic markers also distinguishes the present findings from the Muslimophobia framework proposed by Awan (2012), suggesting that religious identity remained more salient than ethnicity in pupils' representations of Islam.

Unlike findings from several Western European contexts, migration and integration played only a minor role in Czech pupils' perceptions of Islam. Instead, terrorism remained the dominant frame through which Islam was understood. This difference may reflect the Czech context, where everyday contact with Muslim communities is very limited and public debate focusing on coverage of terrorism has been more salient than public debates concerning integration. In contrast to many British pupils described by Quartermaine (2019), only a small number of Czech pupils explicitly questioned the association between Islam and terrorism. This may reflect broader educational challenges in addressing Islam and religious diversity, topics that teachers often perceive as politically sensitive or controversial (Baltacı and Kayacan 2019; Jackson 2014; Abbas 2025). Consequently, pupils may encounter simplified representations of Islam that remain insufficiently challenged within educational settings (Abbas 2025).

Although broader cultural and media narratives appear to have shaped pupils' perceptions of Islam, the findings also indicate that these perceptions were not entirely uniform. The more nuanced perspectives expressed by eighth-grade pupils and those who had travelled to Muslim countries suggest that personal experience may provide an important counterbalance to dominant media narratives. Although the present study cannot determine causality, this pattern is

consistent with intergroup contact theory, which suggests that positive contact with members of an out-group may reduce prejudice and stereotyping (Pettigrew and Tropp 2006).

This study has several limitations. Pupils of just one lower-secondary public school in a higher income Prague neighbourhood participated. Consequently, the findings should be interpreted as reflecting negative social representations within a specific educational context rather than as representative of Czech pupils as a whole. Pupils' responses may have been influenced by the first author's dual role as teacher and researcher. Future research could compare students of the same grade level across the entire city, or across the country, focusing on differences between the capital and the peripheries.

Moreover, the survey data were collected as part of an educational activity; hence, some pupils may not have approached the tasks with the same level of engagement. The findings are also based on pupils' self-reported associations and perceptions, which may not fully capture the complexity of their understandings. Although the interpretation of drawings and mind maps was supported by pupils' written explanations and follow-up group discussions, distinguishing between descriptive associations and negative social representations occasionally required researcher judgement.

Furthermore, the study did not examine how Islam was represented in educational materials or textbooks used during geography, social studies subjects' classes, which may also have contributed to pupils' social representations and should be considered in future research. The influence of individual pupil backgrounds, familial educational environments, teacher and local cultural contexts likewise warrants further investigation. Finally, the analysis was theoretically informed by postcolonial scholarship and social representations theory, with particular attention to negative representations identified in previous literature. Although descriptive associations were also analysed, alternative theoretical frameworks might have highlighted different aspects of pupils' understandings of Islam.

6. Conclusion

This study examined negative social representations of Islam among lower-secondary pupils in Prague and the factors shaping their perception towards Islam and Muslims. The findings indicate that the most prevalent negative social representations associated Islam with terrorism, violence, the oppression of women, and cultural backwardness, reproducing an Orientalist distinction between a modern and progressive "West" and a culturally different Muslim world. At the same time, more than half of all associations identified in the mind maps were descriptive rather than

explicitly negative, suggesting that pupils' understandings of Islam were not exclusively shaped by negative social representations. Pupils' perceptions appeared to be influenced by a combination of media exposure, educational experiences, and personal contact. While television, social media, and online media emerged as the most reported sources of information, direct contact with a Muslim peer was associated with more nuanced perceptions and more positive perceptions towards Islam.

These findings are important because negative social representations may contribute to prejudice, social exclusion, and the marginalisation of Muslim minorities. Understanding how such representations emerge during adolescence can help educators develop more effective approaches to teaching about religious and cultural diversity.

Given that pupils' most frequent negative social representations associate Islam with terrorism and gender inequality, geography education should explicitly address these themes through evidence-based teaching. Regional geography offers opportunities to challenge negative social representations by presenting diverse case studies from Muslim-majority countries that highlight their cultural, social, economic, and political diversity.

Likewise, teaching about migration and integration can provide pupils with more balanced perspectives on the role of Muslims in contemporary European societies. The finding that pupils with direct contact with a Muslim peer expressed more positive views also highlights the value of creating opportunities for meaningful intercultural dialogue and encounters within educational settings, for example through encounters with members of local Muslim communities, invited speakers, or classroom discussions. Finally, political geography and geopolitics can encourage a more nuanced understanding of conflicts in Western Asia, North Africa, and other world regions by highlighting the complex interplay of historical, political, economic, and geopolitical factors rather than attributing them primarily to religion.

By combining visual methods, follow-up group discussions, and social representations theory, this study contributes to geography education research by providing one of the first empirical insights into how Czech lower-secondary pupils construct understandings of Islam and Muslims. More broadly, it demonstrates the value of visual methodologies for exploring how young people negotiate cultural difference and reproduce, challenge, or modify broader societal narratives about religious minorities.

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