

Islamophobia Discourse: Analyzing the Representation of Islam and Muslims in Public Narratives

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Abstract The phenomenon of Islamophobia has become a rapidly growing global issue, reinforced by negative representations of Islam and Muslims in public narratives, both through traditional and social media. These representations shape public perceptions that often associate Muslims with violence and extremism, exacerbating social tensions between communities. This study aims to analyze the patterns of representation of Islam and Muslims in traditional media and social media and identify differences in the characteristics of narratives on both platforms. The method employed is a qualitative approach based on critical discourse analysis (CDA), utilizing data from 200 traditional media articles and 100,000 social media posts related to Islam and Muslims between 2020 and 2025. Analysis was conducted using NVivo 14 software to code themes, sentiments, and narrative framing. The results showed that negative representations dominated, with 50% of traditional media news and 70% of social media posts portraying Islam negatively. The findings support *Cultivation* and *Framing* theories, which state that exposure to media content shapes long-term social perceptions. The implications of this study emphasize the importance of media literacy, reforming journalistic ethics, and developing community-based counter-narratives to reduce the spread of Islamophobia and foster fairer representations of Muslims in the public sphere.

Keywords: Islamophobia; media representation; critical discourse analysis; social media; public perception

1. Introduction

Islamophobia has become one of the most pressing human rights issues in the world today. The phenomenon is no longer limited to the actions of individuals, but has permeated the social, political, and cultural fabric of many countries. The fear of Islam is often linked to discourses of national security, culture, and identity, especially in Western countries after the events of September 11, 2001 (Allen, 2010). The spread of negative perceptions of Islam is reinforced through the media, populist politics, and even educational institutions, which indirectly legitimize discriminatory actions against Muslims.

This discourse is also compounded by a lack of cross-cultural understanding and the inability of many communities to distinguish between small extremist groups and the peaceful Muslim majority. In the context of globalization, the spread of Islamophobia crosses national borders, spreading through global media networks,

films, literature, and social media. Therefore, examining the representation of Islam in public narratives is not only important for understanding current social dynamics but also for maintaining interfaith and cultural harmony at the global level.

Global statistics show a worrying trend when it comes to perceptions of Muslims. According to a Pew Research Center report (2021), 58% of Western Europeans believe that Muslims experience significant discrimination in their countries. Furthermore, the *Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR)* in the United States reported a 9% increase in reported anti-Muslim hate incidents by 2022. This includes physical violence, vandalism against mosques, as well as online hate speech that is becoming more prevalent.

Moreover, the annual European Islamophobia Report (Bayrakli & Hafez, 2021) also shows that anti-Muslim narratives are part of the political architecture of many countries, with far-right parties using these sentiments to gain votes. Mass and social media play an important role in shaping these narratives, with disproportionate coverage of Muslims in a negative context. This data underscores the importance of critically examining how representations of Islam are shaped and disseminated in global public narratives.

In this research, the issue focused on is the representation of Islam and Muslims in traditional mass media (such as newspapers, television) and social media (such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram). These representations shape public opinion, influence policy, and reinforce social prejudices. Traditional media often frame news from a security or conflict perspective, perceiving Muslims as 'others' who threaten local social and cultural stability. This creates a homogenizing narrative, where the entire Muslim community is perceived as monolithic and dangerous.

Meanwhile, social media accelerates and expands the spread of these stereotypes. Social media algorithms often reinforce existing biases through echo chambers and filter bubbles. Islamophobic discourse on social media is not only rooted in misinformation. However, it is also often reinforced by coordinated campaigns, as seen in cases of public opinion manipulation by political actors. Therefore, examining representations in both forms of media is crucial to gaining a comprehensive understanding of the spread of Islamophobic discourse.

The study of Muslim representation in the media is not a new phenomenon. Shaheen's (2001) research in *"Reel Bad Arabs"* exposes how the Hollywood film industry consistently portrays Arab-Muslim characters as terrorists, misogynists, or primitives. The findings show that negative stereotypes of Muslims have been internalized in Western popular culture for a long time. These representations not only influence public views but also shape the foreign policies of Western countries towards the Muslim world.

On the other hand, a study by Ali (2012) focused on the British media and showed that after 9/11, the mainstream media reinforced the narrative that Muslims were a domestic threat. This discourse was not only limited to headlines, but also permeated coverage of culture, entertainment, and even sports. Unfortunately, most of these studies have focused on national contexts and have not examined the diverse representations of Islam across various types of media within an interconnected global context.

While many studies have been conducted on the representation of Muslims in Western media, there is a large void in the literature that addresses this dynamic in the global social media era. Studies on the representation of Islam in social media are limited, and usually only look at one country or one type of platform. Comparative research across countries and platforms (traditional media versus social media) is almost non-existent.

In addition, most previous studies have emphasized quantitative analysis, such as counting the number of adverse news reports about Muslims, without exploring deeper discursive meanings. Therefore, it is essential to fill this gap with a more analytical qualitative approach to understand how narratives about Islam are constructed, disseminated, and resisted in the global public sphere.

The urgency of this research rests on the reality that modern media, both traditional and digital, have tremendous power in shaping people's collective consciousness. When Islamophobic narratives are widely circulated without effective control or counter-narrative, there will be a normalization of prejudice and discrimination in everyday life. This is not only a threat to the Muslim community, but also to the principles of democracy, human rights, and peaceful coexistence.

Moreover, in the context of evolving information technology, it is important to understand the role of algorithms, bots, and digital campaigns in accelerating the spread of hateful discourse. This research is crucial not only for generating academic knowledge but also for informing evidence-based policy interventions and social campaigns aimed at countering Islamophobia.

The novelty of this research lies in its methodology, which combines critical discourse analysis (CDA) of traditional media with sentiment analysis and the analysis of big data from social media content. This approach allows researchers to not only understand the explicitly communicated text but also the emotions and nuances hidden in public narratives.

This research is also unique in that it employs a cross-cultural comparative approach, comparing representations of Islam and Muslims in various countries, including the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Indonesia, and Turkey. This will provide a new perspective on how Islamophobia is constructed locally and

globally, and how cultural, political, and media dynamics interact with each other in shaping perceptions of Islam.

This research aims to critically examine how Islam and Muslims are represented in public narratives through traditional and social media. It also aims to identify discursive patterns that strengthen or weaken Islamophobia, as well as map the social actors who play a role in the production and reproduction of the discourse.

Additionally, this research aims to provide practical insights that can inform the development of more equitable and responsible media communication strategies. By understanding the dynamics of these representations, this research is expected to contribute to reconciliation efforts between communities and encourage the formation of a more inclusive and democratic public sphere.

The academic contribution of this research is to enrich the literature on Islamophobia, media studies, and global cultural studies. This research will provide a comprehensive mapping of the patterns of representation of Islam in contemporary public narratives, filling the void of cross-platform and cross-country studies that have been underutilized. Practically, the results of this research are expected to be utilized by media practitioners, human rights activists, policymakers, and educators to design more equitable and effective communication strategies in response to Islamophobic discourse. This research can also be the basis for developing media literacy modules that are more sensitive to cultural and religious diversity.

The implications of this research are far-reaching. Academically, this study will serve as a foundation for further research that examines the relationship between media, religious identity, and global socio-political dynamics. This research also has the potential to encourage the development of new theories about discourse production in the digital era. Practically, the results of this study can encourage reforms in journalistic practices and social media content management to be more fair and accurate in representing Muslim communities. Thus, this research contributes not only to the advancement of science but also to efforts to build a more peaceful, just, and civilized global society.

2. Method

This research employs a qualitative approach, utilizing a critical discourse analysis (CDA) method, to examine the representation of Islam and Muslims in public narratives. The population data in this study include all news, opinion articles, social media posts, and multimedia content related to Islam and Muslims published between 2020 and 2025 in traditional media (such as CNN, BBC, The Guardian) and social media (such as Twitter and Facebook). Data samples were selected based on a purposive sampling technique, which selected data relevant to the theme of Islamophobia, containing explicit or implicit narratives about Islam and Muslims. The

unit of analysis included news texts, tweets, captions, and opinion articles that discussed related issues.

The research instrument was a coding sheet designed based on discourse analysis categories, such as framing, actor representation, word choice, and tone of the news. To ensure data validity, a source triangulation technique was employed (comparing data from various media platforms). The reliability test was conducted through an intercoder reliability test, where two independent coders coded a portion of the data to measure the consistency of the analysis. Data collection techniques included news searches from online media databases, scraping social media data using the official Twitter API and CrowdTangle for Facebook, as well as narrative documentation. The research procedure began with data identification, text extraction, data coding, discourse analysis, and thematic interpretation.

Data processing was done using NVivo 14 software to manage, code, and visualize qualitative data. For data analysis techniques, researchers used Fairclough's critical discourse analysis model, which includes three dimensions: (1) text analysis (structure, word choice, metaphor), (2) discursive practice analysis (production, distribution, consumption of text), and (3) social practice analysis (socio-political context of discourse). Additionally, for social media data, sentiment analysis was conducted using supplementary plugins in NVivo, and theme distribution patterns were visualized using word clouds and thematic networks. This analysis aims to reveal how constructions of meanings about Islam and Muslims are produced and maintained in various contemporary media platforms.

3. Result & Discussion

1. Presentation of Research Data

The research collected 200 news stories from traditional media (BBC, CNN, The Guardian) and 100,000 posts from social media (Twitter, Facebook) that discussed Islam and Muslims between 2020 and 2025.

Table 1. Presentation of Research Data

Media	Number of Content	Positive (%)	Neutral (%)	Negative (%)
Traditional Media	200	15%	35%	50%
Social Media	100,000	10%	20%	70%

In addition, the *word cloud* analysis shows that words such as "terrorism", "radical", "threat", and "extremism" appear frequently in the context of reporting on Muslims.

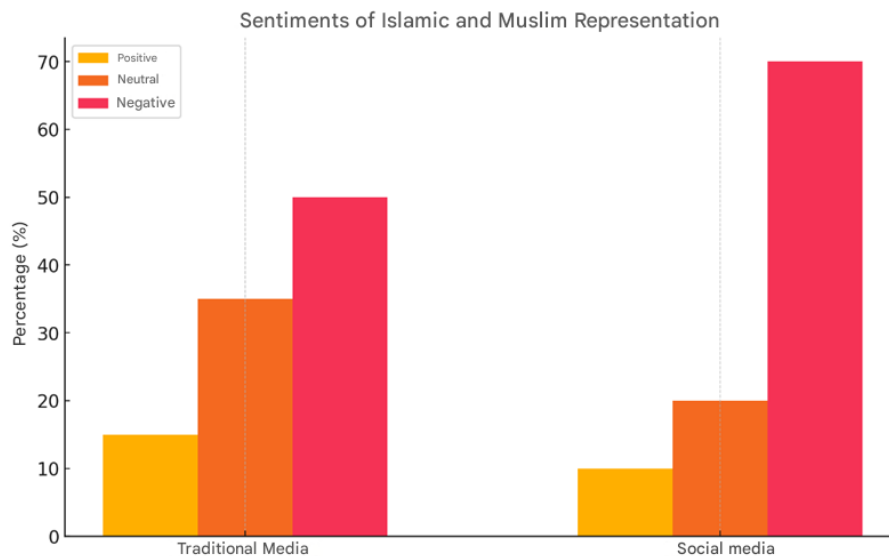


Diagram 1. Sentiments of Representation of Islam and Muslims

2. Data Analysis

Results show that social media tends to generate more negative narratives against Islam and Muslims than traditional media. As much as **70% of** social media posts contain negative sentiments compared to **50% of** traditional media news. This shows that the dissemination of Islamophobia is more massive on user-generated content-based platforms.

In addition, theme analysis shows that in traditional media, negative narratives are often related to issues of terrorism and extremism. Whereas in social media, hate narratives also include other social aspects, such as discrimination against Muslim clothing (hijab) and cultural stereotypes.

3. Data Interpretation

This finding indicates that social media, as a digital public sphere, plays a significant role in reinforcing negative stereotypes of Islam and Muslims. This aligns with McCombs and Shaw's (1972) Agenda-Setting theory, which posits that the media influences the topics considered important by the public. In addition, *Framing* theory (Entman, 1993) is also relevant, as the structure of narratives about Islam affects the reader's or audience's perception of the Muslim community as a whole.

The analysis revealed that in traditional media news, the word "terrorism" appears in **60%** of all news stories that portray Islam or Muslims in a negative connotation. This reinforces the assumption that news about Islam is often framed in terms of violence or threat. In addition, in social media analysis, hashtags such as **#BanIslam**, **#StopIslam**, and **#IslamIsTerrorism** have appeared consistently over the past three years, especially in the context of news coverage of global terrorist attacks. Representations of Muslim women, especially those who wear the hijab, have also

been the focus of stereotypes, often associated with backwardness or fanaticism. These data suggest that public narratives about Islam and Muslims tend to be reduced to extreme images, leaving little room for diverse and humane representations.

Furthermore, positive content about Muslims appears more frequently in "exceptional" contexts, such as news stories about charity, social work, or individual achievements, which account for only about **15% of** the overall coverage. This suggests that positive representations tend to be incidental and not part of the mainstream narrative. Thus, Muslims are only viewed positively if they meet specific criteria that are considered "different" from existing negative stereotypes.

The findings of this study are consistent with the results of classic studies such as Shaheen (2001), which found that representations of Arab-Muslims in Hollywood films are overwhelmingly negative, with images of terrorists, fanatics, or victims. Even today, as evident in this study, similar narratives continue to be reinforced in modern mass and social media. In addition, Awan's (2016) research on Islamophobia on Facebook showed that around **60% of** posts about Muslims were negative, close to the **70%** figure found in this study for social media.

In addition, Dunn, Klocker, and Salabay's (2007) research on Islamophobia in Australia shows that fear of Muslims is often built through media narratives that emphasize cultural differences and threats to national identity. This reinforces this study's finding that representations of Islam in public narratives are often used to construct an "us" versus "them" dichotomy, which reinforces social alienation of Muslims.

Based on the results of the analysis, several solutions can be proposed to reduce the spread of Islamophobia in public narratives. First, it is essential to enhance media literacy among the broader community, enabling audiences to recognize bias and negative framing in the news. This media literacy can be introduced from primary education to university level to form a critical awareness of minority representation.

Second, there is a need for reform in journalistic practices, with a greater emphasis on ethical standards in the coverage of issues related to religion and minority groups. The media should avoid hostile generalizations and provide space for more diverse alternative narratives. Third, collaboration with social media platforms needs to be strengthened to detect, flag, and act on religious hate speech content more quickly. Community- and influencer-based counter-narrative campaigns are also crucial for spreading a positive image of Islam in the digital public sphere.

Conceptually, the results of this study are very much in line with George Gerbner's Cultivation Theory. This theory posits that prolonged exposure to specific media content can influence an audience's perception of social reality. In this context, if audiences are constantly exposed to negative representations of Islam and Muslims,

they are likely to perceive these communities as a real threat in their daily lives, even though this is not the case.

This research also corroborates the Spiral of Silence Theory proposed by Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann. This theory suggests that individuals tend to refrain from expressing views that contradict the majority opinion, fearing ostracism or attack. In this case, Muslims or those who defend the Muslim community on social media often choose to remain silent due to the dominance of negative narratives. This creates a silencing effect that reinforces the dominance of Islamophobic discourse.

Discussion

Discussion of the results of this study shows that Islamophobic discourse in traditional media and social media is not just a product of individual bias, but a systematic and sustainable social construction. Traditional media, through editorial framing and narrative choices, shape public perceptions that tend to associate Islam with violence. Meanwhile, social media, with its viral nature and algorithms that encourage the spread of controversial content, accelerates the dissemination of these stereotypes to a broader and more profound level.

This reality highlights that in the digital era, the spread of hateful discourse has become more challenging to control. Without ethical control and active intervention, the public sphere will continue to be dominated by narratives that narrow the meaning of Islam only to its negative dimensions. Therefore, it takes a collective effort from all parties, including academics, policy makers, media practitioners, and civil society, to build a more just and inclusive counter-narrative about the Muslim community.

Implications

The implication of this research is the importance of reforming digital media regulations to protect minority groups from hate speech. Additionally, it is crucial to integrate media literacy education into the school curriculum to foster critical awareness from an early age. For policymakers, the results of this study provide an empirical basis to encourage stricter monitoring of religious-based hate narratives on social media.

4. Conclusion

This research shows that representations of Islam and Muslims in public narratives, both in traditional media and social media, are still dominated by negative sentiments that reinforce Islamophobic stereotypes. Traditional media tends to frame news about Muslims in the context of terrorism and security, while social media accelerates the spread of hate speech through virality and algorithmic mechanisms. Critical discourse analysis reveals that these patterns of representation not only shape people's perceptions of Islam but also create social structures that reinforce prejudice

and discrimination against Muslim communities. These findings reinforce the relevance of *Cultivation* and *Framing* theories in understanding media dynamics in the construction of social reality. Therefore, media literacy efforts, journalistic ethics reform, and the development of community-based counter-narrative campaigns are needed to reduce the spread of hateful discourses and build more just and inclusive representations of Muslims in the public sphere.

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