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The Interpretation of Islam on Social Media: Islamophobia and the West

ABSTRACT

The media's role is to mold concepts and present one interpretation as fact. The media has a significant impact on how the public perceives each given issue that arises globally. Muslims and Islam have become the main conversation subjects on Western social media platforms. Globally, Muslims have been portrayed negatively by Western media. Twenty years after the fields of science and technology have advanced, the media appears to be a key factor in inciting Islamophobia among the general public. This article examines discussions on Facebook in Western nations regarding Islam, the Islamic faith, Islamophobia, or and Muslim beliefs. The study also examined how Muslims have been depicted on social media and how the West has affected public perception of Islam. The study found that the West denigrates Islam, the religion of Muslims, and that this leads to Islamophobia worldwide. Facebook postings about Muslim fanaticism, jihad, the hijab, mosques, Muslim men's beards, Muslim women's clothing, extremism, and terrorism are frequently emphasized.

Keywords: Facebook, Islam, extremism, social media, Muslims, & Islamophobia.

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Introduction

Islamophobia, or the irrational fear of Islam, has been increasingly prevalent in Western nations in recent years. It is characterized by prejudice and hateful preconceptions about Islam and Muslims, which lead to discriminatory practices and the suppression of Muslims in the West. The increased use of Internet-based online resources has transformed cultures with outdated, archaic styles into ones that are more informed and modern. The use of social media has a significant impact on how the public feels and how it changes. Due to easy access to knowledge and understanding, social media and various other internet resources have made it easier for the general public to think regarding their rights. Social media not only altered thought patterns but also transformed citizen attitudes and behavior, leading to a rise in participation. But social media has altered the way events happen in the modern world. Furthermore, the advent of social media fosters group activities by fostering a sense of collective will.

Researchers have produced a number of publications that demonstrate how these forms of social media are used to disseminate anti-Islamic information to internet audiences. It is critical for scholars studying social media platforms to determine the extent to which these instruments are utilized to sway public opinion against Islam. According to Goran Larsson's research, not a single study has examined the role that social media networks have in the dissemination of Islamic ideas¹. Because journalists use a wide range of online assets for their research projects, we may conclude that the Internet either directly or indirectly influences way Islam and Muslims seem on social media. Journalists use these online tools to obtain information, ideas, and news items. Larsson's research of Wiki Islam ultimately led him to the conclusion that content posted on Wiki Islam² clearly displays an expression of Islamophobia. He calculated that Islamophobia in the West may be both promoted and combated with the use of modern technologies. Among the most active online organizations opposed to Islam are Islamic Watch, Campus Watch, Headline Magazine, Discovery Internet, and Islamic Watch. It is evident from looking at these websites that they have been successful in influencing people's ideas and perspectives toward Islam and Muslims³. Research on Islam and the World Wide Web can be found in many different forms, including social media activities by Muslims, how Islamic knowledge is formed through online sources, how Muslim communities discuss contemporary Islamic issues online, online cyber legislators as well as online translators, online legislation that uses the Internet for the Muslim community, and more. The Internet is used by Muslims to debate the hijab and/or jihadist organizations; several Muslim organizations utilize the Internet to propagate terrorism. However, relatively few researches looked into the misconceptions and incorrect claims about Islam that may be found online. "Online Islamophobia ought to be given the same significance that Islamophobia in everyday life is," according to a research on the subject on Twitter⁴.

At the moment, Facebook is the most widely used social networking platform. As of November 2018⁵, Facebook boasted 2.8 billion active members worldwide. Even though, Facebook has

¹ Larsson, Göran. "Cyber-Islamophobia? The case of WikiIslam." *Contemporary Islam* 1, no. 1 (2007): 53-67.

² Larsson, Göran. "Cyber-Islamophobia? The case of WikiIslam." *Contemporary Islam* 1, no. 1 (2007): 53-67.

³ Salaita, Steven. "Curricular activism and academic freedom: representations of Arabs and Muslims in print and internet media." *Arab Studies Quarterly* (2008): 1-14.

⁴ Awan, Imran. "Islamophobia and Twitter: A typology of online hate against Muslims on social media." *Policy & Internet* 6, no. 2 (2014): 133-150.

⁵ Larsson, Göran. *Muslims and the new media: Historical and contemporary debates*. Routledge, 2016.

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been the subject of extensive research in the fields of business, politics, advertising, tourism, and education, among others. Nonetheless, relatively few scholars have focused on the disparaging information and materials on Islam and Muslims. In its comprehensive analysis titled "Islamic Phobia on the Online: Increasing Internet Hatred for Muslims," the Online Hatred Prevention Institute (OPHI) asserts that the two most widely used social media platforms⁶, Facebook and Twitter, have a large number of well-organized anti-Muslim pages. Researchers looked at Facebook's derogatory campaign on Islam and Muslims in this study.

What is the hate of Islam?

Since there are very few references to the term "Islamophobia" prior to the 1990s, many academics believe it to be relatively recent⁷. The phrase was originally used in print by a French writer named Alam Quellien⁸.

Edward Said used this phrase later in 1985 to suggest that there was a tight relationship between Islamophobia and anti-Semitism. Some people describe Islamophobia as "the exclusion of Muslims from political and social affairs"⁹. Alternatively, it may be argued that there is bias or discrimination against Muslims¹⁰. Some experts have noted that the term "Islamophobia" implies that Muslims should refrain from participating in social and political spheres. Following 9/11, there was a significant rise in Islamophobia, which has been linked to both Muslims and terrorism as a result of the 9/11 event. Muslims across the world have encountered a range of limitations on their daily activities. Since science and technology have advanced over the last 20 years, media has been a key factor in inciting Islamophobia. The caricature against Islam and Muslim beliefs has been strengthened by it¹¹. It is critical to draw attention to the ways that Islamophobia appears in the media, particularly on social media. Based on the results of earlier research, Islamophobic stories and depictions in the media can be categorized into three main areas: portraying Muslims as a threat to Western civilization, social ethics, and religious alongside cultural differences between Muslims and non-Muslims that lead to extreme and group pressures¹². Furthermore, there is considerable evidence demonstrating the poor portrayal of Muslims in the media. It is reasoned in another study piece that Muslims pose a serious threat to the West and are mostly misunderstood and misrepresented¹³. According to a related study, Muslims are shown in a bad light and Islam is perceived as an aggressive and intolerable faith. Ironically, the media's portrayal of the aforementioned notions is based on some narrow-minded perspectives and characteristics of Islamophobia¹⁴. The researchers also claim that political party representatives should be held accountable for promoting Islamophobia in their speeches, in addition to the media's portrayals of Islamophobia. Social

⁶ Bail, Christopher A. *Terrified: How anti-Muslim fringe organizations became mainstream*. Princeton University Press, 2014.

⁷ Allen, C. *Islamophobia*. Surrey (U.K.); Burlington (U.S.A.): Ashgate Publishing Limited. (2010).

⁸ CONWAY, G. *Islamophobia: a challenge for us all; Report of the Runnymede Trust Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia*. (London: Runnymede Trust 1997).

⁹ Fekete, L. *A Suitable Enemy: Racism, Migration and Islamophobia in Europe*. (London: Pluto Press, 2009).

¹⁰ Esposito, J. and Kalin, I. *Islamophobia*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

¹¹ Knott, K., Poole, E. and Taira, T. *Media Portrayals of Religion and the Secular Sacred*. (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Limited 2013).

¹² Morgan, G. and Poynting, S. *Global Islamophobia: Muslims and Moral Panic in the West (Global Connections)*. Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Group, 2012).

¹³ Poole, E. *Reporting Islam*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2009).

¹⁴ Ahmed, S. and Matthes, J. Media representation of Muslims and Islam from 2000 to 2015: A meta-analysis. *International Communication Gazette*, 79 (3), (2016), 219-244.

media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and Orkut are nearly identical in their vigorous anti-Islamophobia campaign¹⁵. Facebook has unveiled a new regulation aimed at minimizing hate speech and related content on Fb pages¹⁶.

Islam in the Western Media:

Muslims and Islam have emerged as the most significant subjects of conversation in Western media outlets. All in all, the Western media painted a very bad picture of Muslims worldwide, accusing them of being involved in a variety of terrorist acts, such as mass shootings, suicide bombers, hijackings, target assassinations, and the promotion of jihadi culture. The claim that Islam is perhaps the most misunderstood faith in the world today—and certainly since the dawn of time—is supported step by step. Not only is it misinterpreted by non-Muslims, but it is also incorrectly understood by Muslims¹⁷. According to Edward, there is comparable prejudice and misinformation regarding Islam and Muslims in the West. This media campaign's only goal is to defame Islam by inciting hatred and fear¹⁸. In this way, four approaches have been used by the international media to portray Islam and Muslims. They first distort the beliefs of Islam to the outside world. Second, they portray Muslims as extreme groups that embrace Islam. Thirdly, they paint Islam as a societal menace to Western civilization. Fourth, their justification for the violence is at odds with Islam, and the nature of the conflicts is unclear. Considering these viewpoints, Islam has been depicted by the West as a religion endowed with evil forces that promotes harassment and violence¹⁹. In all kinds of media, particularly social media where gatekeeping is nonexistent, Western and American press provide a biased and favored picture of Islam and Muslims. Hollywood's popular culture adheres to generalizations of certain preconceptions concerning Muslims in the western world. The Western and American media portray Islam as an ideology of terrorism, portray Muslims as primitive and disrespectful, and portray Islam as a theology of fanaticism and extremism, as has been well proved by researchers who have studied Islam and Muslims over over fifty years. Fundamentalist Islam has become a political force that is equally prominent due to current challenges²⁰. Another research looks at the constraints and restrictions placed on Western media when it comes to reporting on conflicts with Muslims and worldwide media violence without taking into account the cultural and historical context of the subject²¹. Similar to this, Muslims are portrayed and featured on American TV shows as perilous migrants with a distinct religion—Islam—who are outsiders and malicious. This is especially true in dramas and documentaries. Muslims and the Islamic faith are portrayed in Western and American media as being violent, aggressive, inhumane, and divisive to the broader population. A few more distinct strategies have also been

¹⁵ Ansari, H. and Ansari, H. *Islamophobia rises in British society* (2018). [online] Aljazeera.com. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2013/07/201374135331488994.html>

¹⁶ Zhao, Shanyang, Sherri Grasmuck, and Jason Martin. "Identity construction on Facebook: Digital empowerment in anchored relationships." *Computers in human behavior* 24, No. 5 (2008): 1816-1836

¹⁷ Morey, P. and Yaqin, A. *Framing Muslims*. (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2011).

¹⁸ Said, Edward W. *Covering Islam: How the media and the experts determine how we see the rest of the world (Fully revised edition)*. Random House, 2008.

¹⁹ Moosavi, Leon. "Orientalism at home: Islamophobia in the representations of Islam and Muslims by the New Labour Government." *Ethnicities* 15, no. 5 (2015): 652-674.

²⁰ Richardson, J. *(Mis) representing Islam: The racism and rhetoric of British broadsheet newspapers*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company (2004).

²¹ Karim, Karim H., and Mike Gasher. "Islamic peril: media and global violence." *Canadian Journal of Communication* 27, no. 1 (2002): 99.

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used by the West to present an honest assessment on the derogatory image of Muslims²². The first appearance of Arabs, Muslims, and the Islamic faith is portrayed in several electronic media TV series, plays, Hollywood films, and historical documentaries as horrible victims of hate crimes and terrorists. When Muslims are portrayed in dramas as "terrorists," the portrayal of Muslims is seen as "positive" in order to counterbalance the bad portrayal. Muslims are regularly singled out for discrimination, mistreatment, and criminal activity on American TV stations and in the media of other Western nations²³. Regarding how Muslims are portrayed in the media, another study described this as a "separated, extensive portrayal" of Islam. The fundamental goal of balancing reporting to find a harmony among a negative and a positive articulation is the key motivation for positive representation with unfavorable portrayals of Muslims. These techniques are employed by TV drama producers, writers, and executive directors to create a sense of "adversaries" between religions for the viewers. Once more, the media's benign portrayal of Muslims was tarnished when they began holding protests to justify their mistreatment and biased opinions. High media dependence has altered viewers' perceptions of illustrative threats. Researchers have found that the media significantly influences how the public views Muslims and that those who rely heavily on it are more likely to be impacted and perceive Muslims as dangerous. People who depend more on the media are more likely to get involved in ethnic conflicts²⁴. The media's primary focus in depicting Islam and Muslims as the dominant social representation in the West has been this trend. Numerous phrases that are often used in media contexts are closely associated with Islam and Muslims. Examples of these expressions are Islamic jihad, global terrorism, extremism, fascism, and obsessive Islam. Islamophobia is growing worldwide as a result of how Muslims are portrayed in the media and how these terms are labeled²⁵.

Islam and Social Media:

Social media was developed to offer online forums for political debate, free speech, and communication²⁶. The media landscape is growing increasingly complex due to the abundance of different sources, such as radio, television, newspapers, etc. Similarly, social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and others are expanding the reach of the public domain. Social media has developed into a new kind of media in which users may engage by posting and downloading material, sharing images or videos, labeling and appreciating messages, like postings, and other activities. Put differently, we might define social media as personal media, where each user is an editorial or journalist for their own self-media. Communication has taken on a new form thanks to the Internet. Social media networks lack the notion of gatekeeping, in contrast to conventional media platforms. Because of its efficacy, social media has emerged as the most hotly debated subject worldwide. Fifth generation warfare and information warfare are two more roles that social media is playing. Users become more conscious of social, political, economic, and religious concerns as a result

²² Petley, J. and Richardson, R. (eds) *Pointing the Finger: Islam and Muslims in the British media*, Oxford: One World Publications, (2011) pp. 201-20.

²³ Akram, Susan M. "The aftermath of September 11, 2001: The targeting of Arabs and Muslims in America." *Arab Studies Quarterly* (2002): 61-118.

²⁴ Ansari, H. and Ansari, H. *Islamophobia rises in British society* (2018). [online] Aljazeera.com. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2013/07/201374135331488994.html>

²⁵ Kallis, A. *Islamophobia in the UK: National Report*, in: Enes Bayraklı & Farid Hafez, *European Islamophobia Report 2017*, Istanbul, SETA, 2018.

²⁶ McLeod, J. M. Media and civic socialization. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 27, (2000), 45-51.

of it. Because of the false information on social media networks, there are new issues in society related to fake material and untrustworthy information. Facebook is a widely used social media platform that is used by a number of groups, individuals, & social media activists to propagate anti-Islamic views amongst internet users including citizens worldwide. Since 1990, as communication technology has advanced, research on Islam and Muslims have quickly arisen on the Internet. As a result, research on Muslims in the mainstream media has been new and is concentrated on emerging digital and social media networks in addition to traditional media outlets. One of the main things threatening social harmony and peace in society today is the proliferation of hate operations targeting Islam and Muslims on social media platforms. After 9/11, anti-Islamic acts gained increasing appeal. The world began associating Islam and Muslims with terrorism; they expressed their opposition before Islam and Muslims not only via print and electronic media, but also—and this was more successful—through online social media networks, which exposed their goals to the broader public. Reports from web portals and social media platforms show how Islamophobia is growing and see Islam as a worldwide threat to Western civilization.

Methodology:

In this investigation, anti-Islamic English-language Facebook sites were chosen for examination from many Western states, not just one. Germany, Denmark, France, and some other European nations are in charge of most of the chosen pages. In other European nations, a lot of content disparaging Islam is posted on social media platforms. A standard was established to select these pages from a small list of pages on Facebook that are highly regarded, highly active, well-known, and have attracted a sizable number of supporters and viewers in order to study readily available materials and evaluate the interesting challenges on Facebook about coverage of Islam and Islamophobia within the Western continent on Social Media. Numerous organizations, educational institutions, and individuals from various backgrounds monitor these sites and respond to posts concerning Islam, Islamophobia, and Muslims. The researcher gathered postings that presented Islam unfavorably and included anti-Islamic and anti-Muslim sentiments. A selection technique was used in this study to choose 50 Facebook sites. Of these 50 Facebook pages, six of the most popular posts—including photos—were chosen, making a total of 300 posts suitable for analysis. The study's time span, which runs from August 1, 2018, to August 1, 2019, was chosen because, since taking office, Pakistan's newly elected prime minister, Imran Khan, has worked to improve public perception of Islam and Muslims worldwide and has discussed Islamophobia in all public forums. In order to facilitate comprehension of the available material, the researchers categorized the resources they had chosen. These categories were created by researchers in order to categorize and explain the data that is currently accessible. The written and visual material from the Facebook posts has been utilized by the researchers. These include the following: Islam and the Islamic religion are threats to world peace and harmony; Islam is a menace to human welfare and world cultures; Islam is an imminent danger to western civilizations and way of life; and Islam is a threat to world peace and religious harmony.

Findings of the Study:

Owing to media bias and ignorance, the West has many misconceptions and misconceptions about Islam and Muslims, which has led to the development of Islamophobia among the general public. Nevertheless, over the past few decades, Islam has expanded rapidly in America and

throughout Europe, and this situation is still present today. It is clear from reading these pages that Muslims are perceived as a danger to Western identity, culture, and religion as well as to the security and safety of the general population.

Islam and the Islamic Religion Endanger Peace and Harmony:

82 entries on this topic were discovered by the study from the chosen pages. Most of these blogs highlight how Muslims are the global jihadist forces' invasion and threaten peace and stability; they do not present Muslims as peace-loving people. On social media, the new idea of radical Islam is also widely visible. Muslim woman has been portrayed as proponents of extremist action and terrorism in several Facebook posts. Some posters portray Muslims as "Islamic jihadists," including men and women. A few image postings link Islam to fascism, terrorism, anti-Semitism, extremism, and feudalism; Muslims are also portrayed as savage, violent, harsh, merciless, and inhumane in these posts. Muslims have lost all human emotion and have become into mindless murdering robots. These posts and images depict Muslims killing people like animals, raping young girls, shooting females, playing with their heads, and other atrocities.

Islam Endangers Global Culture and Human Well-Being:

The researcher discovered 74 entries in this category suggesting both Islam and Muslims seem hazardous, on par with extremism, crime, and terrorism. The operations of terrorists, suicide bombings, kidnappings, hijackings, attacks on mosques and schools, and the murder of innocent people have made global instability a serious menace. These blogs address a range of claims made about Muslims concerning terrorist attacks that take place across the world, connecting Islam to these occurrences. Words like bombers, youthful crowds, snipers, hijackers, assassins, and haters of mankind were among the ones used specifically to refer to Muslims. The labels "Islamic militants," "extremists," and "terrorists" are frequently used to refer to Muslims in various posts. The bulk of these images and writings have made clear how Muslims are ruining Western society. A few posts made by the Western participants reveal that Muslims are against women's education, assault, abduct, and rape young girls as their primary means of doing so.

Islam Endangers Western Civilizations and Lifestyles:

The 63 posts the researcher collected for this study on the subject demonstrate how Muslims pose a danger to Western civilization and way of life. The lifestyle and cultural practices of Muslims differ greatly from those of Westerners. Lifestyles in the West and Islam differ greatly from one another. The posts discussed the prominent words related to Muslim religion, such as forced marriages, marriages with young girls, early marriages, the social position of women in Muslim society, public mockery of women, Muslim women working in the workforce, women greeting one another with men, and men's dominance. People's sense of humor has grown about the application of Islamic law on women, and several more derogatory pictures of Muslim lifestyles have surfaced on Facebook pages. The majority of these posts are related to this animal-based theme. Social media users in the West refer to the Muslim massacre of Hilal as "Hilal killings." Muslims often slaughter animals for food, particularly on the annual holy holiday of Eid ul Azah. Social media was used by India and the West to demonstrate how cruelly Muslims butcher animals. For Westerners, goods called after Hilal meals or products can also be a major source of confusion.

Islam Is a Danger to World Peace and Religious Harmony:

There were 81 postings on this topic discovered in this investigation. Terrorists worldwide are seen to use all forms of their malevolent actions as a practical application of Islamic teachings. The West saw Islam's rapid rise to prominence as the world's most progressive and dominant religion and saw this as a continual danger. Islam is a religion of peace; it is not the same as Western philosophy. A few entries in this research study emphasized that the concepts derived from the Quran are unable to be flexible and considerate to other religions. In Europe, Islamic institutions are often not accepted and are frequently attacked. The West does not recognize educational institutions, universities, or other establishments that support Muslim ideas of religious liberty. One of the chosen Facebook pages states that while Islam is neither an ideology nor a religion, it is a form of worship that frequently tramples on the freedom of other faiths. The posts suggested that Islam represents the root of religious strife and a danger to religious peace on a worldwide scale. Since Muslims do not accept other religions and kill its adherents on the pretext of being infidels, this poses the biggest threat to those faiths. These posts perpetuate a lot of prejudices, such as the idea that Muslims compel the Christian community to adopt Islam or face repercussions, and the notion that Islam is against other religions.

Discussion:

Muslims and Islam have taken center stage in discussions in Western media. Overall, the Western media presented a very unfavorable picture of Islam and Muslims globally, emphasizing Muslims' participation in terrorist and extremist acts like bombings by suicide, hijackings, target killings, shootings in schools, terrorist attacks, and the dissemination of Jihadi videos criticizing the West, among other things. The western media has portrayed Islam and Muslims in a negative light by associating them with terrorism, which is the primary factor contributing to the rise of Islamism in the West as a whole. This media campaign's only goal is to negatively portray Islam by using force and hostility. According to the opinions expressed on posts on Facebook, Islam is infused with evil energy and encourages harassment and violence. In print, electronic, and social media networks, the Western and American press play a part in presenting a prejudiced and biased image of Muslims. Along with the sequences in the well-known movie "True Lies" when 80 terrorists are slain and it turns out they are Arab Muslims, Hollywood has produced pop culture that perpetuates prejudices about Muslims. Based on the coverage, it appears that the American and Western media regard Islam as an ideology of extremism and terrorism, portraying Muslims as hateful and backward people. Not only did popular media outlets like TV, magazines, and newspapers portray Muslims and the Islamic faith in an identical manner, but so did social networking platforms. These pages have a very negative and critical tone. To depict a poor image of Islam and encourage the growth of Islamophobia, certain derogatory terms about Muslims as well as the Holy Quran have been utilized in a harsh and repulsive manner. Many phrases are used to characterize Islam and Muslims through Western online social networks, which are encouraging Islamophobia. These labels include extremism in religion, religious fundamentalism, global terror, Islamization, Jihadism, and Islamic tyranny. On social media, participants are dominated by feelings of insecurity, anxiety, and hatred. Simultaneously, it is imperative to investigate alternative approaches to modify the unfavorable portrayal of Islam and Muslims in Western media. Appropriate tactics must be employed to counteract the negative portrayal of Islam and

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Islamophobia. The consequences of this portrayal of Islam and Muslims will intensify intergroup, interpersonal, and interreligious relations, posing a threat to Muslims worldwide.

Conclusion:

Upon reviewing many study studies on Islamophobia, or it is evident that the fear of Islam and the ambiguity surrounding its expansion in the West are prevalent fears among Westerners. It is imperative that the Muslim community investigates a few alternatives in the interim to rectify the unfavorable representations of Islam and Muslims within Western media outlets. Imran Khan, the prime minister of Pakistan, recently made a significant advancement in the fight against Islamophobia in the West during his speech to the UN General Assembly. Premiers from Pakistan, Turkey, and Malaysia have decided to establish an English-language TV station similar to the BBC and broadcast it throughout Europe in an effort to combat Islamophobia by emphasizing the Islamic teachings of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH).