

# A Systematic Literature Review of Islamophobic Discourses in International Media: Trends and Stereotypes

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## ABSTRACT

**Aim of the Study:** This particular study intends to evaluate previous researches from the year 2017-2023 on the phenomenon of Islamophobia from western media's perspective and to highlight the stereotypes against Muslims and Islam that often appear in the media.

**Methodology:** Systematic literature review is conducted and Google Scholar was used as an initial database from the year 2017-2023 with keywords "Islamophobia & Western Media" & "Western media Stereotypes of Islamophobia". After refining the data, the studies included were analyzed using thematic analysis and five recurring themes emerged.

**Findings:** The findings suggest that there has been only negative representation of Islam and its followers in the western media. All of the studies reviewed found 9/11 incident to be the triggering point and record rise in anti-Islamic rhetoric, linking Muslims to be the followers of terrorist ideologies. Available literature also revealed that negative stereotypes against Muslims were not only created but also maintained through International Media discourses. The identified stereotypes included Muslims being represented as 'others', as a 'social threat', as 'terrorists'; Muslim men being represented as extremist and Muslim women as oppressed, backward and uneducated.

**Conclusion:** The study concludes that the problem with westerners not having enough understanding of Islam is that they have their own experts to define and represent Islam. While West represent 'West', 'East' is also represented by West. There should be enough Muslim representatives in higher authorities and in westerner media who can depict true picture of what Islam and Muslims are like and there should also be availability of enough platforms where Muslim experts can represent true picture of Islam its followers.

**Keywords:** Islamophobia, Islam, Muslims, West, Stereotypes, Media, Discrimination, Social Construction of Reality.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Since the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, an exponential rise in discrimination against Muslims has been observed in the western world. In the light of recent socio political environment with its wave of western nationalism, this anti-Islamic rhetoric is further amplified. International Media also played its role in creating and highlighting negative stereotypes against Muslims and maintaining an environment of fear and disgust. Overtime Racism took many forms, one of the most popular one is known as ‘Islamophobia’ (Rehman & Hanley, 2023).

According to Micu (2012) Islamophobia is closely linked with Racism because Muslims physical appearances are the major contributors in perceiving Muslims as terrorists. Zimbardo (2012) defines Islamophobia as the feeling of hatred, fear and disliking towards Muslims and people who fulfill the description of Muslim look alike people created by the western societies however Beydoun (2018) goes one step further in defining Islamophobia and states that Islamophobia is not only the hatred or feeling of dejection towards Muslims but it has become a phenomenon that requires complete removal of Muslims from the western society.

Islamophobia is not limited to Americans only, anyone who places himself against Islam and Muslims is considered as an Islamophobe. Islamophobes thinks Muslims as outsiders, violent and Islam as unassimilable. Islamophobia is also known with many other names such as Muslimophobia, anti-Muslimism, anti-Muslim racism, anti-Muslim hate and anti-Muslim prejudice. According to Considine (2017) although the term Islamophobia is widely used in international media but the fact that it still appears in inverted commas indicates that the implication of this term is still unclear.

There are many misconceptions that Islamophobia started after the tragic 9/11 incident but it is not true. 9/11 tragedy may prove to be the turning point in highlighting the stereotypical treatment against Muslims but such discriminations were being part of American culture since long. Along with the incident of 9/11 a lot of other events unfolded in the twentieth century like the terrorist attacks in Madrid, New York, London and other regions of the world and controversy of Danish Cartoon has once again highlighted the fears, sense of dejection and stereotypes against Islam and Muslims (Thonnart, 2016).

Islam is the 2<sup>nd</sup> most followed religion in the world yet Muslims are projected to different forms of Islamophobia both on individual level and state level. There are many reports which depicts the rise in hate crimes against Muslims since the 9/11 incident on individual level as well as certain state level anti-Muslim policies were also implemented against Muslims, like discriminatory immigration policies, increased surveillance including racial profiling of Muslims at the airports and banning of religious practices (Naderi, 2018).

In light of recent terrorists’ attacks, Western Media has been observed for portraying only the negative image of Muslims and Islam. Western media has been feeding anti-Islamic and anti-Muslims stereotypes to the world since ages i-e representing Muslims as aggressive, extremist, illiterate and conservative. This leads to increased hate crimes against Muslims in the western world and Western Media is considered to be a major corroborator in spreading hate crimes against Muslims (Tama & Sulistyaningrum, 2023).

### *1.1 Purpose of the Study*

Since the rise of Islamophobia in the western world, there has been seen parallel rise in academic researches on the Muslims portrayal in western media. Academicians, policy makers, decision makers and media professionals keep discussing this phenomenon of Islamophobia in different lenses. This particular study intends to evaluate previous researches from the year 2017-2023 on the phenomenon of Islamophobia from the lens of western media. Furthermore, it also aims to highlight the common stereotypes against Islam and Muslims that appears in different forms of western media. In doing so, this study aims to contribute to the existing stream of the phenomenon of “Islamophobia” and how it is experienced in the western societies by the Muslims.

## ***1.2 Research Objectives***

- To investigate the phenomenon of Islamophobia in relation to western Media in previous literature.
- To explore major stereotypes highlighted in western Media towards Muslims and Islam in the previous studies.

## ***1.3 Research Questions***

**Q1:** How the Phenomenon of Islamophobia has been studied in relation to western Media in previous literature?

**Q2:** What are the major stereotypes highlighted in western Media towards Muslims and Islam in the previous studies?

## ***1.4 Theoretical Framework***

This study is guided by Media theory and social construction of reality. This theory explores the relationship between media and how it constructs and creates social reality for us in various ways (Flew, 2017). However, this theory ignores other factors that are involved in constructing reality for people rather focuses solely on media power, that media is solely responsible for information and shaping of the world around people.

In relation to Islamophobia and Media theory of social construction of reality, it implies the power of western media and that western media has the ability to construct, disseminate and reinforce only the negative perception about Islam and Muslims (Saleem et al., 2016). In many cases western media perpetuates on creating biased and fake coverage against Muslims such as in news media, in dramas, cartoons and in movies (Hassan & Azmi, 2021). Due to this conditioning effect, people have become accustomed to considering Islam as a religion of extremism and Muslims as terrorists.

This theory can be best understood from the perspective of media frames in connection to social construction of reality as it appeared in Berger and Luckmann's theory (Adoni & Mane, 1984). Western Media has created frames for Muslims and Islam and it strictly operated on these particular frames thus constructing reality for the world around.

From the perspective of media theory and social construction of reality, it can be concluded that Islamophobia is not only result of individual policies and rules but western media also plays a huge role in shaping the world's perception about Muslims and Islam.

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

In keeping with the above aims and research questions, a systematic review design is adopted for this particular study to provide a systematic gathering, investigation and reflective explanation of academic studies analyzing Islamophobic content. This methodology was used in order to investigate how Islamophobia has been researched previously from the lens of western media and what major stereotypes against Muslims were being highlighted in international media.

This particular methodology which involves review of previous relevant studies carries utmost importance in the huge stream of research scenario. This method proves to be an important research tool for the scholars as it informs them how to make best use of already available literature to give reflective analysis of the given phenomenon under study. This is a highly methodologically rigorous research method that is used to organize, structure and retrieve unbiased literature about a specific topic (Barn et al., 2014).

## 2.1 Search Strategy

The following search technique was used in retrieving data for this particular study. It involved the following steps 1) At first initial search was done in online database library; Google Scholar. Google Scholar was used from the interval of year 2017 to year 2023 with keywords “Islamophobia & Western Media” & “Western media Stereotypes of Islamophobia”. The keywords with specific codes are mentioned in Table no. 1 in the following paragraphs. 2) The second step included adding the data only in major indexing databases which means that it only included studies that have proper doi. 3) Recording the results. Themes were being made from the retrieved data. 4) Results were discussed.

**Table 1:** Search Keyword code

	Code
K1	Islamophobia & Western Media
K2	Western Media Stereotypes of Islamophobia

Since the interval between which the study is conducted was large, the researcher opted for non-probability convenient sampling technique. Since the initial database search would have yielded a lot of articles under the selected keywords, so the researcher opted for convenient sampling as it was physically impossible to systematically review all the searched articles. Convenience sampling is a qualitative non-probability sampling technique where the data is selected for analysis as per the convenience of the researcher (Emerson, 2021). Convenience sampling has its advantage of being an easy and cheap technique but also has a disadvantage of being at the risk of sampling bias but this type of sampling technique is preferred in certain instances specially where it is physically impossible for the researcher to collect data from the entire population due to different reasons (Etikan & Alkassim 2016). For this particular study, articles that appeared in first 10 pages of Google Scholar search were selected based on convenient sampling technique and further screened based on the criteria which yielded around 40 articles for further analysis.

The studies retrieved for data analysis were screened against exclusion and inclusion criterion mentioned in Table 2.

## 2.2 Selection and Screening of Article

At first the articles were searched and selected based on the relevance of their titles and later by reading the abstracts. At this point any duplicate paper were excluded and then the screened articles were selected on the basis of certain inclusion and exclusion criteria which is mentioned in the coming paragraphs.

Several inclusion and exclusion criteria are devised while conducting systematic literature reviews (SLR). For this particular study only those papers are included for review that are published in recognized journals, that discussed aspects of Islamophobia from media lens, papers that are only in English language and papers which included Muslims living in non-Muslim countries as the sample population. The SLR mostly includes some excluding rules in order to guarantee a complete and comprehensive review procedure. Studies like Theses/dissertations, commentary, book chapters were excluded, as this paper is focusing only on the published research papers on Islamophobia from the media lens. While it's important to take into account different studies from various languages and involving different themes but it will be out of the scope of this particular study, that's why articles with language other than English and with absence of the relevant keywords will be excluded while doing the review procedure. Each retrieved article will be investigated individually to check if it's meeting the set criteria and only those articles will be selected for further analysis and interpretations that are meeting the inclusion and exclusion criteria. The inclusion and exclusion criteria is mentioned in Table 2.

**Table 2: Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria**

<b>Classification</b>	<b>Inclusion</b>	<b>Exclusion</b>
<b>Participants</b>	Studies in which Participants when asked identify themselves as Muslims.	Studies in which Participants do not identify themselves as Muslims.
<b>Language</b>	English Language.	Languages other than English.
<b>Data type</b>	Research Articles.	Theses, Editorials, Book chapters.
<b>Publication status</b>	Published papers.	Non-published papers.
<b>Article content type</b>	a) Articles discussing Islamophobia from the media lens. b) Articles discussing Islamophobic discourses in western media.	a) Articles discussing Islamophobia from themes other than media. b) Articles discussing Islamophobic discourses in Asian/eastern media.

### **2.3 Thematic Analysis**

The data retrieved and collected from the retained studies were brought together via thematic analysis. It is a process that allows researcher to merge and analyze scattered data in a coherent and systematic manner. To guide analysis of this particular study, thematic analysis by Braun and Clark (2006) was used to make themes guided by the theoretical framework of this particular study i-e the media theory and social construction of reality. The analysis involved six stages, beginning with becoming familiar with the data and observing recurring patterns in responses to create codes using specific keywords. The resulting codes were then gathered, organized, and thoroughly reviewed, facilitating the identification of major themes within the data (see Appendix-Thematic Map). By reviewing the themes, the ones having more supporting data and repeating patterns are refined. After have distinctive major themes, the final report is made.

### **3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

The initial search in an online database library; Google scholar using the Keywords K1 “Islamophobia and western media”, K2 “Western Media Stereotypes of Islamophobia” between the intervals 2017 to 2023 yielded around more than 100 publications. The researcher limited the search to first 10 pages on Google Scholar as it was convenient for the researcher. After scrutinizing the articles based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria set forth for this particular study as mentioned in Table no. 2, and removing articles that are duplicates, almost 40 studies came within the scope of this study and were retained for further analysis. The data was analyzed via thematic analysis and five major themes emerged through the data which are discussed in the coming paragraphs.

Almost all the studies relevant to the review were conducted in western countries depicting that Islamophobia is a phenomenon of west and highlighted major stereotypes against Muslims and Islam. All of the studies reviewed found 9/11 incident to be the triggering point and record rise in anti-Islamic rhetoric, linking Muslims to be the followers of terrorist ideologies. Available literature also revealed that negative stereotypes against Muslims were not only created but also maintained through International Media discourses. Some common themes that emerged through this particular study are discussed below:

### ***3.1 US vs Them dichotomy***

Muslims have continuously been represented as ‘terrorists’, ‘extremist’ and ‘violent’ with their men being presented as oppressors and women projected as being oppressed. Ghamdi and Safrah (2020) in their paper investigated the vital role played by mass media in generating and reproducing Islamophobia. They investigated movies like “Homeland series”, cartoons like “Aladdin”, print media like “The Sun” newspaper, and revealed that western media tends to project over exaggerated and wrongful stereotypes of Arab Muslims. They concluded that western media discourses portray Muslims as uncivilized, primitive and barbaric while continuously maintaining these stereotypes through their media discourses. However, the western media tends to represent themselves as superior, more civilized, progressive and more liberal than the Muslims thus creating an “us vs them” dichotomy.

Nawaz & Siraj (2023) also revealed similar results after investigating Islamophobic discourse in British press. They revealed that journalists used expressions in newspapers aligning with their prejudiced ideologies like “civilized vs un civilized”, “feminists’ vs Islamists or fundamentalists”, declaring Muslims to be inferior and incompatible with the western societies hence creating the concept of ‘othering’. Basit (2018) & Imran (2020) also investigated Islamophobia in western media and concluded the creation of same “Us vs them”, “East vs West”, “Muslims vs Christians” dichotomy.

Cervi et al., (2023) also investigated projection of Muslims in Western Media, predominantly the Western press and revealed the same results that were consistent with the “us vs them” dichotomy. They revealed that western media reinforces otherness by emphasizing “the sameness between all Muslims” and their “differences with the west”. They concluded that westerners are being successful in creating a separate discourse for West which is superior to Muslims and other minorities living in their countries.

### ***3.2 Islam and Muslims related terminologies in Western media***

Over the course of time, there has been observed a pattern where Muslims and Islam are represented using some specific terms. According to literature available on Islamophobia, it has been found that after 9/11 there is a particular pattern and some particular terms that are used to address Muslims and Islam in the western media. Using unfavorable terminologies in the western media is one aspect of demonizing and discriminating against Muslims and Islam (Zhang, 2017; Younes et al., 2020).

Ghani (2021) in his paper also discussed the role of western media in perpetrating Islamophobic discourses and revealed that term like “Jihadis”, “militants”, “Islamic militants”, “terrorists”, “Islamic bombs”, “violent Islam” are frequently used for Muslims and Islam in western media when talking about terrorist acts perpetrated by Muslims while when reporting terrorist acts committed by non-Muslims, western media does not use the same terminologies and use terms like “hate crimes”, “mentally unstable white man” etc. hence creating a negative image of Muslims and declaring only Muslims as extremist and terrorists.

Saleem et al., (2021) in their paper observed the same pattern of phrases used while addressing Islam and Muslims. They wrote that one of the FOX channel news presenter said that “all Muslims are not terrorists but all terrorists are Muslims” hence reinforcing this major stereotype against Muslims. Also with the advent of Social Media, hate speech against Muslims is seen in this new public sphere as marginalized and discriminatory statements are being used against Muslims. Varol (2022) in his paper also revealed that on social media particularly on Facebook, the word Muslim is used in synonym with vile, barbaric, evil, uncivilized, wild, pedophile and crazy.

### ***3.3 Stereotypes related to physical appearance of Muslims***

Media is considered to be one of the most important tools for constructing or reconstructing realities and shaping mental images. Western Media while portraying Muslims follow some particular stereotypes related to Muslims appearances. Naderi (2018) in his research investigated Muslim men experiences in United States by conducting in depth interviews and shared that one of the participant revealed that ‘he

always shaves his beard when he leaves for airport to avoid unwanted attention and stares from people and to look less Muslim. He was devastated that Muslims have to go through unwanted racial profiling at airports just on the basis of their physical appearances’.

The representation of Muslims in Hollywood movies are creating, guiding, perpetuating, promoting and reinforcing orientalist discourses against Muslims. Hollywood proves to be one of the major corroborator in promoting typical stereotypes related to Muslims. Western movies almost always represent Muslims with brown skin, wearing turbans, speaking with a particular accent, wearing traditional/native attires and associated with acts of hostility and terrorism (Eijaz, 2018).

These stereotypical portrayals related to physical appearances of Muslims in western media created a lot of problems for Muslims. For example, shortly after 9/11 a lot of airport incidents happened where Muslims were evacuated from the planes just because of their perceived stereotyping by Islamophobes. Ethnicities who have similarities in appearance with Muslims also became victims of such discrimination. The stereotypical caricature of Muslims is brown, bearded wearing turban if a man and wearing hijab if a woman. Because of the similarity in appearance Sikh community also became a victim of the scaremongering against Muslims after the 9/11 incident (Wolf & Halm, 2017).

### ***3.4 Stereotypes related to Muslim Women***

Westerners have a stereotypical way of defining a Muslim woman and describing her physical appearance. These descriptions are created and reinforced greatly by western media. Muslim women are represented as suppressed, housewives, sex objects, imperiled, backward, uneducated and even as terrorists. They are portrayed almost always as wearing headscarves or veils by the western media. Veils or headscarves are considered as a sign of modesty and morality in Islam but western media has associated veils/headscarves with oppression and gender injustice (Taufiq & Handayati, 2020; Tasneem et al., 2023).

Women with headscarves are deslared as religious fanatics. Western media has created a negative stereotype for veiled Muslim women associating it with extremism and oppression. Tasneem et al. (2023) in their study even found out that women who wear headscarf/Hijab face security risks, discriminations, difficulties in their careers, stigmatization and even verbal and physical harassments.

These stereotypes strangle individual freedom of Muslim women and create barriers for them to participate fully in society. Western media has always criticized Islam for marginalizing Muslim women and giving undue authority to Muslim men. This veiled image of Muslim women has long been used by western media to represent the stereotypical tyranny and misogynist ideology of Muslims and Islam created by west (Ahmad et al., 2021).

Terman (2017) studied Muslim women portrayal in US news media coverage and revealed that most of the stories covering Muslim women in US media revolved around issues related to gender inequality, honour killing and violence at the expense of other topics. The media compares western women who are portrayed as liberal and progressive with that of lives of Muslim women who need to be saved by western women from the so called tyranny and misogyny imposed by Islam and Muslim men.

In fact, US news media is obsessed with portraying Muslim women as oppressed and according to them veil proves to be a symbol of oppression for Muslim women. For example, in one of the news related to women in a US newspaper was headlined as “A Quiet Revolution in Iran; Beneath Coat and Scarf, Women Discover the Freedom to Play” reinforcing the stereotype that Muslim women are forcefully made to cover themselves with headscarves and it represents oppression and injustice (Terman, 2017).

### ***3.5 Representation of Islam as a religion of extremism and terrorism***

Stereotypes for Muslims and Islam created by western media are more or less interlinked. After thorough analysis of the retrieved literature there was one common theme that was Islam being represented as a

religion of extremism, violence and terrorism while representing Christianity as a religion of peace and prosperity (Saleem et al., 2021; Zhang, 2017)

Saleem et al., (2021) in their paper discussed one such incident of western media biased coverage against Islam by mentioning Bill Maher, a well-known media figure and host of the satirical political show "Real Time with Bill Maher" on HBO. They state in their paper that Bill Maher consistently portrays the Islam and its followers in a negative light, despite his claims of being progressive and tolerant towards all religions. He has spoken against Islam and its followers on various occasions in his show for instance, once in his show he made highly prejudiced and Islamophobic comment that "Islam is the motherlode of bad ideas, the Quran is a hate-filled holy book and the Islamization of Europe is underway". Western media is filled with a lot of such other examples as well.

The previous literature related to Islamophobia provides evidence that there has been exponential rise in hate crimes against Muslims after continuous negative portrayal of Islam and Muslim especially after the 9/11 incident. Even west has started war on terror in the name of ethnic cleansing as a counter attack of terrorism which is leading to killing of innocent Muslims all around the world. Zhang (2017) in his paper further goes ahead and declares that the reason for misrepresentation of Islam in western media in selective and biased coverage and sheer ignorance at the hands of western media experts to study the true essence and history of Islam.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

After analyzing the available literature on Islamophobia, it is concluded that Islamophobia in the media has become an important topic of research and debate in recent years. The results show that numerous researchers investigated Islamophobia from the lens of western media and retrieved results that are showcasing Muslims and Islam in a negative light only. There has been underrepresentation of Muslims and Islam in its true essence in the western media hence creating only negative and biased impression about Muslims and Islam among the world.

The problem with westerners not having enough understanding of Islam is that they have their own experts to define and represent Islam. While West represent 'West', 'East' is also represented by West. There should be enough Muslim representatives in higher authorities and in westerner media who can depict true picture of what Islam and Muslims are like and there should also be availability of enough platforms where Muslim experts can represent true picture of Islam its followers.

The studies suggest that there are numerous stereotypes created and are being maintained by western media against Muslims and Islam which are contributing directly to the rise in hate crimes against Muslims in the western countries. Stereotyping, particularly in the context of portraying Muslims and Islam, is contributing to biased and limited understandings. Keeping in mind the above discussion it can be concluded that developing critical media literacy among viewers is crucial for challenging and demystifying these stereotypes.

For future researchers, it is recommended to look for psychological effects of Islamophobia on Muslims and to study how it is affecting their everyday lives living in west. This study was limited to exploring only the Islamophobic discourses in media and highlighting major stereotypes against Muslims and Islam, the future researches can also explore factors behind Islamophobia and ways to overcome Islamophobia.

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## Appendix: Thematic Map

