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Framing of Islamophobia in The Western Press: A Critical Analysis

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Abstract

This quantitative content analysis delves into the representation of Islam and Muslims in Western media, uncovering a disturbing prevalence of Islamophobia. The findings reveal a dominant pattern of negative portrayals, largely perpetuating stereotypes and biases. The framing predominantly highlights fundamentalism, with occasional racism and religious discrimination. Furthermore, Western media tends to characterize Muslims and Islam as conservative and restrictive, associating the religion with threats, intolerance, and a war-like disposition. The analysis underscores the widespread use of demonizing language when discussing Muslims, overshadowing positive representations. At times, Muslims are depicted as lacking in culture and sophistication. The Western press often intentionally omits positive aspects of the narrative while emphasizing a global perspective that reinforces a Western-centric viewpoint. This pervasive negative portrayal of Islam and the prevalent Islamophobic undertones in Western media align with Edward Said's concept of 'us versus them.' It illustrates a stark division between the Western and Islamic worlds.

Keywords: Content Analysis, Episodic Frames, Thematic Frames, Islamophobia

1. Introduction

The portrayal of the Islamic religion and Muslims in the Western press has been extensively debated. This coverage has faced substantial scholarly criticism for its often-hostile rhetoric and reliance on stereotypes when discussing one of the world's largest religions and its diverse followers. Notably, reporting on Islam-related issues has seen a significant increase, and the framing of Islam has evolved considerably. Since 1965, three-quarters of the world's nations have ratified the United Nations (UN) International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination. However, the media plays a significant role in perpetuating biases against Muslims (Banton, 1996). Instead of primarily attributing fear and anxiety to anti-democratic forces, the media often portrays public concerns in cultural and racial terms, disproportionately assigning blame to certain religions for acts of violence and predispositions, reinforcing stereotypes (Reiter, 2012).

The Western press employs episodic and thematic frames when discussing Muslims and Islam. These frames frequently depict Muslims and Islam as sources of terrorism, crime, immigration challenges, and threats to liberal societies. They also tend to portray Muslims as conflict-ridden, brutal, despotic, misogynistic, and fundamentalist (Vliegenthart & Roggeband, 2007; Poole, 2000;

Richardson, 2004). Williams (2003) and Conboy (2010) further argue that Muslims are often presented as problematic whenever they appear in the media. Stereotypical representations of Islam and Muslims have concerned media scholars since the 1980s (see, for example, Said, 1981). However, this trend has evolved significantly due to critical events such as 9/11 and the 7/7 London bombings (Cannizzaro & Gholami, 2018). Nevertheless, some scholars, like Rane et al. (2014), contend that Orientalism, as articulated by Edward Said, still serves as a central predisposition through which Western media discusses Islam and Muslims, emphasizing differences and conflicts.

This study examined how Western media portrays Islam and Muslims, primarily focusing on identifying episodic and thematic frames related to Islamophobia. The research sought to evaluate how the Western press characterizes Islam, investigating whether it is depicted as a threat or a source of peace. Additionally, it scrutinized the portrayal of Muslims, assessing whether they are presented as uncivilized or as proponents of peace. The study also explored broader themes, such as conflict and harmony, associated with Islam in Western media coverage. This study's central research question was: "What episodic and thematic narratives did the selected Western newspapers employ when covering Muslims and Islam?"

2. Literature Review

Several studies, including those conducted by Elizabeth Poole and Richardson (2001, 2004), have shed light on the portrayal of Muslims in British newspapers. These studies reveal that British newspapers, often influenced by orientalist thinking, depict Muslims not as an integral part of their society but as an "out-group" or the 'other' (Poole, 2002). The central theme in British media framing is the perpetuation of "cultural racism" against Islam and Muslims (Poole, 2002). This bias has deep roots in the British colonial past, where power dynamics were used to exert authority over colonized populations (Hall, 1997). A recent case study focusing on reporting the "Operation Trojan Horse" incident in two British newspapers exemplified how the press adopted a radicalization narrative. In this narrative, Muslims were often depicted as a "suspect community," Islamic practices were framed as fanatical and potentially linked to terrorism (Poole, 2018).

Several research studies have uncovered a concerning pattern in portraying Islam and Muslims in the Australian press in recent years. This portrayal is more prejudiced, racial, intolerant, derogatory, negative, and stereotypical (Lowe, 1995; Manning, 2006; Quayle & Son, 2009; Rane, 2008; Susskind, 2002). Notably, Peter Manning, a prominent Australian journalist and media analyst, identified orientalist and stereotypical approaches in Australian newspapers when reporting on events in Indonesia, Lebanon, Syria, Israel, and Palestine.

Rane (2008) conducted a study revealing that the Australian media has painted a misleading picture of Islam, perpetuating stereotypes that lead to misinterpretations and strained relations between Muslims and the broader society. Rane (2008) coined the term "Mass Media Islam" to describe this mediated version of Islam, which he argued fosters unmediated interactions between the two communities. Additionally, Akbarzadeh and Smith (2005) documented the use of negative terms to describe Islam and Muslims, particularly in the context of national and international terrorism, such as "Muslim fanatics," "radical Islamic groups," and "Islamic fundamentalism."

Nacos and Torres-Reyna (2007) noted that since 9/11, dominant epithets used for Muslims include the bearded Muslim extremist, the niqab-wearing woman portrayed as subjugated or oppressed, and the deceitful bomber living among us. According to Powell (2018), the US-led 'war on terror' has amplified Islamophobia worldwide, impacting how media categorizes violent acts as terrorism and attributes motives differently to Muslims than non-Muslims. Extensive coverage of terrorism has created an atmosphere of Islamophobia characterized by fear and hatred. One prevalent Islamic stereotype that persists is that of the fundamentalist Muslim rebel portrayed as committed to waging jihad or holy war against the West.

Edward Said (1997) argued that negative generalizations about Islam and Muslims have become an accepted form of defamation and libel of foreign cultures in the West. He asserted that no other religion, including Jews, Africans, or other Orientals, faces such widespread negative portrayals in contemporary media discourse. Alghamdi (2015) and Nurullah (2010) also contend that Western media, with a particular focus on British and US media, plays a significant role in perpetuating biases, irrationality, and an inaccurate image of Islam and Muslims among Western audiences.

3. Theoretical Framework

According to Nelson and Kinder (1996), a frame essentially shapes how a particular issue is perceived and understood. News frames are tools that journalists use to organize and present information to their audiences (Gitlin, 1978). For this research, two primary frames were selected: episodic and thematic. Frames can be either issue/event-specific (episodic) or broader in scope (thematic). Iyengar (1991) made a distinction between thematic and episodic frames. Episodic frames focus on isolated events within a specific issue, whereas thematic frames delve into a broader societal issue, providing a more comprehensive perspective (De Vreese, 2005, p. 56). Iyengar (2011) noted that a thematic news frame often includes in-depth background information and frequently employs statistics. In contrast, an episodic news frame portrays issues through individual instances or specific events, often conveyed through personal narratives, making them more engaging (Gross, 2008; Iyengar, 1991). The relative strength of episodic and thematic frames to argue that our understanding of the dynamics of frame strength can be advanced through a better incorporation of citizens' emotional reactions (Raza, et al., 2023).

Numerous studies have utilized framing theory to analyze media coverage of Islam and Muslims. Researchers such as Ibrahim (2003), Siraj (2006), Nacos and Torres-Reyna (2007), Sardar and Davies (2010), Poole (2002, 2006, 2011, 2016), Morey and Yaqin (2011), Powell (2011), Ali (2012), Han and Rane (2013), El-Nawawy and Elmasry (2017), among others, have explored how these frames impact the portrayal of Islam and Muslims.

The framing approach focuses on deliberately selecting and presenting events and concepts, often implicitly implying their existence. This framing technique is frequently employed in news coverage, utilizing themes with similar underlying concepts. It significantly emphasizes elements like headlines, introductions, and the concluding portions of news stories. Furthermore, it prioritizes placement in prominent positions within print media and at the outset of TV news broadcasts (Palmeri, 2019).

A substantial portion of framing revolves around the master theme, which tends to portray issues as being 'pro' or 'against,' 'good' or 'bad,' 'for' or 'against. This approach often involves highlighting

certain elements while disregarding others. Visual media entails carefully selecting images that reinforce a particular viewpoint in favor of or against a given topic (Siraj, 2007).

For instance, in discussions involving casualties, specially coined thematic words can significantly shape public perception, such as 'killed' versus 'murdered', 'collateral damage,' or 'incidental death.' Reference modes play a role here, too, with pro-Western writers using terms like 'Taliban' versus 'Liberators.' In quoting attributions, journalists tend to employ linguistic expressions that align with their ideological perspectives, such as 'civilized' versus 'uncivilized,' 'feminists' versus 'radicals,' 'peace lovers' versus 'Islamists,' and 'fundamentalists' (Siraj, 2006).

One notable aspect of the framing approach is its capacity to exclude certain aspects of a narrative while emphasizing a global perspective to reinforce the chosen frame, often portraying it as beneficial to society. For instance, Powell (2011) illustrated how Muslims involved in acts of terrorism frequently framed Muslims as 'terrorists' in Western media. Additionally, these media outlets tended to emphasize their religious and ethnic identities, portraying them as having sinister motives and connections to terrorist organizations like Al-Qaida and ISIS (Hina, 2023)

4. Methodology

This study employed a quantitative approach to analyze the various and prevalent frames used by the selected Western Newspapers in their coverage of Islam and Muslims from January 2015 to December 2016. The primary objective was to investigate the disparities in their reporting using episodic and thematic frames. The study aimed to discern how Islam and Muslims were portrayed and identified thirteen episodic and fourteen thematic frames. The framing methodology was applied to identify the most recent episodic and thematic frames employed in Western media content and to assess the presence of Islamophobia in these newspapers. The study used a probability systematic sampling technique to collect data from the selected newspapers (The Washington Post, The Australian, The Guardian, and The National (Finance)Post. Details of the stories in these newspapers are available in Table 1.

4.1.Recording and Contextual Unit

Using the recording and contextual coding techniques to analyze the coverage, we use the headline and the lead as the recording unit while the whole story is the contextual unit to analyze the thematic and episodic frames. If there was uncertainty about how to code based on the headline, lead, or paragraph, the researcher read the entire article until a coding decision was reached.

4.2.Results

The final sample containing 1230 articles was distributed among the selected newspapers as follows: 324 articles (26.3%) from The Guardian, 368 articles (29.9%) from The Washington Post, 293 articles (23.8%) from The Australian, and 245 articles (19.9%) from the National Post (Table 1).

Table 1: Sample Characteristics

Variables	N & Percentage
Total Stories	1230
Guardian	324 (26.3)
The Washington Post	368 (29.9)
The Australian	293 (23.8)
The National (Finance)Post	245 (19.9)

Research Question 1 seeks to understand how the selected newspapers covered the episodic frames. Table 2 shows the frequency and percentages of episodic frames within each newspaper. As evident from the table, there was a clear difference in the coverage of eventual frames in all the selected newspapers. This was also supported by the chi-square test (X²=214.647; p=.000). For instance, The Guardian allocated more coverage, with 121 stories (37.3% out of 324) featuring the 'Racism/Religious Discrimination' frame. In contrast, The Washington Post featured 114 stories (31.0%), The Australian included 90 stories (30.7%), and The National Post had 58 stories (23.7%) that used the 'Stereotypes/Prejudices/Fundamentalism' frame more prominently than other episodic frames. This analysis underscores the variations in how these newspapers approached and emphasized specific episodic frames in their reporting on Islam and Muslims.

Table 2: Frequencies and Percentages of Eventual Frames in Newspapers

Australian	Post	National	Guardi	an Wa	Washington Post	
Episodic Frames		N (%)	I	N (%)		
N (%)	N (%)	N (%)			,	
	olvement in 57 (6.9)	Terrorism 56 (4.6)	2 (0.6)	12 (3.3)	25	
Crime Epis 7 (2.9)	odes 35 (2.8)		9 (2.9)	3 (0.8)	16 (5.5)	
Immigratio 14 (5.7)	n 81 (6.6)		20 (6.2)	24 (6.5)	23 (7.8)	
Race/faith I 52 (21.2)	Discrimination 271 (22.0)		121 (37.3)	70 (19.0)	28 (9.6)	
Physical ab			36 (11.1)	16 (4.3)	4 (1.4)	
4 (1.6)	60 (4.9)					

Religious Activities	13 (4.0)	15 (4.1)	9 (3.1)
11(4.5) 8 (3.9)			
Muslim in Politics	6 (1.9)	43 (11.7)	20 (6.8)
17 (6.9) 86 (7.0)			
World Politics	15 (4.6)	34 (9.2)	31 (10.6)
32 (13.1) 112 (9.1)			
Stereotypes	66 (20.4)	114 (31.0)	90 (30.7)
58 (23.7) 328 (26.7)	,	, ,	, ,
Islamic Rules regulations	1 (0.3)	1 (0.3)	5 (1.7)
0 (0.0) 7 (0.6)			
Muslim and Communities	23 (7.1)	29 (7.9)	26 (8.9)
22 (9.0) 100 (8.1)			
Others	10 (3.1)	3 (0.8)	2 (0.7)
3 (1.2) 18 (1.5)	,		
Total	324 (6.3)	368 (29.9)	293 (23.8)
245 (19.9) 1230 (100)	324 (0.3)	300 (23.3)	293 (23.8)

Research Question 2 is about how did the selected newspapers give coverage to the thematic frames. Table 3 shows the result of the thematic frame in the selected press with frequencies and percentages supported by the Chi Square test.

Table 3: Thematic Frames in the Selected Newspapers

National	Guardian Total	Guardian Washington Post		Australian Post	
Thematic Frames	N (%)	N(%)	N (%	.)	
N (%) N (%)	14 (70)	14(/0)	14 (//))	
Islam is Threatful ¹ 564 (45.9)	111 (19.7)	163 (28.9)	174 (30.9)	116 (20.6)	
Islam is Peaceful ² 163 (13.3)	35 (21.5)	50 (30.7)	51 (31.3)	27 (16.6)	
Islam is Tolerant ³ 425 (34.6)	143(33.6)	168 (39.5)	77 (18.1)	37 (8.7)	
Islam is Intolerant ⁴ 609 (49.5)	98 (16.1)	193 (31.7)	196 (32.2)	122 (20.0)	
Westerners are Tolerant 789 (64.1)	5 222 (28.1)	242 (30.7)	169 (21.4)	156 (19.8)	

Westerners are Intolerant ⁶	292 (34.3)	252 (29.6)	149 (17.5)	159 (18.7)	
852 (69.3) Muslims are Uncouth ⁷	25 (12.4)	73 (36.1)	67 (33.2)	37 (18.3)	
202 (16.4) Muslims are Couth ⁸	64 (27.1)	80 (33.9)	45 (19.1)	47 (19.9)	
236 (19.2) Islam is War-Oriented ⁹	8 (17.0)	10 (21.3)	12 (25.5)	17 (36.2)	
47 (3.8) Islam is Peace-Oriented ¹⁰	3 (15.0)	6 (30.0)	2 (10.0)	9 (45.0)	
20 (1.6) Islam is a Foe ¹¹	30 (11.3)	97 (36.5)	79 (29.7)	60 (22.6)	
266 (21.6) Islam is a Friend ¹² 149 (12.1)	7 (4.7)	68 (45.6)	42 (28.2)	32 (21.5)	
Use of Demonizing Lang. ¹ 86 (7.0)	³ 9 (10.5)	16 (18.6)	38 (44.2)	23 (26.7)	
Use of Good Language ¹⁴ 16 (1.3)	2 (12.5)	3 (18.8)	6 (37.5)	5(31.3)	
¹ Chi Square=105.682; p. = .055					
⁴ Chi Square=91.866; p.=.09 Square=158.274;p.=.000	0 ⁵ Chi	Square=83.309; p.=.0)44 ⁶ C	hi	
⁷ Chi Square=39.534; p.=.93 Square=31.079;p.=.268	1 1		161 ⁹ C	hi	
¹⁰ Chi Square=26.852; p.=.0 Square=52.335;p.=.211	30 ¹¹ Chi	¹¹ Chi Square=47.861; p.=.800		hi	
¹³ Chi Square=10.947; p.=.5	33 ¹⁴ Chi	Square=10.080;p.=.34	14		

The table clearly illustrates the prominence of specific thematic frames among various news outlets. Notably, The Guardian (N=292 or 34.3 percent), The Washington Post (N=252 or 29.6 percent), and the National Post (N=159 or 18.7 percent) allocated a larger share of their coverage to portraying Westerners as intolerant toward Islam and Muslims, compared to other frames. This difference in coverage was statistically significant (chi-square=158.274; p=<0.001).

In contrast, The Australian (N=196 or 32.2 percent) prioritized portraying Islam as an intolerant religion more than other thematic frames in their stories. However, the chi-square test results (chi-square=91.866; p=0.090) suggest that the number of stories depicting Islam as intolerant in The Australian newspaper did not significantly differ from other newspapers.

5. Discussion

The study's findings have revealed significant disparities in the frequency of the frames used, with the 'Stereotypes/Prejudice/Fundamentalism' frame emerging as the most prevalent, closely followed by the 'Racism/Religious Discrimination' frame (Manning, 2003; Saeed, 2003, 2007; Moosavi, 2013; Ameli et al., 2007; Kundnani, 2007; Poole, 2000; Nacos & Torres-Reyna, 2007). These results suggest a pervasive tendency in media coverage to portray Islam and Muslims in a stereotypical light. These findings align with prior research conducted by these scholars, consistently illustrating Muslims as depicted in a static, monolithic, and resistant-to-change manner. Islam is often unfairly characterized as inherently backward and patriarchal.

The overarching conclusion is that Western media outlets generally depict Muslims as uncivilized, terrorists, radicals, and a source of global instability. The Western media narrative concerning the Muslim world exhibits a clear bias, often utilizing satirically crafted thematic terms such as 'uncivilized,' 'Brutal,' 'anti-feminists,' 'radicals,' 'Islamists,' 'fundamentalists,' and 'Taliban,' among others. A substantial portion of this framing approach revolves around a binary portrayal of issues as either 'pro' or 'against,' 'good' or 'bad,' and 'for' or 'against.' This approach frequently accentuates specific elements while downplaying others (Siraj, 2006). For instance, Powell (2011) illustrated how individuals of the Muslim faith, unlike Christians and others involved in acts of terrorism, and thus the Western media consistently framed Muslims as 'terrorists'. Furthermore, these media sources frequently emphasized the religious and ethnic identities of Muslims, portraying them as having sinister intentions and affiliations with terrorist organizations like Al-Qaida and ISIS (Hina, 2023).

Examining how events involving Muslim casualties were framed using thematic terminology to shape public perception. Instead of using the term 'killing of Muslims,' the media often opted for phrases like 'collateral damage' or 'incidental death.' Reference modes also come into play here, with pro-Western writers using terms like 'Taliban, terrorists' instead of 'Liberators.' In similes and metaphors, Western journalists use expressions that align with their ideological viewpoints, like 'civilized' versus 'uncivilized,' 'feminists' versus 'radicals,' 'peace lovers' versus 'Islamists,' and 'fundamentalists'. The study also observed that frames used by Western press regarding Muslims and Islam tend to exclude certain aspects of an event while emphasizing a global perspective to reinforce the selected frame, often presenting it as beneficial from their societal standpoint.

Regarding the behavior and attitude of the Muslim population within Western society, the overall approach of Western media in news reporting and opinion pieces aligns with Said's (1978) assertion that the Western press often portrays Muslims as inferior, uncultured, unintelligent, and incompatible with Western society, necessitating guidance from the culturally superior West. On a global scale, Western media coverage characterizing Islam and Muslims employs harsh terminology, such as 'terrorist,' 'peace destroyers,' 'Taliban,', perpetrators, Suicide bombers, and 'backward,' perpetuating stereotypes and biases.

6. Conclusion

The findings of this study reveal that all four selected Western newspapers extensively covered Islamophobia, which was notably pervasive across both episodic and thematic frames. Furthermore, the overall tone of the coverage tended to lean more negative than positive when depicting Islam and Muslims. The Western press exhibits racial and stereotypical biases when portraying Islam and its followers. Muslims are frequently considered conservative and perceived as a potential threat to Western values. This negative portrayal of Islam, coupled with Islamophobic undertones prevalent in Western media, aligns with Edward Said's concept of 'us versus them,' illustrating a clear division between the Western and Islamic worlds, often framed in adversarial terms. These findings underscore the critical need to address biases and stereotypes in media representation, particularly concerning Islam and Muslims, and to recognize the potential consequences of perpetuating such negative narratives.

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