

Islam and Media Narratives in the Representation of Muslim Identity in the Digital Age

Nur Diananingsih¹

¹Universitas Islam Makassar, Fakultas Hukum

Corresponding Author: Nur Diananingsih

Abstract

This article examines how Muslim identity is represented in the digital age through the competing narratives of mainstream and digital media. Using a qualitative approach and critical discourse analysis, it explores media texts from international news outlets alongside digital content such as hashtags, influencer posts, and user-generated media. The findings reveal three main dynamics. First, mainstream outlets continue to reproduce Orientalist stereotypes, often framing Muslims within narratives of extremism, security threats, and cultural incompatibility. Second, digital platforms provide spaces for counter-narratives, where Muslims reclaim their voices, normalize everyday practices, and foster transnational solidarity through what has been called a “digital ummah.” Third, hybrid identities emerge at the intersection of religion, modernity, and consumer culture, blending Islamic symbols with popular culture but also raising concerns about commodification and authenticity. These dynamics show that Muslim identity in digital spaces cannot be reduced to either victimhood or resistance; rather, it is shaped by ongoing negotiations between agency, representation, and structural constraints. While digital platforms expand opportunities for visibility and self-representation, they also reproduce hierarchies of power through algorithmic bias, commercialization, and geopolitics. The study underscores the need to view digital media as both a site of empowerment and a terrain of struggle over Muslim identity.

Keywords

Muslim Identity
Digital Media
Media Narratives
Orientalism

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Introduction

In the twenty-first century, media has emerged as one of the most powerful institutions in shaping how identities are represented and perceived. For Muslim communities in particular, the digital age presents a complex landscape of opportunities and challenges. Historically, mainstream media especially in Western contexts has often framed Islam through a narrow set of narratives that emphasize extremism, terrorism, and cultural incompatibility with modernity (Latif, 2024; Funk & Said, 2004; Lyons, 2014). These portrayals are neither neutral nor incidental but tied to larger discourses of Orientalism, securitization, and geopolitical power. They have contributed to the marginalization of Muslims, reinforcing stereotypes that influence public opinion, state policies, and even interpersonal relations. Within this framework, Muslims are frequently positioned as the “Other,” defined less by their lived realities than by narratives imposed upon them.

The digital age, however, has disrupted this dynamic to a significant extent. Unlike traditional mass media that operates through top-down dissemination, digital platforms such as Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok allow for more participatory and decentralized modes of communication (Su, 2020; Lu et al., 2025; Oluwafemi, 2025). This transformation creates space for Muslims to articulate their own voices, challenge dominant stereotypes, and project diverse forms of self-representation. For instance, Muslim influencers, activists, and scholars have used social media to share everyday experiences, religious reflections, and cultural creativity that complicate monolithic portrayals (Zaid et al., 2022; Hammad, 2022;). Such practices demonstrate that Muslim identity is not static but multifaceted, encompassing intersections of religion, gender, ethnicity, class, and geography (Mills & Gökarıksel, 2014; Nayel, 2017; Au, 2023; Hotait & Ali, 2024).

At the same time, the shift to digital media does not mean that power inequalities vanish. Online platforms are shaped by algorithmic logics, corporate interests, and state surveillance, all of which affect whose voices are amplified and whose are silenced. For example, studies have shown that algorithmic biases can reinforce Islamophobic content by privileging sensational or polarizing material that garners higher engagement (Ibrahim, 2023; Tréré & Bonini, 2024; Ganesh & Moss, 2022). Similarly, governments have increasingly monitored and censored Muslim online activity, framing it through the lens of counter-terrorism and security. Thus, while digital media expands the possibilities of self-representation, it simultaneously reproduces older hierarchies of visibility and legitimacy in new forms. This paradox highlights the need for critical engagement with both the emancipatory and restrictive dimensions of digital communication.

Moreover, the narratives surrounding Islam in the digital sphere reveal the global and transnational character of Muslim identity. Unlike in earlier eras, where representation was filtered primarily through national media, today's digital platforms enable Muslims from different regions to connect, share, and construct collective imaginaries that transcend territorial boundaries (Rizvi, 2021; Berfin Emre, 2023; Zaid et al., 2022). Diasporic communities, for example, often use digital spaces to negotiate their dual belonging—asserting their Muslim identity while also engaging with broader societal debates on multiculturalism, citizenship, and social justice. This transnational dimension fosters a sense of solidarity across borders, yet it also generates tensions, as local specificities of culture and practice sometimes conflict with globalized representations of Islam (Mandaville, 2011; Bowen, 2004; Mazya et al., 2024; Hassan, 2025).

Cultural production in digital spaces further illustrates the creativity of Muslim self-representation (Demerdash, 2024; Jaiswal & Kapoor, 2024). From modest fashion influencers redefining the global fashion industry to digital art, podcasts, and vlogs that highlight Muslim life, these initiatives demonstrate how identity can be performed, narrated, and commodified in new ways. Such practices contest the dominant framing of Muslims as solely objects of security discourse, instead presenting them as agents of cultural innovation and everyday normalcy. Yet, the commodification of Muslim identity online also raises questions about authenticity, commercialization, and the risk of reducing complex experiences into marketable aesthetics (Hasan, 2009; Ali, 2020).

It is also important to recognize that digital platforms are not equally accessible to all Muslims. Socioeconomic disparities, digital literacy, and linguistic divides mean that certain voices—often urban, educated, and English-speaking dominate online spaces, while marginalized groups remain underrepresented (Louisy, 2013; Liu & Darvin, 2024; Tankosić, 2022). This imbalance challenges the idea that digital media inherently democratizes representation. Furthermore, while some Muslim narratives gain visibility in global platforms, local or minority perspectives can be overshadowed, reinforcing new hierarchies within Muslim communities themselves.

Taken together, these dynamics suggest that the representation of Muslim identity in the digital age is a contested and multilayered process (Iner & Yucel, 2015; Chapman, 2016; Novak & El-Burki, 2016; Ahmed, 2003). It cannot be reduced to a simple story of liberation from stereotypes nor to an account of continued marginalization. Rather, it is shaped by ongoing struggles over power, visibility, and meaning. Media narratives about Islam remain embedded in global discourses of politics and culture, but Muslims are no longer passive subjects of representation; they are increasingly active participants in shaping how their identities are understood.

Against this backdrop, this article explores how Islam and Muslim identity are represented in the digital age through competing media narratives (Azad, 2017; Latif, 2024; Funk & Latif, 2004). It argues that while digital platforms offer unprecedented opportunities for self-representation, they also reproduce older forms of inequality in new and subtle ways. By examining both mainstream and digital media, the discussion highlights the tensions between marginalization and empowerment, stereotype and authenticity, exclusion and belonging (Behm-Morawitz & Valerius, 2024). Ultimately, understanding Muslim identity in the digital era requires attention to both the structures of media power and the creative strategies of resistance and negotiation employed by Muslim communities themselves.

Methods

This study adopts a qualitative research design with an interpretive orientation, as the focus lies in exploring how media narratives construct and circulate representations of Muslim identity in the digital age. Rather than testing hypotheses or measuring variables, the research seeks to analyze meanings, discourses, and practices that shape Muslim self-representation across different media platforms. The interpretive approach allows for a deeper understanding of the symbolic and ideological dimensions embedded in media texts as well as in user-generated content.

The primary method used is critical discourse analysis (CDA), building on the works of Fairclough (1995), van Dijk (1998), and Wodak & Meyer (2009). CDA is particularly suitable because it investigates how power, ideology, and identity are reproduced and contested through language, images, and narratives. In this study, CDA is applied to both traditional media outputs—such as online news coverage from international outlets—and digital platforms, including social media posts, YouTube videos, and influencer content that explicitly engage with Muslim identity. Through this method, the research examines how dominant stereotypes, counter-narratives, and hybrid forms of identity are articulated, negotiated, and circulated.

The selection of data follows a purposive sampling strategy. Mainstream media texts were chosen from leading global news outlets (e.g., BBC, CNN, Al Jazeera, The Guardian) covering Islam and Muslims between 2015 and 2023, a period marked by heightened global debates around migration, terrorism, Islamophobia, and digital activism. Digital media sources were drawn from popular hashtags (#MuslimIdentity, #BeingMuslim, #HijabFashion) and accounts of Muslim content creators across platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok. This range ensures that both institutional and grassroots narratives are included, enabling comparative insights.

For data collection, the study compiled a corpus of approximately 100 media items, divided equally between mainstream and digital media. Each item was archived, coded, and categorized according to themes such as representation of Islam, identity negotiation, counter-stereotyping, commodification, and hybridity. The analysis focused not only on explicit content (e.g., headlines, hashtags, captions) but also on implicit elements such as imagery, framing devices, and intertextual references.

To enhance analytical rigor, the research incorporates triangulation of data sources. In addition to textual analysis, secondary literature—academic articles, reports on Islamophobia, and studies on digital activism—was consulted to situate findings within broader socio-political contexts. Reflexivity was also integrated into the methodology, acknowledging the researcher's positionality and potential biases in interpreting media texts.

Ethical considerations were carefully addressed, particularly with digital media content. Only publicly available posts were analyzed, and personal identifiers beyond usernames were anonymized when cited to protect the privacy of individual users. The aim was to respect the autonomy of digital communities while still engaging critically with their narratives.

Results and Discussion

The analysis of media texts reveals three overarching patterns in the representation of Muslim identity in the digital age: the persistence of negative stereotypes in mainstream outlets, the emergence of counter-narratives in digital spaces, and the negotiation of hybrid identities shaped by both global and local contexts. Together, these findings illustrate the contested and dynamic nature of Muslim self-representation, highlighting how power, ideology, and resistance intersect in the digital media landscape.

Persistence of Stereotypes in Mainstream Media

Mainstream media outlets continue to frame Muslims through the lens of security, extremism, and cultural otherness. Coverage of events such as terrorist attacks or refugee crises often foregrounds Islam as a source of suspicion, reinforcing a narrative of incompatibility between Islam and Western values (Poole, 2002; Saeed, 2007). This reductionist framing has long-term consequences: it not only feeds into societal stereotypes but

also shapes state policies on immigration, security, and multiculturalism. By continually positioning Muslims as a “problem” to be managed, mainstream media contributes to a climate of fear and distrust, normalizing Islamophobia as part of public discourse.

In news articles surveyed from outlets like CNN and *The Guardian*, recurring linguistic choices such as “radical,” “Islamist,” or “fundamentalist” were prominent, associating Muslim identity with threat rather than diversity. These linguistic practices operate as powerful signifiers, where single words condense complex realities into simplified frames of danger. The visual dimension further compounds this issue: images of veiled women or men in religious attire juxtaposed with scenes of conflict subtly create associations between Islam and violence. Such semiotic pairings leave little room for nuance, reinforcing binaries of “us” versus “them” and erasing the plural and everyday realities of Muslim life.

These practices reproduce Orientalist discourses (Said, 1997) that homogenize Muslims and deny them individual complexity. The persistence of these frames suggests that mainstream media does not merely report reality but actively constructs it through selective emphasis and repetition. The problem, therefore, is not simply misrepresentation but the systematic production of narratives that define who Muslims are in the public imagination. This not only marginalizes Muslims but also limits broader societies from engaging with Islam as a multifaceted tradition, instead reducing it to a monolithic and threatening other.

Counter-Narratives in Digital Media

By contrast, digital platforms have enabled Muslims to reclaim their voices and contest reductive portrayals. Analysis of hashtags like #BeingMuslim and #HijabFashion demonstrates how online communities articulate narratives of empowerment, creativity, and normalcy. These digital expressions disrupt the dominance of mainstream narratives by offering alternative ways of being Muslim that foreground joy, resilience, and cultural pride. Muslim influencers on TikTok and Instagram, for example, use the language of everyday life—fashion choices, family interactions, humor—to subtly but powerfully resist stereotypes. These posts do not deny religion but instead integrate faith into modern lifestyles, thereby normalizing Muslim identity in ways that resonate across cultural and generational boundaries. In doing so, digital spaces become arenas for identity performance where Muslimness is shown as ordinary, relatable, and plural rather than threatening.

Importantly, such counter-narratives also create solidarity across transnational audiences, fostering what Echchaibi (2011) terms the *digital ummah*. Here, Muslims are not bound solely by geography but by shared digital practices, conversations, and acts of storytelling that cross national borders. This sense of belonging is especially significant for younger generations who experience Islam both as a lived tradition and as a contested label in public discourse. By amplifying diverse Muslim voices—from hijab fashion bloggers in Indonesia to comedians in the United States—digital media allows for a redefinition of belonging that challenges exclusionary national or cultural categories.

However, digital spaces are not free from challenges. Algorithmic biases often amplify sensationalist or Islamophobic content, marginalizing counter-narratives and reinforcing stereotypes at a structural level. Furthermore, Muslim creators face targeted harassment, trolling, and even state surveillance, which constrain their freedom to express identity openly. These dynamics reveal the precariousness of digital empowerment: while platforms offer unprecedented opportunities for visibility and agency, they simultaneously reproduce hierarchies of power and exclusion. This tension underscores the dual role of digital platforms as both sites of liberation and control, reminding us that reclaiming representation in the digital sphere is always partial, contested, and fragile.

Negotiation of Hybrid Identities

A third finding concerns the formation of hybrid identities at the intersection of Islam, modernity, and consumer culture. On platforms such as YouTube and Instagram, Muslim creators often blend religious symbols with popular culture—for example, integrating hijab into global fashion trends or producing comedy sketches that mix Islamic references with everyday struggles of youth. These practices demonstrate the creative agency of Muslims to reinterpret tradition in contemporary contexts, showing that identity is not static but

constantly renegotiated. At the same time, such hybridity raises important questions about commodification. The commercialization of Muslim identity—evident in the rise of halal tourism, modest fashion industries, and corporate branding campaigns—risks reducing Islam to a lifestyle product rather than a spiritual or ethical framework (Gökarıksel & McLarney, 2010). This shift suggests that while hybridity opens avenues for inclusion and visibility, it can also flatten religious meaning into consumer choices.

This hybridity is not entirely new; as Mandaville (2014) argues, Muslim identities have always been shaped by negotiation across borders and contexts, from the Indian Ocean trade networks to diasporic communities in Europe and North America. What digital media changes is the **speed, scale, and intensity** of these negotiations. Local practices can now achieve global visibility within hours, transforming niche cultural expressions into worldwide trends. Yet, this rapid circulation also produces new forms of tension within Muslim communities. The visibility of hybrid identities sparks debates over authenticity, religious authority, and cultural dilution, as some view these practices as legitimate adaptations while others see them as departures from orthodoxy.

These tensions reveal that hybridity in the digital age is both empowering and destabilizing. It allows Muslims to claim space within global cultural economies, but it also highlights fractures within Muslim communities over what constitutes a “true” or “authentic” expression of faith. Thus, digital hybridity is not simply a celebration of diversity but a contested process that reflects deeper struggles over meaning, legitimacy, and belonging.

Broader Implications

Taken together, the findings suggest that Muslim identity in the digital age cannot be reduced to either victimhood or resistance. Instead, it emerges as a dynamic field of ongoing negotiation where media narratives, user agency, and structural constraints intersect. This complexity challenges binary frameworks that portray Muslims either as passive subjects of representation or as heroic resisters of oppression. In reality, Muslim identity online is produced through uneven encounters—between dominant discourses and counter-discourses, between self-expression and surveillance, and between local practices and global circulation.

Mainstream outlets continue to reproduce stigmatizing discourses, casting Muslims within frames of extremism, cultural incompatibility, and security threats. Yet, digital media simultaneously opens avenues for Muslims to assert agency, construct counter-narratives, and create hybrid cultural forms that challenge these stereotypes. This duality demonstrates the paradox of digital spaces: they can empower marginalized voices while also exposing them to harassment, misrepresentation, and algorithmic invisibility. Thus, agency exists, but it is always exercised within conditions that constrain and shape its possibilities.

At the same time, these opportunities are embedded in broader logics of digital capitalism and geopolitics, which limit the extent of transformative change. Content moderation policies, platform algorithms, and corporate interests determine which Muslim voices gain visibility and which remain silenced. Similarly, geopolitical contexts—such as the war on terror, refugee crises, and state surveillance regimes—continue to frame how Muslims are seen and heard online. As a result, while digital media expands the horizons of representation, it does not dissolve existing hierarchies of power. Rather, it reconfigures them in ways that require continuous negotiation, resistance, and adaptation.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Muslim identity in the digital age is not a fixed category but a contested terrain shaped by the interplay of media narratives, digital agency, and structural constraints. While mainstream outlets continue to reproduce stereotypes that associate Islam with extremism and cultural otherness, digital platforms provide new opportunities for Muslims to construct counter-narratives, perform everyday identities, and experiment with hybrid cultural forms. Yet, these opportunities are uneven, constrained by algorithmic biases, commercialization, and geopolitical forces that limit the scope of transformative change. The findings highlight that the struggle over Muslim representation is ongoing: digital media can amplify alternative voices, but it does not erase entrenched hierarchies of power. Instead, it reconfigures the field of contestation,

requiring critical engagement with both the possibilities and the limitations of identity-making in the digital public sphere.

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