



Reading Islam in Western Media: Hermeneutic Perspectives and the Hybridity of Southeast Asian Muslim Cultures

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<https://doi.org/10.23917/suhuf.v37i2.11850>

ARTICLE INFO

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received Month 07, 2025

Revised Month 10, 2025

Accepted Month 11, 2025

KEYWORDS

Western Media

Hermeneutics

Hybrid Culture

Southeast Asian Muslims

Global media landscape

ABSTRACT

This article examines how Islam is represented in Western media and how Southeast Asian Muslim communities interpret and respond to these representations. Using Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics and Homi K. Bhabha's theory of cultural hybridity, this study explores the intersection between Western media narratives about Islam and the regional cultural contexts of Muslims in Southeast Asia. Representations of Islam in Western media often contain orientalist bias and symbolic simplifications that shape the global public's perception of Muslims. However, Muslims do not always accept these depictions unquestioningly. Traditionally, Muslims in Southeast Asia have negotiated meaning and constructed new identities that combine Islamic traditions with modern values. This study employs a qualitative-hermeneutic approach by analyzing Western digital media texts including online news outlets (BBC, CNN) and popular audiovisual platforms (Netflix, YouTube) alongside Muslim audience responses collected from social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok. The findings demonstrate the formation of a dynamic hybrid identity resulting from the interaction between Western media portrayals and Southeast Asian Muslim socio-religious practices in the digital era. This raises epistemological challenges in understanding religious authority and symbolic meaning in online spaces. Therefore, a more critical and contextual approach is needed in rereading the representation of Islam within the global media landscape.

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1. Introduction

The representation of Islam and the Muslim community in Western media framing still shows information inequality. The news categories about the Islamic community that most often appear in Western media are dominated by violence, rebellion, terrorism, war, and even death. Therefore, the

news orientation generally portrays Muslims in negative stereotypes [1]. A systematic literature review by Khan et al. confirms that Islamophobia, who synthesized various scientific study publications from 2002-2022 indexed by Web of Science, Scopus, and ProQuest. This research, in the form of a systematic literature review, describes the trend of Islamophobia in the West, which is formed from discourse based on anxiety and fear of the Muslim community. Western media framing shapes public perceptions that influence various Western attitudes and policies toward the Muslim community [2]. The role of Western media not only strengthens social inequality but also shapes the horizon of global public understanding of cultural and religious identities, including Islam.

Edward W. Said calls this representation a long-standing legacy of Western ethnocentrism. Western societies view Islam as foreign, backward, and even dangerous [3]. This perspective is historically rooted in the tradition of Orientalism and continues to evolve into neo-Orientalism. Negative media framing of Islam has now developed in new forms through various mass-published media narratives, both through print and electronic and digital media [4], [5]. In this context, Western society's reading of Islam through the media is inseparable from the reader's position and cultural background. In other contexts, non-Arab Muslim entities, such as those in Indonesia and Southeast Asia, generally represent moderate Islam with strong local cultural characteristics. These Muslim communities employ an eclectic and tolerant approach, both in the context of Islamic jurisprudence and in multicultural social institutions [6].

Against this background, the author conducts a media study using a hermeneutic approach. The hermeneutic approach, particularly as formulated by Hans-Georg Gadamer, offers a framework for understanding how meaning is formed through the intersection of the text's horizon and the reader's horizon. The theory of fusion of horizons allows us to see that understanding Islam in Western media is not objective but rather is always influenced by history, cultural prejudices, and the reader's collective experiences [7]. In this article, Western media is positioned as a "cultural text," while Muslim communities, particularly in Southeast Asia, function as active readers who bring a collective horizon, traditions of cooperation, and local Islamic values. Furthermore, the interaction between global representations and local responses creates non-linear cultural dynamics. The emergence of urban Muslim influencers and open digital da'wah demonstrates the emergence of a hybrid culture. Islamic symbols in the digital media era are packaged in the style of digital capitalism. Homi K. Bhabha calls the concept of hybridity with the Third Space, where the boundaries between the global and the local, tradition and modernity, are continuously negotiated [8].

Therefore, this study seeks to answer three main research questions:

1. How is Islam represented in Western digital media?
2. How do Southeast Asian Muslim audiences interpret and negotiate these representations?
3. How does the interaction between Western representations and Muslim interpretations contribute to the formation of hybrid cultural identities in the digital era?

Through these questions, this article aims to demonstrate that understanding Islam in global media spaces requires not only textual analysis but also a dialogical engagement between cultural horizons. Such an approach reveals that Muslim identity today is not merely a passive product of Western representations but a dynamic and creative negotiation within the global digital landscape.

2. Method

This study uses a qualitative approach with a philosophical hermeneutic framework developed by Hans-Georg Gadamer. The author uses this approach to understand how Western digital media represents Islam and how the horizons of meaning between text and reader interact dynamically in a changing cultural context [9]. The main object of this study is Western digital media content that represents Islam, both in the form of news content and social media narratives. This content is analyzed as a cultural text that contains a historical horizon and certain value prejudices [10]. The process of interpreting the text is carried out through the principle of fusion of horizons, namely the meeting between the horizon of the Western writer/media with the horizon of the reader, namely the

Muslim community in the non-Arab global region, namely Southeast Asia, including Indonesia. In understanding the context of digital media, the author uses a cultural discourse analysis approach through the hybrid culture theory of Homi K. Bhabha. This approach aims to capture the cultural dynamics that emerge in the response of Muslim communities in the digital era to these representations.

In this study, Western digital media, including online news outlets (BBC, CNN), film and documentary platforms (Netflix, YouTube), and social media discourses, are treated as cultural texts. These texts contain implicit historical biases and ideological orientations that shape the global perception of Islam. Meanwhile, Southeast Asian Muslims, especially from Indonesia and Malaysia, are positioned as active interpreters who bring their own cultural experiences, religious values, and digital literacy into the interpretive process. Data for this research were collected through purposive observation of Western media content published between 2020 and 2024, focusing on visual and narrative portrayals of Islam and Muslim identities. In addition, audience responses were examined through user-generated comments, opinion articles, and digital cultural expressions such as Islamic lifestyle content, da'wah videos, and social media interactions (Twitter, Instagram, TikTok).

This methodological orientation aligns with recent scholarship that integrates hermeneutic inquiry with media and cultural analysis [11]. This analysis considers the reader's position as an active subject who not only passively receives meaning but also negotiates it based on values, collective experiences, and local dynamics. Data sources were obtained from digital media narratives, and responses of Muslim readers used by the author were drawn from social media comments, opinion articles, and digital cultural expressions such as Islamic preaching videos, religious memes, and urban Muslim lifestyle phenomena. Therefore, this study contributes not only to understanding media representation but also to advancing an interpretive epistemology that situates Southeast Asian Muslims as dialogical agents in the global circulation of Islamic images and discourses.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Readings of Islam in Western Media Texts

In the context of digital media platforms, representations of Islam are often still shaped by the legacy of classical orientalism, criticized by Edward Said (1978). Western media, through news, documentaries, and even social media algorithms, indirectly inherit a worldview that positions Islam as the "other", an exotic, backward, or even dangerous cultural and religious entity. Wahid (2023) extends Said's framework into the notion of neo-Orientalism, showing that this bias persists within modern digital narratives that claim neutrality but remain rooted in colonial imaginaries [12]. Similarly, Pun (2013) and Iwamura (2011) demonstrate how digital technologies create a new form of virtual Orientalism, where visual representations of Muslims are selectively amplified to sustain global stereotypes. Taken together, these studies reveal a continuum rather than a rupture between classical and digital Orientalism, indicating that Western portrayals of Islam evolve technologically but remain ideologically consistent [5], [13].

In Gadamer's hermeneutic approach, every text exists in a dialogical relationship between the author's and the reader's horizons of meaning [14]. Western media, as producers of digital texts, continuously reinterpret Islam through the lens of their own historical experiences—colonialism, secular modernity, and geopolitical tension [15]. When read together with Said's Orientalist critique, Gadamer's perspective reveals that these texts are not neutral reflections of reality but expressions of inherited cultural prejudices. This synthesis allows us to see how Western representations of Islam are shaped by overlapping horizons: the epistemological prejudice of the West and the reactive interpretation of Muslim audiences.

In the digital era, Muslim audiences respond to dominant Western narratives not only through resistance but also through creative reinterpretation. The emergence of Muslim content creators, da'wahainment [15], and urban "halal lifestyle" movements exemplifies this active negotiation. When viewed through Bhabha's, 2012 concept of hybridity, these practices are not merely defensive reactions but acts of cultural translation that produce the Third Space a dynamic arena where global

capitalist aesthetics and Islamic spirituality coexist [8], [16], [17]. This theoretical integration highlights that Southeast Asian Muslims participate in a hermeneutic process that transforms Western narratives into locally resonant identities, rather than simply accepting or rejecting them [18], halal lifestyles, Islamic values of social justice, and narratives of migration (hijrah) in an urban context. This can be understood as both a form of cultural resistance and an affirmation of identity. However, the Muslim response does not stop at resistance. In many cases, a process of cultural hybridization occurs, namely the creation of new cultural spaces that blend Islamic values with global-capitalist elements. This theoretical integration highlights that Southeast Asian Muslims participate in a hermeneutic process that transforms Western narratives into locally resonant identities, rather than simply accepting or rejecting them.

Homi K. Bhabha calls this space the Third Space, a transformative space where identity is not fixed but constantly negotiated. Phenomena such as "crazy rich Muslims," Muslim fashion influencers, or urban-sharia lifestyles are clear examples of this hybrid culture. They combine religious symbols with global aesthetics and digital consumption [17]. This hybrid culture reflects the reality of urban Muslim communities facing the challenges of globalization. The principle of "think globally, act locally" is also evident in how Muslim communities adapt Islamic teachings to contemporary needs without uprooting them from their spiritual roots and local traditions. Digital media is not only an arena for the contestation of meaning but also a field for the expression of Islamic identity and creativity in the global landscape [16]. Thus, Muslims' reading of media representations cannot be simplified as acceptance or rejection. It is a complex interpretive process combining collective memory, local dynamics, and an ever-evolving global imagination.

3.2. Dialogues Between Western and Islamic Discourses in Contemporary Media

The encounter between the Islamic world and Western media was not only technological but also epistemological. With the advent of the printing press and the modern media in the 18th and 19th centuries, Muslim societies began to grapple with new forms of knowledge dissemination. Although initially met with considerable resistance, Western media were eventually adopted and modified for da'wah, education, and political struggle [19]. From Islamic newspapers in the colonial era to digital da'wah in the modern era, this interaction demonstrates a process of adaptation and cultural negotiation rich in social and religious dynamics. The use of digital media in Islamic da'wah broadens the audience and enhances interaction between preachers and congregations. However, they also note the potential for message distortion and the importance of digital literacy among preachers to ensure the authenticity and accuracy of information [20].

In recent decades, mass media have transformed into a key pillar in shaping public perceptions of religion and culture, including Islam. Global media, including television channels, social media, and online news portals, have a significant influence in constructing specific narratives about Islam and Muslims. One considerable dynamic in the representation of Islam is the increasingly visible pattern of polarization and stereotyping, particularly in news reports related to terrorism and radicalization [21]. Representations of Islam in Western media are often associated with negative narratives, such as terrorism, radicalization, and extremism, leading to Islamophobia. However, several studies indicate a shift in how global media portrays Islam, with the emergence of more diverse and complex representations [22]. Since the attacks of September 11, 2001, Islam has been directly linked to the discourse of terrorism in Western media. Recent studies have shown that despite attempts by the media to promote more diverse narratives, the dominance of negative discourses against Islam remains strong. One interesting aspect is the shift in the representation of Islam in the era of social media and digital platforms, where Muslim users are beginning to have a greater say in defining their own identities. A recent study found that social media platforms such as Twitter and Instagram provide a space for Muslim activism to influence media narratives about Islam. However, despite progress in diverse representation, the dominance of stereotypes linking Islam to terrorism remains highly visible on many mainstream platforms [23].

The hermeneutical approach, developed by Hans-Georg Gadamer, provides a framework for interpreting media texts as entities that are always dependent on historical and cultural contexts. Media discourse related to Islam not only reflects social reality but also reinforces dominant ideologies that

position Islam as "Other" to the West. Despite efforts to present Islam more objectively, the discourse constructed is often influenced by the history of colonialism and Western domination. With advances in information and communication technology, new media such as blogs, podcasts, and video platforms like YouTube have opened up space for more diverse representations of Islam. Social media now serves as an arena for Muslims to voice their perspectives and avoid the narratives often constructed by mainstream media [24].

Although new media offers a space for more inclusive representation, significant challenges remain in addressing hoaxes and misinformation that contribute to the formation of negative images of Islam. While social media allows individuals to share their personal experiences and perspectives, there is still a risk that extreme narratives can spread rapidly. Social media has become a new arena for the formation of religious authority. Religious figures with large followings on platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok play a crucial role in guiding young Muslims. However, the plethora of sources of information creates doubts among audiences about the authenticity and authority of the messages they receive. While unlimited access to religious knowledge via the internet is beneficial for many young Muslims, the sheer volume of unfiltered information also raises doubts and tensions about the credibility and authority of religious knowledge, even when the source is a celebrity Imam [25].

3.3. The Resonance of Western Media in the Constellation of Islamic Culture and Thought

Western culture, through digital media, has influenced the way Islamic messages are conveyed and received. The adaptation of popular culture in digital fatwas, such as the use of slang and visualizations in comics, demonstrates an effort to reach a younger audience. However, this approach also raises questions about its authenticity and conformity to traditional Islamic values. Triantoro et al. revealed that Habib Husein Ja'far adapted Japanese slang and culture in delivering his fatwas on social media, as well as visualizing his fatwas in modern comics [26]. This suggests that modern technological developments provide opportunities for religious figures to deliver their fatwas digitally by adopting popular cultural forms, thereby attracting the attention of modern young Muslims [26].

The influence of media on the Islamic world extends beyond technical aspects to the dimensions of thought and culture. Media transformation has shifted the center of knowledge authority from traditional scholars to new figures emerging through social media and digital platforms. This phenomenon has had positive impacts in the form of expanded access to knowledge, but it also poses challenges in maintaining authenticity and depth of understanding. In this context, media has become an arena for contestation between modernity and tradition, between science and spirituality, between globalization and Islamic identity [27].

The digital era offers significant opportunities for disseminating Islamic knowledge, but also presents serious challenges. The rapid spread of information can lead to misinformation and polarization of opinion. Furthermore, the commodification of religion and journalistic ethics in digital Islamic media are critical issues that need to be addressed. One significant impact of digital media is the ease of access to various sources of Islamic knowledge, both traditional and contemporary. Through the internet, anyone can access Islamic books, religious articles, and even video lectures conducted by scholars from around the world. This is crucial in the context of globalization, where Muslims separated by distance and time can now be connected through a single network [28].

However, on the other hand, technological globalization poses significant challenges to the way Muslims understand and practice their religion. Differences in interpretation in digital media sometimes create difficulties in maintaining the integrity of Islamic doctrine in local contexts. This means that even though access has become easier, the wide variety of interpretations available online must be carefully filtered to avoid distorting valid religious teachings. Digital media has also brought about a transformation in the form of Islamic preaching. It extends beyond lectures to utilise pop culture, humour, and visualisations to convey religious messages. Fatwas, previously delivered in written form or lectures, are now often presented in videos, podcasts, and memes. Western pop culture, such as anime and comics, is often used to convey Islamic values to young audiences [29].

Al-Zaman explains that "Islam in the digital world finds new ways to convey traditional teachings through popular cultural forms. This shows the flexibility of religion to adapt to the times, even though

it still faces challenges in maintaining the integrity of its teachings. This phenomenon shows that Islamic culture can continue to develop and adapt to an increasingly digital and modern global environment. Although digitalization provides many opportunities for the spread of Islamic messages, the biggest challenge is how to maintain the authenticity of Islamic teachings. In cyberspace, information can spread very quickly, but not always with the correct accuracy. Misinformation or even misleading information can easily go viral, and this is a big problem in the digital Islamic world [30].

Overall, the transformation of digital media has had a significant impact on Islamic culture, both in terms of the dissemination of knowledge, religious authority, and adaptation to global culture. The digitalization process provides opportunities for Islam to expand and become more accessible to people worldwide but also demands caution in maintaining the authority and authenticity of religious teachings. Muslims must continue developing digital literacy and strengthening their capacity to filter information to avoid falling prey to the spread of misinformation. This phenomenon has given rise to what Ziauddin Sardar calls postnormal knowledge, an era in which the authority of knowledge becomes fluid, and meaning is reconstructed in a constantly changing participatory space. In this context, Muslims are no longer merely recipients of inherited knowledge but also shapers and disseminators of meaning within the digital ecosystem. This process opens up new opportunities but also challenges the foundations of classical Islamic epistemology [31].

Gadamer's hermeneutic approach helps us understand that meaning always emerges from a dialogue between horizons, not from static structures. However, in the digital space, this dialogue doesn't always occur in-depth. Algorithms reinforce echo chambers and close off the possibility of dialogue between meanings. Therefore, if digital media becomes the primary source of Islamic knowledge, the epistemological challenge that arises is how to maintain a balance between accessibility and authenticity, between popularity and scientific truth. The emergence of digital Ustaz, hijrah influencers, and online communities such as Muslim Millennials or the Hijabers Community exemplifies how Islamic authority and narratives are being reshaped in the digital space. This is not just a change in style but a transformation in the way we know Islam. In this situation, it is crucial to develop critical epistemological awareness so that people are not only exposed to content but also able to distinguish between traditional authority, contextual interpretations, and sometimes misleading viral content.

3.4. Hybrid Culture and the Dynamics of Southeast Asian Muslim Identity

In interpreting the dynamics between Western media and the responses of Southeast Asian Muslim communities, Homi K. Bhabha's hybrid culture theory provides a sharp conceptual lens. In his book, *The Location of Culture* [8], Bhabha introduced the idea of Third Space. In this cultural space, the dominance of a particular culture does not solely determine identity but is dynamically constructed through a process of intercultural negotiation. The concept of Third Space demonstrates that identity is not a fixed entity but rather a product of the ever-changing interaction between dominant cultures and subcultures. In the context of Islamic representations in Western media, Muslims are not merely victims or passive spectators but actors who reshape their identities through new interpretations, aesthetics, and narratives. This hybridity emerges as a response to the pressures of globalization and as a form of spiritual adaptation in the digital age.

Phenomena such as "crazy rich Muslims," *hijrah* influencers, and the urban Islamic lifestyle demonstrate how Muslims are creating new interpretive spaces that combine Islamic values with modern lifestyles. They do not necessarily imitate the West, but neither do they reject it entirely. This is the form of cultural translation Bhabha refers to: a process of crossing boundaries of meaning and creating new articulations of identity. In practice, the digital space has become a major laboratory for the formation of this hybrid culture. This is where Muslims experiment with religious symbols, market values, global aesthetics, and local authenticity. They create styles, discourses, and communities that cannot be reduced to the conventional Islam-West dichotomy. This is precisely where the subversive nature of Third Space lies it breaks down boundaries, blends identities, and offers alternatives to the dominant, hegemonic narrative. However, hybrid culture is not without its problems. It has the potential to dilute Islamic values into symbolic forms that are merely trends rather than meaningful

spiritual practices. Therefore, this analysis also calls for critical awareness: in the space of hybridity, Muslims need to continue negotiating between cultural identity, spiritual commitment, and epistemological resistance to the hegemony of global narratives.

In understanding the dynamics of Muslim culture in Southeast Asia, particularly in Indonesia and Malaysia, Homi K. Bhabha's theory of hybrid culture is an essential analytical tool. In "The Location of Culture", Bhabha asserts that cultural identity is not fixed and homogeneous but rather is continually negotiated in what he calls the Third Space. This space is an arena where meaning, values, and identity are formed through the intersection of local culture and global influences.

Southeast Asian Muslim communities are a concrete example of identity formation within the Third Space. On the one hand, they are deeply rooted in local Islamic traditions that are collective, Sufi, and community-based. On the other hand, they are exposed to global modernity, digital capitalism, and Western media representations that often distort the image of Islam. Within this tension, a distinctive cultural hybridity is formed. Phenomena such as the *hijrah* lifestyle, Muslim fashion influencers, Sharia entrepreneurs, and digital Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia and Malaysia demonstrate how Southeast Asian Muslim communities are responding to the digital era in creative and adaptive ways. Even Malay Muslim women in Singapore cultivate piety by attending popular Islamic self-development classes [32]. They create a space of expression that combines religious identity with symbols of global modernity without losing their roots in local values. Islamic lifestyles are displayed through social media content, halal brands, digital da'wah, and cosmopolitan Islamic visual aesthetics.

This aligns with Bhabha's concept of cultural translation, where Muslim communities transform global values into meaningful local narratives. This process is not simply an imitation of the West but a form of artistic agency where Southeast Asian Muslims interpret and give meaning to their own identities within a fluid digital landscape. However, this hybridization process also brings epistemological and spiritual challenges. There is a risk of commodifying Islamic values into mere lifestyle symbols, spirituality being reduced to aesthetics, and scholarly authority being displaced by media popularity. This is a crucial moment where Bhabha's theory helps us understand that hybrid culture is not just about blending but also about negotiating meaning and contesting discourses. Using Gadamer's hermeneutic approach, we can understand that Southeast Asian Muslim communities are not simply media consumers but active readers who produce meaning through their local experiential horizons.

4. Conclusion

The intersection between Western media and Islamic traditions in the digital era reveals a complex dialogical relationship rather than a one-way representation. Western media continue to frame Islam through a neo-Orientalist lens, simplifying its diversity into uniform narratives of violence, conservatism, or exoticism. However, through hermeneutic engagement, Southeast Asian Muslims reinterpret these portrayals and recontextualize them within their own cultural and spiritual frameworks. This process of reinterpretation demonstrates that Muslims are not passive recipients of global discourse but active producers of meaning. Using Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, this study shows that the understanding of Islam in media representation is the result of an ongoing fusion of horizons between the Western producer's bias and the Southeast Asian audience's lived experience. This dialogical process generates new cultural articulations that merge traditional values with global modernity. Homi K. Bhabha's theory of hybridity further explains that such encounters produce a Third Space a symbolic arena where Islamic identity is continuously negotiated through digital aesthetics, language, and popular culture.

The findings of this study contribute to a broader epistemological understanding of Islam in global media studies. They reveal that Muslim identity in the digital era is no longer defined solely by religious authority or Western narratives but by the dynamic interplay between global representations and local interpretations. Hence, future research on Islam and media should not only focus on representational bias but also on how interpretive communities transform meaning through

hermeneutic dialogue and cultural creativity. Ultimately, this study highlights that rereading Islam in Western media requires both critical distance and cultural empathy. Only through such an integrative hermeneutic approach can scholars and audiences move beyond the binary of “self” and “other,” toward a more ethical and dialogical understanding of Islam in the global public sphere.

Author Contribution: Muhamad Riza Chamadi serves as the first author and corresponding author of this article. He was responsible for developing the main idea, developing the theoretical framework, reviewing the literature, collecting and analyzing field data, and writing the overall manuscript. Riza also integrated a hermeneutic approach and developed an interpretation of the social phenomena studied. Kuntarto contributed to the refinement of the methodology, philosophical analysis, and validation of the analysis results. He provided in-depth conceptual input and academic criticism, particularly in strengthening the epistemological approach and harmonizing the structure of the manuscript. Muhamad Baedowi contributed to the literature review process and edited the final substance of the manuscript. He also assisted in evaluating the feasibility of the data and strengthening the connection between the field data and the theoretical context. He also participated in academic discussions throughout the development of the article. Lis Safitri contributed by assisting in refining the clarity of the manuscript and ensuring consistency across sections. All authors have read, approved, and are accountable for the content of the manuscript.

Acknowledgement: The Author would like to thank his fellow lecturers in Islamic Religious Education at the Faculty of Language and Culture at Universitas Jenderal Soedirman, who have provided input, support, and encouragement during the process of compiling this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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