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Combating Islamophobia in the Digital Sphere: An Analysis of Onepath Networks' Communication Strategies

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Abstract

General Background: Islamophobia has intensified in the digital era as social media accelerates the spread of negative narratives about Islam and Muslims. **Specific Background:** In response, Onepath Networks—an Australian-based Islamic media organization—actively counters misinformation through targeted digital communication strategies. **Knowledge Gap:** Existing studies rarely provide a focused examination of how a single Islamic media institution systematically constructs counter-narratives across social platforms. **Aims:** This study analyzes Onepath Networks' use of educational, humanistic, and phenomenological content on YouTube and Instagram to combat Islamophobia. **Results:** The findings indicate that storytelling techniques, personal narratives, and peace-oriented messaging effectively reduce bias by humanizing Muslim identities and fostering intercultural understanding. **Novelty:** This research offers a case-specific analysis that demonstrates how a faith-driven digital media organization operationalizes counter-Islamophobia strategies beyond general social media activism. **Implications:** The study highlights the potential of well-designed digital communication strategies to dismantle stereotypes, strengthen inclusive discourse, and guide future media-based efforts against Islamophobia.

Highlights:

- Analyzes Onepath Networks' strategic use of YouTube and Instagram to counter Islamophobia.
- Highlights phenomenological storytelling and personal narratives to humanize Muslim identities.
- Shows how structured digital communication can reshape public perceptions and foster intercultural understanding.

Keywords: Islamophobia, Social Media, Onepath Networks, Communication Strategies, Digital Counter-Narratives

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Introduction

In today's digital era, it is difficult to control the massive flow of information. With the emergence of various social media platforms, people have the freedom to choose the sources of information they consume according to their needs and personal preferences. [1] This also applies to social media, which plays a crucial role in delivering news, including issues such as Islamophobia. Islamophobia, or the fear and prejudice against Islam and Muslims, has become one of the most significant challenges in the modern era, especially amid the dynamics of globalization and technological advancements. In recent decades, this phenomenon has escalated significantly, exacerbated by stereotypes and misunderstandings continuously produced and disseminated through various communication channels, including social media. This has become a major challenge affecting Islamic civilization and Muslim communities worldwide. [2]

Social media is a platform that allows users to create personal pages and connect with others in the same network to share information and communicate. Unlike traditional media, which relies on print and broadcast formats, social media utilizes the internet as its primary medium. These platforms encourage active participation by providing opportunities for users to give open feedback, comment, and share information quickly and without limitations. The process of creating a social media account is straightforward and does not take much time. [3] With its extensive influence and ability to shape public opinion, social media often serves as the primary battleground for spreading negative narratives about Islam. [4] While this technology holds great potential for disseminating accurate information and fostering intercultural dialogue, it is also frequently misused to reinforce prejudice and create polarization. This places Muslims in a vulnerable position, subject to discrimination and marginalization.

However, despite these challenges, social media also presents unique opportunities to counter Islamophobia. With the right communication strategies, digital platforms can be utilized as tools to foster a better understanding of Islam, deconstruct stereotypes, and promote positive narratives that support peace and tolerance. [5] Therefore, it is essential to explore the role of social media in shaping public perceptions and developing effective approaches to combat Islamophobia in the digital age. Several previous studies have highlighted how social media can reinforce stereotypes and spread misinformation about Islam. For instance, a study by Moordingsih explains that digital media has been used to strengthen negative stigmas against Muslims through algorithm-based propaganda. [6] Meanwhile, a more recent study by Kurniawan and Afifi suggests that while social media often serves as a tool for spreading Islamophobia, these platforms can also be leveraged to educate the public and foster tolerance when utilized with the right strategies. [7] In another study, [8] examined the role of social media in reducing Islamophobia in Australia and found that digital education campaigns can help mitigate biases against Islam in the long run. [8]

Prejudice, misinformation, and stereotypical portrayals of Muslims have found fertile ground in the digital sphere, often shaping negative public perceptions. While many studies discuss the general role of social media in amplifying or countering these narratives, this study narrows the focus to analyze how Onepath Networks—an Australian-based Islamic media organization—strategically uses digital platforms to combat Islamophobia. By examining its communication strategies, this research aims to explore how educational and humanistic content can be used effectively to deconstruct Islamophobic discourse and promote positive perceptions of Islam online. This focus is significant in light of growing Islamophobic sentiments globally and the urgent need for innovative media-based counter-narratives. This research employs a qualitative approach with a descriptive analysis method to examine various anti-Islamophobia campaigns conducted on social media. By understanding both the strategies and challenges involved, this study aims to offer new insights for academics, media practitioners, and Muslim communities in utilizing social media as a counter-narrative tool against Islamophobia. This article provides a comprehensive analysis by integrating findings from relevant literature and offering practical recommendations for communication strategies in the digital era.

Method

The research method used in this article is qualitative with a descriptive-analytical approach. This approach aims to understand the conditions of a specific context. [9] In this case, it is used to understand the phenomenon of Islamophobia on social media by providing an in-depth depiction of the patterns of Islamophobic narratives and the counter-narratives used to address them. The selection of this method is based on the characteristics of the phenomenon, which are better analyzed through narrative and interpretative exploration rather than a quantitative approach. The data used in this study comes from secondary sources, obtained through a literature review of relevant literature, including academic journals, books, research reports, and articles. Data were collected through a literature review focusing specifically on Onepath Networks' digital media campaigns and their strategic use of platforms such as YouTube and Instagram. According to Sugiyono, secondary data refers to data that is not directly obtained by the researcher but is gathered from other sources or documentation. [10]

In the context of a literature study, this research examines data from various reference books and previous studies relevant to the research topic. According to Sarwono, a literature study is a library-based research method aimed at establishing a theoretical foundation for the research problem. This study does not require field research and solely relies on the analysis of articles, journals, and library collections. [11] This study employs content analysis as its analytical technique, where the data collection process begins with document analysis of various sources discussing Islamophobia and social media. The selected literature is based on its relevance to the research theme, source validity, and contribution to understanding how social media can serve as a tool for spreading or countering Islamophobia. The collected data is then analyzed using content analysis, a systematic analytical technique used to deconstruct content and process messages. [12] The content analysis process involves several stages, such as collecting data from relevant academic documents (reputable journals, research reports, and various articles discussing Islamophobia), categorizing the collected literature (based on Islamophobia's

dissemination patterns, the role of algorithms, and counter-narrative strategies), and interpreting the data to analyze patterns and trends related to the research topic. [13] Through this technique, the study can identify patterns, trends, and strategies used in Islamophobic narratives on social media. The analytical process includes data categorization, theme identification, and interpretation of the relationship between social media and the formation of public perceptions of Islam.

This research is based on Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann's social construction of reality theory, which explains how social reality is constructed through interaction and language in society. [14] In this study, social media serves as a space where Islamophobia is constructed through narratives reproduced by internet users, algorithms, and mainstream media. Additionally, this study also refers to Antonio Gramsci's hegemony theory, which is relevant in analyzing how dominant discourse can shape public thought. [15] In the case of Islamophobia, social media often reproduces dominant narratives that discredit Islam, thereby creating a biased perception of Muslims. The study is grounded in the theory of social construction of reality by Berger and Luckmann, as well as Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony, to interpret how Onepath Networks challenges dominant negative discourses about Islam.

Results and Discussion

A. The Meaning and Characteristics of Islamophobia

Islamophobia is derived from the combination of two words: "Islam" and "phobia." The word "Islam" itself has a clear definition as the religion followed by Muslims. Meanwhile, "phobia" refers to feelings of fear, dislike, or anxiety, often without a solid or logical basis. Phobia can also be defined as an excessive worry experienced by someone when facing an object or situation they fear, or even just when imagining or anticipating a situation they consider frightening[7]. The term "Islamophobia" emerged as a response to a new phenomenon that required a specific term. Prejudice and anti-Muslim attitudes have grown rapidly in recent years, necessitating the creation of an appropriate term to describe this. The use of this new term, "Islamophobia," is not intended to provoke conflict, but is believed to play a vital role in improving public perception and fostering more harmonious relationships between different groups. Islamophobia has several key characteristics that are important to understand. In a report by the Runnymede Trust, key explanations are provided that help differentiate between these characteristics, such as the difference between open and closed views of Islam. Phobias and irrational fears of Islam are characteristic of closed views, where people see Islam with prejudice and suspicion. In contrast, open views reflect logical disagreement, constructive criticism, as well as appreciation and respect for Islam and Muslims[6]

Thus, researchers conclude that Islamophobia is a form of irrational fear and prejudice against Islam, often manifesting in negative attitudes and views towards the religion and its followers. Islamophobia can manifest in various forms that directly affect individuals and Muslim communities. Discrimination often occurs when individuals or Muslim groups are treated unfairly in contexts such as employment, education, or public services. Discrimination stems from prejudice, which creates divisions and differences between groups. This process often cultivates social distance that strengthens such separations. [16] Verbal violence also appears on social media, often in the form of relentless insults, accompanied by mocking and demeaning actions using hate speech. Such behavior is highly inappropriate for public spaces. [17] Verbal violence is also one of the common forms, where insults or hate speech are often directed at Islam and Muslims. In addition, physical violence, such as attacks or vandalism against Muslim individuals or property, represents an extreme form of Islamophobia. Stereotypes and stigma, linking Islam with terrorism or extremism, strengthen misunderstandings and prejudice. The stereotype of Islam as a religion of terrorism refers to the view that Islam is often associated with acts of terrorism, thus being seen as a perpetrator of various violent acts. This negative stigma arises from the frequent terrorist attacks carried out by individuals or groups claiming to follow Islam. As a result, many people worldwide view Islam as a harsh or violent religion. This perception, continuously reinforced by stereotypes and stigma, causes misunderstandings and solidifies the prejudice that Islam is synonymous with terrorism or extremism. [18]

Additionally, the phenomenon of spreading fake information has become increasingly common, especially on social media. This is linked to the negative impact of technological advancements that facilitate access to information. One serious consequence is the spread of false information about Islam through various social media platforms and news outlets, ultimately worsening misconceptions about the religion. [19] Unjust surveillance and law enforcement, such as racial profiling, also contribute to injustice towards Muslim communities. Finally, negative representation in the media can further damage the image of Islam, strengthening prejudice and fear in society. All these forms collectively create an atmosphere of significant injustice and hostility towards Muslims.

B. The Role of Social Media in the Spread of Islamophobia

Social media has become a powerful platform for disseminating information, but it has also been misused to spread Islamophobic narratives. Social media algorithms often reinforce existing biases, leading to the spread of fake news and negative stereotypes about Islam. Negative stereotypes about Muslims are often formed through mass media. The image of terrorists, frequently associated with features like long beards or wearing robes, is spread through television and the internet. Western media often disseminate negative stereotypes about Islam, and the wide access to media such as television, radio, and the internet accelerates the spread of these stereotypes. When society lacks adequate media literacy skills, they tend to trust and spread unverified information, and when terrorism cases are linked to Islam, this can increase fear and hatred toward Muslims. [20]

The development of digital technology has opened up great opportunities for various parties to utilize social media in ways that are not always positive. [21] In this context, some individuals or specific groups often use social media platforms to spread sensitive content containing hate speech or radicalization, under the guise of Islam. Such content is typically designed to

tarnish the image of Islam, a religion known for teaching peace, compassion, and tolerance. Instead, this content seeks to reshape public perceptions of Islam as a religion associated with violence, extremism, and threat. As a result of the spread of biased and misleading information, hatred toward Islam has increased worldwide. [7] Many people, influenced by these negative narratives, begin to view Islam and Muslims as real and dangerous enemies. This phenomenon, known as Islamophobia, reflects how technology and social media can be used to worsen misunderstanding and hostility toward certain groups, threaten social cohesion, and deepen divisions between groups in society.

There are many general impacts of Islamophobia, which refers to fear, hatred, or prejudice against Islam and Muslims, and it has become a deepening issue in the Western world. The impacts are not limited to negative social perceptions but extend to various aspects of Muslim life, including worship, economy, politics, education, and social life. Minority groups, whether based on religion, ethnicity, race, language, or culture, often face various obstacles in gaining fair and equal access to their rights. In countries such as the United States and parts of Europe, Muslim communities often face obstacles that hinder their basic rights, including freedom of religious practice, participation in economic activities, and the freedom to express political views openly. [22] The discrimination arising from Islamophobia not only hampers social integration but also affects the quality of life for Muslims living in these regions. This article aims to examine the impacts of Islamophobia in these areas, as well as how this phenomenon contributes to the marginalization of Muslims in Western countries.

In the field of worship, Islamophobia significantly impacts Muslims' freedom to practice their religion in the West, particularly in Europe and the United States. Difficulties in establishing places of worship, such as mosques, reflect resistance from local communities to the presence of Islam. This phenomenon reflects structural discrimination that violates the principle of religious freedom. Additionally, the ban on wearing the hijab in countries like France reflects a narrow interpretation of secularism that harms the religious identity of Muslim individuals. In the economic field, economic discrimination faced by Muslims in the West reflects the direct impact of Islamophobia. Muslim-owned businesses are often avoided, leading to economic loss and marginalization. Even in Muslim-majority countries like Indonesia, the influence of Islamophobia is seen in society's preference for interest-based banks over Islamic banks. This shows the increasing dominance of capitalism, undermining the principles of Islamic economics based on justice and balance.

In the political field, Islamophobia also affects the political rights of Muslims in the West. Restrictions on expressing opinions and engaging in politics show violations of human rights. Attacks on Muslim politicians in the Netherlands and Belgium reflect how this discrimination has been institutionalized. As a result, Muslims find it difficult to influence public policy, further widening the gap between Islamic political culture and the Western world. In the field of education, discrimination in education makes it difficult for Muslims in Western countries to gain equal access and opportunities. The ban on religious practices on campuses in Denmark shows a disregard for the relationship between religion and education. Furthermore, the marginalization of Muslim students reinforces the stereotype that Muslims are not advancing in knowledge and technology. These barriers reflect how Islamophobia not only harms individual Muslims but also global innovation and creativity. Lastly, in the social field, Islamophobia exacerbates social relations between Muslims and non-Muslims. Marginalization, discrimination, and even racial crimes become daily experiences for Muslims in the West. A 2009 study by the EU Fundamental Rights Agency showed that 33% of Muslims experienced discrimination, and 11% faced racial crimes, reflecting a serious threat to social cohesion. However, despite these pressures, the number of Muslims in the West continues to rise, signaling growing interest in Islam amid social resistance. [23]

C. Social Media as a Tool for Shaping Public Perception

Social media refers to internet-based sites and platforms that allow users to interact by providing spaces to create, share, and exchange content such as information, opinions, and interests. Additionally, social media plays a role in building identity, conversation, connections, relationships, reputation, and communities. The main characteristics of social media include participatory nature, openness, exchange of information through conversation, engagement, and interconnectedness, making it a new form of technology that facilitates social interaction and enables collaboration and discussions across various parties. [24] There is a wide variety of content that expresses hatred toward Islam on platforms like news sites, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and others. Such hate content shapes public opinion in how Islam is viewed. One example of Islamophobia that has recently emerged involves a Muslimah blogger in Bangkok and internet users in Thailand. The blogger posted on her Facebook page, "Madam Kashmir," about the Hamas attack on Israel on October 7, 2023. Following the post, Thai netizens massively insulted and harassed her online, accusing her of sympathizing with the Hamas militant group. [25] This case led to an increase in extreme hatred, exacerbating the already existing Islamophobic situation in the country with a minority Muslim population, creating a very dangerous situation.

The use of social media in the dissemination of any information has a significant influence on the public in shaping public opinion or views. [26] Similarly, information related to Islamophobia also has a large impact on how the public understands and responds to contemporary issues. Social media has become a crucial platform for spreading messages related to Islamophobia, where these messages can quickly spread and influence public perspectives widely. Through social media, society gains access to various information related to contemporary issues, including news, posts, and comments from other users, which also help form their opinions. The interactions that occur on social media expose the public to different viewpoints, which ultimately shape their perceptions of these issues. Therefore, social media plays a significant role in shaping public opinion and contributes to social and political dynamics in society, especially concerning sensitive issues like Islamophobia.

D. Case Study: Onepath Networks and Digital Strategies to Combat Islamophobia

To understand how digital strategies can be effectively utilized to combat Islamophobia, it is important to examine a

concrete example of an organization that has systematically implemented such approaches. One prominent example is Onepath Networks, a media organization based in Australia that leverages social media to spread peaceful and educational messages about Islam. Through this case study, this article analyzes the digital communication strategies employed by Onepath Networks in addressing negative narratives about Islam and evaluates the effectiveness of their approach in shaping more positive public perceptions. Strategies to overcome Islamophobia on social media involve various approaches and comprehensive exploration of this issue, aiming to change negative perceptions of Islam and Muslims. [27] One of the key strategies is disseminating educational content that highlights the positive values of Islam, such as tolerance, peace, and compassion. Online campaigns promoting these positive narratives can help counter biased or misleading information that often dominates social media. Additionally, collaboration with influential figures and organizations with a broad reach is crucial in strengthening anti-Islamophobia messages. Thus, these strategies not only challenge existing stereotypes but also foster greater awareness and deeper understanding of Islam among social media users.

In efforts to combat Islamophobia and the negative perceptions of Islam, various organizations around the world have harnessed the power of social media. One prominent organization in this regard is Onepath Networks, based in Australia. Onepath Networks utilizes the power of social media to stop or at least reduce negative issues. Founded by Mala Manjanni in March 2014 in Sydney, Australia, this organization produces videos and documentaries aimed at spreading the message of Islam, thereby reducing or dispelling negative views about the religion. [8] In efforts to address the challenges of Islamophobia and negative perceptions of Islam, a number of organizations around the world have utilized social media as a highly effective tool to deconstruct the negative narratives that have emerged. One of the most prominent examples of using the power of social media for this purpose is Onepath Networks, an organization based in Australia. Founded in March 2014 by Mala Manjanni in Sydney, Onepath Networks has a clear goal of reducing the negative impact of public perceptions of Islam through the production of educational and inspiring content.

Onepath Networks utilizes various social media platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram to reach a wider audience. In this context, the organization produces videos and documentaries designed to provide a more accurate and humanized portrayal of Islamic teachings, as well as introduce the life experiences of Muslims that are often unseen by the general public. The content produced by Onepath Networks not only focuses on explaining Islamic religious teachings but also addresses relevant social issues, such as the experiences of Muslims facing discrimination and stereotypes, while providing space for more open and constructive discussions on these topics. As such, the organization aims to alleviate the social tensions that often arise due to misunderstandings of Islam while building a deeper understanding of the values contained within the religion. One of the main strengths of the approach taken by Onepath Networks is the use of highly accessible social media, which can quickly spread across the globe. Platforms like YouTube allow this content to be watched and shared in a very short time, creating a viral effect that can reach a broader audience from diverse backgrounds. This not only helps form a better understanding among individuals who already have an interest in Islam but also has the potential to reach those who may have never been exposed to information about Islam before. Furthermore, through videos and documentaries highlighting personal stories, Onepath Networks invites the audience to see Islam from a more humanized perspective, reducing the perception often shaped by the negative news frequently disseminated by mainstream media.

However, despite the effectiveness of this approach in providing a better understanding of Islam, Onepath Networks faces the challenge of how much long-term impact can be achieved through these efforts. While their positive messages are able to reach a wider audience, significant changes in broader societal views of Islam require more than just social media campaigns. This is due to deeper structural factors, such as political, cultural, and economic influences, that shape public perception. In many cases, people who hold negative views about Islam may not be open to information that contradicts their beliefs. Additionally, social media also has the potential to exacerbate social polarization, as audiences with similar views tend to connect with one another, while those with differing views may become more isolated. Therefore, while Onepath Networks plays an important role in combating Islamophobia through the content they produce, deeper societal perception changes still require cross-sector cooperation, including with educational institutions, governments, and civil society organizations.

One important aspect of Onepath Networks' approach is the use of phenomenology in delivering their message. By exploring the subjective experiences of Muslims, the organization not only speaks about Islam as a religious doctrine but also about how the religion is practiced and lived by its followers in everyday life. This opens up opportunities for the audience to see the human side of Muslims, which is often overlooked in broader narratives about global conflicts or terrorism. This phenomenological approach allows the audience to connect with the experiences and emotions depicted in their content, creating a stronger empathetic bond and reducing the understanding gap. On the other hand, the biggest challenge faced by Onepath Networks is addressing misinformation and hoaxes circulating on social media. In many cases, social media is used as a platform to spread misleading or even hateful information about Islam. While Onepath Networks strives to provide a more accurate and positive narrative, they still face the great challenge of ensuring that their message is not only accepted but also properly understood by a wider audience. Their success in combating Islamophobia, therefore, depends on their ability to compete with deeply ingrained negative narratives in society.

Onepath Networks provides an important example of how social media can be utilized to convey da'wah messages and combat Islamophobia. Despite the ongoing challenges, the approach used by this organization remains relevant and demonstrates that social media is not just a tool for entertainment but can also serve as a means to change broader social perceptions. However, to achieve more profound change, a more holistic approach is required, one that involves various sectors of society and a more comprehensive approach to educating the public about Islam and its followers. In addition, Onepath Networks is also active in holding open dialogue sessions that allow the public to gain a deeper understanding of Islamic teachings and values directly. This initiative not only aims to provide accurate information but also to encourage the public to think more critically and openly. In this way, they strive to challenge misconceptions and negative stereotypes

often associated with Islam, opening space for better understanding and tolerance among Australian citizens. Through its educational, humanistic, and participatory approach, Onepath Networks demonstrates that social media is not merely a space for the dissemination of Islamophobia, but also a powerful tool for conveying constructive da'wah and dismantling harmful stereotypes. Although still faced with structural challenges such as misinformation, algorithmic bias, and ideological resistance, Onepath Networks' strategies offer valuable insights for other organizations seeking to harness digital platforms for inclusive counter-narratives. This case study affirms that successfully combating Islamophobia requires a synergy of strong content, wide distribution, and sustained cross-sectoral engagement.

Conclusion

Onepath Networks exemplifies a strategic and impactful approach to countering Islamophobia in the digital era. Through a combination of educational media, personal storytelling, and phenomenological framing, the organization leverages social media to promote understanding and empathy. The content they produce not only counters negative stereotypes but also empowers Muslim voices and narratives in mainstream digital spaces. While structural challenges such as algorithmic bias and ideological resistance persist, Onepath's efforts highlight the transformative potential of digital communication strategies in fostering intercultural dialogue. Future initiatives to combat Islamophobia should take inspiration from such models, combining strategic content, cross-sector collaboration, and digital literacy to build more inclusive and tolerant societies.

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