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## **PERCEPTIONS OF MUSLIM CONVERTS ON THE INFLUENCE OF MEDIA IN COMBATING ISLAMOPHOBIA: A PHENOMENOLOGY STUDY IN SABAH AND SARAWAK**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This study examines Muslim converts' perceptions in a Muslim-majority country of the influence of mass media (television and radio), and social media (Facebook and YouTube) in addressing Islamophobia within the framework of Stig Hjarvard's mediatization concept. Mediatization, according to Hjarvard, is the understanding of how media increasingly shape and influence various aspects of society, transforming the way individuals and institutions engage with the world. This qualitative study employed a phenomenological approach in order to understand Muslim converts' lived experiences and their perspectives on the media strategies in combating Islamophobia. The participants were 20 Muslim converts living in Sabah and Sarawak city centres. Data was collected through individual interviews and analysed using the thematic analysis and interpretive phenomenological approach (IPA). The study discovered the presence of Islamophobia in Sabah and Sarawak. It is found that Muslim converts in Sabah and Sarawak perceive the media, including both Islamic mass media and social media, as influential tools in combating Islamophobia, with a focus on dispelling myths, promoting understanding and engaging in interfaith dialogue. This research expands Hjarvard's concept of media influence in countering Islamophobia through Islamic da'wah. In conclusion, this study emphasises the media's vital role as an alternative information source, aiding in educating about Islam and potentially decreasing or eliminating Islamophobia in Malaysia and the global setting.*

**Keywords:** Islamophobia, mass media, social media, Muslim converts, Sabah and Sarawak

## **INTRODUCTION**

In an era of media influence, a false narrative portraying Muslims as a monolithic threat has gained attention, perpetuating stereotypes, and contributing to the alarming rise of Islamophobia worldwide. A thorough analysis of newspaper headlines on Islam from 1956 to 1997 revealed that the mass media in the U.S. has tended to portray Muslims in a more one-sided way than in Western Europe and Israel (Madani 2000). The 9/11 tragedy marked the beginning of increased one-sided reporting in the mass media, which reinforced the already existing sentiment that sees Islam as the 'enemy within' (Esposito 2011). In the weeks that followed, many television channels reported extensively on the investigation into the tragedy; they combed through possible attackers, interviewed family members, friends and associates of the potential attackers, and portrayed the bombing as an act by Muslims motivated by their religion (Rahmatti 2015). Thus, this study is conducted to counter the aspects of the media that portray harmful and biased coverage of Islam as a religion and Muslims as its followers.

Despite being prevalent in Muslim-minority countries, Islamophobia cases have been reported to have taken distinct forms in Muslim-majority nations, reflecting historical and socio-political complexities. However, the studies related to Islamophobia in Muslim-majority countries are few and far between. Muhammad Sufi and Yasmin (2022), in their review of 52 studies on Islamophobia, found that only one study focused on a Muslim-majority country, Indonesia, where one group of Muslims suffered from Islamophobia from another group of Muslims.

Shukri (2019) stated three incidences causing tensions among Muslim groups that fuel Islamophobia in Indonesia (1) Allegations of Islamophobia arise from differing views on implementing Islamic law, (2) Difficulty distinguishing between moderate and radical Muslims, and (3) Groups like the Islamic Defenders Front exacerbate tensions by targeting non-practicing Muslims. Following Sufi and Yasmin's (2022) claim on insufficient research focus, there is the need to conduct this study which focuses on another Muslim-majority country, Malaysia.

Islamophobic discourse in Western media can negatively impact Muslims' sense of belonging, safety, mental health and well-being (Bull and Rane 2018). With the rise of Islamophobic sentiments around the world, it is important to understand how different communities, including those living in Muslim-majority countries, are affected and how they respond. This justifies the selection of Sabah and Sarawak as the location of this study, given the diverse ethnicities in the two states. Sabah's demographic structure is characterised by ethnic diversity, with the majority being Kadazan Dusun, followed by Chinese, Murut, Paitan, Bajau, and Brunei Malay.

In Sarawak, over 30 ethnic groups contribute to its heterogeneous population, with the Iban as the largest ethnic community, and it is the only state in Malaysia where Christianity is the majority religion. By exploring the viewpoints of Muslim converts from different ethnicities, the study seeks to highlight the lived experiences of individuals who have chosen to embrace Islam and their perspectives on the media's strategies to address Islamophobia.

Technology, notably social media, plays a central role in shaping the narrative around Islam (Faradillah Iqmar, Nor Azlili, & Iza Sharina 2015). Strategies to combat Islamophobia involve leveraging media potential, adopting 'peace journalism' (Anderson 2015), and using the internet as a platform for self-representation by Muslims (Hammad 2020). Regardless, the previous studies focus more on social media as a platform to strategise the combat of Islamophobia. Therefore, this study aims to explore the strategies of Malaysian mass media and social media in combating Islamophobia, contributing to a comprehensive analysis of approaches to various media platforms.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **The Epistemology of Islamophobia**

Islamophobia is a term that refers to prejudice and hostility towards the religion of Islam. Islamophobia was used as early as 1925 in France (Dinet and ben Ibrahim 1925), but the mention of the term in 1999 in the American magazine, *Insight* (Richardson 2004) was the first time the term was officially popularised. There is an extensive history between the two dominant world religions, Christianity and Islam, dating back to the medieval era, and in the 11th century, Islam was regarded by Europe as the "main civilisational enemy" of Christianity (Morey and Yaqin 2011).

The shift to multi-religious societies in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the Western countries due to colonial (Allen 2010) and war displacements (Yildiz 2017) increases media attention and coverage of events affecting Muslims. Said (1981) stated that the US mass media has a long history of spreading negative portrayals of Islam, and according to Larsson (2007), it includes the new media that have 'questionable' interpretations of Islamic facts such as *WikiIslam*. Kastolani (2020) indicated that social media such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and Twitter have been used to spread Islamophobic fears with hate speeches to gain more coverage.

*Author*

In the 90s, Altareb (1998) reported the attitudes of non-Muslim students in the U.S. towards Muslims in the Middle East and found that they derived their knowledge of Islam and Muslims from movies and media sources. Nevertheless, the insinuations of misrepresentation of Islam in the Western media are not limited to local (the West) concerns, there are also negative comments in the news about Islam or Muslims in different parts of the world.

For example, the violence of the Syria-based terrorist group ISIS that has been widely reported in the Western media by portraying it as representative of Muslims as a whole. What the audience does not know is that ISIS attacks are more common in the Middle East and their victims are Muslims (Kumar 2018). It is used as a backdrop to examine the problem of militant Islam in different local contexts, which are not the same in all countries, and implies that it is a national problem. The Western media's emphasis on ISIS-related violence can lead to a misguided belief that Islam is inherently connected to terrorism, fostering negative stereotypes about Muslims.

In the Asian context, overt Islamophobia exists in Myanmar and Sri Lanka, where Buddhist societies view minority Muslim groups as a 'threat' to their faith and thus to peace in the countries. For one, Islamophobia in Myanmar can escalate into harmful attacks on Muslims when their faith contradicts Buddhist sentiments, which are guided more by racist than religious interests, according to Imtiyaz (2018). Muslim Rohingyas face discrimination and ethnic cleansing in Myanmar, in addition to being denied citizenship due to an Islamophobic regime (Mohamed Nawab 2019).

In Singapore, Muslims were considered to express their loyalty to the *ummah* (Muslim community) rather than the state, resulted in years of exclusion from armed forces, units and appointments related to national security (Lily Zubaidah 2012). The discrimination and ethnic cleansing faced by Muslim Rohingyas demonstrate open Islamophobia, whereas the exclusion of Muslims from certain roles related to national security policy in Singapore substantiate institutionalised Islamophobia.

But in fact, Islamophobia is also an issue in Muslim-majority countries, although it appears in different forms. In Muslim-majority countries, Islam is deeply rooted in religious practices, and disputes over the existence of Islamophobia date back to postcolonial attempts to secularise the state and abandon religions (Bazian 2019). Mohamed Nawab (2019) highlighted the factors leading to the rise of Islamophobia in Malaysia, particularly the link between race and religion, and the encroachment of *Islamic* politics into the lives of non-Muslims. In a study by Ahmad Faizuddin, Jaffary and Zaizul (2020), Buddhists in Malaysia expressed

Islamophobic tendencies in response to Muslim dominance in political and administrative spheres.

Ahmad Faizuddin, Jaffary and Zaizul (2020) added that while Buddhists claimed that they felt religiously threatened by the implementation of Islamisation, this fear was probably racially and not religiously motivated. Osman (2006) noted that political and economic competition between races often gets in the way of preachers and those who want to learn about Islam. Nevertheless, Nur Amali (2020) asserted that the Chinese and Malays in Malaysia often conflate the two different terms and treat them as one.

### **Mediatization, Countering Islamophobia and Islamic *Da'wah***

Lundby (2009) viewed mediatization as the increasing impact of media on all aspects of social life, focusing on both the mediatization of society and the mediatization occurring within society. Schulz (2004) defined mediatization as a concept that analyses the development of communication media, impact on dependencies, constraints and exaggerations with potential implications for new media. Expanding beyond the mediatization of politics (Kepplinger 2002), this concept has been investigated in diverse domains of culture and society, including migration (Hepp et al 2011), sports (Ličen 2022), education (Kerimov 2022), and religion (Hjarvard 2008).

This study employed Stig Hjarvard's mediatization conceptual framework. In Hjarvard's (2008) mediatization study, the media is perceived as an agent of religious change, indicating the power of media in shaping public opinion about religion. His study found that the authority of religious institutions in the Nordic countries has declined significantly as a result of the rise of the media. Hjarvard (2008) argued that the media can have opposite effects on religion; it can lead to either a desacralisation or a re-sacralisation of society.

Sufi and Yasmin (2022) highlighted that most studies of Islamophobia have been conducted in the United Kingdom or the United States, suggesting that Islamophobic incidents are more common in these two countries than in other parts of the world. As a countermeasure, Sufi and Yasmin (2022) argued that the media can help reduce or even alleviate negative expressions about Islam and Muslims, as an important complement to policymakers. Anderson (2015) recommended that the news media adopt 'peace journalism' as a method of disseminating the right information about Islam and combating Islamophobia by challenging prevailing news conventions. Hammad (2020) is certain that the internet could be an effective platform to host a series of forums where Muslims can represent themselves. Resisting Islamophobia can be an act by Muslim individuals, for example, a Muslim student living in the United States wrote

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poems about his feelings and shared them online to combat Islamophobia (Wheatley 2019). The other approach is the representation of Muslim leaders in performing the politics of belonging in the United States (McGinty 2012).

Aydin et al. (2021) suggested that social media continues to host dialogues about terrorist attacks, which then evolve into hashtags, groups and pages created in response to the media event and frame. Following the terrorist attack on the Christchurch Mosque in New Zealand in 2019, internet users showed their solidarity in the fight against Islamophobia through hashtags, including #helloworldbrother, by sharing commemorative practices as a community (Harju and Huhtamäki, 2021). The use of hashtags was also shown on social media after the Charlie Hebdo attacks in January 2015 (Giaxoglou and Spilioti 2020). Incidents involving murders committed by Islamophobic criminals are commemorated on social media platforms, evoking a mourning effect (Jiwani and Al-Rawi 2021) and inviting users to witness acts of violence.

Islamic *da'wah* has been adopted to challenge bias representation of Islam, so (Ghazali 2007) suggested that is imperative to understand the ways the media are used to counter Islamophobia. *Da'wah* which is the act of inviting others to Islam, is often done through preaching, teaching, or sharing information about the religion (Zulkipli 2001). Media like television, radio and social media platforms can be used to dispel negative portrayal of Islam through *da'wah*. Through informative and engaging content, media outlets can educate audiences about the true essence of Islam (Abu Hassan 2012) and promote peaceful coexistence (Dauda 2023).

Most studies on the topic of media and resistance to Islamophobia discuss the issue from the point of view of social media representation. In other words, the studies focus on how Islam is portrayed in social media rather than analysing what role the media plays in combating Islamophobia. The role of the media should be studied in depth and from different platforms, old and new, as many of the platforms have become semi-independent institutions and can serve their audiences and users, either as the general public or individuals (Hjarvard 2013).

## **METHODOLOGY**

The study design is qualitative and aims to explore Muslim converts' perceptions of the influence of the media as a platform to combat Islamophobia. This is a phenomenology study, which involved the deliberate samples of Muslim converts in Sabah and Sarawak, selected through purposive sampling. Smith and Nizza (2022) defined phenomenology as the interpretation of "how participants perceive, describe, feel, judge, remember, make sense of, and talk to others about

a phenomenon". Phenomenology, commonly used in nursing and psychology, is also suitable for studying religious conversion as it helps explore individuals' experiences and perceptions during this process. Heidegger explained that it involves digging beyond surface appearances to understand the meaning of experiences, while Paley (2017) stated the need of ascribing significance to individual data elements for a comprehensive understanding.

This study employed the method of semi-structured interview to collect data from 20 Muslim converts in Sabah and Sarawak. The flexibility of semi-structured interviews allows researchers to vary the order of questions depending on the social background of the participants (Bayeck 2021) It builds sufficient rapport (Lobe, Morgan and Hoffman 2022), or address issues of interest to the research during the face-to-face interview while allowing participants the freedom to speak in a non-judgmental environment (Robinson and Schulz 2016). This method was efficient in understanding Muslim converts' perceptions of the influence of the media in combating Islamophobia, based on their experiences as followers of different religions and beliefs before they embraced Islam.

In this study, the interviews were conducted using the framework introduced by Moustakas (1994), involving 'naïve' descriptions gathered through open-ended questions and dialogue. Some of the interview questions are as follows:

1. Do you think mass media can be used to counter misunderstanding of Islam? How?
2. How do you perceive the role of mass media in shaping opinions about Islam?
3. Do you think social media can be used to counter misunderstanding of Islam? How?
4. How do you perceive the role of social media in shaping opinions about Islam?
5. Are there specific types of media content that you believe contribute positively to the understanding of Islam?

The study then proceeded to outline the structure of the experiences by reflecting on and interpreting the narratives shared by Muslim converts. The study focused on two major cities that are the cultural epicentres of Malaysian Borneo: Kota Kinabalu, Sabah and Kuching, Sarawak, mainly because the two cities have a diversity of cultures, ethnicities and faiths. The data collection spanned for two months, from September 2016 to October 2016.

After the data collection, the researchers transcribed the recordings of the interviews into written texts and the study opted for verbatim transcription. This study used a thematic approach to categorise the themes that emerged from the



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interviews and used a descriptive (eidetic) and interpretive (hermeneutic) phenomenological approach to analyse the data. In this study, the Interpretative Phenomenology Approach (IPA) developed by Smith was applied, which views data analysis as an iterative process involving re-reading of transcripts and three levels of coding: descriptive, linguistic and conceptual (Smith and Nizza 2022). The identities of the participants were maintained as confidential by providing pseudonyms indicated as follows: A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, I, J, K, L, M N, O, P, Q, R, S, and T.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

The findings section contains three sub-sections namely the status of Islamophobia in Sabah and Sarawak, the influence of Malaysian mass media and the influence of social media.

### **The Status of Islamophobia in Sabah and Sarawak**

In examining the status of Islamophobia in Sabah and Sarawak, this study revealed various reactions on the internet, exposing instances of religious conflict and negative portrayals that potentially impact social harmony. Usually, the negative reactions on the internet are the result of articles that refer to racist acts against non-Muslims or acts by Muslims that seem to restrict the rights of other religious followers (Mohamed Nawab 2019). Nur Farhana and Nur Syarihah (2020) believed that the increasing conflicts related to religious misunderstanding can affect social harmony in Malaysia. More specifically, Participant B raised one particular concern about the affordance of borderless technology in which information from West Malaysia can affect those in East Malaysia:

[Participant B]

For us in Sarawak, *da'wah* (Islamic proselytisation) needs to be done delicately. We sugar-coat a lot of times. Sometimes, right after we share good things about Islam, there is an issue broke out in Peninsular, like *Salib* (the cross) and we had to explain on Facebook to non-Muslims and new converts here. It is tiring. That is the danger of the media (7 September 2016).

The expansion of media and communication allows people to see what other regions of the world are going through. Although the participants in Sabah and Sarawak live in peace and harmony, they are aware of any religious issues that happen outside their states. Participant B who was a religious activist in Sarawak expressed her worries about how the media were capable of reversing their hard

work of promoting a greater understanding between Muslims and non-Muslims in Sarawak.

A case in point is the coverage of the Christian 'cross issue' which happened in 2015. Different media outlets, both mass and social concocted their versions of the stories to sensationalise the issue. Participant B was concerned that the coverage in media could shape non-Muslims' opinions that Islam is a rigid religion, thus leading to Islamophobia. When the issue reached Sarawakians, it confused them because they have been living together in a multi-religious state peacefully. Additionally, Islamophobia might arise when there is a failure to clearly distinguish between religion and race. Participant O rhetorically asked:

[Participant O]

If you are going to media, like radio, Malays will go to certain channels, Indians different channels. What does this mean? This can create misunderstanding that Islam belongs to one race only (11 September 2016).

Participant O's statement suggests that the media's channelisation based on racial lines may contribute to the misunderstanding that Islam is associated with a specific race. Similar to Participant O, some participants remarked about how Islam is always portrayed as the religion of the Malays, often making Muslim converts feel out of place. Participant K believed this is related to superiority exhibited by some Muslims on social media:

[Participant K]

Some Muslims are quite arrogant. On social media, Muslims know how to judge but hardly ask about the real situation. This is not a good image for Islam (9 September 2016).

Participant K's observation suggests that the perceived arrogance of some Muslims on social media and their tendency to pass judgment without understanding the real situation might contribute to negative perceptions. Regardless, Sabah and Sarawak participants in this study demonstrated high tolerance in dealing with people of other ethnicities and beliefs diplomatically. Participants A and M, both from Sarawak shared their pride and tips in living in a multicultural society:

[Participant A]

We live together, with different ethnicities and religions. We are used to it. It is common to see people from different religions staying in one house (7 September 2016).

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[Participant M]

We live together with people from different backgrounds and religions in the same house. It's normal for us. Do not insult other religions, do not provoke other religious followers (10 September 2016).

Participant A's and Participant M's statements reflect a sense of familiarity and acceptance with living among individuals of diverse ethnicities and religions, suggesting the commonality and normalcy of such coexistence. The importance of avoiding insults and provocations towards other religions suggests a commitment to maintaining harmony and mutual respect in their shared living spaces.

### **The Influence of Malaysian Mass Media**

The findings from this study demonstrate the participants' beliefs in the effectiveness of Malaysian mass media in dispelling negative portrayals of Islam. Many Islamic evangelism programmes are conducted in mosques throughout Malaysia, which keeps the houses of worship in the media spotlight. For example, Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia (JAKIM) and Jabatan Agama Islam Wilayah Persekutuan (JAWI) frequently become co-contributors for many Islamic programmes and the latest is *KAFA d'Hijrah* broadcasted on TV Al-Hijrah.

In the context of multicultural audiences in Sabah and Sarawak, the participants highlighted the power of mass media in shaping perceptions, fostering understanding, and mitigating Islamophobia through strategic programming and considerate content curation. For instance, Participants D and E stated that:

[Participant D]

The media can use their position in society. The media can show the true practice of Islam to the audience. I think this can help change the negative image (8 September 2016).

[Participant E]

Yes, the media are very important. Instead of violence, show kindness like helping people. It can make a difference to non-Muslims to learn about Islam (8 September 2016).

Both Participants D and E advocated for a more constructive and informative media approach to counteract stereotypes and promote good image of Islam. It is possible that the effect is not the same for born Muslims because they are used to this information, but the participants were optimistic that this method is effective

especially for Muslim converts and thus for non-Muslims. Exposure to the true image of Islam can change, if not reduce, the negative perceptions of both converted Muslims and non-Muslims because they grow up with different values, cultures, and beliefs.

Before converting to Islam, the Muslim converts in this study admitted that they knew very little about Islam. Since their exposure to Islam in real life was limited due to unfamiliar surroundings and busy schedules, the media became an essential alternative for them to improve their understanding. Islamophobia can be reduced through mass media because the platforms provide extensive content with detailed explanations about Islam with minimum distraction, as the following excerpt from Participant F shows:

[Participant F]

Yes, you can use that. And it's good, because when you try to clear the air without being interrupted. You can clear it with TV, radio. And if they have questions, you can give your phone number to contact (1 October 2016).

Participant F believed that uninterrupted statements should have more impact on the recipients of the message. Since the media are the intermediaries, Muslims could disseminate Islamic information without fear of being interrupted in the middle of a conversation. Even though broadcast media such as television and radio have their breaks, they are scheduled in advance to avoid distorting the programme's message. The participant compared the mass media to face-to-face conversations, where recipients are free to speak out of turn, which could interfere with the intended message. In contrast to mass media, the audience can decide for themselves how to interpret the message without anyone waiting for their feedback.

Mass media, especially television, have been known for decades as "family media," and therefore it would be effective in eliminating misunderstandings about Islam by addressing a heterogeneous audience at the same time. Participants G and R said:

[Participant G]

Yes, it is very effective. A lot of my family members are Christians and they always think that Islam is a savage religion and encourages its followers to kill people. So when they watch on the media that is showing good images of Islam, it can correct the perceptions of my family members (9 September 2016).

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[Participant R]

It is good. Like in my family, there are non-Muslim members who are still conflicting about Islam. Media can be used to give them further understanding. If they want to watch it or not, it is up to them (6 October 2016)

The above excerpts by Participants G and R indicate the presence of Islamophobia in Sabah and Sarawak, albeit to a lesser degree. While sharing about their journeys to Islam, some participants from Sabah and Sarawak admitted to being the recipients of hostile reactions from their family members. In the context Participant R's excerpt, the Malaysian mass media has an impact on Muslims and non-Muslims when they sit together to watch Islamic programmes that give them a positive view of Islam and eventually reject any negative ideas.

Mass media can be a 'safe' medium in which most programmes are thoroughly screened before broadcast. The subtlety of the mass media in Malaysia is commendable, as it reverently considers the feelings of non-Muslim audiences and does not broadcast religiously offensive content:

[Participant H]

It could attract non-Muslim audiences because their methods are subtle. They produce the contents for general view. I think Malaysia media have thoroughly thought about the consequences of their materials (1 October 2016).

[Participant T]

On television we can see true information and whether the preacher is good or not. At my office, my non-Muslim colleague told me her son likes to watch *Tanah Kubur*. That is good about the media (9 October 2016).

Participant H complimented the sentience of Malaysia media while Participant T gave an example of one Islamic drama, *Tanah Kubur* (Graveyard) that attracted her non-Muslim colleague's son to watch. The Malaysian media's awareness is commendable as it is in line with the mainstream media's policy of banning any form of *da'wah* that compares Islam to other religions (Andreas 2010). This policy was developed to ensure lasting tolerance between the different religions practised in Malaysia.

As indicated in the Participant T's excerpt above, Islamic materials produced by the Malaysia mass media are able to arouse positive curiosity about Islam among non-Muslims. The power of mass media as an antidote to Islamophobia is evident

in the way it can shape public opinion, helping to reduce the sentiment and promote understanding and acceptance of Muslims.

### **The Influence of Social Media**

As for social media influence, this study found that there are two types of *da'wah* in social media: first, as an extension to receive *da'wah* from famous Muslim preachers, and second, as a platform for performing *da'wah*, where participants take the secondary role in combating Islamophobia. Increased mediatization has made it possible to conduct religious proselytisation outside of the physical space and mainstream media, where preachers can disseminate their sermons through their accounts on social media such as YouTube and Facebook. Participant B stated that:

[Participant B]

At first, I watched preachers on TV. But now, I follow them on social media like Facebook. Whenever I go to places that do not have TV, I will go on social media to see their preaching (7 September 2016).

Participant B mentioned a shift in consuming religious content, transitioning from watching preachers on TV to following them on social media like Facebook. This suggests that social media serves as an extension of TV, providing a convenient and accessible platform for individuals to continue accessing religious content, especially in locations without TV access.

The majority of participants in this study agreed that famous Muslim preachers have a greater responsibility in combating Islamophobia than ordinary Muslims, implying the influence of the media through the adoption of the platform by famous Muslim preachers.

[Participant I]

For me, the people itself, such as certified preachers, is more important in spreading about Islam, because it is much convenient in term of communication and their knowledge are from the right and certified resources (4 October 2016).

[Participant N]

When I was searching about Islam, I got a lot of information from preachers like Ahmad Deedat and Zakir Naik. Also the videos of Hussin Yee, Yusuf Estes. YouTube has a lot of videos of why people chose Islam (10 September 2016).

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In Participant I's statement, the emphasis on "certified preachers" and the convenience in communication suggests a preference for authoritative figures and a reliance on information perceived to be trustworthy. The use of the term "certified resources" implies a desire for accurate and validated knowledge. For Participant N, the mention of specific preachers and YouTube as a source of information indicates a reliance on digital media and influential preachers in shaping their understanding of Islam. The statement suggests that online platforms play a significant role in providing diverse perspectives on religion.

However, it is not only an opportunity for famous Muslim preachers to contribute to the dissemination of *da'wah* that is anticipated to counter Islamophobia, but Participant J saw it as the chance to fight back on equal ground. It underscores the importance of having knowledgeable and articulate individuals, such as Participant J who was a *da'wah* activist, because he could effectively communicate the teachings and principles of Islam to a wider audience, by adopting the interreligious debate method of Ahmad Deedat.

[Participant J]

As I focus my *da'wah* work on non-Muslims, I still like referring to the pioneer's work such as Ahmad Deedat's because his *da'wah* was on comparative religions (5 October 2016).

In this excerpt, Participant J highlighted his preference for referring to the work of Ahmad Deedat in his *da'wah* outreach, which focused on comparative religions. It suggests that the Participant J's experience with religion had led him to value the approach of comparative religion in sharing his faith with others. By sharing their experiences and providing guidance, the activists can help those Muslims who live in a society where they may face discrimination and prejudice.

This study found that there are non-Muslims who reconstructed their perceptions towards Islam after being exposed to the Islamic lectures showing the true, peaceful side of Islam, as suggested by Participant K:

[Participant K]

Media is important because if you check Facebook, there are Islamic talks by *ustaz* and *ustazah* shared by non-Muslims. My friends, family and I were surprised to see that too (9 September 2016).

Based on the excerpt above, Participant K believed that the success of eliminating the misunderstanding about Islam is gauged through the level of acceptance of

non-Muslims. The mention of non-Muslims sharing these talks indicates a growing interest in learning about Islam and its teachings. It highlights the potential for social media to challenge preconceived notions and foster greater understanding between different communities. It also suggests that social media can play a role in promoting cross-cultural dialogue and breaking down barriers between groups.

With its interactive features and fast dissemination speed, social media is a powerful tool for tackling the issues of Islamophobia. Through social media, people from different backgrounds can engage in conversations, share their experiences, and create a sense of community. Participants L and M agreed that this approach helps break down stereotypes and promote understanding, tolerance, and acceptance of different cultures and religions.

[Participant L]

Not through sharing or posting videos. We can have discussions with them on blogs or websites. We try to answer their questions about Islam. I think it is effective (9 September 2016).

[Participant M]

We can do it through Facebook. We can send them private messages or we make the message public to correct the misunderstanding. After all, Facebook could spread messages quickly (10 September 2016).

Participants L and M perceived interactive social media as effective platforms and by interacting online, the Muslims are given the chance to explain the actual practices of Islam. The use of private messages is a more personalised approach to addressing Islamophobia. This could be particularly in effect in engaging individuals who may hold negative beliefs about Islam but are open to learning and discussion. The mention of making messages public indicates the potential for social media to reach a wider audience, publicly and privately, and create a broader impact.

## **DISCUSSION**

In understanding the Muslim converts' perceptions of the influence of media and the media strategies in combating Islamophobia, this study posits three important yet connected themes. The three themes are (1) the status of Islamophobia in Sabah and Sarawak; (2) the influence of Malaysian mass media; and (3) the influence of social media.



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The first theme highlights the current state of Islamophobia in Sabah and Sarawak, which is characterised by media-driven tensions (mass media and social media), with social media acting as an arena for various reactions and instances of religious tensions. The present study's findings on racial differences align with the insights provided by Mohamed Nawab (2019), who highlighted factors contributing to the rise of Islamophobia in Malaysia, emphasising the interconnection between race and religion.

This echoes the concerns raised in Ahmad Faizuddin, Jaffary, and Zaizul's (2020) research, where Buddhists in Malaysia expressed Islamophobic tendencies, attributing it to Muslim dominance in political and administrative spheres. In addition to the prevailing competitive factors, namely politics and the economy (Osman 2006), this present discovery introduces a fresh element of competition. It discloses that the media, which has been perceived to be in favour of Muslims and, by extension, the racial majority Malays, constitutes another significant factor. This suggests a complex interplay of various dynamics shaping perceptions and tensions related to Islamophobia in the country. The exclusionary portrayal of Islam either in the media or outside contributes to a climate of Islamophobia by reinforcing stereotypes and limiting the visibility of diverse Muslim experiences in Malaysia.

As regards on the influence of Malaysian mass media, the findings show the presence of Islamophobia in Sabah and Sarawak, though to a milder extent and mass media exposure to the right Islam are effective in combating the negative sentiments towards Islam. This represents contemporary *da'wah*, using media to propagate Islam by highlighting its positive aspects without engaging in comparisons that may offend other religions.

This study found that Malaysian mass media are effective due to the subtlety and careful content curation, promoting positive curiosity about Islam, ultimately serving to counter Islamophobia. It supports the study of Fauziah et al. (2020), that media practitioners at Bernama, TV Al-Hijrah, Radio Televisyen Malaysia (RTM), Harian Metro, and Berita Harian demonstrate good work ethics and are aware of the importance of verifying Islamic information before disseminating the content in mainstream Malaysian media. According to Safiyyah and Zaridah (2022), Malaysian news media show a keen awareness and, as much as they want to claim freedom of the press, they know that maintaining harmony in a pluralistic society is paramount.

The third and final theme pertains to the power of social media in challenging Islamophobia. The power of countering Islamophobia is primarily on the influential Muslim leaders. This finding builds upon McGinty's (2012) concept that renowned Muslims can influence public perceptions of Islam, shifting the

focus from influential Muslim leaders to well-known Muslim preachers. This study also extends the effectiveness of famous Muslim preachers to the digital realm.

This study found that social media also allows common Muslims to do *da'wah* by learning from famous Muslim preachers and interacting with non-Muslims to answer their queries about Islam. Building on Hammad's (2020) acknowledgment of the internet's efficacy for Muslims to represent themselves, this study introduces a new perspective, emphasising that Muslims can go beyond personal representation. It highlights the active role of Muslims in representing Islam by engaging in *da'wah* and addressing inquiries from non-Muslims about the religion. This is in line with *da'wah* aspect which, according to Zulkiple (2001), every Muslim acts as a communicator of Islam, with the responsibility of conveying positive messages and giving *da'wah* based on their abilities.

In regards to Stig Hjarvard's mediatization concept, this study formulates the mediatization in combating Islamophobia in the context of Muslim-majority country. This study proposes that Malaysian mass media and social media have been utilised to combat Islamophobia through *da'wah* and how they influence each other.

Firstly, the process of mediatization introduces the integration of *da'wah* into Malaysian mass media practices, through the focus on the positive aspects of Islam and careful content curation that respects other religions. This study found that the establishment of a religious media has the power to influence audiences to develop a favourable perception towards Islam. The finding from this study contrasts to Hjarvard's (2013) observations of growing secularization in Nordic nations, which indicate a diminishing influence of conventional religious establishments. This study discovered that traditional religious institutions such as Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia (JAKIM) and Jabatan Agama Islam Wilayah Persekutuan (JAWI) still have the power to determine or at least influence the Islamic content broadcast by religious mass media. This is portrayed through the application of *da'wah* in the mass media strategies. In relation to this, Efendi, Siregar and Damanik (2023) stated that radio and television media are effective in spreading *da'wah* due to their reach, information speed, and cultural effects. This is believed due to the fact that Islam is the official religion in Malaysia, thus the Malaysian mass media endorse Islam.

Secondly, Hjarvard's mediatization suggests that the rise of new media evangelists is concerned with reducing the authority of religious officials. However, this study revealed that the authority on social media is in fact the extension of the one defined for mass media. The difference is, social media allows the users to indicate a preference distinction, where the users show more

*Author*

interest in acquiring knowledge about Islam from preachers like Hussin Yee and Zakir Naik, who are seldom featured in mass media, focusing their *da'wah* efforts on non-Muslim audiences. The involvement of online Muslim preachers and Muslim netizens exemplifies active contributions to the mediatization process on social media platforms.

One important implication from this study is that there is a critical need for the media practitioners, policymakers and religious authorities to collaborate in developing inclusive media strategies that actively combat Islamophobia. It is particularly pertinent for those involved in media content creation, regulation and religious leadership.

## **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, this study validates Hjarvard's mediatization theory by demonstrating the crucial role of both mass media and social media in shaping perceptions and combating negative stereotypes surrounding Islam in Sabah and Sarawak. While media-driven tensions, particularly on social media, can potentially lead to religious conflict and negative portrayals, participants in these regions exhibit high levels of tolerance and diplomacy. The Malaysian mass media's positive portrayal of Islam, marked by sensitivity and careful curation, is recognised as effective in countering negative sentiments. Additionally, social media serves as a platform for both receiving *da'wah* from famous online Muslim preachers and for Muslim individuals performing *da'wah* to combat Islamophobia.

Applying Hjarvard's long-term mediatization concept, this study argues that media shapes *da'wah* as a means to counter Islamophobia, facilitating representation, information dissemination, and engagement. In turn, *da'wah* influences media strategies, impacting content creation and interactions across mass and social media platforms. Future research could explore the content of social media accounts combating Islamophobia through virtual ethnography, providing deeper insights into the specific narratives and strategies employed in Sabah and Sarawak.

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