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Islam and Muslims in Western Media, 1960–2026: A Systematic Review of Portrayal Research by Western and Pakistani Scholars

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ABSTRACT

Western media have shaped how non-Muslims imagine Islam and Muslims for more than a century, yet research on these portrayals has not been brought together across its full history or across the scholarly communities that produce it. This systematic narrative review draws on 88 works published between 1960 and 2026, identified through Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, journals recognised by Pakistan's Higher Education Commission and citation chaining. Each work was coded for period, medium, setting, method and principal finding, appraised for quality, and synthesised chronologically and thematically through the lenses of Orientalism and framing. The literature developed through six periods, from studies of the medieval image of Islam to computational work on double standards and Muslim self-representation. Press studies account for 45% of the corpus and film and television for 30%. Across periods and media, Islam is most consistently portrayed as violent; other recurring portrayals are cultural incompatibility, oppressed or dangerous Muslim women, a "good Muslim/bad Muslim" split, racialisation and the absence of ordinary Muslim life. Coverage of Muslims is also more negative than coverage of comparable groups and events. Pakistan-based scholars, who produced 18 of the 88 works, all since 2012, find the same image in Hollywood films and in British and Australian newspapers, but publish mainly in national journals. The review brings Pakistani and international scholarship together for the first time and proposes an agenda for multilingual, multimodal and platform-aware research.

Introduction

Non-Muslims in Europe, North America and Australasia usually encounter Islam first through the media. Through news, film, television, social media and now generative artificial intelligence, they pick up images of a faith followed by nearly two billion people, and in the absence of direct contact these images largely define who a Muslim is (Lajevardi, 2020; Saleem et al., 2017).

Scholars have long been concerned with such images. Daniel (1960) and Southern (1962) showed how medieval Europe came to see Islam as false, violent and sensual. Said (1978, 1981) turned that history into a theory of power and applied it to American journalism, and Shaheen (1984, 2001) showed that the screen Arab, routinely conflated with the Muslim, was portrayed as villain, buffoon or seducer. Research expanded rapidly after 2001, and a meta-analysis of 345 studies found that Muslims are portrayed predominantly negatively and that Islam is most often associated with violence (Ahmed & Matthes, 2017).

That meta-analysis, however, covered only news studies published between 2000 and 2015. It excluded most earlier scholarship, work on fiction and the years since 2015, in which computational methods have compared Muslims with other groups (Bleich & van der Veen, 2022; Kearns et al., 2019), streaming services have commissioned Muslim-authored series (Punathambekar et al., 2025) and language models have been shown to associate Muslims with violence (Abid et al., 2021). Existing reviews have also drawn little on Pakistani research on Hollywood and on British and Australian newspapers. This review addresses these gaps. It concerns portrayal only; audience effects are reviewed separately. It asks four research questions:

RQ1. How has research on the portrayal of Islam and Muslims in Western media developed from its beginnings to 2026?

RQ2. Which portrayals does this research consistently identify, and how do they vary?

RQ3. How do Western, Pakistan-based and Pakistani-diaspora contributions compare?

RQ4. What gaps remain for future research?

Conceptual Framework

Nearly all studies in the corpus use one or both of two lenses. *Orientalism* explains much of *what* is portrayed. Said (1978) argued that Western knowledge created an irrational, despotic and unchanging Orient in contrast with a rational West. Later scholars describe a *neo-Orientalism* in which the passive, exotic East is replaced by an active, threatening Islam (Kerboua, 2016; Samiei, 2010). Gender is often central: the figure of the oppressed Muslim woman is used to justify intervention (Abu-Lughod, 2002), and Muslims are often split into "good" and "bad" (Mamdani, 2002).

Framing explains *how* portrayals are produced. Some aspects of reality are made more salient in order to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and remedy (Entman, 1993). Quantitative studies measure frames, tone or the coverage given to comparable events (Ahmed & Matthes, 2017; Kearns et al., 2019), while qualitative studies, including most Pakistani work, use critical discourse analysis to show how language realises such frames (Ghauri & Umber, 2019; Richardson, 2004). In this review, Orientalism provides the categories against which portrayals are compared, and framing captures how they vary in salience, tone, attribution and the treatment of comparable events.

Method

Design

The study is a systematic narrative review. Because the corpus combines historical, discourse-analytic, corpus-linguistic, computational and meta-analytic work on news, film, television and digital media, statistical pooling was not possible; the evidence was instead synthesised descriptively, chronologically and thematically.

Search Strategy

Scopus and the Web of Science Core Collection were searched for (Islam* OR Muslim* OR Arab*) AND (portray* OR represent* OR fram* OR stereotyp* OR Orientalis* OR Islamophob*) AND (news OR press OR television OR film OR Hollywood OR series OR streaming OR "social media" OR "language model") in titles, abstracts and keywords, with no date restriction. Google Scholar was searched for books and reports, journals recognised by Pakistan's Higher Education Commission (HEC) were searched for Pakistani scholarship, and backward and forward citation chaining was conducted from all included works.

Eligibility Criteria

Works were included if they examined the portrayal of Islam or Muslims in Western (European, North American or Australasian) news, film, television, streaming, social media or AI systems, and were peer-reviewed articles, scholarly books or major research reports in English, or in German or Turkish with an English summary. Studies of audience effects only, of non-Western media, or of Arabs without reference to religion were excluded, as were opinion pieces, theses and conference abstracts. Screening of titles and abstracts, and then of full texts, identified 88 works.

Quality Appraisal and Analysis

Each empirical study was appraised for (a) a clearly stated aim, (b) explicit sampling, (c) a transparent procedure, (d) reported reliability or rigour, (e) claims grounded in data and (f) proportionate conclusions. No study was excluded on quality grounds, since

this would have removed most foundational and qualitative work, but appraisal informed the weight given to each study. For each work, author, outlet, medium, setting, sample, method, framework and principal finding were recorded (Table 2), and each work was classified by scholarly community: Western, Pakistan-based or Pakistani-diaspora.

Results

Profile of the Corpus

The 88 works span 66 years (Table 1); each is summarised in Table 2. Until 2000 the field was small and largely book-based; it grew rapidly after 2001, and the decade 2001–2010 alone produced almost a third of the corpus. News was by far the most common focus (40 works, 45%), followed by television (13) and film (13); only five works concerned social media and AI. Western and international scholars produced 68 works (77%), Pakistan-based scholars 18 (20%), all published since 2012, and Pakistani-diaspora scholars two. Fouteen of the 18 Pakistan-based works appeared in national or non-indexed journals.

Table 1

Distribution of Included Works by Period

Period	Works, n (%)	Pakistani-authored, n	Dominant media	Dominant methods
I. 1960–1977: Historical foundations	2 (2.3)	0	Medieval texts	Intellectual history
II. 1978–2000: Orientalist critique and the screen Arab	7 (8.0)	2 (diaspora)	US news, TV, film	Critical and textual analysis
III. 2001–2010: War-on-terror turn	28 (31.8)	0	British, US, Australian and European press; TV drama	Content, framing and discourse analysis
IV. 2011–2017: Measurement at scale	21 (23.9)	5	Newspaper corpora, cable news, Twitter	Corpus linguistics, tone analysis, meta-analysis
V. 2018–2022: Comparison, platforms and streaming	23 (26.1)	12	Newspapers, global film samples, Hollywood, AI	Sentiment analysis, disparity models, audits, CDA
VI. 2023–2026: Double standards and self-representation	7 (8.0)	1	Terror-attack coverage, streaming series	Computational comparison, industry analysis
Total	88 (100)	20		

Note. CDA = critical discourse analysis. Pakistani-authored works comprise 18 by Pakistan-based and 2 by Pakistani-diaspora scholars.

Table 2

Works Included in the Review (N = 88)

Study	Medium and setting	Method	Principal finding
Periods I–II (1960–2000)			
Daniel (1960)	Medieval European texts	Intellectual history	Medieval image of Islam as false, violent and sensual
Southern (1962)	Medieval European thought	Intellectual history	Views moved from ignorance to polemic to partial understanding
Said (1978)	Western scholarship and art	Critical genealogy	Knowledge constructed an irrational "Orient" serving empire
Said (1981)	US news, Iranian revolution	Critical analysis	Coverage reduced Islam to a militant monolith
Shaheen (1984)	US television	Textual analysis, interviews	Arabs as villains, sheikhs, terrorists and buffoons
Sardar & Davies (1990)†	British media, Rushdie affair	Critical analysis	Muslims cast as fanatical and irrational
Ahmed (1992)†	Global Western media	Critical-anthropological analysis	Muslims framed with hostility and left voiceless
Karim (2000)	North American news	CDA	Narrow "Islamic peril" images obscured political causes
Hussain (2000)	Danish news	Discourse analysis	Muslims the primary targets of minority discourse
Period III (2001–2010)			
Abbas (2001)	British press	Ideological analysis	Concentrated ownership produced negative views of Islam
McAlister (2001)	US film, news, religious media	Cultural history	Images of Islam aligned with US strategic interests
Shaheen (2001)	Hollywood, 900+ films	Textual survey	Arabs and Muslims overwhelmingly vilified
Mamdani (2002)	US political and media discourse	Critical essay	Muslims divided into "good" and "bad"
Abu-Lughod (2002)	US discourse, Afghanistan war	Critical essay	"Oppressed Muslim woman" justified intervention

Study	Medium and setting	Method	Principal finding
Poole (2002)	British national press	Content and discourse analysis	British Muslims framed as threat and incompatible
Shaheen (2003)	Hollywood film	Textual survey	Villain, sheikh and maiden stereotypes across a century
Richardson (2004)	British broadsheets, 1997–1998	CDA	Liberal titles reproduced anti-Muslim racism
Ramji (2005)	Hollywood action films, 1990s	Film analysis	Films taught audiences to "know" the Muslim terrorist
Kabir (2006)	Australian media, 2001–2005	Content analysis	Muslim terrorists versus a civilised West
Macdonald (2006)	European and US veil debates	Textual analysis	Veil reduced to a symbol; women's voices absent
Boggs & Pollard (2006)	Hollywood terrorism films	Critical analysis	Spectacle of terrorism supported militarism
Semmerling (2006)	Hollywood film	Textual reading	Films stage an "Orientalist fear"
Khatib (2006)	Hollywood and Arab cinemas	Comparative film analysis	Arab world as a dangerous space for American action
d'Haenens & Bink (2007)	Dutch press, 1998–2004 (n = 677)	Content analysis	Topics, speakers and slant around the van Gogh murder
Hafez & Richter (2007)*	German public TV (133 items)	Thematic content analysis	81% of items linked Islam to negative topics
Nacos & Torres-Reyna (2007)	US news	Content analysis, opinion data	Coverage grew and became more thematic after 2001
Saeed (2007)	British media	Narrative review	Muslims constructed as an alien "other"
Moore et al. (2008)	British press, 2000–2008	Content analysis	Coverage rose sharply and centred on terrorism
Shaheen (2008)	Hollywood, post-2001	Textual survey	Villainous portrayals persisted
Gottschalk & Greenberg (2008)	US political cartoons	Visual analysis	Cartoons made Muslims a visual enemy
Steuter & Wills (2008)	North American news	Metaphor analysis	Enemies described as vermin, disease and prey

Study	Medium and setting	Method	Principal finding
Korteweg & Yurdakul (2009)	Dutch and German discourse	Discourse analysis	Honour violence attributed to Islam
Pantazis & Pemberton (2009)	UK counter-terrorism discourse	Critical analysis	Muslims produced as a "suspect community"
Ibrahim (2010)	US network TV news	Framing analysis	Islam presented through a narrow conflict frame
Kumar (2010)	US news, Bush II era	Framing analysis	Five Orientalist frames of Islam
Meer et al. (2010)	British press	Discourse analysis	More Muslim voices, sorted into moderate and fundamentalist
Samiei (2010)	Western discourse	Conceptual analysis	Orientalism reworked into a threatening Islam
Period IV (2011–2017)			
Powell (2011)	US terrorism news	Framing analysis	Islam framed through fear and "us versus them"
Morey & Yaqin (2011)	UK and US news, film, TV	Cross-media analysis	Representations diversified within limited stereotypes
Alsultany (2012)	US TV drama and news	Textual analysis	"Simplified complex representations"
Rahman (2012)‡*	Time, Newsweek, 1979–2002	Framing analysis	Pakistani women as victims of "repressive" laws
Takacs (2012)	US television	Textual and industry analysis	The war on terror became entertainment
Gul (2013)‡*	Six Hollywood films	Content analysis	Films represented US war-on-terror policy
Baker et al. (2013a, 2013b)	British press, ~143m words	Corpus linguistics, CDA	"Muslim" collocated with conflict and extremism
Alsultany (2013)	US TV and media	Textual analysis	"Positive" images worked within the terrorism frame
Awan (2014)	Twitter, UK (500 tweets)	Content analysis	Typology of online anti-Muslim offenders
Rahman (2014)‡	Time, 1998–2002	CDA	Pakistani women framed as "intolerant" others
Bleich et al. (2015)	British headlines, 2001–2012	Large-N tone analysis	Right-leaning titles most negative

Study	Medium and setting	Method	Principal finding
Bowe et al. (2015)	US newspapers	Content analysis	More nuanced picture in some outlets
Dixon & Williams (2015)	US network and cable news	Content analysis vs official data	Muslims over-represented as terrorists
Kent (2015)	Ms. Marvel comics	Reception and textual analysis	Heroine accepted for being "normal"
Castonguay (2015)	Homeland	Textual analysis	Series complicit in the security imaginary
Fatima (2016)‡*	Six Hollywood films	Textual analysis	Recurring negative stereotypes of Muslims
Törnberg & Törnberg (2016)	Swedish online forum	Topic modelling, CDA	Muslims constructed as a homogeneous threat
Kerboua (2016)	Western scholarship and media	Conceptual analysis	From Orientalism to neo-Orientalism
Ahmed & Matthes (2017)	Global media, 345 studies	Meta-analysis	Muslims framed negatively; Islam linked to violence
Terman (2017)	US newspapers, 4,000+ articles	Computational text analysis	Women in Muslim countries framed through oppression
Ghauri et al. (2017)‡*	Australian and Western news	Narrative review	Muslims framed as inferior and threatening
Periods V–VI (2018–2026)			
Martini (2018)	British broadsheets	CDA	Women joining ISIS recast as "jihadi brides"
Kearns et al. (2019)	US news, 136 attacks	Regression on coverage	357% more coverage for Muslim perpetrators
Ghauri & Umber (2019)‡	Australian editorials	CDA	Political parallelism between The Age and The Australian
M. H. Khan et al. (2019)‡	Trump's statements	CDA	Self–other binary portrayed Islam negatively
Cockbain & Tufail (2020)	UK "grooming gangs" narrative	Critical analysis	Crime racialised and attributed to Muslim culture
Yazdiha (2020)	New York Times, 1992–2010	Topic modelling	More racialised frames after 2001

Study	Medium and setting	Method	Principal finding
Lajevardi (2020, 2021)	US cable news, 1992–2016	Sentiment analysis	Muslims covered more negatively than other minorities
Umber & Ghauri (2020)‡*	Australian editorials	Ideological square	Securitised, "Othered" image in The Australian
Siddiqua & Sultan (2020)‡*	British media	Critical review	Muslims framed as deviant and dangerous
Sajid et al. (2020)‡*	The Times (UK), 67 articles	CDA	Islam presented as inherently violent
Yousaf et al. (2020)‡*	Four Hollywood films	Qualitative content analysis	Muslims shown as anti-West and "uncivilised"
Ali & Rizvi (2020)‡*	Hollywood films	Semiotic analysis	Signs and camera construct Muslim characters negatively
Mengal et al. (2020)‡*	Facebook, Western countries	Qualitative analysis	Islam named negatively; Islamophobia generated
McKeown & Ye (2020)	TIME, 1923–1992	Diachronic corpus analysis	Shift to negative political references
Abid et al. (2021)	GPT-3	Algorithmic audit	"Muslim" completed as "terrorist" in 23% of analogies
A.-B. Khan et al. (2021)	200 popular films	Content analysis	Under 2% of speaking characters Muslim
Bleich & van der Veen (2021, 2022)	US newspapers since 1996	Sentiment analysis	Muslims covered more negatively than other religions
Balcı & Çifçi (2021)*	Kalifat (Netflix)	Textual analysis	Devout Muslims tied to IS
Betus et al. (2020)	US news, 2006–2015	Text analysis, regression	"Terrorism" label five times likelier for Muslims
M. H. Khan et al. (2021)‡	Trump's tweets (n = 40)	CDA	Demagogic exclusion of Muslims
Ghauri et al. (2021)‡*	Australian editorials, 2016	CDA	Othering discourse persisted
Warrich et al. (2021)‡*	Australian tabloids	Framing analysis	Terrorism stories associated with Muslims
Tariq et al. (2021)‡*	US print media	Discourse analysis	Muslims constructed as a threat to the West

Study	Medium and setting	Method	Principal finding
De Coster et al. (2024)	US and UK press, 10,233 articles	Computational text analysis	Muslim attacks covered more negatively and longer
Abdul Rehman & Salma (2024)	BBC, Al Jazeera, Al Arabiya online	Comparative content analysis	BBC called the Christchurch attacker "gunman" more than "terrorist"
Qamar et al. (2024)‡*	Hollywood, pre/post-2001	Qualitative comparison	Orientalist stereotypes dominant in both periods
Şahin (2025)*	Kalifat (Netflix)	Qualitative content analysis	Muslims linked to terrorism; women deprived of rights
Sweida-Metwally (2025)	Western discourse on Gaza	Critical analysis	Islamophobic tropes made the war legible
Punathambekar et al. (2025)	Streaming series	Industry and textual analysis	Muslim creators build distinct cultural worlds
Biano (2025)	Ramy, Mo	Textual analysis	Prestige TV reappropriates the "American Muslim"

Note. † Pakistani-diaspora author; ‡ Pakistan-based author; * national or non-indexed journal or non-academic periodical. CDA = critical discourse analysis.

Development of the Field

Periods I–II (1960–2000). The field began in intellectual history. Daniel (1960) and Southern (1962) showed that the image of Islam as a religion of violence, lust and deceit is medieval in origin, which suggests that modern portrayals draw on an old repertoire rather than simply reflecting events. Said (1978, 1981) built on this history to develop a theory of how Western media represent Islam, and Shaheen (1984) provided the first systematic evidence from American television. Retrospective studies later extended the record. Shaheen (2001) found very few ordinary or sympathetic Arab characters in more than 900 Hollywood films from the silent era to 2000, and McKeown and Ye (2020) found that in *TIME* magazine between 1923 and 1992, "Mohammedan" tended to be used neutrally whereas "Muslim" tended to appear in negative references to conflict. In the 1980s and 1990s, coverage of Muslims living in the West increased. Pakistani-diaspora scholars were among the first to argue that the media portrayed Muslims as fanatical while denying them a voice (Ahmed, 1992; Sardar & Davies, 1990), and Karim (2000) and Hussain (2000) analysed news in North America and Denmark.

Period III (2001–2010). The attacks of September 2001 changed both coverage and research. A British research programme found that Muslims were presented as culturally different and threatening, even in liberal broadsheets (Poole, 2002; Richardson, 2004), that coverage rose sharply and focused on terrorism (Moore et al., 2008), and that counter-terrorism discourse produced a "suspect community" (Pantazis & Pemberton, 2009). Similar patterns appeared in the United States (Ibrahim, 2010; Kumar, 2010), Australia (Kabir, 2006), Germany, where 81% of Islam-related items on public television concerned negative topics (Hafez & Richter, 2007), and the Netherlands (d'Haenens & Bink, 2007; Korteweg & Yurdakul, 2009). Meer et al. (2010) found that more Muslim voices were quoted, but that they were sorted into moderates and fundamentalists. On screen, studies converged on the Muslim, usually Arab, as Hollywood's default villain (Khatib, 2006; Semmerling, 2006; Shaheen, 2008). This period mapped the core repertoire but rarely measured prevalence or compared Muslims with other groups.

Period IV (2011–2017). Research moved towards measurement. Corpus analysis of some 143 million words of British newspaper text found that "Muslim" appeared mainly alongside conflict, extremism and terrorism (Baker et al., 2013a, 2013b). Bleich et al. (2015) asked "negative compared with whom?" and found that Muslims were portrayed more negatively than Jews in British headlines, particularly in right-leaning newspapers. Dixon and Williams (2015) found that Muslims were over-represented as

terrorists relative to official statistics, and Terman (2017) found that US coverage of women in Muslim-majority countries emphasised violence and oppression. In fiction, sympathetic Muslim characters were added, but within the terrorism frame (Alsultany, 2012, 2013). In the same period, Pakistan-based scholars began to publish on how *Time* and *Newsweek* framed Pakistani Muslim women as victims of "repressive" laws (Rahman, 2012, 2014) and on Muslim characters in Hollywood films (Fatima, 2016; Gul, 2013).

Periods V–VI (2018–2026). The central question was no longer whether Muslims were portrayed negatively, but whether they were portrayed more negatively than others. Muslims were covered more negatively on US cable news than Black, Latino and Asian Americans (Lajevardi, 2021), and more negatively in US newspapers than Catholics, Jews and Hindus, both before and after 2001 (Bleich & van der Veen, 2021, 2022). Attacks by Muslim perpetrators received on average 357% more coverage than other attacks (Kearns et al., 2019), were about five times more likely to be labelled "terrorism" (Betus et al., 2020) and were covered more negatively and for longer (De Coster et al., 2024). Fewer than 2% of speaking characters in 200 popular films were Muslim, and those who appeared were disproportionately linked to violence (A.-B. Khan et al., 2021); GPT-3 completed analogies about Muslims with "terrorist" in 23% of cases (Abid et al., 2021).

The first sustained counter-trend also appeared: Muslim-authored series such as *Ramy*, *Mo* and *We Are Lady Parts* build Muslim cultural worlds rather than merely correcting stereotypes (Biano, 2025; Punathambekar et al., 2025). Pakistan-based authors produced 12 of the 23 works in Period V, notably a programme of research on Australian editorials (Ghauri & Umber, 2019; Umber & Ghauri, 2020), analyses of Donald Trump's rhetoric (M. H. Khan et al., 2019, 2021) and studies of Hollywood films (Qamar et al., 2024; Yousaf et al., 2020).

Recurring Portrayals and Sources of Variation

Six portrayals recur across the corpus (Table 3). The association between Islam and violence is the most consistent finding across periods and media (Ahmed & Matthes, 2017; Baker et al., 2013b; Shaheen, 2001), and disparity studies show that it does not simply reflect reality (Betus et al., 2020; Kearns et al., 2019). In coverage of the veil and integration, Muslims are depicted as culturally incompatible (Korteweg & Yurdakul, 2009; Poole, 2002). Muslim women are cast as victims in need of rescue or as naive "jihadi brides" (Martini, 2018; Terman, 2017). Muslims are sorted into moderates and extremists (Mamdani, 2002; Meer et al., 2010), religion is treated as race (Cockbain & Tufail, 2020; Yazdiha, 2020), and ordinary Muslim life is largely absent (Hafez & Richter, 2007; A.-B. Khan et al., 2021).

Table 3

Recurring Portrayals of Islam and Muslims

Portrayal	Core content	Key evidence	Span of evidence
1. Islam as violence	Islam linked to terrorism, war and extremism	Baker et al. (2013b); Ahmed & Matthes (2017); Kearns et al. (2019); Abid et al. (2021)	Daniel (1960) to De Coster et al. (2024)
2. Cultural incompatibility	Muslims as hostile to liberal values and unwilling to integrate	Poole (2002); Korteweg & Yurdakul (2009); Bleich et al. (2015)	Said (1981) to Umber & Ghauri (2020)
3. Oppressed or dangerous women	Victims of the veil and "repressive" law, or naive "jihadi brides"	Rahman (2012, 2014); Terman (2017); Martini (2018)	Abu-Lughod (2002) to Şahin (2025)
4. "Good" versus "bad" Muslims	Moderates versus extremists; patriotic agents versus terrorists	Mamdani (2002); Meer et al. (2010); Alsultany (2012)	Mamdani (2002) to Biano (2025)

Portrayal	Core content	Key evidence	Span of evidence
5. Racialisation	Religion treated as race; crime attributed to culture	Yazdiha (2020); Cockbain & Tufail (2020); Lajevardi (2021)	Abbas (2001) to Sweida-Metwally (2025)
6. Absence	Ordinary Muslim lives missing from news and screen	Hafez & Richter (2007); A.-B. Khan et al. (2021)	Shaheen (1984) to Punathambekar et al. (2025)

The direction of portrayal is consistent across media, but its intensity varies. Portrayals are more negative in right-leaning outlets (Bleich et al., 2015; Ghauri & Umber, 2019), in thrillers and talk shows than in comedy and Muslim-authored drama (Biano, 2025; Hafez & Richter, 2007), and in the years after 1979, after 2001 and after major attacks (McKeown & Ye, 2020; Moore et al., 2008). Domestic Muslims are quoted more often than Muslims abroad (Meer et al., 2010), and Muslim creators produce markedly different portrayals (Punathambekar et al., 2025).

Scholarly Communities

Western scholarship supplies the field's theory and most of its large-scale and comparative evidence, but it is concentrated on British and American newspapers. Pakistani-diaspora scholars produced some of the earliest analyses of global media coverage of Muslims from a Muslim standpoint (Ahmed, 1992; Sardar & Davies, 1990). Pakistan-based scholarship, which is more recent, stands out in three ways. First, it focuses on film and discourse, applying van Dijk's ideological square or semiotics to small, purposive samples (Ali & Rizvi, 2020; Sajid et al., 2020; Yousaf et al., 2020). Second, it independently confirmed in the Australian press the pattern of political parallelism first reported for Britain (Ghauri & Umber, 2019; Umber & Ghauri, 2020). Third, it brings postcolonial and gendered perspectives (Rahman, 2012, 2014). Every Pakistan-based study confirms the themes of violence, threat and the "Other" identified by Western scholars, but these studies rarely use comparison groups, reliability statistics or computational tools, and they are seldom cited in Western research. The communities thus differ in method and visibility, not in their findings.

Discussion

Theoretical Implications

The evidence supports the central prediction of the Orientalist thesis, a monolithic and threatening Islam, across 66 years and every medium. Comparative studies, however, qualify it: news values such as violence, proximity and the identity of the perpetrator interact with Orientalist assumptions to produce measurable double standards (Betus et al., 2020; Kearns et al., 2019). Framing theory explains this interaction better than Orientalism alone because it specifies how salience and attribution vary by outlet, genre and event. The rise of Muslim-authored streaming fiction adds a further qualification: who tells the story increasingly shapes what the story is (Punathambekar et al., 2025).

Practical Implications

Journalists should label attacks consistently regardless of the perpetrator's identity and include ordinary Muslim voices beyond terrorism stories. Film and television producers should treat absence as seriously as negative portrayal (A.-B. Khan et al., 2021). AI developers should audit their models for religious bias (Abid et al., 2021). Pakistani research councils and departments should support larger, comparative studies aimed at indexed journals.

Conclusion

Across 88 works published between 1960 and 2026, Western media have presented Islam chiefly through violence, otherness and the subjugation of women, a finding shared by Western, Pakistan-based and Pakistani-diaspora scholars. What has changed is the strength of the evidence, which now shows that Muslims are portrayed more negatively than comparable groups and events. Muslim-authored streaming fiction is the first sustained counter-trend.

Limitations

The review covered publications in English, German and Turkish, so scholarship in Dutch, French, Spanish, Scandinavian and other languages is under-represented. Narrative synthesis requires judgement about how much weight to give each study. Studies from national journals, included to capture Pakistani scholarship, vary in quality; they are flagged in Table 2.

Future Research

Future research should build multilingual corpora beyond the Anglosphere; analyse images, sound and editing as well as words; audit recommendation algorithms and generative AI; and link texts to newsroom and commissioning practices. Pakistani research would benefit from larger samples, comparison groups, reported reliability and computational tools. Finally, content analysis should be complemented by reception studies in Muslim-majority countries such as Pakistan.

Declarations

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