

## A Pragmatic Analysis of Islam-related Terminologies in Selected Eastern and Western Mass Media

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### Abstract

The mass media are blamed for constructing a negative image of Islam through the use of Islam-related terms in reporting terrorism. It is presumed that when Islam-related terms are used without regard to their original connotations, they are likely to lose their original meanings and begin to take on altered meanings created by the media. Therefore, this study aims to explore the use of Islam-related terminologies in selected eastern and western mass media outlets in relation to their semantic and linguistic interpretations. The study employed a qualitative approach in which content analysis was used. Using purposive sampling, *The Jordan Times* and *Al-Jazeera* were chosen from the eastern Arab world while *The BBC* and *The Guardian* were chosen from the western media. A total of 368 news articles focusing on Islam and Muslims were collected from the selected news media outlets using internet-based search from March 2018 until October 2019. The findings showed significant differences ( $P = 0.000/P < 0.05$ ) exist between the selected eastern and western mass media outlets in using Islam-related terminologies. The terms are used more frequently in the western media outlets than in the eastern media outlets. Further analysis of the findings revealed that the selected media outlets use Islam-related terminologies, such as “Islamist” and “Jihadist”, in negative contexts. The use of Islam-related terminologies in the selected media outlets could be influential in making the audience to perceive Islam as a religion of terrorism. The negative use of Islam-related terms could be minimized through training of journalists on news coverage of religion, provision of proper guidelines on religious reporting and ensuring that these guidelines are strictly followed. It was envisaged that this study would be useful to the media outlets, particularly in the process of news gathering, production, and dissemination.

**Keywords:** Islam, Media discourse, online news, pragmatic analysis, terminologies, terrorism

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## Introduction

The use of Islam-related terminologies in news coverage of Islam has become a contentious issue amongst scholars, researchers, and religious experts (Mohideen, & Mohideen, 2008; Reynolds, 2015; Hassan, Azmi, & Abubakar, 2017). The problem associated with the use of Islam-related terms in the media arises when expressions are used without regard to their original connotations. In this situation, the terms lose their original meanings and begin to take on altered meanings created by the media. This is particularly critical and consequential in the mass media discourse and perceptions of Islam and Muslims in the audience mindsets (Reynolds, 2015). According to Shadid and van Koningsveld (2002), terminologies are nowadays used to describe movements with Islamic religious designations. The terms are used in the media mostly in articles focusing on Islam and Muslims (Ameli et al., 2007). In fact, the use of Islam-related terminologies in negative contexts may reinforce negative stereotypes and prejudices against Muslims (Ameli, Marandi, Ahmed, Kara, & Merali, 2007).

In any case, after the 9/11 attacks, the media paid much attention on Islam-related news with various coined terms such as “Islamic terrorism”, “Islamic fanaticism”, “Muslim extremists” (Mohideen & Mohideen, 2008; Nurullah, 2010; Ridouani, 2011). These kinds of terminologies constitute part of media texts with the tendency to associate Islam with terrorism depending largely on the manner in which the news story is constructed (Hassan, Azmi, & Abdullahi, 2020). As a result of the distortion of words’ meaning, taking into consideration the news context, the media reinforce stereotypes and negative images of Islam (Moore et al., 2008; Reynolds, 2015; Hassan et al., 2017). This problem arises when the media use Islam-related terms in negative context without considering their original connotations. In this situation, the terms lose their original connotations and begin to take on altered meanings created by the media.

In essence, previous studies established that the language used in news coverage of Islam is mostly distorted as a result of the media’s choice of words to describe Islam and Muslims (e.g. Allen, 2012; Hassan et al., 2017; Moore, Mason, & Lewis, 2008). Most of these studies were conducted in the western countries, particularly the US and the UK (e.g. Allen, 2012; Moore et al., 2008) while very few relevant studies focused on the media in Muslim-majority nations (e.g. Hassan et al., 2017). None of the previous studies compared between the eastern and the western mass media in relation to the use of Islam-related terms. Therefore, this study focuses on the use of controversial Islam-related terminologies in the eastern and the western mass media discourse on terrorism. Specifically, this study aims to address the following research questions.

- Q1 What are the differences between the eastern and the selected western mass media in using Islam-related terminologies?
- Q2 How do the eastern and the western mass media use Islam-related terminologies of terrorism in terms of context and connotation?

## News Coverage of Islam in the Media

There has been a considerable increase in scientific publications about news coverage of Islam. A number of studies have investigated the construction of Muslims’ identities in the media (Samaie & Malmir, 2017; Bleich & van der Veen, 2018; Bleich, Souffrant, Stabler, der Veen, & Maurits, 2018; Nickerson, 2019). Most of the studies illustrated that the media tend to associate

Islam with terrorism, and the images as well as discourses relating to Islam and Muslims in the mass media tend to be negative (Powell, 2018; Nickerson, 2019). Sultan (2016) noted that considerable literature is available to indicate that the media construct reality by presenting a mass-mediated view through negative representation. Such representation is “tinged with negative signifiers with the global media’s predominantly negative portrayal of Islam and Muslims” (p. 1). The negative representation, as reported in the previous studies, is sharply reflected in the media discourse. For example, Samaie and Malmir (2017) explored the pervasive representation of Islam and Muslims in a 670,000-word corpus of US news media stories published between 2001 and 2015. The findings indicated that, in general, Islam and Muslims are associated with violence and portrayed as “radical Islamists and Islamic militants” (p. 7.).

Similarly, Baker, Gabrielatos, and McEnery (2013) examined the patterns of representation around the word “Muslim” in a 143-million-word corpus of British newspaper articles published between 1998 and 2009. The analysis showed that ethnic/national identity, characterizing/differentiating attributes, conflict, culture, religion, and group/organizations were referenced. The ‘conflict’ category was found to be lexically rich, containing many word types. Muslim world and Muslim community were found to be used to collectivize Muslims, “both emphasizing their sameness to each other and their difference to the West” (p. 255). Muslims were also represented as easily offended, alienated, and in conflict with non-Muslims.

Relatively, the representation of Islam and Muslims in the news media coverage “focuses on presenting adherents of the Islamic faith as being at odds with Western culture and values” (Ewart, Cherney, & Murphy, 2017, p. 3). This kind of representation may create tension in the society. The media portray Muslims as sympathetic to terrorists, economically backward and conservative (Ewart et al., 2017). Using computer-assisted, lexicon-based analysis, Bleich and van der Veen (2018) comparatively investigated whether Muslims portrayed more negatively than other religious groups and explored the factors associated with the negative portrayal of Islam in the US media. According to the findings, the average tone of articles about Muslims is considerably more negative compared to the other groups. The negative tone is most strongly associated with stories about extremism and events in foreign settings.

Nurullah (2010) argued that the US media focus on the negative depiction of Islam and Muslims by associating them with violence and terrorism for “a few accounts of individuals who commit suicide bombings in the name of Islam” (p. 1043). According to the author, an important point in the account of the negative representation of Muslims in the media started after the 9/11 attacks, where Islam has widely been associated with violence and terrorism while Muslims are portrayed as terrorists. According to Shadid and van Koningsveld (2002), the western media contribute to the negative image of Islam and Muslims through the choice of content and news construction in their articles. Thus, portraying all Muslims as fundamentalists in the media might lead to an image that could generally be recognized and accepted by the audience. Allen (2012) concluded that “the media reinforce the notion that Islam is profoundly different from and a serious threat to the West” (p. 11).

Furthermore, Sultan (2016) noted that the media “construct reality by presenting a mass mediated view through framing, shaping and portrayal” (p. 1). A study conducted by Powell (2018)

noted that, in media representation of Islam and Muslims, thematic framing exists which results in a situation of media coverage of terrorism that is different for acts of terror committed by Muslims than by non-Muslims. This pattern associates Islam with terrorism, and hence creating a fear of the “other”. Saeed (2007) also argued that British Muslims are portrayed as an ‘alien other’ in the media. This misrepresentation can be associated with the development of Islamophobia that has its roots in cultural representations of the ‘other’. Saeed further argued that the treatment of British Muslims and Islam follows the themes of ‘deviance’ and ‘un-Britishness’. In actual fact, the media present negative images of Muslims and Islam.

Powell’s study examined 11 terrorist incidents from 2011 to 2016, to determine if any changes in media coverage of terrorism have occurred in a climate of increased awareness of Islamophobia. The study found that the media continue to frame domestic terrorism as isolated incidents of troubled individuals, and “Islamic” terrorism as a larger problem from Muslims connected to international terror groups. This kind of “unequal reporting increases viewership while simultaneously allowing current perceptions about Islam and terrorism to continue” (Nickerson 2019, p. 547). Jahedi, Abdullah, and Mukundan (2014) also noted that the dominant mass media tend to marginalize the ‘Other’ and misrepresent the events regarding Islam and Muslims.

Nickerson (2019) ascertained whether the media reinforce a false synonym between Muslims and terrorism. Specifically, the study focused on news framing bias and how this bias impacts the portrayal of terrorism and Muslims through politically and emotionally charged discourse. Nickerson considered terrorist events in France and Turkey, analyzing the U.S media’s portrayal of these events to uncover what elements journalists select, emphasize, and deemphasize in countries with predominantly Muslim and non-Muslim populations. The study found that “news media framing utilizes biased, negative imagery, portraying the events in these countries in a way that reinforces current prejudices against Muslims, even when Muslims are themselves the victims” (p. 547).

A few studies focused specifically on the use of terms in Islam-related news (e.g. Allen, 2012; Hassan et al., 2017; Moore, Mason, & Lewis, 2008). These studies found that Islam-related terms are mostly used in a negative context, which might create negative perceptions of Islam and Muslims. For example, Moore et al. (2008) studied the language used in British media in relation to Islam and Muslims. The study found that the language used about British Muslims reflects negative or problematic contexts. According to the study, “the most common nouns used in relation to British Muslims were terrorist, extremist, Islamist, suicide bomber and militant with very few positive nouns (such as ‘scholar’)” (p. 3). The findings further showed that the most common adjectives used were radical, fanatical, fundamentalist, extremist and militant, portraying more threatening versions of Islam than to moderate Islam. Indeed, the media make more references to radical Muslims than moderate Muslims (Allen, 2012).

Terms such as “terrorist”, “fundamentalist” and “blood-thirsty” are over-generally used terminologies ascribed to Muslims (Nurullah, 2010; Ridouani, 2011). According to Mohideen and Mohideen (2008), expressions such as “Islamic terrorism”, “Islamic fanaticism”, “Muslim extremists”, “Islamist and political Islam” have been pejoratively used in the media. In addition,

words and phrases constitute part of texts which convey messages and ideas. In this regard, Hassan, et al. (2020) argued that “the media’s tendency to associate Islam with terrorism depends largely on the manner in which the news story is constructed” (p. 173). Reynolds (2015) found that negative words and phrases are significantly used in news coverage of Islam and Muslims. As a result of the distortion of words’ meaning, the media reinforce stereotypes and negative images of Islam.

Previous studies highlight a number of consistent themes, showing that the nature of some news media reporting has reinforced stereotypical representations of Islam and has portrayed Muslims as different, strange, threatening and inferior. Very few studies have examined Muslims’ reactions to the negative representation of Islam in the mass media. For instance, Ewart et al. (2017) explored the attitudes of Muslims to news media coverage of Islam and Muslims by drawing on data from focus group discussions conducted with Australian Muslims. The findings revealed that Australian Muslims are highly critical of news media coverage of Islam and Muslims and express concern about the divisiveness that such portrayal can have for the society. Studies focusing directly on Muslims’ responses to news stories about Muslims and Islam have identified that attitudes toward news coverage of Islam tend to be negative (Ewart et al., 2017).

Similarly, very few studies reported positive coverage of Islam in the media. For example, Hassan and Sabli (2018) focused on how Islamic teachings are portrayed in non-Islamic films. The study found that the representation of Islamic teachings in films has been explained through the depiction of performing prayers, reading Quran, covering *Aurah* and kindness towards parents. The study showed that non-Islamic films play a role of highlighting positive images and teachings of Islam for the benefit of the society. Another study assessed more than 800,000 articles between 1996 and 2016 in a range of British, American, Canadian, and Australian newspapers (Bleich et al., 2018). The findings showed that articles touching upon devotion in Islam are not negative at all. In essence, if the media “strive to provide a more balanced portrayal of Muslims and Islam within their pages, they may seek opportunities to include more frequent mentions of Muslim devotion” (Bleich et al., 2018, p. 247).

In sum, previous research on the news coverage of Islam has generally found evidence for negative bias. Generalizations and stereotypes were the commonly identified problems with news coverage of Islam, which result in the association of Islam and Muslims with terrorism coupled with repeated negative labelling of Muslims. A meta-analysis conducted by Ahmed and Matthes (2017) found that a large majority of studies on media discourse on Islam covered western countries and there is a lack of comparative research in this research area. Therefore, this study investigates the controversial Islam-related terminologies in mass media discourse on terrorism, focusing on the eastern and the western mass media.

### Theoretical Approach

This study is guided by Halliday’s Systematic Functional Linguistic (SFL) theory. SFL “studies the functional and situational organization of language in the social context” (Halliday & Hasan, 1985, p. 11). Thus, the theory presumes that language is inseparable from texts while cultural and social contexts of discourse affect the linguistic interpretations. SFL enables researchers and linguists to analyze written or spoken discourses. In SFL, the core element of

interpretation is meaning rather than the structure and every act of language is an act of meaning (Halliday, 2013). Halliday's SFL theory has been used to interpret various texts in relation to social and political contexts (Sharififar & Rahimi, 2015). Some studies used this theory to investigate the media portrayal of Islam in general (Jahedi et al., 2014; Farhat, 2016) while studies focusing on Islam-related terms employed news framing analysis (Hassan et al., 2017). This study considered SFL because Islam-related terminologies could be best understood in context since words and context are inseparable.

The functional aspect of language cannot be neglected as it is an essential element for understanding language and its implications. Function is interpreted not just in relation "the use of language but as a fundamental property of the language itself, something that is basic to the evolution of semantic system" (Halliday & Hasan, 1985, p. 17). Language in SFL is "a semiotic system" (p. 12) specified to humans. System and function are fundamental elements of language in SFL theory. The system entailed two distinctive properties: 1) syntactic relations of word combinations and their order; and 2) paradigmatic relations that focus on word choice. The multi-options of words are chosen to produce a well-organized and meaningful discourse that serves purposively the required goals. These words, phrases, and clauses generate sentences, paragraphs, and texts which convey messages and ideas.

SFL theory presumes that meanings imply choice, the components of language make meanings and that various settings and contexts influence meanings and may reshape people's thoughts and their final judgments of a certain topic. In media discourse on terrorism, phrases such as "Islamic extremist" or "Islamic violence" are understood differently (Hassan et al., 2017). SFL theory views languages as establishing "social semiotic" frameworks affected by the social, physical, cognitive, interpersonal, situational and cultural context (Haratyan, 2011). These functions are categorized under three meta-functions: ideational semantic, relational semantic and textual semantic:

1. The ideational meaning is concerned with establishing grammatical resources to construe and interpret the inner and outer experience of the world. A clause is the representative part of this experience that helps to draw a mental image of reality under six processes (Halliday, 2004): material, mental, relational, behavioral, verbal, and existential.
2. Relational meaning is associated with the relationship between the speaker(s) and the addressee(s). It is used to establish the speaker's role and attitude in the speech situation and the relationship with others under the mood and modality systems (Almurashi, 2016).
3. The textual meaning is concerned with the creation of text with the existence of both ideational and relational meanings to describe its theme structure in written and spoken discourses.

Since language is inseparable from texts (Halliday, 2013) and forms an integral part of news construction (Hassan et al., 2017), communication researchers use content analysis to study media messages. Content analysis allows researchers to systematically analyze news contents and enables familiarity with texts as well as provides valid inferences from the texts ((Leedy & Ormrod, 2001; Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007).

## Methodology

This study employed content analysis to systematically explore a more detailed picture of how Islam-related terminologies are used in eastern and western mass media discourse on terrorism. Content analysis is recognized as a useful and well-established approach particularly in analyzing news products (MacNamara, 2005; Arthur, 2012; Willnat, Weaver, & Choi, 2013). Though the initial stage of data collection and coding represents qualitative approach, the data were systematically quantified and analyzed (Winter, 2000).

## Data Collection

Islam-related articles were collected from the eastern and the western mass media. Using purposive sampling technique, one broadcast media outlet and one print media outlet were chosen from each region respectively. *BBC* and *The Guardian* represent the western media while *The Jordan Times* and *Al-Jazeera* represent the eastern mass media. Only Islam-related articles published in the selected newspapers between March 2018 and October 2019 were selected and analyzed. The articles were chosen based on headlines and texts using internet-based search from the websites of the respective media outlets. To search for relevant articles, “Islam” and “Muslims” were used as keywords. On the basis of this research considerations, units of analysis represent Islam-related terminologies from the selected newspapers, consisting of single expressions of words and compound words. This was done to explore how Islam-related terms are used in the selected media outlets.

## Coding and Data Analysis

Coding is the process of converting raw data into usable data through identification of concepts or ideas that share some common features (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). In this study, the selected articles were carefully read to identify Islam-related terminologies. A total of 20 different terms were identified. Subsequently, the frequency of these terms was obtained separately using AntConc software which is commonly used for linguistic analysis. The linguistic interpretation involves choice of lexical words (both single or compound) and their contexts of use. In addition, the findings are discussed using the SFL theory as a key theoretical procedure (Halliday & Hasan, 1985; Haratyan, 2011; Halliday, 2013).

## Findings

The selected media outlets produced a large number of related articles (368) within the period of data collection. The eastern media (*Aljazeera* and *The Jordan Times*) published 109 Islam-related articles while the western media (*BBC* and *The Guardian*) published 259. The overall articles were considered during the process of identifying the Islam-related terminologies, which were subsequently analyzed based on frequency and connotations RQ1 asks “what are the difference between the eastern and the western mass media in using Islam-related terminologies?” Table One tabulates these differences.

Table 1. *Frequency of Islam-related terminologies*

SN	Terminology	Eastern media Freq. (%)	Western media Freq. (%)	Total Freq. (%)
1	Islamist	6(30.0)	83(48.0)	89(46.1)

2	Jihadist	1(5.0)	42(24.3)	43(22.3)
3	Jihad	4(20.0)	12(7.0)	16(8.3)
4	Allahu Akbar	2(10.0)	7(4.0)	9(4.7)
5	Islamic Extremist	0(0.0)	4(2.3)	4(2.1)
6	Islamic militancy	0(0.0)	4(2.3)	4(2.1)
7	Islamic extremism	0(0.0)	4(2.3)	4(2.1)
8	Muslim extremist	1(5.0)	3(1.7)	4(2.1)
9	Radical Islam	1(5.0)	2(1.2)	3(1.6)
10	Islamic group	0(0.0)	2(1.2)	2(1.0)
11	Islamic terror	0(0.0)	2(1.2)	2(1.0)
12	Islamic terrorism	0(0.0)	2(1.2)	2(1.0)
13	Islamic militant	0(0.0)	2(1.2)	2(1.0)
14	Muslim terrorist	1(5.0)	1(0.6)	2(1.0)
15	Islamic movement	2(10.0)	0(0.0)	2(1.0)
16	Islamic ideology	0(0.0)	1 (0.6)	1(0.5)
17	Islamic incarnations	1(5.0)	0(0.0)	1(0.5)
18	Islamic militant activity	0(0.0)	1(0.6)	1(0.5)
19	Islamic radicalization	0(0.0)	1(0.6)	1(0.5)
20	Muslim attackers	1(5.0)	0(0.0)	1(0.5)
	Total	20(100)	173(100)	193(100)

P = 0.000 (P < 0.05)

As shown in Table One, a total of 193 different Islam-related terms are used in the selected mass media. Significant differences ( $P < 0.05$ ) exist between the selected eastern and western mass media outlets in using Islam-related terms. The terms are used eight times more in the western media (173) than in the eastern media (20). A total of nine different terminologies, including Islamic extremist, Islamic militancy, and Islamic extremism appeared only in the western mass media. Nevertheless, only three terms – Islamic movement, Islamic incarnations, and Muslim attackers – appeared only in the eastern media. After the 9/11 attacks in the United States, Islam-related terminologies of terrorism became increasingly used in the media, mostly focusing on violence, murder, and massacres. Though there are a series of processes involved in news production, journalists play the most significant role and have a great responsibility for the frequent use of these Islam-related terms (Hassan et al., 2017). According to the findings of Reynolds (2015), negative phrases are significantly used in news coverage of Islam and Muslims.

It is also clear from Table One that the most frequently used Islam-related terminologies in the chosen articles are “Islamist” and “Jihadist”. The term “Islamist” which appeared 89 times in the overall articles, represents the most commonly used Islam-related terminology in the selected media. The term constitutes almost half (46.1%) of the overall terminologies used in the selected eastern and western mass media. Logically, the findings reveal that the term is more commonly used in the western media (48%) than in the eastern media (30%). Similarly, Hassan et al. (2017) found that the most commonly used terms in non-western media are “Islamist”, “militants”, and “radical Islam”. These terms may imply negative connotations in the audience’s mind-sets and

carry different interpretations. Textual analysis requires analyzing the language functions used in the texts to examine their meanings in contexts. RQ2 asks “how do the eastern and the western mass media use Islam-related terminologies in terms of context and connotation? Figure 1 depicts how the selected media use Islam-related terminologies.

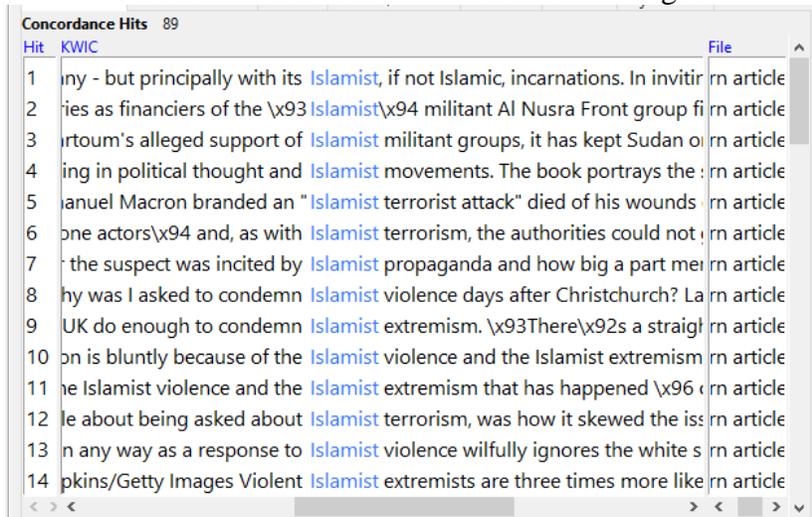


Figure 1. Context of Islam-related terminologies

As depicted in Figure One, the most frequently used Islamic-related terminology “Islamist” is used alongside extremism, terrorism, violence, and militancy. This indicates that the selected media outlets use Islam-related terms in negative contexts and connotations. Accordingly, the term “Islamist” itself connotes “terrorism” as used in the selected news articles. This is because, in the selected articles, Islamists are likely to be mentioned in the context of terrorism. For example, on 4<sup>th</sup> June 2018, *BBC* reports “security services expect the threat from Islamist terror to remain at its current heightened level of "severe" for at least another two years” (Terror strategy, 2018, p. 3). Another report in *The Guardian* stated that “a global Islamist extremist movement that continues to pose a significant threat” (Burke, 2019, p. 1). These reports indicate that the word “Islamist” is mostly used in place of “terrorist” in the selected media outlets. These findings are consistent with most of the previous studies (Mohideen & Mohideen, 2008; Reynolds, 2015). Words are used to reveal the feelings or attitudes of a writer (Hasits, 2007).

On 3<sup>rd</sup> June 2018, *The Guardian* reported “Britain faces a severe threat from Islamist terrorism” (Press Association, 2018, p. 1). This kind of expression might create the impression that Islam is a threat to peace. Similarly, Mohideen and Mohideen (2008) found that words such as “Islamic terrorism” have been pejoratively used in the media. Studies have conceptually defined media as indirectly having an influence on audience perceptions of Islam through the use of Islam-related terms (Gamson, Croteau, Hoynes, & Theodore, 2003; Hassan et al., 2017). The power of using adjectives can never be underestimated. They could be used either consciously or unconsciously. If used unconsciously, adjectives could change the intended meaning into a different connotation. For example, when the adjective “Islamic” is used with the noun “terrorism”, the act of terror is associated with Islam, and thereby it indirectly creates a negative image of Islam.

From the above-mentioned considerations, it appears that Islam-related terminologies are powerful enough to generate different interpretations in the audience mind-sets.

Another issue is related to the inappropriate use of the term “Allahu Akbar”. This term which is considered holy amongst the Muslims is mostly perceived as an ‘evil word’ especially by the non-Muslims. For example, consider what *Al-Jazeera* quoted from the Chinese political declaration “The White Paper” “They screamed the evil words of ‘getting into heaven by martyrdom with jihad’” (China says, 2019, p. 3). This expression is emotionally negative and has the tendency of generating hatred rather than promoting peace. According to Hassan et al. (2017), “The manner in which language is utilized in media discourse on Islam needs serious attention” (p. 237). Similarly, Moore et al. (2008) found that the language used in reporting Islam reflects negative or problematic contexts.

It should be noted some words are used neutrally in the selected articles by identifying the perpetrators by their names or nationality other than religion. Examples of such neutral expressions used in the selected articles include the news reported by *Al-Jazeera* on 27<sup>th</sup> April 2019, stating that “police hunted for people linked to Mohamed Hashim Mohamed Zahran, who has been named as the ringleader of the Easter Sunday bombings” (Relatives of suicide, 2019, p. 2). The same newspaper identified terrorist groups by their names “a man was killed in a rampage that police said was inspired by the Islamic State and the Levant group (Australia police, 2018, p. 1)”. In the above statements, the verbs “said” is used to attribute the information to the police as a news source. This is probably because the writers tried to be objective in the news writing process. These findings are consistent with a few studies that found positive or neutral portrayal of Islam and Muslims in the media (Bleich et al., 2018; Hassan & Sabli, 2018).

### Discussion of Findings

This study has compared the use of Islam-related terminologies in the eastern and the western mass media using content analysis, as a research method, and Halliday’s SFL theory. As presumed by SFL theory, language serves as a social semiotic system and any act of communication involves choices (Halliday, 2003; Halliday, 2004; Feng, 2008). Based on this central theoretical principle, the present study investigated the use of Islam-related terminologies in the eastern and the western mass media discourse on terrorism. This is because, as postulated by the theory, the choice of words and context as well as language construction in Islam-related news depend mainly on the decisions of journalists and editors. Because language is functional (Halliday, 2004), making linguistic choices of words and expressions could play an important role in manipulating Islam-related news either intentionally or unintentionally.

The findings of this study showed that Islam-related terminologies used in the eastern and the western mass media discourse on terrorism are used in negative context. This could be seen in using adjectives such as ‘Islamic’, ‘Jihadist’, and ‘Islamist’ to describe the terrorists. This is consistent with the findings reported in the previous studies (Mohideen, & Mohideen, 2008; Moore et al., 2008; Allen, 2012; Hassan et al., 2017). Mohideen and Mohideen (2008) found that many offensive terms, such as fascist, fanatical, radical, hardline, militant Islam co-occur before “Islam”. The word “Muslim” is used after “militant” and before “terrorists” as in “militant Muslims and Muslim terrorists”. Based on the assumptions of SFL Theory, writers are responsible for the choice

of words in their communication with the audience (Halliday, 2004), and therefore journalists and editors could be held responsible for the negative use of Islam-related terms in news coverage of Islam.

The negative use of Islam-related terminologies is related to word choice based on the journalists' personal judgment or prejudices which could be influential in the process of news writing and construction. Gradually, the negative use of Islam-related terms results in negative perception of Islam. According to Mohideen and Mohideen (2008), expressions such as "Islamic terrorism", "Islamic fanaticism", "Muslim extremists", "Islamist and political Islam" have been pejoratively used in the media. The most frequently used words to describe Muslims in the media include "terrorist", "extremist", "Islamist", "fundamentalist" and "militant" (Moore et al., 2008; Nurullah, 2010; Ridouani, 2011). These words are critical in Islam-related news construction because "one of the major factors that contribute to the media's negative portrayal of Islam is their selection of words to describe Muslims" (Hassan et al, 2020, p. 167).

This study could advance the public's understanding of the media representation of Islam and Muslims by paying particular attention to the use of controversial Islam-related terminologies in the media. A large majority of studies on media discourse on Islam focused on the western media per se and there is a lack of comparative research in this research area (Ahmed & Matthes, 2017) while very few relevant studies focused on the media in Muslim-majority nations (Hassan et al., 2017). Another contribution lies in the application of Halliday's SFL theory, which offers an opportunity to study this phenomenon with particular attention to media language and interactional discourse (Halliday, 2004).

Language and religion form the three domains of any society as they are concerned with the context and aims of human existence (Pratt, 2006). These inseparable domains are stretched together to establish a system of life for nations. The righteous expressive language is used to convince people of religious teachings and political limits. This is because language does not only encompass words and sentences but also consists of interactional discourse (Halliday, 1978). Unfortunately, the mass media, with their dynamic influence, use Islam-related terms in a negative context (Hassan et al., 2017). As a result, the image of Islam tends to be negatively framed in the media. In sum, the findings reported in this study demonstrated that Islam-related terminologies are negatively used in the eastern and the western mass media discourse on terrorism. Based on the assumption of SFL theory, journalists could be held responsible for the negative use of Islam-related terms in news coverage of Islam. This is because the negative use of Islam-related terminologies is related to word choice based on the journalists' personal judgments.

## Conclusion

This study investigated the use of Islam-related terminologies in the eastern and the western mass media discourse on terrorism. To the best of the researchers' knowledge, this study serves as the first attempt to adopt SFL theory to specifically investigate the phenomenon of Islam-related terms in relation to news coverage of Islam. It was found that significant differences exist between the selected mass media outlets in using Islam-related terminologies. The most frequently used Islam-related terminologies in the chosen mass media are "Islamist" and "Jihadist". These terms were found to be used mostly in negative contexts. As used in the chosen media, the term "Islamist"

is used alongside extremism, terrorism, violence, and militancy. Halliday's SFL theory, which guided this study, offers an opportunity to study this phenomenon based on the assumptions that any act of communication involves choices, text is inseparable from context, and language does not only encompass words and sentences but also consists of interactional discourse (Halliday, 2004).

In addition, journalists and editors bear great responsibility for the negative use of Islam-related terminologies. Though news articles generally follow a sequence of editing processes, at times, copies pass through almost unchanged and finally published. The negative use of Islam-related terms could be minimized through training of journalists on the coverage of religious news, provision of proper guidelines on covering issues involving religion and ensuring that the guidelines are strictly followed. Institutions concerned with journalism education should also give consideration to how they can develop a comprehensive curriculum on religious literacy in their programs. In fact, if the mass media are properly regulated in matters concerning religion, peace and harmony are likely to be promoted.

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