

THE IMAGE OF ISLAM IN GERMAN MEDIA

Orhan Gökce* - Thomas Brüsemeister**

Abstract

Surveys indicate that the German public perceives the presence of Islam and Muslims within the country as a threat to social purity and cultural and religious heritage. Myriad studies have also demonstrated that this biased attitude is increasingly prevalent. The media plays a significant role in shaping and perpetuating these negative perceptions, as well as in reproducing and normalizing Islamophobic and anti-Muslim racist discourses, given that it serves as the primary source of information for many. Due to the media's crucial influence on Western societies, this article investigates the thematic contexts in which Islam and Muslims are represented and the knowledge production mechanisms preferred by Western media in reporting on Islam and Muslims. To this end, a content analysis is conducted on reports related to Islam published in five leading German newspapers between 2021 and 2022. The findings reveal that Islam and Muslims in German media are framed primarily through narratives of wars and conflicts in Islamic regions, as well as terrorist incidents conducted in the West with Islamic references. Moreover, the media discourse on Islam is constructed using negative clichés and stereotypes, such as radical, reactionary, fundamentalist, militant, violent, oppressive, dangerous, defiant towards the West, and intolerant, alongside racist narratives.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Islam, Media, Image, Islamophobia, Islam journalism.*

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* Prof. Dr., Selcuk University, Political Science and Public Administration,
E-mail: ogokce@selcuk.edu.tr, Türkiye, Corresponding author. Orcid:0000-0003-3095-8466.

** Prof. Dr., Justus-Liebig-Universität Giessen, Institut für Soziologie Professur für Sozialisation und Bildung,
E-mail: thomas.bruesemeister@sowi.uni-giessen.de, Orcid: 0009-0002-8443-6911, Germany.
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ALMAN MEDYASINDA İSLAM ALGISI

Orhan Gökce - Thomas Brüsemeister

Öz

Anketler, Almanya'da kamuoyunun, İslam ve Müslümanların ülke içerisindeki varlığını toplumsal saflığa, kültürel ve dini mirasa yönelik bir tehdit olarak algıladığına işaret etmektedir. Bu önyargılı tutumun giderek yaygınlaştığı çeşitli araştırmalarla da ortaya konmuştur. Bu algının şekillenmesinde ve normalleştirilmesinde en etkili aktörlerden biri, toplumun başlıca bilgi kaynağı olan medyadır. Medyanın Batı toplumları üzerindeki belirleyici etkisinden hareketle, bu çalışma, Alman medyasında İslam ve Müslümanların hangi tematik bağlamlarda temsil edildiğini ve bu temsillerin üretiminde hangi bilgi üretim mekanizmalarının tercih edildiğini incelemektedir.

Bu doğrultuda, 2021–2022 yılları arasında Almanya'nın önde gelen beş gazetesinde yayımlanan İslam ile ilgili haber içerikleri üzerine bir içerik analizi gerçekleştirilmiştir. Bulgular, İslam ve Müslümanların çoğunlukla İslam coğrafyasındaki savaşlar ve çatışmalar ile Batı'da İslami referanslarla gerçekleştirilen terör eylemleri bağlamında ele alındığını ortaya koymaktadır. Medya söyleminin, Müslümanları radikal, gerici, fundamentalist, militan, şiddet yanlısı, baskıcı, Batı karşıtı ve hoşgörüsüz gibi olumsuz klişelerle ve ırkçı anlatılarla yapılandığı gözlemlenmiştir. Bu temsil biçimi, kamusal alandaki İslamofobik eğilimleri pekiştirmekte ve toplumsal düzeyde ayrımcı yapıları beslemektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *İslam, Medya, Algı, İslamofobi, İslam haberciliği.*

Introduction

Surveys have consistently shown that at least half of the German population associates Islam with *terrorism*, *conflict* (Richter & Paasch-Colberg, 2022, p. 3; Pickel, 2019, p.80; Hafez & Schmidt 2015, p. 28), war, threat, oppression of women, violence, intolerance, and anti-democratic tendencies Hafez & Schmidt 2020; Pickel, 2019, p. 82; Karis, 2013, p. 311; Schiffer, 2015, p. 121). This negative perception of Islam is widespread across various socio-demographic and socio-economic groups in Germany and indicates a deeply entrenched sense of threat among the population. It is suggested that this perceived threat regarding Islam in German society stems not from subjective experiences but rather from the way Western media portrays Islam (Schiffer, 2005a; Halm, 2006; Hafez & Schmidt, 2015; 2020). This is because, in the West, the media predominantly frames Islam in the context of terrorism, war, unrest, and protests in the Islamic world (Hafez, 2002; Richter & Paasch-Colberg, 2022). It can be argued that this has a negative impact on public perceptions of Islam and Muslims, which in turn adversely affects Muslims themselves. In this regard, investigating how Western media contextualizes and represents Islam and Muslims is of foremost importance.

The image of Islam in German media has been the subject of scientific research for decades. The politicization of Islam and its initial portrayal as a problem by the German media began after the 1979 Iranian Revolution (Hafez, 2002). However, the serious discovery of Islam as a major issue in Western media occurred in the aftermath of 9/11 (see Spielhaus, 2010, p. 12; Karis, 2013, p. 11).

After the September 11 terrorist attacks, the number of studies on Islam increased significantly, leading to the emergence of extensive literature on the subject. Examples of such studies include those by Halm (2008), Hafez and Richter (2007), Schiffer (2005a), and Hafez (2002a, 2002b). The central question of these studies is: How is Islam portrayed in Western media? The questions addressed in this article are like those in previous research, as it also examines the image of Islam in the media. However, it

differs significantly from other similar studies in certain aspects. Existing research has highlighted the media's role in spreading and reinforcing the image of Islam in German public opinion. However, these studies do not provide a reliable empirical foundation to evaluate assessments regarding the media's strategy of framing Islam.

This article focuses on the question of which thematic issues and events the German media associates with Islam and Muslims. Studies based on the core hypotheses of the agenda-setting approach suggest that the media constructs a particular reality by selecting and framing specific events and phenomena. This, in turn, shapes the public discourse and the image of the discussed subject or group in this case, Islam and Muslims (Maurer, 2022). This effect is particularly relevant in Western societies, where the general population has limited direct experience or interaction with Muslim communities and Muslim immigrants, making the media the primary source of information and thus influencing public attitudes (Pickel & Öztürk, 2018).

According to Hafez (2017), Islam has a poor representation in the West and in Germany. The image of Islam in the German media possesses the following characteristic features, which have also been confirmed by numerous studies in the field of media representation of Islam:

- i. Islam is not portrayed as a religion per se but rather as a form of politics or as the political ideology of violence (Hafez & Schmidt, 2020).
- ii. The range of topics associated with Islam in the media is highly restricted, focusing on violent processes (terrorism, assassinations), oppression, human rights violations, and international conflicts (Hafez & Richter, 2007). Consequently, the construction of an Islam that appears regressive, violent, and conflict-ridden is largely conducted through narratives of conflicts and terrorism in Islamic countries (Hafez & Richter, 2007; Hafez, 2013; Karis, 2013; Brinkmann, 2015; Richter & Paasch-Colberg, 2022).

- iii. There is a lack of distinction between extreme and moderate forms of Islamic fundamentalism in public discourse. Additionally, public opinion tends to decontextualize fundamentalism (Hafez, 2004).
- iv. Negative events dominate news coverage, while positive aspects are entirely absent. Islam is consistently associated with terrorism, the oppression of women, violence, extremism, fanaticism, and backwardness (Hafez, 2002a, 2002b; Schiffer, 2005a; Gökce, Brüsemeister & Huth, 2022). The discussion of Islam and Muslims through such controversial and negatively connoted events or topics contributes to the creation of a negative public image of Islam and Muslims. Since the Western population generally lacks primary experiences with Muslim-majority countries or direct contact with Muslim immigrants (see Schiffer, 2005a), audiences are likely to perceive what they see or read in the media as accurate (see Karis, 2013, p. 46). As a result, the rise of negative stereotypes and prejudices against Islam and Muslims, as well as increasing societal polarization, becomes inevitable (Hafez & Schmidt, 2015, p. 67). Indeed, it is not surprising that an anti-Islam and anti-Muslim knowledge system is socially shared in the West (Shooman, 2014, p. 220).

For this reason, Hafez and Schmidt (2020) argue that “the current image of Islam stands at a crossroads between a persistent negative agenda and hesitant renewal.” However, if this “hesitant renewal” occurs outside of traditional journalistic formats, the information gap between German society and the Muslim population living there will widen, ultimately harming social cohesion (see Richter & Paasch-Colberg, 2022, p. 4).

According to Hafez and Richter (2007, p. 14) the problem is not necessarily that the media covers Islam and Muslims from the perspective of negative events and issues; rather, the core issue is that the normal, everyday, and positive aspects are never reported. Therefore, the authors emphasize the need to maintain balance in the journalism of Islam-related topics.

The studies that find negative representations of Islam in the media suggest that there may be a need for the media to avoid negative reporting and increase positive coverage. The fact that such conclusions pose considerable problems for research became increasingly aware when the theory of news values (cf. Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Schulz, 1976) provided a basis for the investigation of the working mechanisms in newsrooms. Negativity is a particularly important news value in news selection. The debate about negative and positive reporting makes little sense, since, as stated above, due to the scarcity of attention and recording capacity, the media have developed certain procedures for perception and processing (news factors) of the topics concerning them, through which they select from the multitude of events and work through them one after the other (Krzeminski, 1985, p. 24). This problem situation is often overlooked in Islamic image research. For example, Schiffer formulates the demand addressed to the media that “only all people simply appear, [which] would only pay tribute to reality” (Schiffer, 2007, p. 198). Schiffer himself would certainly have to accept that it is impossible to let all people appear in the media. Accordingly, the representation of Islam is subject to the same conditions as the other topics (Gökce, 1988). Therefore, the most negative reports in the media about many countries that are culturally and geographically distant may be negative. Even the majority groups of society can face negative representation, for example, it is often mentioned that the Catholic Church in Germany experiences a negative representation in the media. According to a study by the Media-Tenor Research Institute, the Catholic Church has an “extremely negative media image” (Hurth, 2006, p. 67).

Negativity, therefore, represents a news value that not only occurs in connection with reporting on Islam but can also affect the members of the majority. Negativity is therefore related to the mass media logic and therefore institutional and not “personal, logical and not intentional, routine and not arbitrary, cultural and not conspiratorial, structural and not attitude-related” (Fleras, 2010, p. 14; according to Karis, 2013, p.

46). Therefore, the demand for more positive representations of Islam and Muslims, as well as for consideration of Muslim everyday life, seems to be little justified, without comparative analysis to other groups or topics.

Most of the studies that point to the negativity of Islam reporting lack such comparison (Karis, 2013, p. 46). Further research is necessary to systematically compare the findings of negative reporting on Islam with the coverage of other faiths and population segments.

1. The Role of the Media in the Construction of the Image of Islam

The assumption that the negative image of Islam in the media shapes the perception of the population would not be completely wrong, but inadequate. Luhmann's concise sentence is often used as an argument for this: "Whatever we know about our society, or indeed about the world in which we live, we know through the mass media" (Luhmann, 1996, p. 9). It would be an oversimplification to assert that most of the German population views Islam as a threat solely due to personal biases of media personnel against Islam and Muslims, which in turn shape their reports to portray a specific enemy image. To suggest that the population uncritically accepts media portrayals would be an oversimplification from a communication science perspective. Consequently, it is not assumed here that the media alone is responsible for shaping the image of Islam (cf. Hafez, 2010; Ata, 2011, p. 75). However, this should not be interpreted as suggesting that the media does not play a role in shaping public perceptions of Islam. We acknowledge that the media's portrayal of Islam significantly influences public opinion. Nevertheless, we are cautious about attributing a uniformly negative or hostile image of Islam to the media or journalists, given the limited attention span of audiences (Luhmann, 1970, p. 15). Journalists are forced to make many selection decisions before an event, or a topic can appear first. In modern societies, the media take over the resulting structuring of public opinion. Accordingly, publicity is defined as the "imputability of the acceptability of topics" (Luhmann, 1970, p. 22). Accordingly, the function of the media consists of first and foremost

determining what is a topic, what belongs on the agenda of public discussion, and how to talk or think about it (Noelle-Neumann, 1980; Krzeminski, 1987, p. 24). However, since several opinions are possible on one topic (Luhmann 1970: 13), the media reduce the multitude of possible opinions to a few alternatives, which are classified in dichotomous contexts (Huth, 1977, p. 103). Attention rules (Schulz, 1976) determine which topics, and which opinions are eventually selected. In this way, they certainly also make a significant contribution to the construction and perception of reality. But from this perspective, the journalist has less of the role of an opinion leader but above all the role of a mediator of interpretation horizons (Krzeminski, 1985, p. 24). The influence of the media is thus quite nuanced and dependent on a variety of factors.

2. Aims and Research Questions

This study seeks to examine how “Islam” is portrayed in German daily newspapers. The goals are twofold: first, to assess whether negative representations continue to prevail, and second, to establish an empirical foundation for future comparisons with television and social media coverage. As a result, one can only formulate something generalizable in terms of the negativity of reporting on Islam.

Research question is: How does the German press report on “Islam”? In this context, the following questions are primarily addressed:

- How significant are Islam and Muslims as media topics?
- From which perspectives, discourses, and representations are Islam and Muslims presented?
- What are the structural features of news about Islam and Muslims?
- Are problematic news factors, such as conflict, guiding elements in Islamic journalism?

This study is investigative and does not aim to evaluate pre-formulated hypotheses. Therefore, it should be considered an exploratory study.

3. Research Method

The research design is content analysis. Content analysis can “be used in an inductive or deductive way” (Elo & Kyngäs, 2007, p. 109). Since the primary aim here is not merely to determine the frequency and thematic scope of Islam and Muslims in news coverage but rather to analyze the perspectives, discourses, and representations through which they are framed, both types of content analysis are employed. In other words, instead of using predefined theoretical categories, categories are derived from the news texts themselves, making qualitative content analysis (deductive content analysis) more suitable (Mayring, 2015, p. 94). However, while qualitative content analysis follows the interpretative-analytical paradigm, the analysis also requires support from the deductive approach. Therefore, the deductive approach is applied to measure the intensity of the data obtained through the qualitative method (cf. Merten, 1983; Früh, 1982). The content analysis is based on those texts or text statements that deal with the topic of “Islam” at defined times. Accordingly, it is essential to define the key aspects of the study, including the investigation period, selection criteria, material basis, units of analysis, data processing methods, and category formation.

3.1. Research Sample

All reporting published in the period from 15.03.2021 and 01.07.2022 included in the analysis. The period of the research has been determined in this way due to the events in Afghanistan. In the preliminary study, it was concluded that the media showed intense interest in the Taliban’s return to power and, as a result, in the topic of Islam, following the USA’s withdrawal from Afghanistan. As the study seeks to provide a comprehensive overview by verifying existing assumptions and exploring new questions regarding the nature and scope of German media coverage on “Islam,” the selected period is well-justified. German daily print media can be divided into nationally active media and local newspapers. National quality newspapers are considered leading voices that are frequently cited

across media. To ensure a comprehensive analysis, major national daily newspapers representing different political orientations were selected. The chosen newspapers—Frankfurter Allgemeine, Frankfurter Rundschau, Süddeutsche Zeitung, Die Welt, and BILD—were included based on their large readership and considerable influence in shaping public discourse on social issues, including Islam and Muslims.

The primary reason for focusing our analysis on newspapers is that newspaper reports are systematically and continuously archived in various databases, making them more accessible from past periods. However, equivalent television program recordings and social media content are difficult to access.

Table 1. Characteristics of Newspapers

Newspaper	Circulation (Copies)	Status	Political Orientation	Readership
Frankfurter Rundschau	115,957	tabloid, paid newspaper, The other quality press, subscription newspaper	left-liberal	left-liberal middle class, focus region Frankfurt Rhine/Main
Süddeutsche Zeitung	255.700	nationwide, paid newspaper, quality press, subscription newspaper	liberal	liberal middle class, focus region Munich/Bavaria
Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung	179.600	nationwide, daily newspaper, quality press, subscription newspaper	conservative-liberal	conservative-liberal middle class, focus region Frankfurt Rhine/Main
Welt	90.000	nationwide, daily newspaper, quality press, subscription newspaper	conservative	conservative middle class, focus region Hamburg, North Germany
BILD	1,02 million	nationwide, daily newspaper, quality press, subscription newspaper	tends to be right-wing	tends to be right-wing, all classes

This study's data consists of news articles published in the five newspapers mentioned between 01.07.2021 and 01.07.2022 regarding Islam and Muslims. All editorial contributions news articles, opinion columns, cartoons, photographs) in the selected newspapers regarding "Islam" and "Muslims" in Germany, Europe, and Muslim-populated countries will be considered. In addition, contributions will also be included in which the words "Islam," "Islamism," "Islamist," "Muslims," etc. are not mentioned explicitly, but the article deals with the topic of "Islam" as a whole, such as the Taliban or Afghanistan. In the case of implicit contributions, the thematic affiliation of such texts will be determined after reading the entire article based on the overall impression. It may be the case that a text contains the word "Islam," but the article is still about a different topic. Such texts will be excluded from the analysis.

The sample is each included newspaper article on the topics of "Islam" and "Muslims". The unit of selection is thus a single issue of a newspaper. Articles with continuation in one sheet are considered separate included. Furthermore, independent images/ cartoons are their units of investigation, which explicitly or implicitly have "Islam" and "Muslims" as their subject. Unless explicitly stated in the case of over- or signatures, only those aspects from the article that deal with the object of study are considered. Here is the contextual unit. In this way, we were able to capture a total of 1914 articles related to Islam as the total for analysis. Table 1 shows how the articles are distributed across newspaper titles.

Table 2. Scope of Sample

Selected Daily Newspapers	Number of Reporting
Frankfurter Allgemeine	493
Frankfurter Rundschau	209
Süddeutsche Zeitung	773
Die Welt	280
BILD	159
Total	1914

The year 2021, which marks the beginning of this study, coincides with the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan. Additionally, Germany witnessed a series of high-profile incidents involving Muslim-origin refugees, including attacks conducted with knives, firearms, and vehicles, as well as assassinations and murders, which significantly shaped public discourse in 2021 and 2022.

The United States' sudden decision to withdraw from Afghanistan came as a major surprise to the media, leading to an extraordinary surge in coverage. In the initial phase, media attention was particularly high due to concerns over the fate of German soldiers and, in this context, the visit of the German Foreign Minister to Afghanistan played a significant role. Consequently, the United States and Germany were central to much of the reporting on these events. The withdrawal of German troops from Afghanistan further contributed to the German media's framing of the situation as a bilateral issue between Germany and Afghanistan.

In this regard, the withdrawal of NATO forces, the Taliban's subsequent takeover, and the ensuing developments played a crucial role in shaping how the German media addressed the topic of Islam. Although not as prominently featured, Iran also appeared in the news as a reference point for the Taliban's ideological model. Within this framework, Islam was primarily represented in relation to conflict and human rights violations, such as the restriction of girls' access to education and the exclusion of women from social life.

Türkiye is also referenced in the news coverage, particularly in relation to its withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention and its role in the activities of Islamic organizations in the West. Additionally, Türkiye frequently appears as a significant shaping factor in discussions concerning Muslims in Germany. The publication of a total of 1,914 articles across the five newspapers during the one-year research period indicates that Islam serves as a significant reference point in German media discourse. More than half of the published articles are primarily news-oriented, while slightly more than one-third are opinion-based pieces. Approximately one-third of the

news texts consist of interviews, discussions, and editorial articles. These 1,914 articles were included in the analysis and subjected to a detailed thematic examination.

3.2. Code Book and Formation of Categories

The core component of this content analysis study is the analytical instrument. For data collection, a coding book and a supplementary sheet were utilized. The coding book includes formal variables such as fundamental information, the level of attention given to the topic (categorized as either a brief mention or the main subject), the specific theme covered (e.g., conflict, disorder, resolution, or efforts to promote understanding), as well as the overall content and news value of the reporting. Formal variables, including the content and news value of the articles, were systematically considered in the analysis.

For the contents of the reporting, a supplementary sheet is also filled in, which subjects the text corpus to further analysis. In addition to the topic, the occasion, the source, the subject of the statement, the form and carrier of the action, the connection with another topic (connection to a long-term topic), evaluations of actions to which reference is made, arguments and opinions are recorded. In addition to the coding book and supporting sheet, a memo is also created for each text, so that the created memos can then serve as a direct material basis for content analysis.

The categories are formulated based on the frequency of occurrence, and their internal differentiations and assignments are based on overall impressions. This does not affect the validity and reliability of the data (Huth, 1985). The categories were not theoretically derived from hypotheses but were instead inductively formulated based on the research material. During this process, the frequency of topic occurrence was considered. This approach does not compromise the validity or reliability of the data (Huth, 1985).

After the initial review and analysis of the study material, it became clear that “Islam” and “Muslims” are discussed in the news primarily in relation to the following topics.

- ◆ Islam-Religion practice
 - Conflicts and crises
 - Terrorism /extremism
 - Unrest/Protests
 - Emigration from the country
 - Fundamentalism/Islamization
 - Religious Intolerance
 - Human Rights Violations
 - Gender segregation
- ◆ Muslims-The Status of Muslim women
 - Women’s oppression / Emancipation
 - Social and political participation – restricted
 - Victim
 - Object of care
 - Poverty
- ◆ Muslims – The Role of Muslims
 - Radical/reactionary militant
 - Victims/refugees
- ◆ Islam in the host Country
 - Security and Law
 - Criminality
 - Integration and Culture
 - Parallel society

To identify both the general trends and the emphasized aspects of the topics covered in the news articles, the coding process was conducted in three stages. For instance, if the theme of *Conflicts and Crises* was

discussed in a news article, both this category and the broader category of *Islam-Religious Practice* coded. If the *Conflicts and Crises* category was associated with one or more specific subtopics—most frequently *Terrorism/Extremism*—then all three categories were coded. Even when only the topic of Terrorism was addressed, the hierarchical structure ensured that all three levels were included in the coding process. Thus, in developing and applying the coding categories, three levels were considered: (1) the specific dimension (subtopic), (2) the concrete level (topic), and (3) the abstract level (overarching category) (see Gökce, 1988). Importantly, the overarching categories do not simply represent the arithmetic sum of their subcategories.

If a news article addressed *Conflicts and Crises* along with its subcategories—such as *Fundamentalism/Islamization*, *Religious Intolerance*, and *Human Rights Violations*—each of these topics was coded separately. However, the broader category of *Islam-Religious Practice* was coded only once. The same approach was applied to topics under the overarching category of *Islam in the Host Country*. For instance, the subtopic *Parallel Society* and other related issues were coded separately. This topic is often discussed in relation to headscarves, burqas, mosques, Quran courses, and the call to prayer. Within this framework, *Parallel Society* is frequently presented as an obstacle to *Integration and Culture*, positioning it as a barrier to social integration. Within the category of *Security and Law*, the analysis covered various issues, including individuals who had joined ISIS and later returned, those who were prosecuted and imprisoned, and criminal activities committed by individuals with Muslim identities, including asylum seekers. Additionally, the study examined radical groups among Muslims (e.g., clans, mafia networks), violent conflicts between Muslims and local populations or other groups, and antisemitic acts committed by Muslims. These topics were coded based on their relevance to the overarching category.

Three coders received intensive training in the use of the codebook. Reliability tests were conducted during the training sessions to ensure that the coders understood the codebook in the same sense and reached

consistent coding decisions. The results were satisfactory to incredibly good (depending on the complexity of the respective).

4. Results and Analysis

The analysis of the articles on which the analysis is based has shown that *Islam* is a frequently occurring topic in the newspapers examined and that the total number of articles with a reference to Islam is about the same in four newspapers except *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. The attention to the thematic complexes in individual newspapers is shown in the following figure.

Table 3. Distribution of Reporting by Topic

Newspapers	Islam-Religionpractice		Muslims-The Role of Muslims		Muslims-The Status of the Muslim Women		Other		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
FAZ	328	66.5	12	25.4	34	6.9	6	1.2	493	25.8
FR	166	79.4	25	12.0	17	8.1	1	0.2	209	10.9
SZ (Southern German)	611	79.0	123	15.9	35	4.5	4	0.6	773	40.4
Die Welt	198	70.7	51	18.2	28	10.0	3	1.1	280	14.6
BILD	104	65.4	31	19.5	24	15.1	-	-	159	8.3
Total	1407	73.5	355	18.6	138	7.2	14	0.7	1914	100

Table 4. Distribution of Islam in the Host Country

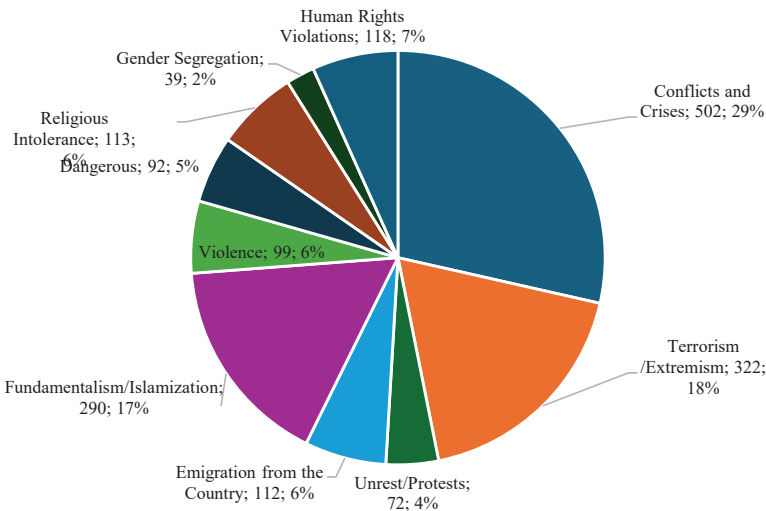
FAZ	223	74	125	65	6	493
FR	105	25	37	41	1	209
SZ	443	112	123	91	4	773
Die Welt	171	38	42	27	3	280
BILD	81	31	24	23	-	159
Total	1023	280	350	247	14	1914

During the research period, the predominant focus in Islamic journalism has been on the overarching topic of *Islam-Religion Practice*. Among the issues addressed, this topic occupies the top position with 53.4% (1023 articles). It is followed by *The Muslims-The Status of Muslim Women* at 18.3% (350 articles), *Muslims-The Role of Muslims* at 14.6% (280 articles), and *Islam in the Host Country* at 12.9% (247 articles). Below, information regarding the subtopics and dimensions addressed under each main category is provided. The figures represent the number of news articles in which the respective topics and dimensions are discussed.

Table 5. The Number of Articles Under the Subcategory of Islam-Religion practice

	N	%
Dangerous	92	10,62
Violence	99	11,43
Terrorism / Extremism	152	17,55
Fundamentalism/Islamization	523	60,39
Total	866	100

Figure 1. Distribution of Topic and Dimensions

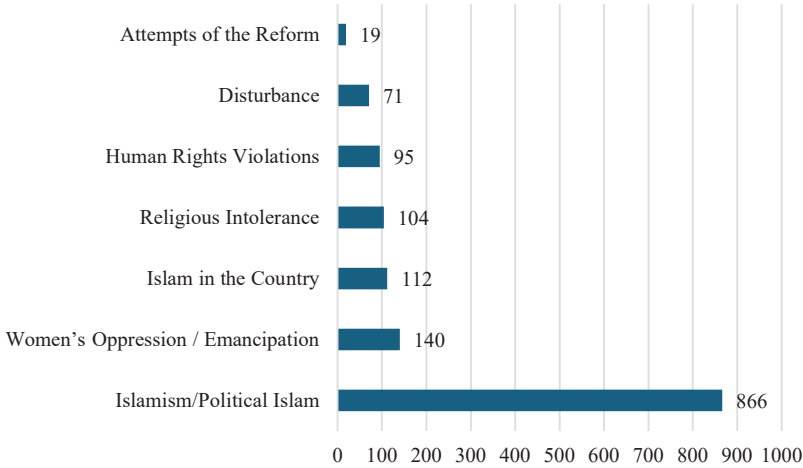


As illustrated in Figure 1, the newspapers analyzed primarily focus on the overarching theme of *Islam-Religion Practice*. This theme accounts for 49.1% of all news articles related to Islam, with a predominant emphasis on *Conflicts and Crises*. Within this category, *Terrorism/Extremism* is the most prominent sub-theme, representing 64.1% of conflict-related coverage and one-fifth of all reporting on Islam—an exceptionally high proportion. This strong association suggests that Islam is frequently framed in the context of violence.

The second most covered topic within *Islam-Religion Practice* is *Fundamentalism/Islamization*, comprising 28.3% of reports. This topic is often linked to notions of violence and perceived threats. The media portray fundamentalism as an increasingly dangerous trend in *Muslim-majority countries*, with implicit distinctions between “covert fundamentalism” in countries like Türkiye and “overt fundamentalism” in nations such as Afghanistan, Sudan, and Yemen, often framed in relation to Iran. Reports suggest that societal challenges in these countries fuel fundamentalism, which, in turn, exacerbates these issues, leading to a cycle of radicalization and violence. The constructed media narrative equates Islam with fundamentalism and, by extension, with terrorism.

The third most frequently reported sub-theme is *Human Rights Violations* (11.5%), followed closely by *Religious Intolerance* (11.0%). These themes often intersect with issues such as *Gender Segregation* and attitudes toward foreigners. The media highlight discrimination, repression, and violence against marginalized groups, reinforcing the portrayal of Muslim-majority countries as spaces of conflict and human rights abuses. This narrow thematic focus—centered on terrorism, crises, extremism, and repression—underscores a persistent media tendency to frame Islam in the context of violence and societal challenges (see also Hafez & Richter, 2007; Richter & Paasch-Colberg, 2022).

Figure 2: The Number of Articles Under the Category of Islam Religion Practice



Conflicts and crises/Terrorism/extremism, Fundamentalism /Islamization, Human Rights Violations and Religious Intolerance is, the general theme under which the subject complex “Islam” is perceived. Because the newspapers primarily address the topic of “Islam” after the central event “US withdrawal from Afghanistan and the takeover of power by the Taliban”. This in turn shows that the image of Islam is indirectly influenced by foreign reporting (Hafez, 2002; Schiffer 2005b; Hafez & Schmidt, 2020; Richter & Paasch-Colberg, 2022).

In about 45,2 percent of the examined FAZ and 61,1 percent of Welt contributions, 50,2 percent of the FR contributions, about 57,3 percent of the SZ contributions, and about 50,9 percent of Bild contributions, “Islam” is presented in negative contexts. If you look at it in an overall ratio, this complex of topics accounts for almost 53 percent of the coverage.

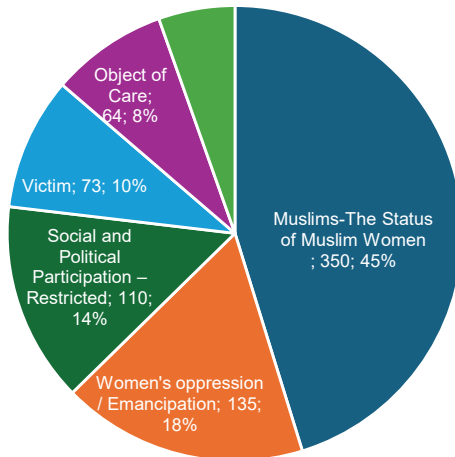
In other words, almost 53 percent of all examined contributions with a negative connotation to Islam have a negative connotation to “Islam”. In addition, posts with the subject content *security, criminality, parallel society*, etc. must be added. which include negative representation. Combined, the number of negative reports is almost 75 percent. The analysis of media

coverage during the study period reveals that most reports focused on conflict-related topics, particularly terrorism and crises. Consequently, violence is portrayed as an integral part of Islam's image. In other words, all violent or conflict-laden events are framed within an Islamic context, contributing to the construction of a confrontational image of Islam. This strategy is primarily executed through coverage of violent incidents in Muslim-majority countries (see Hafez & Richter, 2007; Hafez, 2013; Karis, 2013; Brinkmann, 2015; Richter & Paasch-Colberg, 2022).

Following *Islam-Religion Practice*, which constitutes the primary thematic category, the topics *The Status of Muslim Women* (18.3%), *The Role of Muslims* (14.6%), and *Islam in the Host Country* (12.9%) are the most frequently covered.

The category *Muslims – The Status of Muslim Women*, representing 18.3% of coverage, is the second most prominent theme related to Islam. Within this framework, discussions on women predominantly revolve around *Women's Oppression / Emancipation*, with subthemes such as *Social and Political Participation – Restricted*, *Victimization*, *Object of Care*, and *Poverty*.

Figure 3. Distribution of Topic and Dimensions

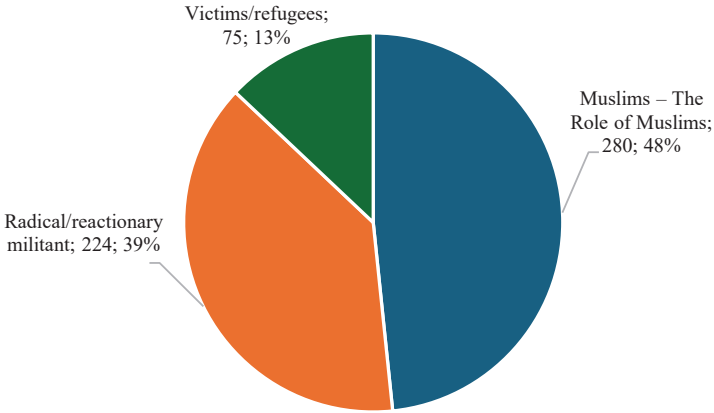


Media portrayals frequently reinforce the narrative that Islam victimizes women by subjecting them to oppression and discrimination in both public and private spheres. This victimhood discourse is consistently represented through both textual and visual elements. Women are often depicted as passive, suppressed, veiled, marginalized, and victims of radical Islam. In news reports on Muslim-majority countries, they are portrayed as uneducated, impoverished, powerless, and entirely dependent on men. Although less frequent, media narratives also associate Muslim women with forced marriages and honor killings. Additionally, visual representations often depict them in headscarves, veils, or burqas—long, black garments—framing them as “victims” forced into these dress codes. The hijab, veil, and burqa are frequently used as symbols of women’s lack of independence and oppression. However, in some cases, veiled women are also portrayed as exotic, mysterious, and intriguing yet still dependent and non-individualized.

Poverty is also predominantly framed through the experiences of women and children. Reports often establish a link between fundamentalism and poverty, suggesting a cyclical relationship in which fundamentalism exacerbates poverty, which in turn fuels extremist tendencies. Accompanying imagery, such as dilapidated homes, barren landscapes, mud-brick dwellings, tattered clothing, and barefoot children, visually reinforces this narrative.

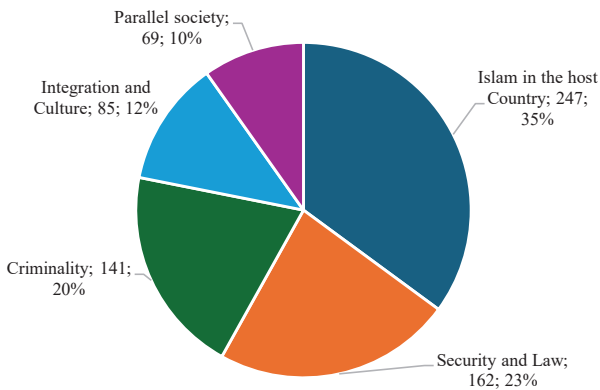
Within the thematic category *Muslims – The Role of Muslims*, Muslims are associated with negative attributes and topics. They are frequently portrayed as radical, reactionary, fundamentalist, violent, extremist, or dangerous. This framing is further reinforced through visual representations. Notably, this subtopic accounts for 68.5% of all reports related to the broader theme.

Figure 4. Distribution of Topic and Dimensions



Another common framing of Muslims in the media is through the victim/refugee perspective. This narrative emphasizes how oppressive and violent forms of Islam target individuals advocating for reform, criticizing authoritarian regimes, and embracing Western values and lifestyles. Approximately 30% of the news coverage within this category focuses on this theme, which is a considerable proportion. The *Islam in the Host Country* category ranks fourth, representing 12.9% of the total coverage.

Figure 5. Distribution of Topic and Dimensions



Within this category, *Security and Law*—particularly its subtheme *Criminality*—receives more attention than *Integration and Culture*. Of the 247 reports in this category, 162 (65.5%) focus on security-related issues, with events such as knife attacks in Würzburg and Oslo, as well as legal proceedings against ISIS supporters, driving this coverage. Additionally, reports cover violent incidents, assaults, and harassment involving Muslim immigrants, though to a lesser extent.

The *Integration and Culture* subcategory, which includes discussions on parallel societies, represents 35% of the total coverage. While not the dominant theme, the contexts in which these issues are presented are noteworthy. Reports often depict Islamic communities, mosques, and Quran schools as breeding grounds for radicalization, portraying them as spaces where fundamentalists gather and recruit members. Calls to prayer, family dynamics, education, and adherence to Islamic norms are framed as elements that hinder integration. Radicalization among Muslim youth is cited as evidence of an increasing trend toward Islamization among Muslim immigrants in the West.

Positive portrayals of Islam are rare in media coverage. Similarly, social topics receive minimal attention, with only a handful of reports highlighting successful Muslim professionals or well-integrated women. In these narratives, unveiled women are often depicted as modern, independent, and assimilated, whereas veiled women are portrayed as passive, oppressed, and victims of radical Islam. Reports frequently associate family structures with barriers to education and integration, suggesting that Muslim families impede their daughters' education and societal participation. Some stories even highlight cases where brothers impose conservative dress codes on their sisters through coercion and violence. In this context, the hijab is portrayed as an obstacle to integration, and Islamic organizations are depicted as hindering rather than facilitating the process.

The media's coverage of integration often emphasizes Muslim behaviors that deviate from Western norms, further reinforcing the perception that Islam itself is the root cause of integration challenges. Reports also link

Muslim communities in the West to radical groups, including returning ISIS fighters and individuals arrested for terrorism-related activities. This framing positions Western countries as safe havens for Muslim extremists, thereby transforming the issue of integration into a security concern. Consequently, the continued association of Islam with terrorism and violence leads the public to perceive Islam as a serious threat and Muslims as potential terrorists (Richter & Paasch-Colberg, 2022).

Overall, media representations of Islam and Muslims are predominantly negative, often associating them with radicalism, fundamentalism, violence, extremism, and danger. This framing reduces Islam to a set of conflict-driven narratives, with media coverage heavily focused on violence. Another critical aspect of media representation is the question of whose voice is amplified. Political and elite actors, particularly Western politicians and Orientalist scholars largely shape coverage of Islam and Muslims. Ordinary Muslims rarely have a voice, and Muslim scholars or politicians are seldom cited as sources (Gökce, 1988).

Image Depictions: The image of the veiled woman – whether in a burqa or a headscarf – and Muslims with a long and dirty full beard, with traditional clothing, headgear and heavy weapons on shoulders are figuratively very present in the coverage. Almost 38 percent of the articles with the topic content “Islamism/Political Islam” are shown with at least one of these pictures. In addition, photo contributions with Islamic symbols such as the crescent, mosque, minaret, applied mass, razed buildings are also published in the reporting. However, the number of these images is not so high. The share of these images is about 3 percent.

What is very considerable is the fact that the image contributions in the reporting are associated with negative connotations. To sum up, it can be noted that in the material of the investigation figuratively the veiled woman, Muslims with a long beard, and traditional vestments and weapons are often found. On the other hand, images on which the crescent moon, mosques, minarets are depicted were published less.

5. Discussion

The topic analysis indicates that the examined newspapers consistently cover the subject of Islam. However, *Süddeutsche Zeitung* diverges in its emphasis, allocating a different level of attention compared to the others. In the newspapers, Islam is generally addressed from the perspective of “Conflict, Terrorism and extremism” and is associated with dimensions and connotations such as radical, reactionary, fundamentalist, militant, violent, dangerous, etc. This way, Islam is reduced to certain negative characteristics and is geographically limited to certain countries such as Iran, Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, Iraq (similarly Saif, 2018). However, discourses about Türkiye increasingly becoming a radical Islamic country are also brought up in the German media. In all the examined newspapers, Islam is addressed in connection with these negative characteristics. For example, this complex of topics accounts for almost 53 percent of the coverage, with negative connotations of “Islam” present in about 45,2 percent of the examined FAZ and 61,1 percent of Welt contributions, 50,2 percent of the FR contributions, about 57,3 percent of the SZ contributions, and about 50,9 percent of Bild contributions. The number of negative reports combined is almost 75 percent, and the number of positive reports is almost 4 percent.

How Islam is presented in the German media, with its negative connotations, shapes the discourse on Islam and influences public perception. Symbols and visuals such as mosques, minarets, crescents, burqas, headscarves, Quran courses, and overcrowded places are frequently used and imprinted in people’s minds. These symbols contribute to the perception that Islam is a threat to the West. Islam is seen as an obstacle to integration of its radicalism, backwardness, and intolerance. “Backwardness” is a frequently used discourse in this context. Consequently, Islam is blamed for the failure of Muslim integration in Germany and the West. Quran courses, mosques, and other religious organizations are considered places that hinder Muslim integration and create militants. Muslims who attend these places are considered as unwilling to integrate, and this is evaluated

negatively. In contrast, Muslims who have integrated into German society, assimilated Western values, and become a part of Western culture are evaluated positively. The media frequently uses the terms “Islamic” and “Muslim” about Islam. The term “Islamic” is mostly used for groups and Islamic movements such as the Taliban, fundamentalists, fanatics, and terrorists, i.e., individuals who are politically extremely motivated or terrorists. On the other hand, the term “Muslim” is used as a “value-neutral” (Kalwa, 2013, p. 120) personal identification. Therefore, while “Muslim” is mostly neutral in meaning, the term “Islamic” carries negative connotations.

Islam is frequently associated with Muslim women in newspapers. Women appear as a preferred topic of media coverage strategy. They are categorized as passive, suppressed, cloaked in a burqa, excluded, oppressed, and victims of radical Islamism. In news related to Afghanistan or the Taliban, women are depicted as uneducated, impoverished, personality-less, and dependent on men without any rights. Consequently, women are featured in the news regarding honor killings, forced marriages, and concealment. Additionally, women are portrayed as victims who are forced to wear headscarves, veils, or burqas, representing their lack of independence and subjugation. The media frequently uses these symbols to imply that women are not autonomous and are under pressure. Women are depicted as victims of discrimination in all public and private spheres in male-dominated societies that are the core of Islamic governance. In the case of Afghanistan, all Islamic countries appear as the site of human rights violations, particularly those against women, and these violations are attributed to Islam. In the media, Muslim women are classified differently depending on whether they wear a headscarf or not, or whether they wear a burqa. If a woman does not wear a headscarf, she is depicted as a fashionable, successful Muslim woman who represents freedom and follows Western or modern trends. On the other hand, if a woman wears a headscarf, veil, or turban, she is portrayed as an unindividualized, dependent Eastern woman, but also interesting, mysterious, attractive, and dangerous at the same time. The media portrays Taliban men as having

long, dirty beards, carrying Kalashnikov machine guns on their shoulders, dressed in black turbans or turbans/caps, black baggy pants (half-shalwar), long shirts, and vests. This visual representation is present in almost every news report. Additionally, men are depicted as warriors who ruthlessly fight for their traditions, societies, and religion.

Conclusion

The construction of Islam is personified as a threatening object. Analysis shows that the perception of Islam is shaped more through internal conflicts, terrorist acts, and violent incidents in Islamic countries, in other words, political events. These events are presented as being related to Islam. Therefore, Islam is portrayed with negative connotations such as Islamic extremism, violence, fundamentalism, human rights violations, and discrimination against women.

The media's focus on conflict, harm, and ethnocentrism in its coverage of Islam and Muslims reflects a broader journalistic approach that prioritizes negative news factors. The portrayal of Islam through narratives of conflict, terrorism, and extremism is primarily shaped by the structural dynamics and operational logic of the media (see Gökce, 1988). However, this does not negate the role of media personnel, who actively influence how news is framed.

The persistent association of Islam and Muslims with negative news factors inevitably contributes to the construction of a negative image of Muslims in Germany and the West, fostering suspicion towards them. In this context, it is unsurprising that public opinion surveys on Islam in Germany indicate that 80% of the population perceives Islam as a fanatical and violent religion and Muslims as potential terrorists (see, Richter & Paasch-Colberg, 2022, p. 3; Pickel, 2019, p- 80; Hafez & Schmidt 2015, p. 28; Karis, 2013, p. 311; Schiffer, 2015, p. 121).).

Undoubtedly, the media plays a key role in shaping the current social perception of Islam. Journalists have a key function in conveying

information about Islam. How they contextualize events can fuel anti-Muslim sentiment or, conversely, contribute to the mitigation of anti-Muslim racism. The findings of the research are in line with the literature on many points. Islam is still being addressed under the main title of “Islamism/Political Islam” and is associated with dimensions and connotations such as radical, reactionary, fundamentalist, militant, violent, extremist, dangerous, and so on. Violence is now part of the image of Islam (Hafez & Schmidt 2015, 2020; Richter & Paasch-Colberg, 2022). With the rise of Political Islam in the Islamic world, debates about Islam and democracy have come to the fore, and the lack of democracy in Islamic countries is attributed to religion. Islamic countries are presented as the site of human rights violations, especially women’s rights violations. The source of this negativity is also attributed to Islam.

The findings are consistent with the literature in some respects. For example, Akbarzade & Smith (2005) note that dominant stereotypes often portray men as foreign or local terrorists or extremists, while women are portrayed as headscarf-wearing individuals under patriarchal oppression and in need of escaping from violence. These images create a fearful perception of Muslims. Saeed (2007) suggests that the media portrayal of British Muslims as a “foreign other” can be linked to the emergence of Islamophobia, a form of racism rooted in cultural depictions of the “other.” The study confirms that the media is responsible for the alienation of Muslims. Abbasi et al. (2021) found that the Islamic and Muslim discourse in global media is both positive and negative. Our study primarily identified negative aspects. It is possible to say that the positive aspects are compatible with social integration, democratic development, and women’s rights.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that the media representation of Islam is not merely the result of news content selection, but rather an ideologically constructed process shaped through framing mechanisms. From the perspective of framing theory, events related to Islam are systematically structured around themes of threat, crisis, and security,

which influence both the selection of newsworthy topics, and the meanings attributed to them. Through the lens of representation theory, Muslim identity is predominantly portrayed as fixed, monolithic, and negatively marked as the “Other,” thereby directly shaping public perceptions. Thus, the media should not be seen as a neutral mirror of reality, but rather as a powerful space of meaning-making that draws the boundaries of social reality and constructs identities. In this context, developing more pluralistic, empathetic, and representation-sensitive media practices is not only an ethical imperative, but also a crucial step toward fostering social cohesion, cultural diversity, and democratic participation.

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Genişletilmiş Özet

Bu çalışma, Almanya'daki önde gelen gazetelerde 2021–2022 yılları arasında yayımlanan İslam ile ilgili haberlerin içeriğini inceleyerek, medyada İslam ve Müslümanların nasıl konutlaştırıldığını analiz etmeyi amaçlamaktadır. İslam ve Müslümanlara yönelik algılar Batı toplumlarında önemli ölçüde medya aracılığıyla şekillendiği için bu temsillerin incelenmesi hem toplumsal önyargıların oluşum sürecini anlamak hem de İslamofobik söylemlerin nasıl yeniden üretildiğini ortaya koymak açısından önem taşımaktadır.

Araştırmada içerik analizi yöntemi kullanılarak *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (FAZ)*, *Die Welt*, *Frankfurter Rundschau (FR)*, *Süddeutsche Zeitung (SZ)* ve *Bild* gazetelerinde yayımlanan İslam odaklı haberler incelenmiştir. Elde edilen bulgular, bu gazetelerin tamamında İslam'ın çoğunlukla çatışma, terör, aşırılık ve şiddet gibi olumsuz temalar çerçevesinde sunulduğunu göstermektedir. “Radikal”, “gerici”, “fundamentalist”, “militan”, “şiddet yanlısı” ve “tehlikeli” gibi sıfatlar haber metinlerinde İslam ile özdeşleştirilmekte; bu durum İslam'ın indirgemeci ve homojenleştirici biçimde temsil edilmesine neden olmaktadır.

İslam'a dair bu olumsuz temsillerin coğrafi bağlamı da belirgindir. İslam çoğunlukla İran, Afganistan, Suudi Arabistan ve Irak gibi ülkelerle özdeşleştirilmekte; böylece hem dinsel hem de coğrafi bir sınırlandırma ile sunulmaktadır. Ayrıca, Türkiye'nin de giderek radikal İslam'a yöneldiği yönündeki söylemler, Alman medyasında artan bir şekilde yer bulmaktadır.

İstatistiksel veriler, söz konusu olumsuz temsillerin yaygınlığını ortaya koymaktadır. İslam'a dair haberlerin yaklaşık %53'ü doğrudan çatışma, terör ve aşırılık temalarıyla ilişkilidir. Örneğin, FAZ'de %45,2, Die Welt'te %61,1, FR'de %50,2, SZ'de %57,3 ve Bild'de %50,9 oranında haber içeriklerinde İslam'a olumsuz çağrışımlar eşlik etmektedir. Tüm gazeteler genelinde, olumsuz temsillerin oranı yaklaşık %75 iken, olumlu içerikler yalnızca %4 oranındadır. Bu veriler, medyada İslam'a yönelik olumsuz temsillerin sistematik bir çerçevede kurgulandığını göstermektedir.

İslam'a dair medyada yer bulan imgeler, kamuoyunda bir tehdit algısının yerleşmesine katkı sağlamaktadır. Camiler, minareler, başörtüsü, burka, Kur'an kursları gibi dini semboller sıklıkla görsellerde ve başlıklarda kullanılarak İslam'ın Batı'ya yabancı, farklı ve tehlikeli bir unsur olduğu algısı pekiştirilmektedir. Bu temsiller, özellikle Müslümanların topluma entegre olma potansiyelini sorgulayan söylemlerle birleşmekte ve İslam'ın entegrasyonun önünde bir engel olduğu şeklindeki yargıları beslemektedir.

Bu bağlamda, başörtüsü takan Müslüman kadınlar çoğunlukla pasif, bastırılmış ve mağdur figürler olarak tasvir edilirken, başörtüsü takmayan Müslüman kadınlar modern, özgür ve Batılı değerlere entegre olmuş bireyler olarak sunulmaktadır. Kadınlar, sıklıkla zorla evlendirilme, eğitimsizlik, namus cinayetleri ve aile içi şiddet gibi temalarla birlikte temsil edilmekte; bu temsiller, İslam'ın kadınları baskı altına alan bir sistem olduğu yönündeki söylemleri güçlendirmektedir. Kadının kıyafeti, sadece bireysel kimlik değil; aynı zamanda İslam'ın Batı karşısındaki konumunun bir göstergesi olarak sunulmaktadır. Erkek figürler ise genellikle Taliban üzerinden temsil edilmekte; uzun sakallı, silahlı, radikal ve savaşçı karakterlerle özdeşleştirilmektedir. Bu temsiller, İslam'ın toplumsal imajını doğrudan "şiddet ve tehdit" ekseninde konumlandırmaktadır.

Araştırma sonuçları, medya temsillerinin ideolojik olarak kurgulandığını ve belirli çerçeveleme stratejileriyle haberlerin sunulduğunu ortaya koymaktadır. Çerçeveleme kuramı bağlamında değerlendirildiğinde, İslam'la ilgili olaylar genellikle tehdit, kriz ve güvenlik ekseninde yapılandırılmakta; bu da hem hangi olayların haberleştirileceğini hem de bu olaylara hangi anlamların yükleneyeceğini belirlemektedir. Temsil kuramı açısından ise Müslüman kimliği sabit, homojen ve öteki olarak tanımlanmakta, bu da kamuoyunun Müslümanlara yönelik güvensizlik ve dışlayıcı tavrını beslemektedir.

Sonuç olarak, bu çalışma İslam'a dair medya temsilinin yalnızca haber içeriklerinin doğal bir sonucu olmadığını, aksine ideolojik bir inşa süreci olduğunu göstermektedir. Medya, toplumsal gerçekliğin pasif bir yansıtcısı değil; anlamların üretildiği, kimliklerin inşa edildiği güçlü bir alandır.

Bu bağlamda, daha çoğulcu, empatiye dayalı ve temsile duyarlı bir medya dilinin geliştirilmesi, yalnızca etik bir zorunluluk değil, aynı zamanda toplumsal barış, kültürel çoğulculuk ve demokratik katılım açısından da kritik bir gerekliliktir.