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**STUDENTS' KNOWLEDGE AND AWARENESS OF WESTERN  
NEWS REPORTING ON ISLAM AND MUSLIMS**



Fauziah Hassan (a)\*, Kalsom Ali (b), Sofia Hayati Yusoff (c), Siti Suriani Othman (d),  
Siti Zobidah Omar (e)

\*Corresponding author

- (a) Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia, Nilai, Negeri Sembilan, fauziah.hassan@usim.edu.my  
(b) Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia, Nilai, Negeri Sembilan, kalsom@usim.edu.my  
(c) Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia, Nilai, Negeri Sembilan, sofia@usim.edu.my  
(d) Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia, Nilai, Negeri Sembilan, suriani@usim.edu.my  
(e) Universiti Putra Malaysia, Seri Kembangan, Selangor, zobidah@upm.edu.my

### Abstract

Many previous studies have examined how the representation of western media in reporting news related to Islam and Muslim communities, especially in the Middle East which has eventually led to the negative depiction and impact to the world. Therefore, this study was conducted to look at the other side of this issue by measuring the level of knowledge, awareness and its impact towards news related to Islam and Muslims as reported by the western/international media among the students of Public Universities in Malaysia. The objectives of this study are threefold; 1) to identify the level of knowledge among public University students about news reporting on Islam and Muslims by western media; 2) to identify the level of awareness among public University students pertaining to news reporting on Islam and Muslims by western media; lastly 3) to investigate the implications of knowledge towards awareness among public University students. The quantitative methodology was applied by distributing the questionnaire to 101 respondents randomly. Our results highlight that respondents were found to have a high level of knowledge and awareness towards the issue of news reporting and the level of knowledge is positively and significantly related to level of awareness. Other than that, this study also has a significant impact between level of knowledge towards level of awareness.

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## 1. Introduction

The interest in reporting religious issues seems to be increasing recently but the problem of unethical reporting is inevitable, and it leads to the accountability of the journalists when they do the reporting or covering events related to religion. In this case, the principles of writing such as factual, fair and balanced reporting are needed to be highlighted as the media keep on reproducing fear, prejudice, stereotypes and hatred (Isyaku et al., 2017). This has been in line with a previous study by Rupal (2012) who stated that reporting on religion had propagated fear and tensions instead of promoting peace and tolerance. The issue of religious plurality is another subject of understanding that has been examined to investigate the level of understanding among Malaysian students at public universities (Mohd Farid & Khadijah, 2017). Another issue includes the level of acceptance of blogs as a medium of preaching and teaching religion among public universities (Ab. Hamid et al., 2014).

Many would agree that perception about Islam and Muslims varies around the world, but we may also agree with the fact that it is generally associated with negativity especially in the West (Alghamdi, 2015; Eid, 2014). From this general view, we may ask a further question, what is the knowledge level of a specific group such as university students on issues related to Islam and Muslims? If it is taken from the Malaysian perspective, a study by Aemy Elyani et al. (2019) for instance demonstrates that university students particularly in Kolej Islam Antarabangsa Malaysia (KUIS) do have some knowledge related to comparative religion. This suggests there is knowledge related to Islam understood by students of higher learning institutions that is necessary for them to understand further the complexity of Islam and its relations with the world. Another study that examines the knowledge level is of UiTM Pahang and UMP students about Islam. The study shows that understanding and practice of religious practices among new students of these universities are not too problematic. There are still many among them who have a strong understanding and practice of religious knowledge. However, there are still some weak students from the knowledge and practice of their religion. This phenomenon is considered alarming as several factors include a question of policy in religion such as a problem of faith that should not occur in a Muslim. Also, negative matters conflict with the foundations of the teachings of sharia has become the norm in their lives (Asjad et al., 2010).

There have been many studies in the past that have selected respondents among students of Public Universities especially for studies involving religion and issues related to Islam and so on. For example, Mohd Fairuz and Latifah (2013) had previously conducted research to identify the students' perception of Islamic studies at the IPTS on issues of the Liberal Islamic faith. The perspectives studied are related to two issues that the religion is struggling with, namely the issue of religion and the issue of religious freedom. The study selected 100 undergraduate students at the Selangor International Islamic University College (KUIS). Apart from that, there was a study done by Mohd Farid and Khadijah (2017) which focused on students of Public Universities towards their response to religious plurality in Malaysia and students' acceptance of religious plurality, perceptions of other religions in the plural community and religious freedom which had collected 800 respondents among students of Public Universities. Lastly, Ab. Hamid et al. (2014) conducted a study to identify blogging as a medium for preaching and religious teaching among IPTA students. The results showed that students at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia

(UKM) and Universiti Malaysia Terengganu (UMT) used blogs as a source of information to gain knowledge about religion. It is therefore essential to accurately gauge the University students' level of knowledge and awareness through comprehensive research dedicated to the subject. Likewise, the researchers believe there are also good reasons to look at students' level of knowledge and awareness pertaining to news coverage on Islam and Muslims in the media and later examine the impacts of the news towards themselves. Thus, the study predicted: H1 level of knowledge significantly impact the level of awareness.

## **2. Problem Statement**

Media have reported widely on Islam-related issues. For example, in 2019, AlJazeera news reported five major issues related to Islam faced by leaders such as Islamophobia, poverty, the Rohingya refugee crisis, the economic disparity faced by a member of the OIC country (Niger) and the Uighur minority issue in China has become among one of the major issues faced by Muslims. Recently, the BBC reported on 19 June 2020 about the Yemen crisis such as unlawful airstrikes, attacks on civil society, indiscriminate violence against women, children and armed conflict and many more. On top of that, Peterson and Shaikh (2020) saying that Muslims in India have become the main target to be blamed for Covid-19 pandemic. Previously, Peterson (2020) reported the violence that raged across the north-east of India's capital for four days as mosques were set alight, Muslims were burned alive in their homes or dragged out into the streets and lynched. Muslim businesses and properties were also set alight. Now, the emergence of modern communication technology has allowed media content pertaining to Islam and Muslims' issues to be disseminated widely. For example, a study by Islam (2019) who researched on the positive and negative effects of social media on Muslim society through a qualitative study. This study aimed to identify the level of awareness of news reporting on Islam and Muslims' issues reported around the world widely among University students and to seek how these highlighted issues impact them. These studies suggest that media reporting is affecting media users hence it should be produced ethically and with sufficient knowledge about the reported subject. Without such ability and effort, media will jeopardize what they should advocate. Therefore, the present study aims to accomplish this.

## **3. Research Questions**

Based on this discussion, this study seeks to develop the research questions as follows:

- What is the level of knowledge among public University students towards news reporting on Islam and Muslims by Western media?
- What is the level of awareness among public University students towards news reporting on Islam and Muslims by Western media?
- What are the implications of knowledge towards awareness among public University students?

## **4. Purpose of the Study**

- To identify the level of knowledge among public University students about news reporting on Islam and Muslims by Western media

- To identify the level of awareness among public University students pertaining to news reporting on Islam and Muslims by Western media
- To investigate the implications of knowledge towards awareness among public University students.

## 5. Research Methods

The researchers selected quantitative approach that emphasizes on measurement and statistical of data collected through a survey to achieve the objectives of this study. According to Creswell and Creswell (2017) survey is suitable to provide quantitative or numerical explanations of population trends, attitudes or opinions by studying samples from that population. Based on the literature review discussed, a survey questionnaire was developed which consists of three sections including seven items on demographic, 16 items measuring the level of knowledge (Altheide, 2007; Cubukcu & Forst, 2017; Haner et al., 2019; Slone, 2014) and a number of 26 items measuring the level of awareness (Hoffman & Jengelly, 2020; Nellis & Savage, 2012; Saiya & Scime, 2014). A total of 101 respondents were randomly selected from Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM) to be involved in this study. The subjects of this study were Muslim students from USIM. Their selection as the subjects of the study was to see the level of maturity of their thoughts on the issue of violence and extremism through a media perspective. As this study did not use a content analysis approach, the level of knowledge and awareness on the issue of violence and extremism was measured based on respondents' level of information through the survey method.

## 6. Findings

Analysis of the data led to the discovering of how Public University students (in this case is USIM) perceived their level of knowledge and awareness towards the issue of violence and extremism as reported by the International media. Any news read or videos and photos watched produced by any international media became the main key point to study the respondents' level of understanding and awareness. Limitations in this study maybe on the focus of which news stories on Islam and Muslims have been focused on. Also, the focus on social media news even though social media play a major role in disseminating news through networked communities. In fact, this study presents on general basis of USIM students' understanding and awareness towards the issue of Islam and Muslims portrayed by the international media. Thus, the power of the international media to influence students' views and understanding have been investigated.

Table 01 shows a picture of the demographic section of this study. It shows that the data is a representation of 101 USIM students from four various academic programs. We measure the gender, age, year of study and also the program of the study. From the table, it showed that majority of the students were female respondents represented 85.1%. Majority of them were between 20 and 22 years which was 73 respondents (48.3%). We also found out that, majority of the respondents were from 3rd year students which represented 67 students (44.4%) and majority of them were from Language program which represented 41.7%.

**Table 1.** Table 01: Demographic Statistics (N=101)

Variables	Demographic	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Institution	USIM	100	100%
Gender	Male	15	14.9%
	Female	86	85.1%
Age	Between 20 and 22 years	73	48.3%
	Between 23 and 25 years	28	18.5%
Year of Study	1 <sup>st</sup> Year	21	13.9%
	2 <sup>nd</sup> Year	11	7.3%
	3 <sup>rd</sup> Year	67	44.4%
	4 <sup>th</sup> Year	2	1.3%
Program	Da'wah	30	19.9%
	Counseling	2	1.3%
	Communication	6	4.0%
	Language	63	41.7%

Table 02 shows scoring of responses that the mean level of knowledge for respondents was between the range of 2.53 to 5. From this table, it showed that a number of students had a very high knowledge which 93 of them with overall mean score 4.058 (SD = .321). Meanwhile, a level of awareness it also reported that majority of the respondents has high awareness with 81 of them with overall mean score 3.934 (SD = .439) respectively.

**Table 2.** Level of Knowledge and Awareness

Level	Low	Moderate	High	Overall Mean	SD
Frequency	(1-2.33)	(2.34-3.67)	(3.68-5)		
Knowledge	-	8	93	4.058	.321
Awareness	-	20	81	3.934	.439

Table 3 shows the descriptive statistics, reliabilities and correlation for the variables of this study. Value of alpha coefficients for all variables exceeded .60 as recommended by Devellis (1991) and Nunnally (1978) showing that the instruments are reliable to be used in current setting. It is also revealed that level of knowledge is positively and significantly related to level of awareness ( $r=.532$ ,  $p<0.001$ ).

**Table 3.** Descriptive Statistic and Correlation Analysis (N=101)

		Mean	SD	I	II
I	Knowledge	4.058	.321	(.816)	
II	Awareness	3.934	.439	.532	(.799)

\* $p<0.001$ ,  $\alpha=0.859$

The impact of level of knowledge towards level of awareness was examined through regression analysis and depicted in Table 4. The value of R2 shows that 28% of the variation in the level of awareness is accounted by the level of knowledge with  $F=39.05$ ,  $p<.001$ . Beta values of .532 ( $p<.001$ )

shows a significant impact of level of knowledge towards level of awareness. Hence, the anticipated hypothesis that level of knowledge is impacting the level of awareness was substantiated.

**Table 4.** Regression Analysis for Level of Knowledge and Level of Awareness (N=101)

Model	B	S.E	B	t	Sig
(Constant)	.985	.473		2.081	(Constant) .000
Knowledge	.727	.116	.532	6.249	Knowledge .000

R<sup>2</sup>= .283 AR<sup>2</sup>= .276  
 F= 39.05 df= 1 p<.001

\*p= significant value, B= Unstandardized beta, S.E= Standard error, β= Standardized beta

## 7. Conclusion

Theoretically, respondents of this study have high level of understanding and awareness towards the issue of violence and extremism reported by the international media. All the respondents have a tendency to interpret whatever portrayed in the media depending on their level of understanding and awareness. This can be seen in Table 02 which resulted the respondents' level of knowledge towards news reporting on Islam and Muslims by the Western media were high and this is similar to the level of awareness which depicted many of the respondents are aware about this issue. The results are in-line with previous literatures by Aemy Elyani et al. (2019) and Asjad et al. (2010).

Next, the hypothesis predicted that level of knowledge will affect the level of awareness. The results support this hypothesis and it shows that the anticipated hypothesis is substantiated. The outcome as presented in Table 3 strongly supports the findings of previous research that were conducted by a number of researchers. The research findings by Norizah et al. (2016) who have examined the type of You Tube contents opted by Muslim youngsters in searching for more information about Islam. They revealed that the basic knowledge of Islam owned by Muslim youngsters is significant in guiding them to choose the right content about Islam from You Tube. It is further supported by Mohd Nizho et al. (2017) who discovered that the search of knowledge on Islamic creed via You Tube by Muslim Malaysian university students has proven their good level of awareness on the foundation of Islam. This shows the level of knowledge on Islam among Muslim Malaysian university students is exceptionally related to the level of awareness and this has impacted their understanding on issues related to Islam and Muslims presented in media.

Likewise, the result from Table 4 shows a significant impact between level of knowledge and level of awareness on issues related to Islam and Muslims by Western media among public university students in Malaysia. The hypothesis is staunchly backed up by a number of literature reviews on the impact of knowledge on the level of awareness about several issues among university students. Nazneen et al. (2019) discovered that the high level of knowledge about Islam owned by Muslim university students in Malaysia does not only give an impact to the level of awareness but also visualizes religious personality. Similarly, a research done by Abdul Latif (2020) found out that having high level of knowledge and awareness about Islam is very crucial for Muslim Malaysian students living and studying in the United Kingdom. How they bring about themselves in demonstrating their image as true Muslims is so much

determined by their level of knowledge and awareness about Islam. Delving into these literatures, they relate with the current finding as shown in Table 4 on how the level of knowledge give impact to the level of awareness.

Many studies have been conducted to study the media representation towards Islam and Muslims issues in the media. However, only few have been done to study from the perspective of students of public universities particularly in Malaysia in order to identify their level of knowledge and awareness towards this imperative topic. From the researchers' point of views, the study to examine the level of understanding and awareness towards this issue among university students is very crucial. Considering that Awani (2016) news in August had reported on a college student who was sentenced to 12 years in prison by the High Court here for supporting the terrorist group by becoming a member. He pleaded guilty to charges of supporting the al-Qaeda terrorist group by being a member of the group. On the other reason, Berita Harian in 2014 also reported that the 14- year-old student from Muar, Johor is believed to have been influenced after communicating via Facebook with two individuals who tried to influence the student to join the terrorist group in the country. For the sake of future, the formation of the good persona among university students are important as they will become a leader in the future. Thus, it is important to encourage their spirit and develop respect towards religion and country for the better development. Therefore, it is proposed that in the future for more researchers to carry out to such studies to probe into various aspects and study the impact pertaining to the issue of Islam and Muslims in the media and include University students from private universities or colleges as well.

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