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Intellectual Discourse

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Intellectual Discourse
Vol. 33, No. 2, 2025

Contents

Note from the Editor 323

Research Articles

The Existentialist Conception of Man: A Comparative Analysis between Muhammad Iqbal and Jean-Paul Sartre 331
Zubaida Nusrat
Adibah Binti Abdul Rahim

Equal Before Allah, Unequal Before the Prophet? Ongoing Discourse on *Matn* Criticism and Its Influence on Muslim Feminist Thought 355
Nuzulul Qadar Abdullah

Critical Thinking as a Mechanism for Situation Handling and Problem Solving: Examples from Ḥadīth Literature 385
Bachar Bakour

Shifting Geopolitics: The Gaza War and the Contours of a Nascent Middle East Security Community 411
Nath Aldalala'a
Syaza Shukri

Power of Knowledge vs. Self-Knowledge Production: The Protagonist's Journey towards Embracing Islam in Umm Zakiyyah's *If I Should Speak* 437
Nadira Brioua
Rahmah Binti Ahmad H. Osman

A Muslim Female Bildungsroman: Quest for Identity and Sisterhood in Islam in Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* (2005) 457
Raihan Rosman

Freedom as Connection to God: An Analysis of Two Novels by Muslim Women's Writers in the Western Diaspora 475
Amrah Abdul Majid

'The Politics of Fear': How Does It Affect Youth Political Participation in Malaysia? 497
Norhafiza Mohd Hed

Perceived Determinants of Child Poverty in Malaysia: A Preliminary Analysis 527
Norhaslinda bt Jamaiudin

Türkiye's Climate Change Policy: An Evaluation of Its Transition to Low Carbon Policies 555
Burcin Demirbilek

The Role of *Ulama* in Shaping Attitude, Subjective Norms, Digitalisation and Trust Towards Cash *Waqf* Behaviour 579
Gustina
Syukri Lukman
Muhammad Rizki Prima Sakti
Mohamad Fany Alfarisi

The Role of Local Wisdom in Shaping Internationalisation Strategies of Islamic Higher Education Institutions in Indonesia 607
Moh. Sugeng Sholehuddin
Isriani Hardini
Muhammad Jaeni
Eros Meilina Sofa
Thi Thu Huong Ho

Perceptions of Three U.S. Presidents (Obama, Trump, and Biden) – A Malaysian Perspective 635
Syed Arabi Idid
Rizwanah Souket Ali

International Students' Direct and Parasocial Contact, and Attitude Towards Malaysian Host Nationals: The Mediating Roles of Cultural Identification and Islamic Identity 659
Tengku Siti Aisha Tengku Mohd Azzman Shariffadeen
Aini Maznina A. Manaf
Nerawi Sedu

Artificial Intelligence in Sinar Harian: Embracing Readiness or Addressing Anxiety? 685
Hafezdzullah bin Mohd Hassan
Rizalawati binti Ismail
Awan binti Ismail

Healthcare Workers' Challenges in Managing Disease Outbreaks: A Systematic Review from an Islamic Perspective 709
Zeti Azreen Ahmad
Aini Maznina A. Manaf
Mazni Buyong
Sofiah Samsudin
Fuad Sawari
Hanani Ahmad Yusof

Faith-Based Approaches to Vaccine Misconception: A Systematic Literature Review of Religious Messaging 731
Wan Norshira Wan Mohd Ghazali
Ahmad Muhammad Husni
Shafizan Mohamed
Mohd Helmi Yusoh
Kamaruzzaman Abdul Manan
Nur Shakira Mohd Nasir

Book Reviews

Jerome Drevon (2024). *From Jihad to Politics: How Syrian Jihadis Embraced Politics.* 759
Oxford University Press. pp. 261.
ISBN 9780197765159.
Reviewer: *Mohamed Fouz Mohamed Zacky*

Zouhir Gabsi (2024). *Muslim Perspectives on Islamophobia: From Misconceptions to Reason.* Palgrave Macmillan. 762

Reviewer: *Arief Arman*

Transliteration Table: Consonants

Arabic	Roman		Arabic	Roman
ب	b		ط	ṭ
ت	t		ظ	ẓ
ث	th		ع	ʻ
ج	j		غ	gh
ح	ḥ		ف	f
خ	kh		ق	q
د	d		ك	k
ذ	dh		ل	l
ر	r		م	m
ز	z		ن	n
س	s		ه	h
ش	sh		و	w
ص	ṣ		ء	ʼ
ض	ḍ		ي	y

Transliteration Table: Vowels and Diphthongs

Arabic	Roman		Arabic	Roman
◌َ	a		◌ًا، ◌ًى	an
◌ُ	u		◌ٌو	un
◌ِ	i		◌ٍي	in
◌َا، ◌ٰ، ◌َى،	ā		◌َوْ	aw
◌ُو	ū		◌َيْ	ay
◌ِي	ī		◌ُوّ	uww, ū (in final position)
			◌ِيّ	iyy, ī (in final position)

Source: ROTAS Transliteration Kit: http://rotas.iium.edu.my

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Note from the Editor

In this issue – *Intellectual Discourse,* Vol. 33, No. 2 (2025) – we present 17 research articles and two book reviews. Five of the articles are selected from Communication and Media Centre International Conference 2024, with the help of our guest editor, Shafizan Mohamed. The articles in this issue cover various disciplines in Islamic studies, social sciences, and the humanities – with relevance to the Muslim World – including philosophy, *Ḥadīth* studies, international relations, literature, political science, public policy, social finance, education, and media and communications.

In the first article (The Existentialist Conception of Man: A Comparative Analysis between Muhammad Iqbal and Jean-Paul Sartre), Zubaida Nusrat and Adibah Abdul Rahim compare the existentialist conception of man between the philosophical and literary works of Sir Muhammad Iqbal and Jean-Paul Sartre. The authors highlight that despite the differences between the two philosophers in terms of their epistemological and metaphysical foundations, both incorporate Socratic *Know Thyself* into their existential views, emphasising self-knowledge in the quest for self-discovery in finding the meaning and purpose of life.

Nuzulul Qadar Abdullah discusses the debates on the analysis of texts (*mutūn*) of *Ḥadīths* by Muslim Feminists and their responses in the second article (Equal Before Allah, Unequal Before the Prophet? Ongoing Discourse on *Matn* Criticism and Its Influence on Muslim Feminist Thought). He explores the methodologies and limitations of contemporary feminist Muslim thought in criticising *ḥadīth* texts. He contends that while Muslim feminist criticisms are innovative, they remain subjective and therefore inadequate to categorically reject well-established narrations.

The third article (Critical Thinking as a Mechanism for Situation Handling and Problem Solving: Examples from Ḥadīth Literature) by

Bachar Bakour examines the critical thinking patterns from ḥadīth literature to investigate how Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and his companions approached complex social situations and problems. The author develops a framework for understanding classical Islamic wisdom by linking them with contemporary cognitive theories, and in doing so, demonstrate how traditional approaches to critical thinking can help solidify modern problem-solving methods.

Geopolitics of the Middle East is the focus of the fourth article (Shifting Geopolitics: The Gaza War and the Contours of a Nascent Middle East Security Community) by Nath Aldalala'a and Syaza Shukri. The article, grounded on Karl W. Deutsch's concept of security community, argues that an emerging security community is developing in the Middle East based on regional dynamics of the Gaza War. Aldalalaa and Shukri argue that ideological divisions are increasingly subordinated to shared interests in regional stability and counter-militancy, moving towards a regional realignment grounded in mutual preservation rather than ideological affinity.

In the fifth article (Power of Knowledge vs. Self-Knowledge Production: The Protagonist's Journey towards Embracing Islam in Umm Zakiyyah's *If I Should Speak*), Nadia Brioua and Rahmah Ahmad H. Osman examine the prevalence of Islamophobia among non-Muslims as portrayed in fictions. Analysing Umm Zakiyyah's *If I Should Speak* (2000), the article argues that the power of media affects non-Muslims' attitudes negatively, resulting in prejudice and misunderstanding of Islam. The authors recommend that self-Islamic knowledge is a key for non-Muslims to understand Islam.

Raihan Rosman examines the quest for identity and its relation to Islamic faith in a Muslim female bildungsroman – an individual's self-development within the concept of a specific social order – in the sixth article (A Muslim Female Bildungsroman: Quest for Identity and Sisterhood in Islam in Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* (2005)). The article scrutinises the transition of the novel's main character, Najwa, whose identity evolved from a secular Muslim in Sudan, to a woman with dual identities, before she becomes a practicing Muslim in London. The article also explores the protagonist's search for an identity and rediscovery of faith through Islamic concepts of individualism and collectivism.

Aboulela's *Minaret* is compared to S.K. Ali's *Saints and Misfits* (2017) in the seventh article (Freedom as Connection to God: An Analysis of Two Novels by Muslim Women's Writers in the Western Diaspora) by Amrah Abdul Majid. Using Allison Weir's (2013) conceptualisation of freedom as connection and belonging to God, the article argues that the centrality of God in the lives of the protagonists is prominent in both novels. Both novels presented the subjectivities of devout Muslim women in connecting faith with their daily lives. The author concludes that their lives are governed solely by the terms set by God, embodying the ultimate definition of freedom portrayed in the narratives.

In the eighth article ('The Politics of Fear': How Does It Affect Youth Political Participation in Malaysia?), Norhafiza Mohd Hed examines the impact of political repression on youth political participation in Malaysia, particularly on the regime's efforts to 'depoliticise' and criminalise dissent. The study suggests that state-led repression has a negative impact on young people's political involvement in Malaysia, fostering a 'culture of fear' that serves as a significant barrier to political activism. Amid such 'culture of fear,' only a small group of determined and courageous young Malaysians are willing to challenge the status quo through channels like social movements and protest activism.

The ninth article (Perceived Determinants of Child Poverty in Malaysia: A Preliminary Analysis) by Norhaslinda Jamaiudin situates child poverty as a public policy issue. In exploring the factors that lead to child poverty in Malaysia, the author finds that adverse parental characteristics increase the likelihood of child poverty. Other factors are parental education level, household size, and family structure – specifically *single parent* households – are all significant contributors to child poverty. To overcome this issue, it is essential to have policy support from the government.

Burcin Demirbilek analyses Türkiye's shift towards low carbon policies in the tenth article (Türkiye's Climate Change Policy: An Evaluation of Its Transition to Low Carbon Policies). He postulates that climate change is to be a primary policy by states because it is to be resolved globally. His article establishes a framework on the consequences of climate change in Türkiye, evaluates how Türkiye shapes its climate and low carbon policies to reduce the greenhouse gases (GHGs) level through analyses of national and international documents and legal structures.

In the 11th article (The Role of *Ulama* in Shaping Attitude, Subjective Norms, Digitalisation and Trust Towards Cash *Waqf* Behaviour), Gustina et al. investigate the key determinants influencing the behaviour of *waqif* (donors) and prospective *waqif* towards cash *waqf* in West Sumatra, Indonesia. Through quantitative methods, the study finds that factors such as attitude, subjective norms, trust, the influence of religious leaders (*ulama*), and digitalisation play a crucial role in shaping the behaviour of *waqif* and prospective *waqif*. It recommends that the government, *nazir* (*waqf* managers), and other stakeholders should actively involve ulama in community education efforts.

The 12th article (The Role of Local Wisdom in Shaping Internationalisation Strategies of Islamic Higher Education Institutions in Indonesia) by Moh. Sugeng Sholehuddin et al. explores how Indonesian Islamic Higher Education Institutions (IHEIs) leverage local values, traditions, and practices to design and implement effective internationalisation frameworks. They find that the integration of local wisdom into the internationalisation strategies of IHEIs represents a multifaceted approach to balancing global academic standards with the preservation of cultural and religious identity.

The notes on the 13th to 17th articles by our guest editor, Shafizan Mohamed, follow after this paragraph. On behalf of the editorial team, we thank the authors who choose to present their research findings in *Intellectual Discourse*. We are also grateful for the contributions of the reviewers who assist us in improving the quality of the works that appear in this issue. On another note, the editorial team would like to announce that we are changing the publication schedule of *Intellectual Discourse* from June and December each year to April and October, starting from the next issue, Vol. 33 No. 3 (2025). *(Please note that the special issue published in January 2025 was assigned Vol. 33 No. 1 (2025)).*

Tunku Mohar Mokhtar
Editor

In this issue, we are pleased to feature five peer-reviewed articles selected from the **"Communication and Media Centre International Conference 2024 (COMETIC '24),"** held on 16–17 October 2024. Organised by the **Communication and Media Centre (COMET)** of the International Islamic University Malaysia, this biennial conference brought together academics, media professionals, policymakers, and postgraduate researchers to engage critically with the conference theme, *"Communication and Media Pause: Reflecting Values and Impacts."* As the media landscape continues to be disrupted by technological innovation, shifting audience behaviour, and global crises, the conference served as a timely intellectual intervention—inviting participants to pause, take stock, and reimagine the direction and values of contemporary media and communication. These selected articles represent a diversity of critical inquiries, methodologies, and perspectives aligned with the conference's aim to interrogate both the promises and perils of media evolution in our time.

The 13th article (Perceptions of Three U.S. Presidents – Obama, Trump, and Biden: A Malaysian Perspective) by Syed Arabi Idid and Rizwanah Souket Ali presents a longitudinal study that tracks Malaysian public opinion on U.S. leadership over more than a decade. Through six nationwide surveys conducted between 2010 and 2023, the authors assess how Malaysians perceive the performance of Presidents Obama, Trump, and Biden in relation to three global issues: the U.S.–China rivalry, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and global economic challenges. The study reveals that while Obama initially enjoyed favourable perceptions due to his diplomatic approach, Trump's presidency marked a decline in approval, particularly due to his foreign policy stance on Palestine. Biden's leadership, though viewed with cautious optimism, is still shaped by long-standing concerns over American global influence. This paper offers a rare Global South perspective on international leadership and media framing, adding valuable depth to transnational political communication scholarship.

The 14th article (International Students' Direct and Parasocial Contact, and Attitude towards Malaysian Host Nationals), by Tengku Siti Aisha Tengku Mohd Azzman Shariffadeen and her colleagues, examines how intercultural contact shapes international students' attitudes toward Malaysians. Using a quantitative survey of 253 students and mediation analysis through Hayes PROCESS, the study explores both direct (face-

to-face) and parasocial (media-based) interactions. The authors find that cultural identification significantly mediates the relationship between both types of contact and students' attitudes, while Islamic identity does not exert the same influence. The paper underscores the importance of fostering cultural affinity—through both physical interaction and media representation—to enhance social cohesion and student integration. This study is particularly relevant in the context of Malaysia's ambition to become a regional education hub, providing actionable insights for institutions aiming to improve the international student experience through inclusive and strategic communication.

The 15th article (Artificial Intelligence in Sinar Harian: Embracing Readiness or Addressing Anxiety?) by Hafezdzullah Mohd Hassan et al. explores the integration of artificial intelligence (AI) in Malaysian newsrooms, specifically within the daily operations of *Sinar Harian*. Through qualitative interviews with ten journalists, the study reveals a nuanced spectrum of responses—ranging from optimism and strategic readiness to deep-seated anxiety and fear of job displacement. The authors apply the lens of technological determinism to argue that AI is not merely a supplementary tool but a transformative force that is reshaping journalistic norms, workflows, and roles. The paper identifies three thematic responses: awareness of AI's capabilities, recognition of its potential to enhance journalistic output, and the conditional trust journalists place in its implementation. The findings offer timely insights into newsroom adaptation in the face of algorithmic media and serve as a valuable resource for media managers, policymakers, and scholars navigating the ethics and impacts of AI in journalism.

The 16th article (Healthcare Workers' Challenges in Managing Disease Outbreaks: A Systematic Review from an Islamic Perspective) by Zeti Azreen Ahmad et al. investigates the multifaceted difficulties faced by healthcare workers (HCWs) during public health emergencies such as pandemics. Based on a systematic literature review of 61 studies from Scopus and Web of Science, the authors identify knowledge deficits and communication barriers as key impediments to effective healthcare delivery. What sets this study apart is its rigorous attempt to frame these challenges through an Islamic lens—drawing on Quranic verses and Prophetic traditions to provide ethical and spiritual guidance for healthcare resilience. The study advocates for a more holistic understanding of healthcare that includes moral and religious fortitude,

especially in crisis contexts. This interdisciplinary synthesis contributes to the emerging field of Islamic bioethics and offers a culturally relevant response to the mental, emotional, and professional burdens experienced by HCWs in Muslim societies.

The 17th contribution (Faith-Based Approaches to Vaccine Misconception: A Systematic Literature Review), by Wan Norshira and her colleagues, addresses the ongoing challenge of vaccine hesitancy within Muslim communities by systematically reviewing religious messaging strategies grounded in Islamic sources. Drawing from 25 studies published between 2016 and 2021 and guided by PRISMA protocols, the authors analyse Qur'anic references, hadith, and fatwa documents that support the legitimacy and necessity of vaccination. Their review finds that Islamic perspectives—when clearly communicated through trusted religious leaders—can counter misinformation and foster greater acceptance of immunisation efforts. The study highlights the importance of integrating faith-based discourse into national health communication strategies and proposes a framework for religious literacy in public health. This article contributes to broader discussions on health communication, religion, and misinformation, offering practical recommendations for the Ministry of Health, educators, and community leaders in Muslim-majority contexts like Malaysia.

Collectively, these five contributions embody the spirit of COMETIC '24—pausing not to retreat, but to confront critical questions head-on. Through diverse lenses—technological, health, ethical, intercultural, and geopolitical—they enrich academic discourse and chart new directions for both scholarship and praxis.

Shafizan Mohamed
Guest Editor

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The Existentialist Conception of Man: A Comparative Analysis between Muhammad Iqbal and Jean-Paul Sartre

Zubaida Nusrat*
Adibah Binti Abdul Rahim**

Abstract: This article examines the existentialist conception of man, as presented in the philosophical and literary works of Muhammad Iqbal and Jean-Paul Sartre, drawing attention to both their similarities and differences. The analysis reveals how both thinkers address human existence, abstraction, freedom, alienation, identity formation and authenticity, reflecting their respective theistic and atheistic ideologies. Iqbal's concept of man, based on his idea of "*Khudi*" (selfhood), emphasises self-realisation, creativity, and the development of individuality in line with divine principles, focusing a dynamic vision of human potential and spiritual evolution. Sartre's view of man, however, centred on the idea that "existence precedes essence," defines man as devoid of any inherent essence or divine guidance, encouraging to create meaning and identity through the freedom of actions and choices. Despite originating from distinct metaphysical traditions, the two perspectives share a common concern with the existential challenges of self-discovery and the pursuit of meaning in a complex and contradictory world.

Keywords: Iqbal, Sartre, Existentialism, Man, Islam, Atheism

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Abstrak: Makalah ini mengkaji konsep eksistensialis manusia, seperti yang dibentangkan dalam karya falsafah dan sastera Muhammad Iqbal dan Jean-Paul Sartre. Ia memberi perhatian kepada persamaan dan perbezaan di antara dua pemikir tersebut. Analisis mendedahkan bagaimana kedua-dua pemikir menangani isu kewujudan manusia, abstraksi, kebebasan, pengasingan, pembentukan identiti dan keaslian, sekaligus mencerminkan ideologi teistik dan ateistik masing-masing. Konsep Iqbal tentang manusia, berdasarkan ideanya tentang "*Khudi*" (keperibadian), menekankan kesedaran diri, kreativiti, dan perkembangan keperibadian selaras dengan prinsip Ilahi, memfokuskan visi dinamik potensi manusia dan evolusi rohani. Pandangan Sartre tentang manusia, bagaimanapun, tertumpu pada idea bahawa 'kewujudan mendahului intipati,' mentakrifkan manusia sebagai tidak mempunyai sebarang intipati yang wujud atau bimbingan Ilahi, menggalakkan untuk mencipta makna dan identiti sendiri melalui kebebasan tindakan dan pilihan. Walaupun berasal daripada tradisi metafizik yang berbeza, kedua-dua perspektif berkongsi kebimbangan bersama dengan cabaran eksistensial penemuan diri dan mengejar makna dalam dunia yang kompleks dan bercanggah.

Kata Kunci: Iqbal, Sartre, Eksistensialisme, Manusia, Islam, Ateisme

Introduction

The question "who is man?" holds great significance in both religion and literature, but this existential inquiry contradicts religious beliefs, raising issues about the existence of God, the nature of faith, and the possibility of meaning in a universe that lacks divine purpose. The late 19th and early 20th centuries witness the rise of existentialism as a provocative literary and philosophical movement in Germany and France, advocating "man's absolute freedom and responsibility," focusing on "human frailty and insecurity," and aiming to establish alternative ways of life and change man's entire system of beliefs and goals. Gradually, this "man-centred and individualistic" philosophical viewpoint gains popularity across Europe and other regions, creating new values, attitudes, and ideals through a strong belief in the supremacy of existence and placing importance on man's subjective experience and personal engagement (Kazmi, 1995, pp. 49–50). Following this approach, Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980), a leading French philosopher and writer of the 20th century, champions atheistic existentialism, challenging the previously dominant essentialist philosophical notion of a predefined, unchanging human nature and proposing a new outlook

on mankind. Similarly, Muhammad Iqbal (1877-1938), an influential South Asian Muslim philosopher, poet, and political thinker, widely known for inspiring the Pakistan Movement, also rejects the rigidity of traditional metaphysical essentialism, which conceptualises human nature as static and eternal, but seeks to reconstruct Islamic thought by integrating existential concerns within a theistic context. This study examines the works of Iqbal and Sartre, as both have had a significant influence on contemporary readers in the East and West through their notable contributions to philosophy and literature, particularly in addressing universal human concerns.

This article is developed into three main sections. The first section of this article will discuss existentialism in both Western and Muslim thought to understand how diverse intellectual traditions respond to the core aspects of the human condition. It will then undertake a critical discussion on the existential foundations of self-creation in Sartre's concept of man, alongside the Islamic theological basis of Iqbal's existential conception of the human being as a vicegerent. By examining two opposing philosophical foundations, this study investigates how each thinker addresses issues of identity, freedom, consciousness, alienation, and the responsibility of existence. Finally, a comparative evaluation is conducted based on Sartre's secular humanism and Iqbal's *Tawhidic* worldview, critically assessing the implications of their respective ideas in the context of modern existential challenges related to self-discovery in a distracted and consumer-driven society, followed by a conclusion.

Literature Review and Methodology

Extensive research has been conducted on existentialism, and many experts and researchers have explored the concept of man from various perspectives. Although Sartre's and Iqbal's existential thoughts have individually received attention, comparative studies between them remain notably limited. Among these writings, Latif Hussain Kazmi's *Philosophy of Iqbal: Iqbal and Existentialism* (1997) is an important scholarly resource in cross-cultural philosophical discourse, which examines how Iqbal's ideas engage with and differs from the existentialist philosophies of scholars like Jean-Paul Sartre, Søren Kierkegaard, and Gabriel Marcel, particularly focusing on existentialist themes such as freedom, creativity, and self-realisation. Kazmi's other book, *Iqbal and Sartre on Human Freedom and Creativity* (2009), analyses how

both thinkers, despite differing metaphysical commitments, centre their philosophies on human freedom and creative self-realisation. Another study by Safaat Ariful Hudda and Abdul Najib titled "Human Being dalam Diskursus Eksistensialisme Barat dan Islam" (2021) compares Sartre and Iqbal with Marcel and Mulla Sadra, highlighting a key contrast between Western rational-emotional and Islamic spiritual-prophetic conceptions of the human being. Elvira Purnamasari's article titled "Kebebasan Manusia dalam Filsafat Eksistensialisme" (2017) identifies a philosophical meeting point between Sartre's atheistic and Iqbal's theistic worldviews through their existential affirmations of human freedom. Existing comparative studies of Sartre and Iqbal only touch on a few recurring existential themes, offering limited analysis of their conceptions of man, particularly in relation to their responses to the problem of abstraction and the crisis of modernity. This study aims to bring to the forefront the issue of how both thinkers define 'man' in relation to the existential challenges of self-discovery and the formation of human identity, particularly through their distinct understandings of self-creation and vicegerency, at a time when contemporary identity is increasingly eroded by mass culture and consumerism.

This article employs a qualitative methodology, relying on a library-based research approach to examine concepts, theories, and findings relevant to the research issue. The primary sources used in this study include Muhammad Iqbal's *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, selected poems from his various collections, and Jean-Paul Sartre's works such as *Being and Nothingness* (1943), *Existentialism and Humanism* (1970), as well as the novels *Nausea* (1938), *The Age of Reason* (1945), *The Reprieve* (1945), *Troubled Sleep* (1949), and *No Exit* (1944). The analysis adopts Alparslan Açıkgenç's comparative methodology, as presented in his book *Being and Existence in Ṣadrā and Heidegger: A Comparative Ontology* (1993), which analyses Mulla Ṣadra (an Islamic philosopher) and Martin Heidegger (a Western existentialist), as an effective model for interpreting Iqbal's Islamic perspective alongside Sartre's secular existentialism. Drawing inspiration from Açıkgenç's approach to cross-philosophical comparison, this study examines Iqbal's concept of *Khudi* (selfhood) in relation to Sartre's notion that "existence precedes essence," exploring Islamic existentialism in parallel with secular humanism, preserving the philosophical integrity of both Islamic and Western traditions.

Existentialism in the Perspectives of Western and Muslim Thinkers

Existentialism in the Western philosophical tradition arose in response to the challenges of modern life, during a time of major social and intellectual change, such as the decline of religion and the disruption caused by war and industrialisation, emphasising that humans must define their own purpose through their subjective experiences. This philosophical movement is particularly viewed as a reaction against the deterministic tendencies of Hegelian idealism, which places the individual as an inevitable part of a rational, preordained historical and metaphysical process, where 'Spirit' occupies the central position and man reflects its essence. Hegelian philosophy views the historical process as a rational and self-developing journey toward absolute knowledge, where individuals find meaning through the roles they play within this universal narrative (Olson, 1962). While Hegel undermines the individual by neglecting personal experience, freedom, and responsibility, existentialists like Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Jean-Paul Sartre argue that these elements are essential to self-determination and identity.

Kierkegaard's existential philosophy emphasises the need for personal belief and subjective understanding, suggesting a turn away from logic toward faith, and exploring the emotional challenges that come with living authentically. Nietzsche, a more radical existentialist, challenges traditional morality and the belief in objective truth, claiming that "God is dead," a declaration that reflects the existential crisis of meaning in a post-religious world. He encourages individuals to overcome nihilism by creating their own values and living with courage and self-overcoming, an ideal embodied in the concept of the *Übermensch* (Overman). Sartre views authenticity as the recognition of human freedom and the commitment to act in alignment with self-created values, despite the absurd and alienating conditions of existence. Heidegger, though not always classified as an existentialist, made significant contributions to existential philosophy through his concept of being. His book *Being and Time*, describes human existence (*Dasein*) as being-toward-death, emphasising awareness of mortality as central to authentic living. Western existentialism is marked by its secular, sometimes atheistic stance, focusing on the individual's responsibility to create meaning in an indifferent or absurd reality (Ibrarullah &

Inamullah, 2022, pp.65-67). Each philosopher, in their respective existentialist approach, emphasises the concept of individualism, such as Kierkegaard through a profound faith in God, Nietzsche through a rejection of religious norms, and Sartre through the assertion of absolute freedom and self-creation, giving importance to the individual over any universal spirit or collective meaning.

During the 20th century, Muslim thinkers explore Western philosophical ideas, particularly existential and Hegelian philosophies, reinterpreting them through the theistic principles of Islamic metaphysics. Despite their critical stance on the secular foundations of these philosophies, these thinkers engage existential ideas within an Islamic context, emphasising that true freedom and meaning arise from closeness to God, not existential emptiness. Ali Shariati, a prominent Iranian intellectual deeply influenced by both existentialist philosophy and Islamic mysticism, rejects Marxist and Hegelian determinism, emphasising the central role of free will, self-awareness, and moral responsibility in his Islamic existential thought. Shariati highlights the significance of historical consciousness, inner transformation, and ethical struggle as essential components of the individual's role in society and spiritual development (Kanaaneh, 2021). Said Nursî views the spiritual crisis of modern man as an existential challenge, rather than a merely social or philosophical issue, as it requires a return to faith, self-purification, and inner growth, strengthening the relationship with God and leading a spiritual life that rises above modern superficiality (Zahratana, 2023). In addressing existential themes in their Islamic reformist thoughts, Shariati links self-awareness to freedom and social justice, while Nursî emphasises faith and the inner journey toward God as a response to modern spiritual challenges. Iqbal, as an existentialist thinker, highlights *khudi* (selfhood) as a dynamic force, viewing humans as co-creators with God and responsible for their own spiritual and moral development (Haryati, 2013). Similarly, al-Faruqi, challenging the impersonal and abstract metaphysics of Western philosophy, advocates for a form of existentialism within Islam that places God and the personal self at its core.

Alparslan Açıkgenç does not identify as an existentialist in the Western sense, but his inquiry into 'existence' and 'being' demonstrates a strong engagement with existentialist thought. In comparing Mullā Ṣadrā and Martin Heidegger, Açıkgenç highlights how Ṣadrā views

existence as the fundamental reality, from which all beings originate from a single, unified existence. Heidegger, likewise, centres his philosophy on Being, particularly in relation to Dasein, which refers to human existence as being-in-the-world. Açıkgenç criticises the disintegrated nature of modern knowledge, advocates for a unified Islamic epistemology, and addresses existential questions through a theistic framework that emphasises the role of divine insight in the search for meaning.

The Existential Foundations of Self-Creation in Sartre's Conception of Man

Sartre's existentialist philosophy, grounded in atheism and phenomenology, defines the human being by prioritising 'existence' as the foundational principle of life, viewing the self as the primary source of philosophical meaning. He argues that the abstraction of human nature is a misleading metaphysical concept, as it imposes a fixed identity on individuals based on universal concepts such as innate reason or divine essence. For him, this essentialist perception of man promotes self-deception and the avoidance of responsibility, through undermining individuals' capacity and freedom to define themselves and their roles. Consequently, he proposes a non-essentialist conception of humanity, asserting that identity emerges from existential freedom rather than from a predetermined essence. Sartre's view of the human condition is rooted in existentialist themes that emphasise freedom, responsibility, consciousness, alienation, authenticity, and the rejection of any preordained human nature, compelling individuals to define their own existence. For Sartre, the act of self-creation is not merely a philosophical ideal but an existential obligation in a universe devoid of inherent meaning or direction.

According to Sartre, 'existence' is the fundamental starting point of man's life, which precedes all notions of essence or divine intention, granting humans freedom and obligation to create their own being. In *Existentialism and Humanism* (1970), he presents a conception of man, reserving the term "existence" for humans alone, denying the presence of God and any predestined essence, and emphasising self-consciousness and freedom as distinct attributes that set humans apart from all other beings (Blackham, 1959, p. 162). He views human life as a conflict between subjective freedom and objective limitation,

blending lived experience with the external dimensions of reality. His *Being and Nothingness* (1957) describes man through an ontological dualism between 'being-in-itself' (*en-soi*) and 'being-for-itself' (*pour-soi*), revealing the existential paradox of two modes "authenticity and alienation," where being "is what it is not and is not what it is." From Sartre's atheistic perspective, the conflict between authenticity and alienation is an inescapable, enduring, and unresolved characteristic of human existence that constitutes the initial stage of freedom.

Freedom, in Sartre's existentialist idea of man, is a complex reality of life that simultaneously serves as an empowering foundation for self-creation and a source of existential dread, as it comes with the responsibility to shape one's own life. Sartre, in his lecture "Existentialism is a Humanism" (1946), defines man as the only truly free being, possessing absolute freedom and generating the source of all values, asserting that "man is nothing else but what he makes of himself." Freedom, in his view, is "an inescapable condition of human existence," that gives rise to feelings of anxiety, anguish, and a sense of condemnation for one's own actions and choices (Campbell, 1977). Sartre, in *Being and Nothingness* (1957), therefore compares 'freedom' with 'nothingness,' arguing that "human reality is free, but it is not enough," as freedom grants individuals the power to choose the meaning and purpose of their lives, while also imposing a profound existential burden. At the same time, he acknowledges that despite the anxiety associated with freedom, this burden of responsibility enables individuals to express their "greater creativity and a more authentic mode of existence." He therefore emphasises "the necessity of self-awareness and the moral courage to live in accordance with one's true self and values" (Sartre, 1957, p.440). According to Desan (1954), "Sartre's freedom is something absolute; He rejects all determinism whatsoever, even under its mitigated form as imperialism of the passions. Consequently, he presents us with a freedom more acute than, possibly, has been seen in two thousand years of philosophy" (p.107).

Sartre contends that human 'consciousness' is the primary source of freedom, generating both self-awareness and the realisation that humans are free from any externally imposed essence. He conceptualises 'consciousness' not merely as a 'passive state of awareness' but as an active capacity for 'free choice, critical reflection, and the creation of new possibilities for humans.' This implies that "consciousness is not a

static substance, but a self-driven, evolving activity, dynamic in nature and always oriented toward the future" (Akinbode, 2023, pp. 17–18). The quality of consciousness, as Sartre claims, depends on its capacity to transcend the present moment and imagine possibilities that do not yet exist. He views consciousness as a process that enables one to look into the future, recall the past, and be aware of things that are not physically present. For Sartre, this sense of incompleteness and the continual striving toward unrealised possibilities distinguish human beings from other forms of being and compel individuals to confront their alienation, actively constructing their own realities through the freedom of self-creation (Schrift, 2006).

In Sartre's view, 'bad faith' represents a self-deceptive state in which individuals avoid facing the existential anxiety and responsibility that are inseparable from human life. This detachment from practical reality serves as an ideological mechanism of social control, restricting the ability of individuals to think and act autonomously (Giordano, 2021). Sartre argues that these self-imposed limits and inauthentic choices are an existential failure to realise the fundamental freedom and responsibility that constitute authentic human existence. Sartre's novel *The Age of Reason* (1947) focuses on the existential conflict between freedom and responsibility through the character of Mathieu, portraying the anxiety of self-definition in a world without inherent values. The novel reflects Sartre's atheist belief that true freedom requires personal choice, moral responsibility, and the courage to live without external justification. In Sartre's self-creation process, living without external justification is a precondition of absolute freedom, where individuals create their own meaning without guidance from God or universal truths, but this freedom also leads to spiritual disconnection and alienation.

Alienation, according to Sartre, is not an impediment to identity formation, but a necessary precondition for radical freedom of choice and moral responsibility for authentic self-creation without external guidance. In his view, alienation is rooted in human consciousness, arising from the existential gap between being-in-itself and being-for-itself, a state of 'nothingness' that isolates the self from the world and functions as a negating force. He perceives alienation as the result of a confrontation between the existential challenge of self-definition and the realisation of the absurdity of existence (Giordano, 2021). Sartre's novel *Nausea* (1938) portrays alienation as central to Roquentin's experience,

manifesting in his detachment from reality and culminating in a strong emotional reaction to the absurdity of life. In line with Sartre's atheism, this moment of existential clarity enables the protagonist to create meaning independently (Mirkhan, 2022, p.915). From the same secular perspective, in *The Age of Reason* (1945), Sartre explores alienation as a psychological and moral condition. Through the character of Mathieu, alienation emerges not as despair, but as the space where self-definition and moral responsibility take shape in the absence of external values.

Death, in Sartre's existentialist view, is an undeniable and final reality in man's life that holds no inherent meaning, which generates profound anxiety and alienation; but the awareness of death forces individuals to make authentic choices within finite limits. Rejecting the notion of an afterlife, he asserts that "death is the destruction of his possible and is itself outside of his possible," which contrasts with Heidegger's view, who considered death as one of man's possibilities (Iwuagwu, 2019, p. 357). In *Being and Nothingness* (1957), he acknowledges that man is subject to the domination of death, driven by the anxiety of dying. He identifies a close connection between the human experience of guilt, finitude, and alienation, elements that create a profound tension in human existence. Thus, Sartre's authentic being perceives this inevitable external event as the absolute end of existence, freedom, and consciousness, considering the awareness of death (finitude) valuable.

In essence, Sartre's concept of authenticity or 'authentic being' is rooted in the imperative to live sincerely with oneself amid the absence of predetermined meaning. For him, the ultimate goal of human existence is to achieve alienation from oneself, God, the natural world, and society. He views human existence as the result of chance or accident, asserting that life has no inherent purpose and is burdened with the responsibility that arises from inevitable anxiety. In his quest for self-discovery, the journey toward 'authentic being' begins with the realisation of nothingness. This recognition leads to freedom, which paradoxically opens the door to 'bad faith,' as individuals may attempt to escape the burden of choice. This avoidance affects the nature of consciousness and creates the conditions for its own existence, through which individuals shape their lives. Sartre's process of becoming a true human prepares individuals for a meaningful existence, emphasising the necessity of experiencing suffering, abandonment, and despair in the pursuit of an authentic life. By confronting suffering, despair,

and nothingness, Sartre ultimately offers a perspective that is not fundamentally negative or hopeless.

The Islamic Theological Foundations of Iqbal's Existentialist Conception of Man as Vicegerent

Iqbal's existentialist response to Muslim philosophical and Sufi traditions offers a critical and constructive approach, emphasising individual freedom, creativity, and self-realisation. His major philosophical work, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam (1930)*, presents an existentialist rethinking of Islamic belief, wherein faith is rooted in subjective experience and responsibility rather than theoretical or abstract religious concepts, which resonates with Kierkegaard's existential perception. He asserts that the essence of the divine cannot be understood through reason or logic alone, it becomes known through a personal, emotional, and experiential relationship with God. Thus, he challenges the passive nature of classical abstraction in the philosophies of Ibn Sina and Al-Farabi, whose metaphysical ideas, deeply influenced by Platonic and Aristotelian thought, tend to obscure the dynamic, intuitive, and ethical dimensions of human existence by giving importance to essence over existence, reason over intuition, and universals over particulars.

Iqbal was initially influenced by the ideas of Ibn Arabi, the famous Sufi philosopher recognised for his pantheistic beliefs, but he gradually distanced himself from some of the more traditional aspects of Sufi metaphysical thought. He offers a critical analysis of Ibn Arabi's thought, especially his notion of *waḥdat al-wujūd* (unity of being), which offers a vision of reality that is too abstract, mystical, and detached from the subjective consciousness and individual experience he seeks to affirm. He challenges aspects of the Sufi concept of 'fanā' (annihilation of the self) as it led to a state of spiritual passivity, focusing on ego negation and constraining both personal will and creative expression (Dar, 1944). Iqbal's reinterpretation of Sufi metaphysical concepts, through an existentialist lens, provides a holistic philosophical conception of human existence, integrating Islamic spirituality with modern existentialist discourse.

Iqbal's concept of man as vicegerent (*khalīfah*) on earth combines the Islamic view of man as presented in the *Qur'an* with existential concerns such as freedom, selfhood, and responsibility, forming a theocentric

vision that distinguishes his thought from the secular existentialism of thinkers like Sartre. His perspective is rooted in the *Qur'anic* verse: "Indeed, I will place a vicegerent upon the earth" (*Qur'an 2:30*), which signifies man's divine accountability, moral responsibility, and creative potential. Iqbal reframes existential themes like suffering, struggle, and anxiety, not as signs of absurdity, but as essential components of spiritual and moral development which resonates with the Islamic concept of *jihād al-nafs* (struggle of the self), viewing life as a continuous journey to reach a higher moral and spiritual excellence.

In contrast to Sartre's notion that "existence precedes essence," Iqbal's existential thought is centred on the idea of '*khudi*,' where a continuous process of self-creation and self-affirmation shapes the individual's essence. Despite the traditional connotations of '*khudi*' as vanity, pomp, and arrogance in Urdu and Persian literature, Iqbal redefines it to represent the self-affirmative soul, emphasising the consciousness of one's ego, self-assertion, and the divine connection between creation and the Creator, ultimately leading to self-realisation. Iqbal contends that '*khudi*' can only be refined through the achievement of these specific objectives, which in turn restores the divine greatness, grandeur, and dignity in humanity. He characterises '*khudi*' as an emotional unity and a luminous element of conscience that illuminates human thoughts and inspirations, regarding it as an eternal reality that unifies scattered and boundless mental states (Ramli, 2016, pp. 102-105). Iqbal's concept of *khudi* reinterprets the Sufi idea of *fanā* as a transformative process, where the self is strengthened and aligned with the Divine, not erased. By identifying God with the inner self and comparing it to the Qur'anic concept of *rūḥ* (soul), he highlights the limits of reason and science in understanding spiritual realities. In this regard, he emphasises 'intuition' and 'religious experience' as important means for gaining authentic knowledge of faith and existence (Bilgrami, 1966). In *Asrar-i-Khudi* and *Rumuz-i-Bekhudi*, Iqbal explores the self or ego's significant role from various perspectives, in shaping reality, emphasising that self-awareness and personal growth lead to a more meaningful existence. As in *Asrar-i-Khudi*, he states:

> "In as much as the life of the universe comes from the power
> of the self,
> Life is in proportion to this power.
> When the drop of water gets self's lesson by heart,

> It makes its worthless existence a pearl.
> The form of existence is an effect of the Self,
> Whatever thou seest is a secret of the Self."
> (Trans. Reynold A. Nicholson)

In Iqbal's philosophy, the self (or ego) is a powerful, creative, and dynamic force that manifests its essence through active involvement, as man's existential journey reveals the significance and distinctiveness of the human self. In *Bāl-i-Jibrīl*, particularly in the poem "Sāqī Nāma," Iqbal emphasises *khudi* as a supremely valuable and significant essence of human individuality and uniqueness, owing to its potential to transcend the material world and connect with higher, spiritual realities. He states:

> "Since time's beginning it was struggling to emerge,
> And finally emerged in the dust that is man.
> It is in your heart that the Self has its abode,
> As the sky is reflected in the pupil of the eye."
> (Trans. M. Hadi Hussain)

For Iqbal, the ego is the core of man's identity and conduct, responsible for revealing the true nature of the self through action, judgment, and inner coherence, integrating all experiences. The presence of this true self, as real and existent, is perceived at pivotal moments through intuition as a source of immediate and self-sufficient awareness, which is further realised through existential action and persistent struggle (Malook, 2024). Thus, self-awareness, in his view, is "foundational to self-actualisation," as a conscious relationship with the inner self enables individuals to access deeper capacities, determining "behavioural growth, identity formation, and self-empowerment." Iqbal argues that the development of self-consciousness is manifested through "the essence of the self," inspired by "creativity and inner longing (soz)," contributing to meaningful living and forming behavioural uniqueness. In this progression of individuality, Iqbal asserts that "human emotions can act as obstacles to self-definition and the pursuit of personal goals, often imposing a negative influence on one's personality and success" (Noor, 2020, pp. 29-33).

In conceptualising man, Iqbal reinterprets the doctrine of *tawḥīd* (God's oneness) as an active force rather than a passive belief, linking divine unity to the human potential for self-realisation, freedom, and accountability. For him, this understanding of *tawḥīd* liberates

individuals from being defined by social, historical, and other external constructs, empowering them to shape their own destiny in relation to the Divine. Thus, freedom, in his view, is real but limited, which is neither a free divine gift nor an imposed burden on man's existence. Rather, it is a matter of personal choice, and an achievement attained through creative struggle, which gradually leads to the Ultimate Ego, or God, who alone possesses complete freedom. Similarly, true 'Self' or 'individuality,' as Iqbal argues, is not an inherent attribute for man, but the result of a 'constant striving' to develop the highest level of 'creativity' and inner 'freedom' and understanding the basic reality or purpose of human 'existence.' Iqbal refutes Sartre's notion of absolute freedom and self-derived value, proposing that true human freedom is realised through a divine relationship, not through isolation of the self since God is the ultimate source of meaning and value.

Iqbal's concept of alienation is not like that of atheist Sartre, although they share a common view that alienation or detachment from the world and external circumstances is required for a creative individual. Iqbal views man's alienated state as a transformative distancing that enables self-discovery and reconnection with God through spiritual awakening and moral growth. He identifies that man's alienation from divine connection is the major impediment to the development of his true self, as it restricts the inner potential to attain immortality (the glory of the ego) and freedom (ultimate destination of the ego) (Hassan, 1978, pp. 208-211). Since Iqbal's understanding of alienation is theocentric and spiritually grounded, his early poems *"Shikwah"* (The Complaint) and *"Jawab-i-Shikwah"* (Answer to the Complaint), present alienation because of man's refusal to engage with the Supreme Reality (God), the external world, and his inner self. By addressing human alienation on both religious and social levels, he focuses it as a form of complain to God, to highlight the spiritual stagnation of man's existential state of being-in-the-world, a condition that Sartre defines as man's inauthentic mode of existence.

Unlike Sartre, for whom death represents the definitive conclusion of existence, a final limitation and negation of the self, Iqbal holds a radically different view. Iqbal perceives death not as an end but as a transition to another mode of existence or a higher state, considering it an integral part of the self's evolutionary journey toward self-realisation and divine union. This process requires transcending the limitations

of the physical world and attaining spiritual maturity. He affirms the immortality of the self (or ego), asserting that the self continues its journey after the body's death in a different form. As articulated in *Bang-i-Dara* (The Call of the Marching Bell): "While the eve of life is the beginning of an eternal life / Death is nothing but the revival of the lust for life / It is a dream that conveys the message of awakening."

Based on the above discussion, it can be concluded that Iqbal's conception of man highlights humans as God's appointed representatives (*khalifah*), emphasising that this role is not merely symbolic but involves active engagement in the spiritual and material development of both the self and society. He frames vicegerency as a dynamic process through which individuals strive to realise their innate potential and contribute to a greater cosmic order. Within this spiritual journey, he views man's self-realisation as essential, with '*fanā*,' the surrender or annihilation of the ego, being a necessary step in purifying the self and achieving deeper closeness to God. For Iqbal, purification (*tazkiyah*) is a deeply spiritual process involving moral and intellectual refinement, achieved through faith, prayer, and reflection, enabling the self to fulfil its role as God's vicegerent on Earth. His concept of perfection aligns with the Islamic notion of *Insān al-Kāmil*, where human perfection is realised through deepening one's relationship with God and engaging in divine creativity and moral agency (Dar, 2013). In Sartre's secular humanism, the concept of divine vicegerency is absent, as he emphasises human autonomy and self-determined purpose, representing 'self-annihilation' as a rejection of fixed identities imposed by external authority and a breaking free from social labels and expectations. Sartre focuses on self-creation in a godless universe, whereas Iqbal sees self-realisation as something achieved through spiritual growth and drawing closer to God.

Sartre's Secular Humanism and Iqbal's *Tawhidic* Worldview: Reassessing Modern Identity of Man

Modernity, with its emphasis on reason, secularism, science, and individualism, led to the erosion of traditional metaphysical foundations, such as belief in God, the soul, and ultimate purpose. This epistemological and existential shift gave rise to a profound crisis of meaning, which Sartre and Iqbal addressed through their contrasting visions, one grounded in atheistic freedom, the other in divine selfhood.

Their respective viewpoints provide a profound understanding of how individuals today respond to absurdity, alienation, and identity crises to seek meaning and self-definition through their freedom of choice in the face of modern existential uncertainty.

Sartre addresses the disillusionment of modern individuals who, in the absence of religious and moral absolutes, are confronted with a world shaped by secularism, individualism, and consumerism, often resulting in a profound sense of disorientation and meaninglessness. Some of his most notable works that explore this theme include the novels *Nausea*, *The Age of Reason*, *The Reprieve*, and *Troubled Sleep*. Sartre's play *No Exit* expresses the existential disillusionment of modern life through its renowned quote, "Hell is other people," highlighting the anguish of being unable to escape others' perceptions and expectations. Sartre frames this existential crisis not as something to avoid, but as a challenge to be faced, not by withdrawing, but through absolute, self-defining freedom. He interprets human life as an ever-developing journey of self-creation, where freedom is not a light privilege but a serious demand for moral responsibility, challenging the modern notion of freedom as effortless autonomy (Giordano, 2021).

Unlike Sartre, who promotes humanism without religion, Iqbal presents an Islamic alternative that reconnects man with the divine, offering a spiritual path for today's humanity. He believes that even though modern life makes people feel empty or disconnected, they can overcome this crisis by discovering their true self, called *khudi*, and by reconnecting with the divine purpose of life. In *Zarb-i-Kalim*, he presents a critical view of modern man, who possesses scientific 'power' but lacks true 'vision.' His poetic message calls for the reawakening of a deeper sense of individuality (selfhood) through relentless action and struggle, aiming to rediscover hidden potential and possibilities, ultimately to find one's true self, connect with God, and attain freedom and immortality. His *tawhidic* vision of man focuses '*khudi'* or 'self-hood' as the core foundation of human life, rather than viewing 'human existence' as the sole basis, affirming that "man is the chosen of God" serving as His representative and trustee in the universe (Malook, 2024).

In the context of contemporary man, who is often eroded by the forces of mass culture and consumerism, Sartre argues that the fundamental challenge of modern existence is the acceptance of radical

freedom and responsibility through which one can confront existential anxiety and strive to live authentically. In his view, mass culture, shaped by consumer capitalism, encourages individuals to adopt self-deceptive behaviours, valuing social acceptance over personal authenticity, which reinforces collective myths of success and desirability that people feel pressured to follow. Thus, contemporary humans tend to avoid the responsibility that comes with freedom by conforming to fixed roles, ideologies, or religious beliefs. Sartre characterises this behaviour as a betrayal of the self, labelling it 'bad faith,' which involves denying one's freedom and responsibility through self-deception (Zheng, 2002). Mathieu Delarue, in *The Age of Reason*, is a portrait of modern man, embodying Sartre's concept of 'bad faith' by denying his own freedom and responsibility. Delarue's avoidance of moral responsibility in his lover Marcelle's abortion, along with his refusal to confront the moral and emotional consequences of his actions, reveals an inner conflict and dilemma that is common among contemporary individuals. However, over time, Delarue becomes gradually aware that the exclusion of emotional and moral concerns in favour of pure rationalism ultimately leads to existential emptiness and inner dissatisfaction. Sartre advocates for resisting the passive conformity imposed by modern social and cultural structures, urging individuals to take responsibility for their choices and create meaning through authentic action (Campbell, 1977). In *Nausea*, Antoine Roquentin, a solitary historian, does not escape his existential anxiety but instead begins to embrace it, contemplating the creation of meaning through art, specifically writing a novel, as a way to affirm life. Roquentin's transformation from despair to the potential for self-authenticity reflects his psychological and philosophical shift.

Much like Sartre, Iqbal encourages modern individuals to rise above passive submission to the norms imposed by contemporary society, but he emphasises the necessity of achieving self-realisation and spiritual awakening. He condemns the superficiality of consumerism and mass culture, calling for a life that is driven by purpose, authenticity, and inner strength. He encourages individuals to rediscover their true selves (*khudi*), stressing the importance of taking responsibility for their personal and spiritual growth and shaping their destinies through meaningful, authentic actions (Hassan, 1978). His *Zarb-i-Kalim* (The Rod of Moses), a collection of political and philosophical poems, promotes self-empowerment and advocates resistance to the oppressive

forces of modern society. Rejecting passive submission to social norms, he champions a bold and purposeful reinvention of self and society, grounded in spiritual insight and moral strength. His long poem "*Saqi Namah*" (The Book of the Cupbearer) passionately calls for a spiritual renaissance within the Muslim World. Here, Iqbal denounces the pervasive materialism of contemporary society, calling for a return to true meaning through faith, self-discipline, and spiritual values. In *Payam-i-Mashriq* (The Message of the East), Iqbal responds to Western materialism by upholding the spiritual legacy of the East, suggesting individuals to reject social pressures and pursue their true purpose through self-awareness and spiritual enlightenment (Kazmi, 1995).

In Sartre's philosophy, with the loss of religion, tradition, and absolute truths as guiding forces in modern life, individuals are left with absolute freedom to create their own identity and meaning without external guidance. He views freedom as a responsibility that simultaneously generates existential anxiety, alienation, and a sense of lacking inherent meaning. In *Nausea*, through the character of Antoine Roquentin, Sartre demonstrates how the inescapable responsibility of absolute freedom, and the lack of universal truths lead to deep existential anxiety and alienation in modern individuals. Roquentin's personal lived experiences lead him to the realisation that existence is absurd and devoid of inherent meaning which forces him to confront the raw 'being' of the world around him, leaving him overwhelmed with a sense of nausea. In *Being and Nothingness*, the phrase "condemned to be free" highlights Sartre's belief that although humans have the freedom to choose and define themselves, this freedom is burdened with responsibility. This viewpoint reminds modern individuals of their existential responsibility, drawing attention to both aspects of absolute freedom (Campbell, 1977).

In contrast to Sartre's view of freedom, Iqbal, in *Asrar-e-Khudi*, presents the freedom of man not as something granted externally, but as a spiritual achievement, attained through persistent, creative struggle that strengthens the self and guides it toward the 'Ultimate Ego' (God). While Sartre's secular humanism defines freedom as a source of existential anxiety and alienation, obliging individuals to determine their own meaning and be solely accountable, Iqbal's *tawhidic* worldview elevates freedom as a journey toward divine-centred self-realisation. He argues that, since the human ego is only

partially free and partially determined, man cannot be completely free or the sole source of all values. For him, freedom is a means to realise one's inherent potential and to effect change in the universe, particularly within the social and moral domains. He contends that humans possess the adaptive capacity to overcome obstacles and an ascending spirit that allows them to rise from one stage to another, ultimately becoming "self-conscious participants in God's creative activity," which enables them to become "co-workers with God" as well (Bahroni, 2013, p. 91). Thus, in the poem *Rumuz-e-Bekhudi* (The Secrets of Selflessness), he shifts the focus from individual self-realisation (*Khudi*) to the role of the individual within the community (Ummah) and in service to God's greater creative purpose. This poem reflects Iqbal's vision of an active, creative man, who is not just obedient to God, but collaborating with Him in manifesting justice, beauty, and spiritual purpose in the world.

Sartre identifies that modern people are challenged to live authentically and bear the full responsibility for their freedom. In *The Age of Reason*, he reveals how modern man, influenced by scientific rationalism and mechanised society, loses his true identity and becomes part of an impersonal system, leading to existential suffering and a crisis of freedom. In this novel, Mathieu Delarue, a philosophy professor in Paris, faces struggles with the burden of personal responsibility, the fear of commitment, and the desire to escape social roles, such as teacher, lover, and citizen. This internal conflict leads him to feel increasingly alienated, as he perceives himself becoming nothing more than a cog in society's machinery. Through the character of Delarue, Sartre depicts the modern individual as trapped in a consumer-driven society, influenced by mass culture and advertising that promotes false ideals, manipulates desires, and alienates people from their true selves. He portrays consumer culture as an extension of self-alienation, where identity is shaped by material consumption rather than personal experience or insight. Sartre emphasises the existential crisis of modern man, showing how the pursuit of social approval leads to the loss of authenticity and the sacrifice of freedom (Zheng, 2002).

Unlike Sartre's focus on the loss of authenticity through social pressures, Iqbal argues that true freedom and authenticity emerge from an inner journey, where individuals reconnect with their "*khudi*" (selfhood) and cultivate a strong sense of will and purpose. He contends that the pursuit of social approval does not undermine authenticity if it is

guided by inner strength, self-awareness, and a commitment to spiritual growth. Iqbal's poem "*Shauq-e-Kamil*" ("The Desire for Perfection") from *Bang-e-Dara* (The Call of the Marching Bell), conveys his idea that "will" is empty and lifeless without the guiding forces of action, wisdom, and desire, asserting the importance of a creative, internal force that drives human existence. He highlights the need for 'self-assessment' and 'self-control' in *Asrar-e-Khudi* (The Secrets of the Self) as essential prerequisites for contemporary individuals to effectively pursue their objectives in a universe where spiritual grounding and inner purpose are often overshadowed by materialism and external distractions (Kazmi, 1995, p. 26). Iqbal focuses on self-awareness as a necessary step in overcoming existential confusion, encouraging individuals to explore their inner selves and uncover the true spiritual motivations that awaken the will and guide their existence.

Conclusion

Although Iqbal and Sartre disagree on some fundamental issues, particularly regarding belief in God and the concept of selfhood, they share comparable views on human existence from both social and individual perspectives. This commonality emerges from the fact that both thinkers experience the same historical context and face similar existential challenges. Despite being influenced by contrasting cultural and philosophical traditions, both incorporate the Socratic idea of 'Know Thyself' into their existentialist views, emphasising self-knowledge as essential for authentic living and encouraging individuals to engage in self-discovery to find meaning and purpose in life.

Iqbal conceptualises humans as *khalīfah*, divinely appointed representatives with the responsibility for spiritual growth, moral duty, and self-realisation through closeness to God. He views the Holy Prophet as the embodiment of the Perfect Man and rejects mystical ideas that erase human individuality. Iqbal argues against any approach that promotes self-annihilation or separation from the universe, emphasising that humans serve as a link between God and universe. Iqbal challenges humanism for its atheistic ideology, rejecting materialism for its tendency to 'dehumanise' and 'inauthenticate' human existence, and places the 'Ultimate Ego' (God) at the core of his existential philosophy, which clashes with Sartre's anti-essentialist approach. Iqbal defines the authentic man by contrasting the *Mu'min (*True Believer, Authentic Man,

or Good Man) and *Kafir* (unbeliever or inauthentic human) through their fundamental attitude toward the life of action or ego-activity, rather than theological considerations. Hence, Iqbal's philosophical identity cannot be labelled as existentialist, even though he offers significant existential insights.

Sartre, however, rejects divine purpose of man, viewing human existence as the result of chance or accident, where individuals are absolutely free and accountable for establishing their own values and meaning to live authentically. Though he acknowledges life's difficulties, at the same time, he emphasises courage, commitment, and personal integrity in the face of an indifferent or absurd world. This view offers empowerment rather than despair, and thus Sartre's existentialist conception of man should not be seen as negative or hopeless, despite being commonly misunderstood as promoting despair or depression. However, Sartre's secular humanism focuses on authenticity born from confronting nothingness, freedom, and the anxiety of existence, whereas Iqbal's *tawhidic* worldview highlights the spiritual growth of man toward *Insān al-Kāmil* through discipline, self-awareness, and divine connection. Despite their different metaphysical commitments, both thinkers address the central existential idea that the human condition demands active engagement, self-realisation, and moral responsibility.

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Equal Before Allah, Unequal Before the Prophet? Ongoing Discourse on *Matn* Criticism and Its Influence on Muslim Feminist Thought

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Abstract: The question of whether Muslim scholars evaluated *mutūn* has garnered considerable interest that evolved into vigorous debates within Islamic studies. Muslim academics countered pioneering orientalists' narrative by asserting that *matn* criticism has always been integral to text verification. Others maintained that it was mainly the domain of the *uṣūliyyūn*. Based on the varying stances, this article presents four viewpoints with regards to *muḥaddithūn's* engagement in *matn* criticism. In the realm of Muslim feminist thought, such debates are often considered peripheral. They underscore a substantial lacuna in *matn* criticism, thus advocating for innovative approaches such as the *tawhidic* paradigm and the *Qur'ānic-weltanschauung* analysis. To provide a more nuanced analysis, the first part of this article proposes a new schema that distinguishes between *isnād*-based and text-based *matn* criticism. Utilising a qualitative research methodology, this paper contends that not all principles of *naqd* were employed by the *muḥaddithūn*, as some have been applied by other scholars, particularly the *uṣūliyyūn*. The second part explores the impact of classical methodologies on contemporary Muslim feminist thought. Findings of this paper prove that the principles introduced by Muslim Feminists are relatively subjective, rather than being conclusively objective, therefore rendering it insufficient to unequivocally reject established narrations. Instead, it suffices only to be used as tools for new readings. This article represents the inaugural scholarly effort to delineate contrasting perspectives on *matn* criticism, which offers a unique contribution, especially for non-Arabic readers.

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Keywords: *Women Ḥadīth, Matn Criticism, Feminism, Tawhidic Paradigm, Gender Studies,*

Abstrak: Perbincangan sama ada para sarjana Muslim menilai *mutūn* telah berkembang menjadi perdebatan yang sengit dalam kajian Islam. Cendekiawan Muslim menyangkal naratif orientalis dengan menegaskan bahawa kritikan *matn* merupakan elemen penting dalam pengabsahan teks. Namun, terdapat juga pandangan bahawa kritikan *matn* berada dalam kerangka kerja *uṣūliyyūn*. Berdasarkan ini, kajian ini membentangkan empat perspektif berhubung penglibatan muḥaddithūn dalam kritikan matn. Dalam pemikiran Feminis Muslim, arus pemikiran mereka menekankan adanya kekurangan dalam kritikan *matn* dan mencadangkan pendekatan inovatif seperti paradigma tawhid dan analisis *weltanschauung* Qur'ān. Kajian ini mencadangkan skema baru yang membezakan antara kritikan matn berasaskan *isnād* dan teks. Dengan menggunakan metodologi penyelidikan kualitatif, kajian ini menunjukkan bahawa data yang sedia ada tidak mencukupi untuk membuktikan bahawa setiap prinsip *naqd* telah digunakan oleh *muḥaddithūn*. Bahagian kedua meneroka impak metodologi kritikan *matn* klasik terhadap Feminis Muslim kontemporari. Hasil kajian membuktikan bahawa prinsip-prinsip Feminis Muslim lebih bersifat subjektif daripada objektif, menjadikannya lemah untuk menolak riwayat-riwayat yang telah diabsahkan kesahihannya. Sebaliknya, prinsip ini hanya sesuai untuk menyumbang kepada wacana pembacaan yang baru.

Kata kunci: *Kritikan Matn, Feminisme, Tawhidic Paradigm, Kajian Gender, Hadis-Hadis Wanita*

Introduction

Since the sayings ascribed to the Prophet (PBUH) constitute a fundamental source of epistemological authority and legal guidance within Sunni Islam, it is imperative for scholars to undertake a meticulous verification process in order to use them as sources of knowledge. In contemporary Islamic discourse, the critique of the authentication process of *ḥadīths* has emerged as a significant area of debate. However, a pertinent question remains: do these scholars also possess equally rigorous, or at least methodologically comparable, frameworks for the analysis of *mutūn* and how did it impact contemporary Islamic thought such as Muslim feminist approaches to *ḥadīth* texts?

The present study seeks to address the research questions by arguing that *matn* criticism, though secondary to *isnād* evaluation, was an integral part of early *ḥadīth* methodology. It further undertakes a critical analysis of contemporary feminist approaches to *ḥadīth*, by acknowledging their innovative contributions while evaluating the epistemological soundness of the principles employed in rejecting Prophetic texts. This study examines how these principles are constructed, applied, and whether they are rationally grounded to challenge established methodologies of authentication.

This article contributes to the discourse on *matn* criticism in two ways. First, it presents four contemporary perspectives on classical *muḥaddithūn's* use of *matn* criticism, leading to a proposed analytical schema: *isnād*-based and text-based criticism. Second, it identifies and assesses the epistemological foundations of Muslim feminist critiques of *ḥadīth*. A review of the relevant literature indicates that neither of these dimensions has been systematically explored in existing Arabic or English scholarship.

Based on the above, the terms *"naqd"* and *"matn"* are crucial to this study. Linguistically, *naqd* refers to the meticulous examination of elements to distinguish what is genuine from what is spurious (al-Jawharī, 1987; Ibn Manẓūr, 1994). In a more specialised sense, early *muḥaddithūn* did not provide an explicit definition of *naqd* in the context of *ḥadīth* criticism. Rather, the term emerged organically in their writings, which indicated evaluative practices that evolved over time (al-Rashīd, 2005).

In response to the absence of a formal definition, contemporary scholars have sought to articulate a clearer understanding of the concept. Nūr al-Dīn ʿItr (1981, pp. 32-33) defines *al-Naqd al-Ḥadīthī*, as the comprehensive analysis of "both *isnād* and *matn* in order to distinguish between the *maqbūl* and the *mardūd.*" This definition reflects the practices of early *muḥaddithūn*, who scrutinised both the chains and the content of narrations. Similarly, Muṣṭafā al-Aʿẓamī (1990, p.5) stated that term *naqd* involves "differentiating between *ṣaḥīḥ* and *saqīm ḥadīth*s and issuing judgments on narrators, either by validating their credibility (*tawthīq*) or impugning them (*jarḥ*)." I reckon that ʿItr's use *of "maqbūl or mardūd"* is more precise than *"saḥīḥ"* and *"saqīm,"* as the scope of acceptability in *ḥadīth* studies is broader than authenticity (*dāʾirat al-Qabūl awsaʿ min al-Ṣiḥḥah*).

Despite slight variations, these definitions are fundamentally aligned as it emphasised two critical aspects: assessment of narrations, as well as evaluation of statuses of narrators independent of their individual narrations. Accordingly, I propose a refined definition of the term *naqd* in the context of *ḥadīth* criticism as: "the systematic evaluation of transmitters, along with the examination of the *asānīd* and *mutūn* of narrations." This definition highlights the dual process of *naqd* which encompasses both the critique of narrations and the assessment of narrators.

On the other hand, the most significant definition of *matn* is by Ibn Ḥajar (1997, p.724): "The *matn* is the ultimate content to which the *isnād* leads, whether it reaches the Prophet (PBUH) directly or indirectly (*ḥukman*) in the form of his sayings, actions, or tacit approvals, or whether it terminates with a companion or a *tābiʿī*." In simpler terms, it refers to "what comes after the *isnād*" (Al-Khayrābādī, 2009, p.24).

The Concept of *Naqd al-Matn* in Islamic Scholarship

Since *ḥadīth* consists of two fundamental components, the *isnād* and the *matn*, it stands to reason that critical analysis would be applied to both. The Syrian scholar Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Idlibī (2013) categorised *ḥadīth* criticism into two: external criticism, commonly known as *isnād* analysis, and internal criticism, as referred to by historians, which corresponds to *matn* analysis. However, I argue that *matn* criticism, as practiced by *ḥadīth* scholars, is far more comprehensive than the textual analysis employed by historians. It includes methods such as *mudraj* (detecting interpolations), *muḍṭarib* (inconsistencies), and *muṣaḥḥaf* (transcriptional errors), many of which are absent from historical methodologies (al-ʿUmarī, 1997).

Following that, al-Rashīd (2005) analysed contemporary applications of *naqd al-matn* and identified five main interpretations:

1. Reconciling the *matn* with contradictory evidences (*al-Tawfīq*)
2. Preferring certain narrations over others (*al-Tarjīḥ*)
3. Disregarding an accepted narration due to contradictions (*tark al-ʿAmal*)
4. Critiquing a *matn* that appears to be reliable in broader *ḥadīth* analysis (*intiqād al-Mutūn*)
5. Rejecting a *matn* despite a sound *isnād* (*radd al-Ḥadīth*)

I contend that this five-fold categorisation does not represent the methodology of the critics. As defined earlier, *naqd* is fundamentally about distinguishing the acceptable from the unacceptable. Thus, methods like reconciling conflicting texts are not strictly part of *matn* criticism. Rather, it can be considered as strategies for resolving apparent contradictions (*ṭuruq ḥal al-Taʿāruḍ*). The essence of *matn* criticism lies in prioritising usage of certain narrations over others, covering *al-Tarjīḥ*, *intiqād al-Mutūn* and radd *al-Ḥadīth*, as outlined in points two, four, and five in Rashīd's schema, or to a lesser degree, *tark al-ʿAmal,* as in point three.

Due to this, I propose a more precise schema that divides *matn* criticism into two: *naqd al-Matn al-Nāshiʾ ʿan al-Isnād* (*isnād*-based *matn* criticism) and *naqd al-Matn al-Nāshiʾ ʿan al-Matn* (content-based *matn* criticism).[1] The former involves examining the *matn* by comparing it with other narrations, where the critique arises from discrepancies among transmission chains. Examples include *mudraj*, *muḍṭarib* and *muṣaḥḥaf*. This type of *matn* criticism generally preserves the broader meaning of the *ḥadīth* and addresses only minor inconsistencies. Therefore, it differs fundamentally from the content criticism raised by orientalists, and excessive elaboration on it is of limited benefit in refuting doubts.

The second type, *naqd al-Matn al-Nāshiʾ ʿan al-Matn* evaluates the *matn* for contradictions with established evidence, independently of the transmission chains. This critique focuses solely on the content's internal inconsistencies, often resulting in the rejection of attribution to the Prophet (PBUH) or, though less decisively, the suspension of its application due to doubts about its authenticity. I argue that the term "content criticism" is less precise than *naqd al-Matn al-Nāshiʾ ʿan al-Matn*, as the former could encompass content critiques rooted in *isnād* analysis.

An illustrative case for *the latter* is the narration by Abū Dāwūd, 28: 3778 and al- Nasāʾī, 22:2243, in which the Prophet (PBUH) is reported to have said: "Do not cut meat with knives, for this is the practice of

[1] I could not find anyone who preceded Ḥamzah al-Bakrī in using these two terms. He introduced them in his lectures on matn criticism delivered at Ibn Haldun University, Istanbul, in 2020.

non-Arabs." Ibn Ḥanbal rejected this *matn* because it contradicts with well-established practices of the Prophet (PBUH), who used knives to carve meat then stood up for prayer and set the knife aside (Ibn al-Jawzī, 1966; Ibn Qudāmah, 1968). Here, the critique is directed at the *matn* itself, independently of other chains of transmission.

It becomes incumbent to note that *naqd al-Matn al-Nāshiʾ ʿan al-Matn* should not be necessarily deemed invalidated if critics ultimately attribute the defect to the *isnād*, as this falls within their area of expertise and specialisation. What is more important is to demonstrate that critics engaged in *matn* criticism independently, whether before or after identifying defects in its *asānīd*. This is consistent with al-ʿAṭāwī's (2007) finding that most of the narrations that al-Bukhārī critiqued for their content, he also critiqued for their chain of transmission.

Contemporary Perspectives on *Muḥaddithūn's* Engagement in *Matn* Criticism

The *isnād* and the *matn* of a *ḥadīth* are fundamentally interconnected and deeply rooted, making it extraordinarily difficult to evaluate it independently. Numerous *ḥadīths* possess outwardly reliable chains yet contain weak or problematic content. Ibn al-Jawzī (1966, p.99) remarked, "there may be an entirely trustworthy chain, yet the *ḥadīth* itself is fabricated, reversed, or tainted by *tadlīs* (obfuscation in transmission). This is the most difficult scenario and can only be identified by expert critics." Despite the growing body of scholarship on the subject, a comprehensive and systematic framework that classifies contemporary perspectives on the *muḥaddithūn's* engagement in *matn* criticism remains absent. Based on that, I have identified four primary viewpoints regarding *matn* criticism as practiced by early *muḥaddithūn.*

First: Absolute Affirmation

The absolute affirmation viewpoint emerged in response to assertions made by orientalists who aimed to undermine the legitimacy of the *sunnah*, by arguing that early *muḥaddithūn* paid insufficient attention to *matn* criticism (Motzki, 2016). In reaction, Muslim scholars produced numerous studies defending the claim that early *muḥaddithūn* did, in fact, engage in *matn* criticism.

Musfir al-Dumaynī (1984b), a leading figure of this viewpoint, claimed that he extracted the criteria used by *muḥaddithūn* to criticise

mutūn from their own writings. He identified seven criteria, including comparing the *matn* with the Qur'ān, cross-examining variants of *ḥadīths* and assessing coherence with historical events. Despite this, al-Dumaynī (1984a, pp.18-19) acknowledged that *ḥadīth* scholars prioritised *isnād* over *matn*, admitting, "we would not be far from the truth if we said that their focus on content analysis was comparatively less than their attention to *isnād* evaluation."

Al-Idlibī (2013) agreed that *muḥaddithūn* had established standards for critiquing *mutūn*, articulated by figures like Ibn al-Qayyim. These standards included examining content for contradictions with Qur'ānic and rational principles. Nevertheless, al-Idlibī (2013) concedes that some scholars focused on *isnād* in an imbalanced manner which resulted to neglecting a holistic view that includes *matn* analysis. Later researchers, including Ṭāhir al-Jawwābī (1991) and Mūzah al-Kūr (n.d.), also added other principles, such as evaluating coherence with historical facts or sensory evidence.

Despite the commendable efforts to revive the contributions of *muḥaddithūn* in criticising *matn*, this prevailing approach has faced criticism regarding how accurately it represents early *hadīth* scholarship. First, there is a tendency to overgeneralise certain criticisms made by later figures such as Ibn al-Jawzī and Ibn al-Qayyim, as if their approaches epitomise the methods employed by all *muḥaddithūn*, especially in the formative first three centuries of Islam. Examples were drawn exclusively from the works of these two scholars, with a noticeable absence of references to the books of *al-ʿilal*. In fact, some researchers outrightly denied that such practices were documented in the genre of *al-ʿilal* (al-Dumaynī, 1984b).

Second, these scholars have not been able to demonstrate that the principles were widely applied by early *muḥaddithūn* in post-ṣaḥābah generations. While it is possible to find one or two examples, the challenge lies in proving that *matn* criticism was a fundamental component of *muḥaddithūn's* work.

Second: Denial

The denial viewpoint holds that early *ḥadīth* scholars did not engage in *matn* criticism. Ḥamzah al-Malībārī (2003), a prominent advocate of reviving the methodology of early critics, argues that evaluating

a *ḥadīth* based on its content's coherence with the Qur'ān or reason was not a consistent principle among early *muḥaddithūn*. He suggests that such assessments were only employed sporadically and not as a systematic method. Similarly, Ḥāfiẓ al-Ḥakīmay (2012) rejects the claim that early critics used content-based criteria, as the cited examples are either weak or fabricated. On the other hand, some scholars emphasise the importance of distinguishing between the roles of *muḥaddithūn* and *fuqahāʾ* (jurists). An example would be al-Rashīd's five-fold classification which was discussed earlier. Al-Rashīd (2005) notes that the first three categories pertain to the domain of *fiqh*, while the fourth and fifth are specific to *ḥadīth* criticism. Hence, failure to distinguish between these two roles has led many researchers to conflate between the two methodologies (al-ʿAzzūzī, 2021).

Along the same lines, Ṭāhā Jābir al-ʿAlwānī (2014) stated that many principles associated with *matn* criticism belong primarily to the realm of *fuqahāʾ*. He outlines nineteen criteria for rejecting *ḥadīths*, including contradictions with scientific knowledge and the promotion of sectarian ideologies. ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd Abū Sulaymān (2005) also alludes to the limited scope of the *muḥaddithūn's* methodology and calls for its revamp in modern times.

In a more detailed analysis, Muʿtaz al-Khaṭīb (2011), widely regarded as one of the most prominent critics of the absolute affirmation viewpoint, argues that the criteria for *matn* criticism, such as incompatibility with the Qurʾān or established *sunnah*, are primarily the domain of *uṣūlīs* and not rooted in the critical methodology of the *muḥaddithūn*. Al-Khaṭīb (2011, pp.453-4) highlights two major issues in the contemporary literature on *matn* criticism. Firstly, the overgeneralisation of isolated examples from figures such as Ibn al-Jawzī or Ibn al-Qayyim portrayed false impressions as being a representative of the methodology of early *ḥadīth* critics. Secondly, a failure to demonstrate that principles like rejecting a *ḥadīth* due to contradictions with rational evidence were systematically applied by early *muḥaddithūn*.

Despite the compelling arguments presented against the former, the second viewpoint has not sufficiently addressed inherent shortcomings within its own framework. It is notable that the majority of writings aligned with this viewpoint have largely overlooked the contributions

of other researchers that clearly demonstrated the existence of explicit examples of *muḥaddithūn* in the early periods engaging in *naqd al-Matn al-Nāshiʾ ʿan al-Matn*. These works, which will be mentioned in the fourth viewpoint, provide critical data that early *muḥaddithūn* did engage in *matn* criticism. A closer analysis of these data would have been crucial to clarify whether such examples indicate the presence of a clear methodology among the early *muḥaddithūn* or if they merely represent isolated cases unlinked to systematic principles of *hadīth* criticism.

Third: Non-Differentiation

This viewpoint posits that there is no substantive difference between the methodologies of *muḥaddithūn* and *uṣūlīs* when it comes to criticising *mutūn*. Sharīf Ḥātim al-ʿAwnī (2008), a major advocate of this position, asserts that the comprehensive framework developed by *muḥaddithūn* was relied upon by *fuqahāʾ* and *uṣūlīs* alike. He contends that claims of a distinct methodology employed by *fuqahāʾ* for *matn* criticism are unfounded, as the principles of *ḥadīth* authentication laid down by *muḥaddithūn* were universally accepted across disciplines (al-ʿAwnī, 2023).

Al-ʿAwnī further emphasises that the reliance of *fuqahāʾ and uṣūlīs* on the critical standards of *muḥaddithūn* demonstrates a methodological unity. He notes that many jurists explicitly stated that a prerequisite for *ijtihād* was familiarity with *ḥadīth* scholars and their criticism. Moreover, al-ʿAwnī suggests that the occasional disagreements of *fuqahāʾ* with *ḥadīth* scholars stemmed from differing interpretations rather than methodological divergence (al-ʿAwnī, n.d.).

Framed by the subsequent two premises, I contend that al-ʿAwnī's view did not represent the holistic reality of the *muḥaddithūn-uṣūliyyūn* scholarship. Firstly, the origins of the principles cited, except for a few, find their roots more suitably in the framework of *uṣūl al-fiqh* rather than in the practices or statements of the *muḥaddithūn*. Secondly, his analysis did not sufficiently address the critiques found in *uṣūl al-fiqh* literature and their application by jurists, particularly from the Ḥanafī and Mālikī schools. These jurists often criticise narrations beyond its *isnād*. In essence, I argue for the need of a more nuanced understanding of the *muḥaddithūn-uṣūliyyūn* relationship, as I view these disciplines as intersecting but not interchangeable.

Fourth: Conditional Affirmation

Researchers aligning to this viewpoint acknowledges that early *muḥaddithūn* engaged in *matn* criticism but maintains that it was applied selectively and within strict parameters (Balhī, 2021). They emphasise on the existence of abundance of examples from early *muḥaddithūn* who engaged in *matn* criticisms due to inconsistencies with external evidences. For instance, Jonathan Brown (2008) contends that by establishing a significant correlation between the *ḥadīths* documented in early works on transmitter criticism and those later classified as forged with explicit *matn* criticism, it becomes evident that early critics engaged in *matn* analysis far more frequently than traditionally assumed. However, this practice was often embedded within the framework and terminology of *isnād* criticism, thus rendering it less apparent. Other researchers, such as Khālid Drays, Nabīl Balhī and Mehmet Ali Çalgan, asserted that *matn* analysis was typically employed when *isnād* scrutiny left certain ambiguities unresolved (Balhī, 2021; al-Drays, 2005; Çalgan, 2024).

This selective approach reflects the *muḥaddithūn's* commitment to preserving the authenticity of *ḥadīth* while acknowledging the necessity of content-based criticism in specific cases. However, it also emphasises that their methodological rigor was centred on *isnād* analysis, with *matn* criticism serving as a complementary tool rather than a primary focus. Thus, this viewpoint offers a nuanced understanding of early *ḥadīth* criticism that harmonised the numerous examples of early *muḥaddithūn* engaging in *matn* criticism with the overuse of such methods by later scholars.

The lack of visibility of *matn* criticism among early *ḥadīth* critics has been explained by contemporary researchers through different perspectives. Brown (2008) attributes it to their effort to not be aligned with *ahl al-raʾy,* therefore prioritising *isnād* over *matn*. Balhī (2021) links it to the dominance of explicit *isnād* criticism, with *matn* issues addressed briefly. Al-Drays (2005) suggests it stems from critics favouring *al-Jamʿ* (synthesis) and *al-Taʾwīl* (exegesis) over *al-Tarjīḥ* (preference), thereby limiting explicit *matn* criticism. The preference for *al-Jamʿ* and *al-Taʾwīl* can be witnessed from the attitudes of critics when addressing *ḥadīth al-Turbah*, where others inferred its direct contradiction with the Qurʾān (Abdullah, 2023).

The above contestations make it apparent that the fourth viewpoint reflects more accurately the balanced reality of *muḥaddithūn-uṣūliyyūn* scholarship. I contend that, based on the examples cited, by my estimation, to over 50 distinct cases, not all the principles can be fully attributed to the craftmanship of the *muḥaddithūn*. Approximately 90 percent of the examples can be encapsulated in three principles only: contradictory to a well-known *sunnah (mukhālafat al-Sunnah al-Mashhūrah)*, contradictory to an established historical fact (*mukhālafat al-Tārīkh al-Thābit*), or determining whether it resembles the speech of the Prophet (PBUH) *(lā yushbih kalām al-Rasūl)*. This suggests that the remaining principles employed in *matn* criticism were deeply rooted in the *uṣūlī* intellectual framework, albeit occasionally utilised by the *muḥaddithūn*. Given that many pre-modern *muḥaddithūn* were also *uṣūliyyūn*, it reflected a likely and significant overlap in their scholarly engagements (al-Shaykh, 2018; ʿĪdū, 2014).

The Origins and Development of Muslim Feminist Critiques of Islamic Texts

Feminist philosophy, whether Western and Islamic, is developed in response to perceived gender biases embedded within traditional systems, particularly religious traditions. It often views traditions as patriarchal structures that marginalise women as active members of society. Scholars in gender studies have highlighted that, while Western (WF) and Islamic feminism (IF)[2] share some foundational principles, they diverge significantly due to their distinct cultural and historical contexts (Badran, 2009; Walters, 2005). IF, for instance, seeks to reconcile Islamic teachings with principles of gender equality, whereas WF often critiques religion as inherently patriarchal (Barlas, 2011).

From a historical standpoint, WF emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries alongside the women's rights movement, which aimed to address legal and social inequities. Initially rooted in Enlightenment ideals of individual rights and equality, WF has evolved through three major waves, beginning with issues such as women's suffrage and

[2] While acknowledging the contestations, I employ 'Islamic Feminism' to refer to feminist discourses rooted in Islamic teachings, aimed at reconciling these teachings with contemporary gender-based ethos.

expanding to varied women-based themes, particularly race, gender identity, and nationality (Tong, 2009).

In contrast, IF did not share the same wave-like development but gained prominence in the late 20th century, as Muslim women pursued Western-inspired paths of modernisation and progress, ranging from dress and lifestyle to the conception of a contemporary society (Esposito, 1998). Therefore, it is understandable why critics usually equate IF to its Western counterpart. As Hidayat Tuksal (2013) noted, it is not wholly erroneous to attribute Muslim women's questions pertaining to Islamic framework, to the influence of Westernisation, modernisation, and Western feminist ideologies.

From a philosophical standpoint, WF has undergone significant evolution over time, with a consistent focus on issues such as political representation, workplace equality, and sexual freedom. This movement frequently critiques patriarchal structures and advocates for systemic changes across all sectors of society (Hooks, 2000; Tong, 2009). Opposingly, IF seeks gender equality within a philosophical framework that is based on Islamic principles to ensure compatibility with religious tenets. Central themes include reinterpreting Qurʾānic texts, promoting women's *qiwāmah*, and challenging patriarchal non-Qur'ānic based texts such as *ḥadīth*s or *fatāwā* that were revered as religious mandates of the *sharī'ah* (Ahmed, 2021; Wadud, 1999).

From a theological standpoint, WF has historically critiqued religion, often viewing it as a patriarchal institution that reinforces gender inequality. Secular feminists, such as Simone de Beauvoir (2011) who framed religion as being inherently oppressive to women, have called for its separation from public life to build an egalitarian society. However, contemporary discourse increasingly acknowledges religion-infused feminism which purport gender equality within their traditions, or feminist theology. Thinkers like Rosemary Ruether (1983) have highlighted feminist reinterpretations of Christian theology that challenge traditional gender norms. She, along with the Jewish feminist Judith Plaskow and Muslim feminist Amina Wadud, supported the feminist projects within the Abrahamic tradition (Plaskow et al., 2015).

By comparison, IF is rooted in Islam, with proponents often framing their intellectual and social activism as acts of faith. Muslim feminists argue that a correct interpretation of Islam supports gender

equality and that many oppressive practices attributed to it are cultural traditions incoherent with Quranic principles (Ahmed, 2021; Wadud, 1999). Consequently, IF has faced opposition not only from Muslim traditionalists but also from certain strands of secularists, who confine concepts such as justice and equality to the framework of secular practices (Mir-Hosseini, 2006).

Recognising these challenges, proponents of IF contend that the relevance of feminism will persist until and unless Muslims, particularly their scholarship, begin to embody the Islamic attitudes towards women (Chaudry, 2015). Asma Sayeed (2013) even advanced the view that historically, traditionalist Sunni Islam, as opposed to recent analyses, was the strand responsible for inclusion of women in the public domain in matters pertaining to *ḥadīth* studies. This position starkly contrasts with the perspective of traditionalist Muslims, who assert that Islam promotes general equality between both sexes in terms of rights and responsibilities, rather than absolute equality or identicality (Aliyu, 2010).

Ḥadīth Studies Through Muslim Feminist Frameworks

By playing a salient role in reinterpreting religious texts, Muslim feminists aim to provide new readings from a non-hierarchical perspective that promotes gender justice and equality. While numerous scholars have addressed the subject of IF, I will specifically highlight figures who have critically engaged with *ḥadīth* texts from a feminist perspective, and they include:

1. Fatima Mernissi (1940-2015): A Moroccan feminist and one of the pioneers of IF. She critiques the political and historical contexts that led to patriarchal interpretations of Islamic texts, particularly those found in *ḥadīths* that justified gender segregation and inequality (Mernissi, 1991).

2. Riffat Hassan (1943-): A Pakistani-American academic, Hassan emphasises on the reinterpretation of Qur'ānic verses and rejection of selected *ḥadīths*, in order to align with gender equality and social justice. She even reinterpreted the story of creation, that may be Adam, a second creation, was created from Eve (Hassan, 1993).

3. Nimat Hafez Barazangi (1943-): A Syrian-born academic at Cornell University, Barazangi is highly regarded within the feminist circles for her engagement with gender justice in Islam. She presents a contemporary approach that contrasts *ḥadīth* with established Qur'ānic principles, shifting the discourse from textual dogmatism to a religio-moral rational framework, and challenging widely accepted narrations (Barazangi, 2017).

4. Asma Barlas (1950-): Born in Pakistan, Barlas is an academic specialising in feminist readings of Islamic texts. She challenges traditional interpretations of Islamic texts and even questions the authenticity of some *ḥadīths* that, according to her, marginalise women. (Barlas, 2011).

5. Amina Wadud (1952-): Wadud is an American Muslim feminist. Her influential books, *Qur'ān and Woman* and *Inside the Gender Jihad* offer feminist readings of the Qur'ān and *ḥadīth*. Wadud gained international attention in 2005 as the first woman to lead a mixed-gender Friday prayer, a move that sparked controversy among traditional Islamic scholars (Wadud, 1999, 2006).

6. Hidayet Şefkatli Tuksal (1963-): A Turkish feminist academic raised in Istanbul within a conservative environment, Tuksal is renowned for her works on feminism in Turkish societies. Her works offer a feminist analysis and gender-just readings of traditional interpretations of the Qur'ān and *ḥadīth* (Tuksal, 2013).

7. Olfa Youssef (1964-): A Tunisian professor at the University of Manouba, Youssef is known for integrating psychological theories into her feminist critiques of Islamic texts. She firmly believes in the non-sutured nature of Islamic texts, contesting the institutionalised phallocentric readings of *ḥadīths* that do not align with gender equality (Youssef, 2017).

Undeniably, many additional names could be included in this list, particularly among the growing number of Indonesian researchers examining the societal impact of seemingly misogynistic narrations on students in Islamic institutions such as *pesantren* (Marhumah, 2015; Nasrullah, 2015; Suryani et al., 2024). However, my discussion

revolves around selected researchers who have directly addressed or utilised principles of *matn* criticism rooted in feminist ethos.

The Muslim Feminists' Approach to *Matn* Criticism

Generally, Muslim feminists do not outrightly reject the authority of the *sunnah*. Hence, it would be unfair to label Muslim feminists as adherents of the Qur'ān-only movement. However, many adopt Fazlur Rahman's interpretive framework, which considers *ḥadīth* as a historical phenomenon rather than a definitive source of law (Rahman, 1965; Wadud, 1999). Even Hassan's (1993) argument that a post-patriarchal Islam is nothing other than a Qur'ānic Islam, embraces *ḥadīths* that are coherent with Qur'ānic moral compass. Consequently, individual *ḥadīths* are often viewed as not carrying binding injunctions.

Mernissi (1991), for instance, contends that many *ḥadīth*s that were traditionally used to subjugate women, stem from patriarchal interpretations rather than authentic Islamic teachings. Similarly, Wadud (2006) emphasises that *ḥadīth*s should be interpreted in light of its historical and social context rather than used as legitimacy to impose restrictions on women's rights. She calls for the reinterpretation through a hermeneutic model grounded in the concept of *tawḥīd*. In the same manner, Barlas (2011) contends that *ḥadīths* should be assessed through universal values like justice and equality. She rejects traditional interpretations that uphold male dominance and accepts only those aligning with the Qurʾān's egalitarian vision.

It can be drawn that the primary reason feminist thinkers prioritise *matn* criticism over *isnad* analysis lies in the perceived historical male dominance that shaped the vessel of tradition, consequently influencing the preservation of Islamic texts. They highlight how figures like Abū Hurayrah and Abū Bakrah have faced criticism for perceived gender biases in the narrations they transmitted (Barlas, 2011; Brown, 2009; Mernissi, 1991).

Although some voices within Muslim feminist thought assert that early *muḥaddithūn* did engage in *matn* criticism, these perspectives are often regarded as having limited influence, as they have not significantly shaped mainstream discourse. Feminist thinkers underscore a substantial lacuna in *matn* criticism and promote innovative approaches in critiquing it. Apart from claiming that *mutūn of sunnah* consist of irreconcilable

inconsistencies, several Muslim feminists argue that male-dominated interpretations of *ḥadīths* have led to the social construction of an androcentric attitude to Islamic theology (Hassan, 1993).

The Muslim feminist's approach to *matn* criticism involves a focused examination of the content of narrations, striving to move beyond the traditional emphasis on *isnad* while examining the broader implications of a *ḥadīth's* message. The status of a narration, including its inclusion in the *Saḥīḥay*n, is deemed immaterial to their criticisms. When examining Qur'ānic texts, Aysha Hidayatullah (2014) discerns three primary methodologies employed by Muslim feminists: the historical contextualisation method, the intratextual method, and the *tawḥīdic* paradigm. However, except for the *tawḥīdic* paradigm, these methodologies have not been systematically applied to *matn* criticism. Instead, I have identified four key principles: the *tawḥīdic* paradigm, *Qur'ānic-Weltanschauung* analysis, influences of Israelite traditions, and gender-discriminatory content. Feminist academics use these principles to reject *ḥadīths* that they deem inconsistent with the egalitarian spirit of Islamic teachings while addressing the historical and cultural biases present in it.

First Principle: Contradictory to the Tawḥīdic Paradigm

The concept of *tawḥīd*, or the oneness of God, is foundational to Islamic theology. It mandates that worship and submission be directed exclusively to Allah while rejecting any notion of associating partners or equivalents with the divine (*shirk*). Feminist exegetes employ the *tawhidic* paradigm to assert that sex-based preferences are forms of "idolatry since it attributes a God-like role to men over women" (Hidayatullah, 2014, p.110). Wadud (2006), who coined the term, argue that certain *ḥadīths* conflict with this cardinal Islamic principle by promoting ideas that elevate the male gender, thus undermining the principle of equality, which is central to the *tawḥīdic* paradigm.

A prominent example is the *ḥadīth* reported by al-Tirmidhī, 12:1159; Abū Dāwūd, 12:2150, Ibn Mājah, 9:1853 and others: "If I were to command anyone to prostrate to another, I would have commanded women to prostrate to their husbands." Feminist exegetes reject this *ḥadīth* by arguing that prostration is an act of worship reserved for Allah alone and that any suggestion of human beings being worthy of prostration violates the essence of *tawḥīd*. They posit that such

narrations originate from patriarchal contexts rather than divine intent, as they attribute a near-divine status to men in marital relationships and depict the wife as "husband's humble servant" (Fadl, 2013, pp. 211-13). Hence, the *Tawḥīdic* hermeneutic paradigm aims to reevaluate *ḥadīths* that appear to elevate men above women in ways inconsistent with exclusive obedience to Allah.

Feminist thinkers have extended this principle to other *ḥadīths* with hierarchical undertones, such as the *ḥadīth* in al-Bukhārī, 56:2858 and Muslim, 39:2225: "Inauspiciousness lies in the house, the woman, and the horse." They purport that the belief in inauspiciousness of women is not only erroneous but wholly superstitious, which contravenes the doctrinal tenets of *tawḥīd* (Tuksal, 2013).

Second Principle: Contradictory to the Qur'ānic Weltanschauung

Another core principle in feminist approaches to *ḥadīth* criticism is the alignment of *ḥadīths* with Qur'ānic *Weltanschauun*g, or an all-encompassing Qur'ānic worldview, which signifies a framework for understanding life, ethics, and human relationships grounded in broad values such as *ʿadl* (justice), *musāwah* (equality), and *raḥmah* (compassion) (Izutsu, 1964; Wadud, 1999). Feminist academics argue that *ḥadīths* conflicting with these principles should be re-examined or rejected. A frequently cited example is the *ḥadīth* narrated by al-Bukhārī, 6:304 and Muslim, 1:79: "The majority of the inhabitants of Hell are women."

Mernissi, Barlas, Barazangi and Tuksal have all criticised this *ḥadīth*. Mernissi (1991) argues that this narration reflects cultural biases rather than divine truth. She highlights the potential for misogynistic attitudes within the early Islamic community to have influenced such narrations. Therefore, it is imperative to scrutinise their authenticity. Barlas (2011) also emphasised the need for *ḥadīth* contents to align with the Qur'ānic portrayal of women as spiritual and moral equals to men. Supporting her claims, Barazangi (2017) added that the Qur'ān categorically rejects collective punishment based on gender, rendering such *ḥadīth* as inconsistent with Islamic principles of justice. Similarly, Tuksal (2013) questioned the *ḥadīth*'s authenticity, noting its resemblance to fabricated fables and its contradictions with the Qurʾān. She argues that Qurʾānic ethical principles should take precedence. Another famous narration that has not been spared from criticism is

the one reported by al-Bukhārī, 59: 3237 and Muslim, 16:1436: "If a man calls his wife to bed and she refused to answer him, the angels will curse her till the morning". Offering new readings, Youssef (2017) opines that the narration reflects a prevalent gender-discriminatory social imagination that equates women to slaves, and marriages to ownership. She further questioned how can one reconcile between the higher objectives of marriages such as amicable companionship, mercy and compassion embedded in the Qur'ān, with coercion to engage in undesired sexual relationships.

This approach aligns with Wadud's (1999, pp. 4,31,85) teacher, Rahman's historical-contextual method, which she often references in her work. Rahman (1984) argued that the ethical spirit of Islam, as captured in the Qur'ān, must guide the interpretation of traditions rather than rigid adherence to literalist readings of texts. Rahman's methodology has influenced feminist academics, who highlight the Qur'ānic emphasis on equality and justice as a lens to criticise *ḥadīths* that seem to perpetuate inequality. The view was further expanded by Barazangi (2017) who asserted the rejection of all *ḥadīths* texts that do not corroborate with Qur'ānic teachings. She argued that Muslims failed to heed to the Prophet's (PBUH) praxis of giving preference the Quran as the primary epistemic source.

Third Principle: Rejecting Ḥadīths with Roots in Israelite Narratives

Feminists criticised *ḥadīths* that appear to have origins in Israelite traditions (*isrāʾīliyyāt*), by basing their arguments that such narrations often introduce foreign theological and cultural biases to authentic Islamic teachings. An example frequently scrutinised is the *ḥadīth* reported by al-Bukhārī, 6:3331 and Muslim, 17:1468: "Woman was created from a rib, and the most crooked part of the rib is its upper part."

Hassan, Hatice Arpaguş, Tuksal and others have challenged this *ḥadīth* on multiple grounds. They point out that the Qur'ān explicitly states that humanity was created from a single soul (*nafs wāḥidah*) (Qur'ān 4:1), without specifying gender hierarchies in creation. As aforementioned, Hassan (1993) even attempted to reinterpret the narrative of creations, arguing that it is plausible Adam was created from Eve and not vice versa. Correspondingly, Tuksal (2013) critiques the symbolic use of the rib in this narration, which portrays women as inherently crooked or deficient. She contrasts it with Qur'ān 4:1 to reject

any notion of ontological hierarchy, arguing that the rib metaphor has been weaponised to justify unequal treatment of women. As a response, Arpaguş (2013) demands a return to Qur'ānic descriptions of human creation: a description that emphasises equality and mutual respect. She argues that such narrations reflect patriarchal narratives borrowed from Jewish and Christian traditions rather than authentic Islamic teachings.

Fourth Principle: Rejecting Gender-Discriminatory and Misogynistic Ḥadīths

Feminists reject *ḥadīths* that portray women in derogatory or discriminatory ways, as such narrations are deemed incompatible with the Islamic ethos and decorum. A closer analysis of this principle reveals that it closely aligns with the second principle, the Qur'ānic *Weltanschauung*. Nevertheless, I categorised it as a distinct principle in *matn* criticism because feminist thinkers often reject narrations they perceive as gender-discriminatory without explicitly analysing their alignment, or lack of it, with Qur'ānic principles. This approach parallels their treatment of narrations with roots in *isrā'īliyyāt*, where rejection is based on the source rather than a detailed argument of contradiction with Qur'ānic values. Similarly, in the case of gender-discriminatory narrations, Muslim feminists consider it sufficient to reject them solely on their perceived misogynistic content. One oft-cited example is the *ḥadīth* reported by Muslim, 4:510: "A woman, a dog, and a donkey interrupt the prayer if they pass in front of the praying person."

Mernissi (1991) devoted extensive sections of her work to refuting this narration. She concluded that the abyss came from Abū Hurayrah, whom she characterised as perpetuating a tradition of misogyny. Furthermore, she emphasised the necessity of reassessing this narration's authenticity via its historical context and the sociocultural dynamics of early Islamic society. In a parallel fashion, Tuksal (2013) argues that such *ḥadīths* reflect cultural prejudices and patriarchal social norms rather than authentic Islamic teachings. She notes that such reports have facilitated woman being associated with negative connotations in the *ḥadīth* literature.

This principle can also be exemplified in Mernisi's criticism of the contentious *ḥadīth* that equates women to satan. It has been narrated in Muslim, 16:1403, that the Prophet (PBUH) saw a woman, and so he came to his wife, Zainab, and had sexual intercourse with her. He

then went to his companions and told them: "The woman advances and retires in the shape of a satan, so when one of you sees a woman, he should come to his wife, for that will repel what he feels in his heart." Mernissi (1991, p.41) proclaimed that such narrations identify women with "*fitna*, chaos, and with the anti-divine and anti-social forces of the universe."

Critical Reassessment of the Muslim Feminists' Approach to *Matn* Criticism

Muslim feminists draw from a diverse array of sources in their approach to understanding *ḥadīth*s. By and large, these sources include works of Western academics and orientalists, though exceptions exist. Many feminist researchers do not reference classical Islamic scholars nor engage with conventional methodologies such as *isnād* verification or traditional *ḥadīth* commentaries.

For instance, Hassan (1993, pp.40,46,63) draws on the works of Goldziher, Guillame and other orientalists to challenge traditional Islamic paradigms. She even adopts external frameworks, such as Fred Cantwell's definition of a true *mu'min*, which underscored her reliance on non-Islamic interpretive models (Hassan, 1993, p.60). Similarly, Barlas (2011, pp. 43,47-50) depended heavily on Goldziher's convictions such as his distinction between *sunnah* and *ḥadīth*. As a result, feminist thinkers employ modern interpretative tools such as contemporary hermeneutics or develop their own interpretive frameworks for critiquing *ḥadīth* texts (Duderija et al., 2020). This methodological dependence on external, often non-Islamic frameworks marks a significant departure from the classical tradition of the *muḥaddithūn*. By privileging modern gender theories and secular hermeneutics over conventional methodologies such as *isnād* analysis and *ḥadīth* commentaries, such approaches risk imposing foreign paradigms onto Islamic texts, thereby undermining the internal coherence and integrity of the Islamic intellectual tradition.

On another note, it is interesting to observe that while the number of total criticised narrations that are deemed to be misogynistic present in authentic canons do not exceed ten, many feminists still maintain a sceptical attitude towards *ḥadīth* corpus. Barlas (2011) identified six misogynistic narrations classified as *ṣaḥīḥ*, while Tuksal (2013) broadly categorizes these into five narrations, akin to the categorisation of Guillame (n.d.). A more extensive study by Saadah Khair (2018)

concludes that only nine narrations from the acceptable collections have been scrutinised by feminist thinkers. Even by the most expansive estimates, which include any women-related narration questioned primarily by Arab modernists, they amount to no more than 29 narrations (Balūj, 2014). When the highest estimate, 29 narrations, is compared to the approximate 4,000 narrations in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* (excluding repetitions), it constitutes less than 1%. Alternatively, if it is compared to the 696 narrations in *al-Bukhārī* specifically addressing women, it accounts for less than five percent (Khair & Dahlan, 2017). Despite this, Tuksal (2013) postulated that misogyny is a common characteristic of women-related reports. This position has been contested by Sultan (2023) who conducted stylistic analytical studies on 18 accepted narrations, employing methodologies such as Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar, Speech Act Theory and Semantic Field Analysis, and concluded that the Prophet's (PBUH) semantic representation of women is often positive.

At first glance, it appears that Muslim feminists have developed a sophisticated framework for criticising *ḥadīth* texts independently of their *isnād*. However, it must be argued that these four principles are relatively subjective rather than conclusively objective, rendering them insufficient as definitive grounds for rejecting established narrations. The examples provided for each principle are open to multiple interpretations and may not necessarily align with a deeper understanding of the principles themselves. As noted in the introduction, this study does not seek to engage every feminist critique, but focuses on evaluating the epistemological soundness of the core principles used to reject *ḥadīth* texts in light of conventional methodologies.

The first principle, which focuses on the *tawḥīdic* paradigm, asserts that all *ḥadīths* must not promote *shirk*. Based on this rationale, it is implausible to argue that any *ḥadīth* authenticated by early *muḥaddithūn* would fall into this category, as doing so would inherently contradict their faith and their commitment to Islam. Even in the case of the *ḥadīth* on "possible prostration" to husbands, none of the critics who authenticated this report equated husbands with God or even elevating their statuses beyond humanhood. Such a comparison would constitute heresy, an accusation that is incongruent with the faith and methodology of these critics. Instead, the *ḥadīth* is interpreted as a rhetorical device denoting the seriousness of a wife's duty, not a literal call for

subjugation. Classical commentators explain that the statement is based on an impossible condition, as *sujūd al-ʿibādah* is reserved for Allah alone. Although *sujūd al-taʿẓīm* was once permitted for the angels to Adam, the Prophet (PBUH) clarified that even this is no longer allowed. (al-Munāwī, 1937). Thus, the statement underscores the husband's rights without implying divine-like authority.

Similarly, the ḥadīth about inauspiciousness of women has not been utilised by scholars as a tool to subjugate women. Instead, two major interpretive trajectories emerge in the commentarial tradition. The first group took the narration at face value but argued that it was either abrogated or descriptive of pre-Islamic or non-Muslim beliefs, though these claims lack strong evidentiary support (al-Quḍāh, 2003). The second, which is the more prominent view held by scholars such as Mālik, al-Subkī, Qāḍī ʿIyāḍ, al-Nawawī, and Ibn Qayyim, maintained that the narration referred to specific individuals rather than women. (al-Nawawī, 1972; Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah, n.d.) Some even affirmed that inauspiciousness is also found in certain men (Balūj, 2014). Taken together, these interpretations suggest that the *ḥadīth*, when read within its exegetical context, should not be dismissed on the grounds of shirk-related connotations. Rather, it highlights the spiritual danger of any spouse who diverts their partner from God, thereby reinforcing the principle of *tawḥīd*.

The other principles similarly lack foundational grounding. For example, the principle regarding alignment with "broad Qurʾānic concepts" remains inherently ambiguous. What precisely constitutes the "broad concepts" of the Qurʾān? Under whose interpretative framework should these concepts be understood? If a *ḥadīth* does not espouse absolute equality between husbands and wives, should it therefore be dismissed as spurious? If so, what would this imply for narrations that emphasise the preferential status of mothers over fathers? Should such narrations also be rejected? These questions expose the principle's inherent subjectivity and its susceptibility to varying interpretations.

A case in point is the *ḥadīth* that the majority of hell's inhabitants are women. While often cited as oppressive, several scholars have responded by highlighting that the majority of paradise's inhabitants are also women, due to their larger numbers closer to the *ākhirah*. This view is upheld by the often-mischaracterised companion Abū Hurayrah,

along with Ibn Taymiyyah, Qāḍī ʿIyāḍ, al-ʿIrāqī, and others (al-ʿIrāqī, n.d.; ibn Taymiyyah, 1995). *Ḥadīth* commentators further clarified that the narration addresses specific blameworthy traits observed among certain women, rather than inherent deficiency in their gender, thereby distancing the report from essentialist or misogynistic interpretations. (Balūj, 2014)

Even Youssef's comparison of wives to slaves appears to be far removed from classical interpretations. Adversaries argue that Islam's approach to addressing differing treatments in sexual relations requires context-specific analysis, as generalising texts from specific contexts weakens their evidentiary value and fails to withstand scientific scrutiny, thereby rendering it methodologically unsound to conclusively reject the authenticity of the *ḥadīth* (Chekireb, 2020). Scholars such as al-Nawawī (1972) and al-Munāwī (1937) affirm that a wife may refuse sexual intercourse for valid reasons, such as illness, but caution against misusing this concession as a means of harm or manipulation.

Furthermore, the principle concerning the influence of *isrāʾīliyyāt* should not be applied indiscriminately. Scholars generally agree that not all *isrāʾīliyyāt* should be outrightly rejected. Instead, such narrations should be cautiously evaluated: acceptance, rejection, or abstention, based on their alignment, or lack thereof, with Islamic teachings and principles (Al-Dhahabī, 1990). Evidently, it is reasonable to posit that certain narratives derived from the shared themes of the Abrahamic faiths may exhibit general similarities, such as the creation of Adam and Eve, while differing significantly in details. Rejecting the narration of woman's creation from the rib solely due to its resemblance to broad Israelite narratives is inadequate, as this logic would also invite the dismissal of major Qurʾānic narratives.

Lastly, the fourth principle, which criticises narrations that perpetuate gender discrimination, is theoretically sound and epistemologically rooted in Islamic traditions. However, its application remains a matter of debate. If a *ḥadīth* critic compares a woman to an animal, for example, this raises an issue of interpretative understanding rather than one of authenticity. Such cases necessitate nuanced analysis to distinguish between the *ḥadīth's* intent and the critic's perception of its implications. In the *ḥadīth* that a woman, a dog, and a donkey interrupt a man's prayer, scholars have clarified that ʿĀʾishah's objection was not

about defending women's dignity per se, but about challenging the legal equivalence made between women and animals in terms of rulings. Balūj (2014) drew a parallel: if one claims that urination and contact with a woman both nullify wuḍūʾ, this does not imply a moral or ontological equivalence, but rather reflects a shared legal effect. This is consistent with the legal maxim: *al-iqtirān fī al-naẓm lā yastalzim al-iqtirān fī al-ḥukm* (conjunction in wording does not necessitate conjunction in ruling) (al-Shawkānī, 1999). It is also inaccurate to attribute misogyny to Abū Hurayrah due to this narration, as it was transmitted by other companions, including Abū Dharr, Ibn ʿAbbās, and Anas. Asserting that all of them held misogynistic views requires substantiating evidence, a point that is frequently overlooked by critics such as Mernissi (Balūj, 2014).

The same can be argued for the case of comparing women to Satan. By expounding on the cosmological creation of Satan in Islamic scholarship, Katherine Bullock (2002) adequately addressed Mernisi's claims and proved that no scholar ever did consider women to be equal to Satan. If any, there were metaphorical allegories that considered certain men and women as heirs or apprentices of Satan.

In essence, these four principles are largely subjective and lack the definitive objectivity required to unequivocally reject established narrations. The criticisms offered by these principles are often grounded in historical analyses, which examine the impact of external traditions, yet bypassing conventional methodologies such as *isnād* verification and classical commentaries. While they provide a framework for interpreting *ḥadīth*, their subjective nature accentuates the need for careful and context-sensitive application.

Conclusion

The debate over the role of *matn* criticism within the methodologies of early *muḥaddithūn* reveals the complexity of Islamic scholarly traditions and the evolving interpretations of Prophetic narrations. This study underscores the diversity of scholarly opinions, categorising them into four distinct viewpoints: absolute affirmation, denial, non-differentiation, and conditional affirmation. It demonstrates that while *muḥaddithūn* undeniably engaged in rigorous *isnād* evaluation, evidence from classical texts such as the *ʻilal* and *mawḍūʿāt* indicates that aspects of *matn* criticism were also employed, albeit not as systematically as

some contemporary scholars suggest. The distinction proposed in this article between *naqd al-Matn al-Nāshiʾ ʿan al-Isnād* and *naqd al-Matn al-Nāshiʾ ʿan al-Matn* offers a nuanced framework to understand the interplay between the two. It also affirms that *matn* criticism was often influenced by broader *uṣūlī* principles and contextual considerations.

This study also explores the methodologies and limitations of contemporary feminist Muslim thought in criticising *ḥadīth* texts. While significant principles, such as the *tawḥīdic* paradigm and *Qur'ānic-weltanschauung* analysis, provide innovative perspectives, they remain subjective and open to multiple interpretations. Therefore, it has been concluded that they are insufficient to categorically reject well-established narrations. If any, these principles can serve as tools for offering alternative readings that align with contemporary understanding of societal values.

In conclusion, this paper represents the inaugural scholarly effort to delineate contrasting perspectives on *matn* criticism, especially for non-Arabic readers. It bridges classical and contemporary approaches and expounds on the strengths and limitations of both, and offers a comprehensive understanding of the intellectual trajectories shaping contemporary Islamic thought. Ultimately, this study contributes to a more holistic appreciation of *muḥaddithūn's* methodology and encourage continued interdisciplinary dialogue for a deeper exploration of Islamic traditions.

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Critical Thinking as a Mechanism for Situation Handling and Problem Solving: Examples from Ḥadīth Literature

Bachar Bakour*

Abstract: In an era marked by complex social challenges, the need for effective critical thinking methodologies has become increasingly vital. While contemporary approaches to critical thinking and problem-solving are well documented, the rich repository of Islamic intellectual tradition, particularly the prophetic teachings, remains largely unexplored in this context. This study addresses this gap by examining the critical thinking patterns embedded in ḥadīth literature, specifically investigating how Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and his companions approached complex social situations and problems. Through systematic analysis of selected narratives from the two authoritative ḥadīth collections of al-Bukhārī and Muslim, the study employs both inductive and analytical approaches to identify and categorise critical thinking skills. From examining twenty carefully selected ḥadīths, eight distinct critical thinking skills were identified and subsequently organised into a novel three-stage model for situation handling and problem-solving. The findings reveal a framework that bridges classical Islamic wisdom with contemporary cognitive theories, demonstrating how traditional approaches to critical thinking can inform modern problem-solving methodologies. The study concludes that while 'wisdom' and 'critical thinking' share fundamental tools and strategies,

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the Islamic conception of wisdom offers a more comprehensive approach that integrates ethical considerations with analytical thinking. This research contributes to both theoretical understanding of critical thinking and practical application of classical Islamic problem-solving methods in contemporary contexts.

Keywords: critical thinking, Ḥadīth, problem solving, situation, skill

Abstrak: Dalam era cabaran sosial yang kompleks, keperluan untuk metodologi pemikiran kritis yang berkesan adalah penting. Walaupun pendekatan moden terhadap pemikiran kritis dan penyelesaian masalah telah didokumentasikan dengan baik, khazanah tradisi intelektual Islam masih belum banyak diterokai, khususnya dalam konteks ajaran Rasul. Kajian ini menangani jurang tersebut dengan meneliti pola pemikiran kritis yang terkandung dalam literatur Ḥadīth, khususnya bagaimana Nabi Muhammad (SAW) dan para sahabat baginda menangani situasi sosial yang kompleks dan menyelesaikan masalah. Melalui analisis sistematik terhadap naratif terpilih daripada koleksi Ḥadīth al-Bukhārī dan Muslim, kajian ini menggunakan pendekatan induktif dan analitikal untuk mengenal pasti serta mengkategorikan kemahiran pemikiran kritis. Daripada meneliti dua puluh Ḥadīth yang dipilih dengan teliti, lapan kemahiran pemikiran kritis yang berbeza telah dikenalpasti dan seterusnya disusun ke dalam model tiga peringkat untuk pengendalian situasi dan penyelesaian masalah. Hasil kajian mendedahkan kerangka kerja yang menghubungkan kebijaksanaan Islam klasik dengan teori kognitif moden, menunjukkan bagaimana pendekatan tradisional terhadap pemikiran kritis boleh memaklumkan metodologi penyelesaian masalah moden. Kajian ini menyimpulkan bahawa walaupun 'kebijaksanaan' dan 'pemikiran kritis' berkongsi alat dan strategi asas, konsep kebijaksanaan Islam menawarkan pendekatan yang lebih menyeluruh yang mengintegrasikan pertimbangan etika dengan pemikiran analitikal. Penyelidikan ini menyumbang kepada pemahaman teori pemikiran kritis serta aplikasi praktikal kaedah penyelesaian masalah Islam klasik dalam konteks kontemporari.

Kata kunci: pemikiran kritis, Ḥadīth, penyelesaian masalah, situasi, kemahiran

Introduction

The capacity for thought stands as a fundamental distinguishing characteristic of human existence. This uniquely human attribute is so essential that Stuart Macluare (1991, p. ix) draws a parallel between thinking and the vital process of breathing. Descartes elevates this

concept further in his philosophical proposition 'Cogito, ergo sum' (I think, therefore I am) (Karam, 1949, p. 64), while the eminent medieval scholar al-Ghazālī (2005, p. 1789) characterises thinking as "the key to light, the basis of seeking insight and the nexus of sciences."

The Qur'ān repeatedly calls upon humanity to engage in intellectual contemplation of natural phenomena—from celestial bodies to terrestrial features, from cosmic cycles to human creation (Zayn, 1995; 'Abd al-Bāqī 1364 AH). This emphasis on cognitive engagement is evident in the frequent occurrence of thought-related terms such as yatafakkarūn*, ya'qilūn, yafqahūn, yatadabbarūn,* and *yatadhakkarūn* throughout the Qur'ānic text (Zayn, 1995; 'Abd al-Bāqī, 1364 AH).

The correlation between cognitive processes and life outcomes underscores the imperative for individuals to fully utilise their intellectual capabilities in addressing daily challenges and situations. For adherents of Islam, which presents itself as a comprehensive life system, this intellectual engagement is integral to achieving both temporal and spiritual well-being, as articulated in the Qur'ānic verse: "whosoever follows My guidance shall not go astray, neither shall he be unprosperous" (20: 123).[1]

The biographical accounts of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and his Companions provide numerous examples of critical approaches to social challenges and problems that merit contemporary examination. This study analyses selected cases from the authoritative collections of al-Bukhārī and Muslim, addressing three primary research questions: what critical methodologies did the Prophet and his Companions employ in addressing situations and problems? To what extent do the critical thinking skills evident in the Prophetic era correspond to contemporary critical thinking approaches? Can these historical examples yield a practical model for modern problem-solving?

Existing research in this field can be categorised into four distinct approaches. The first encompasses general works exploring the intersection of critical thinking and Islamic thought. Notable among these is Mohammad M. Malik's work (2019), which examines Islamic perspectives on informal logical fallacies, providing a foundational

1 Qur'ānic translations are sourced from Arberry (1955) unless otherwise specified.

introduction to critical thinking within Islamic discourse. Malik's subsequent article (2021) further develops this theme by establishing a basic framework for critical thinking based on Islamic principles relevant to knowledge acquisition and research methodology. The second category comprises studies that analyse social problem-solving examples from classical ḥadīth collections, though these studies often lack systematic methodological approaches (Farag and Walā', 2014). The third category focuses on critical thinking within Islamic education, particularly emphasising pedagogical applications. This includes Al-Rāshidī's (1427 AH) work on developing critical thinking skills for school students, and Hülya Kosar Altinyelken's (2021) empirical research examining critical thinking pedagogy in non-formal Islamic education, based on interviews with 27 young adult alumni from four Muslim communities in the Netherlands. The fourth category encompasses scholarly works examining the Prophet's role as an educator and teacher, offering insights into his pedagogical methods and teaching approaches (Abū Ghuddah 1996; al-Munajjid 1417 AH; al-Asmar 1421 AH; al-Naḥlāwī 2010, 2011). This study builds upon these works by specifically focusing on critical thinking as a mechanism for dealing with situations and problems, taking the two Ṣaḥīḥs as a research field. It then formulates a practical framework drawn from the selected sample, contributing to both theoretical understanding and practical application of Islamic critical thinking methodologies.

Key Concepts

In contemporary discourse on modes of thought, the Arabic terminology for thinking (*fakkara, fikr, tafkīr*) encompasses intellectual processes of consideration and mental examination (Lane, 1968, vol. 6, p. 215). Al-Fayyūmī (1977, p. 479) defines *al-fikr* as "the systematic arrangement of mental constructs to achieve a specific objective." Al-Jurjānī (2004, p. 142) further elaborates this concept as the "cognitive process of organising known elements to facilitate the acquisition of unknown knowledge," emphasising how human cognition builds upon existing knowledge frameworks to discover new understanding. Al-Rāghib al-Aṣfahānī (2009, p. 643) distinguishes between *al-fikrah*, the latent cognitive capacity, and *al-tafakkur*, its active manifestation through rational deliberation. In contemporary psychological terms, thinking is conceptualised as "a higher mental process facilitating information manipulation and analysis" (Kutty, 2019, p. 156). Within a broader

context, thinking encompasses "all cognitive products, including judgments, attitudes, knowledge, opinions, and beliefs" (Matsumoto, 2009, p. 543).

Critical thinking, specifically, is defined as "the mental processes, strategies, and representations people use to solve problems, make decisions, and learn new concepts" (Sternberg, 1986, p. 3). Alternative definitions emphasise it as the capacity for rigorous situational analysis through distinction-making, interpretation, evaluation, and conclusion-drawing, while maintaining objectivity and impartiality (Al-Sharqī, 2005). The practical application of critical thinking transcends theoretical definitions, encompassing various cognitive processes: error detection, analytical contemplation, problem-solving, higher-order thinking skills as delineated in Bloom's Taxonomy, and the identification of biases and logical inconsistencies (Jerwan, 2007, p. 61).

Significant parallels exist between the Arabic concept of *ḥikmah* and contemporary understanding of critical thinking. *Ḥikmah*, traditionally translated as 'wisdom' or 'maxim,' encompasses multifaceted meanings throughout Arabic intellectual history (Gutas, 1981). It is conceptualised as the optimal selection and timing of actions (Ibn al-Qayyim, 1973, vol. 2, p. 479) and "the comprehension of fundamental truths coupled with corresponding action, encompassing both theoretical and practical dimensions" (Lane, 1968, vol. 2, p. 617). Both critical thinking and *ḥikmah* share foundational objectives in analysing situations, formulating judgments, and resolving complex problems. However, *ḥikmah* represents a more comprehensive paradigm, integrating intellectual capabilities with practical application, ethical considerations, and spiritual insight. This holistic approach distinguishes it from the more specifically cognitive orientation of critical thinking.

The essential skills comprising critical thinking include inference, induction, reflection, evaluation, analysis, and synthesis (Al-Rāshidī, 1427 AH; Jerwan, 2007). These skills manifest as mental activities that shape cognitive patterns, subsequently guiding responses to situational challenges. The domain of critical thinking remains dynamic, continuously incorporating novel approaches to addressing real-world situations and problems. In this context, a 'situation' denotes circumstances or incidents requiring specific responses or interventions. While 'problems' constitute a subset of situations, their distinct mention emphasises their particular significance in critical thinking applications.

Research indicates that exemplary critical thinkers exhibit specific characteristics: intellectual curiosity, comprehensive knowledge, rational trust, cognitive flexibility, evaluative fairness, and recognition of personal biases (cited in Levevre, 2017, p. 9). These attributes enable them to conceptualise issues, articulate perspectives, extract insights, and propose solutions to societal challenges (Bakkar, 2010, p. 21). The presence of critical thinkers is essential for societal development, as they possess the capability to formulate innovative concepts and frameworks for social reform. Their enhanced social consciousness facilitates comprehensive understanding and effective solution development for various societal challenges.

Methodology

The study adopts inductive and analytical approaches to examine critical thinking patterns in ḥadīth literature. The research methodology proceeded through several systematic stages:

1. Source Selection

The study focuses on the Ṣaḥīḥs of al-Bukhārī and Muslim for their widely recognised authenticity and wide coverage of early Muslim society. These collections provide rich documentation of the Prophet's and Companions' problem-solving approaches across various social, political, and personal situations.

2. Criteria Development Process

The derivation of critical thinking criteria followed a systematic content analysis approach:

- Initial screening of both Ṣaḥīḥs to identify narratives containing problem-solving scenarios or decision-making situations
- Close reading and analysis of identified texts to detect recurring patterns of reasoning and problem-handling approaches
- Categorisation of observed thinking patterns into distinct skills based on their core cognitive functions
- Cross-verification of identified categories across multiple narratives to ensure consistency and validity

3. Selection and Analysis

Through this process, 20 representative ḥadīths were selected: 15 related to the Prophet's problem-solving approaches, four depicting Companions' critical thinking methods, and one illustrating Heraclius's analytical approach. These texts were chosen based on their clear demonstration of identifiable critical thinking skills.

4. Skills Identification

The detailed analysis of these narratives revealed eight distinct critical thinking skills: analogy and examples, avoiding surmise and rumours, party conciliation policy, fairness, foreseeing consequences, motive-based judgment, posing questions, and report verification. The identified critical thinking skills align with several established theoretical frameworks in cognitive psychology and educational theory. The skills can be mapped to recognised models as follows: the skill of analogy and examples corresponds to Sternberg's Triarchic Theory of Intelligence (1985), which emphasises analogical reasoning as a key component of analytical thinking. Similarly, Gentner's Structure-Mapping Theory (1983) explains how analogical thinking facilitates problem-solving through comparative analysis. Report verification and avoiding surmise align with Paul and Elder's Critical Thinking Framework (2001), particularly their emphasis on intellectual standards of accuracy and clarity. They also reflect Ennis's (1987) critical thinking dispositions, specifically the emphasis on seeking reliable sources and avoiding hasty conclusions. Foreseeing consequences and motive-based judgment mirror elements of Bloom's Taxonomy (1956), particularly the higher-order thinking skills of analysis and evaluation. They also align with Facione's (2000) critical thinking framework, which emphasises inference and explanation as core critical thinking skills. The skill of posing questions corresponds to King's Inquiry Model (1995) and Socratic Questioning theory, both emphasising the role of strategic questioning in developing critical thinking. Meanwhile, fairness and party conciliation reflect elements of Paul's (1992) framework of fair-mindedness in critical thinking and Johnson's (1992) theory of argumentative dialogue, emphasising the importance of considering multiple perspectives. These theoretical connections demonstrate that the skills identified in the ḥadīth narratives align with contemporary understanding of critical thinking processes, while offering unique cultural and historical perspectives on their application.

5. Model Development:

The identified skills were then organised into a three-stage model based on their logical sequence in problem-solving scenarios. This model emerged from observing the chronological pattern of how these skills were typically applied in the analysed narratives.

Table 1: Skills Grouping on the Basis of the Study Model

No.	Stage	Skill/tool
1.	Pre-SHPS⁕	1. report verification 2. avoiding surmise and rumours
2.	In the middle of the process of SHPS	1. party conciliation policy 2. analogy and examples 3. fairness 4. motive-based judgment 5. posing questions
3.	Post-SHPS	1.foreseeing consequences

⁕SHPS: 'situation handling, and problem solving'

The model presents a systematic three-stage approach to handling situations and problems. The first stage focuses on information integrity: when receiving information, one must verify the authenticity of news, events, or incidents before accepting them as factual. Similarly, when communicating information to others, one must ensure it is based on verified facts rather than speculation or rumours. In the second stage, five specific critical thinking skills are employed to analyse and address the situation or problem comprehensively or partially. The final stage requires careful consideration of how one's actions or judgments might impact the situation, emphasising the importance of foreseeing potential consequences before implementing solutions.

Discussion

Stage one: Pre-SHPS

1. *Report verification*

"And pursue not that thou hast no knowledge of; the hearing, the sight, the heart - all of those shall be questioned of" (Qur'ān, 17:36).

This verse serves as a profound directive for humanity, emphasising the importance of critical thinking in distinguishing between true knowledge, conjecture, and illusion. It underscores the Islamic imperative for Muslims to ground their beliefs, arguments, and even faith in clear, conclusive evidence, rather than relying on speculation or hearsay.

The Qur'ān vehemently condemns *al-taqlīd al-'a'mā* (blind imitation), as seen in multiple verses (2:170; 5:104; 31:21; 43:23). Similarly, the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) admonished Muslims to avoid being *imma'ah*—a term denoting those who uncritically follow the actions and opinions of others, whether good or bad, without engaging in thoughtful inquiry or discernment (Ibn al-Athīr, 1972, vol. 11, p. 699). These teachings collectively highlight the fundamental role of critical reflection in Islamic thought, guiding believers toward intellectual and spiritual integrity. This following statement encapsulates the guiding principle of scientific and research inquiry in Islam:

إنْ كنتَ ناقلاً فالصحةَ أو مدَّعياً فالدّليلَ

> If you are quoting, verify the source, yet if you are making a claim, give evidence (Al-Būṭī, 1997, p. 34).

Four ḥadīths

1. After residing in Madīnah, the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) initiated a series of invitations to prominent rulers and monarchs, urging them to embrace the message of Islam. Among the recipients of these letters was Heraclius, the Emperor of the Roman Empire. Upon receiving the Prophet's message, Heraclius undertook an investigation into the character and claims of Muhammad. As part of this inquiry, a delegation of the Prophet's tribesmen was summoned to Heraclius' court for questioning. This critical engagement, meticulously recorded in various ḥadīth sources (Al-Bukhārī, 1993, vol. 1, pp. 7–8; Muslim, 1991, vol. 3, pp. 1393–1395; Ibn al-Athīr, 1972, vol. 11, p. 265), highlights Heraclius' methodical approach to verifying the truth about the Prophet. A summary of this verification process is presented in the following figure.

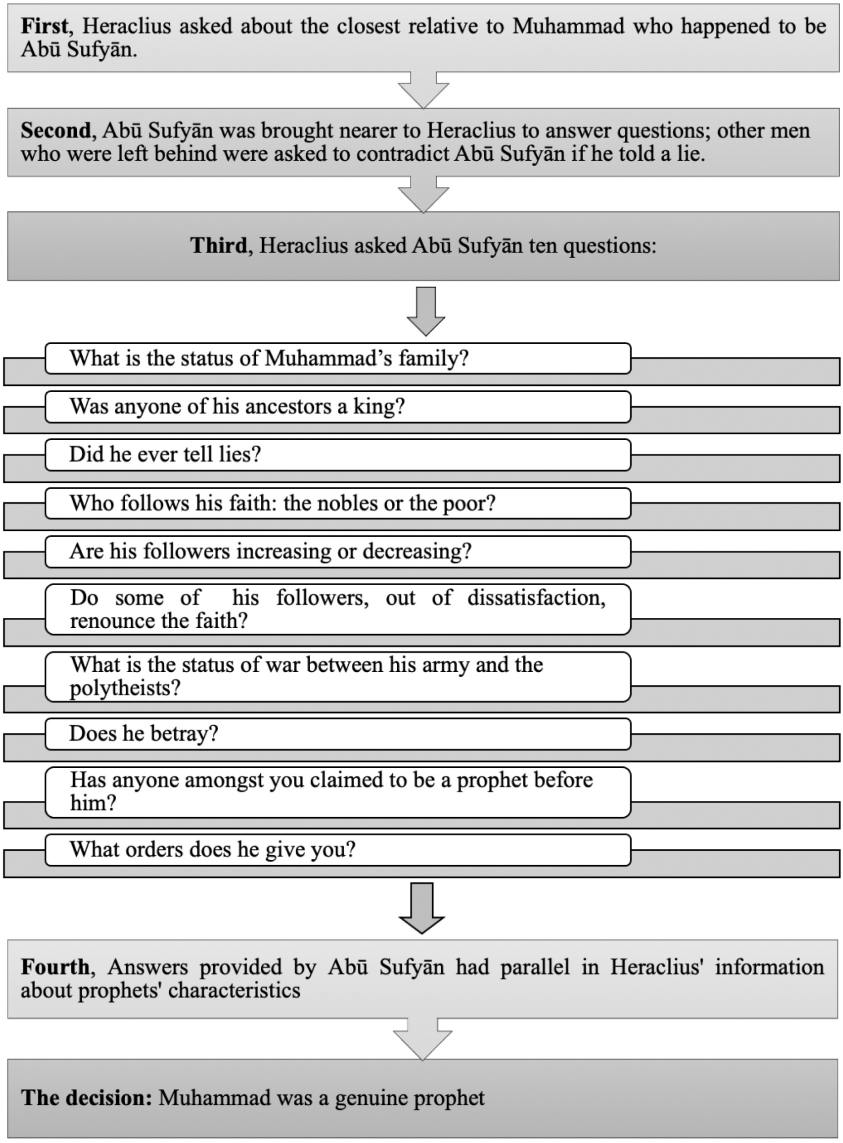

Figure 1: Heraclius critical treatment of Muhammad's claim of the prophethood

2. A significant incident of intellectual verification is recorded when 'Abdullah Ibn Salām, a Jewish scholar of notable erudition, sought to authenticate the Prophet's divine mission through three specific inquiries. These questions, which Ibn

Salām believed could only be answered by a genuine prophet, concerned the initial signs of the Day of Judgment, the first sustenance provided to the inhabitants of Paradise, and the genetic principles determining a child's resemblance to either parent. The Prophet, receiving divine communication through Gabriel, provided immediate responses that satisfied Ibn Salām's intellectual criteria, leading to his subsequent declaration of faith (shahādah) (Al-Bukhārī, 1993, vol. 4, p. 1628; Muslim, 1991, vol. 1, p. 252).

3. A noteworthy incident regarding the limits of authority occurred during a military campaign when a commander, known for his wit, sought to test his soldiers' obedience. After instructing them to gather and ignite firewood, he commanded them to cast themselves into the flames, citing prophetic instructions regarding obedience to authority. The soldiers, after deliberation, chose to defer the command and seek prophetic guidance. The Prophet's subsequent ruling established a crucial principle: "Had you entered the fire, you would never have emerged from it, for obedience is mandatory only in matters that are legally valid and reasonable" (Al-Bukhārī, 1993, vol. 4, p. 1577; Muslim, 1991, vol. 3, p. 1469).

4. Muslim's introduction to his Ṣaḥīḥ (1991, vol. 1, p. 13) documents a significant methodological shift in hadith transmission through 'Abdullah Ibn 'Abbās's observation. Initially, during the Prophet's lifetime, the Companions eagerly received all prophetic narrations. However, following the emergence of internal conflicts and civil strife within the Muslim community, a more rigorous approach was adopted, whereby only well-established and authenticated prophetic traditions were accepted for transmission.

What is particularly interesting is Heraclius's approach - rather than dismissing the message outright, he conducted what appears to be a systematic investigation, including interviewing people who knew Muhammad personally. This suggests a critical approach to truth-verification even in that historical period. Ibn Salām's narrative represents a scholarly method of verification based on specialised knowledge. The questions he posed were strategically chosen to test

both prophetic knowledge and divine connection. The specific nature of these questions – covering eschatology, paradise, and genetics – suggests they were deliberately selected to be beyond ordinary human knowledge.

While the two previous accounts focus on external and intellectual assessments, the third narrative delves into the ethical and legal dimensions of verification within Islamic teachings. It establishes an essential principle in Islamic jurisprudence: the limits of authority and the significance of rational judgment in religious obedience. This account emphasises that blind obedience is not a virtue in Islam; instead, it highlights the integration of reason and ethical consideration in guiding actions, offering a profound framework for understanding authority and accountability.

As for Muslim's passage, it reveals a crucial development in Islamic historiography and ḥadīth sciences. It shows how political and social circumstances led to the development of more rigorous authentication methods. This shift from general acceptance to careful scrutiny represents an early example of historical criticism and source verification methodology. The collective narrative these passages present suggests that early Islamic society had developed sophisticated methods for verifying claims, whether they were diplomatic, intellectual, legal, or historical in nature. This challenges simplistic views of medieval religious societies and shows evidence of multifaceted epistemological frameworks.

2. *Avoiding surmise and rumours*

The Qur'ān emphasises the importance of verifying information and condemns the spread of unsubstantiated rumours and false information (Qur'ān, 49:6). It specifically warns against actions that harm others' dignity and reputation (Qur'ān, 24:23). Consequently, critical thinking requires that one's judgments and problem-solving approaches should not be based on unverified information, conjecture, or hearsay.

Four ḥadīths

1. The Prophet stated: "Avoid making assumptions (*al-ẓann*), for assumptions are the least reliable form of discourse" (Al-Bukhārī, 1993, vol. 5, p. 1950; Muslim, 1991, vol. 4, p. 1985).

2. The Prophet cautioned against prefacing statements with *za'amū* (meaning 'it is presumed' or 'they claim') (Ibn Ḥanbal, 1993-2001, vol. 38, p. 409). He discouraged both the dissemination of and reliance upon unverified accounts and information lacking credible sources (Ibn al-Athīr, 1972, vol. 11, p. 742).

3. The Prophet declared that habitually repeating unverified information is sufficient to label someone as untruthful (Muslim, 1991, vol. 1, p. 10).

4. Similarly, the Prophet prohibited the use of vague attributions such as qīl wa qāl ('it is said' or 'someone said') (Al-Bukhārī, 1993, vol. 5, p. 2375).

Stage two: In the middle of SHPS process

1. *Party conciliation policy*

In most disputes, there are typically winners and losers. A wise judge or mediator seeks to achieve a resolution that satisfies all parties whenever possible. However, when such an outcome cannot be attained, their focus shifts to easing the disappointment of those who feel wronged and mitigating their resentment.

One ḥadīth

At the end of the seventh year AH, the Prophet, accompanied by his Companions, performed 'Umrah al-Qaḍā' (the compensatory 'umrah) (Ibn Hishām, 1955, vol. 2, p. 371). Upon their return to Madīnah, an emotional situation arose when the daughter of the Prophet's uncle, Ḥamza, requested to accompany him. Upon arrival, a dispute emerged among three Companions—'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib, Zayd ibn Ḥārithah, and Ja'far ibn Abī Ṭālib—over who had the rightful claim to care for the child.

Each presented his argument:

- 'Alī asserted, "I have the right to take her, for she is the daughter of my uncle."
- Ja'far countered, "She is also the daughter of my uncle, and her aunt is my wife."

- Zayd added, "She is the daughter of my brother."[2]

In his wisdom, the Prophet decided to entrust the custody of Ḥamza's daughter to her maternal aunt, Asmā' bint 'Umays, recognising that a maternal aunt holds a status akin to that of a mother. To address the potential for lingering emotions and to ensure harmony, he consoled and praised each of the Companions with kind and affirming words:

- To 'Alī, he said, "You are from me, and I am from you."
- To Ja'far, he remarked, "You bear a resemblance to me in both appearance and character."
- To Zayd, he affirmed, "You are both our brother and our freed slave"

  (Al-Bukhārī, 1993, vol. 2, p. 960; Ibn al-Athīr, 1972, vol. 8, p. 345).

This incident demonstrates the Prophet's ability to resolve disputes through fairness, emotional intelligence, and thoughtful communication. Through addressing the feelings of each party, he not only resolved the conflict but also reinforced the bonds of brotherhood among his Companions.

2. *Analogy and examples*

The use of analogy and illustrative examples represents a fundamental pedagogical method in prophetic teaching. This approach establishes cognitive bridges between abstract concepts and concrete, familiar experiences, thereby facilitating deeper understanding and problem resolution. The following authenticated traditions demonstrate this methodology:

Five ḥadīths

1. A Bedouin approached the Prophet expressing doubt about his paternity due to his child's unexpected skin colour. The Prophet responded with a masterful analogy: "Do you possess camels?" Upon confirmation, he inquired about their coloring.

2 Zayd referred to the fact that the Prophet created fraternisation between Ḥamza and Zayd for the sake of God. This is why he said 'daughter of my brother'. Ibn Ḥajar (1379 AH, vol. 7, P. 505).

The Bedouin acknowledged having red camels with occasional grey offspring. When asked about the source of this variation, the Bedouin attributed it to heredity. The Prophet then drew the parallel: "Similarly, your child's colouring may reflect ancestral traits" (Al-Bukhārī, 1993, vol. 6, pp. 2511-2512; Muslim, 1991, vol. 2, pp. 1137-1138).

2. An inquirer sought clarification from the Prophet regarding a specific Qur'ānic verse (25:34) that describes the gathering of disbelievers on the Day of Resurrection, specifically their mode of movement upon their faces. The questioner's uncertainty centred on the feasibility of such locomotion. The Prophet's response demonstrated logical reasoning through divine capability: "He who has granted the ability for bipedal movement in the present world possesses the power to enable facial locomotion in the hereafter" (Al-Bukhārī, 1993, vol. 5, p. 2390; Muslim, 1991, vol. 4, p. 2161). This explanation established a clear relationship between divine omnipotence in both worldly and eschatological contexts.

3. A woman from the tribe of Juhaynah approached the Prophet with a heartfelt concern. She said, "My mother had vowed to perform Hajj, but she passed away before fulfilling it. Should I perform Hajj on her behalf?" The Prophet responded with wisdom and clarity: "Yes, perform Hajj on her behalf. If your mother had an outstanding debt, wouldn't you have paid it off for her? Likewise, fulfil Allah's debt, for He has the greatest right to be repaid." (Al-Bukhārī, 1993, vol. 2, pp. 656–657; Cf. Ibn al-Athīr, 1972, vol. 3, p. 417).

4. When questioned about marital intimacy's spiritual status, the Prophet demonstrated inverse reasoning: "If illicit relations incur sin, surely licit relations merit reward" (Muslim, 1991, vol. 2, p. 698).

5. The Companion Abū Ṭalḥa al-Ansārī faced a deeply personal tragedy when his young son passed away while he was away from home. His wife, 'Umm Sulaym, displayed remarkable composure and wisdom in handling the situation. She instructed the family members to withhold the devastating news until she could inform Abū Ṭalḥa herself. When Abū Ṭalḥa returned

> home, he found dinner prepared, and ‘Umm Sulaym had made an extra effort to dress attractively, presenting herself in a way that would strengthen their bond and comfort him. They spent the night together as husband and wife. Afterward, she gently began to convey the news, asking him a thought-provoking question: “If someone lends something to another and later asks for it back, does the borrower have the right to refuse?” Abū Ṭalḥa replied, “No.” With great emotional intelligence, ‘Umm Sulaym then said, “Seek the reward from Allah (*iḥtasib*) for your son, as he has returned to Him.” Overwhelmed with grief, Abū Ṭalḥa expressed his dismay: “You kept me uninformed about my son’s death until we acted as we did.” Stricken with sorrow, Abū Ṭalḥa went to the Prophet and recounted what had transpired. The Prophet, recognising the patience and wisdom of ‘Umm Sulaym, offered a heartfelt prayer: “May Allah bless your night.” (Muslim, 1991, vol. 4, p. 1909).[3]

3. *Fairness*

The Qur’ān establishes a fundamental principle of justice: “O believers, be you securers of justice, witnesses for God. Let not detestation for a

[3] A significant pedagogical example, documented outside the compilations of al-Bukhārī and Muslim, illustrates the Prophet’s methodological approach to moral instruction. The narrative describes an encounter where a youth approached the Prophet seeking permission for illicit relations (zinā). While this request provoked immediate censure from those present, the Prophet employed a distinctly methodical approach. Initially requesting the youth’s proximity, the Prophet initiated a series of introspective queries. He asked the young man to consider such behavior in relation to various female members of his family - beginning with his mother, then daughter, sister, and extending to both paternal and maternal aunts. Each inquiry elicited a decisive negative response from the youth. Through this sequential questioning, the Prophet established a framework of ethical reciprocity, demonstrating how personal aversion to such conduct regarding one’s own family members logically extends to society at large. The methodology employed transformed an abstract moral prohibition into concrete, personally relevant understanding. The encounter concluded with a prophetic supplication for the youth’s moral and spiritual welfare. The narrator records that this intervention proved definitively effective, as the young man maintained moral rectitude thereafter. (Ibn Hanbal, 1993-2001, vol. 36, p. 545).

people move you not to be equitable; be equitable – that is nearer to god-fearing. And fear God; surely God is aware of the things you do" (5:8). From a psychological perspective, antipathy can profoundly influence cognitive processes, potentially obscuring one's ability to recognise merit in adversaries. This divine directive thus instructs adherents to transcend emotional bias and maintain equitable treatment toward both allies and opponents.

Two ḥadīths

1. In the aftermath of the Battle of Ḥunayn, the Prophet distributed the spoils of war among *al-mu'allafah qulūbuhum* (new converts whose hearts were to be reconciled), while the Anṣār (his devoted Medinan supporters) received nothing. This decision upset some members of the Anṣār. When the Prophet heard of their discontent, he convened a private gathering with the Anṣār in a tent to verify the reports. In response, the elders among the Anṣār clarified, saying, "O Allah's Prophet, our leaders have said nothing; it was merely some of the younger ones among us." The Prophet then delivered a heartfelt sermon, addressing them: "O assembly of the Anṣār! Did I not find you astray, and Allah guided you through me? You were divided, and Allah united you through me. You were impoverished, and Allah enriched you through me." Each statement was met with the Anṣār affirming, "Indeed, O Prophet of Allah."

The Prophet continued, "Why do you not respond to me? You could have said, 'We believed in you when others disbelieved. We supported you when others abandoned you. We sheltered you when others expelled you. And we comforted you when others turned away.'" He then explained, "Are you upset with me over a small worldly matter that I gave to others to win their hearts, while I entrusted you to your strong faith in Islam? Would you not be pleased to see others leave with sheep and camels, while you return home with the Prophet of Allah? By Allah, were it not for migration, I would have counted myself among the Anṣār. If the people took one path through a valley or mountain pass, and the Anṣār took another, I would choose the path of the Anṣār. The Anṣār are my inner garment (*shi'ār*), while others are my outer garment (*dithār*)." Finally, the Prophet supplicated, "O Allah, have mercy on the Anṣār, their children, and their descendants." (Al-Bukhārī, 1993, vol.

4, p. 1574; Muslim, 1991, vol. 2, p. 738; Ibn al-Athīr, 1972, vol. 8, pp. 384-389; Ibn al-Qayyim, 1998, vol. 3, pp. 415-416).

The Prophet's Methodological Response:

1. Verification: He convened a private assembly with the Anṣār to authenticate the reported grievances.
2. Historical Context: He methodically recalled their shared journey, emphasising their transformation through divine guidance.
3. Dialectical Engagement: He invited their perspective, acknowledging their substantial contributions to the Islamic cause.
4. Strategic Rationale: He elucidated the underlying wisdom of his resource allocation.
5. Emotional Resonance: He affirmed their special status through the metaphor of inner garments (*shi'ār*), contrasting with outer garments (*dithār*).
6. Spiritual Elevation: He redirected their focus from material considerations to their privileged spiritual relationship.
7. Benediction: He concluded with a comprehensive supplication for their welfare.

This incident demonstrates the intricate interplay between cognitive and emotional faculties in human decision-making. Contemporary neuroscience corroborates this relationship, revealing that neural pathways from emotional centres to rational processing areas significantly outnumber those in the reverse direction. This neurological architecture suggests that emotional factors exert greater influence over human behaviour, learning, and judgment than purely rational considerations (Bakkār, 2010, p. 55). The Prophet's resolution exemplifies a approach that addresses both rational comprehension and emotional satisfaction, providing a model for effective conflict resolution and leadership.

2. The Prophet articulated a foundational principle regarding marital relations: "A believing man should not harbor complete aversion toward a believing woman; if he finds displeasure

in one of her characteristics, he will discover satisfaction in another." (Muslim, 1991, vol. 3, p. 1091). The Prophet's guidance on interpersonal relations demonstrates psychological insight while establishing fundamental principles for healthy relationships. The ḥadīth artfully combines psychological wisdom with practical guidance, emphasising the importance of comprehensive character evaluation rather than allowing singular traits to dominate one's perception of others. This teaching introduces the concept of cognitive reframing, encouraging individuals to balance their assessment of others by recognising both positive and challenging attributes. The guidance proves particularly significant in addressing sex relations and marital dynamics, promoting mutual respect, and understanding between spouses.

4. *Motive-Based Judgment*

A critical thinker refrains from passing judgment without first understanding the underlying motivations behind people's actions.

Two ḥadīths

1. Incident of Hatib ibn Abi Balta'ah: in the sixth year after Hijrah, the Prophet entered into the Treaty of Hudaybiyah with the Quraysh. This agreement established a ten-year truce (Ibn Ishaq, 1990, pp. 499-507; Lings, 1984, pp. 252-256). Under its terms, the Khuzā'ah tribe allied with the Prophet, while the Bakr tribe aligned with the Quraysh. However, the Bakr tribe, supported by the Quraysh, attacked the Khuzā'ah, violating the treaty and reigniting hostilities. This breach ultimately led to the Conquest of Makkah (Lings, 1984, pp. 297-307; al-Qurtubi, 2006, vol. 10, pp. 99-100). While preparing for the conquest, Hatib ibn Abi Balta'ah, a Companion, sent a letter to the Quraysh warning them of the Muslim army's plans. The Angel Gabriel informed the Prophet about Hatib's actions, which appeared as aiding disbelievers. Upon questioning, Hatib explained his motives: he had no tribal connections with the Quraysh, unlike other emigrants who had relatives in Mecca to safeguard their families and property. His letter was an attempt to secure protection for his dependents, not an act of disbelief or betrayal. Hatib further clarified that he was confident Allah would grant

victory to the Prophet regardless of his letter (Ibn Hanbal, 1993-2001, vol. 23, p. 191). Understanding his motivation was rooted in familial concern rather than disloyalty to Islam, the Prophet accepted his explanation without punishment. (Al-Bukhari, 1993, vol. 4, p. 1095; Muslim, 1991, vol. 4, p. 19415).

2. The incident with ʻĀishah and the broken dish: **o**n one occasion, while the Prophet was at his wife ʻĀishah's house, another wife sent a dish of food to him. In a moment of jealousy, ʻĀishah struck the dish, causing it to fall and break. The Prophet calmly picked up the broken pieces and the spilled food, remarking to those around, "Your mother[4] has become jealous." He replaced the broken dish with a new one and returned it to the other wife (Al-Bukhari, 1993, vol. 5, p. 2003; Ibn al-Athir, 1972, vol. 8, p. 436).

These narratives illustrate the Prophet's approach to ethical judgment, emphasising the importance of understanding motives before passing judgment. In both cases, he demonstrated how apparent transgressions might stem from understandable human emotions or circumstances rather than malicious intent. The Prophet's responses combined emotional intelligence with practical wisdom, showing how understanding motivations should inform our reactions to others' actions.

5. *Posing questions*

Based on some of previously discussed hadith examples, the Prophet's pedagogical methodology demonstrates the power of strategic questioning as a tool for deepening understanding and resolving complex situations. Rather than merely providing direct answers, he often employed carefully crafted questions to guide individuals toward deeper insights and more nuanced understanding of ethical principles. This approach served multiple purposes in the Prophet's teaching: it encouraged active intellectual engagement, revealed underlying assumptions, and helped individuals discover solutions through their own reasoning processes. His questions were not merely rhetorical devices but were designed to illuminate overlooked aspects of situations and challenge superficial understanding of moral issues.

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4 [4] The Prophet's wives are recognised as mothers of the believers, as stated in the Qur'anic verse (33:6).

Stage three: Post-SHPS

Foreseeing consequences

A distinguishing characteristic of critical thinking is the ability to anticipate potential outcomes and adjust actions accordingly. This foresight becomes particularly crucial when decisions might lead to severe or catastrophic consequences, necessitating careful consideration and potential restraint.

Two ḥadīths

1. Jābir ibn ʻAbdullah al-Anṣārī narrated: "While accompanying the Prophet during a battle, a considerable number of the *Muhājirīn* (Emigrants) joined us. Among them was an individual known for his playful sense of humour, who, in jest, struck an Anṣārī man on the hip. The Anṣārī became enraged and called upon his fellow Anṣār for support, while the Muhājir also called for his companions. The Prophet, upon hearing the commotion, approached and asked, "What is the matter with people, invoking the slogans of the Age of Ignorance (*Jāhiliyyah*)?" After being informed of the incident, the Prophet admonished them, saying, "Cease this behavior, for such appeals are wicked and divisive." Meanwhile, ʻAbdullah ibn Ubayy ibn Salūl, the leader of the hypocrites, remarked disdainfully, "the Emigrants have turned against us. When we return to Madīnah, the more honourable will surely expel the lowly," intending to demean the believers. Upon hearing this, ʻUmar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb said to the Prophet, ʻO Messenger of Allah, should we not eliminate this vile man?' The Prophet replied, ʻNo, lest people say that Muhammad kills his companions.'" (Al-Bukhārī, 1993, vol. 4, pp. 1861–1862; Ibn al-Athīr, 1972, vol. 2, p. 389).

2. In a conversation with ʻĀishah regarding the Ka›ba›s reconstruction, the Prophet revealed his desire to restore it to Ibrahim›s original foundation. However, he refrained, stating, «Were it not for the fact that your people are close to the Pre-Islamic Period of ignorance, I would have Ka›ba demolished...» (Al-Bukhārī, 1993, vol. 2, pp. 574-575; Muslim, 1991, vol. 2, pp. 968-967).

These prophetic examples illustrate a sophisticated approach to decision-making that considers both immediate actions and their long-term implications. The narratives demonstrate how effective leadership requires understanding the delicate balance between ideal objectives and practical realities. In the first instance, the Prophet prioritised community stability and his leadership's long-term credibility over immediate punitive action. In the second, he recognised that architectural reformation, despite its religious validity, could potentially undermine the community's spiritual stability during their transition to Islamic practices.

This approach teaches that social reform requires understanding deeply embedded societal structures, traditions, and psychological attachments. Rather than implementing immediate, dramatic changes, effective reform often requires a gradual, measured approach that considers people's readiness for change and the potential consequences of hastily implemented reforms, regardless of their inherent merit.

Conclusion

This study's examination of critical thinking through the lens of ḥadīth literature reveals a framework for situation handling and problem-solving that remains remarkably relevant in contemporary contexts. Through systematic analysis of narratives from al-Bukhārī and Muslim's collections, we have uncovered a structured approach that demonstrates how critical thinking skills were effectively employed in early Islamic society to address complex social challenges. The theoretical significance of these findings lies in their contribution to our understanding of critical thinking as both a timeless and culturally embedded practice. The study reveals that many modern cognitive theories and problem-solving frameworks find historical precedent in Islamic traditions, particularly in the Prophet's methodical approach to handling various situations. The overlap between 'wisdom' and 'critical thinking' discovered in this research suggests that traditional Islamic concepts of wisdom encompass and perhaps exceed contemporary understandings of critical thinking.

From a practical perspective, the three-stage model derived from this analysis offers a valuable tool for modern problem-solving. Its emphasis on information verification, systematic analysis, and consequence consideration provides a robust framework that can be applied across

various social and professional contexts. The model's strength lies in its foundation in real-world examples from ḥadīth literature, demonstrating its practical efficacy in addressing complex social situations.

However, this study represents only an initial exploration of a vast intellectual territory. Several promising directions for future research emerge. Firstly, the extension of this analytical framework to other classical Islamic sources, including additional ḥadīth collections and early Islamic literature, could reveal further dimensions of critical thinking methodologies. Secondly, comparative studies examining the relationship between Islamic approaches to critical thinking and contemporary cognitive theories could enrich both fields of study. Thirdly, empirical research testing the effectiveness of the proposed three-stage model in modern contexts could validate its practical applicability. And fourthly, investigation into how the identified critical thinking skills could be integrated into contemporary educational curricula, particularly in Islamic educational institutions.

This study demonstrates that classical Islamic sources contain sophisticated problem-solving methodologies that can enrich our current understanding of critical thinking. The framework presented here not only bridges historical wisdom with contemporary needs but also provides a practical model for addressing modern challenges while remaining grounded in traditional Islamic thought.

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Shifting Geopolitics: The Gaza War and the Contours of a Nascent Middle East Security Community

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Abstract: The Gaza War, though geographically contained, served as a powerful accelerant *within a pre-existing trend* for an ongoing regional transformation in Middle Eastern security dynamics. This article argues that the conflict did not merely reflect, but actively propelled a shift toward state-centric security cooperation and the systematic sidelining of non-state actors. In doing so, it catalysed the development of a nascent Middle East Security Community (MESC), drawing on Karl Deutsch's concept of security communities. Motivated by converging regime security imperatives, key regional actors including Israel, Egypt, Jordan, and the Gulf monarchies have intensified institutional collaboration through mechanisms such as the Abraham Accords and normalisation initiatives. The war underscored a growing consensus around pragmatic conflict management; wherein ideological divisions are increasingly subordinated to shared interests in regional stability and counter-militancy. While structural and political obstacles to deeper integration remain, the conflict marked a pivotal moment in the consolidation of interest-driven and intergovernmental security architectures, signalling a regional realignment grounded in mutual preservation rather than ideological affinity.

Keywords: Security-Community, October 7, Arab Response, Gaza War, Israel Security, Regional Order.

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Abstrak: Perang Gaza, walaupun terbatas secara geografi, bertindak sebagai pemacu yang kuat *kepada arah aliran yang sedia ada* untuk transformasi serantau yang berterusan dalam dinamika keselamatan Timur Tengah. Makalah ini berhujah bahawa konflik itu bukan semata-mata mencerminkan, tetapi secara aktif mendorong peralihan ke arah kerjasama keselamatan berasaskan negara dan mengenepikan organisasi-organisasi bukan kerajaan secara sistematik. Dengan berbuat demikian, ia memangkin pembangunan Komuniti Keselamatan Timur Tengah (MESC) yang baharu, berdasarkan konsep komuniti keselamatan Karl Deutsch. Didorong oleh keperluan keselamatan rejim, negara-negara utama serantau termasuk Israel, Mesir, Jordan, dan monarki-monarki Teluk Parsi telah memperhebat kerjasama institusi melalui mekanisme seperti Perjanjian Abraham dan inisiatif normalisasi. Perang Gaza menggariskan konsensus yang semakin meningkat di sekitar pengurusan konflik secara pragmatik, di mana perpecahan ideologi semakin tunduk kepada kepentingan bersama dalam kestabilan serantau dan anti-militansi. Walaupun halangan struktur dan politik untuk integrasi yang lebih mendalam masih kekal, konflik itu menandakan detik penting dalam penyatuan kerangka keselamatan antara kerajaan yang dipacu kepentingan negara, menandakan penjajaran semula serantau yang berasaskan pemeliharaan bersama dan bukannya pertalian ideologi.

Kata kunci: Komuniti Keselamatan, 7 Oktober 2023, Tindakbalas Negara-negara Arab, Perang Gaza, Keselamatan Israel, Peraturan Serantau.

Introduction: The Security Community

The Gaza War and its parallel Lebanese front demonstrate a pattern of calibrated escalation within the region's deterrence-dominated system, where high-risk confrontations remain spatially and politically contained. Despite Israel's sustained military operations against Hamas and Hezbollah, the attritional weakening of these groups has not triggered systemic escalation involving Iran or Arab states. This restraint is particularly evident in Arab states' responses, which were limited to diplomatic condemnations while avoiding direct intervention. Their cautious approach demonstrates evolving regional security dynamics within a pre-existing trend, where Israel's security becomes increasingly intertwined with broader Middle Eastern arrangements. These developments reflect and reinforce the regional security architecture initiated by the 1991 Oslo Accords.

This article advances the argument that a nascent Middle East Security Community (MESC) is emerging, defined primarily by the

growing rapprochement and strategic convergence between Israel and various Arab states. While the Middle East does not yet have a fully-fledged, mature regional security community, it increasingly exhibits the features of a nascent one, including the reduction of interstate hostilities and the gradual institutionalisation of security cooperation. This development has significantly reduced the likelihood of warfare between regional actors, particularly a full-scale war between Arab states and Israel, while also facilitating the progressive marginalisation of non-state entities. Drawing upon Adler and Barnett's (1998) conceptualisation, a security community denotes a collective of states bound by shared norms, values, and reciprocal understandings of security threats, cultivating a diplomatic framework robust enough to supplant military confrontation as the preferred mechanism for conflict resolution. The Middle East's evolving security architecture, though still in its early stages, demonstrates the foundational elements of such a community, suggesting the potential for deeper integration, even as significant challenges remain.

According to Karl Deutsch (1957), a security community is characterised by the expectation that disputes are resolved without the use of force. Therefore, integration for Deutsch is the attainment, within a territory, of a sense of community and of institutions and practices strong enough and extensive enough to assure dependable expectations of peaceful change among its population (p. 5). Examples include the European Union (Adler & Barnett, 1998), NATO (Deutsch et al., 1957), ASEAN (Acharya, 2001), the Nordic countries (Wæver in Adler and Barnett, 1998), the U.S.-Canada relationship (Deutsch et al., 1957), and the Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR) in South America (Hurrell in Adler & Barnett, 1998).

Since the 7 October 2023 attacks, Hamas and Hezbollah have suffered significant military and political decline, diminishing their regional influence. This weakening of non-state actors has enhanced a strategic space for states to further develop regional alignments. The Gaza War accelerated structural shifts, fostering closer cooperation among Gulf monarchies, Egypt, Jordan, and Israel; all institutionalising shared security interests through diplomacy and intelligence-sharing. While non-state actors retain localised relevance, regional security is now dictated by inter-state agreements, exemplified by the stark decline, as mentioned above, of non-state actors like Hamas and Hezbollah

(International Crisis Group, 2024; US Department of Defense, 2024). This trend mirrors broader transitions toward state-dominated governance, as seen in the PKK's 2025 ceasefire with Türkiye.

Karl Deutsch's foundational concept of security communities (1957, pp. 5-7; 17; 430; 434) is considered as spaces where states develop "dependable expectations of peaceful change." In the Middle East, the overriding motivation across regional actors remains regime survival, which is 'helped' by dependable expectations of peaceful change. Adler and Barnett argue that peaceful change arises not simply from shared interests, but from the social processes of identity formation, norm diffusion, and trust-building that transform interests over time (Adler & Barnett, 1998, pp. 34–36). In this light, the emerging Middle Eastern security architecture resembles what they term a "nascent" security community, where states begin to coordinate policies in response to shared threats but without the deep normative integration or collective identity that characterises mature communities (Adler & Barnett, 1998, p. 30). A key driver of this alignment is the shared perception of Hamas as a common threat shaped by converging security concerns, ideological opposition to Islamist militancy, and anxiety over Iranian influence. For Israel, particularly after October 7, Hamas constitutes an existential threat. For Egypt, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Bahrain, Hamas is viewed both as a Muslim Brotherhood offshoot and a destabilising Iranian proxy.

This convergence has translated into practical coordination: Egypt has tightened border controls to curb arms smuggling (Zohar, 2015), Gulf states have directed financial support to the Palestinian Authority to marginalise Hamas, and intelligence cooperation has intensified to disrupt Hamas-Iran networks. This alignment, however, predates 2023. The Abraham Accords (2020) institutionalised strategic ties, while the Negev Forum (March 2022) convened Israel, Arab states, and the U.S. to address transnational issues including Palestinian governance, health, and water security (Reuters, 2022). More recently, Arab-Israeli backing for Egypt's UN-led Gaza reconstruction plan at the Arab Summit in Cairo (March 2025) reinforces this strategic trend. These developments indicate a departure from zero-sum antagonism toward structured cooperation. They suggest that the behavioural thresholds of Deutsch's framework are increasingly evident, rendering inter-state war in the region progressively less plausible.

Scholars such as Michael Barnett (1998) and Louise Fawcett (2013) have argued that persistent tensions, intermittent wars, and weak regional institutions preclude the Middle East from constituting a fully-fledged security community. Barnett views the region's recurrent crises, from the Arab-Israeli conflict to the Gulf Wars, as manifestations of deep strategic mistrust, which undermines the emergence of stable, peaceful expectations. Fawcett similarly notes that while regional organisations like the Arab League and the Gulf Cooperation Council have at times fostered cooperation, they lack the institutional capacity to enforce durable conflict resolution.

The Arab–Israeli conflict has historically been defined by a succession of major interstate wars (1948–49, 1956, 1967, 1969–70, 1973, 1982) and a protracted series of lower-intensity military confrontations (Buzan & Wæver, 2003, p. 188). This historical context makes the contemporary regional response to the 2023-24 Gaza War particularly revelatory. Despite the catastrophic human toll, with at least – as of February 2025 – 48,339 deaths in Gaza and 912 in the West Bank,[1] regional powers have demonstrated unprecedented restraint, opting for diplomatic channels. This strategic posture marks a fundamental transformation in Middle Eastern conflict dynamics: where previous eras saw violence spillover across borders, current approaches reflect a calculus favouring containment and mediated resolution, even amidst profound humanitarian catastrophe. Following this, our effort to conceptualise the Middle East as a nascent security community is informed by contemporary regional shifts, chief of which is the Gaza War.

Before engaging directly with Barnett's and Fawcett's claims, it is essential to consider Adler and Barnett's critique of Deutsch's foundational theory. They observe that "notwithstanding the tremendous admiration we have for Deutsch's scholarly and political vision, his conceptualisation of security communities was fraught with theoretical, methodological, and conceptual difficulties" (1998, p. 5). Their revival

[1] UNOCHA, *Hostilities in the Gaza Strip and Israel – Reported Impact*, 22 February 2025, https://www.ochaopt.org; WHO, *West Bank Health Crisis* Update, 24 February 2025, https://www.emro.who.int/pse/publications-attacks.html; World Bank, Gaza Damage Assessment, 18 February 2025, https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/westbankandgaza/publication/economic-monitor.

of Deutsch's concept aims "to draw attention to the concept's importance for understanding "contemporary" events and to suggest refinements of his initial formulation in order to generate a viable research program" (Adler & Barnett, 1998, p. 5). In light of this, and given the profound geopolitical transformations since Barnett's and Fawcett's analyses, including the Abraham Accords, Israel's strategic convergence with key Arab states, and the marginalisation of non-state actors, their frameworks appear increasingly outdated. Moreover, if Deutsch's original model is theoretically contested, then part of the derivative applications by Barnett and Fawcett likewise warrant critical reconsideration. While we recognise their contributions, our analysis deliberately privileges contemporary empirical developments over these earlier frameworks to more accurately reflect the emerging regional security architecture.

A similar perspective appears in Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver (2003), who designate the Middle East as a regional security complex marked by chronic insecurity, external interference, and a lack of shared normative frameworks. This characterisation has grown increasingly untenable since 2023, as the Gaza War catalysed structural transformations across the region. The structural underpinnings of the region have begun to shift, not by the eradication of traditional rivalries, but through the institutionalisation of pragmatic cooperation, strategic convergence, and emerging alignments that challenge the core assumptions of the "self-help" regional order. Moreover, this evolving pattern undermines Shibley Telhami and Michael Barnett's (2002) argument that fragmented identities render a shared regional outlook unattainable. While identity fragmentation persists, it no longer functions as an absolute barrier to collective security practices. Instead, what is emerging is a conditional, interest-based convergence that mirrors the early stages of what Adler and Barnett termed a nascent security community, one in which war among core states becomes increasingly improbable.

Hamas's position in Gaza illustrates the limits of non-state governance within the emerging inter-state security framework. Lacking sovereign legitimacy, Hamas is treated as an armed entity outside the bounds of recognised authority.[2] Regional Forums in

[2] U.S. State Department, *Country Reports on Terrorism* 2023 (Washington, DC: 2023), designation of Hamas as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) since 1997, State.gov/terrorist-designations; European Union Council Decision

Amman and Cairo reaffirmed that Palestinian leadership should remain with the Palestinian National Authority, a stance supported by Arab states and the international community (*The Jordan Times*, 2025). This alignment allowed regional actors to avoid being drawn into Hamas's confrontation with Israel, preserving their focus on regime and state security over ideological entanglement.

The Gaza War illustrates a shift in regional security dynamics where the diminished role of non-state actors reinforces the primacy of sovereign states and reflects a convergence around shared threat perceptions that align with security community theory principles. Israel's dominant position reveals a structural paradox: it stabilises the regional environment through deterrence and strategic coordination, yet simultaneously reproduces asymmetries and grievances that obstruct deeper normative integration. Although certain attributes of a pluralistic security community such as sustained diplomatic engagement and limited conflict escalation are increasingly evident, the region remains deficient in institutional embeddedness and ideational convergence, both of which are essential for full consolidation. Nonetheless, the ongoing reconfiguration of alignments suggests the emergence of a regional security architecture more aligned with contemporary modalities of cooperative management, in which strategic divergence is not suppressed but instrumentalised. As argued in this article, the acceptance of political and ideological heterogeneity has become a functional asset, reinforcing regime durability while contributing to a minimally integrative, stability-oriented order.

2024/475, *Official Journal of the European Union* (2024), maintaining Hamas on the EU terrorist list. "The Council of the European Union recently extended these measures, including asset freezes and travel bans, for another year, until January 20, 2026, against individuals and entities supporting Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad's violent actions. This update builds upon previous decisions, maintaining sanctions against those previously identified as responsible for financing or enabling Hamas and PIJ's activities," https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2025/01/13/hamas-and-palestinian-islamic-jihad-council-extends-restrictive-measures-by-one-year/; United Nations General Assembly Resolution ES-10/23, *Illegal Israeli actions in Occupied East Jerusalem and the rest of the Occupied Palestinian Territory* (June 2023); Arab League, *Cairo Declaration on Palestinian Reconciliation* (2024), Doc. 419/2024, reaffirming the Palestinian Authority as the sole legitimate representative.

Key Features of the Nascent MESC

The Middle East Security Community (MESC), while ostensibly aimed at fostering collective security in the conventional sense, is also accurately characterised by a tacit and, at times, adversarial understanding among regional actors that their own security is inextricably linked to the preservation of incumbent ruling structures. In this context, the notion of "community" does not rest on normative ideals of mutual trust or shared identity, as emphasised in classical models, but rather on a functional consensus that regime stability constitutes the paramount strategic objective. The regime functions as the immediate agent of the security structure. This logic also applies to Iran, where the regime prioritises ideological commitments over interest-based alignments, setting it apart from the broader regional pattern.

The Middle Eastern political landscape remains fundamentally shaped by recurrent warfare. Conflicts increasingly pose existential threats to regional regimes, as exemplified by the fate of Saddam Hussein's government. The 2003 collapse of Iraq's Ba'athist regime established a powerful precedent that has since deterred Arab leaders from military adventurism (Hashim, 2018; Lynch, 2022). Furthermore, a shared recognition among member states is that their core security interest lies in suppressing actors that threaten the cohesion and legitimacy of the regional order. This is evident in coordinated efforts to contain disruptive non-state actors that are perceived as threats to sovereign authority. Concurrently, the MESC displays certain features that shape ongoing geopolitical realignments, including diplomatic convergence, counterterrorism cooperation, and increased security-sector engagement. It is from this premise that the defining characteristics of the MESC can now be identified:

First, the defining characteristic of the MESC is the persistent use of military force. The Middle East's regional order emerged from the Ottoman Empire's collapse and subsequent Western intervention exemplified by artificially imposed borders under agreements like Sykes-Picot (1916). This legacy has made military force indispensable for state consolidation, as evidenced by independence struggles such as Algeria (1954–1962). Modern Middle Eastern geopolitics remains fundamentally shaped by warfare. Conflicts including the Arab-Israeli Wars (1948, 1967, 1973), Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988), and Gulf Wars

(1991, 2003) have directly reconfigured political alignments, borders, and regional hierarchies (Sørli, Gleditsch & Strand, 2005). Military power, thus, often supersedes diplomatic channels, as regimes frequently rely on force to maintain authority, illustrated clearly by Assad's Syria, Saddam's Iraq, and Egypt's military-backed governments, and clearly demonstrated by the outcome of the Arab Spring (2010–2012).

Yet, wars in this region seldom yield definitive Viktor's Diktat; instead, they perpetuate cycles of unresolved hostilities. The 1948 Arab-Israeli war, despite an Israeli victory, set conditions for subsequent conflicts. Likewise, the inconclusive Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988) and the aftermath of the 1991 Gulf War directly contributed to further instability and eventual emergence of groups like ISIS. Additionally, the Middle East's military dynamics extend beyond direct warfare into coercive diplomacy and economic sanctions, reinforcing force as a cornerstone of diplomatic engagement (Schelling, 1966; Art & Cronin, 2003). The 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) exemplify this, as the U.S. combined economic sanctions and explicit military threats under a 'maximum pressure' strategy (Davari, 2020; Shalal, 2025; Holland et al., 2025).

Second, a core feature of the MESC is Israeli dominance following the post-1990–91 fragmentation of regional powers, most notably the marginalisation of Iraq and the initiation of the Peace Process. This enabled Israel's deeper integration into Middle Eastern geopolitics. The Kuwait Crisis reordered regional dynamics, loosening the pre-existing Arab consensus and allowing states to prioritise national interests. Since 2020, this shift has accelerated through normalisation (Abraham Accords), intelligence and security cooperation (e.g., Saudi-Israel overflight permissions), and economic integration. Arab silence on Gaza is marked by the erosion of Pan-Arab boycotts and a functional recognition of Israel's regional legitimacy.

Third, the MESC is shaped by divergent survival imperatives: Arab regimes prioritise regime preservation through authoritarian consolidation, patronage, and reliance on external powers (Aldalala'a, 2024), while Israel focuses on state survival via military supremacy, deterrence, and regional integration amid contested legitimacy. This asymmetry forms a paradox where divergent security logics converge. Israel's liberal-democratic façade coexists with occupation policies,

including actions labelled genocidal by the International Criminal Court (2024), aligning it structurally with authoritarian states that similarly flout human rights (Amnesty International, 2024). Following Deutsch's model, these actors foster mutual conflict-management norms and forging a pragmatic, trust-based security community that prioritises stability.

Another defining feature of the Middle East Security Community is the United States' influence on the region. From a structural realist perspective (Waltz, 1979), the U.S. influence is maintained through a combination of military deterrence, strategic alliances, and economic aid. The U.S. serves as a crucial pillar in this security architecture by providing Israel with advanced military capabilities, intelligence cooperation, and diplomatic backing, ensuring that its qualitative military edge remains unchallenged (Mearsheimer & Walt, 2007). A feature of the security community is the application of force, which effectively renders American influence an extension of Israel's dominance. This particular feature of regional politics is likely to persist well into the future. The immediate cause lies in the deeply entrenched historical mistrust among Arab states. While a detailed examination falls beyond the scope of this article, it is worth recalling that the region's current trajectory of political transformation was catalysed by Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990, a moment that significantly deepened intra-Arab suspicions and fractured collective regional trust.

Despite the developments outlined above, the Palestinian issue continues to represent a major point of contention within regional politics, reflecting the enduring complexity involved in achieving lasting regional stability (Maher, 2020). Yet, the declining influence of groups like Hamas and Hezbollah marks a regional shift toward state-centric security as Iran's traditional support wanes. Tehran's ability to sustain Hezbollah has eroded due to disrupted arms routes via Damascus and crippling economic sanctions. U.S.-driven informal sanctions, in particular, forced global banks to sever ties with Iranian institutions, prompting a retreat to cash-based transactions and reducing Iran's capacity to fund proxies (Clawson, 2008). Iran's nuclear programme and its broader regional ambitions have also emerged as central concerns. Accordingly, this article will later examine how both actual and perceived Iranian threats have shaped the genesis and evolution of

the MESC against the backdrop of shifting regional geopolitics (Fakhro & Baconi, 2022; Quamar, 2020).

Israel's Security

Israel's national security conception is fundamentally forged by recurrent warfare. The October 7 attack fractured Israel's perceived aura of invincibility and profoundly impacted its security sense; nevertheless, it reaffirmed an entrenched truism within the Israeli strategic psyche: the perception of an enduring existential threat remains permanent (Michael, 2009). This belief originates in the nation's inception. Upon Israel's declaration of independence on 14 May 1948, neighbouring Arab states rejected UN Resolution 181 and invaded Israel the next day. Israel's victory in this inaugural conflict was not merely military but an existential prerequisite for survival. Consequently, preserving this hard-won "triumph" against future existential defeat remains the core principle underpinning Israel's evolving security doctrines reinforced by the paradigm of an 'occupying force.' Israel's uncompromising prioritisation of security and survival is inextricable from its enduring role as an occupying power. The logic embedded in Israeli national security discourse, marked by doctrines of pre-emptive force and existential vigilance, implicitly acknowledges a condition of permanent occupation as foundational to its strategic posture. Israel prioritises overwhelming deterrence, maximalist control mechanisms, and pre-emptive suppression of perceived threats, often entrenching the very conditions that fuel resistance and undermine long-term stability. This, coupled with state-centric security priorities, systematically exclude not only non-state actors from political and economic structures, but also any actors, including states, who could challenge the regionally dominant-Israeli security arrangements.

Strategic calculus of occupying powers has been subject to significant scholarly scrutiny. Roberts (2006) contends that historical precedents demonstrate how occupying forces often employ coercive measures not solely to suppress immediate resistance, but also to rationalise the perpetuation of their military presence and territorial control. Within the Israeli context, recurring military engagements with Hamas arguably serve multiple, intertwined strategic purposes beyond immediate retaliation. These conflicts function to underline the perceived necessity of ongoing and robust military operations, thereby

reinforcing the legitimacy and scope of Israel's expansive domestic and regional security apparatus. Simultaneously, they fortify domestic political narratives and bolster justifications presented to Western allies, all emphasising the continuous and proximate nature of security threats facing the state.

This practice aligns with broader historical patterns observed in prolonged occupations where cyclical violence serves to perpetuate the rationale for sustained military dominance by the occupying power (Gordon, 2008). The immediate outcomes of conflicts such as the Gaza War predictably conform to a recurring regional paradigm: such wars seldom produce definitive victors capable of imposing a stable political resolution. Instead, they primarily function to reinforce entrenched security doctrines and the underlying conditions that perpetuate them.

Israel's strategic posture, epitomised by its operations against Hezbollah, reveals a defining feature of the new MESC: protracted conflicts persist without escalating into conventional interstate war. The region's paramount objective has crystallised around consolidating state control and eradicating non-state challengers via limited attacks. This paradigm, normalised through recurrence, manifests in Turkey's struggle with the PKK, Iraq's campaigns against Al-Qaeda and ISIS, Syria's multifaceted civil war, and Israel's sustained confrontations with Hamas and Hezbollah. Within this context, the Gaza War transcends mere retaliation for October 7; it embodies a regional imperative of asymmetric warfare, systematically neutralising entities operating beyond the state framework, perceived as existential threats to the established order and Israel's security.

This state-centric imperative defines the post-Kuwait Crisis regional order, explicitly structuring Arab-Israeli relations around state actors. Hedley Bull's framework (1977, p.10) crystallises this logic, defining "order" as inherently state-based, prioritising survival, security, and stability through state interactions. Iran, however, represents a critical exception to this paradigm. Deliberately leveraging asymmetric power, Tehran strategically cultivated non-state proxies, most prominently the "Axis of Resistance" (Hamas, Hezbollah, Houthis, pro-Assad forces, Iraqi militias). This article analyses Hezbollah, Hamas, and the Houthis not as legitimate peers but as challengers operating outside, and deliberately

marginalised by, the dominantly state-centric MESC framework. MESC's focus on inter-state security cooperation and economic initiatives formalises the systemic sidelining of such groups, reinforcing the very conditions that perpetuate protracted, sub-conventional warfare aimed at neutralising perceived threats to the state-centric established order. The affiliation of these groups with Iran unifies the objectives of both Israel and Arab states, where Islamist organisations have been seen as a threat. The rounds of attacks and counterattacks between Israel and Iran demonstrated how regional security constellation's function: Iranian missile attacks against Israel on 14 April 2024 were thwarted with the help of Arab air forces (Arab Centre Washington DC, 2024) and similarly Iranian drones were intercepted by Jordan in the early morning attacks on 13 June 2025 (Aladam, 2025). Additionally, talk of Saudi-Israeli normalisation has persisted despite the Gaza War (The Arab Centre Washington DC, 2023).

Saudi Arabia has not rejected normalisation with Israel outright but has tied it to progress on Palestinian statehood. This approach aims to maintain U.S. support and uphold its leadership in advocating for Palestinian rights (*Al Jazeera*, 2025). Saudi Arabia's regional strategy exemplifies calibrated pragmatism in a volatile security environment, enabling Riyadh to advance its interests without overtly compromising its ideological or diplomatic positions. By fostering close ties with the Trump administration, the Saudis can secure U.S. guarantees and shape regional dynamics in ways that tacitly support normalisation with Israel without formally endorsing it. Simultaneously, by insisting that normalisation is contingent on the establishment of a Palestinian state, Saudi Arabia maintains alignment with the Palestinian cause, projecting itself as a guardian of Arab consensus. In parallel, its rapprochement with Iran allows it to distance itself from Israeli or U.S.-led escalations, reducing the risk of appearing complicit in regional aggression. This multidirectional diplomacy is particularly effective in an evolving security landscape increasingly characterised by elements of a nascent security community, where shared interests in de-escalation, regime preservation, and conflict containment among regional actors are beginning to override ideological divides. Within this emerging order, Saudi Arabia's strategy not only mitigates risks but positions the kingdom as a central broker in shaping the terms of Middle Eastern stability.

In the current regional security architecture, the protection of Israeli security has become a shared strategic interest among several Arab states, particularly those aligned with the United States and engaged in normalisation processes. While this does not imply unanimity across the region, it reflects a broader convergence around threat containment and the preservation of regional order, where Israeli stability is increasingly viewed as integral to managing wider security dynamics. This orientation was most clearly demonstrated when several Arab states coordinated efforts to intercept Iranian missiles directed at Israel (Arab Centre Washington DC, 2024). Such actions highlight an emerging willingness to contribute to regional stability through direct cooperation in safeguarding Israeli security.

The Gaza War in Security Community Context

In terms of immediate security outcomes, the Gaza War highlights several key points. First, it stresses Israel's readiness, with the U.S. and Western support, to take prolonged military actions against any threat to its security. Second, it highlights the profound fragmentation within the Palestinian leadership, with the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank adopting a largely passive and detached stance regarding the situation in Gaza. Factionalism between Hamas and Fatah perpetuates instability and undermines the prospects for a sustainable peace. As Scham (2023) explains, Israel has a vested interest in maintaining the separation of Palestinian factions as unity among them would pose a strategic threat to Israel's security. Their strategic divisions, coupled with external political pressures particularly from Israel and the U.S., continue to delay the creation of a unified Palestinian front that might pave the way for a more robust and coherent peace process (Stock, 2017; Alhamdan, 2020).

Third, the factionalised nature of Palestinian politics, marked by the paralysis of the Abbas-led Palestinian Authority and its public criticism of Hamas, has deepened internal divisions and weakened collective resistance. This internal discord has enabled Israel to frame the war as a counterterrorism operation that fits within the MESC's framework of defeating non-state actors. Meanwhile, the initial protests across the Arab World have largely given way to indifference. Gaza's suffering has become a recurrent media fixture, no longer a catalyst for Arab street mobilisation. This shift reflects not only media fatigue but

also a broader strategic recalibration among Arab regimes. Stability, regime preservation, and alignment with powerful international actors increasingly take precedence over popular sentiment. The muted response of institutions such as the Arab League emphasises the declining centrality of the Palestinian issue in Arab political discourse, even as the humanitarian devastation in Gaza continues.

The Gaza War has clarified and reinforced the emergence of a nascent pluralistic security community among key Arab states and Israel. In Adler and Barnett's (1998) terms, such a community is defined by "dependable expectations of peaceful change" (p. 34), and "mutual responsiveness" (pp. 47-49; p. 134) among states that, while retaining their sovereignty, develop "a compatibility of core values derived from common institutions" (p. 7). Ironically, all peace agreements between Arab States and Israel, including major accords such as in 1979, 1994, and the Abraham Accords were a transition from "ideological Arabness" to interest-based conduct. The Arab states' preference for non-intervention and diplomatic containment over mobilisation suggests the internalisation of mutual expectations for crisis management and conflict avoidance, even in the absence of deep collective identity. As such, the Gaza War has not disrupted the process of regional security integration; rather, it has clarified its underlying structure, revealing how the inclusion or exclusion of particular actors plays a central role in shaping emerging security arrangements. This reflects Adler and Barnett's assertion that "who is inside, and who is outside, matters most" (Adler & Barnett, 1998, p. 4) in determining the normative boundaries and operational logic of security communities.

Following Donald Trump's provocative statement in early 2025 calling for the "cleaning out" of Gaza and the deportation of its residents to Egypt and Jordan, Arab states issued a unified and unequivocal rejection of the proposal. At a Cairo summit on 1 February 2025, representatives from Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the UAE, Palestine, and the Arab League declared that any forced displacement of Palestinians would be a violation of their "unalienable rights" and warned it would "threaten the region's stability...spread conflict and undermine prospects for peace" (*CBS News*, 2025). Egypt's President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi firmly stated that such displacement "can never be tolerated or allowed" due to its implications for Egypt's national security, and cautioned that the relocation of Palestinians could

jeopardise the Camp David peace framework (*Reuters*, 2025). Similarly, Jordan's King Abdullah II reiterated his government's longstanding position: "no refugees in Jordan, no refugees in Egypt," affirming a regional consensus against resettlement schemes (Malik, 2025). On 4 March 2025, an Arab League emergency summit endorsed Egypt's $53 billion counterproposal focused on Gaza's reconstruction, advocating a technocratic transitional administration of Palestinian professionals and eventual restoration of Palestinian Authority governance, specifically to preserve Gaza's demographic integrity and thwart any attempts at mass expulsion (Doucet & Hussein, 2025). These coordinated diplomatic actions illustrate not only the rejection of external coercion but also the consolidation of a shared regional approach that defends Palestinian territorial continuity and reflects the logic of a nascent, policy-oriented security community in the Arab world.

External forces and regional security

The strategic landscape of the Middle East remains profoundly shaped by the preferences and priorities of the United States (Byman & Moller, 2016; Dunne, 2023). The origins of the contemporary U.S. role in the Middle East can be traced to the aftermath of the 1990–1991 Kuwait Crisis, when, at the formal request of Saudi Arabia, the U.S. stationed its troops on Saudi soil for the first time in the kingdom's history (Bunton, 20240). This military presence evolved into sustained regional dominance not only due to America's unique power projection capabilities, accelerated by the concurrent collapse of the Soviet Union, which cemented U.S. status as the sole superpower (Malik, 2014), but also because of the strategic legacy generated by the Kuwait Crisis. This legacy entrenched a framework of security dependency among Gulf states while exacerbating mistrust within the Arab world, particularly between U.S.-aligned monarchies and populations resentful of Western military encroachment (Nicolas, 2024).

The primary security concern for Arab states, particularly those in the Gulf, has not been the threat of military invasion or external aggression, but rather the risk of domestic instability, which is in line with the argument made by Barnett and Gause in *Security Communities (1998)*. In this context, regime survival has consistently remained the central objective guiding Arab states' security strategies (Tibi, 1998). The United States has come to be perceived as a stabilising force in

the region, simultaneously supporting incumbent regimes and deterring Iran's regional influence, thereby providing crucial security assurances to both Gulf and broader Arab states. This role is further exemplified by substantial annual U.S. military and financial aid to Egypt, amounting to approximately $1.4 billion, and to Jordan, approximately $1.1 billion (Salhani, 2025).

The return of Donald Trump to the White House in 2025 has not fundamentally altered the path or outcomes of the Gaza War. His Trump 2.0 policies are an extension of his previous administration's regional policies, particularly on the question of Iran, which remains key in understanding the formation of a regional security community. Trump's firm stance against Iran and his unwavering support for Israeli security bolstered a collective alignment among several Arab states, oriented around threat containment and the marginalisation of non-state actors (Dunne, 2023; Kelly, 2024). Although this alignment has been shaped more by strategic interests and external patronage than by deep normative integration, it has nonetheless fostered increased transnational cooperation and identity convergence. As Barnett and Gause argue in their analysis of the Gulf Cooperation Council, even alliances initially formed for regime protection can create conditions that facilitate community-building through social interaction and shared security frameworks (Barnett & Gause in Adler & Barnett, 1998, pp. 119-160). In this evolving context, the sustained presence of the United States continues to serve as a stabilising force, offering security guarantees that underpin the gradual emergence of regional cohesion (Byman & Moller, 2016).

Trump's objectives rest on a functional logic: an end to the Gaza War, or the beginning of any War, is only viable if it conforms to the stabilising imperatives of the emerging regional security community, which demands the systematic exclusion of destabilising actors. Within this context, if Iran is perceived as a threat to the coherence of this alignment, structured increasingly around Israeli strategic centrality, the United States, Israel, and aligned Arab states may not only endorse but also support coercive measures, including military action, to safeguard the integrity of the evolving regional security architecture.

In *Security Communities,* Adler and Barnett articulate a nuanced view of external intervention in the context of security community

development. They emphasise that the role of external actors is double-edged. On one hand, powerful states can support the emergence of security communities by acting as "cores of strength" that anchor integration and generate positive expectations of security and prosperity. These actors, through persuasion or "nudging," can encourage weaker states to converge around shared norms and interests. This supports Deutsch's observation that security communities develop around cores of strength. The United States is the "core of strength" in the emerging Middle East security community.

However, the authors caution that the effects of external intervention are contingent. When intervention is coercive, unilateral, or seen as undermining sovereignty, it can hinder the trust-building and norm-sharing essential for a security community. For instance, the history of U.S. intervention in Latin America, particularly its disregard for regional consensus and sovereignty norms, is presented as a major obstacle to regional community-building, despite the absence of major wars in the region. In contrast, where external actors act as facilitators of multilateralism and value diffusion, such as through the United Nations, Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), or regional organisations, their involvement can foster the social learning and normative alignment needed for communities to emerge. The authors call such efforts "strong multilateralism," which contrasts with transactional, interest-based "weak" multilateralism and is more likely to lead to community formation. Ultimately, Adler and Barnett argue that external powers do not simply impose or prevent the emergence of security communities; rather, their influence is mediated by the degree to which their actions align with shared norms and institutional practices already present or nascent in the region, which is the precise case of American engagement in the Middle East.

Given that Iran remains a central security concern for Israel and, to a considerable extent, for Gulf Cooperation Council members, it functions as a focal point for consolidating a nascent regional security community. A key reason is that Iran lacks viable options for engaging in open warfare with Israel, a reality that highlights the effectiveness of regional security arrangements in constraining escalation. In effect, Iran had never fought a war with Israel for Palestine. Yet, Israel's posture towards Iran is not dislodged from the overall security arrangements in the region. Israel's strike capabilities depend on U.S. logistical and

diplomatic support, and Israeli defence analysts consistently caution that unilateral military action without Washington's coordination would be both strategically limited and regionally destabilising.

At the same time, Iran's regional influence through its proxy networks, particularly Hezbollah and the Assad regime in Syria, has been significantly diminished as discussed earlier. Aware of these shifts, Gulf states have increasingly favoured diplomacy and coordinated deterrence as strategies to manage Tehran's asymmetric threats, such as maritime disruption, rather than opting for direct military confrontation (Stimson Center, 2024; CSIS, 2020). These converging patterns of behaviour suggest the emergence of a regional security architecture grounded in shared threat perceptions, mutual restraint, and pragmatic cooperation, all of which align with the defining features of a nascent, pluralistic security community.

Importantly, the resilience of this emerging community lies in its capacity to manage internal fragmentation and external threats without escalating into open conflict. The region's preference for diplomatic coordination and interest-based security partnerships, exemplified by Arab states' rejection of Trump's call to displace Gazans and their assumption of reconstruction responsibilities, reinforces the notion that security communities can emerge not solely from cultural or ideological unity but through sustained social interaction and functional interdependence. As Adler and Barnett caution, the success of such communities depends on whether external powers act in ways consistent with the region's evolving norms and practices. In the case of the Middle East, the alignment between American strategic interests and regional security imperatives (Nasr, 2025) appears, for now, to support rather than obstruct the formation of a pluralistic, if nascent, security community.

As Adler and Barnett emphasise, the development of institutions within a nascent security community marks a critical shift from *ad hoc* cooperation to more structured, norm-guided interaction. In this early phase, institutions do not emerge fully formed but evolve incrementally through social processes of interaction, persuasion, and norm internalisation. These institutions function initially as mechanisms for information sharing, threat identification, and behavioural coordination, helping to reduce uncertainty and build trust among historically

adversarial actors (Adler & Barnett, 1998, pp. 50–53). Importantly, they also serve latent functions by fostering social learning and constructing collective identities, even when formal treaty arrangements remain absent.

The institutionalisation process is thus both instrumental and constitutive; it facilitates cooperation while gradually reconstituting state interests and identities. As interactions become routinised and expectations of peaceful change deepen, the institutions themselves transform from instruments of utility to embodiments of community norms. In the Middle East context, the emergence of shared fora, coordinated security responses, and diplomatic alignments, though still fragile, suggests that the region may be traversing this formative stage. Whether the security community in the region grows strong or remains stable depends on the same factors that create security concerns. These factors include Israel, backed by the United States, without a counterbalance to U.S. influence in the region. China's role is mainly economic, acting like the region's "factory and supermarket." Meanwhile, Iran, since 1979, has remained in conflict with other regional countries. It is unlikely, according to regional political norms, for Iran's relationships with other states to develop beyond U.S. influence.

Conclusion

The Gaza War is poised to reinforce the pre-war regional security architecture rather than disrupt it. Due to Israel's enduring presence, non-state actors within the region could consistently emerge to challenge it as an extension of the people's disapproval for normalisation with Israel as reported in the Arab Barometer (Robbins, 2025). The potential for any future conflicts to escalate into war, as seen currently, hinges on the security community's ability to contain these threats. However, eliminating such groups or preventing minor conflicts remains uncertain.

State hegemony defines the Middle East system, progressively marginalising non-state actors. While militant groups historically demonstrated disruptive capacity, their influence remains contingent on state patronage, external sponsorship, or fragile governance. The securitisation of politics (See Abrahamsen & Williams, 2006), state-centric counterterrorism, and Arab-Israeli normalisation (absent popular consensus) reinforce this paradigm. Even in conflict zones like Yemen or Syria, non-state actors' operational viability depends on sovereign

states' strategic calculus regarding material support and operational constraints. The region thus remains fundamentally structured by interstate engagement, with sovereignty and regime security as its organising principles.

The Iran-Israel conflict remains intractable. Trump's 'maximum pressure' strategy – marked by severe sanctions – may force Tehran to negotiate rather than escalate, especially given Netanyahu's persistent threats of military action. As Nephew (2024) notes, Iran's regional weakening (including Hezbollah's decline and Assad's faltering regime) could paradoxically facilitate comprehensive talks rather than preclude them.

Middle East dynamics offer Israel strategic options against Iran. Strikes on Syrian military assets, aimed at degrading defences, could precede broader action against Iran's nuclear facilities. Advocates argue the current climate favours pre-emptive strikes, citing Tehran's nearing nuclear breakout, failed diplomacy, and ongoing regional instability (Kroenig, 2024). Historical models like Israel's 1981 Osirak and 2007 Syrian reactor operations provide precedents.

Nonetheless, Israel's security apparatus would grapple with a paradoxical reality: while the neutralisation of Iran's nuclear capabilities is deemed essential for safeguarding national security, the elimination of Iran as a strategic counterbalance could, in the long run inadvertently destabilise the broader security architecture. In such a scenario, Israel might find its role in containing Iran's influence marginal, or worse, diminished. This could potentially erode the strategic leverage that underpins its regional security model. This duality highlights the complexity of Israel's calculus in confronting the multifaceted Iranian threat. The Israel-Iran relationship demonstrates the mutually reinforcing benefits that have, paradoxically, served the strategic interests of both regimes within the state-centric security community. Iran's leadership, particularly its clerical establishment, has leveraged its advocacy for the Palestinian cause as a mechanism to bolster domestic legitimacy.

Israel's regional dominance relies on two key factors: strong U.S. support and weaker neighbouring states. Therefore, the persistent weakness and fragmentation of regional counterparts further consolidate Israel's cyclic strategic advantage. The absence of a unified Arab security bloc reduces the likelihood of coordinated opposition. While Israel

remains the dominant regional actor, its hegemony requires continuous reinforcement through strategic alignment with global powers and the exploitation of regional power asymmetries. The durability of this dominance is not structurally guaranteed; it is conditioned by evolving variables such as shifts in U.S. foreign policy priorities, changes in regional threat perceptions, and potential realignments among Arab states or with external powers like China or Russia. In this sense, Israel's pre-eminence must be understood as a contingent geopolitical configuration: resilient but inherently adaptive, rather than a fixed or inevitable strategic outcome. The long-term sustainability of this dominance is, therefore, a dynamic rather than a predetermined certainty. This concludes the title of this article: shifting geopolitics.

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Power of Knowledge vs. Self-Knowledge Production: The Protagonist's Journey towards Embracing Islam in Umm Zakiyyah's *If I Should Speak*

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Abstract: Islamophobia has been a frequently used concept by non-Muslims who claim to be afraid of Muslims. Islam is misperceived and misunderstood as an oppressive religion; however, Islam's message and teachings have affected a significant number of non-Muslims all around the world. Consequently, many such people have converted to Islam, particularly women. This study addresses the story of Umm Zakiyyah's *If I Should Speak* (2000). The story is about a Christian black American, Tamika Douglass, who was influenced by the media and her parents in prejudging and perceiving Islam. However, she started to change her perceptions of Islam after she had comprehensively studied the religion and consequently embraced Islam. This study aims to first analyse some essential terms such as power and (self)- knowledge, and then explore the influence of the media on Tamika's attitudes towards Islam. It also investigates how Tamika has become a Muslim after being influenced by Islamic teachings. This research adopts a qualitative research method. It applies a descriptive-theoretical analysis to shape a new understanding and interpretation of the literary text. The study finds that the power of media affects non-Muslims' attitudes negatively, resulting in prejudice and misunderstanding of the faith. The study recommends that self-Islamic knowledge is a key for non-Muslims to understand Islam. Knowledge of the Qur'an in particular is of great benefit

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for a convert to be guided on the right path. Such a Qur'anic influence could be seen in Umm Zakiyyah's novel.

Keywords: Islam, media, prejudice, power of knowledge, self-knowledge

Abstrak: Islamophobia telah menjadi konsep yang sering digunakan oleh orang bukan Islam yang mengaku takut kepada Islam. Islam dilihat dan dipromosikan sebagai agama yang menindas; namun, mesej dan ajaran Islam telah mempengaruhi sebilangan besar orang bukan Islam di seluruh dunia. Akibatnya, sebilangan besar orang seperti ini telah memeluk Islam, terutamanya wanita. Kajian ini membincangkan kisah *If I Should Speak* karya Ummu Zakiyyah (2000). Kisah ini adalah tentang seorang Kristian kulit hitam Amerika, Tamika Douglass, yang dipengaruhi oleh media dan ibu bapanya dalam menilai dan memahami Islam. Bagaimanapun, dia mula mengubah persepsi dan kepercayaannya terhadap Islam selepas dia mempelajari Islam secara menyeluruh. Akibatnya, dia memeluk Islam. Kajian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis terlebih dahulu beberapa istilah penting seperti kuasa dan (diri)-pengetahuan, kedua meneroka pengaruh media terhadap sikap Tamika terhadap Islam, dan ketiga menyiasat bagaimana Tamika telah menjadi seorang Muslim selepas dipengaruhi oleh pengetahuan Islam. Penyelidikan ini menggunakan kaedah kajian kualitatif. Ia menggunakan analisis deskriptif-teoretikal untuk membentuk pemahaman dan tafsiran baharu teks sastera. Kajian mendapati kuasa media mempengaruhi sikap bukan Islam secara negatif, mengakibatkan prasangka dan salah faham Islam. Kajian itu menyarankan agar ilmu keislaman diri adalah kunci untuk orang bukan Islam memahami Islam. Ilmu al-Quran khususnya amat besar manfaatnya bagi seorang mualaf untuk mendapat petunjuk ke jalan yang benar. Pengaruh al-Quran sebegini dapat dilihat dalam kisah Ummu Zakiyyah.

Kata kunci: Islam, Media, Prejudis, kekuatan ilmu dan pengetahuan diri

Introduction

Umm Zakiyyah's novel, *If I Should Speak*, came out in 2000 and received the Distinguished Authors Award at the Muslim Girls Unity Conference. The novel has been taught at different schools and universities in several countries such as Howard University and Indiana University in the US and Prince Sultan University in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. The novel is divided into eleven parts, arranged in chronological order, and narrates the journey of its protagonist, Tamika Douglass. The protagonist, being a racist Christian, shows much hatred towards Muslims. This is

because of the negative coverage of the media which manipulated her misunderstanding and wrong attitudes towards Islam. After studying about Islam extensively from authentic sources, she came to believe in its tenets and subsequently espouse the religion.

The novel addresses some essential issues such as Islamophobia, racism, identity, religion and Islamic teachings, particularly the message of the Holy Qur'an. The author, who clarifies how the media plays an essential role in shaping one's cultural knowledge, narrates Tamika Douglass' initial prejudices and assumptions against Islam and Muslims. Umm Zakiyyah ends the story with Tamika's change of attitude toward Islam. She explains how Tamika became a Muslim after having searched Islam, reciting the Qur'an and befriending Muslims. The study shows that self-knowledge has played a fundamental role in helping Tamika benefit from the community's belief system (media and assumptions) by changing cultural knowledge into self-knowledge.

This study adopts a descriptive analytical approach to investigate the power of self-knowledge in changing the protagonist's prejudicial attitudes toward Islam who eventually converted to the faith. The writer explains how Tamika's attitudes changed after she started to search for knowledge from different sources, which gradually brought her to the path.

Having conceptualised the novel, the writer plotted the story in her mind in line with the desired goals. Such aims indicate the themes and the general issues that the novel deals with. Other objectives concerning the writer's inferred meanings should not be neglected since they imply Islamophobia, racism, media propaganda and cultural knowledge about Islam. Such inferred utterances and meanings extracted from the selected texts are the main focus of the present study. Thus, this research investigates the power of media in shaping and influencing the cultural knowledge of non-Muslim communities about Islam and Muslims, and demonstrates how individual self-knowledge of a Christian Black American, Tamika, changes her unfavourable views of Islam to glowing and affirmative ones.

The authors of this article have narrowed down their discursive focus in the piece to shed light only on the cultural knowledge of the mainstream American community concerning hijab, jihad and oppression of Muslim women.

Literature Review

There are some critical studies available on the novel. *Asiatic*, in its fifth volume (2011), published an article on *If I Should Speak*, authored by Raihanah M. M., Ruzy Suliza Hashim and Noraini Md Yusof. The title of this article is "The Road Not Taken: Shedding Xenophobia, Embracing the Other in Umm Zakiyyah's *If I Should Speak*." The study discussed the novel from a minority viewpoint. They explain the issues of stereotypes and prejudices based on Du Bois' *Of Our Spiritual Strivings* as represented through the protagonist Tamika Douglass. Raihanah, Hashim and Yusof, having studied Tamika's prejudicial attitudes towards Muslims generally, have emphasised that Tamika, as an African-American experiences a sense of 'Othering' after her white roommate is targeted by a racist incident. Due to her "identity," Tamika has faced many multi-cultural and multi-religious issues. The authors were inspired by Robert Frost›s well-renowned poem, "The Road Not Taken" (1920). They explain that in "*If I Should Speak,*" Umm Zakiyyah picks up on both the road metaphor and the minority issue by problematising the minority experience through the creation of a compounded sense of being the other in race, religion and gender" (2011, p. 48). The authors argue that Umm Zakiyyah demonstrates some cases of xenophobia and war politics taking place within minority communities where there are misunderstandings and misrecognitions between individuals belonging to multi-religious societies. This study focuses on how others could embrace Islam and become religious after they are not influenced by media manipulation.

In her article, "Islamic Da'wah Through American Novel: A Study of Sociology of Literature in Umm Zakiyyah's *If I Should Speak*," Bondan Eko Suratno (2015) discusses the novel from a socio-religious perspective concerning Islamic *da'wah* [call for faith]. The novel pays special attention to how *da'wah* is addressed throughout the literature stated in the novel. The novel also addresses the topic of *jihad* that has been introduced by Umm Zakiyyah. According to Suratno, Umm Zakiyyah has firstly, introduced Islam in the novel, and secondly, explained how the West perceives Islam. Suratno's study argues that non-Muslims' prejudice against Islam has led to very serious problems, one of which is Western's stereotyping of Islam based on their misperception of jihad. For this very reason, the present study claims that one's self-knowledge and learning is a key for understanding the true teachings of Islam and

for correcting negative ideas about Islam. The article seeks to show that non-Muslims are capable of perceiving Islam positively. Thus, it refers to 'the protagonist's journey' to emphasise the significant role of self-knowledge in putting an end to western's prejudices against Islam.

Finally, in "Postcolonialism, Islamophobia and Inserting Islamic Facts in African-American Fiction: Umm Zakiyyah's *If I Should Speak*" (2021), Nadira Brioua highlights Umm Zakiyyah's narrative about the truth of Islam in line with the original sources of Islam: Qur'an and the Sunnah. The article analyses how Umm Zakiyyah reconsidered the truth of Islam after having unequivocally understood the true meanings and goals of jihad, prophecy on women›s issues and rights and the reality of Jesus in Islam. It finds that Umm Zakiyyah narrates Islam and Muslims to counter the West's negative views about Islam and emphasise the power of Muslims› self-identity enhanced by self-knowledge and cultivation in line with the teachings of the Holy Qur›an and Hadith. Such knowledge led Tamika Douglass to convert to Islam.

Theoretical Accounts

Postcolonialism

The present study uses Postcolonial Theory as a framework emphasising the postcolonial concepts of power, knowledge and self-knowledge. These concepts are discussed and analysed from a postcolonial perspective in line with the narrative themes: media, prejudice and conversion. The influence of media has significantly contributed to the Westerners' misperception and misunderstanding of Islam. This has resulted in creating prejudicial and stereotypical attitudes towards Islam and Muslims. Nevertheless, one's own perception could be changed if one reads the Islamic literature critically, as in the case of Tamika, the novel's protagonist.

Postcolonialism is a movement against colonialism. This movement, which had different goals, is led by theorists, scholars, writers and novelists. The movement has addressed some essential issues such as slavery, racial and cultural discrimination, displacement, emigration, resistance, representation, difference and otherness, and gender. Postcolonialism could be defined as "a process of regaining control over colonised/independent people through sifting their cultures, identities and beliefs in order to get rid of the Western cultural invasion"

(Ashcroft et all., 1995, p. 12). Robert J. C. Young (2003) explains that "postcolonialism offers you a way of seeing things differently, a language and a politics in which your interests come first, not last" (p. 2). Based on Young's statement, we as Muslims belonging to the Global South should define ourselves differently from the Global North to maintain our sense of belonging and separate identity. Similarly, postcolonial literature often reflects the cultures, beliefs, languages, traditions and beliefs of the "Third/Muslim World." It generally studies the effects of colonialism on societies and cultures. It means that postcolonialism shows cultural colonisation by the colonisers' strategies in othering others and spreading their culture over the world.

Being powerful through knowledge and discourse, the West has spread its culture throughout the Third World. In this context, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (1998) emphasise "… the system of knowledge and beliefs about the world within which acts of colonisation take place" (p. 42). They went on arguing that knowledge as a concept is generated by the understanding of "those who have power and control of what is known and the way it is known, and those who have such knowledge have power over those who do not" (p. 72).

In *Orientalism* (1978), Edward Said emphasised the relationship between power/hegemony and knowledge: "How does one know the "things that exist," and to what extent are the "things that exist» constituted by the knower? This is left moot, as the new value-free apprehension of the Orient as something that exists is institutionalised in area-studies programs" (p. 300). Said paid attention to the Western knowledge production that "presents the Oriental as "fixed," "stable," "in need of investigation, in need even of knowledge about himself. No dialectic is either desired or allowed" (1978, p. 308). So, based on his view, there is a relationship between knowledge and formulation of the binary of the "West" and the "Rest"; the "Self" and the "Other"; the "Powerful" and the "Weak"; and the "non-Muslim Speaker" and the "Muslim Silent" who cannot speak, or in other words, who has been enforced to remain voiceless. In this context, "the relationship between Occident and Orient is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony" (Ashcroft et all., 1995, p. 89).

With regards to Islam, the strategy of "othering" explains the West's thirst for control, imperialism and power by intellectually and culturally

invading the Muslim World. The creation of the *East* and the *West* as two separate entities is another strategy to create anti-bilateral relationship to dominate the East and to cover the Muslim World. Within this framework, Said highlights that the intellectual and cultural division between the West and the Muslim World is a mirage that was created by the West. He stresses that "knowledge and coverage of the Islamic World are defined in the United States by geopolitics and economic interests on – for the individual – an impossibly massive scale, aided and abetted by a structure of knowledge production that is almost as vast and unmanageable" (1978, p. 154).

In "Islam through Western Eyes," Edward Said confirms that "the Westerners know nothing about Islamic civilisation, history, and culture. They ignore the great Muslim writers, intellectuals or musicians because Islam is portrayed to the Westerners only in the image that fits the West's agenda as a new style of imperialism without colonies" (1980, p. 7). One of the West's goals for intellectual production is to prove the negativity and uselessness of Muslims' intellectual knowledge. The main aim of this is to create non-Muslims' prejudicial stereotypes.

Intellectual production has spread through various means, including social media. In this context, Thomas Sealy (2017) states that "If we accept that media coverage is an important source of cultural knowledge production, then even this broad framing of Muslim converts is likely to have a strong impact on how they are perceived in society more widely" (p. 4). Said also speaks about the role of media in his book, *Covering Islam* (1981). He considers media as a tool of power to take over the Muslim World and to defame the image of Islam. Media, which portrays Islam as a religion of 'terrorism,' associates Islam with violence and fundamentalism. Such a fabrication is used as a 'pretext' to declare the "War on Terror." As such, Said wrote that, "He [Grunebaum] has no difficulty presuming that Islam is a unitary phenomenon, unlike any other religion or civilisation, and thereafter he shows it to be antihuman, incapable of development, self-knowledge, or objectivity, as well as uncreative, unscientific, and authoritarian" (1978, p. 296). Indeed, the Western media overtly promotes the policy of 'othering' Islam. Akbar S Ahmad (1992) emphasises "nothing in history has threatened Muslims like the Western media" (p. 223). In *Is Objective Reporting on Islam Possible? Contextualising the Demon*, Syed Farid Alatas (2005) explores the relation between Islam and power. According to

Alatas, Islamic civilisation succeeded earlier in extending its power, control and influence like the Ottoman Empire, but today, the West is the dominant civilisation in both economic and cultural spheres. The threat of hostility towards Islam is deeply rooted in the West based on experiences of past encounters.

Likewise, in *Post-Orientalism: Knowledge and Power in Time of Terror* (2009), Hamid Dabashi emphasises that Orientalists' knowledge about Islam and Muslims reflects their hegemonic desire, and that the colonised (Muslims in general) should resist this Western hegemony. Edward Said states that Dabashi associates the mode of oriental knowledge with the production of colonialism. Dabashi (2009) adds that "the origin and function of this mode of knowledge are compatible with the imperial imaginary they serve, for the problem of knowledge production in an age of empire will have to begin with the political provenance of that empire, the U.S. empire, and the postmodern predicament of its illusion of sovereignty, legitimacy, and authority."

Muslim Writers, Novelists and Islam

To elaborate the truth of Islam, some astonishing Muslim writers use knowledge as a weapon to refute the West's perceptions and misunderstanding and perceive Islam as a powerful system with an impact on power relations. They enhance the acceptance of the "other" by representing the rest's cultures in terms of alterity/otherness and represent Islam differently from the way the Western media or writers do. For example, Malak quotes a statement by an early South Asian feminist writer, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, "Our religion is based on Love and Truth. It is our religious duty to love one another and to be absolutely truthful" (2005, p. 30). Hossain, here, wants to show the peaceful and true Islam which calls for a sense of love, acceptance and tolerance between all people for correcting the misunderstanding and stereotypes that show Islam as a violent religion.

Muslim writers and novelists have formed an intellectual writing style that has enriched contemporary critical thinking. Among these writers, we find: Ahmed Ali's landmark work *Twilight in Delhi* and is now an established literary tradition, a recognised and respected one at that, popularly and academically. One could point out several prominent works: in 1981, Salman Rushdie's novel *Midnight's Children* received the Booker Prize; in 1994, M.G. Vassanji's novel *The Book of*

Secrets received the prestigious Giller Award in Canada; and in 1995, Bangladeshi-Australian Adib Khan's novel *Seasonal Adjustments* received the Commonwealth First Novel Prize, with the awarding committee praising it for "provid[ing] a Muslim voice to Australia's multicultural literature" (*Chimo* 40). Moreover, both Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Paradise* and Ahdaf Soueif 's *The Map of Love* were shortlisted for the Booker in 1994 and 1999, respectively. Amin Malak (2005) states that: "These writers have taken up a daunting linguistic, aesthetic, and intellectual challenge and have given voice, with varying degrees of clarity and commitment, to the erstwhile unrepresented, underrepresented, or misrepresented Muslims." (p. 12). They proposed some methods to understand and interpret the text (particularly the literary one) in different ways. As for fiction, many Muslim writers have addressed the issue of post-colonial Muslim identity. For instance, Umm Zakiyyah, in her novel, contributes successfully to Islamic postcolonialism. She uses the counter-narratives by narrating the change of Islam and Muslims' issues in order to refute and criticise the colonial discourse that usually misrepresents Islam and Muslims from an Islamic perspective. One of these controversial issues that the writer attempts to defend is 'hijab,' which not as the West claims as a kind of oppression, reflects the identity of a Muslim woman.

Umm Zakiyyah's *If I Should Speak*

In "*If I Should Speak,*" Umm Zakiyyah addresses different topics related to Muslims, the most important of which are Islamophobia and misunderstanding of Islam. She portrays the media as an evil means used to convey false information and unconstructive knowledge and demonstrates the process of knowledge transformation that the convert protagonist had experienced. She demonstrates how cognitive reconciliation led Tamika Douglass, one of the characters, to search for truth, change her negative attitudes and prejudices towards Islam and eventually become a convinced Muslim.

In *If I Should Speak*, Umm Zakiyyah reports how Muslims are subjected to prejudices and stereotypes promoted and incited by the media in America. She demonstrates how non-Muslim characters show prejudicial attitudes toward their Muslim counterparts, which is a result of media influence. Tamika's experience of having prejudicial attitudes against Islam reflects how Western media prejudges Islam and Muslims.

Tamika's feedback on Islam is expressed in Umm Zakiyyah's words: "She did not know much about Muslims aside from what the media portrayed of angry Black nationalists, religious fundamentalist men, and oppressed women" (p. 37). Muslims in America are a "secondary minority group;" therefore, Tamika knew little about them for they "were not a significant part of her life" (p. 123), and for all she knows is that Muslims will go to Hell (Ibid).

Having moved to the campus, Tamika met her new Muslim roommates, Aminah Ali and Durrah Gonzalez. Knowing that her roommates are Muslims, "her heart sank at the news, feeling a sense of xenophobia and anxiety about living with them even with knowing little of them, but "enough to know she didn't want one as a roommate," Aminah Ali, the religious one (p.5). Tamika's reaction can be explained in line with Thomas Sealy's view: "Muslims are likely to feature in abuse and prejudice and [bad] "news" (2017, p. 1). The narrator says, "She had heard a lot about Muslims and how strict they were, and she was not sure she would get along with Aminah at all, religion major or not" (p. 30).

Despite Tamika being a religious person using Islam as her research topic, she initially did not want to befriend Aminah who was very knowledgeable about Islam. In fact, Tamika has heard a lot about Muslims and "how strict [about religious practices] they were" (p. 30). She is not the type of person who often exaggerates her knowledge of others she does not know. She is different with her Muslim roommates for she has only known of Muslims from the media portraying them as "angry Black nationalists," "religious fundamentalist men" and "oppressed women" (p. 37). Tamika's attitudes can be defined as "'parallel barriers of prejudice' that involve 'a desire of many Western Europeans to hold Muslims at a distance" (Stoica, 2013, p. 24).

Tamika views Aminah as 'strict and oppressed:' strict for being devoted believer and oppressed for daily wearing of hijab. Misrepresentation of hijab develops Tamika's wrong perceptions that led to her to stereotype Islam and Muslims. Tamika considers hijab as a means of oppression practiced by Muslim men over Muslim women. Tamika's stereotypical attitudes here can be explained within Karin van Nieuwkerk's view: "Lack of knowledge of Muslim women's home-

grown historical and contemporary feminisms reinforces stereotyping of Islam by others as well as self-stereotyping practices" (2006, p. 199).

However, Tamika's attitude towards Aminah gradually begins to change. Tamika cries involuntarily while she listens to Aminah's reciting the Qur'an and begins to understand her spiritual strength, finding "herself empathising with whatever Aminah was feeling at that moment, sensing tears forming in her own eyes" (p. 35). Tamika sees why prayer is important to Aminah and Dee when she hears Aminah recites "strange words" from a "green book" [the Qur'an] and becomes more curious to understand the meaning of those strange but powerful words. In fact Islamic prayer raised a million questions in Tamika's mind.

In addition to Aminah's different view of perceiving Islam, Dr. Sanders, the religious professor, encourages Tamika to study Islam. He told her "I started reading about other religions, and it really opened my eyes. It made me realise there was something else out there. As a teenager, I never knew that others even had any real beliefs. I had thought of the people of the world as belonging to either one of two groups" (p. 38). His words helped her to end religious prejudice. Tamika believes that God creates people differently with different religions, beliefs, races, as well as roots, and sends different messengers to guide them to the truth but does not know that Islam is God's religion with a message of peace to all people.

Tamika reconsiders her perceptions and attitudes about Islam due to her parents' unanswered questions concerning Christianity. She blindly followed her parents' Christianity as God's true religion, which they believe is right, while all others are wrong (p. 73). According to Althusser (1984), "ideology is not just a case of the powerful imposing their ideas on the weak: subjects are 'born into' ideology, they find subjectivity within the expectations of their parents and their society, and they endorse it because it provides a sense of identity and security through structures such as language, social codes and conventions" (p. 37). When Tamika asks her best friend, Makisha, her parents and the preacher for her evidence, they reply, "We are only here to believe" (p. 71). Makisha's belief reflects the words of Daniela Stoica, "In addition, since the power to act in specific ways, to claim resources, to exert control or to be the object of control depends on the dominant types of

knowledge available in a specific society, knowledge and power emerge in interconnected forms" (p. 118).

Tamika's burning desire for the truth encouraged her to write down her first 'paper' on Islam and told Dr. Sanders: "I guess I'll just do it on Islam" (p. 36). It was 'curiosity' that led Tamika to read about Islam as she believes that all of what she knows about Islam and Muslims "is nothing like Aminah appeared" (p. 37). She wanted to learn about Islam and started to recite the Qur'an. She further engage in a discussion with Aminah about some topics related to Islamic teachings, about what Islam is and how to become a Muslim, and read about different matters such as hijab, jihad, prophet Mohammed (PBUH) and women's issues.

Being the first authentic source of Islam, Tamika starts learning and understanding the Qur'an. Karin van Nieuwkerk (2006) writes "Since apprehending Islam as a rational religion was important to the women to continue their search for knowledge, which typically began with reading the Qur`an as the ultimate authority" (p. 205). Having understood the exegesis of the Qur'an, Tamika comes to the truth that Jesus is not God's son but like other messengers sent by God to guide people to His path. Eventually, Tamika believes that Muhammad (PBUH) was the last and final messenger sent to the whole world regardless of their races, cultures, beliefs and traditions. Umm Zakiyyah writes "we have only to apply what has been taught to us by Allah through our Prophet. The West has to learn to accept that there is only One God, even for Christians. Civilisation is only in the state of ubudiyyah (servitude) to Allah; this is the same for everybody" (p. 142). Furthermore, Tamika recognises the essence of Islam and the meaning of becoming a Muslim.

Having had regular dialogues with Aminah, Tamika has remarkably some pivotal Islamic issues. This dialogue is commented on by Sylvie Avakian's statement that "It assumes the signification of the relationship between the 'I' and the 'Other'" (2015, p. 83). Some of Tamika's misreprepresentions due to the media's influence are clarified by Aminah and she now understands Islam as a whole (its teachings and practices). She learned about Aminah's perception of hijab, jihad and that Islam respects and protects women rights in general and particularly in respect with marriage, inheritance and freedom of participation and speech within the scope of Sharia. To seek the truth of Islam, Aminah's help made her understand the Muslim society from inside. Tamika's experience

fits Duncan Black Macdonald's method of "understanding the other from within." This helped Tamika to remove all suspicions about Islam and Muslims, and answer all the questions reasonably, rationally and convincingly. In this context, Daniela Stoica stated that "the acquisition of new knowledge perspectives and cognitive reconciliation are also reflected in the researchers' discourses that describe the Islamic message as 'logical' and 'simple,' and acknowledge the monotheistic dimension of Islam by contrasting it with their previous religious affiliation" (p. 112).

It is noteworthy to mention that Umm Zakiyyah draws attention to Tamika's prejudgment of jihad as a concept affiliated with terrorism and violence. Previously, and because of the media manipulation of facts, Tamika believed that jihad was a term denoting "terrorism which is done in the name of God" (p. 110) and that jihad and terrorism are interchangeable terms. Such a belief is obvious in Tamika's statement that "I could understand obeying a man and covering her body, but she did not support terrorism, even if done in the name of God" (p. 110). Md. Mahmudul Hasan explains how media manipulates and distorts some Islamic concepts and states "[jihad] is one of the most significant [instances] of linguistic colonialism" (2014, p. 9). Having done her research, Tamika now believes that jihad should not be affiliated with terrorism; it is a means of self-defense when Muslims are oppressed and persecuted (Marranci, 2006).

In her journey of writing a paper on Islam, she decided to visit a mosque as a place of worship and her unawareness of 'others' (Muslim) is apparent in her statement that "as if I were in another country." Her experience and trial of knowing others could be expressed in Gabriele Marranci's words "knowledge comes from different sources, social and non-social, which in any case are external to the organism. The human being needs to receive information from the environment" (2006, p. 17). Shocked with a surprise, at the mosque, Tamika watches Muslims passionately talking and smiling to one another. "Some women stopped to shake her hand, hug her, and say, "'As-salaamu-alaikum'" (p. 126). Umm Zakiyyah reports that Tamika has experienced estrangement and describes her feeling with this statement: "she felt awkward, out of place with each embrace, unfamiliar with such friendly contact between strangers" (p. 126). Despite such an 'estrangement,' Tamika admires the spirit of sisterhood between Muslim women and the vigorous

bond of unity which is described in the way "they stood shoulder-to-shoulder, foot-to-foot" (p. 126). She hardly believes how these people with different ages and belonging to different races and nationalities gather in one place to worship One God. Umm Zakiyyah states that "She [Tamika] was inspired by the sermon, even as she admired the prayers' unity" (p. 128). Tanya Gulevich lay emphasis on such a sense of peace at a mosque, stating that "Muslim architects designed magnificent mosques evoking the peace and transcendence of God and inspiring worshipers to humility and reverence" (2004, p. 90).

As self-educator and knowledge-seeker, Tamika has become very close to the 'truth' about Islam and Muslims. This has made her reconsider 'others' as well as her attitude and perception. She previously considered Muslim women oppressed for they wear hijab, and weak because they are dependent on men, and now being aware of her false prejudgment and stereotyping of Islam, she changed her approaches. Stuart Hall (1983) states that "the true knowledge without masking always leads to the recognition of the real" (p. 128). Such a change took place right away after Tamika mingled with Muslims especially Aminah whose personality she is very much amazed by, and she would never thought of her being outspoken and strong-minded. Umm Zakiyyah writes that "Aminah's appearance gave the impression that she was quiet and soft spoken" (p. 113). Tamika is very surprised, as well, that Aminah is such a pleasant woman with a sense of humour. When Tamika watches and listens to a "white woman and a Cuban woman sitting in a room with their families, reminiscing on their lives, their lives before Islam" (p. 131), she could not believe what she has witnessed since she thought of a Muslim woman to be 'oppressed' and 'persecuted' by man. She is even shocked to see Muslim women speaking, laughing, wearing beautiful clothes and 'having fun.' She was equally shocked by Aminah's mother, Sarah, with "white skin," "fair hair" and "green eyes" and could not believe that Sarah is the one whom she had seen wearing all black outside. Tamika now understands that Muslim women wearing hijab are not oppressed, that, they wear hijab to emphasise on their identity as Muslims who should be pious and modest. She blamed herself for misconceiving and misjudging Muslim women and now reconsidered her attitudes against Muslim women as "average women" and "regular people," realising that "They were not oppressed. They were not even introverts. Rather, they were opinionated, strong women,

who loved who they were and what they had chosen. No one had forced them into anything. No one had asked them to cover, told them they had to. They had simply done it, because God wanted them to." (p131)

Tamika's experience reflects Elizabeth Warnock Fernea's recognition of how the West unfairly misrepresents and portrays Muslim women's lives in Islam. She argues that "and so I set out, and over two years of traveling, discovered that the realities of Muslim women's lives today have far surpassed the discourse about those lives with which we have been presented in the West" (1998, p. ix). Tamika has reconsidered her views and attitudes and "her stereotypes were swept away like dust after a brisk wind, removing all doubts from her mind as to what she should do" (p.132). Eventually, she has recognised that she has been unaware and ignorant about 'others/Muslims.' Previously, Tamika as a black woman had suffered from 'prejudices' from her white ex-roommate, Jennifer. Now, she considers herself as a racist Christian labelling Muslims as "others." Ultimately, she has learned that "other religions could be attacked at the base, but no one, even the most scholarly of 'Islam's enemies,' had been able to attack the foundation of the religion, the pure worship of God" (p. 28). Her prejudices against Muslims are very similar to Jennifer's who mistreated her due to her different skin color. "She now understood what it meant to be racist like Jennifer, a White person who had carelessly flung a filthy, racist word at her, tearing at her heart? No. But it was possible; definitely possible that she had viewed Muslims the way Jennifer had viewed her."

Having learned about the 'true Islam,' Tamika has realised that she was a racist herself. She even starts to reconsider her religion and search for the truth of who Jesus is. Besides, she has questioned other beliefs that she has inherited from her family without knowledge. Daniela Stoica points out that "Once individuals discover Islamic knowledge, they reconsider their core assumptions concerning the nature of reality, truth, and knowledge, as well as their representations of the world and their role inside it. While they evolve as believers, they change their perspectives on religious knowledge and faith" (p. 109). She realised that she knows nothing about Christianity.

Consequently, Tamika starts first doubting her Christian beliefs, and second finding answers to her questions. She studied Christianity and shared her doubts with her friend, Makisha, who advises her to

believe in what her parents taught her and to not listen to her Muslims roommate(s) who try to convince her that 'Christianity' is controversial and telling her: "just remember that we ain't here to question God, we're just here to believe" (p. 43). Her words "just to believe" do not make sense to Tamika who has become more suspicious of Christianity. In this regard, Aminah emphasises that "people don't actually submit because of various reasons, like pride, fear, or weakness, or because they don't want to be ostracised by their family or friends, and so on. But for many others, they just want to hold on to the religion of their parents" (p. 59). In fact, Tamika has realised that her parents are influenced by the media in conceiving, Islam which has led them to have different stereotypes against Muslims; and that Makisha's parents influence made her blindly and unquestionably believe in 'Christianity.'

Tamika's ignorance can be further elaborated in Miller's words (1990) that "The peasant's destiny will be revealed to [her] by the leader [parents], in a relation of active to 'passive,' literate to 'illiterate,' progress to tradition, knowledge to 'ignorance'" (p. 44). Tamika has become more and more doubtful because of the discrepancies between the Pastor's answers and what she used to hear from her mother.

Umm Zakiyyah reconsiders Tamika's situation, stating that "Tamika concluded that she had believed in Christianity only because it was all she had been taught. And if that was a sufficient reason to 'just believe,' then how could Tamika believe her religion was right and others wrong, given that everyone was taught something, and, for many, it was not Christianity? So should they too 'just believe' because it had been taught to them by their parents and community? It made no sense. Certainly, there had to be more to truth than 'just believing without questioning'" (p. 73). This indicates the fact that knowledge plays an essential role in transforming one's prejudicial attitudes and false perceptions, and is a key for one to understand the truth and embrace Islam. Daniela Stoica states that "Islamic knowledge as actively embodied via devotional activities that contribute to the growth of Islamic subjectivities or the (re)activation of these women's real Islamic selves and simple religion based on a single truth. This is made up of Islamic truth and its monotheistic message" (p. 126).

Tamika's self-awareness has become stronger for her "feeling shamefully bare, stripped of her beliefs of herself" (p. 95). Tamika

has been wondering why the Bible has gone into a constant process of change since it is God's own words; while, the Holy Qur'an has never been altered or changed preserving its 'original source of truth, revelation and knowledge.' Karin van Nieuwkerk states that "Islam is a natural, social, and complete way of life. It is a rational, scientific and logical religion, and this makes it the most convincing religion as compared to the other monotheistic options" (2006, p. 107).

The end of the novel revels that Tamika has become a Muslim and her conversion can be read in Yazbeck Haddad's words: "acceptance of Islam as an individual journey from confusion to peace, from conflict to resolution, from drift to coherence, from emptiness to fulfillment" (2006, p. 42). When presenting her paper, Tamika shows up in hijab and announces her conversion to Islam. She calls her teachers and fellow classmates to re-consider and understand Islam from its original sources 'the Holy Qur'an and Hadith' saying "As we can see, Islam, the fastest growing religion in the world, is a holistic religion, its teachings affecting every aspect of the Muslim's life. Its roots reach back as far as Adam, and given its followers' strict adherence to its original teachings, it holds an authenticity that no other religion can rightfully claim. History shows that other religions have changed tremendously, their teachings having been adapted and compromised over time. And although, as we saw earlier, some heretical groups of Muslims seek to adapt the religion, Islam is the only religion that remains in its orthodox form. The teachings of Islam are profound and its message convincing, which is why I chose the religion for myself" (p. 192)

Overall, Tamika's overview of Islam can be summed up in three words: original, authentic and convincing. She recognised that she was ignorant and that she judged Islam without 'true knowledge.' However, she converted to Islam after having realised the truth. In this regard, Anthony C. Alessandrini states that "it was not only about asking the other to recognise his fault, for him to ask for forgiveness, to pay a compensation, but also for oneself about finding another access to recognition, which was through knowledge" (p. 270).

Having been closed to Muslims and studied Islam from its original sources, Tamika has realised that her being Islamophobic is unjustifiable. Umm Zakiyyah stresses that the Western media can be extremely hostile and prejudicial towards Muslims. In addition, Umm Zakiyyah refers

to Tamika's conversion to Islam by emphasising that non-Muslims' prejudicial attitudes toward Islam could change if they come to know about Islam from the 'original sources.' i.e. the Holy Qur'an and Hadith, as well as an unbiased media. To understand 'history-based fact,' Umm Zakiyyah emphasises the importance of religion-based dialogues. In sum, one's self-knowledge is a powerful tool to find the truth.

Tamika's interaction and mingling with Aminah in particular and Muslims in general, has led her to reconsider her prejudgments and stereotypes. In reference to Tamika's experience of giving up prejudicing and stereotyping Muslims, Umm Zakiyyah emphasises that self-knowledge and constructive dialogue are very important for "Westerns" to seek the truth, which helps them to co-exist with Muslims. In this regard, Tariq Ramadan emphasises that "dialogue is an act of conviction, of listening, of self-awareness, of self-knowledge, and the heart: together, these qualities constitute wisdom" (2004, p. 204).

Conclusion

In *If I Should Speak*, through the journey of Tamika from prejudging Islam to embracing it, Umm Zakiyyah reflects the power of knowledge that makes Tamika change her negative stereotypical prejudgments towards Islam and Muslims. Tamika's journey of being a Christian to eventually embrace Islam emphasises the role of self-knowledge in seeking the 'truth.' In other words, 'Westerners' should give up believing in what the media says about Islam, rather, they should be self-educators. They should rely on self-knowledge and cultivation, and refer to the original sources of Islam: the Holy Qur'an and Hadith.

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A Muslim Female Bildungsroman: Quest for Identity and Sisterhood in Islam in Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* (2005)

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Abstract: After 9/11 and 7/7 incidents, the question of faith and identity continuously generates huge interest among Muslims and non-Muslims in the UK. This paper aims to scrutinise the quest for identity and its relation to Islamic faith in a Muslim female bildungsroman, Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* (2005). It will explore the self-identification of the main character, Najwa and in particular will consider the geographical settings, Sudan and London, the shifting between twentieth and twenty-first centuries using Rita Felski's models of self-discovery and self-knowledge. It will also examine the transition of Najwa's identity from that of a secular Muslim in Sudan, to a woman with dual identities, before she becomes a practicing Muslim in London. The concepts of individualism and collectivism in Islam through the portrayal of sisterhood at Regent's Park Mosque, London will also be explored in the protagonist's search for an identity and rediscovery of faith.

Keywords: Leila Aboulela, *Minaret*, British Muslim literature, Muslim female bildungsroman

Abstrak: Selepas peristiwa 9/11 dan 7/7, persoalan mengenai iman dan identiti telah menjadi tumpuan yang besar di kalangan Muslim dan bukan Muslim di UK. Kertas kajian ini adalah bertujuan untuk mengkaji pencarian identiti dan hubungannya dengan keimanan berdasarkan kefahaman Islam dan ajaran Islam berpandukan sebuah novel iaitu *Minaret* (2005) karya Leila Aboulela. Kajian ini meneliti aspek pengenalan diri Najwa selaku watak utama di dalam novel ini

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berdasarkan latar belakang geografi di Sudan dan London, dan peralihan antara abad ke-20 dan ke-21 menggunakan model penemuan diri dan pengetahuan diri oleh Rita Felski. Ia juga mengkaji perubahan identiti Najwa daripada seorang Muslim sekular di Sudan, kepada wanita yang mempunyai dua identiti yang berbeza, sehingga menjadi seorang wanita Muslim yang mengamalkan ajaran Islam di London. Penceritaan mengenai kepentingan persaudaraan wanita di Masjid Regent's Park, London, dalam pencarian identiti watak utama adalah dikaji berdasarkan konsep individualisme dan kolektivisme dari kacamata Islam.

Kata kunci: Leila Aboulela, *Minaret*, Kesusasteraan British Muslim, Bildungsroman (kedewasaan) perempuan Muslim

Introduction

The quest for identity seems increasingly crucial for Muslims in Britain, particularly after a number of incidents such as 9/11, 7/7, Manchester Arena, the London Bridge terror attacks, and the Windrush Generation scandal. Because of these events, the concept of Britishness is hugely debated, and identities of British Muslims are questioned. However, identity is far from straightforward. The process of forming identity or self-identification varies depending on individuals, families and even different groups of people. Some may either assimilate, integrate or accommodate two or more cultures to construct their identity. However, most modern British Muslims reflect on the difficulties of reconciling Islamic faith, Muslim culture and Britishness as part of this process of identifying a secure identity in modern Britain. This article aims to scrutinise the quest for identity and its relation to the Islamic faith in a Muslim female bildungsroman, Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* (2005). It will explore the self-identification of the main character, Najwa, and in particular will consider the time and geographical settings – Sudan and London, and the shifting between twentieth and twenty-first centuries. This will be done by utilising Rita Felski's models of self-discovery and self-knowledge. Self-discovery in public sphere promotes assimilation to the host society while self-knowledge is a more personal voyage by understanding one's own consciousness and needs (Felski, 1989). This article will then discuss faith as an identity marker via the concepts of individualism in Islam (Felski's self-knowledge) and collectivism (Felski's self-discovery) through the portrayal of sisterhood portrayed at Regent's Park Mosque, London. The exploration of Najwa's developing

identity revolves around several phases in her life as she shifts from being a non-practicing Muslim in Sudan to a practicing Muslim in London.

Minaret's plot – the genre in which it is written, and the style of writing employed – in particular, the non-linear arrangement of chapters is very important for the purpose of exploring Najwa's shift of identities in relation to her faith. The structure of the novel is complex as Najwa is described in two different geographical settings, which are Sudan and London, and the novel is also set both in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The novel begins in Khartoum in 1984-1985 before moving to London in 2003, 1989-1990, and 1991 and it ends in London in 2004. The non-chronological order of the chapters thus offers an expression of women's constantly evolving identity. Najwa is introduced as a secular upper-class Sudanese, but the novel then gradually shifts to a view of her as a practicing Muslim in London. This organisational strategy can be read as Aboulela's method of enhancing a sense of her main character's fluidity and her identity from a Muslim youth to a Muslim grown woman.

Female Bildungsroman as a Genre

Aboulela's organisational strategy suggests that *Minaret* may be categorised as a female bildungsroman, as the plot of the novel expresses and emphasises Najwa's quest for her own sense of identity and her process of rediscovering faith. Generally, the bildungsroman is viewed as a nineteenth century form that incorporates a story of an individual's self-development within the concept of a specific social order. Some critics also define bildungsroman as the articulation of a concept relating to 'apprentices of life' (Hader, 2005). This expresses the traditional concept of bildungsroman as a biography or life-writing encapsulating the protagonist's quest towards self-development, maturity and knowledge. Rita Felski (1989) however proposes that a female or feminist bildungsroman offers a different vantage point to the traditional concept of bildungsroman:

> "…the heroine has to struggle painfully toward by freeing herself from the subordinate role she has occupied in the heterosexual relationship. Whereas the male Bildungsroman is often defined as a novel of apprenticeship and typically depicts the childhood and early manhood of the protagonist,

> the feminist Bildungsroman thus embraces a much wider range of ages. It is often after the experience of marriage that the heroine is able to see through and reject the seductive myth of romance as the key to female identity, so that the journey to self-discovery frequently occurs at a relatively late stage in the protagonist's life" (p.138).

This shows that the feminist bildungsroman is not entirely the same as the concept of traditional bildungsroman as the latter offers a simple and straightforward story of the life journey of the protagonist at an early stage in life. Traditional bildungsroman can be found in works by, for example, Charles Dickens, such as *David Copperfield* and *Great Expectations*. Dickens' works portray the standard form of a traditional bildungsroman, which introduces the protagonist's childhood and concludes once she or he has redefined a point of significant development in their lives. Ilott (2015) stated that "the Bildungsroman (from the German for a novel of education or transformation) is a novel from predisposed towards discussions of identity in crisis, as youthful protagonists consider various ontologies that they will either accept or reject in their paths to maturity, self-awareness and autonomy" (p.28). The female or feminist bildungsroman, however, is more symbolic, often non-linear, and does not necessarily use the habitual framework where the life journey of the protagonist begins during childhood and ends during early adulthood. This feminist model can be seen in *Minaret* as readers are only introduced to Najwa at the point when she is halfway through her teenage years in Sudan with limited information about her childhood background. Then the text is fast-forwarded to her life in London, first as an exiled daughter of a politician then as a maid. Felski's feminist model of the bildungsroman suggests that the female protagonist struggles to free herself from heterosexual relationships and subordinate roles and indeed we can see this model portrayed in *Minaret*. This is portrayed when Najwa begins to regain her faith and sense of identity after the male characters in her life such as Anwar and Tamer have left. *Minaret* also illustrates that Najwa accomplishes self-satisfaction towards the end of the novel that can be seen as a parallel to Felski's suggestion that "the self-discovery journey of female protagonist often occurs later in life" (Felski, 1989, p.127).

On a similar vein, Ilott (2015) added a significant point in her book chapter, "British Muslim Bildungsromane", by stating that "it is

more important than ever to consider the nuanced accounts of Muslim faith and identity provided in fiction and to evaluate crucially the relationship between Britishness and Islam enacted therein" (p.27). This is undoubtedly important when exploring *Minaret* as the main character, Najwa, adopts an identity that the primary signifier is a Muslim or an Islamic identity despite her multicultural background coming from Sudan and an immigrant Muslim in London. Aboulela successfully "recentres identity around Muslim faith, releasing her Bildungsromane from West/East, colonial/postcolonial, centre/margin binaries. She gives her characters a new stable and rooted mode of being whilst challenging Orientalist stereotypes" (Ilott, 2015, p.43). In a later section of this paper, we will explore the ways in which the quest of identity in *Minaret* is strongly centred with Islamic faith which directly suggests *Minaret* as a Muslim female bildungsroman.

Another element that can be observed in Aboulela's written style is discussed earlier. *Minaret* is introduced and written in a symbolic way:

> "I look up and see the minaret of Regent's Park mosque visible above the trees. I have never seen it so early in the morning in this vulnerable light. London is at its most beautiful in autumn. In summer it is seedy and swollen, in winter it is overwhelmed by Christmas lights and in spring, the season of the birth, there is always disappointment. Now at its best, now it is poised like a mature woman whose beauty is no longer fresh but still surprisingly potent" (p.1).

This extract is particularly significant in the exploration of identity and its multiple phases in *Minaret*. This can be seen when Aboulela introduces her main character, Najwa, in relation to the British four seasons: autumn, winter, summer, and spring. She describes these seasons and then aligns these to a woman's maturity. This suggests that the whole opening section symbolises Najwa's character, who at the end of the novel is portrayed to be a mature woman who has changed both physically and spiritually from a non-practicing Muslim girl to a practicing Muslim woman. This correlation between the British four seasons and Najwa's sense of identity suggests that *Minaret* may be best understood symbolically. The novel is full of visual imagery that aids readers to engage and understand Najwa's shift of identity. Despite the fact that the novel is not written in a direct manner, it emphasises that it is about a woman's search for her own sense of identity, particularly

as the above extract is written at the beginning of the novel. It is also interesting that Aboulela describes spring as the season of birth, but suggests that it brings disappointment whilst autumn is described to be the most beautiful season. Possibly, in the context of the novel, autumn offers the benefits of maturity, thus maturity itself is the reason for autumn's beauty.

Quest for Identity

The quest for identity in *Minaret* is mainly presented through Najwa's growth, which ultimately leads her to regain faith. Initially, faith is absent in Najwa's life, but her sense of self shifts significantly after her rediscovery of faith. Rita Felski proposes two useful strategies in searching for an identity arguing that it may be found, either through self-discovery in what she terms as 'public sphere' or through inward discovery of 'self-knowledge'. Self-discovery in a public sphere is an assimilation process where one will try to adapt to other cultures. On the other hand, an inward self-knowledge is when one tries to understand one's own consciousness and tries to integrate it into the public domain (Felski, 1989). An inward self-knowledge aids in finding satisfaction as both inner self and public world are taken into consideration without having to reject and conform specifically to one culture. Meanwhile, self-discovery in a public sphere is limited only to the process of assimilation instead of taking into account either integration or accommodation. Furthermore, Felski (1989) suggests that the separation of inward consciousness and outward self-realisation does not signify resistance and both strategies are to be perceived as "mutually inclusive" (p.127). The term 'mutually inclusive' suggests that self-discovery in a public sphere and inward self-knowledge are not standalone strategies as they may be interlinked to one another. This can be observed in *Minaret* as self-discovery in a public sphere and inward self-knowledge are portrayed as mutually inclusive as Najwa finds herself undergoing both strategies in finding a sense of identity. These strategies help her to rediscover her faith and become a practicing Muslim. Thus, both Felski's strategies in searching for an identity offer useful frameworks for reading *Minaret.*

In *Minaret*, the ways in which Aboulela uses time and geographical settings are significant as they contribute to our understanding of Najwa's quest for identity. The novel takes place in twentieth century

Sudan and twenty-first century London. This breakdown illustrates two opposing identities that Najwa holds, first as a secular Muslim teenager, and later, a practicing Muslim woman. Felski's strategy of self-discovery in a public sphere can be observed when Najwa is portrayed undergoing several phases of assimilation from Sudanese culture to British culture. For example, she is mentioned wearing western clothing, she starts drinking tea and coffee without sugar, she contemplates buying an Arabic magazine or *Slimming*, and she even visits Selfridges without buying any goods, simply for the British experience. Furthermore, Najwa's assimilation to British culture begins to affect her dressing styles: "In Khartoum I would never wear such a short skirt in public. I might wear it at the club or when visiting friends by the car, but not for walking in the street" (p.129). This shows that Najwa is aware of changes in her lifestyle and this includes the way she dresses as she does not observe her normal dress code when she is in London. She is more confident doing the things that are considered inappropriate in Khartoum when she is in London. This is most probably due the state of Britain as a non-Muslim country, or simply an example of hedonism. Thus, Najwa feels as if she has much more freedom than when she was in Sudan, an Islamic country. Although freedom may be subjective from one individual to another, the freedom she feels may be due to the fact that being away from home means being detached from strong familial, cultural, and religious ties. In other words, in Britain, Najwa feels as if she is not forced to abide by the Islamic faith or any Muslim cultures. However, this freedom is not always described unproblematically.

Najwa's character is described as lost in the freedom she is offered in London but later in the text, London is also the space she becomes closer to her faith. This phase of religiously observing Islamic faith and practices only occurs after she unsuccessfully tries to conform to British culture. Felski's second model of inward self-knowledge is significant in discussing this phase of transition as Najwa is described as unsure of her actual identity: "For a brief moment, I am not sure who I am, the Najwa who danced at the American club disco in Khartoum or Najwa, the maid Lamya hired by walking into Central Mosque one afternoon" (p.111). Najwa is capable of reflecting and engaging with her inner self which offers her the ways in which to contemplate and thoroughly analyse herself without any distractions from her surroundings. Lindsey Moore (2012) in her reading of *Minaret* suggests that a 'voyage inward'

is when a female identity is reacquired by disengaging from dominant social norms and regained through the consciousness of a female self. This idea is useful as Najwa is portrayed successfully finding her own sense of identity after she withdraws herself from the normalities of her former life. For example, Najwa's decision to leave her boyfriend, Anwar, acts as a catalyst for her shifting identities from a non-practicing Muslim teenager to a practicing Muslim woman.

A number of episodes in *Minaret* prompt us to view Felski's model of inward self-knowledge as a suitable method for reading Najwa's character. However, Anwar's character can also be considered as the source of epiphany in Najwa's quest for identity. Anwar does not aid Najwa in her rediscovery of Islamic faith but instead he influences her to constantly indulge in worldly affairs and sins. Thus, Anwar's character indirectly contributes to Najwa's quest for identity as he triggers her to respond to her own consciousness, and to finally rebel against his orders and acts. This is can be observed in the novel when Anwar and his friends do not observe their fasting during Ramadhan, and Najwa feels concerned about it:

> "Instead of getting the ice I locked myself in the bathroom. My mind felt tilted. I almost expected to look in the mirror and see my neck craned to one side. I had always observed Ramadhan even when Mama was ill in hospital […] Fasting was the only religious thing I ever did – how many days have I missed? Anwar knocked the door and I thought, 'He knows I'm upset, he's coming looking for me.' But he just needed the toilet" (p.232).

This incident provokes Najwa to question her identity, and to reconsider her relationship with Anwar. It is as if as a result of this event, she begins to engage with her inner self and learns to prioritise herself over Anwar and his affairs; this can be identified as a form of inward self-knowledge. These questions of Islamic practices, specifically, fasting, and the dynamics of her relationship with Anwar indirectly remind Najwa of her mother, her home country, Sudan, and her religion, Islam. Hence, Anwar's character can be considered as the source of epiphany or a catalyst that triggers Najwa to begin thinking about her sense of identity through inward self-knowledge instead of self-discovery in a public sphere. Furthermore, the word 'mirror' in the above extract is significant in exploring Najwa's shift of identities as the concept is repeated twice

in the novel. The second appearance of the 'mirror' is described in the above event that takes place at Anwar's flat. An earlier use of the idea is found describing the night when Najwa's father is arrested at their house in Sudan, and Najwa is mentioned staring at the mirror thinking it was a dream: "Wide awake, I went to the bathroom. I stared at myself in the bathroom mirror, smoothed my eyebrows, admired how the yellow of my pyjamas suited my skin and forgot about Baba." (p.54). Both of these incidents signify Najwa's shifts of identity as she leaves Sudan after the first incident and later is described as drifting apart from Anwar and her secular lifestyle. Therefore, the image of the 'mirror' indicates a glimpse of Najwa's inner self which makes her question her own sense of identity and her principles in life indirectly leading her to explore which identity to uphold or find suitable for herself.

Faith as an Identity Marker

One of the significant ways of exploring Najwa's quest for identity is through the relationship between faith and identity. Najwa's growth is strongly interlinked with faith, particularly, in her quest to rediscover Islamic faith. Islamic faith is not parallel to Muslim culture, as faith is a global phenomenon inclusive of all Muslims despite their differences in nationality, ethnicity, and geographical setting. It is a global portrayal of Muslims in that it focuses on the Islamic teachings and practices that are derived solely from Islamic scriptures such as the Quran and Hadith literature and Islamic jurisprudence, and puts aside local Muslim cultures. Thus, Islamic faith is more transcendental than Muslim culture, as it applies to all Muslims regardless of time and space. Examples of Islamic faith are practices that are bounded by the pillars of Islam such as praying five times a day, fasting during Ramadan, and performing Hajj when one is able to. One of the practices that is often debated is the act of veiling or wearing *hijab*. When observing these practices, they indirectly and directly make Muslims, particularly Muslim women, across the globe more visible in public especially when they are not within a Muslim community and a majority Muslim country. Hasan (2015) offers a useful view of this as he suggests that the religion of Islam itself has no boundaries, and its believers and practitioners tend to feel at home despite being in different geographical settings. This view is depicted in many of Aboulela's works such as *Minaret* and *The Translator* as the main characters are described as feeling at home when practising faith in Britain despite not being literally and physically at home in Sudan.

Tariq Ramadan (2010) suggests that culture and faith are interconnected, and that faith tends to be grounded in or related to a specific geographical setting. He states that:

> "[t]here is no faith or religion without culture, nor any culture without a religious substrate, but religion is not culture: operating distinction is not easy […] They stick to the ways of life of their countries of origin, often confusing religion, culture and tradition" (p.43).

This suggests that Islamic faith and Muslim culture are mutually significant and work alongside each other in shaping one's Muslim or Islamic identity. However, at times, this overlapping of practices may cause confusion as to what is Islamic faith and what is culturally inscribed. In Shelina Janmohamed's *Love in Headscarf*, for instance, Shelina and her Buxom Aunties have different beliefs concerning what constitutes the idea of an Islamic identity because Shelina is more inclined to practise Islamic faith than rely on culture. On the other hand, the Buxom Aunties are more culturally-driven with their Muslim culture of South Asian roots.

Ramadan (2010) argues that the differences of identities among Muslims globally may be due to diverse interpretations of the Quran and Hadith literature, and a diversity of cultures and traditions which have existed prior to Islam (p.42). Muslims from Africa, Asia, and Europe share the same religion but have their own principles and ways in which they practice faith. This can be observed in the characters of the sisters at Regent's Park Mosque in *Minaret* as they came from multiple backgrounds and cultures yet all of them share the same faith. However, the distinction between Islamic faith and Muslim culture in *Minaret* is not as apparent as most British Muslim writings such as *Love in a Headscarf* and *The Making of Mr Hai's Daughter* since *Minaret* seems to offer a more positive portrayal of a Muslim identity that is not too attached to any culture. Ilott (2015) also believes that "*Minaret* can be read as an example of the prioritisation of religion as a new source of identity for her postcolonial, migrant characters" (p.44). On a similar vein, Sorour (2021) argues that despite the fact that *Minaret* narrates a journey of Najwa who is in a dilemma to succumb to Western norms when she first arrived in London, in the end, it (the Western norms) could not save her. This is undeniably accurate when exploring *Minaret* through the lens of postcolonialism as none of the characters are

bounded by any cultural or national backgrounds. Instead, their priority is practicing Islam and upholding Islamic faith as their identity marker.

Ramadan (1999) offers a useful definition of Muslim identity as an identity that is "altogether faith, rulings, emotions, and feelings which have to be organised, shaped, harmonised within a spiritual and active way of life" (p.179). The Muslim identity that *Minaret* offers is not limited to strict Islamic rulings. Instead it offers a larger scope by mixing faith and emotions together. This is evident when Najwa observes:

> "Sometimes the tears ran down my face. I sweated and felt a burning along my skin, in my chest. This [faith] was the scrub I needed. Exfoliation, clarifying, deep-pore cleanse – words I knew from the beauty pages of magazines and the counters of Selfridges. Now they were for my soul not my skin" (p.247).

Terms such as 'exfoliation, clarifying, and cleanse' are more common nowadays as people are more concerned with beauty and health, and Selfridges is undoubtedly well-known to British people. The above extract shows that Aboulela successfully describes her character's feeling of longing for faith in a metaphorical way by integrating both modern day lifestyles, or specifically British lifestyle, and faith to offer readers a glimpse of how Najwa's inner self operates. Thus, the Muslim identity that *Minaret* offers is not only bound to Islamic faith but instead suggests that faith, emotions, and culture can be harmonised. The phrase: "Now they were for my soul not my skin" offers a double meaning that suggests the terms derived from modern day skincare routine can offer a wider meaning by connecting those terms with soul cleansing instead. Thus, this duality in meaning suggests that harmonising and overlapping faith and culture are possible.

Although we have explored that Muslim identity is a mixture of Islamic faith and Muslim culture, Anshuman Mondal (2008) suggests that Muslim identity tends to be more common among those who are involved in mass migration either voluntarily or forced. He states that "there is a more profound and fundamental way in which migration has affected Muslim identity" (p.115). He suggests that a diasporic community asks greater questions about identity, and in most scenarios, those who are dispersed find it hard to self-identify as anything other than a Muslim. Many of the characters explored in British Muslim

writings, or perhaps British Muslims in reality as well, feel as if they are less British and less Asian and more of a Muslim although in reality, they are a mix of all three: British, Asian, and Muslim, for instance. In *Minaret* this is evident in one of Najwa's conversations with Tamer when they discuss each other's identities, and how they self-identify themselves. Tamer states:

> "I've lived everywhere except Sudan: in Oman, Cairo, here. My education is Western and that makes me feel that I am Western. My English is stronger than my Arabic. So I guess, no, I don't feel very Sudanese though I would like to be. I guess being a Muslim is my identity" (p.110).

Mondal's idea is exemplified here as the characters in *Minaret* are more prone to adopt a practicing Muslim identity or rather Islamic identity instead of culturally-driven identities. In *Minaret*, faith seems to be portrayed as the main objective of its characters as all of them want to uphold a Muslim identity that is driven by Islamic faith more than any other sense of identity. Rehana Ahmed (2017) states that "faith is a positive component of identity and here [in *Minaret*] too, the protagonist Najwa journeys from a vague cultural identification with Islam to a profound and enabling piety" (p.218). This is a useful reading of Najwa's journey as readers are not informed of Najwa's cultural identification or anything cultural when she is in Sudan, but the novel is then fast-forwarded to her time in London, in search of an identity that leads her to rediscover Islam. It is because of Najwa's religious faith that she is able to articulate an Islamic feminism which is at odds with secular feminisms that have historically sought to overcome religion.

Individualism in Islam and Collectivism through the Portrayal of Sisterhood at Regent Park Mosque, London

The relationship between faith and identity in *Minaret* is portrayed in two ways. One of these explores the concept of individualism in Islam and its relationship to collectivism through the sisterhood at Regent's Park Mosque. These two concepts can be scrutinised using Rita Felski's models of self-knowledge and self-discovery since the concept of individualism can be seen as a form of self-knowledge where faith is a unique spiritual and individualistic bond within oneself. Meanwhile, self-discovery can be elucidated through the shared sisterhood in the novel. The term 'individualism' is defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary*

(2024) as "the habit of being independent and self-reliant; behaviour characterised by the pursuit of one's own goals without reference to others; free and independent individual action or thought" or "the principle or theory that individuals should be allowed to act freely and independently in economic and social matters without collective or state interference. Opposed to collectivism." This definition of individualism may be seen as promoting negativity as individualism is often regarded as a self-centred concept that is only concerned with oneself and not with others. However, there are a number of ways in which the concept of individualism is viewed and practised in the past and today. In fact, the concept of individualism varies as the West and the East view them in different ways especially in relation to collectivism. The East is not as positive as the West concerning the concept of individualism as collectivism is more common in their everyday life. On the other hand, in the West, individualism has evolved as a common social practice, especially in striving for one's rights, interests, and achievements. This distinction might be seen as an oversimplification, but it is still useful for the purpose of this paper.

Contrariwise, the concept of individualism in Islam offers a different form of meaning as it refers to a unique relationship that one has with one's God without having to have a mediator such as an *imam* or a priest to speak to God. Aboulela explores this idea in one of her interviews with Catherine Rashid (2012) when she states that "I think individualism is a good thing in Islam, in that every Muslim has a direct relationship with Allah without the need of church or clergy" (p.621). This direct connection with God is exclusively personal as it is only between oneself and the inner self. It is of course impossible to know how an individual perceives faith and God; while individuals may share similar values, culture, and even surroundings in a collective community, they may not all share faith in the same way. There are undoubtedly many types of individualism but I would like to categorise this kind of individualism, in *Minaret*, as spiritual individualism due to the protagonist's personal and unique relationship with God (Allah).

Borhandden Musah (2011) adds to Rashid's idea of individualism as he sees individualism in Islam as "creating a link to Allah, emotional stability and balance, patience at hardships, flexibility in facing reality, optimism, and uniqueness of Muslim personality and (that it) develops socialisation" (p.71-71). This suggests a deeper form of individualism

as it offers various outcomes and elements instead of simply a link to God. Again, these may differ from one person to another. This form of individualism in Islam can be perceived as an important aspect in shaping a Muslim identity as it links identity and faith together. This can be observed in *Minar*et when Najwa first enters Regent's Park Mosque, and she says to herself: "I wanted you to be good but I wasn't sure if I was prepared" (p.237). Then she adds, "I sat hunched on the floor, knowing I wasn't good, knowing I was far away and just taking the first step in coming here still wasn't enough."(p.238). This scenario of talking to herself suggests an intimate connection that is spiritual as Najwa connects reclaiming her faith while at the same time finding her identity. In other words, Najwa consciously wants to adopt a more Islamic identity as her personal decision without it being forced upon her.

The concept of spiritual individualism in *Minaret* can be further explored when Najwa is described as surrounded by practicing Muslims at her university back in Sudan, but is not even influenced or inclined to practise her faith: "I walked past them to the garden outside and sat on the steps of the porch watching those who weren't praying. Not everyone prayed" (p.42). This suggests that faith is something personal and is not shared by everyone. Though the act of practising faith is done publicly, it does not attract everyone to perform it. Despite sharing the same faith, each individual is affected differently, and unfortunately, some may not be affected at all. This can be seen in this episode where Najwa is portrayed to be the one who is not praying and mentioned as only observing others who pray. This suggests that faith is indeed a more personal concept. Najwa is gradually affected by all these religious practices as she is repeatedly mentioned to be envious of those who pray and wear hijab at her university, and of her maids who wake up early to pray and recite the Quran on the lawn of her house in Sudan. She states "Our house was a house where only the servants prayed. […] reciting the Quran until it was time for the dawn prayer. I remember him [the guard at her house] sitting cross-legged in the garden, dark as a tree" (p.95). *Minaret* portrays faith as an individualistic concept but at the same time makes its main character, Najwa, attracted to faith in a subtle way. This can be observed in the novel as Najwa is placed in a situation where she is surrounded by practicing Muslims both at home and university in Sudan though she is not a practicing Muslim. It may

seem like the portrayal of faith is a form of collectivism, but instead, the novel makes us view the concept of faith as both individualistic and within a collective sphere. This is because if faith is really only a collective concept, Najwa eventually will be portrayed among those who are practicing since she is surrounded by practicing Muslims, but she is not. Thus, the concept of individualism in Islam is indeed personal and spiritual as the feeling itself is not shared. Najwa only begins to understand this concept of individualism after she rediscovers her faith when she is alone in London: "I reached out for spiritual pleasure and realised that this was what I had envied in the students who lined up to pray on the grass of Khartoum University. This is what I had envied in our gardener reciting the Quran, our servants who woke up at dawn. Now when I heard the Quran recited, there wasn't a bleakness in me or numbness, instead I listened and I was alert" (p.243). This suggests that faith is indeed individualistic or personal in nature as it is only after Najwa rediscovers faith that she then understands that the hollowness within her was actually her longing for faith despite being surrounded by practising Muslims.

However, in spite of the importance of individualism as in Najwa's rediscovery of faith, her sense of identity is also a product of collectivism (as Rita Felski's categorises as self-discovery) through the sisterhood she surrounds herself with at Regent's Park Mosque. The sisterhood at Regent's Park Mosque play a vital role in shaping Najwa's identity in relation to faith and it offers a form of collective identity. The sisters share the same faith despite having different backgrounds in terms of culture, ethnicity, and language. This can be seen in the text in the relationship between Najwa and the Senegalese ambassador's wife as they do not speak the same language yet seem to understand one another: "I didn't tell her more than my name. There was no need – we had come together to worship and it was enough […] Evening after evening, every day for three weeks, we stood and knelt together. Then our periods swung and arrived at the same time. One day I was praying and she was not there. The next day, I was absent too" (p.188). This illustrates that the interaction between Najwa and the Senegalese ambassador's wife is unique as they do not share any common values or even language but only the act of attending the congregation prayers during the nights of Ramadan. This scenario can also be seen as an example that suggests a form of individualism in Islam yet in a collective manner. It is

collective in the sense that these sisters at the mosque may or may not know each other personally but they are capable of practising their faith together. Furthermore, the sisterhood at Regent's Park Mosque can be considered as similar to the concept of brotherhood in Islam. Zygmunt Bauman (2004) defines 'brotherhood' as "the epitome of squaring the circle: different yet the same, separate yet inseparable, independent yet joined." (p.10). This definition of brotherhood suggests a parallel view to the sisterhood in *Minaret*, as Aboulela successfully portrays that the sisters are the same but at the same time different. They are considered the same in terms of their act of seeking and practising faith. This can be observed when Najwa describes the gatherings at the mosque: "I did like them. I liked the informality of sitting on the floor and the absence of men […] I would leave the mosque refreshed, wide awake and calm, almost happy."(p.243). The satisfaction and happiness that Najwa describes from her visits to the mosque signifies that the sisterhood at Regent's Park Mosque acts as a catalyst to her rediscovery of faith and identity. Therefore, in *Minaret*, Najwa's sense of identity is a product of both individualism and collectivism, and both contribute to Najwa's quest for identity in modern Britain.

Conclusion

Minaret is a Muslim female bildungsroman that significantly portrays its main character, Najwa undergoing several challenges in searching for an identity as she goes through a transition from a non-practicing Muslim teenager in Sudan to a practicing Muslim woman in London. The transition is underpinned by her faith. Both Felski's strategies of searching for identity offer useful models for reading and interpreting the quest for identity in *Minaret* but, ultimately, Felski's model of inward self-knowledge is portrayed as a more successful framework in aiding Najwa's rediscovery of faith and her adoption of a Muslim identity. One of the male characters in the novel, Anwar, also acts a catalyst for Najwa's quest for identity, as his character causes Najwa to engage with her inner self. Furthermore, the concepts of individualism in Islam and collectivism through the portrayal of sisterhood at Regent's Park Mosque contribute in shaping Najwa's quest for identity. The concepts of individualism and collectivism both work hand in hand in Najwa's phases of rediscovering Islam utilising Rita Felski's strategies. Hence, the quest for identity in *Minaret* is strongly rooted to Najwa's rediscovery of faith, and by the end of the text, she is illustrated as a

practicing Muslim woman. The Muslim identity that Najwa upholds is a sense of identity that transcends cultural and national barriers by recentring Islam as the primary signifier. *Minaret* is a powerful literary text as it highly emphasises the strength of faith of a Muslim woman living in modern Britain. Thus, indubitably *Minaret* can be considered as a Muslim female bildungsroman that successfully debunks stereotypical images of Muslim women in the West that are commonly illustrated as Othered.

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Freedom as Connection to God: An Analysis of Two Novels by Muslim Women's Writers in the Western Diaspora

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Abstract: This article is built on the postulation that critical reading of fiction by Muslim women writers has often favoured frameworks that locate the texts as a form of 'writing back' against stereotypes of Muslim women. I suggest that while such perspectives are useful, they have also led to the under exploration of the influence that Islam has on fiction writing, particularly on the portrayal of women and their everyday lives. As an attempt to address this shortcoming, in this article, I present an analysis of two novels, *Minaret* (2006) by Leila Aboulela and *Saints and Misfits* (2017) by S.K. Ali, which are focused on the demonstration of faith by the female characters, particularly relating it to how they connect to God. This is done by utilising Allison Weir's (2013) conceptualisation of freedom as connection and belonging to God where the submission to rituals and norms is seen as a method to create a connection to God. I argue that, in the novels, the centrality of God in the lives of the protagonists is prominent. Thus, when they experience moments of spiritual depravity, they are pushed towards an improvement of personal religious commitment. This commitment has a central aim of connecting to God, and when it is realised, the female protagonists are released from the captivity of worldly desires and expectations.

Keywords: Muslim women's writing, Leila Aboulela, S.K. Ali, Muslims in diaspora

Abstrak: Makalah ini dibina atas anggapan bahawa pembacaan kritikal terhadap fiksyen oleh penulis wanita Muslim sering kali menggunakan kerangka

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yang melihat teks sebagai satu bentuk 'penulisan semula' terhadap stereotaip wanita Muslim. Makalah ini mencadangkan bahawa walaupun perspektif ini berguna, ia juga telah membawa kepada kurangnya penerokaan pengaruh Islam terhadap penulisan fiksyen, khususnya dalam menggambarkan wanita dan kehidupan harian mereka. Sebagai usaha untuk menangani kekurangan ini, makalah ini membentangkan analisis terhadap dua novel, *Minaret* (2006) karya Leila Aboulela dan *Saints and Misfits* (2017) karya S.K. Ali, yang memfokuskan kepada penzahiran iman oleh watak-watak wanita, terutamanya berkaitan dengan bagaimana mereka berhubung dengan Tuhan. Ini dilakukan dengan menggunakan konsep kebebasan sebagai hubungan dan kepunyaan kepada Tuhan oleh Allison Weir (2013), di mana penyerahan kepada ritual dan norma dilihat sebagai kaedah untuk mencipta hubungan dengan Tuhan. Dalam dua buah novel ini, keutamaan Tuhan dalam kehidupan protagonis adalah jelas. Oleh itu, apabila mereka mengalami saat-saat kekosongan rohani, mereka terdorong untuk meningkatkan komitmen agama mereka. Komitmen ini bertujuan untuk menghubungkan diri kepada Tuhan, dan apabila ia dicapai, para protagonis wanita dilepaskan daripada belenggu keinginan dan jangkaan duniawi.

Kata kunci: Penulisan wanita Muslim, Leila Aboulela, S.K. Ali, Muslim dalam diaspora

Introduction

The image of the oppressed Muslim woman in Western literature has a long history of production and dissemination, tracing back to the height of the Ottoman Empire and enduring through the European colonial era (Kahf, 1999). It remains prevalent in contemporary narratives, particularly after 9/11 (Abu-Lughod, 2013). Bernadette Andrea (2009) identifies early modern English literature as a key period where patriarchal travel writing shaped these stereotypes. English women writers of the time replicated these depictions, often intertwining feminist demands with "[O]rientalist discourses" (p. 286). Andrea (2007) further traces the roots of these portrayals to Elizabeth I's correspondence with Safiye, the Ottoman queen mother. Although not a reigning queen, Safiye held an influential position on her son, Mehmed III's administration during an Ottoman era where women had significant influence – a period described as the Sultanate of Women. Her letters to Elizabeth were mistranslated to minimise her authority and reframe her, and by extension Elizabeth, "as a mere woman" (original emphasis, p.

26). Such alterations exemplify how the British colonial agenda sought to erase the agency of Muslim women.

Jasmin Zine (2002) observes that the enduring image of the subjugated Muslim woman reflects "discursive currents of European representational politics… [based on a] complex intermingling between the desire and disavowal of difference" (p. 4). These representations are tied to racialised and gendered experiences in Western interactions with the Muslim World, reinforcing reductive stereotypes that persist in Muslim women's writing. Randa Abdel-Fattah, a Palestinian-Australian writer, recounts being questioned by publishers if her bestselling novel, *Does My Head Look Big in This?* (2005), included themes of honour killing (Cassidy, 2006). Similarly, Shelina Zahra Janmohamed notes publishers' surprise at Muslim women's stories not being uniformly tragic (Chambers, 2013). These examples reflect an Orientalist expectation that homogenises Muslim women's identities, erasing distinctions of race, class, and ideology within Muslim societies (Morey & Yaqin, 2011; Zine, 2008).

This trope – the use of language to convey specific or complex ideas beyond its literal meaning – has perpetuated a dominant readership that expects Muslim women to be portrayed as passive, victimised, and reliant on Western figures for liberation. Such portrayals embed colonial subtexts and the view of the Muslim World as inferior to the West while fostering commercial success for writers and publishers. These constraints limit the creative freedom of Muslim women writers, who may feel compelled to meet these expectations. However, the post-9/11 era has begun to destabilise this narrative. Movements like #MeToo and Black Lives Matter have amplified voices advocating for women's and minority rights, fostering greater diversity in portrayals of Muslim women. Writers like Leila Aboulela, S.K. Ali, Ayisha Malik, Na'ima B. Robert, Ausma Zeenat Khan, Shelina Zahra Janmohamed, Huda Fahmy and Uzma Jalaluddin have already emphasised faith and religion in their works. These authors depict Muslim women protagonists as religiously observant while navigating ambitions and experiences common to their non-Muslim peers. Their unique trait lies in how their religiosity shapes their lives.

These works have gained recognition in academia, prompting discussions on Muslim women's subjectivities. Nonetheless, existing

analyses often approach these narratives through postmodern, postcolonial, or multicultural lenses (see Ahmed, 2015; Ahmed, Morey, and Yaqin, 2015; Chambers and Herbert, 2015). Frequently, identifiers like the hijab are examined primarily through sociopolitical and historical frameworks, focusing on visibility and agency. This approach risks oversimplifying Muslim women's identities and neglects their spiritual connections. While such critiques are valuable for challenging hegemonic narratives, they do not fully address the integral role of faith in these women's lives.

In this paper, I examine *Minaret* (2006) by Leila Aboulela and *Saints and Misfits* (2017) by S.K. Ali, highlighting how faith is central to their narratives. While previous analyses acknowledge the importance of Islam in these novels, they often frame discussions within diasporic and postcolonial contexts. These perspectives can overemphasise sociopolitical resistance, leading to a one-dimensional interpretation of Muslim women's identities. By contrast, I argue that these works illustrate the protagonists' journeys toward self-actualisation through their connection to God. Faith and religious practices emerge not only as personal commitments but also as transformative elements that shape their agency and identity within their respective cultural and social contexts.

Theoretical Imbalance in Reading Muslim Women's Writing in the Western Diaspora

Leila Aboulela's Minaret (2006)

Leila Aboulela's second novel, Minaret, explores contrasts through its six-part first-person narrative. The story alternates between Najwa's past as the Westernised daughter of a wealthy aristocratic family in Khartoum and her present as a devout Muslim woman working as a maid in London. After the 1985 coup in Sudan, Najwa's father – an influential government official – is executed, forcing her family into exile. In London, tragedy continues as her mother succumbs to cancer and her brother is jailed for drug-related charges, leaving Najwa alone to face displacement. Initially, she embraces the freedom of exile, reconnecting with a former lover, Anwar, but his inability to provide security and her growing spiritual emptiness push her toward a transformative religious journey.

Najwa's "coming-to-faith" (Dimitriu, 2014, p. 120) is portrayed as a gradual process rooted in personal growth. Early signs of her spiritual longing appear when Quranic recitations evoke "a bleakness" and "a depth and space" that feel "hollow and numb" (Aboulela, 2006, p. 134). While waiting for her mother's shrouding, she reflects on "that hollow place… where the longing for God [is] supposed to come from" (135). Responding to this inner calling, Najwa finds clarity and peace in devoting herself to activities at the Regent Park Mosque, befriending its community, and working for a wealthy Arab family. Her spiritual strength becomes evident when she ends a love affair with Tamer, her employer's devout younger brother, choosing connection to God over romantic fulfilment. This decision culminates in her pilgrimage to Hajj, steering the narrative away from traditional romance tropes.

The novel's Western setting plays a symbolic role, mirroring Aboulela's own spiritual growth when she adopted the hijab in London. She credits this transformation to "her sense of spirituality, which asserted itself more powerfully perhaps, against the new, secular backdrop" (Akbar, 2010). London acts as a transformative space, highlighting Islam's universality and challenging the perceived dichotomy between Islam and the West. Critics often interpret Minaret as a counter-narrative to Orientalist depictions of Muslim women (see Al-Karawi & Bahar, 2014; Ball, 2010; Hasan, 2015; Morey & Yaqin, 2011). However, Najwa's commitment to her faith transcends binary representations of female Muslim subjectivities, reflecting her agency and spiritual growth as a devout Muslim.

While some critics, like Eva Hunter (2013) argue that Aboulela's advocacy for complete reliance on faith cannot be the "quietist 'solution'" (p. 94) to a troubled life, Aboulela herself contends that the novel is about "faith itself and how spiritual development is a need that is as valid and as urgent as love and career" (Chambers, 2009, p. 100). Anna Ball (2010) echoes this by pointing out that the strength of *Minaret* lies in the portrayal of the simplicity of Najwa's faith that is focused on individual spiritual fulfilment. This theme is introduced from the first page with "Bism Allahi, Ar-Rahman, Ar-Raheem" (Aboulela, 2006, p. 1), an invocation of God which means, "in the name of Allah, the Most Gracious and the Most Merciful." This phrase, which precedes all Quranic chapters except one, signifies reliance on and connection to God in all endeavours. It comes as Najwa is anxious about starting a

new job, underscoring the novel's emphasis on dependency and spiritual connection as central themes.

S. K. Ali's Saints and Misfits (2017)

S.K. Ali, a Canadian Muslim author, has gained recognition with her Young Adult (YA) novels, including four romances and a dystopian narrative. Her debut, *Saints and Misfits*, stands apart from *Minaret* in its setting and themes but similarly advocates for Islamic faith as essential to female agency. The protagonist, Janna Yusuf, a practicing Muslim teenager, is depicted as navigating her beliefs in challenging circumstances rather than seeking spiritual awakening. A finalist for the William C. Morris Young Adult Debut Award in 2017, *Saints and Misfits* is celebrated among Muslim teens. Ali's intent was to offer "foundational books" with "stories [that are] rooted in their own Muslim backgrounds" (Young, 2021). However, the novel has yet to receive substantial scholarly attention.

Told from 15-year-old Janna's perspective, the story presents her as a hijab-wearing, devout Muslim engaged with her local mosque and knowledgeable in Islamic history. She is also portrayed as a relatable teenager – introverted yet sociable, studious, and diligent. However, she harbours two significant secrets: first, her trauma from nearly being raped by Farooq, a respected *hafiz* in her Muslim community, and second, her feelings for Jeremy, a non-Muslim classmate. Janna struggles to report Farooq's actions, fearing her accusations would not be believed against the reputation of someone who has memorised the Quran. Farooq's continued presence at community events intensifies her distress. Meanwhile, her romantic feelings for Jeremy conflict with her self-image as a "non-casual-dating kind" (Ali, 2017, p. 19) of Muslim, complicating her internal struggle.

Critics have mainly focused on Janna's dual identity as an American-born Muslim, exploring the tension between Islam and the West. This tension is particularly evident in the perception of her veiled body, which draws both attention and judgment in predominantly white spaces. Such representations turn the Muslim woman's body into a "freak show to establish the spectator's legitimacy and power over the spectacle on display" (Khachab, 2020, p. 5), while also suggesting the 'hyper-visibility' of female Muslim identity (White, 2020). These analyses focus on Ali's (2017) critiques of societal efforts to control

Muslim women's identities, showing that the pressure stems less from Islamic practices and more from societal biases that resist diverse expressions of Muslim womanhood.

I move the attention to the central position of Islam in the narrative. As Janna confronts fear and shame, she struggles to maintain her faith, experiencing moments of spiritual weakness. Janna builds a supportive relationship with Sausun, a young *niqabi* whose boldness inspires her to confront Farooq. She also seeks guidance from her uncle, an *imam* known for his unconventional approach to *da`wah*. These individuals demonstrate resilience in hostile environments, reflecting the strength Janna needs to reconnect with her faith. Unlike Najwa's spiritual awakening in *Minaret*, Janna's approach to challenges is practical but deeply rooted in her belief system. By recognising the connection between her difficulties and her faith, Janna reaffirms her relationship with God. Ultimately, it is this spiritual foundation that enables her to address her struggles and reclaim agency.

Alternative Theoretical Consideration: The Centrality of God in Reading Fiction by Muslim Women Writers

Both *Minaret* and *Saints and Misfits* challenge stereotypes of the oppressed Muslim woman by showcasing how Islam empowers the protagonists to assert their agency. Their actions stem primarily from personal spiritual development rather than as a reaction to Western ideologies. This demonstrates that the characters' dedication to Islamic practices reflects multifaceted motivations, highlighting the depth of their religious commitments. To understand this further, I draw upon Allison Weir's (2013) work, which expands on Saba Mahmood's (2005) reconceptualisation of agency. Mahmood's seminal study of female 'pietists' in Cairo – active participants in mosque activities during the 1990s Islamic revival – offers insights into how agency can be understood beyond conventional secular-liberal frameworks.

Mahmood (2005) critiques dominant feminist notions of freedom, which equate agency with autonomy and resistance to norms. She argues that agency and norms are not necessarily in opposition. For many Muslim women, adherence to religious practices and norms serves as a pathway to self-realisation rather than a symbol of oppression. Mahmood's use of "paradox of subjectivation" (29) urges for a re-evaluation of freedom that transcends the binary of subjugation and

resistance. She explores how submission to "historically and culturally specific disciplines" (29) can foster empowerment, challenging Western interpretations of freedom as strictly individualistic or oppositional. Mahmood's framework opens a space for understanding religious practices as tools for cultivating agency and offers an invitation to refine and extend this perspective.

Weir (2013) builds upon Mahmood's ideas, suggesting that Mahmood's focus on power and norms restricts the broader understanding of freedom. She argues that "disciplinary practices are not fully analysable in terms of operations of power directed toward inhabiting norms and toward the achievement of a pious self" (327). For the pietists Mahmood studied, religious submission is not merely an act of compliance but a means to establish a connection to God. Weir highlights this "creation of a connection to God" (original emphasis, 327) as central to understanding agency. Unlike Mahmood, she emphasises that freedom extends beyond the self and is shaped by relational connections, particularly those with the divine.

Weir (2013) identifies two dimensions of freedom within these religious practices: inhabiting norms and inhabiting connections. In the first, freedom is realised through disciplined actions oriented toward a clear purpose, providing a framework where "free play is possible" (329). This enables individuals to fully immerse themselves in practice without distraction. Weir describes this as the "phenomenological dimension of participant experience" (329), emphasising how focus and discipline foster liberation. The second dimension involves cultivating connections to the self, others, and, most importantly, the Sacred. This aligns with Islamic tradition where religious practices are fundamentally about connecting with God. Seyyed Hossein Nasr (2008) underscores that faith centres on a believer's relationship with God, shaping daily life, mental well-being, and interpersonal relationships. It also forms the cornerstone of a meaningful existence.

The concept of submission in Islam further supports this perspective. Mehdi Aminrazavi (2001) explains that 'Islam' signifies both "peace" and "submission," and "only he who submits himself to God can be in peace" (106). Submission does not negate human agency; instead, it aligns human freedom with responsibility toward God. As Dogan (2014) notes, humans are seen as mirrors reflecting divine attributes

and as stewards of the universe, capable of making free and accountable choices. Weir (2013) integrates this theological perspective, emphasising that a connection with God possesses a spiritual and mystical quality. This connection becomes the axis around which all other relationships and responsibilities revolve, enabling freedom as both a discipline and a relational experience.

In the context of *Minaret* and *Saints and Misfits*, the protagonists exhibit a conscious commitment to Islam, structuring their lives around its principles. Md. Mahmudul Hasan (2015) observes that Najwa's transformation in *Minaret* reflects "an alternative definition of freedom that is, the right to choose one's way of life based on the Islamic worldview, to adopt Islamic identity and to embrace Islamic principles" (98). Similarly, Heather Snell (2017) asserts that Janna's faith in *Saints and Misfits* propels her to confront and resolve the challenges that entrap her. Faith becomes a crucial resource for navigating personal and societal struggles. Drawing on Weir's theorisation, I analyse how both protagonists recognise their spiritual voids and rebuild their agency by adhering to Islamic practices. These practices act as structures that regulate their lives, enabling them to focus on their connection with God. Through this connection, the protagonists transcend worldly desires and expectations, achieving liberation. This demonstrates that agency is not limited to resistance against external forces but can also emerge from spiritual growth and connection. Mahmood and Weir's insights provide a lens for understanding how religious practices shape individual and collective identities. This perspective shifts the focus from oppositional narratives to the transformative potential of faith, highlighting the diversity and complexity of Muslim women's experiences.

Minaret: Materialism as a Destructive Force

By highlighting the duality of material wealth and self-fulfilment, *Minaret* is a staunch critique of materialism. Through Najwa, wealth is described as a destructive force that removes social cohesion and silences one's agency. Despite being the daughter of an influential and wealthy father in Khartoum, she is a docile and passive character who is detached from reality. She carelessly insists that "[t]here is nothing [she] can do about" (Aboulela, 2006, p. 34) the poverty she sees in Khartoum and fails to understand the impact of the anti-government political rallies at her university on aristocratic families like hers. Najwa's shallowness

stems from how her family paradoxically treats her. Her parents adore and spoil her, and she is expected to maintain her *status quo* by living "at a certain standard" (35). However, she has little other purpose in life, and becomes overshadowed by her twin brother, Omar. She studies Business at the university because that is what her father demands of Omar, and she wants to be with him. Her studies are only "to kill time" (102) until she is expected to marry. This aimlessness erodes her agency and despite her social status, she is unable to find a voice to assert her subjectivity. During one of her mother's charitable visits to a local orphanage, Najwa becomes aghast at the way the guardian is harshly addressing a disabled boy and she tries to speak up. Yet, she is quickly silenced by her own realisation that her "voice sound[s] stupid, everyone ignore[s] [her]" (21).

The narrative does not explain if Najwa's father is correctly charged with corruption, but he is described as a man who is preoccupied with wealth – he comes from a poor family who works his way up in the government and "married above himself…into an old wealthy family" (Aboulela, 2006, p. 8). Upon his execution, his family finds themselves becoming "unfamiliar to each other simply because [they have] not seen each other fall before" (61). Najwa's brother later squanders his inheritance on drugs and ends up in jail for a drug-related violence. Perhaps the most notable critique of materialism in *Minaret* is reflected in Najwa's relationship with Anwar. Their brief university romance quickly ends due to his role as a socialist student leader who openly condemns her father for corruption due to his role as a socialist student leader. Anwar reappears later in Najwa's life in London, where, like her, he lives as a political exile after the government he helps bring to power is overthrown in another coup in Sudan. They rekindle their relationship, but as it progresses, Anwar takes on an antagonistic role. He is critical of Najwa for her aristocratic background although he has no qualms about benefiting from her wealth, such as when she purchases him "the best, most up-to-date computer" (170) and finances his PhD tuition fees.

Anwar and Najwa is a mismatched couple from the outset. As the son of a senior technician of the railways in Khartoum, Najwa describes that his world is far removed from hers, yet it is this disparity that draws them to each other. In London, they both become equals in their exiles. Anwar's presence offers Najwa comfort and gives her "hope that

[she] would not be in limbo for long, that [she] would not be without a family for long" (Aboulela, 2006, p. 156). Their relationship creates the experiences of temporal and narrative moments for Najwa to envision the possibility of returning home. This indicates that while the concept of home is structured in one's identity paradigm, it is less about a physical concept and more about the emotional resonance of familiarity and belonging (Stierstorfer, 2015). Their forced displacements bind them together, with each representing a metaphorical reflection of the other's fragmented self and desire for connection. Their shared stories of losses and hardships become personal narratives that structure their lives, allowing them to form an emotional attachment.

Najwa eventually becomes ambiguous with this relationship, admitting that "could never feel entirely safe with him" (Aboulela, 2006, p. 163). The relationship ends when Anwar accuses her of being "brain-washed about the importance of virginity" (175) when she expresses sexual guilt and asks for him to marry her. Najwa feels deeply betrayed when he refuses and chooses instead to continue his betrothal to his cousin in Sudan. He criticises Arab societies where there are "double standards for men and women" (174) yet shamelessly recounts his visits to the brothels in Khartoum and speaking about a prostitute there "as if she were a pet" (176). Anwar's behaviour outlines the hypocrisy of patriarchy where he, like her father and brother, has failed to provide her with a sense of security or safety (Chambers, 2009). Although he presents himself as progressive on women's issues, Anwar clearly submits to power-structured gender relations that allows him specific benefits and control over the women in his life. This difficult relationship compels Najwa to reconsider her attachment to what is familiar, and to reassess her idea of home, for it has now become a space that exploits her femininity, leaving her vulnerable.

The Centrality of God in Friendships and Marriage

Najwa's transformation begins when she realises that she is unaware of the arrival of *Ramadan*. She tries fasting and is ashamed when she fails. This is a symbolic realisation of her spiritual deprivation, marking a turn-to-religion moment. Najwa recognises a desire for "a wash, a purge, a restoration of innocence [and] yearn[s] to go back to being safe with God" (Aboulela, 2006, p. 242). She turns to the Regent Park Mosque for guidance, and it does not disappoint. When she is at the mosque for

the first time, an unseen woman comes up from behind to help cover her exposed knees and legs as she awkwardly prays in an inappropriate dress. A young woman sits near her and recites Surah Al-Rahman from the Qur'an. Najwa becomes aware of the repeated verse: "So which of your Lord's favours do you deny?" This becomes a metaphorical scene that welcomes her back to Islam. As she is awakened to God's presence, she is also offered a sense of home.

Talafha et al. (2022) argue that her spiritual deprivation is erased by the connection that Najwa makes with people at the mosque, rendering the central position of the mosque in aiding her transformation. Finding meaning through human connections is inherent to Najwa's nature, and this is evident in her relationships with the women at the mosque. Unlike previous connections, these friendships are now intertwined with a spiritual bond. Najwa, for example, befriends Shahinaz who vehemently believes that their friendship is strong simply because they "both want to become better Muslims" although they have "little in common" (Aboulela, 2006, p. 105). Najwa also describes how she performs *Taraweeh* prayers during *Ramadan* next to the wife of the Senegalese ambassador and how the woman's chauffeur drives her home afterwards. She poignantly remembers how important people would frequent her parents' house in Khartoum but recognises that such a connection was only possible because of her class status. Now, the focus on God quite easily erases these differences and connects one person to another.

I have argued above on how the novel, particularly in its characterisation of Anwar, is a staunch critique of patriarchy. Here, I draw attention to an opposing perspective. Eva Hunter (2013) argues that Aboulela is not actually criticising patriarchy but rather, she is "criticising the fact that it does not work as it should". She contends that Aboulela is exemplifying the monotheistic religious beliefs that "have all promised 'protection' to women, who are offered a 'special' and elevated position in society – within domestic surroundings" (93). Hunter rightfully argues that domesticity cannot be a guarantee of female safety, and a woman cannot be expected to submit to a quiet, pious life without consideration of her socio-economic and psychological well-being. However, this outlook is limited in its conceptualisation of domesticity as it comes from a purely liberal-humanist perspective that views life of domesticity as a submissive and passive one – one

that Saba Mahmood's (2005) study works against. Hunter's argument is based on the failure to "distinguish between social norms and oppressive subordination, and rests on the assumption that all social norms are oppressive, or sources of subjugation" (125).

The differences between Aboulela's (2006) idea of patriarchy with the one implied by Hunter (2013) can be seen in the former's descriptions of men and women in marriage, significantly related to the following Quranic verses:

> [Your wives] are your garments. And ye are their garments (2:187).
>
> And among His Signs is this, that He created for you mates from among yourselves, that ye may dwell in tranquillity with them, and He has put love and mercy between your (hearts): verily in that are signs for those who reflect (30:21).

These two verses outline that men and women should complement each other in marriage, with a strong emphasis on compassion and mercy. This is reflected in Shahinaz's marriage. As a homemaker and mother of four, she has put her ambitions for higher education on hold to start and manage her family, including the care of her widowed mother-in-law. It is not a perfect marriage as Shahinaz complains of hardships and difficulties, but she equally praises her husband, Sohayl. He is sensitive and understanding towards his wife and is supportive when she decides to finally continue her education. In this ideal, women's domesticity does not always have to be viewed as a docile submission to patriarchy. Gender roles can instead be seen as reciprocal acts of commitment when each man and woman fulfil their duties and responsibilities. This view is further expanded in Najwa's brief narrative of Ali, a devout British Muslim revert. He is "tender and protective" (Aboulela, 2006, p. 242) towards his wife, and Najwa is touched "by his patience with the children, the way he took on life" (241).

What these men have in common is their devotion to Islam. Both Ali and Sohayl are devout Muslims and so, they develop an understanding of their duties to God and to their wives. Aboulela's view on marriage in *Minaret* is focused on the centrality of religion in the formation of an ideal marriage. Asma Barlas (2019) suggests that in Islam, "spousal (and parental) rights are claimed through the practice of faith, hence

by observing the limits ordained by God" (198). Therefore, when a marriage is on the terms set by God, the partners would be able to understand and carry out their duties and exercise their rights.

Religious devotion is also the reason for Najwa's attraction to Tamer, the only devout member of his family. She recognises his immaturity – he is much younger than her – but she describes an enthralling smell of "Paradise on the young" (Aboulela, 2006, p. 3) when they first meet. However, when their relationship causes tension between him and his mother, Najwa realises that his mother's disapproval has become "an obstacle to his spiritual growth" (264). Eventually, she moves away from this relationship to allow "Tamer to find heaven at the feet of his mother" (Moolla, 2021, p. 18), indicating a recognition of the importance of the mother figure in Islam.

I would like to point out that Najwa's rejection of Tamer is also a final stage of her transformation that allows her to recognise her agency. She now has the ability to carve her identity and navigate her desires, mirroring Weir's (2013) description that a successful connection to God allows "an experience of freedom in one's various relationships with others, with oneself, and with the world" (329). For Najwa, this is an abstract form of freedom. It does not allow her to regain any fragment of her lost life – neither the material wealth, nor her family – yet she finds herself refreshed and filled with "spiritual pleasure" (Aboulela, 2006, p. 243). She describes being happy because she is praying and is able to enjoy a life filled with hope.

Saints and Misfits: The *Hijab* and the Wrestle for Agency

In *Saints and Misfits*, S. K. Ali provides a complex view of the practice of wearing the *hijab*. Despite Janna's voluntary decision to wear it, she finds herself struggling to assert this agency with both the secular-liberal and faith-based communities she belongs to. The novel opens with her secular father, Haroon's public display of displeasure at Janna's decision to wear burkini while swimming during a holiday with his new family. Nonetheless, Janna is no stranger to the scrutiny of her *hijab* as she is one of the few Muslims in school. She laments that on hot days, "everyone will act annoyed as soon as [she] step[s] into school" and "[t]he first thing off everyone's lips will be *Don't you feel hot in* that?" (original emphasis, Ali, 2017, p. 93).

The *hijab* here takes on a symbol and meaning that defines Janna's identity. This identity is stigmatised as she is seen as separate and different from the dominant white majority. However, her marginalisation and devaluation endure when she is unveiled. A clear example can be seen by her best friend, Tats' insistence for Janna to unveil in front of her love interest, Jeremy. She invites him into the all-girls gym class where Janna does not observe the *hijab*. Janna is caught off-guard and voices her displeasure, yet Tats manipulates her by suggesting that "he has every right to use the room" and he should be allowed a glimpse of "the real Janna" (112). Although this starts off as a well-meaning attempt to display Janna's attractiveness, Janna loses the right to control her own bodily autonomy. She also has her identity questioned with the claims that she loses authenticity when she is in *hijab* (Khachab, 2020).

When some jealous classmates post photos of Janna without the *hijab* on *Facebook* without her consent, the comments leave her deeply disturbed. She is described as "*hawt turd* and *sizlin' brown stuff*" (original emphasis, Ali, 2017, p. 168). These experiences of forced unveiling outline the multifaceted position of the Muslim woman in a dominant white society. They point towards the implementation of patriarchy where her veiled body is mocked and her unveiled one becomes racialised. Her image also has a sexualised undertone used to attract male attention. It signifies that Janna's otherness is retained and emphasised even without the *hijab*, hinting towards the ingrained legacy of Orientalist perception of the female Muslim as an erotic subject. She turns into a newly discovered enigma – becoming a "freak show" (Khachab, 2020, p. 14) and a form of entertainment.

The Complex Narratives of the *Hijab*

Despite feeling uncomfortable being seen without the hijab, Janna quietly enjoys the attention it brings. The admiration makes her "feel like the most beautiful girl in the world" (Ali, 2017, p. 115), and she appreciates that "[s]omeone thinks [she's] hot" (original emphasis, 35). Being unveiled offers her a glimpse of beauty and femininity aligned with normative Western standards. She seeks a similar feeling when she deliberately unveils in front of Jeremy. However, this decision comes with personal conflicts. While applying make-up and styling her hair, she ensures her body is covered with a tracksuit and jacket instead of gym shorts and a t-shirt. As she approaches Jeremy, she expresses guilt:

"I know I look good, but, oddly, I don't want him to intentionally look at me. Maybe if it's by accident, it would feel better?" (130). This reflects a complex, contradictory self-view – her choice to unveil is deliberate, presenting a new subjectivity, yet it conflicts with her beliefs. She acknowledges removing the hijab distances her from her faith.

Many Muslims believe that the *hijab* is a dress code that is meant to encourage modesty by protecting the wearer's beauty and as a form of protection against unwanted attention. This is based on a verse in the Quran,

> O Prophet! Tell thy wives and daughters, and the believing women, that they should cast their outer garments over their persons (when abroad): that is most convenient, that they should be known (as such) and not molested. And God is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful. (33:59).

This verse underlines a profound connection between the concealment of beauty and the prevention of sexual misconduct. Within the context, the *hijab* becomes "a strong refusal to expose certain body parts in public, satisfy male voyeuristic pleasures, and cater to the ogling gaze of strangers" (Hasan, 2018, p. 33). It is a statement that protects the woman's sexuality, retaining it as a form of privacy. Even so, Ali (2017) narrates an incident that puts forth the need to interpret the injunction to wear the *hijab* beyond mere literalism. Janna finds herself becoming a victim of sexual assault *while* she is in *hijab*. The perpetrator, Farooq, is considered "a beacon of light for all youth" (Ali, 2017, p. 7) due to his achievement of memorising the whole Quran and perceived piety. Janna remains silent as she is uncertain if anyone would belief her story as Farooq's "cloak of piety" makes him "untouchable" (173). Farooq also tries to keep her silent. When Janna's unveiled pictures are spread into the Muslim community, Farooq comments that she has "taken a step to the [evil] side" (173). He secretly films her walking with Jeremy at a lake, presumably on a 'date' and sends it to her close friends and family on the pretext of protecting her against wrongdoing. This accusation shapes easily against Janna as the minority Muslim community in America is rather protective of their Muslim identity and expects a certain standard of religiosity (Casey, 2018). These are malicious actions to control the way Janna is viewed, drawing the blame away from him. A few weeks after the attack, Farooq corners Janna to admit that he made a "mistake" (Ali, 2017, p. 207) but blames her for 'wanting' him first.

Religiosity, as a concept and practice, is related to positive developments of self-control, self-regulation, and character development (S. Ahmed, 2009; McCullough & Willoughby, 2009). Farooq's actions demonstrate the contrary, portraying that religiosity can also be manipulated and distorted to influence the way one views the religious person. 'Appropriate' behaviours become the basis of classification and recognition of a good Muslim. The problem that such expectations create is two-fold. First, it allows certain definitions of propriety that may only suit specific people. Second, it allows the policing and surveillance of actions that work to regulate behaviours, leading to the victimisation of and discrimination against those who are perceived as 'bad' Muslims. Ali (2017) portrays that religiosity is a subjective experience of the individual although it is often seen as a concept that is measurable. This may be because as Chaudhary et al. (2020) indicate, for Muslims in America, the relations between religiosity and performative actions are linear – the more public it is, the more one is considered as religious.

Freedom as connection to God in *Saints and Misfits*

Saints and Misfits is more of a bildungsroman in its theme of the teenage protagonist's search for identity instead of a narration of spirituality. Despite that, as the central character is a practicing Muslim, the positioning of God in her life is rather transparent. I have mentioned above of Janna's guilt when she decides to appear unveiled in front of Jeremy. After her plan is foiled and she is embarrassed, she significantly questions "Is Allah upset at me?" (Ali, 2017, p. 131). Clearly, Janna connotes the act of wearing the *hijab* to God and thus, sees that her decision to unveil to please a boy as being against God. She also seeks to understand the Islamic view on Muslim and non-Muslim romantic relations from her uncle who is the *imam* at the local mosque. When she is advised to consider the relationship from the perspective of spirituality, she begins to work against dissolving this attraction and tells Jeremy that "[t]here can be no us" (Ali, 2017, p. 315). These scenes reflect an attempt to re-connect and re-affirm her faith where she recognises that her own actions may deplete her connection to God and actively seeks to improve this.

Janna's strength in confronting Farooq is significantly triggered by the Ramadan prayers. She becomes horrified to learn that Farooq has been asked to lead the prayers and laments that "…his hands [will

be] raised in takbeer to begin prayers …[with] [t]he same hands" (Ali, 2017, p. 84-85) that attacked her. I suggest that this realisation is steep in the understanding of the Islamic faith and a sense of duty towards the Muslim community. The role of *imam* is a significant one, even if only in leading prayers. While there is no formal training for an *imam*, he must be a respected member of the congregation as the act of praying is an act of worship. The *imam* must, therefore, be of good character conduct (Ederer, 2021). Janna does not only respond to this hypocrisy because it threatens her safety and well-being, but also because it reflects poorly on the Muslim society as whole. As she terms his attack as "*something against the laws of God*" (original emphasis, Ali, 2017, p. 161), it highlights Janna's recognition of the interrelated connection between one's actions with God. The attempted rape does not only reflect his flaws; it also indicates his failure to uphold his values before God.

S. K. Ali (2017) also provides a practical solution to sexual misconduct. Janna creates an unlikely but strategic alliance with her friend, Sausun, whose characterisation is a unique contrast: "she wears long gowns with Doc Martens boots and severe black scarves on her head" (44). While "not exactly a glamour queen" (p. 44), Janna later learns that Sausun has a popular YouTube account where she attempts to dispel stereotypes about women in *niqab*. In a significant moment when Janna tells her about Farooq's attack, Sausun invites her to perform the night prayer where Janna feels like she is "talking to Allah." They spend a long time in supplication, and she is able to say her "personal prayer to God" (p. 213). In this simple action, Janna is able to connect to God as she is in the state of *khushu'* where prayer performances involve "the profoundest reverence and humility in every gesture [where the] soul is washed of impure ideas by prayer" (Afridi and Syed, 2011, p. 263). This is because the performance of religious rituals requires the mind to escape its current state to transfer it to a sacred place (Renard, 1996). Symbolically, after these experiences, Janna receives the strength to finally voice her torment. Freedom is finally achieved with this sense of connection with God.

Conclusion

Minaret and *Saints and Misfits* are both successful representations of practicing Muslim women in fiction. Through these depictions, Leila Aboulela and S.K. Ali are presenting the subjectivities of devout

Muslim women, particularly in how practices of faith are connected to their daily lives. In this paper, I have attempted to do justice to them by emphasising the centrality of faith in my analysis, suggesting that their primary concern is in creating and maintaining a connection with God. They highlight that the protagonists' connection to God serves both spiritual and practical purposes. Spiritually, it guides them toward self-actualisation; practically, it becomes a conscious choice to exercise their agency. In this light, their lives are governed solely by the terms set by God, embodying the ultimate definition of freedom portrayed in these narratives.

Ultimately, both novels illustrate that freedom is not a monolithic concept, but a multifaceted one deeply rooted in Islamic theology and practice. Through their protagonists' journeys, they advocate for an understanding of freedom that transcends Western paradigms. They emphasise that true liberation lies not in escaping norms but in inhabiting them with purpose, connection, and devotion. This redefinition of freedom not only challenges stereotypes and enriches the understanding of the interplay between faith and agency, it also underscores the novels' success in portraying a meaningful life rooted in devotion to God.

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'The Politics of Fear': How Does It Affect Youth Political Participation in Malaysia?

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Abstract: This article explores the impact of political repression on youth political participation in Malaysia, particularly on how the regime's efforts to 'depoliticise' and criminalise dissent have shaped youth engagement. Using a mixed-methods approach through data obtained from in-depth interviews and analysis of data from the Asian Barometer, the findings reveal that 'the politics of fear' has a negative effect on youth involvement in conventional activism. At the same time, unconventional participation shows no significant differences. Qualitative insights highlight a pervasive 'culture of fear,' deterring most young Malaysians from political involvement, with only a small, courageous group willing to challenge the status quo, given the high risks associated with political activism in the country.

Keywords: repression, political participation, Malaysia, youth, depoliticise.

Abstrak: Makalah ini menyelidiki kesan penindasan politik terhadap penglibatan politik belia di Malaysia, khususnya bagaimana usaha rejim untuk 'menyahpolitikkan' dan menghukum para demonstran telah membentuk penglibatan belia. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan campuran melalui data yang diperoleh daripada temu bual mendalam dan analisis data sedia ada dari Asian Barometer, dapatan kajian menunjukkan bahawa 'politik ketakutan' memberi kesan negatif terhadap penglibatan belia dalam aktivisme politik konvensional. Dalam masa yang sama, penyertaan dalam kegiatan politik bukan konvensional pula tidak menunjukkan perbezaan ketara. Dapatan kualitatif turut menekankan tentang kewujudan 'budaya ketakutan' yang meluas, sekali gus menghalang kebanyakan belia Malaysia daripada terlibat dalam politik, tetapi hanya sebilangan kecil golongan berani yang sanggup mencabar *status*

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quo, memandangkan risiko tinggi yang dikaitkan dengan aktivisme politik di negara ini.

Keywords: penindasan, penglibatan politik, Malaysia, belia, nyahpolitik.

Introduction

In recent years, numerous democratic states that uphold civil liberties such as freedom of expression, assembly, and human rights have increasingly suppressed legitimate dissent, particularly among young people (Bessant, 2016; Fernandez, 2008). Pre-emptive tactics, including anti-terror laws, crowd control measures, and non-lethal weapons, have been used against young protesters in established democracies. For instance, the Anti-Lockdown protests in the UK and the Yellow Vest movement in France witnessed confrontations between protesters and police, resulting in mass arrests. However, these instances are relatively minor compared to those in authoritarian regimes, where repression has been a long-standing tool to maintain power, even before youth-led movements advocating for democratic reforms, such as the Arab Spring in 2011 and the Hong Kong pro-democracy protests, authoritarian regimes increasingly targeted and suppressed young people (Lucan, 2014). Many scholars categorise semi-democratic regimes, which blend both democratic and autocratic features, as "hybrid" or "authoritarian" regimes (Levitsky & Way, 2010). In these regimes, democratic institutions like elections and citizen participation often serve as a façade, concealing more authoritarian practices like limited civil liberties and frequent human rights violations. According to Fein (1995), semi-democratic regimes are the most repressive, facing greater threats than either fully democratic or autocratic states. As a result, such regimes are more likely to employ political repression, including strict legal measures and violent tactics, to limit political engagement, especially among youth.

Despite this, research specifically examining the effects of 'the politics of fear' on political participation in Malaysia remains limited. Malaysia presents a unique case in which young people must navigate the challenges of pursuing democratisation while contending with a government determined to suppress such efforts. This was especially evident in the late 1990s, during the Reformasi movement, when the

government utilised various repressive mechanisms, including criminal laws, political imprisonment, and violence, to stifle reform (Ruijgrok, 2021). This paper seeks to investigate the extent to which political repression affects youth political participation in Malaysia, focusing on how the government has sought to depoliticise and undermine youth engagement through repressive actions.

Political Repression and Political Participation

Political Repression

Many scholars of social movements tend to focus more on political mobilisation and collective action, with fewer addressing the issue of state repression. Within the literature on state repression, three main perspectives can be identified. The first group of scholars examines the policing of protests, focusing primarily on actions such as imprisonment or the use of violence against demonstrators (e.g., Soule & Davenport, 2009). The second group explores violations of personal integrity, including mass killings, torture, and disappearances (e.g., Harff, 2003). Lastly, some scholars are concerned with negative sanctions and the restriction of civil liberties, such as political bans, censorship, and limitations on freedom of expression (e.g., Hibbs, 1973). Among those studying state repression, Tilly (1978) offers a detailed conceptual framework, defining repression as a key element of the political opportunity structure. Tilly (2006) views repression as actions or processes that increase the costs of collective action. Strategies used by governments to suppress opposition include banning political parties, censoring media, arresting dissidents, and, in extreme cases, employing torture and mass killings. Tilly's understanding of repression, while rooted in social movement and contentious politics, is broadly applicable to the study of political participation as a whole.

Goldstein (1978) further defines state repression as the use of physical sanctions, whether actual or threatened, against individuals or organisations within a state's jurisdiction, to impose costs or prevent activities perceived as threats to the regime. In essence, when the government employs force to control individuals or organisations for political reasons, it is engaging in state repression. Non-state repression, by contrast, refers to actions or processes imposed by non-governmental actors that similarly raise the costs of collective action. In a political context, repression occurs when the government raises

the costs of mobilisation and collective action by limiting access to communication and resources for organisations (Tilly, 1978), thereby restricting individuals' freedom and participation in non-institutional efforts to demand political change (Earl, 2011). As dissident behaviour increases, so does the state's repressive response, as repression and dissent are closely linked and mutually reinforcing. Dissent represents efforts to challenge and change the existing power structures, while repression aims to suppress and stabilise these challenges. According to Davenport (2009), two main factors influence how governments respond to dissidents: firstly, the acceptability of the dissidents' actions, which includes the number of challenges, their duration, geographic scope, and level of violence; and secondly, the acceptability of the dissidents' group, which includes its ideology, objectives, members, and relationship to the existing power structure. In general, dissidents who use unacceptable tactics or directly challenge the government are more likely to face repression.

In addition to repression, Tilly (1978, 2006) also discusses two other strategies that governments may use to control citizens: facilitation and tolerance. Facilitation involves actions that reduce the costs of collective action for groups, such as granting publicity, legalising membership, or incorporating dissident leaders into the government. Tolerance, on the other hand, refers to the government's passive acceptance or inaction in response to dissent (Davenport, 2009). It is important to recognise that state repression often involves a combination of these elements—governments may repress some groups while facilitating others. Tilly (1978) further argues that different institutions exhibit varying patterns of repression. For instance, repressive governments may repress many groups and actions, but facilitate only a few, particularly those viewed as unacceptable. This is often associated with authoritarian systems. In contrast, totalitarian regimes tend to repress fewer dissidents than repressive governments, while also tolerating or facilitating some groups. Democracies, which are more tolerant regimes, generally tolerate and facilitate a broader range of groups and actions. As a result, democratic governments are less likely to rely on repressive mechanisms and seek to minimise the threat posed by dissent (Davenport, 2009). While Tilly focuses on state actions aimed at altering the costs of collective action, Snyder (1976) offers a different typology of state repression, based on two dimensions: the level of violence used (violent vs. non-violent) and

the timing of the state's response (pre-emptive vs. reactive). Khawaja (1993) adds another criterion: the nature of the targets, distinguishing between actions directed at individuals (participants) and those aimed at collectivities, including bystanders (collective punishment). For this study, all these typologies will be used to assess how the government raises the costs of participation for those challenging its authority, whether individually or collectively.

What are the effects of repression? Repression can have both positive and negative outcomes. Individuals assess the costs and benefits of their actions, choosing to participate only when the expected benefits outweigh the risks—a cost-benefit analysis (Clarke et al., 2004). As repression intensifies, it may deter dissent by creating barriers to collective action, leading to disengagement and defection. In simple terms, greater repression typically reduces participation. However, deprivation theory presents a counterargument. Gurr (1970) suggests that repression may lead to 'collective frustration,' which can increase the desire for dissent and pressure the regime. Similarly, Tilly (2006) posits that repression may foster division among elites and heighten the determination to resist. Others argue that state repression often has a curvilinear effect (Khawaja, 1993) or pushes dissenters toward alternative forms of political expression (O'Brien & Deng, 2015). Honari (2018), however, critiques much of the existing literature on state repression for its focus on macro-level analyses, which overlook how individuals respond to repression. Without understanding these individual responses, scholars risk underestimating key outcomes of repression. As this study examines the effects of repression on political participation, it is crucial to consider individual reactions to repression.

Political Participation

Most of the literature on political participation tends to focus on democratic practices (Van Deth, 2014), rather than on authoritarian systems. Verba et al. (1995, p.38) define political participation as "an activity that has the intent or effect of influencing government action, either directly by affecting policy-making or indirectly by influencing the selection of policymakers." Similarly, Ekman and Amna (2012, p. 289) describe political participation as "...all actions aimed at influencing governmental decisions and political outcomes." While various scholars offer different definitions and interpretations of political participation,

the core ideas remain consistent (Brady, 1999). Four main elements can be identified from these definitions: activity, citizen, influence, and political decisions.

'Activity' refers to how citizens engage in political actions, such as voting, protesting, or attending meetings. Given the wide variety of activities available, the term can be somewhat broad (Grasso, 2016, p.13). Additionally, individuals often specialise in specific activities that align with their goals (Verba, Nie & Kim, 1978). Some scholars also include informal political engagement, like discussions or following political news, as forms of participation, though Van Deth (2014) argues that watching television or merely expressing concern about politics does not qualify as true participation.

The second element, 'citizen,' emphasises that political participation is primarily carried out by the general public, not by politicians, civil servants, or professional lobbyists (Burns, Scholzman & Verba, 2001). The third element, 'influence,' refers to the voluntary nature of political participation, meaning it should not be coerced or mandated by law (Brady, 1999). However, even in cases of compulsory voting, such participation is still considered meaningful, as it has a significant impact (Van Deth, 2014). The fourth component, 'political decisions,' refers to participation aimed at influencing how the government allocates resources and public goods, targeting the broader political system rather than just specific policymakers. The concept of political participation has expanded over time, evolving from a one-dimensional focus on electoral activities to a two-dimensional model that incorporates unconventional methods, such as protests. Barnes and Kaase (1979) argue that protest-oriented activities do not fit neatly into a one-dimensional model, as participation in one form does not necessarily lead to participation in others (Keil & Gabriel, 2013). This led to the classification of political involvement into two categories: conventional and unconventional participation.

Recent literature goes further by promoting a multidimensional approach, where individuals engage in various forms of political participation, including membership in political parties, social movements, and electoral activities (Norris, 2002). Civil activities such as volunteerism and social engagement are also considered part

of political participation. The rise of these new channels has blurred the traditional left-right political spectrum, signalling a need to broaden the understanding of political participation beyond mainstream activities. As political engagement continues to evolve, it is essential to reconceptualise participation to include a wider range of actions that extend beyond conventional politics. Based on these conceptual frameworks, this article aims to examine the impact of political repression on youth political participation in Malaysia. Specifically, the hypotheses are:

H1: Political repression has a negative effect on youth political participation in Malaysia.

H2: Young males who feel repressed are more likely to be engaged in unconventional politics than young females.

H3: Young Educated Malaysians who feel repressed will be more engaged in unconventional political activism.

'The Politics of Fear' in the Malaysian Context

Malaysia can be described as having a hybrid political system that blends elements of both democracy and authoritarianism (Razali, 2017). Within this hybrid regime, the political structure incorporates democratic institutions such as competitive elections, separation of powers, multiparty participation, citizen involvement, federalism, and executive authority, alongside authoritarian features like limited civil liberties, gerrymandering, a dominant political party, and patron-client relationships. These democratic and authoritarian attributes function together to "uphold and sustain the regime" (Razali, 2017, p. 378). The presence of democratic institutions provides a source of legitimacy for the regime to maintain power. Some argue that Malaysia operates as a competitive authoritarian state, where political parties and elites are allowed to contest elections, but the playing field is highly skewed in favour of the dominant party, rendering elections neither free nor fair (Levitsky & Way, 2010; Case, 2002). Even though Barisan Nasional (BN) lost its two-thirds majority and was defeated for the first time in the 14th General Election, many still contend that the election was not entirely fair (Thomas, 2019; Tsu Chong, 2018). While public participation is permitted, the opportunities are often constrained and

closely monitored by the regime. As Malaysia is considered semi-authoritarian, the government restricts citizen participation and represses numerous groups and activities. Over the years, Malaysians have faced various repressive mechanisms, including the use of legal force, cyber surveillance, censorship, and, at times, violence.

Legal Force

The most potent tool of 'the politics of fear' frequently employed to suppress political dissent in Malaysia is the enforcement of draconian laws such as the Sedition Act of 1948, the Internal Security Act (ISA) of 1960 (later replaced by the Security Offences (Special Measures) Act of 2012), and the Universities and University Colleges Act (UUCA) of 1971. These laws were heavily enforced following the 1969 ethnic riots, marking a turning point that transformed Malaysia's political landscape—from democratic to what some scholars term 'semi-democratic' (Crouch, 1996), 'authoritarian democracy' (Case, 2002), 'soft authoritarianism' (Means, 1996), and 'quasi-democracy' (Zakaria Ahmad, 1989). For instance, the 1975 amendments to the UUCA aimed to 'depoliticise' students by prohibiting them from joining or supporting political parties or trade unions, participating in off-campus activities, and dissolving all student organisations (Weiss, 2011). The government replaced the student union with a weaker entity, the 'Students Representative Council,' effectively ending the student movement as a significant political force in Malaysia. However, Section 15 of the UUCA was amended in 2012 to permit students to join political organisations, including political parties outside of campus (Wan, 2019).

During Mahathir's tenure as prime minister, media freedom was further curtailed through an amendment to the Printing Presses and Publications Act (PPPA) of 1984, which required both domestic and international publishers and printing firms to obtain annual permits. Under this law, the minister had 'absolute discretion' to approve or reject permits, and decisions to revoke or suspend permits could not be challenged in court (Milne & Mauzy, 1999, p. 113). This gave the government the authority to prohibit any news deemed 'malicious' and a threat to national interest and security. Defamation laws were also frequently used against journalists and media outlets critical of the government, leading to widespread self-censorship. The government's

firm control over mainstream media stifled opposition voices and restricted the public's right to publish.

In 1987, Mahathir carried out a large-scale implementation of the ISA in an infamous crackdown known as *Operasi Lalang* (Weeding Operation), during which 106 political and civil rights leaders were detained without trial. The operation took place amid challenges to Mahathir's leadership and ethnic tensions concerning language and education issues. *Operasi Lalang* instilled a pervasive culture of fear, as Mahathir used detention to consolidate his position within the ruling party (Hwang, 2003, p. 154). Similarly, the ISA was deployed to arrest former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim and his supporters during the 1998 Reformasi movement. Despite growing calls for the ISA's abolition, the government continued to detain dissidents under the law, including blogger Raja Petra and opposition MP Teresa Kok in 2008. However, following public pressure, the government repealed the ISA, replacing it with the Security Offences (Special Measures) Act of 2012, designed to maintain public order and national security.

In addition to the ISA, another frequently used tool for silencing government critics, both online and offline, is the Sedition Act of 1948. The Sedition Act criminalises any speech, actions, words, or publications deemed to have a 'seditious tendency.' This includes inciting hatred or disaffection against any ruler or government and promoting hostility between different ethnic or social groups (Sedition Act 1948, Section 3 (1) (a)). Although the Act remains in effect, the government has proposed replacing it with the National Harmony Act. Notable individuals charged under the Sedition Act include student activists Adam Adli and Safwan Anang for making seditious statements at a political forum in 2013, and university lecturer Azmi Sharom, who was charged over statements on the 2009 Perak constitutional crisis (Nair, 2017; Tan, 2017). More recently, political cartoonist Fahmi Reza was charged under the Sedition Act and the Communications and Multimedia Act of 1998 for depicting Prime Minister Najib Razak as a clown, a caricature widely shared on social media (Human Rights Watch, 2016). Another law affecting protest rights and freedom of association is the Peaceful Assembly Act (PAA). While the PAA allows peaceful rallies without requiring a permit, organisers must notify the police at least 10 days in advance. Failure to adhere to the regulations renders the rally unlawful, and organisers may face charges.

Cyber Surveillance and Censorship

In Malaysia, the public was first introduced to the internet in 1992 when the country's first Internet service provider (ISP) was launched by the Malaysian Institute of Microelectronic Systems (MIMOS). Today, the internet plays an integral role in daily life, with people increasingly relying on it for communication and news dissemination. The internet penetration rate surged from 0.1% in 1995 to 87.4% in 2018 (Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission, 2018), though access remains largely concentrated in urban areas (Wok & Mohamed, 2017).

One of the most common online activities for Malaysian internet users is social engagement, particularly through social media. DataReportal (2024) reported that nearly 97.4% of internet users in Malaysia have social media accounts. Facebook is the most popular platform, with 97.3% of the country's 24.6 million social networking users holding accounts, followed by Instagram (57.0%) and YouTube (48.3%) (Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission, 2018). Despite the rapid growth of internet users and the government's ongoing efforts to expand internet access, freedom in Malaysia's cyberspace remains restricted.

This is due to government internet censorship and surveillance, implemented in part to prevent hate speech, defamation, or violent content. In a semi-democratic regime and a multiracial society like Malaysia, such measures are justified by the need to maintain security. To this end, the government has committed to limiting online freedom for security reasons and has invested billions of Ringgits in enforcing cybersecurity laws aimed at protecting national security and monitoring online activities. However, the Communication and Multimedia Act (CMA) 1998, particularly Section 233 (1)(a), which criminalises the transmission of any communication deemed offensive with the intent to annoy, threaten, or abuse another person, is perceived by young Malaysians as a tool for government surveillance and suppression of dissent, as it has frequently been used against the public (Mohd Hed, 2018).

For example, in 2015, Khalid Ismath was charged with 11 counts under Section 233 of the CMA and three additional counts under Section 4(1) of the Sedition Act for posting allegedly offensive comments on

Facebook about the Johor royalty and the Malaysian police (Amnesty International, 2016). Similarly, in 2016, graphic artist and activist Fahmi Reza was charged for posting a caricature of Prime Minister Najib Razak as a clown on social media, a depiction that was widely circulated online. As a result, Fahmi Reza's Twitter account was placed under police surveillance, and he faced two charges under the same section of the CMA, each carrying a maximum penalty of two years in prison or a fine of RM 50,000 upon conviction (Mohamad Fadli, 2017, January 18).

Furthermore, there is an issue of unequal media access, where opposition parties are legally allowed to operate but face significant hurdles, including restricted access to the media, as well as constant surveillance and harassment. The state maintains a monopoly over mainstream media, particularly television and radio, resulting in coverage that is heavily biased in favour of the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) party while providing the opposition with limited media exposure. Many private media outlets are owned by individuals or companies closely linked to the BN government through patronage, cronyism, or proxy ownership (Mustafa, 2005). On the other hand, opposition parties are often portrayed negatively in mainstream media. As a result, Malaysians are deprived of the opportunity to make fully informed decisions when casting their votes (Mustafa, 2005).

Violence Against Civilians

For the Malaysian government, any form of protest, public rally, or social movement aimed at challenging the status quo is regarded as an 'unacceptable culture.' As a result, the government takes pre-emptive measures to prevent such activities by deploying excessive force, including tear gas, water cannons, mass arrests, and, at times, police brutality. This heavy-handed approach was notably evident during the 1998 Reformasi movement when thousands of demonstrators who had gathered illegally in front of the National Mosque were dispersed by police using tear gas and water cannons (Khoo, 2003). In response, the crowds retaliated by throwing rocks, water bottles, and iron rods at the police, leading to violent clashes. Hundreds of demonstrators were arrested, and many were injured after being beaten with batons. Since then, the government has continued to employ similar tactics to control

and disperse protesters in other major demonstrations in Malaysia, including the 2007 Hindraf rally and the Bersih rallies.[1]

Methodology

This article employs a mixed-methods approach, combining both quantitative (survey) and qualitative (semi-structured interviews) methods to examine the effects of state-led repression on political participation. The approach follows an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design, as outlined by Cresswell & Plano Clark (2011). It begins with the analysis of quantitative data to identify the patterns of participation, followed by a subsequent analysis of qualitative data to further explain and contextualise the quantitative findings. Both data sets are given equal weight in the analyses, with the integration of findings occurring at the interpretation stage. Although the two data sets are analysed separately, their findings are interconnected and integrated,

[1] The Hindu Rights Action Front (HINDRAF), also known as Hindraf Makkal Sakhti (People Power)—a coalition of Indian non-governmental organisations to preserve the Hindu community rights, led a massive protest against the BN government, mainly the MIC, for failing to address and serve the interests of Indians. The Hindraf rally was a new awakening of resentment among the Indians, which had never been seen before, showing their greater awareness and political consciousness to struggle for their rights. This also appeared to be a sharp decline in Indians' confidence towards the MIC and its leadership in the 2008 general election.
The name BERSIH was derived from the name of its organiser, BERSIH (Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections), a coalition of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and the opposition parties. The idea of organising the BERSIH movement was developed by the opposition parties after they were defeated in the 2004 General Election, and was supported by a coalition of civil society groups. They formed a committee called the Joint Action Committee for Electoral Reform (JACER), intending to reform the electoral system to ensure clean, free, and fair elections. At the early stage of BERSIH's formation, it was affiliated with political parties. Later, there was an initiative to re-launch BERSIH as a non-partisan social movement (Khoo, 2014). BERSIH held its first rally in 2007, and this was followed by another four street protests in 2011 (BERSIH 2.0), 2012 (BERSIH 3.0), 2015 (BERSIH 4.0), and 2016 (BERSIH 5.0). Support for the BERSIH movement grew rapidly, with thousands of young people from different ethnic groups joining the demonstrations. See Khoo (2014) for further discussion.

providing a comprehensive understanding of 'the politics of fear' and its impact on political participation.

Phase 1: Re-analysis of Existing Data Survey

The quantitative method used in this research is the re-analysis of existing survey data from the Asian Barometer, specifically from Waves 2 to 5 (2005-2019). The Asian Barometer survey was selected because it offers a comprehensive range of political actions and variables, addressing a variety of political topics that are well-suited to the region's characteristics. The total sample size for young Malaysians aged 18 to 30 includes 570 respondents in Wave 2, 493 in Wave 3, 601 in Wave 4, and 1009 in Wave 5. This study follows the Malaysian Youth Policy's 2018 redefinition of youth, reducing the age range from 15-40 years to 15-30 years. The broader youth category was chosen to capture a larger segment of the population with diverse political interests, attitudes, knowledge, and experiences. The survey data were analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 23, using descriptive statistics such as cross-tabulations and comparison of proportions tests.

For regression analyses, two dependent variables were created: 'conventional participation' and 'unconventional participation.' Conventional participation was measured on a scale from 0 to 1, where 0 indicated no participation in any activities, and 1 indicated participation in all activities such as voting, party membership, attending party meetings, and contacting politicians. Similarly, unconventional participation was measured on a scale from 0 to 1, where 0 indicated no participation in activities, and 1 indicated participation in all activities, including signing petitions, demonstrating, boycotting products, and using force or violence for political reasons.

Both conventional and unconventional participation variables passed principal component analysis (PCA) tests. The Bartlett's Test of Sphericity (Bartlett, 1954) was significant (0.000) for all items, and the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) value was 0.80, surpassing the recommended threshold of 0.6 (Kaiser, 1974), confirming the suitability of the data for factor analysis. The conventional politics items loaded on a single component with an eigenvalue greater than one (e=1.50, explaining 53.03% of the variance), while the unconventional participation items also loaded on a single component (e=1.57, explaining 55.53% of the variance).

The independent variables included elements of repression such as free and fair elections, trust in government, freedom of speech, political freedom, media control, government transparency, and equality. These variables were coded as 1 for yes and 0 for no. Socio-demographic variables were coded as follows: youth (1 for ages 21-40, 0 for ages 41-70), male (1 for male, 0 for female), urban (1 for urban areas, 0 for rural areas), and university education (1 for university degree, 0 for others).

Phase 2: Semi-structured Interviews

The qualitative component of this study involved conducting face-to-face semi-structured interviews. This method was chosen as it enables a deeper exploration of the lived experiences of young Malaysians and their diverse perspectives on politics, allowing for close interaction between the researcher and the participants. A total of twenty Malaysian youths aged between 18 and 30 years were purposively selected to reflect a diversity of backgrounds. This includes those who were actively participating in political parties, social movements, and non-governmental organisations, as well as those who had not participated actively in politics (those not registered as voters and not affiliated with any political parties or organisations), ensuring ethnic representation (Malay, Chinese, and Indian), gender balance, and geographic variation (urban and rural areas). This heterogeneity aimed to capture a broad spectrum of youth political experiences under state-led repression. The interviews were conducted between November 2021 and April 2022, either face-to-face or via online platforms, depending on informants' location and accessibility. The qualitative data were then analysed using thematic analysis. The coding process followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework for thematic analysis. After transcribing the interviews verbatim, the data were read multiple times to ensure familiarity. Initial codes were then generated inductively, capturing meaningful units related to fear, repression, political engagement, and resistance. These codes were reviewed and grouped into broader categories based on recurring patterns and conceptual relevance. Themes were then refined, named, and validated by comparing them across participants to ensure consistency and representativeness. NVivo software was used to assist in organising and managing the coding process. Therefore, the analysis generated four key themes:

1. Culture of Fear – Many respondents linked their political disengagement to fear of state surveillance, arrest, or legal punishment. This widespread anxiety helps explain the low levels of participation seen in the quantitative data.
2. Disillusionment with Electoral Institutions and System – Several participants expressed scepticism toward the transparency and fairness of Malaysia's electoral process. This disillusionment aligns with the low rates of party membership and political contact revealed in the survey.
3. High Perceived Cost of Participation – Respondents viewed political activism, especially protests as carrying personal risk, which contributes to their avoidance of political engagement.
4. Motivated Resistance and Political Awakening – Despite the general trend of disengagement, a small group of participants reported increased political involvement due to feelings of injustice. These individuals align with the subset of youth who continue to engage in unconventional participation.

These themes offer a deeper understanding of the statistical findings and illustrate how state repression influences young people's perceptions, fears, and motivations, ultimately shaping their political behaviour.

Findings and Analyses: Quantitative Data

Table 1 presents the percentage of young Malaysians participating in political activities from 2005 to 2016. Analysing the four waves, we observe that the percentage of young people involved in political activism increased in Wave 3 but slightly declined in Wave 4, except for activities such as voting, attending party meetings, and demonstrating. Although there has been a slight rise in participation in activities like voting, attending campaign meetings, and demonstrations, the survey data reveal that less than half (50%) of young people engage in these activities, except for voting (53%). Notably, party affiliation among young people is low, as party membership dropped significantly from 12% in Wave 2, 5% in Waves 3 and 4, to just 3% in Wave 5. This supports findings by Pandian (2012, 9 June), who observed that young voters tend to be 'fence-sitters,' showing uncertainty toward party affiliation and instead voting based on issues such as unemployment, security, and corruption. Regarding unconventional political participation, the

percentage of young people involved in activities like boycotting, signing petitions, demonstrating, or using violence remains low, at less than 30%. Overall, the data suggest that young Malaysians are less likely to engage in political activities, whether conventional or unconventional. This finding contrasts with arguments by Norris (2002) and Dalton (2008), who suggest that young people are generally more engaged in unconventional forms of participation.

Table 1: Political Participation of Young People from 2005 to 2019

	Wave 2 (2005-2008)	**Wave 3 (2010-2012)**	**Wave 4 (2012-2016)**	**Wave 5 (2013-2019)**
	18-30 yrs (N: 570)	**18-30 yrs (N: 493)**	**18-30 yrs (N: 601)**	**18-30 yrs (N: 1009)**
Voted	45%	48 %	53%	58%
Party Membership	12%	5%	5%	3%
Attend a campaign meeting	24%	24%	25%	26%
Contacted Politician	30%	37%	17%	17%
Boycotted	12%	41%	29%	12%
Signing a petition	13%	21%	14%	18%
Attended a demonstration	5%	5%	6%	7%
Used force or violence for a political cause	2%	3%	2%	4%

It is important to highlight that while many political activities, such as signing petitions and boycotting, increased in Wave 3, they declined in Wave 5. This trend can be attributed to several factors. First, legislative reforms were introduced to create more democratic space for public participation. For instance, the amendment to AUKU (Section 15) allowed students to join political organisations outside of campus, and the Peaceful Assembly Act 2012 (PAA) permitted public assemblies without requiring a police permit, though organisers were required to

notify the police at least 10 days in advance. Second, the emergence of the 'Bersih' social movement heightened public awareness of democratic values through activities such as lobbying, signing petitions, and protesting. Third, social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter became powerful democratic tools, providing greater access to political information and enabling social movements to mobilise people for actions like signing petitions. However, between 2012 and 2016, the government intensified its crackdown on basic rights, restricted free speech, and arrested and charged opposition activists. In addition, human rights organisations such as SUARAM were subjected to hostile investigations by government-controlled media.

Table 2: Effects of 'The Politics of Fear' and Repression on Political Activism

	Conventional Participation		**Unconventional Participation**	
	Model 1	**Model 2**	**Model 1**	**Model 2**
N	1207	1207	1207	1207
R	0.143	0.247	0.189	0.275
R^2	0.020	0.061	0.036	0.076
Adjusted R	0.015	0.052	0.031	0.067
Standard Error	0.242	0.237	0.207	0.203
F	4.15	7.06	7.41	8.90
p-value	0.001	0.001	0.001	0.001
Constant	.366	.389	.235	.263
Free & fair Election	**.099*** (0.018)	**.089*** (0.018)	**.175*** (0.015)	**.167*** (0.015)
Trust for Government	-.005 (0.016)	-.004 (0.016)	-.050 (0.014)	-.041 (0.014)
Limited Freedom of Speech	-.037 (0.020)	-.041 (0.020)	-.027 (0.017)	-.017 (0.017)
Limited Freedom of Politics	-.003 (0.019)	-.003 (0.019)	.013 (0.016)	.003 (0.016)
Media Control	-.026 (0.027)	-.037 (0.026)	-.022 (0.023)	-.028 (0.022)

	Conventional Participation		Unconventional Participation	
	Model 1	**Model 2**	**Model 1**	**Model 2**
Transparency of Government	**-.099*** ** (0.014)	**-.089** ** (0.014)	.048 (0.012)	.052 (0.012)
Young*Repression		**-.198*** ** (0.032)		0.061 (0.028)
Young*Male* Repression		**.116*** ** (0.028)		**.111*** ** (0.024)
Young*Female* Repression		**-.082** ** (0.013)		**-.155*** ** (0.011)
Young*Urban* Repression		.020 (0.028)		-.027 (0.024)
Young*University education*Repression		.036 (0.042)		**0.091** ** (0.036)

Key: ***p≤ 0.001 **p< 0.01 *p≤ 0.05
Items in () refer to standard errors

Table 3: Effects of 'The Politics of Fear' on Political Activism

	Conventional Participation					Unconventional Participation				
R	0.143					0.189				
R^2	0.020					0.036				
Adjusted R	0.015					0.031				
Standard Error	0.242					0.207				
F	4.15					7.41				
p-value	0.001					0.001				
Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p	B	SE	β	t	p
Constant	0.366	0.020		18.5	<0.001	0.235	0.017		13.985	<0.001
Free & fair Election	**0.061**	**0.018**	**0.099**	**3.426**	**<0.001**	**0.092**	**0.015**	**0.175**	**6.085**	**<0.001**
Trust for Government	-0.003	0.016	-0.005	-0.182	0.856	-0.023	0.014	-0.050	-1.681	0.093

Limited Freedom of Speech	-0.022	0.020	-0.037	-1.094	0.274	-0.014	0.017	-0.027	-0.799	0.424
Limited Freedom of Politics	-0.002	0.019	-0.003	-0.083	0.934	0.006	0.016	0.013	0.398	0.691
Media Control	-0.024	0.027	-0.026	-0.898	0.370	-0.018	0.023	-0.022	-0.784	0.433
Transparency of Government	**-0.049**	**0.014**	**-0.099**	**-3.429**	**<0.001**	0.020	0.012	0.048	1.676	0.094

Key: ***p≤ 0.001 **p< 0.01 *p≤ 0.05
Items in () refer to standard errors

Table 4: Effects of Repression on Political Activism

	Conventional Participation					Unconventional Participation				
R	0.208					0.209				
R^2	0.043					0.044				
Adjusted R	0.039					0.040				
Standard Error	0.239					0.206				
F	10.8					10.9				
p-value	0.001					0.001				
Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p	B	SE	β	t	p
Constant	0.353	0.100		33.8	<0.001	0.274	0.009		30.521	<.0.001
Young* Repression	**-0.181**	**0.033**	**-0.204**	**-5.574**	**<0.001**	-0.045	0.028	-0.059	-1.605	0.109
Young* Male* Repression	**0.095**	**0.028**	**0.116**	**3.364**	**<0.001**	**0.067**	**0.024**	**0.096**	**2.777**	**0.006**
Young* Female* Repression	**-0.033**	**0.013**	**-0.086**	**-2.623**	**0.009**	**-0.056**	**0.011**	**-0.170**	**-5.203**	**<0.001**
Young* Urban* Repression	0.018	0.028	0.024	0.631	0.528	-0.017	0.024	-0.026	-0.695	0.487
Young* University education* Repression	0.050	0.042	0.039	1.197	0.231	**0.107**	**0.036**	**0.096**	**2.945**	**0.003**

Key: p≤ 0.001 **p< 0.01 *p≤ 0.05 ***
Items in () refer to standard errors

Table 2 displays the results of several regression analyses for the effects of 'politics of fear' such as free and fair elections, trust in government, limited freedom of speech, restricted political freedom, media control, government transparency, and equality among people, across different forms of participation (conventional and unconventional). These analyses incorporate socioeconomic predictors and repression, including repression*young, repression*young*male, repression*young*female, repression*young*urban, and repression*young*university. Notably, the inclusion of repression-related interaction terms in Model 2 significantly improved model fit for both types of participation. The findings in Table 2 reveal that free and fair elections have a positive and significant impact on conventional activism and unconventional activism. This relationship is especially strong in the context of unconventional participation, and even when controlling for socioeconomic and repression factors, suggesting that youth who perceive the electoral process as fair are more likely to engage not only in formal political channels but also in activism beyond traditional platforms. These results support the literature (e.g., Weitz-Shapiro & Winters, 2008), confirming that people are more likely to engage in conventional politics when they perceive the voting system as fair and free, and vice versa. Moreover, government transparency negatively affects conventional activism, indicating that when youth view the government as opaque, they may become disillusioned with formal political engagement. Interestingly, this same perception does not have a significant effect on unconventional forms of participation, highlighting a possible divergence in how different participation types respond to political cues. As shown in Model 2, the negative effect of being young*repressed on conventional activism aligns with findings in the literature (Tilly, 1978), showing that young Malaysians who feel repressed are less likely to participate in formal political activities. However, there are no significant differences in unconventional participation. Additionally, being male and feeling repressed has a positive effect on both conventional and unconventional political activism, confirming previous research (Karp & Banducci, 2008; Norris, 2002) that repression appears to mobilise young males to participate in political activities, both formal and informal, whereas young females tend to disengage from both conventional and unconventional participation in response to repression. As expected, controlling for socioeconomic factors shows that having a university education and feeling repressed

positively influence unconventional participation, indicating that educational exposure may provide tools or confidence for political expression in non-traditional arenas. By comparing the models across Tables 3 and 4, it becomes evident that the 'politics of fear' operates along deeply gendered and educational lines. While general political conditions, such as free and fair elections, encourage participation, they are insufficient on their own to explain the differentiated responses to repression. Only when repression is examined with age, gender, and education, as done in Table 4, does the complexity of youth political behaviour under semi-authoritarian rule come into full view. This reinforces the argument that fear is not a universal deterrent; rather, it is a selective force that suppresses some while provoking others into action.

Overall, the quantitative analyses confirm that 'the politics of fear' operate unevenly across demographic groups. While repression may mobilise some segments, it simultaneously silences others, particularly young women. The analysis confirms Hypothesis 1 (H1), showing that political repression negatively affects youth participation in conventional political activism in Malaysia, though it has no significant effect on unconventional participation. The study also supports Hypothesis 2 (H2), finding that young males who feel repressed are more likely to engage in both conventional and unconventional politics, compared to young females. Similarly, the study confirms Hypothesis 3 (H3), showing that young Malaysians with a university education who feel repressed are more inclined toward unconventional activism. Several key findings emerge from this study. First, state-led repression in Malaysia, particularly perceptions of electoral fairness and government transparency, has a stronger influence on conventional political participation than on unconventional forms. This aligns with O'Brien and Deng's (2015) argument that repression often drives individuals to pursue alternative modes of political expression, such as protest. Furthermore, individuals with higher levels of education who perceive themselves as repressed are more inclined to engage in unconventional political activities.

Findings and Analyses: Qualitative Data

As discussed earlier, political engagement in Malaysia has shown a downward trend in both conventional and unconventional participation,

except for voting. To explore the impact of state-led repression on political engagement, we asked the interviewees whether such repression has a positive or negative effect on Malaysians' political participation. Through in-depth interviews with 20 individuals, including those who refrain from voting or disengage from political and civic activities, as well as political activists, the majority (18 out of 20) expressed that state-led repression, such as the use of legal force and violence against civilians, negatively affects political participation. The main reason for this disengagement is the 'culture of fear' created by oppressive laws, such as the Sedition Act of 1948, the Official Secrets Act of 1972, and the Universities and University Colleges Act of 1971, which stifle political rights and freedoms. These laws, many of which date back to colonial times, give the regime central authority to suppress citizen participation and undermine the democratic process. As one interviewee (Informant 2) remarked, "I think we are not completely free to participate in politics because there are still barriers that restrict our freedom and political rights." Similarly, Informant 15 noted, "the violent repression used by the government on dissidents scared not only me but Malaysians as a whole from getting involved in politics."

The study concludes that Malaysians exposed to state repression are more likely to become fearful and passive, leading to disengagement from both formal and informal political activities, including protest activism. This fear of government-imposed legal force results in a perception that political participation in Malaysia is high-risk or high-cost. These findings align with existing literature (Tilly, 1978; Davenport, 2009) suggesting that political repression increases the costs of collective action, which in turn diminishes individuals' willingness to participate. In addition, 10 out of 20 interviewees mentioned that political repression, particularly through the state's control over institutions and laws, has eroded their confidence in the political system, leading to political disengagement. Specifically, the government's control of the electoral process through the Electoral Commission has created a system perceived as unfair, particularly toward the opposition. The Commission has faced criticism for issues such as missing voters, phantom voters, gerrymandering, and the influence of money politics. Consequently, many Malaysians have lost faith in the political process, especially elections. As Informant 8 stated, "I sometimes doubt the voting system because it's not fully transparent. When the system isn't transparent, we can't expect much

change through elections." Similarly, Informant 5 commented, "voting can bring change, but it depends on the transparency and integrity of the electoral system. The more transparent it is, the more we can achieve change."

Although some interviewees have participated in protest activism, such as demonstrations and social movements, the majority (18 out of 20) believe that protest is an important part of democracy. They view it as a way to express dissatisfaction with the government or specific issues. As Informant 7 put it, "protest is a way to express our dissatisfaction with certain issues. We can demonstrate as long as it's organised properly and doesn't disturb the public." Informant 1 echoed this sentiment, stating, "protest is important to make our voices heard and to ensure the government pays attention to us." Despite this, many Malaysians see protest as a risky activity that could lead to negative consequences. As protest is seen as a threat to the government, the authorities continue to use legal and excessive force to suppress protesters, often claiming that such actions are "not in line with our culture" (Najib, 2016, November 18). This demonstrates the government's rejection of protest as a legitimate form of political participation. However, not all repressed young people are afraid to challenge the regime and demand political change. Despite increasing repression aimed at limiting citizen participation, a small group of Malaysians channels their frustration into political activism. This supports Gurr's (1970) theory that repression can generate 'collective frustration,' which may increase the likelihood of collective action. When interviewed, over half of the respondents (18 out of 20) said they were motivated to participate in activism due to feelings of deprivation, injustice, and indignation toward the repressive regime. As Informant 13 noted, "we can see that our country is not heading in a better direction. We are moving towards a 'failed state' in terms of the economy, politics, and society. So, we need a total change, not just small-scale reform." Similarly, Informant 16 commented, "we are fighting for a better Malaysia. This is not for us, but for the next generation."

Several movements in Malaysia have successfully influenced policy changes, such as the national campaign to abolish the Internal Security Act (ISA), led by a coalition of human rights NGOs under the banner of the Anti-ISA Movement (Gerakan Mansuh ISA, GMI) since 2001. After a decade of protests and resistance against indefinite detention

without trial, the government repealed the ISA in 2011. Furthermore, four interviewees mentioned that they had been arrested at least once during their political activism. As Informant 7 reflected, "I was arrested seven times as a student activist and twice when I worked for SUARAM." Despite repeated arrests, most of these activists expressed that they were not deterred, and the government's crackdowns only fuelled their determination to continue fighting for change. They cited the experiences of past political figures as a source of inspiration in their resistance.

Conclusion

This study highlights the impact of 'the politics of fear' on political participation in Malaysia by utilising a mixed-methods approach, combining both quantitative data and qualitative interviews from 20 young Malaysians. The quantitative results indicate a decline in various political activities among young people in Wave 5, with the exceptions of voting, attending campaign meetings, and demonstrating. Despite this downward trend in political engagement, the findings reveal that repressive measures, such as unfair elections, restricted freedom of speech and political expression, and government non-transparency, are particularly evident in unconventional political activities. The qualitative analysis further shows that 'the politics of fear' discourages political participation, especially among young Malaysians. The study concludes that repressive actions, including the enforcement of existing criminal laws and the use of violent repression, prevent Malaysians from actively engaging in politics. Specifically, state-led repression has a negative impact on young people's political involvement in Malaysia, fostering a 'culture of fear' that serves as a significant barrier to political activism. Given the risks and high costs associated with political participation in Malaysia, only a small group of highly determined and courageous young Malaysians are willing to challenge the status quo through channels like social movements and protest activism. The majority, however, remain politically inactive or limit their involvement to low-risk activities, such as informal political discussions. As a result, the widespread disengagement of young Malaysians from politics is slowing the country's transition to democracy and may make such a transition difficult to achieve in the future.

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Perceived Determinants of Child Poverty in Malaysia: A Preliminary Analysis

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Abstract: Child poverty is a significant topic in public policy discussions. Children who are poor face numerous disadvantages. The deprivations they face are multifaceted and often closely linked to low-income households. Children are dependent on their parents, and when parents are unable to meet their children's basic needs, it can severely hinder the children's development and overall well-being. Although low income is commonly viewed as the primary cause of child poverty, it may not be the sole factor. Child poverty can be attributed to several factors beyond parental income. Various economic and family demographic variables are associated with the overall well-being of children. This preliminary study aims to investigate the determinants of child poverty in Malaysia from the perspective of the general public. Guided by Bronfenbrenner's ecological system theory (1979), public perceptions are measured quantitatively based on four key factors that exist within a multi-layered environment: state policy commitment, health, family structures, and the labour market. The findings indicate that adverse parental characteristics increase the likelihood of child poverty. Factors such as the parental education level (47.5%), household size (61.5%), and family structure – specifically *single parent* households (64.5%) – are all significant contributors to child poverty. This study enhances the understanding of child poverty and offers new insights for policymakers, urging them to adopt a child-centred approach within the existing poverty framework to better support disadvantaged children.

Keywords: Child poverty, forms of deprivation, poor parental characteristics, and public perception.

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Abstrak: Kemiskinan kanak-kanak merupakan topik penting dalam perbincangan dasar awam. Kanak-kanak yang miskin menghadapi pelbagai kekurangan. Kekurangan yang mereka alami adalah dalam pelbagai aspek, dan masalah ini sering dikaitkan dengan isi rumah berpendapatan rendah. Kanak-kanak bergantung kepada ibu bapa mereka, dan ketidakupayaan ibu bapa untuk memenuhi keperluan tersebut akan menghalang perkembangan dan kesejahteraan kanak-kanak secara serius. Walaupun pendapatan rendah biasanya dilihat sebagai punca utama, ia mungkin bukan faktor utama yang menyumbang kepada kemiskinan kanak-kanak. Kemiskinan kanak-kanak boleh disebabkan oleh beberapa faktor lain seperti ekonomi dan demografi keluarga. Tujuan penyelidikan awal ini adalah untuk mengkaji faktor yang menyumbang kepada kemiskinan kanak-kanak di Malaysia dari perspektif orang awam. Berpandukan teori sistem ekologi Brofenbrenner (1979), persepsi awam diukur secara kuantitatif menggunakan empat faktor utama yang wujud dalam pelbagai lapisan persekitaran iaitu komitmen dasar negara, kesihatan, struktur keluarga, dan pasaran buruh. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahawa faktor kemiskinan keluarga menyumbang kepada kemiskinan kanak-kanak. Faktor-faktor seperti tahap pendidikan ibu bapa (47.5%), saiz isi rumah (61.5%), dan struktur keluarga - ibu atau bapa tunggal (64.5%) dilihat sebagai penyumbang utama kepada kemiskinan kanak-kanak. Kajian ini membantu dalam membina pemahaman yang lebih baik tentang kemiskinan kanak-kanak dan menawarkan pandangan baharu kepada pembuat dasar dalam rangka kerja sedia ada, terutamanya dalam menangani isu kemiskinan kanak-kanak.

Kata kunci: Kemiskinan kanak-kanak, bentuk kekurangan, ciri keibubapaan yang lemah, persepsi awam

Introduction

Child poverty is defined as the lack of fundamental necessities essential for children's well-being. Due to economic insecurity, affected children often face deprivation, placing them at an elevated risk of multidimensional poverty. In this context, children in poor households are more likely to experience deprivation on almost all non-income poverty indicators relating to education, health, housing, and environmental conditions (Redmond, Praino & Siddiquee, 2016). They face numerous barriers, ranging from limited educational attainment to overall development. In many cases, children are unable to complete their years of schooling, contributing to rising school dropout rates. This precarious situation is exacerbated by poor living conditions. Health becomes a major concern, as inadequate housing conditions -

including overcrowded homes, limited living space, restricted access to clean water, and malnutrition – contribute significantly to poor health outcomes. Such deficiencies in living standards negatively affect children's overall well-being.

Malaysia is among the top five countries with a higher percentage of children vulnerable to poverty – with one out of three children affected (Farhana and Mohd Husni, 2018). Increased attention has been given to this issue following a 2018 UNICEF study on urban child poverty. The report, titled 'Children Without,' highlights the poor living conditions of children in low-income flats in Kuala Lumpur, where they are found to be both socially and materially disadvantaged (UNICEF, 2018). The study revealed that nearly 11% of children in Malaysia live in urban poverty, with 15% of children under five years of age being underweight. Approximately 22% of children are stunted, and only 50% of five- to six-year-olds are enrolled in preschool (UNICEF, 2018). Children born into impoverished households suffer considerably; some are deprived of schooling and lack hope for the future. They do not enjoy the privilege of access to quality education and a better living environment. Limited access to home literacy resources and frequent school abandonment – often caused by parents' inability to afford school related expenses – are key contributors to learning poverty and illiteracy. These impoverished conditions not only restrict educational opportunities, but also harm children's overall health and development. The report further indicates that underprivileged children are more likely to be stunted and underweight. A lack of access to adequate and nutritious food remains the primary cause of many health-related issues among these children.

Unlike adults, children are particularly vulnerable, as they lack the resources and autonomy to overcome poverty without external support. Numerous challenges place them at a disadvantage. According to Reynaert et al. (2023), child poverty constitutes a violation of children's rights, as it hinders their development, inhibits growth, and denies them access to basic life opportunities. In severe cases, poor children may face violence, abuse, or abandonment, thereby jeopardising their growth, development, and survival. As a result, early childhood poverty has a direct impact on a child's physical and socio-emotional development (Mishra et al., 2023). This is an alarming situation, as deprivation beginning in childhood can lead to a multitude of problems, including

underachievement, illiteracy, and juvenile delinquency (UNICEF, 2018).

In Malaysia, the development of child rights-oriented public policies is primarily the responsibility of the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development (MWFCD). In policy-making, the concept of children's rights appears to be fully embraced as part of the Ministry's policy commitment in providing children with a standard of living necessary for their physical, mental, spiritual, moral, and social development. As recognised by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), children's rights encompass four major dimensions: survival, development, protection, and participation. These dimensions represent three aspects of child well-being: relative, subjective, and material. The interdependence of these child-related issues has driven the MWFCD to prioritise concerns related to child protection and care, particularly child abuse and neglect. However, only one dimension – relative well-being – appears to be consistently addressed, while material and subjective well-being, including issues related to child poverty, receive comparatively less attention. Although child poverty has not featured prominently in Malaysian public policy discourse, improving children's well-being has remained a consistent priority for the government. This is demonstrated by the implementation of various national action plans aimed specifically at enhancing children's education, health, and social welfare.

Despite significant progress toward enhancing children's well-being, persistent problems remain. The growing number of children in need of protection underscores the urgency for more decisive and robust policies to combat child poverty (Free Malaysia Today, 2024). Child poverty is a root cause of numerous other child-related issues. Therefore, it is imperative to assess child poverty separately from adult poverty, as children experience poverty differently from adults. In response, effective intervention strategies should be developed based on a thorough understanding of the underlying causes of child poverty. Child poverty is influenced by a range of factors that go beyond parental income, including economic and demographic variables that are closely linked to children's overall well-being.

This preliminary study, therefore, aims to explore the perceived drivers of child poverty in Malaysia by focusing on four key

contributing factors: state policy commitment, the labour market, family structure, and health. These factors represent the complex multi-layered environments that either support or hinder child development, as outlined in Bronfenbrenner's ecological system theory. To achieve this objective, the article is structured into six sections, beginning with the introduction. A literature review on child poverty and its consequences in both general and Malaysian contexts is presented in sections two and three, respectively. Section four briefly discusses the research methodology, while the results are presented in section five. The final section discusses the issue in relation to the four identified determinants of child poverty within the Malaysian context.

Literature Review

The impacts of poverty are more pronounced on children. A mountain of evidence shows that poverty can lead to cognitive, emotional, and physical harm in children (Madrick, 2020). Children's relative, subjective, and material well-being will suffer significantly, often leading to a vicious cycle of poverty. Policymakers have struggled to support children's well-being due to the inherent complexities of policymaking. They encounter a variety of obstacles when providing support for the 'needy' child, including a lack of resources, inadequate governance, and poor policy coordination (Karadzhov, 2023). Evidence indicates that many initiatives intended to promote children's well-being are often ineffective due to organisational setbacks. In this context, inadequate policy responses profoundly impact disadvantaged children by delaying their access to healthcare, education, and other essential services. According to Wight (2014), many families with incomes above the poverty line – let alone poor households – experience food insecurity. Families earning just above the poverty threshold remain economically vulnerable and in need of assistance from authorities. As a result, boosting social benefits is viewed as the most effective means of directly lifting children and families out of poverty. A targeted family benefits initiative – particularly through cash income support and tax benefits – would improve child outcomes and reduce child poverty. However, income-based initiatives must be supplemented with non-income-based interventions. Driven by children's needs and interests, the government is expected to broaden societal engagement when developing child-centric policies. Given this importance, the quality of a state's welfare policy is a key predictor in reducing child poverty.

States that have adopted more inclusive, generous, and supportive policies have demonstrated greater success in lowering child poverty (Rodgers, 2007).

To articulate a comprehensive strategy for reducing child poverty, policymakers must evaluate the wider context of socio-cultural, structural, internal, and external factors that influence children's long-term development (Zdunek, et al., 2019). The dynamic interactions of social ecological factors significantly affect the lives of children. The socio-ecological approach acknowledges the influence of a child's environment at the family, community, and societal levels. Children's positive and negative outcomes can be attributed to these factors, particularly the roles played by family and community. Family is considered a critical determinant of children's health and education, while community conditions significantly influence a child's vulnerability to adverse childhood experiences (Baumont, et.al., 2020). The complex layers of child's environment, encompassing both the microsystem and macrosystem, shape development outcomes. In this regard, poverty can be observed in each of these systems, as outlined in Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory. The presence of poverty across multiple layers of a child's environment – including the family and community – has a direct influence on the child's development. A study by Schewcik (2017) explains how such factors such as low socio-economic status, poor community conditions, and weak state welfare support negatively impact children's personal resources, development, and overall well-being.

Poverty significantly increases the likelihood of children's rights being violated. Children who live in poverty often suffer the worst outcomes. Poor children are particularly vulnerable to violence, abuse, abandonment, and exploitation (Gunn and Duncan, 1997). Protections through governmental interventions are considered significant, as poverty puts them in a variety of disadvantageous situations. When the basic needs of children are not satisfied, the foundational conditions for their development and growth deteriorate (Watson, et al., 2009). According to reports, children living in poverty have limited access to healthcare, education, and social services, and are more likely to live in poor quality home environments. Under such circumstances, children's well-being suffers, making it difficult for them to grow, develop, and pursue life's opportunities (Chapman, et al., 2023). Children living in

poverty rarely have a chance to go to school and have limited access to essential services such as healthcare; they also face poor housing conditions. Without adequate care and protection, many children are forced to confront juvenile delinquency, child marriage, forced labour, and other disadvantages for generations (Tran, 2023; De Schutter et al., 2023). Indeed, living in poverty has a negative impact on children's development.

The research literature primarily identifies various factors that push children into these unfortunate situations. As noted above, the literature documents that factors such as demographics, health, viability of the state economy, and inclusiveness of state welfare programs are associated with an increase in child poverty. A substantial body of research indicates that the dominant factors contributing to the increase in child poverty over time are single parenthood (Rodgers, et. al, 2007, Kutsar, 2020), sick and unemployed parents (Bradshaw, 2002; Rodgers, 2007; Watson, 2009; Boston, 2014), low parental education and ethnic minority status (Rodgers, 2007; Roelen, 2012; Cheung et al., 2018), and inadequate policy responses (Rodgers, 2007; Jonathan, 2014; Madrick, 2020). These four factors provide crucial insights into child poverty. According to a study by Cheung et al. (2018) conducted in Hong Kong, ethnic minority groups are at greater risk of child poverty. This can be attributed to cultural differences, language barriers, and inadequate policy responses. Since the needs of the Chinese majority have driven policies for reducing poverty, the needs of ethnic minority children have not been adequately addressed. Research on child poverty reveals that children are more likely to live in poverty if their parents were low achievers and possessed the lowest human capital. Low income is linked to low parental education (Kutsar, 2020). Moreover, children are at higher risk of living in poverty if they come from households with unemployed parents, single-parent families, or large families with three or more children. Wider socio-economic factors have been identified as the primary contributors to child poverty. In New Zealand, 48% of impoverished children live in households with three or more members and in workless households (Boston, 2014). It is well established that child poverty rates vary considerably by race, ethnicity, and family structures.

Many scholars argue that reducing child poverty is possible through an inclusive and comprehensive welfare plan. This relationship is

supported by Rodgers (2007), who compared child poverty rates across states in America and highlighted the importance of state policy support in controlling child poverty. The inclusiveness of state welfare policy is the major predictor of reduced child poverty rates, while other economic and parental characteristics must also be considered. The multivariate analysis reveals that unemployment, children living with a single parent, and parents without a high school degree experience higher poverty rates (Rodgers, 2007). Appropriate policy strategies can lead to significant decreases in child poverty rates because early intervention improves child outcomes (Saunders, et.al, 2019). Parents need strong incentives, combined with considerable financial support, to enter the workforce and participate in the labour market. Notably, limiting child poverty heavily depends on achieving high parental employment levels. Employment is the most effective factor to break the cycle of poverty. In addition to monetary and economic measures, more comprehensive policy initiatives should be developed by analysing the issue of child poverty from a child-centred approach. The various basic needs of children can be better understood through multidimensional poverty measurement because they are multidimensionally impoverished. This can be used to identify child-specific requirements such as education, health, housing, water, and sanitation (Roelen, 2012). The ability of children to access food, housing, education, and health is the best way to measure child poverty (Abdu, 2018). Through this method, children identified as both financially and multidimensionally impoverished can receive better assistance. Severe deprivation in all dimensions can be estimated accurately. Recognising various forms of deprivation leads to the development of more secure and stable multidimensional approaches. This is critical, as the elements of child poverty differ from those of adults.

Addressing Child Poverty in Malaysia

Malaysia has recorded remarkable achievements in poverty alleviation. National poverty rate began to decline in the 1980s and continued its downward trend into the 2000s, following the implementation of the New Economic Policy (NEP, 1970-1990) and other national policies. Fighting poverty has emerged as a major focus of the national development strategy and has been consistently highlighted under different leaderships, demonstrating the importance of reducing poverty and inequality in the country.

In recent years, poverty has increased due to unexpected events, such as economic crises and pandemics. The COVID-19 pandemic is a testament to this, having significantly impacted poverty. Many people have lost jobs during the pandemic, plunging them into poverty. Prior to 2020, the unemployment rate in Malaysia was 3.3% (DOSM, 2019); however, it rose to 4.1% in 2022 (DOSM, 2022). A significant drop in household income pushed the T20, M40, and B40 into lower income groups (DOSM,2021). These categories refer to household income classifications in Malaysia: T20 represents the top 20% of Malaysian household incomes, M40 represents the middle 40%, and B40 represents the bottom 40%. The COVID-19 pandemic forced thousands of B40 households below the poverty line, with nearly 12.5% of households earning less than RM 2,500. Following the pandemic, Malaysia's national poverty rate marginally increased from 5.6% in 2019 to 8.4% in 2020 (Ririn, 2021), before steadily declining to 6.2% in 2022 due to several governmental policy measures (Sufi Muhammad, 2023). Although the poverty rate is declining, hundreds of thousands of families continue to face economic challenges. Many of them are forced into a downward spiral of poverty. The increasing number of poor families results in an increasing number of poor children, further affecting their growth and development.

Child poverty is an emerging issue in Malaysia. The prevalence of child poverty is rising due to the pandemic. Children living in poverty face multiple forms of deprivation (Norhaslinda and Maziah, 2023). A study by Redmond et al. (2016) revealed that Malaysian children living in larger households, low-income families, and rural areas experience significantly higher levels of non-income deprivation. A substantial proportion of children are vulnerable to income disparities and deprivation. This disadvantaged group continues to live in dilapidated and deteriorating homes, lack access to healthcare and education, and have limited access to basic communication tools and clean water. Likewise, a 2018 UNICEF study exposed the deprivation experienced by children living in low-cost flats in Kuala Lumpur. Due to economic hardship, their constitutive rights have not been adequately protected, and their health conditions have been negatively affected. It was revealed that nearly 11% of children in Malaysia live in urban poverty, with 15% of children under five being underweight. About 22% of children are stunted, and only 50% of five- to six-year-olds are enrolled

in pre-school (UNICEF, 2018). Economic disparities and deprivation therefore impact children's well-being (Noralina and Siti Hajar, 2017). The fulfilment of children's needs – measured by the degree to which material, education, health, and social service necessities are met – is indispensable for child's growth and development.

Current poverty measures focus primarily on poor households, with little attention paid to the specific needs of children. Despite Malaysia's progress in poverty elimination, childhood poverty remains prevalent as many unfortunate families and children are left behind. Slow policy development and a lack of data on child poverty in Malaysia have resulted in persistent deprivation across many child rights domains. Existing policy initiatives focus mainly on monetary solutions, with insufficient attention paid to the essential aspects of child well-being such as nutritious food and healthcare (Norhaslinda, 2023). The nature of child poverty remains largely hidden within conventional poverty policies. Deficiencies in policy-making are compounded when databases fail to reflect children's real constraints. This policy challenge arises when no specific indicators have been established to guide policy actions related to children's well-being. This policy gap must be addressed through the formulation of comprehensive social protection specifically targeting poor children. These issues have led to the current study, which assesses the determinants of child poverty from a public perspective. Guided by Bronfenbrenner's ecological system theory, the determinants of child poverty are examined through factors that exist in the microsystem (family, school, neighbourhood, parents' workplace) and macrosystem (the larger social systems and structures, including major societal institutions such as public agencies) of a child's environment (Zdunek, et.al., 2019). These complex layers of environment are argued to have a significant impact on child development. The interaction between these different environmental layers may either support or hinder a child's development.

Research Methodology

The perceived determinants of child poverty are examined quantitatively using a survey questionnaire. Guided by Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979), the study investigates the multiple factors that exist within the multi-layered environments of the microsystem and macrosystem. The complex environment layers were categorised into

four key factors: state policy commitment, health, family structure, and the labour market.

Survey questionnaires were administered among the public in Selangor, Malaysia. Respondents were asked to express their opinions on a variety of factors that influence child poverty in Malaysia. Their perceptions were assessed using a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from (1) Not contribute at all, (2) Not contribute, (3) Slightly contribute, (4) Contribute, to (5) Most likely to contribute. The questionnaire included ten closed-ended questions representing the four identified factors – state policy commitment, health, family structures, and the labour market. Additionally, two questions were included to assess public perceptions of the impact of poverty on children and whether they believe children suffer differently from adults in poverty.

The survey was administered through an online platform. To facilitate data collection, a convenience sampling technique was used, and the survey link was distributed via social media. In total, 252 questionnaires were completed and returned. Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS IBM 22, and descriptive statistical analyses were presented to investigate the perceived drivers of child poverty in Malaysia. For analysis, responses rated (4) Contribute and (5) Most likely to contribute were combined to capture respondents' perceptions of the key determinants of child poverty. To strengthen the analysis, a data triangulation technique was applied, combining both quantitative data and secondary data analysis.

In terms of data quality, a reliability test was conducted to determine the internal consistency of the items used to measure each construct. Table 1 shows the results of the reliability analysis. As shown in the table, the constructs exceeded the minimal acceptable standards for internal consistency. Evidently, all items comprising the scales are internally consistent, with overall Cronbach's Alpha values above .5

Table 1: Reliability Analysis

Variables	Cronbach's Alpha (α)	N of items
Determinants of Child Poverty	.777	10

Note: Reliability test indicates that the scale has reliability above α=.50

Findings

Demographic data

Table 2 presents the demographic data for 252 respondents who participated in the study. The majority were female (71.8%) with males comprising 28.2%. In terms of education, a majority of the respondents had pre-degree qualifications (57.5%), 19.0% held a degree, 13.9% had no formal education, and another 9.5% of respondents pursued postgraduate studies. Regarding employment, 44.0% were students, followed by 16.3% working in the private sector, 17.9% in the public sector, 13.1% unemployed, 7.9% self-employed, and 0.8% retired. In terms of household dependents, 34.5% had four to seven dependents, 35.3% had either a dependent or none, 25.4% had two to three dependents, and 4.8% had eight or more dependents. Respondents fell into four household income categories: 28.2% of respondents earned less than RM 5,000 monthly and are classified as part of the B40 group, of which 34.5% earned less than RM 2,500. The M40 and T20 groups represented 26.2% and 11.1% respectively. Furthermore, 26.2% of respondents reported having unemployed dependents in the household, highlighting a significant decline in household income and the potential adverse effects on children's well-being.

Table 2: Demographic Information for 252 Respondents

Variable	Category	Percentage
Gender	Male	28.2
	Female	71.8
Education	No Formal Education	13.9
	Pre-Degree	57.5
	Degree	19
	Postgraduate Level	9.5
Employment Status	Student	44
	Private Sector	16.3
	Public Sector	17.9
	Self-Employed	7.9
	Unemployed	13.1
	Retirees	0.8

Variable	Category	Percentage
Household Dependents	4-7 dependents	34.5
	1 or none	35.3
	2-3 dependents	25.4
	>8 dependents	4.8
Household Income Categories	Less than RM 2500	34.5
	Less than RM 5000	28.2
	More than RM 5000	26.2
	More than RM 10000	11.1

Perceived Determinants of Child Poverty

A substantial majority (72.6%) agreed that the impacts of poverty has more severe consequences for children compared to adults, with 80.9% stating that children suffer differently. These perceptions underline the urgent need for child-centred policy interventions. Table 3 outlines the descriptive analysis assessing the determinants of child poverty. The determinants of child poverty are quantified using four factors derived from the complex multi-layered microsystem and macrosystem environments, namely: state policy commitment, family structure, health, and the labour market. Ten items were developed to assess the public perception of the factors influencing child poverty in Malaysia. The perceived determinants of child poverty are assessed on a five-point scale ranging from (1) Not contribute at all to (5) Most likely to contribute. As shown in Table 3, two items were developed to assess state policy commitment, two items for health factors, four items for family structures and parental characteristics, and two items for labour market factors. The discussion of the descriptive data presented in Table 3 is further supported by secondary data.

Table 3: Perceived Determinants of Child Poverty

Item	1	2	3	4	5
Family: Children are more likely to live in poverty due to low levels of parental educational attainment	4.3%	11.9%	34.1%	26.1%	21.4%
Family: Children who are living in a large household (>3 children) would be deprived in life due to poverty	3.5%	10.7%	24.2%	37.7%	23.8%

Item	1	2	3	4	5
Family: Children who come from single parent households are more likely to experience poverty	2.0%	12.0%	21.5%	38.6%	25.9%
Family: Low-income household (< RM 2500) contributes to child poverty	3.5%	7.1%	17.0%	35.3%	36.9%
Labour Market: Parental employment is closely associated with child poverty	7.5%	10.0%	25.5%	32.7%	24.3%
Labour Market: Heightened risks of living in poverty due to low-paid parental jobs has contributed to child poverty.	3.5%	5.5%	14.6%	40.8%	35.3%
Health: The pandemic pushed thousands of children into poverty due to unemployed parents	3.1%	5.9%	3.1%	27.3%	60.3%
Health: Bereaved children who lost their parents due to the pandemic are more likely to experience child poverty	2.7%	6.7%	5.1%	27.3%	57.9%
State Policy: A lack of inclusiveness in state policies when dealing with child poverty has contributed to the increasing child poverty rate	2%	3.1%	15.1%	53.2%	26.6%
State Policy: Inadequate attention by policymakers has contributed to the increasing child poverty rate	2.4%	4.8%	11.9%	57.9%	23.0%

Descriptive analysis reveals public perception on the determinants of child poverty. As shown in Table 3, respondents generally agree that family structure and parental characteristics are the main causes pushing thousands of children to the brink of poverty. Similarly, the labour market also plays a contributing role in this context. 57% of respondents concur that parental employment is closely associated with child poverty, particularly for parents working in semi-skilled and low skilled sectors, earning low-paid jobs (76.1%). Regarding the health factor, the emergence of the pandemic has worsened the situation faced by poor children. In general, 87.6% believe that the pandemic intensified the situation due to parental unemployment, and 85.2% agree that many children were living in impoverished conditions after losing their parents to the pandemic. Since the impacts of poverty are most pronounced on children, the government is expected to alleviate the situation by providing support and assistance to affected groups,

particularly children living in poverty. However, the public believes that government policies are not inclusive enough in addressing child poverty in Malaysia (79.8%), and 80.9% agree that this issue has been largely unattended by the government, thereby contributing to a rise in child poverty in the country.

To further discuss the findings, the following discussion on descriptive analysis is substantiated with secondary data. Poor parental characteristics appear to provide significant insights into child poverty. By combining scales (4) Mostly contribute and (5) Most likely to contribute, the results show that factors such as parental education level (47.5%), larger household size (61.5%), and single-parent family structure (64.5%) are all likely contribute to child poverty. Comparatively, children from single-parent households face a higher risk. This suggests that children raised by single parents are perceived to be far more likely to live in poverty, as single parents confront greater economic insecurity than other family types (Paroline and Emma, 2022). As the sole provider, the single-parent is likely to face multiple limitations that restrict their ability to provide substantial financial support to their children. A study by UNICEF (2024) reveals that parents are becoming increasingly concerned about their children's future possibilities, particularly in terms of educational accessibility and quality, especially as the cost of providing education has risen significantly. These economic challenges are more pronounced for single parents, since a paid job does not necessarily imply that a household can meet all the needs of a child.

The descriptive analysis reveals that the incidence of child poverty is considerably influenced by family structure, including household size (61.5 %). This has been confirmed by research conducted by Redmond et al. (2017), which found that children living in larger households with seven or more people experience significantly higher non-income deprivation compared to children in households with six or fewer people. The number of children per household significantly affects the probability of being poor (Bardshaw, 2002; Fusco, 2020). In the case of Malaysia, the average household size shrank from 4.3 in 2010 to 3.8 in 2020. As reported, more developed states tend to have smaller household sizes, with Penang and Kuala Lumpur recording the lowest average of 3.5 persons per household (Adib, 2022). However, two of Malaysia's poorest states, Kelantan and Sabah, recorded the highest average household sizes of 4.9 and 4.7 persons respectively. Worsening

the situation, these two states also recorded the highest incidence of absolute poverty. The absolute poverty rate in Sabah is 19.2%, followed by Kelantan at 13.2% (MOE, 2024). The poorest families with more children and larger household sizes were especially worse off. One possible contributing factor to the decline in their standard of living is a lack of sufficient income. This has raised significant concern over the effects of poverty on children. Clearly, children are impacted by these circumstances, as they face limited access to education, healthcare services, and decent living standards.

Previous research has shown that families with a parent who did not complete high school tend to have greater rates of poverty (Rodger, 2007; Inoue, 2023). There is a strong correlation between parental participation in the labour force, education attainment, and children's living conditions (Smith, 2018). The current research findings indicate that 57% of respondents believe parental employment is closely related to child poverty, and 76.1% think children are at increased risk of poverty when their parents have low-paying jobs. There is a clear correlation between household income and education, where lower education attainment increases the risk of living in poverty. Supporting this argument, a study by the Khazanah Research Institute (KRI) reveals that household heads with a degree earn 3.6 times the income of those without a degree (KRI, 2018). In Malaysia, only a third of employed people hold a degree. Due to low education levels, many families face economic insecurity by working in semi-skilled and low-skilled occupations. As shown in Table 3, 47.5% of respondents perceived low education as a dominant factor contributing to child poverty. This situation is especially prevalent in Malaysia where the majority of the workforce is employed in both semi-skilled and low-skilled jobs (Faiqah, 2024), which are associated with higher risks of being financially insecure (Roelen, 2012). These factors deprive children in various ways, and such deprivation may hinder families' ability to enjoy even basic pleasures (Saunder, 2019).

It can be argued that the micro system is the most immediate environment influencing children's development. In this regard, the environment in which children live significantly impacts their development and socialisation. Bronfenbrenner's bioecological system theory states that a child's development is influenced by complex layers of environment (Eriksson, et al., 2018). The interaction of

family, community, institutions, and other situational factors plays a critical role in shaping children's development. Within this context, situational health factors such as parental loss and the pandemic may have had compounding effects on children's lives. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic significantly affected societal well-being in general, and children's well-being in particular. Projections estimate that nearly 400,000 Malaysian families were pushed into poverty due to the pandemic. Children, particularly bereaved children, faced severe challenges during the pandemic. As shown in Table 3, 87.6% of respondents agreed that bereaved children are the most affected group, as they are more likely to suffer following the sudden loss of one or both parents. As of 2021, 4,422 children had lost a parent, both parents, or guardian due to COVID-19 (Loheswar, 2021). The absence of parents results in children assuming greater household responsibilities, and in many cases, these challenges are exacerbated due to a lack of financial resources. The rise in child poverty and the growing number of unemployed households due to the pandemic are deeply concerning. As a result, there has been an increased number of households living below the poverty threshold due to loss of income. The current study also reveals that 87.6% of respondents agreed that the pandemic pushed thousands of children into poverty through parental unemployment. This affects hundreds of thousands of B40 households now at the risk of falling into poverty due to pandemic-related disruptions. The pandemic has impacted all income groups and created many "new poor" households in Malaysia (DOSM, 2021).

The government is facing immense challenges due to the multifaceted needs of impoverished children. The issue is further complicated by its inextricable links to other household and parental factors. Due to its complexities, current policies fail to address the diverse needs of disadvantaged children adequately. Children's needs are multidimensional and require a comprehensive strategic plan that accounts for all elements of their well-being. Unfortunately, child poverty appears to be insufficiently prioritised. In Malaysia, childhood poverty is typically addressed within the broader framework of adult poverty, despite the unequal distribution of resources within households. The well-being of children risks being overlooked when policy-making disregards factors such as household size, composition, and parental characteristics. Descriptive analysis in Table 3 shows

that 79.8% of respondents agreed that the lack of inclusiveness in state policies has contributed to rising child poverty rates. Even now, the role of child poverty in setting the policy agenda has been, for the most part, inadequate. Even though child poverty is acknowledged by the government, this recognition has yet to lead to meaningful policy interventions. A distinct lack of state policy commitments is regarded as a key factor in understanding the persistence of child poverty. In fact, 80.9% of respondents agreed that insufficient attention from policymakers has contributed to the increasing rates of child poverty. Early policy intervention is essential, as childhood poverty drives various other issues affecting children. Recognising the problem and raising awareness among policymakers are the first crucial steps toward making child poverty a policy priority.

Discussion

Poverty is a prime example of a policy dilemma. Most problems associated with poverty have multiple causes. It is linked to a variety of factors, including unemployment, migrant status, household income, low educational attainment, and the cost of living. There are countless factors that contribute to poverty, and just when we believe we have a firm grip on the problem, something new emerges. The multifaceted nature of poverty warrants multidimensional strategies, as no single approach or solution can adequately address the issue. Each factor is too broad and complex to address in isolation. As a result, understanding the causes does not necessarily lead to successful solutions, because the context and circumstances of poverty change frequently. Many analyses begin with income, but poverty is about both social and economic ties (Spicker, 2016). The ever-changing nature of poverty implies that no single, definitive solution can be developed to have the same long-term impact, as some actions may become obsolete over time.

When there are many different groups with different needs impacted by poverty, especially children, the difficulty of managing poverty becomes more apparent. Children born into poor families are more vulnerable to poverty. Early exposure to poverty increases the risk of being trapped in a cycle of generational poverty. In Malaysia, nearly 6.2% of households live in poverty (Demery, 2024). These figures show that thousands of children are deprived, and that such deprivation will most certainly result in violations of their fundamental rights. The

well-being of children is connected to many features, including access to education, social services, a safe and decent home environment, adequate healthcare, clean water and sanitation, opportunities to express themselves, psychological and emotional support, as well as overall safety. These elements cover the tangible and intangible factors that significantly impact their daily living conditions.

Compared to adults, children experience poverty differently. Children who live in impoverished conditions do not have access to education, learning devices, healthcare, nutritious food, and other essentials. When these basic needs are unmet, children suffer deprivation, and their overall well-being deteriorates. There are a variety of factors that contributed to this situation. The study categorised these factors into four: the state's welfare policy, the labour market, health, and family structure. According to the findings, the public perceives these four factors as primary contributors to child poverty. Unmet basic needs may arise from poor parental characteristics, but the root cause is often economic precarity. Children pay a heavy price due to their parents' financial difficulties. A parent's inability to provide adequate care and support has a direct adverse effect on the child's well-being and development. This inability is closely associated with the labour market or the type of employment held. Economic hardship occurs due to low-paid job or, in some cases, unemployed parents. The greater the financial hardship faced by parents, the more severe the suffering experienced by their children.

Deprivation among poor children comes in numerous forms. Factors such as lack of nutritious food and parents' inability to provide proper healthcare led to growth problems, underweight, stunting and malnutrition. This parental inability is often driven by increasing economic precarity stemming from income and employment issues. Data from Ministry of Health (MOH) revealed that, the prevalence of underweight, stunting, and wasting among children under five years of age increased between 2015 to 2019 (VNR, 2021). To tackle the problem of under-nutrition, the first National Nutrition Policy was introduced in 2003 with the goal of ensuring that everyone has adequate access to nutritious and quality food. The severity of the issue has necessitated the continuation of the national plan through the implementation of the third phase of the National Plan of Action for Nutrition of Malaysia III, 2016-2025, aimed to provide optimal nutritional well-being of mothers,

infants, and young children in Malaysia. Integrating nutrition objectives into the National Development plan is a crucial step in renewing commitments to improve children's well-being.

The current research also perceived that poor parental characteristics – including low educational attainment, larger household size, and single parenthood – mainly contribute to the poor academic achievement. Study has shown that children in poverty are more likely to experience learning difficulties (Naven et al., 2019). This has led to increased illiteracy among children, particularly at the primary school level. In the case of Malaysia, the high rate of 'learning poor' among school children is alarming, and this situation has been further exacerbated by poverty and the pandemic, since economic hardships limit access to education (Letchamanan, 2022). The health crisis increased unemployment and worsened the poor conditions faced by children. Research findings reveal that the majority of respondents perceived health-related factors – particularly those linked to the pandemic – as exacerbating the issue, especially for children who lost their parents. Without financial support and care, children were reported to be living on their own, and some were forced to work at an early age. School attendance was no longer feasible when daily survival became the primary concern. Under such circumstances, learning opportunities were hindered, and this learning poverty may perpetuate generational poverty. There have also been reports of a significant increase on the number of Malaysian children who are unable to read and understand simple texts by the age of ten (Hana Naz and Qistina, 2024). Increased illiteracy is an indication of learning poverty which in turn increases the likelihood of dropping out of school. According to a World Bank study conducted in 2023, learning poverty in Malaysia is a serious concern, with over 40 percent of children from low-income and marginalised groups affected (Nurfarhana, 2024).

Studies have also shown that childhood poverty is linked to many negative outcomes beyond poor academic achievement, including a higher likelihood of child marriage, juvenile delinquency, forced labour, and exploitation. Approximately 1,500 cases of child marriage were documented in Malaysia between 2007 to 2017 (UNICEF, 2021), and this concerning figure is compounded by a worrying upward trend in child exploitation, abuse cases, and juvenile delinquency. Reports indicate a significant 10.5% increase in the number of children involved in crime in 2020, which is a higher rate than in previous years. Specifically, first-

time offences increased by 4,916 cases. In terms of child labour, the 2018 Employment Survey estimated that 33,600 children were involved in child labour in Malaysia, with Sabah and Sarawak recording the highest proportions (UNICEF, 2024). Many child poverty studies (Gunn and Duncan, 1997; Bradshaw, 2002; Chapsman, et al, 2023), confirm that poverty is a strong predictor of child development outcomes and there are many negative outcomes associated with childhood poverty. Children are exposed to high-risk environments when they are financially deprived. Financial limitations often leave their needs unmet, making it nearly impossible to lift children out of poverty.

The risk of child poverty is much higher in households with three or more children (Bradshaw, 2002). The size of the household is significant because larger households experience greater levels of deprivation. Not only are low-income families affected, but even higher income families may face relative deprivation due to household size. Thus, it can be inferred that a certain income level does not necessarily guarantee that a household can meet all of a child's needs. The study's findings indicate that economic and demographic factors play a role in influencing this issue. While economics plays a major role, studies have also shown that income-based poverty correlates with poor parental characteristics (Cheung et al, 2018; Inoue, 2023). Children from large households, single-parent's families, bereaved children who have lost their parents, and those with parents struggling with alcohol or substance abuse are more likely to experience relative deprivation. Deprivation can be classified into two categories: material and social. According to Saunders (2019), material deprivation impacts objective well-being. In such cases, children may eat fewer than three meals per day, lack adequate nutrition, have parents unable to afford basic school necessities such as uniforms and school equipment, and live in overcrowded housing conditions. In contrast, social deprivation primarily affects emotional and mental well-being, or a child's overall subjective well-being. Socially deprived children may lack toys, home internet access, opportunities to go on holidays or school trips, and may be left alone at home because parents work long hours. Children who experience both forms of deprivation are said to be multidimensionally impoverished.

Multidimensional poverty implies that children are increasingly at risk of being deprived in non-monetary aspects of their well-being when they experience monetary poverty (Roelen, 2012). Addressing child

poverty is becoming more difficult due to its complexity. In Malaysia, the issue of child poverty remains hidden and under-prioritised. One of the main obstacles to protecting vulnerable and marginalised children has been the fragmented nature of policy initiatives aimed at improving the various dimensions of children's well-being. There are significant challenges to adopting a centralised and child-focused approach in tackling child poverty. The public believes that a lack of state policy commitments and inclusiveness in policy actions in dealing with child poverty are among the contributing factors. Currently, most initiatives aimed at promoting children's well-being are conducted independently by various government agencies. It is important to note that no specific action plan has been formulated explicitly under the name of 'child poverty.' The complexity of the issue has prompted the government to adopt a phased approach, which has been the main policy framework. However, current measures are far from adequate, with slow and piecemeal progress. Since poverty is the chief contributor to many child-related issues, a more inter-sectoral collaboration and a centralised policy framework are necessary. The lack of policymaker attention suggests broader lack of political will to advocate for more sophisticated, nuanced, and credible strategies to combat child poverty.

Conclusion

Poverty, particularly child poverty, is too harmful to ignore. Children, as the most vulnerable victims of poverty, have extremely limited ability to improve their situation on their own. To lift them out of poverty, policy support from the government is essential. Understanding this issue is thus the first step for policymakers to adopt proactive measures in addressing child poverty, as ignorance is the most significant impediment to successful policymaking. By investigating the drivers of child poverty, this study provides deeper insights into the realities of child poverty and various aspects of children's wellbeing that might be jeopardised by poor living situations. It is hoped that this knowledge will spur intense interest from the government to effectively address issues related to child poverty.

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Türkiye's Climate Change Policy: An Evaluation of Its Transition to Low Carbon Policies

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Abstract: Since the Industrial Revolution, many countries have achieved notable progress in their industries, transportation, economic growth, and technical advancements. Higher concentrations of greenhouse gases (GHG) such as carbon dioxide (CO_2), methane (CH_4), nitrous oxide (N_2O) and water vapor (H_2O) in the atmosphere, as well as changes in regional and global climates, were associated with increased production and the consequent need for more energy and intensive use of fossil fuels. Because of intense production and consumption practices that assumed natural resources were limitless, major environmental issues resulted from industrialisation. Türkiye is experiencing the negative consequences of climate change and aim to reach zero emission target. In this context, this article utilises documentary analysis and examine the related reports including 'Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change' (IPCC) reports, European Union (EU) progress reports and Turkish national reports as well as Türkiye's legislative and institutional structures on low carbon policies.

Keywords: low carbon policy, Türkiye, climate change, zero emission target, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change

Abstrak: Sejak Revolusi Perindustrian, banyak negara telah mencapai kemajuan yang ketara dalam industri, pengangkutan, pertumbuhan ekonomi dan kemajuan teknikal mereka. Kepekatan gas rumah hijau (GHG) yang lebih tinggi seperti karbon dioksida (CO_2), metana (CH_4), nitrus oksida (N_2O) dan wap air (H_2O) di atmosfera, serta perubahan dalam iklim serantau dan global,

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dikaitkan dengan peningkatan pengeluaran dan akibatnya memerlukan lebih banyak tenaga dan penggunaan intensif bahan api fosil. Oleh kerana amalan pengeluaran dan penggunaan yang sengit yang menganggap sumber semula jadi tidak terhad, isu alam sekitar utama yang terhasil daripada Revolusi Perindustrian tidak dapat dielakkan. Türkiye sedang mengalami akibat negatif perubahan iklim dan kini mahu untuk mencapai sasaran pelepasan sifar. Dalam konteks ini, makalah ini menggunakan analisis dokumentari dan meneliti laporan berkaitan termasuk laporan 'Panel Antara Kerajaan Mengenai Perubahan Iklim' (IPCC), laporan kemajuan Kesatuan Eropah (EU) dan laporan kebangsaan Türkiye serta struktur perundangan dan institusi Türkiye mengenai dasar karbon rendah.

Kata kunci: dasar karbon rendah, Türkiye, perubahan iklim, sasaran pelepasan sifar, Konvensyen Rangka Kerja Pertubuhan Bangsa-Bangsa Bersatu mengenai Perubahan Iklim

Introduction

Climate change can generally be defined as long-lasting changes at local and global scales (Şengün & Kalağan, 2022, p. 130). For example, global temperatures are increasing, glaciers are melting, precipitation regimes are changing, frequency of extreme weather events are increasing and sea levels are rising (Şahin, 2014, p. 12). The global temperatures increased by roughly 1.2°C on average in 2020 compared to pre-industrial levels. Average sea water level has risen globally by about 28 cm since 1870 and between 1901 and 2010, the average sea level increased 19 cm worldwide (Demircan, 2022, p. 51). It is estimated that the average temperature will increase by 2°C by the end of the 21st century (2081-2100) (Şensoy, 2022, p. 24).

Declining water levels and droughts are already seriously affecting agricultural production and causing food shortages and climate change will exacerbate the problem of food and water security. The warming and acidification of the oceans have already negatively affected fisheries and shellfish farming, and losses and reductions in food production have negatively affected indigenous people and small-scale food producers (IPCC, 2022b; 2022a, 9). Therefore, if the IPCC›s scenario of average temperature increase reaching 2°C in 2050 is realised, 180 million people are predicted to face hunger and 450 million people are predicted to experience water scarcity (Aydın, 2022, 88).

In addition, the rapidly increasing world population is predicted to grow to 9.6 billion people by 2050 (Şensoy, 2022, p. 25). With the growth of cities, fertile water and land resources are decreasing gradually because of the decrease in forested and agricultural areas and the consumption of fossil fuels (Şen, 2022). Severe weather events which include heat waves, biodiversity decline, access to safe food, dust storms and forest fires, and issues such as epidemics, serious illnesses due to air pollution and access to clean water have started to increase (Birpınar, 2022, p. 23), which can create security issues such as food, water, and energy security (Demirbilek, 2021). In addition, the food and water crises caused by extreme floods and droughts induced internal displacement of more than 20 million people (IPCC, 2022a, p. 48). Besides, in 2018, 17.2 million people had to migrate due to climate change impacts (Demirbaş & Aydın, 2020, p. 168). For example, Tuvalu, which relies on fishing for most of its livelihood and faces the risk of sea level rise, has signed a 30-year migration agreement with New Zealand to take in 75 Tuvaluans a year as part of a climate change adaptation project (Şensoy, 2022, p. 29).

As a result, it is necessary to ensure a healthy environment, energy security and diversity to mitigate the climate change's negative consequences. In this context, the significance of transition from primary energy sources like natural gas and oil to renewable energy is increasing. By 2023, it is estimated that if the use of renewable energy is doubled, emissions can be reduced approximately twice as much (Güner & Turan, 2017, pp. 48-49). By ensuring energy efficiency, air pollution caused by fossil-based energy will decrease and deaths and diseases due to air pollution will also decrease (Duman Altan & Sağbaş, 2020, p. 20). Regarding this, it is critical that climate change is seen as a primary policy by states and that it should be solved globally. This article draws a framework on the consequences of climate change in Türkiye, evaluates how Türkiye shapes its climate and low carbon policies to decrease the greenhouse gases (GHGs) level by analysing national and international documents and legal structures.

Türkiye and Climate Change

Türkiye is a country that has been late in addressing environmental problems due to its dominant economic policies and its focus on economic growth. It became acquainted with the problems and

impacts of climate change during the 1970s. At that time, there were environmental movements and organisations in many states around the world, while this awareness was just developing in Türkiye. During this period, Türkiye was also influenced by these environmental movements and adopted various regulations. For example, the Undersecretariat of Environment under the Prime Ministry in 1978, the General Directorate of Environment in 1984, the Undersecretariat of Environment in 1989, and the Ministry of Environment in 1991 laid the foundations of the institutional structures of this period (Özışık, 2020, p. 71).

It is predicted that Türkiye will experience an increase in ecological degradation due to global warming, deterioration and decrease in water resources, forest fires, severe drought, and desertification (Şen, 2022, p. 14). In Türkiye, temperature increases have occurred since 1993, and the hottest year was observed in 2010, where seasonal average temperatures increased. For example, in 2018-2019, winter temperatures averaged 1.3°C while spring temperatures averaged 0.7°C, whereas the summer season was 1.0°C, and the fall season was 1.9°C above the normal temperatures (ÇED İzin ve Denetim Genel Müdürlüğü, 2020, p. 77). According to climate change projections for Türkiye, the annual average temperature increase in Türkiye is estimated to be between 1.0 °C - 2.0 °C between 2016-2040, between 1.5 °C - 4.0 °C between 2041-2070, and finally between 1.5 °C - 5 °C between 2071-2099. In 2019, there were 935 extreme events recorded, of which 36% were floods and 27% were storms (ÇED İzin ve Denetim Genel Müdürlüğü, 2020, pp. 3, 84). Furthermore, in 2020, the average temperature was 14.9°C and a total of 984 extreme events occurred in Türkiye that year (Şensoy, 2022, p. 34; Demircan, 2022, p. 53). In the Mediterranean and Black Sea regions of Türkiye, floods occur frequently due to heavy rainfall. However, severe droughts are likely to be experienced along with decreasing rainfall intensity in the Central Anatolia region (Şen, 2022, p. 8). According to IPCC reports, a hot and dry climate is expected to prevail in Türkiye by 2030, with an increase in both summer and winter temperatures. Therefore, Türkiye is expected to potentially face serious threats of drought and desertification (Demirbaş & Aydın, 2020, p. 172). Additionally, with increasing population growth, Türkiye's annual per capita water potential is estimated to decrease to 1,120 m^3 (ÇED İzin ve Denetim Genel Müdürlüğü, 2020, p. 4).

Energy security is not guaranteed since Türkiye imports most of its fossil fuels, including natural gas and oil, for industrial use. The country›s energy needs are growing (Tuğaç, 2019). Türkiye's energy demand is met by 27.6% from domestic sources (ÇED İzin ve Denetim Genel Müdürlüğü, 2020, p. 40). Therefore, Türkiye is an energy-dependent country with high energy losses (Duman Altan & Sağbaş, 2020, p. 7). Unlike countries with low energy intensity such as Japan and Germany, Türkiye is one of the energy-intensive states like Canada and the USA (Altan & Sağbaş, 2020, p. 14). In 2019, Türkiye obtains 49.05% of its installed capacity from renewable energy and the rest from other sources (ÇED İzin ve Denetim Genel Müdürlüğü, 2020, p. 2). Türkiye's renewable energy consumption has increased especially in the last 10 years. In 2018, the rate of renewable energy sources – mainly from the hydropower plants – in energy production was around 32%, and in 2019, it was around 44% (Yurddaş, 2022, p. 211). There were 117 wind power plants in 2018, owned by energy companies. The Turkish government in 2016 introduced the 'Renewable Energy Resource Areas' (YEKA) to offer investors suitable zones for wind and solar energy generation (Akçalı et al., 2023, pp. 136-137). Türkiye has made some strides in producing renewable energy, such as building nuclear facilities and providing subsidies. However, it has also invested in coal and natural gas, as seen in the TurkStream pipeline. In addition, Türkiye still does not set any date to leave coal, although it is a requirement for OECD states under the Paris Agreement (Akçalı et al., 2023). Also, Türkiye has attempted to explore oil and gas in the Black Sea to decrease its natural gas dependency on other countries.

Climate Change Policies of Türkiye and its International Interaction

The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) was the world's first climate convention and was opened for signature at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio in 1992. This agreement focused on the issues related to reduction in emissions and cooperation on research and technology (Birpınar, 2022, p. 26). The Rio Conference raised awareness on climate change and its impacts and emphasised that environmental issues can be solved through joint action plans (Karakaya & Sofuoğlu, 2015, p. 4). To guarantee the effective implementation of the Convention, Conference of the Parties (COP) meetings are organised every year. At the COP3,

the Kyoto Protocol was signed to determine how much greenhouse gas emissions each country would emit and how financing requests would be evaluated. The Kyoto Protocol is only related to the emission reductions of developed countries. During the commitment period covering the years 2008-2012, it is aimed to reduce the total emissions of GHGs by at least 5% below 1990 levels (Birpınar, 2022, pp. 27-28).

195 states signed the Paris Climate Agreement in 2015. Emphasis was placed on the concept of climate justice and the need to keep global warming at 2^0C or less by 2100. However, unlike the Kyoto Protocol, it was decided that countries would set their own adaptation and mitigation targets according to their own conditions and aim for carbon neutrality for the period 2051-2100 (Yapraklı & Bayramoğlu, 2017, p. 440). The legally binding Kyoto Protocol focuses on developed and industrialised countries. However, the Paris Agreement, which is not legally binding, focuses on all signatory countries taking responsibility within the framework of their own capabilities and setting the average global temperature (Gökçin Özuyar et al., 2021, p. 35). Moreover, the 'Green Climate Fund' was established for developed countries to lead and support developing countries, and it was aimed to address the financial requirements of developing countries for GHG mitigation and adaptation (Birpınar, 2022, p. 28).

In the beginning, Türkiye's attitude towards the UNFCCC was distant (Köse, 2018, p. 62). Since Türkiye was an Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) member in the UNFCCC, which was opened for signature in 1992, it was included in both Annex I and Annex II lists. From 1995 to 2000, Türkiye made attempts to leave the Annexes of the UNFCCC because of being a developing country, not a developed country, and was not eligible for financial support, but failed to do so (Şahin, 2014, pp. 25-26). It was decided at the 7th Conference of the Parties to the UNFCCC in 2001 that Türkiye would be removed from Annex II and the Parties were invited to acknowledge the unique circumstances that set Türkiye apart from the countries in Annex I (T.C. Çevre ve Şehircilik Bakanlığı, 2010, p. 4; Balaban, 2019, p. 265). At the COP17 meeting, which took place in Durban in 2011, it was agreed that Türkiye, as an Annex I country, would receive support for reducing emissions, technology development, technology transfer and capacity building. At COP18, which took place in Doha in 2012, it was agreed that Türkiye, as an Annex I country, would be supported

by Annex II countries in their climate change strategies at national level and low-emission strategies (Birpınar, 2022, p. 29). Additionally, COP20 restated in the final COP conclusions regarding Türkiye›s stance. Yet, these COP decisions lacked concrete instructions on how Türkiye should use the Green Climate Fund (Arı, 2022, p. 98). In October 2021, the Turkish Parliament approved the Paris Climate Agreement setting a goal of zero emissions by 2053. The target of Türkiye, which was introduced at COP27, is to limit its GHGs emissions to 690m tonnes of CO2 (Avcı et al., 2022, p. 5). Finally, the 97-point Glasgow Climate Pact was established at COP26 in 2021. China and the United States, two of the highest contributors of GHGs, agreed to establish policies on emission reduction and to cooperate on issues such as circular economy and carbon capture. 105 other states made commitments to reduce methane emissions as well as more than 40 states agreed to phase out coal. Besides, more than 130 states pledged to combat deforestation and prevent land degradation by 2030 (Kavak, 2022, pp. 259-262).

Climate-related Development Plans and National Documents in Türkiye

In the Tenth Development Plan (2014-2018), a chapter titled "Climate Change and Environment" was introduced for the first time; and concepts including cleaner production, green growth and eco-efficiency were defined (Şahin, 2014, p. 37). The Eleventh Development Plan (2019–2023) addressed the pressures of rising food consumption, urbanisation, and climate change on agricultural productivity, as well as the need for skilled labour and technology to keep up with demands. Concepts related to sustainable use of water and soil resources and food security were also highlighted. Given that Türkiye is among the nations most impacted by climate change, efforts to restrict the trend of rising emissions and promote green growth have received particular attention. Furthermore, climate change's detrimental effects on water resources and plans to prevent water losses due to evaporation and the creation of groundwater basins and dams were mentioned. The increase in natural disasters due to climate change is also mentioned in the report, and in this context, the sustainable development of cities, the importance of effective disaster management and the importance of integrated urban planning were emphasised (T.C. Cumhurbaşkanlığı Strateji ve Bütçe Başkanlığı, 2019).

Several strategic objectives which are highlighted in the Türkiye Climate Change Strategy Report (2010-2023) include limiting the rate of increase in greenhouse gas emissions, increasing access to financial resources within the framework of greenhouse gas adaptation and mitigation to climate change, changing consumption patterns to be climate friendly together with the public sector, private sector, universities, and non-governmental organisations, and finally, increasing public awareness (T.C. Çevre ve Şehircilik Bakanlığı, 2010, pp. 9-12). Furthermore, in the section of the report titled 'Energy,' it is stated that to increase the country's energy supply security, clean energy technologies, especially hydraulic and wind energy, should be increased along with the improvement in energy consumption in public institutions. It was also emphasised that energy-friendly transportation such as bicycles in cities and metro and rail systems in metropolitan areas should be encouraged (T.C. Çevre ve Şehircilik Bakanlığı, 2010, pp. 20-21). In addition, the short, medium, and long-term aims have been set for both agriculture and animal husbandry. In the short term, policies such as the more conscious use of fertilisers, dissemination of modern techniques in agricultural spraying, organic agriculture, and the use of modern pressurised irrigation systems have been adopted. In the medium term, the implementation of crisis management based on drought forecasting, the protection and improvement of soils and lands, and the development of techniques that increase carbon sequestration in the soil were highlighted. Long-term goals include developing urban forestry and preventing the formation of urban heat islands (T.C. Çevre ve Şehircilik Bakanlığı, 2010, pp. 27-30).

The Republic of Türkiye Climate Change Action Plan (2011-2023), released in 2012, set several targets which include increasing renewable energy capacity and improving technology, reducing losses and leakages in electricity distribution, reducing annual energy consumption in public institutions by 20% until 2023, and increasing energy efficiency in buildings. The plan also aimed to create new technologies to limit greenhouse gas emissions in the industrial sector (T.C. Çevre ve Şehircilik Bakanlığı, 2012, pp. 9-10). Within land use and forestry sectors, the aim was to raise the quantity of carbon sequestered in forest areas by 15% in 2020 (T.C. Çevre ve Şehircilik Bakanlığı, 2012, p. 13).

The National Energy Efficiency Action Plan (2017-2023) mentions several projects related to energy efficiency. These include

the establishment of energy management systems in public buildings, organised industrial zones, commercial buildings, and industrial enterprises; and the establishment of a National Energy Efficiency Financing Mechanism to support energy efficiency investments (T.C. Enerji ve Tabii Kaynaklar Bakanlığı, 2017, pp. 14-15). Moreover, it aimed to establish a database and reporting systems for energy efficiency activities to determine energy efficiency indicators and report them on a sectoral basis. It is also aimed to carry out activities for strengthening the administrative and institutional structure of energy related institutions on renewable energy and energy efficiency related issues. There are projects such as certifying and encouraging sustainable green buildings and encouraging the use of sustainable energy sources in new buildings (T.C. Enerji ve Tabii Kaynaklar Bakanlığı, 2017, pp. 27).

Additionally, the EU negotiation process has been one of the driving forces impacting climate policies in Türkiye (Şahin, 2014, p. 39). The EU progress report stated that Türkiye is 'moderately prepared' in adjusting the climate *acquis.* However, in terms of implementation, especially on waste management and industrial pollution there still needs to be progress (EC, 2015, p. 76). In terms of air quality, adjusting to the EU air quality directive was necessary (EC, 2016, p. 87). According to the EU reports, air pollution remained high and no progress had been made in terms of adjusting to EU air quality directives (EC, 2021, p. 106; EC, 2022, p. 115). However, Türkiye adopted EU waste management legislation and focused on the strategies increasing recycling and reuse, zero waste management approach and banning free plastic bags (EC, 2020, p. 91). According to the EU Türkiye 2023 report, Türkiye increased its installed power capacity by 54% to include renewable energy by 2022. Growth in renewable energy installations was driven by private investment as well as the feed-in tariff was maintained by 2030. Furthermore, the National Energy Plan (2023–2035), created in accordance with Türkiye's 2053 Net Zero Emission Target, seeks to further raise the percentages of renewable energy and nuclear sources in installed capacity and primary energy consumption. Besides, regarding hydrocarbons, Türkiye has evolved in its adherence to the EU *acquis*. Still, there is not enough compliance with the offshore oil and gas operations safety directive including in the transportation of hydrocarbons. Türkiye has stepped up efforts to generate gas domestically from its newly found Sakarya field in the Black Sea (EC, 2023, p. 112).

Nonetheless, despite energy saving initiatives, there is still a significant reliance on imported gas and oil, especially natural gas from Russia, while the need for energy is rising quickly. The cost-effective decarbonisation of the economy still depends on the creation of a national emissions trading system (ETS) which is in line with the EU ETS and sufficiently ambitious, particularly regarding the total cap on allowances (EC, 2023, p. 69). Additionally, Türkiye still does not adhere to EU emissions regulations for new light-and heavy-duty vehicles, nor does it completely apply the Fuel Quality Directive (98/70/EC). Türkiye needs to develop an alignment strategy for the Carbon Capture and Storage Directive (2009/31/EC) and the relevant regulations within the *Fit for 55* package that were approved during the reporting year (EC, 2023, p. 117). Also, one of the most important requirements for raising readiness is having more strategic planning, which includes defined goals and milestones, significant funding, and improved administrative capabilities. Currently, there is a lack of compliance with the regulations for air quality, nature preservation, water and waste pollution, and industrial pollution. To achieve full compliance with the EU *acquis* for climate action, including but not limited to emission trading, Türkiye must complete the outstanding commitments mandated by the Paris Climate Agreement; and ensure the complete application of the Environmental Impact Assessment Directive and other horizontal environmental regulations necessary to meet environmental standards (EC, 2023, pp. 114–115). Therefore, even though Türkiye has some progress regarding renewable energy and waste management while adjusting the EU *acquis*, there remain significant efforts needed to decrease carbon emissions.

Legal Structure

There are various legal arrangements have been made to combat climate change in Türkiye. The amendment to the Environmental Law (Article 3/h) mentions incentives to be given for combating climate change, such as promoting zero waste, reuse of wastewater for the implementation of circular economy principles, recovery of waste, and reducing the use of single-use packaging and plastics (Official Gazette, 2018, no. 30621). Thus, Türkiye joined the Kyoto Protocol to the UNFCCC in 2009 (Official Gazette, 2009, no. 27227), and the Ratification of our Accession to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change was adopted by the Parliament on October 16, 2003 (Official

Gazette, 2003, no. 25266) as well as the Vienna Convention for the Protection of the Ozone Layer in 1991, the Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer in 1991, the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification in 1998 and the UN Convention on Biological Diversity in 1996 (DSİ, 2023, p. 48).

In addition, the Regulation on Greenhouse Gases Emission Monitoring (Official Gazette, 2014, no. 29003) was enacted based on the Kyoto Protocol to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and the Environmental Law's Article 3 (Official Gazette, 1983, no. 18132). This regulation sets out the rules for the determination of reporting, monitoring and verification of GHGs emissions and also determines the liabilities of organisations and enterprises based on the activities which are listed Annex I of the regulation (2014, no. 29003, Article 1;2), which include the production of cellulose from wood or other fibrous materials; paper, cardboard or cardboard with a daily production capacity of 20 tons or more, factories with a total rated thermal power of 20 megawatt and above incineration of fuels (hazardous or household waste except incineration). Under this regulation, the Communiqué on Monitoring and Reporting GHG Emissions (Official Gazette, 2014, no. 29068) which set out the principles and procedures for reporting and monitoring GHG emissions and related activity data (Article 1) as well as the Communiqué on Verification of GHG Emission and Verifiers (Official Gazette, 2017, no. 30258) that determine the guidelines and standards for verifying these GHG reports as well as the qualifications and accreditation requirements of the verification organisations that will perform these procedures. Additionally, the Ministry also enforced the Voluntary Carbon Market Project Registration Communiqué (Official Gazette, 2013, no. 28790), which seeks to govern the guidelines for the registration of projects designed to obtain carbon certificates and that reduce greenhouse gas emission.

Other regulations related to climate change include the Law on the Use of Renewable Energy Resources for Electricity Generation (Official Gazette, 2005, no. 25819) and the Energy Efficiency Law (Official Gazette, 2007, no. 26510), which aimed to increase energy efficiency and the use of renewable energy in the production, consumption, and distribution of energy in sectors such as transportation. Regulation on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer which was adjusted from the EC/1005/2009 Regulation on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer was also regulated (Çevre Yönetimi Genel Müdürlüğü, 2017).

In addition, local governments are important actors and have many responsibilities in this regard. According to the Environmental Law (Official Gazette, 1983, no. 2872), municipalities are obliged to establish or operate municipal solid waste disposal systems (Art. 13) and the principles for the protection of biodiversity shall be determined by taking the opinions of local administrations, universities, and other relevant organisations (Art. 9/a). According to the Law on Municipalities (Official Gazette, 2005, no. 25874), municipalities must perform or have performed services such as zoning, water and sewerage, transportation, cleaning and solid waste management and afforestation (Art. 14). Also, they have responsibilities for the collection, sorting, and recycling of solid waste (Art. 14/g) and the construction, maintenance and repair of bicycle and pedestrian paths (Art. 14/ş). Law on Special Provincial Administration also contains some important regulations. Accordingly, the Special Provincial Administration is responsible for afforestation, parks, and gardens, supporting forest villages, emergency aid and rescue (Art. 6/b), planning, maintenance and repair of bicycle roads and lanes, bicycle and electric scooter parking and charging stations (Art. 6/c) (Official Gazette, 2005, no. 25745). Law on Metropolitan Municipalities also contains important regulations. In parallel with the sustainable development principles, municipalities have duties of ensuring the protection of water basins, making the metropolitan solid waste management plan, collecting, and treating the waste of marine vessels (Art. 6/i). They also have the duty to provide support to disaster areas and to make plans for natural disasters on a metropolitan scale (Art. 6/u) (Official Gazette, 23.07.2004, no. 25531).

Moreover, Türkiye accelerated legal arrangements in the field of environment by undergoing the harmonisation process with the EU's environmental *acquis* by gaining the candidate status in 1999 (Özışık, 2020, p. 71). For example, there has been a significant harmonisation with the EU *acquis* including developing the River Basin Management Plans for 25 river basins in Türkiye, completing the Sectoral Water Allocation Plans for 25 basins by 2023, the Flood Management Plans for 23 basins and the Drought Management Plans for 13 basins. In addition to these, there are various practices for soil pollution. The Regulation on the Control of Soil Pollution and Point Source Contaminated Sites (2010/No. 27605) includes detection and cleanup of point pollution that may occur in case of leakage or accidents during the transportation,

storage, disposal, or recovery of hazardous wastes (ÇED İzin ve Denetim Genel Müdürlüğü, 2020, pp. 141-143). The Regulation on the Protection of Waters against Nitrate Pollution from Agricultural Sources (2016/29779) was put into force in line with the EU Nitrate Directive (91/676/EEC) to prevent pollution of soil from agricultural activities and initiated the process of preparing for the Nitrate Action Plans for 25 basins (ÇED İzin ve Denetim Genel Müdürlüğü, 2020, pp. 146-147).

Low Carbon Policies of Türkiye and Recommendations

The investments on renewables and electric cars that reduce methane emissions are necessary for reaching the net zero target by 2050 (IEA, 2023, pp. 13, 16). Energy crises because of the Covid-19 pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine have intensified investments in clean energy. Disruptions in supply chain have prompted countries to take rapid actions in developing technologies for domestic supply as well as making regulations, for example Net Zero Industry Act of EU (IEA, 2023, p. 48).

Türkiye made its most ambitious carbon neutrality aim when it declared its 2053 target to the UN General Assembly in September 2021. However, Türkiye insisted on not adopting any legally binding, absolute emissions mitigation objectives. Yet, this long-term goal toward decarbonisation signifies a shift in Türkiye's climate policy. Türkiye's Ministry of Environment and Urbanisation was reorganised and renamed the Ministry of Environment, Urbanisation and Climate Change as part of its ambitious strategy. Furthermore, a Directorate of Climate Change was also established (Arı, 2022, p. 102). Considering Türkiye's climate change adaptation efforts, the Directorate is responsible for determining national and international policies, and actions (including those pertaining to carbon pricing and ETS), conducting negotiation processes, and guaranteeing coordination with pertinent institutions and organisations (ICAP, 2023, p. 71). Türkiye has made some progress, such as organising the first National Climate Council meeting in 2022, organised by Climate Change Directorate with other stakeholders, including NGOs and private sector. At the meeting, it was proposed that the ETS's auction proceeds be allocated in accordance with goals for low-carbon, green development, as well as the need for just transition initiatives to assist the most disadvantaged members of society. The Council suggests that at least half of this money should go

toward helping the reel sectors reduce their greenhouse gas emissions (ICAP, 2023, p. 9). The outcomes of the meeting included starting a pilot ETC in 2024 in accordance with the Türkiye's 2053 net zero target and establishing a national ETC (ICAP, 2023, p. 70), which may profit from the carbon market strategies outlined in the Paris Agreement and could be connected to the EU Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) (Arı, 2022, p. 102).

In addition, Türkiye has prepared a draft Climate Change Law that seeks to establish institutional and legal structure for organising and instrumenting measures to decrease GHGs emissions and adopt to climate change. This includes the legal basis of carbon pricing tools and the ETS (ICAP, 2023). This law intends to regulate emissions reduction, adaptation to the changing climate, and planning and implementation instruments related to these concerns in accordance with the net zero emissions (NZE) target and green development vision. This law provides the planning and implementation instruments for the realisation of these activities, as well as the procedures and guiding principles of the institutional and legal framework for reducing emissions and adapting to climate change (Article 1; 2). Contributions towards the 2053 NZE objective can also come from reducing industrial carbon generation; for example, by implementing business models under the Turkish Environmental Label system and setting up the framework for the green industrial zones certification. This green infrastructure with labelling programme could serve as a catalyst for changes in the building, energy, transportation, and other sectors towards achieving the 2053 NZE target (Arı, 2022, p. 104). The Environmental Labelling System in Türkiye was established by the Environmental Labelling Regulation (2018), which came into effect in accordance with the EU Ecolabel Regulation (No. 66/2010/EC) (Birpınar et al., 2023, p. 63). This system aims to implement the circular economy, increase energy efficiency, minimise waste and provide opportunities to open additional markets. In this context, it also aims to raise awareness of enterprises, especially small and medium-sized enterprises, about environmental labelling and waste management (T. C. Ticaret Bakanlığı, 2021, p. 18).

Policy makers develop a variety of policy instruments to deal with climate change. There are different types of instruments in the theory; regulatory, market-based, voluntary, and informational instruments. Emissions trading schemes and eco-taxes are market-based instruments;

informational instruments aim to change the behaviour of social actors by applying eco-label schemes and eco-management schemes. However, they are different in practice and in theory in the countries (Jordan et al., 2012, p. 540). Economic instruments are important tools to address the effects of climate change. The importance of economic instruments has been growing from 1970s. Besides, the sorts of the instruments have been increased as well. Therefore, OECD (2023a, p. 9) addresses the instruments which include taxes and fees, subsidies and payments for biodiversity, deposit-refund schemes and tradable permits and offsets. Taxation policies should focus on creating green employment and decreasing carbon emissions. Government should make policy on environmental taxes, targeting the pollutants as well as allocating tax revenues for green jobs (Kolsuz & Yeldan, 2017, p. 1249).

To address the effects of climate change and increase resilience, especially for creating more climate resilient urban cities, Türkiye's government should allocate resources via fiscal instruments including taxes, subsidies, incentives, and grants, and creating funds with this revenue (for example, *climate fund*) (Balaban, 2019, p. 276). The taxes should include energy products, transport services, pollution emissions and resources management for soil, land, biodiversity, and forests (OECD, 2023a, p. 4). Then, regarding the creation of climate policies, the most important questions that need to be answered are what tools Türkiye will use to attain the 2°C objective and what sort of macroeconomic effects these tools will have. Three primary policy instruments can be identified, which are carbon tax; using the money raised from the carbon tax to fund investments in renewable energy sources to generate power; and autonomous efficiency increases (that is, contingent upon market conditions and technical advancements) (Yeldan & Voyvoda, 2015, p. 8). One of the most important taxes aimed at reducing GHG emissions is the *carbon tax*. It is a tax levied in proportion to the carbon content of fuels. First introduced in 1990 in Finland, the carbon tax has been implemented in countries such as the Netherlands, the UK, Sweden, and Australia (Sapmaz, 2022, p. 2). It is especially important for countries such as Türkiye, where coal consumption is still high to implement this tax.

Although Türkiye is late for setting a carbon market, it is eager for this. In addition, the carbon market, diffused by the EU is not a neutral process and failed to meet the targets on investing form decarbonised

power generations. Therefore, should Türkiye, as a developing country, follow the failed policy instruments? For Türkiye to adopt the international carbon market, it has attempted to make legislative amendments for EU Emission Trading System (EU ETC) (Ethemcan & Gündoğan, 2019, p. 517-518). Therefore, Türkiye had been trying to adopt to the carbon market which is diffused by the EU and World Bank. As a part of the EU accession process, in 2024, Türkiye intends to start an Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA III) project for the transposition of the EU ETC legislation into secondary legislation that specifies the technical features of national ETS (ICAP, 2023, p. 70; Kutlu, 2021, p. 162). The important points at this level are setting precise emission reduction targets and providing "fair distributions of emissions allowances," however, even if Türkiye adopts to the EU policy, for example EU ETS Directive 2019, it is still criticised by the EU for its limited progress (Ethemcan & Gündoğan, 2019, p. 519). Also, a difficult problem is changing the current tax structure to replace implicit or indirect taxes with carbon pricing (carbon trade and tax), in addition to the ETS (Arı, 2022, p. 102).

There are some difficulties to low-carbon systems which are technical, social, institutional, environmental, and economic in nature. The social pillar means public participation in the transition to low carbon energy. Public awareness should be increased to prevent resistance to change and social transition. Economic challenges from the fact that making the switch to a low carbon economy requires significant investment as it involves changes in consumer behaviours and technologies. Hence, governments should provide subsidies. Additionally, there are some institutional barriers that can exist, including short-term policies and low fossil-fuel prices (Kamali Saraji & Streimikiene, 2023, p. 8). Carbon pricing is necessary to reduce the emissions and create revenue for investing green energy. However, for carbon pricing policy to be successful, political feasibility and public support are needed (Uyduranoglu & Ozturk, 2020, p. 1176).

Financial support to deploy low-emission and less energy-intensive innovations in the national economy and residential sectors can pave the way for a green economic transition. The expanding population and escalating economic activity in Türkiye are leading to a rise in emissions and a corresponding rise in mitigation expenses. Due to Türkiye's limited financial resources and the growing impact of climate change,

the country has been unable to cover these expenses by relying solely on its own national resources without obtaining a grant. Moreover, the work required for carbon pricing necessitates data and expertise, compounded by the growth of the emission-intensive cement sector, which increases in emissions – these are important challenges (Arı, 2022; Uyduranoglu & Ozturk, 2020). While Türkiye's institutional classification under the UNFCCC is a major contributing factor to this issue, Türkiye prefers to address this challenge by differentiating itself as a developing country under the Paris Agreement in accordance with the rights granted by the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties (Arı, 2022, p. 106-107). In addition, even if the use of renewable energy has increased recently, fossil fuels still account for much of the primary energy supply in the world. The demand for energy, particularly in the transportation, housing, industrial, and electrical production sectors, is driving up imports of natural gas and oil (Arı, 2022, p. 100). As Türkiye's population grows, so does the increase in energy use. However, if Türkiye increases the use of coal, it cannot reach the target of zero-carbon in 2053 (Kayakuş et al., 2023; Şahin, 2014, p. 4). Therefore, increasing the use of renewable energies, including hydropower, geothermal, wind power, solar energy and bioenergy as well as using low carbon technologies like EVs and carbon capture and storage (CCS) is required. Even if there has been research on CCS, there is no progress in practice (Yousefi-Sahzabi et al., 2017, p. 601).

Therefore, for the transition to low-carbon system, the coal-based energy production should be a priority as most of the emissions come from coal. Türkiye should develop a gradual plan to phase out coal and should collaborate with the private sector, unions and vocational training institutes. Particularly in the coal regions, creating employment opportunities for the local people who work in the coal sector, and identifying the new employment opportunities, ascertaining the skills needed and providing necessary vocational training for the locals, are important. Additionally, in the regions where coal mining and coal-fired electricity generation activities take place, regular monitoring of environmental impacts, identifying hazardous substances and wastes, and their storage are essential (Avcı et al., 2022, pp. 7-8). By phasing out fossil fuels, transitioning to renewable energy, energy efficiency, electrification in associated industries, and focusing on achieving net zero by the early 2050s, the Turkish economy could be substantially

decarbonised within 30 years. To achieve this, it is recommended that coal be completely phased out of power generation by 2035, that coal use in buildings should be phased out as soon as possible, and that installed capacity of electricity from renewable sources should be increased to 50% by 2030, alongside solar and wind power plants be increased by 2030 (Şahin, 2014, pp. 9-10).

Conclusion

This article discusses how Türkiye has been affected by climate change, its position, and activities in the international arena in the fight against climate change; the multi-layered actors and their roles and the legal arrangements in line with combating the negative impacts of climate change. Although Türkiye has taken important institutional and legislative steps, especially in the last decade, it is still intensively reliant on fossil fuels and still imports large quantities of them. Therefore, to accommodate the growing energy demand in industry and other sectors in Türkiye, it is important to ensure energy efficiency through new technologies and to reduce external dependency by using domestic resources. In this context, Türkiye needs institutes and university departments that address climate change in an integrated manner. Additionally, incentives such as tax reductions should be introduced for private sector activities as part of combating climate change.

Fundamentally, cities must be built to withstand climate change and generate a greater proportion of their energy from renewable sources. At the local level, it is very important to encourage public transportation, support local governments' projects related to the use of renewable energy, and for local governments to make climate plans in an environmentally sensitive manner, and to raise awareness at the local level. On the route to the green transition, lowering reliance on imports of foreign fossil fuel resources is a side benefit of emission mitigation. Furthermore, Türkiye should follow the EU's climate strategy and policies as a candidate for membership in the EU. For instance, the European Green Deal and its supplementary measures, for example Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanisms, seek to lower greenhouse gas emissions through domestic initiatives as well as partnerships with trading partners. Finally, green industrial policies are important to offset the effects of carbon pricing (such as unemployment) as industries are dependent on taxes and environmental legal structures. This could form the basis of a significant future research agenda.

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The Role of *Ulama* in Shaping Attitude, Subjective Norms, Digitalisation and Trust Towards Cash *Waqf* Behaviour

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Abstract: Cash *waqf*, a popular form of endowment in contemporary times, holds immense potential for economic empowerment and social development, particularly in developing Muslim-majority countries like Indonesia. Despite its promise, a significant gap persists between the potential and the actual acceptance of cash *waqf*. This study investigates the key determinants influencing the behaviour of *waqif* (donors) and prospective *waqif* towards cash *waqf*. Utilising questionnaires for data collection, the findings reveal that factors such as attitude, subjective norms, trust, the influence of religious leaders (*ulama*), and digitalisation play a crucial role in shaping the behaviour of *waqif* and prospective *waqif*. The study's implications highlight the need for government, *nazir* (*waqf* managers), and other stakeholders to actively involve ulama in community education efforts. Enhancing public understanding could help integrate cash *waqf* more deeply into the lives of Muslims, fostering a broader culture of charitable giving.

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Keywords: Cash *waqf*, Digitalisation, religious leaders, SEM-PLS, West Sumatra

Abstrak: *Waqf* tunai, satu bentuk endowmen yang popular pada zaman moden ini, mempunyai potensi besar untuk pemberdayaan ekonomi dan pembangunan sosial, terutamanya di negara-negara majoriti Muslim yang sedang membangun seperti Indonesia. Walaupun terdapat janji, jurang yang signifikan masih wujud antara potensi dan penerimaan sebenar *waqf* tunai. Kajian ini menyelidik faktor-faktor utama yang mempengaruhi tingkah laku *waqif* (dermawan) dan *waqif* yang berpotensi terhadap *waqf* tunai. Menggunakan soal selidik untuk pengumpulan data, penemuan menunjukkan bahawa faktor-faktor seperti sikap, norma subjektif, kepercayaan, pengaruh pemimpin agama (ulama), dan pendigitalan memainkan peranan penting dalam membentuk tingkah laku *waqif* dan *waqif* yang berpotensi. Implikasi kajian ini menekankan keperluan bagi kerajaan, *nazir* (pengurus *waqf*), dan pihak berkepentingan lain untuk secara aktif melibatkan ulama dalam usaha pendidikan masyarakat. Meningkatkan pemahaman awam boleh membantu mengintegrasikan *waqf* tunai dengan lebih mendalam dalam kehidupan umat Islam, memupuk budaya dermawan yang lebih luas.

Kunci Kata: *Waqf* tunai, Digitalisasi, pemimpin agama, SEM-PLS, Sumatra Barat

Introduction

Cash *waqf* is an Islamic social finance instrument where cash is donated/pooled/invested in various projects or assets and used for charitable or religious purposes. With basic principles that allow *waqf* funds to be managed and invested productively, cash *waqf* can have a significant positive impact on society. The potential of cash *waqf* in alleviating poverty and improving economic conditions has been recognised in various studies (see Mohsin (2013); Izzah (2022); Cizakca (2000).

The potential of cash *waqf* has been identified by many researchers, such as (Lubis & Lestari, (2021); Hasan (2024); Rahayu (2023), as a great opportunity for economic empowerment and social development. However, there is an evidence gap between the potential and the realisation. This makes it important to note the factors that can increase the motivation of cash *waqf* givers (called *waqif*) or what is considered by *waqif* to increase the realisation of cash *waqf*. This study begins with the gap between potential and realisation. The gap between the potential

amount of cash *waqf* and the existing realisation has been studied by Intan and Nidia (2019). For several regions in Indonesia, data on the amount of cash *waqf* collected from several nazir can be seen in the table below.

Table 1: Potential Dan Realisation of Cash *Waqf* Receipts

YEAR	2019	2020	2021
WAQF POTENTIAL (IDR)	77.000.000.000.000	180.000.000.000.000	360.000.000.000.000
REALIZATION (IDR)	185.000.000.000	391.000.000.000	819.360.000.000
PERCENTAGE (%)			

Source: (BWI, 2022)

As can be seen in Table 1 above, the actual collection (IDR 800 million) of cash *waqf* in the year 2021 was below the potential (IDR 360 trillion), amounting to less than 0.5%. As of the *Badan Wakaf Indonesia* (*Waqf* Authority of Indonesia – BWI) statement, the recent update on actual cash *waqf* collection reached IDR 2.23 trillion (Imam, 2023).

A study Izzah (2022) highlighted the potential of cash *waqf* in reducing poverty, which can play an important role in improving people's economic conditions. However, despite its great potential, the realisation of cash *waqf* in Indonesia is still far from optimal. Another gap researched by Hasan (2024) revealed a discrepancy between public awareness and actual participation in cash *waqf*. Although 62% of the public is aware of cash *waqf*, only 38% are involved in this activity. This shows a gap in realising the full potential of cash *waqf*.

Later, Lubis and Lestari (2021) emphasised the importance of increasing public understanding and trust in cash *waqf* to optimise its potential, suggesting that its proper realisation can improve community welfare. Furthermore, Rahayu (2023) conducted a sentiment analysis on cash *waqf*, revealing fundamental issues that need to be addressed to bridge the gap between the potential and actual collection of cash *waqf*. These studies collectively highlight the significant potential of cash *waqf* in various aspects of economic development and social welfare while pointing out the need to overcome the challenges in realising this potential to maximise its impact on society.

In fact, according to Gustina et al. (2024), there is a lot of potential for cash *waqf* that can be explored in Indonesia, especially in the West

Sumatra region. This potential includes the majority Muslim population in West Sumatra, whose cultural philosophy is closely tied to Islam. Additionally, West Sumatra has a significant potential to attract cash *waqf* due to the consistency of the local government's efforts in encouraging the implementation of cash *waqf*. However, this potential is also followed by tremendous challenges in the West Sumatran context, such as the challenge of *waqf* literacy, especially for the community, and the improvement of the quality of nazir. This is also an important part that can be improved to increase the realisation of cash *waqf*.

The ulama holds a pivotal role in West Sumatra's community, guiding and shaping public perception toward cash *waqf* by influencing attitudes, subjective norms, and trust. As respected religious authorities, they educate the public on the spiritual and economic benefits of cash *waqf*, fostering positive attitudes toward donation. Their influence on subjective norms ensures that *waqf* is seen as a collective religious obligation, reinforcing social pressure to participate. Additionally, ulama builds trust by endorsing *waqf* institutions, ensuring transparency, and addressing concerns about fund management. Their leadership strengthens community confidence, making cash *waqf* a widely accepted and sustainable philanthropic practice.

Reflecting on the description above, the *waqf* donor or *waqif* plays an important role in the realisation process of cash *waqf* apart from the *waqf* management or institution, the government, and other stakeholders. Given these dynamics, this study seeks to explore the role of the ulama in reinforcing the influence of attitudes, subjective norms, digitalisation, and trust on the behaviour of cash *waqf*. The role of ulama is very important in guiding and shaping the public's perception related to attitudes, subjective norms, and public trust in donating money, while digitalisation is also crucial in facilitating access and transparency in making *waqf* transactions. This study adopts the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) and integrates the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) to analyse how mobile and online payment systems can enhance cash *waqf* participation. Previous studies have primarily focused on TPB in cash *waqf* behaviour; however, limited research has examined the combined influence of TPB and TAM, particularly in the context of digital *waqf* payments. By addressing this gap, the present study contributes to the *waqf* literature and offers practical insights for policymakers, *waqf* institutions, and the broader Muslim community.

The study aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the factors influencing *waqif* behaviour, ultimately offering recommendations to bridge the gap between potential and realisation in Indonesia's cash *waqf* sector.

Literature Review

Extended Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB)

In the context of research related to an individual's behaviour and intention in giving cash *waqf*, the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) can be a relevant framework. TRA, developed by Fishbein and Ajzen (1975), has been widely used in the field of socio-psychology to study individual behavioural intentions. Subsequently, the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) is an extension of TRA and was developed by Ajzen in 1991. TPB acknowledges that TRA has limitations in accounting for behavioural control factors. Therefore, TPB expands the framework by incorporating the concept of perceived behavioural control.

According to this theory, there are three primary factors commonly used to assess an individual's intention and behaviour: attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control. These factors are crucial in shaping a person's intentions and actions. Research by Iranmanesh et al., (2020) indicates that these variables can influence an individual's intention and willingness to act.

However, the variables included in the TPB are not limited to just these three; the TPB framework is flexible and allows for the incorporation of additional variables to better predict individual intentions and behaviours (Jatmiko et al., 2023). According to research by Iranmanesh et al (2020), the TPB model, when adjusted to consider relevant factors, can explain up to 63.4% of the variance in the willingness to engage in certain behaviour. Consequently, researchers have introduced new variables to enhance the explanatory power of the model, such as personal characteristics (Zain et al., 2019), trust (Shukor et al., 2019; Osman et al., 2016; Haidlir et al., 2021; Indahsari et al., 2014), past behaviour (Azizi et al., 2019), religiosity (Haidlir et al., 2021; Indahsari et al., 2014; Shukor et al., 2016), integrity and reputation (Shukor et al., 2019), knowledge (Jatmiko et al., 2023; Kasri & Chaerunnisa, 2022), digitalisation (Farokhah et al., 2019; Azhar, 2022; Fianto et al., 2017; Lahuri, 2024), and religious leaders (Arli et al., 2023; Chrisna, Noviani and Hernawaty, 2021; Masrizal et al., 2023; Gustina et al., 2024).

This study does not rely on the three main variables typically used to measure intention and behaviour. Instead, it incorporates new variables identified by prior researchers, such as digitalisation, trust, and religious leadership.

Factors that Influence the Behaviour of *Waqif* in Cash *Waqf*

Individual and institutional behaviour towards cash *waqf* is influenced by various factors such as trust, religiosity, knowledge, and the theory of planned behaviour. Nurhaida (2023) found that perceived behavioural control, trust, and religiosity have a positive influence on the intention to participate in cash *waqf*-giving behaviour. This suggests that individual beliefs and perceptions play an important role in shaping cash *waqf*-related behaviour.

Kasri and Chaerunnisa (2022) highlighted the role of knowledge, trust, and religiosity in explaining online cash *waqf* behaviour among Muslim millennials. This study shows that better knowledge and trust can increase participation in cash *waqf*, especially through online platforms. Meanwhile, Mujahidah and Rusydiana (2023) found that attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control significantly influence the intention to do cash *waqf* among Indonesian Muslim youth. This study shows that social norms and attitudes towards cash *waqf* can encourage greater participation.

In addition to the above research, Mujahidah and Rusydiana (2023) analysed the impact of religiosity, trust, service quality, and promotion of *waqf* decisions in choosing cash *waqf* products. This study proves that factors such as religiosity, trust, service quality, and promotion can increase the number of cash *waqf* realisations. Furthermore, Nuryitman (2022) highlighted the moderating effect of Islamic religiosity on the intention to participate in *waqf*, emphasising the role of trust. This signals that a *waqif's* trust in the *nazir* (*waqf* management institution), strengthened by his religiosity value, will increase the intention of a *waqif* to endow money.

In line with the background, the study by Iman, Santoso and Kurniawan (2021) highlights the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) and religiosity in influencing the Muslim community to engage in cash *waqf*. In this regard, understanding the motivation behind the *waqif's* behaviour is crucial for a *waqif* decision. Related to these motivations,

Jannah and Soemitra (2022) identified four motivations for cash *waqf*, which are categorised into religious aspects such as religiosity, empathy, altruism, and platform credibility. These four motivations are still categorised under local cultural aspects.

In contrast to previous studies, Afandi, Harahap and Lubis (2022) emphasised the positive influence of knowledge, media information, religiosity, and altruism on *waqif* interest in Cash *Waqf*-Linked Sukuk. These findings highlight the importance of religious beliefs and altruist tendencies in encouraging *waqif* participation in cash *waqf* initiatives. In addition, the role of education and awareness in promoting cash *waqf* cannot be underestimated.

Strategies such as using digital platforms have been explored to enhance cash *waqf* practices. Azhar (2022) examined the factors influencing cash *waqf* decisions on the Kitabisa.com crowdfunding platform, highlighting the limited impact of religiosity. Fianto et al. (2017) dan Lahuri (2024) discussed the potential application of blockchain and smart contracts in *waqf* asset management. They suggest technological advancements to streamline the *waqf* process. Educating *waqif*s, promoting awareness, and using digital tools are crucial in encouraging active participation and optimising the impact of cash *waqf* in promoting social welfare and economic development.

Religious leaders (ulama) have historically played a central role in influencing charitable behaviours in Muslim communities. Their authority in religious and social matters makes them pivotal in shaping public perceptions of *waqf* (Mohd Noor et al., 2022). In countries like Malaysia and Turkey, ulama's endorsements have significantly bolstered public participation in *waqf* programs.

In Indonesia, particularly West Sumatra, ulama's influence is deeply embedded in cultural and religious life. Research suggests that ulama's engagement in promoting *waqf* can enhance trust and legitimacy, thereby increasing participation (Arli et al., 2023). Comparative studies indicate that formalising ulama's role in *waqf* initiatives, as seen in Malaysia, can provide a structured approach to increasing contributions. Arli et al. (2023) investigated the mediating effects of religiosity and the role of religious leaders on the perceived brand value of a product. This research is a comparative study of India and Indonesia using questionnaires. This study found that intrinsic religiosity has a direct

positive effect on extrinsic religiosity, which then mediates the effect of intrinsic religiosity on the value of brands endorsed by religious leaders.

Therefore, it is important to know the factors that are dominant in the consideration of *waqif* for their decision to donate money. Based on the aforementioned discussions on cash *waqf* across different jurisdictions, the researchers believe that it is important to know the factors that influence *waqif*s in donating money.

Objectives of Research

The main objective of this research is to explore the determinants and factors of attitudes, subjective norms, digitalisation, trust levels, and the presence of ulama on Cash *Waqf*. In relation to this, the researchers ask the research questions as follows:

1. How does attitude influence the *waqif*'s behaviour in giving cash *waqf*?
2. How does subjective norm influence the *waqif*'s behaviour in fulfilling cash *waqf*?
3. How does digitalisation influence the behaviour of *waqf* endowers?
4. How does trust affect the behaviour of *waqf* endowers?
5. What is the effect of the role of ulama in moderating the above variables on the behaviour of *waqf* endowers?

Methodology

Research Design

This research uses quantitative research. Quantitative research is a research method based on the philosophy of positivism as a scientific method because it fulfils scientific rules concretely or empirically, objectively, measurably, rationally, and systematically (Sugiyono, 2019). Quantitative methods aim to test predetermined hypotheses that will be used to research certain populations and samples, data collection using research instruments, and quantitative or statistical data analysis.

Population and Sample

Waqif is a person who has done *waqf* through money, which is done by Muslims because *waqf* is a practice of Islam. From this, it can be said

that the population is Muslims in West Sumatra because of the scope of research for the province of West Sumatra. From the population, a representative sample is taken with several criteria, namely Muslim, *baligh*, and has been or plans to donate money. Samples can be found from *waqif* who are already registered with the *waqf* institution Muslims who are part of the majlis taqlim community, or schoolteachers whose schools have *zakat, infaq, sadaqah*, and *waqf* institutions.

The sample in this study uses a formula developed by Hair Jr et al., (2019), who state that the sample size can be determined based on the number of variables used, with a ratio of 20:1. In this model, six variables are used, so the minimum sample size is 6*20 = 120 samples.

Data Collection Techniques

Primary data is collected through a structured questionnaire designed to measure respondents' attitudes, subjective norms, trust, digitalisation, and the moderating role of religious leaders. The questionnaire employs a six-point Likert scale (strongly agree – agree – sufficiently agree – less agree – disagree – strongly disagree), eliminating the neutral option to reduce respondent ambiguity (Kriyantono, 2014). The six-point scale enhances validity and reliability compared to traditional five-point scales (Joshi et al., 2015). The questionnaire was developed based on validated constructs from previous studies, ensuring that it effectively captures attitudes, norms, trust levels, digitalisation, and the perceived influence of religious leaders (ulama).

Data source

The data used are primary data. Primary data is data obtained directly from the first source of data collection. This data was obtained from the results of a questionnaire that had been shared with respondents by providing questions or statements that had been arranged systematically and answered by respondents (Sugiyono, 2019).

Research Variables

This study aims to examine and explore the relationship between attitude factors, subjective norms, digitalisation, trust and the role of religious leaders in the behaviour of *waqf* and cash endowments. For this reason, the researcher formulated an independent variable (X) consisting of attitude variables, subjective norms, digitalisation, and trust, while the

variable religious leader is a moderating variable. Dependent variable (Y) is the *waqf*'s behaviour when giving money. Therefore, the research framework developed is as follows:

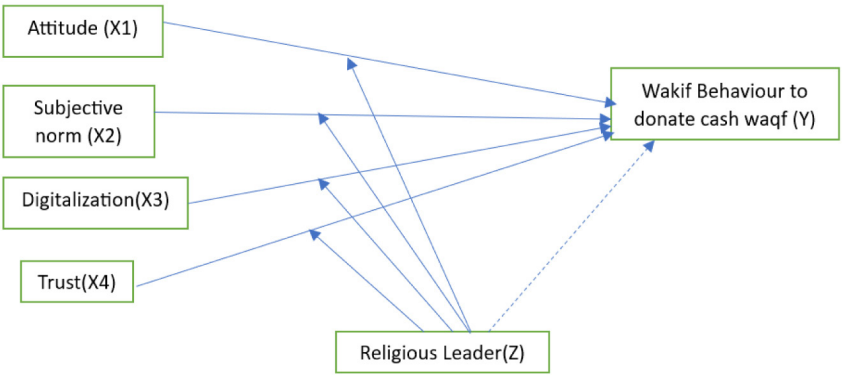

Figure 1: Research Framework

The hypotheses proposed in this study are:

H1: Attitude has a positive and significant effect on *waqf* behaviour in cash *waqf*

H2: Subjective norm has a positive and significant effect on *waqf* behaviour to donate in cash *waqf*

H3: Digitalisation has a positive and significant effect on the behaviour of *waqif*s in cash *waqf*

H4: Trust has a positive and significant effect on the behaviour of *waqif* in cash *waqf*

H5a: Religious leader strengthens the influence of attitude on *waqif* behaviour in cash *waqf*

H5b: Religious leaders strengthen the influence of subjective norm on *waqf* behaviour.

H5c: Religious leaders strengthen the influence of digitalisation on *waqif* behaviour in cash *waqf*

H5d: Religious leaders strengthen the influence of trust on *waqf* behaviour.

Data Analysis Technique

The data that has been obtained through questionnaires will be analysed using the Structural Equation Model (SEM) technique based on Partial Least Square (PLS). The reason for using SEM is that it allows us to see the relationship between variables simultaneously and takes into account the direct and indirect effects between variables. This makes it possible to create a path model that can better explain the relationship between variables. SEM helps researchers to confirm the theory and to explain whether or not there is a relationship between latent variables. According to Imam Ghozali (2016: 417), the PLS method is able to describe latent variables (not directly measurable) and is measured using indicators.

The stages in this data analysis are:

1. Outer model test (validity and data reliability test)
2. Inner model test (structural model test), namely the model durability test
3. Hypothesis testing

Findings and Discussion

Demographic profile

The study sampled 378 respondents, consisting of 227 women (60.05%) and 151 men (39.94%), indicating that women exhibit higher enthusiasm in contributing to cash *waqf*. The majority of *waqif* are aged 40–50 years (35%), followed by those over 50 years (29%), suggesting that cash *waqf* participation increases as individuals near retirement age, when religious and social contributions become a greater focus.

Regarding employment, 30% of respondents work in the private sector, while 26% are civil servants. In terms of education, most respondents hold a Bachelor's degree (42%), followed by Postgraduate degrees (28%). Geographically, 42% of respondents are from Padang, with significant representation from Payakumbuh (14%), Bukittinggi (10%), and other key cities in West Sumatra. This distribution ensures that the study captures insights from major economic and religious centres. The complete demographic data can be found in Table 2.

Table 2. Demographic Profile of Respondents

No	Statement	Person	Percentage	No	Statement	Person	Percentage
1.	**Gender**			4.	**Education**		
	Female	227	60.05%		Elementary School	12	3%
	Male	151	39.94%		Middle School	9	2%
2.	**Age**				High School	81	21%
	<20 years	15	4%		Bachelor's Degree	159	42%
	20-30 years	53	14%		Postgraduate Degree	106	28%
	30-40 years	65	17%		Others	11	3%
	40-50 years	134	35%	5.	**Hometown**		
	>50 years	111	29%		Padang	157	42%
3.	**Work**				Pasaman	28	7%
	Student	27	7%		Bukittinggi	37	10%
	Housewife	59	16%		Solok	21	6%
	Government employees	97	26%		Padang Panjang	6	2%
	Private employees	113	30%		Payakumbuh	52	14%
	Other	82	22%		Batusangkar	17	4%
					Lainnya	58	15%

Source: Author's data (2024)

This research is a survey study conducted on 378 samples. These samples are *waqif*, meaning those who have previously performed cash *waqf* or intend to perform cash *waqf*. This means that most of the samples are individuals who have performed cash *waqf* and *waqf* through money and have done so repeatedly. The following is the initial framework before processing with SEM PLS.

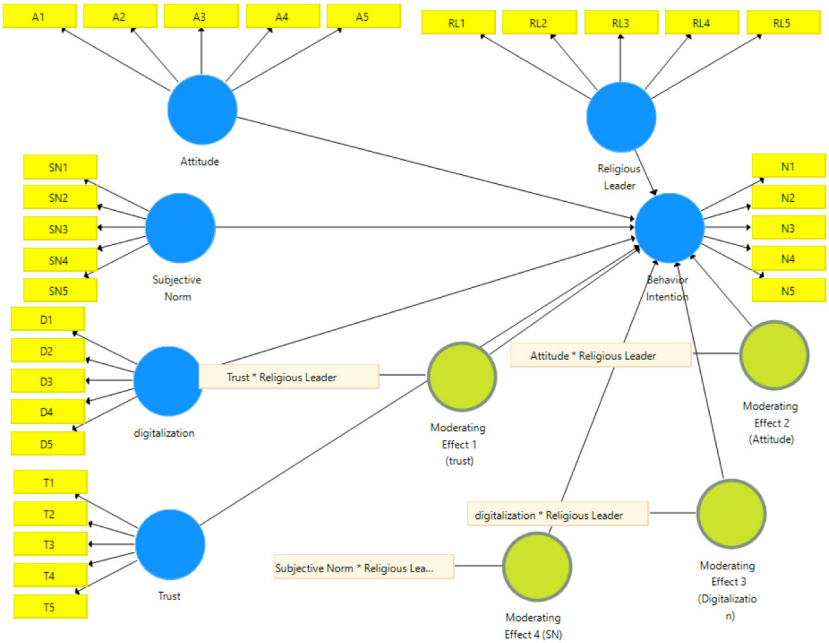

Figure 2: Initial research framework before processing
Source: processed results from SEM PLS (2024)

In Figure 2, there are variables of attitude, subjective norm, digitalisation, trust that are directly related to variable Y, namely the behaviour intention of *waqif* in cash *waqf*.

Then we analyse it using these steps.

I. Measurement Model Test / Indicator Test / Outer Model

The outer model test is a test conducted to determine the validity and reliability of the research questionnaire used. To test the validity of Smart PLS, we can use two forms of testing, namely Convergent Validity and Discriminant Validity. This can be seen from the results of the calculate PLS Algorithm.

Convergent Validity

This test is carried out by looking at the outer loading value. The standard is the outer loading value > 0.5. If the outer loading value is > 0.5 then the indicator is valid.

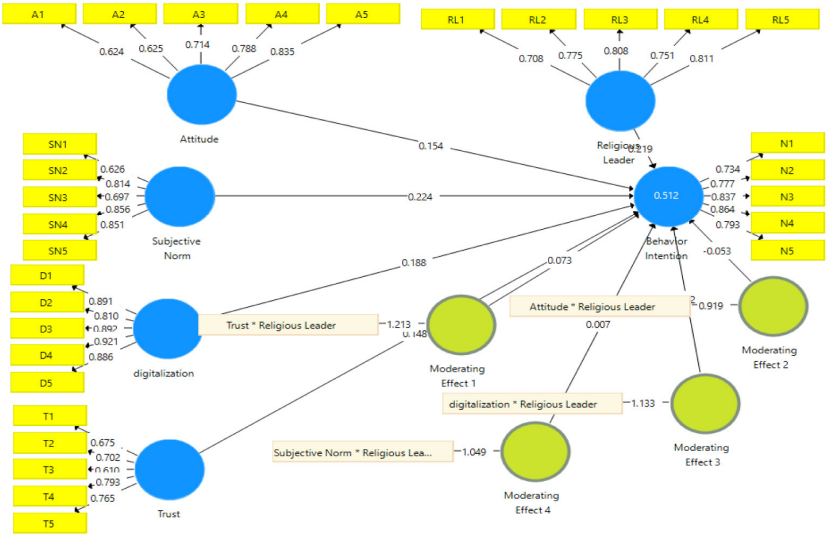

Figure 3: Outer Loading Value after Calculating PLS Algorithm

In Figure 3, it can be seen that the outer loading value shows that all variables X1, X2, X3, X4, Z and Y > 0.5, so all latent variable indicators are valid.

Discriminant Validity

This test is carried out by looking at the AVE value and the AVE root value. It can be seen from the AVE value, where indicators are considered to meet the discriminant validity value if the AVE root> correlation between latent variables (As can be seen from the Fornel-Larcker criterion).

Construct Reliability and Validity

Matrix	Cronbach's Alpha	rho_A	Composite Reliability	Average Vari
	Cronbach...	rho_A	Composi...	Average Variance Extracted (...
Attitude	0.768	0.797	0.843	0.521
Behavior Intention	0.861	0.869	0.900	0.643
Moderating Effect 1	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000
Moderating Effect 2	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000
Moderating Effect 3	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000
Moderating Effect 4	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000
Religious Leader	0.832	0.844	0.880	0.595
Subjective Norm	0.830	0.854	0.881	0.599
Trust	0.770	0.809	0.836	0.507
digitalization	0.927	0.934	0.945	0.776

Figure 4: Results of AVE Value of Discriminant Validity Test

Based on Figure 4, the AVE value of each variable is > 0.5, so the discriminant validity is fulfilled. Based on the AVE root value (As can be seen from the Fornel-Larcker criterion).

Discriminant Validity

Fornell-Larcker Criter... | Cross Loadings | Heterotrait-Monotrait ... | Heterotrait-Monotrait ... | Copy to Clipboard: | Excel F

	Attitude	Behavior ...	Moderati...	Moderati...	Moderati...	Moderati...	Religious ...	Subjectiv...	Trust	digitalizat...
Attitude	0.722									
Behavior I...	0.564	0.802								
Moderati...	-0.026	0.041	1.000							
Moderati...	-0.159	-0.061	0.358	1.000						
Moderati...	-0.011	0.084	0.599	0.388	1.000					
Moderati...	-0.094	-0.065	0.263	0.581	0.193	1.000				
Religious ...	0.537	0.551	-0.122	-0.211	-0.143	-0.287	0.772			
Subjectiv...	0.621	0.558	-0.031	-0.107	0.004	-0.058	0.460	0.774		
Trust	0.444	0.470	-0.344	-0.035	-0.148	-0.036	0.544	0.390	0.712	
digitalizat...	0.445	0.489	-0.138	-0.013	-0.190	0.004	0.466	0.410	0.510	0.881

Figure 5: Fornel- Larcker Criterion Value

The root AVE value of each variable > is compared to the root AVE in terms of its correlation with other variables so that discriminant validity is fulfilled.

Outer Model Collinearity Test

In this study, measuring the collinearity test based on the VIF value < 5 indicates no collinearity.

Collinearity Statistics (VIF)

Outer VIF Values | Inner VIF

	VIF
A1	1.329
A2	1.314
A3	1.478
A4	1.588
A5	1.907
Attitude * Religio...	1.000
D1	3.176
D2	2.173
D3	3.215
D4	4.197
D5	3.402
N1	1.617

Collinearity Statistics (VIF)

Outer VIF Values | Inner VIF

	VIF
N2	1.759
N3	2.089
N4	2.506
N5	1.917
RL1	2.035
RL2	2.226
RL3	1.983
RL4	1.766
RL5	2.036
SN1	1.466
SN2	1.893
SN3	1.522

Collinearity Statistics (VIF)

Outer VIF Values | Inner VIF

	VIF
SN3	1.522
SN4	2.910
SN5	2.858
Subjective Norm ...	1.000
T1	1.683
T2	1.932
T3	1.505
T4	1.647
T5	1.713
Trust * Religious ...	1.000
digitalization * R...	1.000

Figure 6: VIF Value Results

Based on figure 6, it can be seen from the VIF value that all variables are < 5, so it can be judged that there is no collinearity between each measured indicator.

Reliability Test

A model can be said to be reliable when viewed from:

Cronbach alpha> 0.7, rho A> 0.7, composite reliability> 0.6.

Construct Reliability and Validity

Matrix | Cronbach's Alpha | rho_A | Composite Reliability | Average Varia

	Cronbach's Alpha	rho_A	Composite Reliability	Average ...
Attitude	0.768	0.797	0.843	0.521
Behavior Intention	0.861	0.869	0.900	0.643
Moderating Effect 1	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000
Moderating Effect 2	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000
Moderating Effect 3	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000
Moderating Effect 4	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000
Religious Leader	0.832	0.844	0.880	0.595
Subjective Norm	0.830	0.854	0.881	0.599
Trust	0.770	0.809	0.836	0.507
digitalization	0.927	0.934	0.945	0.776

Figure 7: Model Reliability Results with Cronbach alpha, rho A, Composite Reliability Values

All three assessment standards have met the requirements, > 0.7, so this model can be said to be reliable.

<u>II. Test Structural Model / Inner Model</u>

R square

R square is a measure of the proportion of variation in the value of the fulfilled variable (endogenous) that can be explained by the variables that influence it (exogenous). The criteria are:

- ✓ R-Square value = 0.75 or higher → Substantial strong model
- ✓ R-Square value = 0.50 - 0.74 → moderate / medium model
- ✓ R-Square value ≥ 0.25 - 0.49 → weak model

In behavioural and social sciences, R^2 values around 0.20–0.30 are often acceptable due to the complexity of human behaviour. In marketing and business research, an R^2 of 0.50 or higher is considered a good fit.

R Square

Matrix | R Square | R Square Adjusted

	R Square	R Square Adjusted
Behavior I...	0.512	0.500

Figure 8: R^2 Results

R^2 model = 52%. This means that the ability of exogenous variables to explain Y is 52% (moderate), so it can be said that the ability of attitude variables, subjective norm, digitalisation, and trust in explaining *waqif* behaviour in *waqf* money is quite strong (good fit) at 52%. The remaining 48% is the influence of other independent variables that are not measured in this study.

III. Hypothesis Testing

We can get information from the bootstrapping test

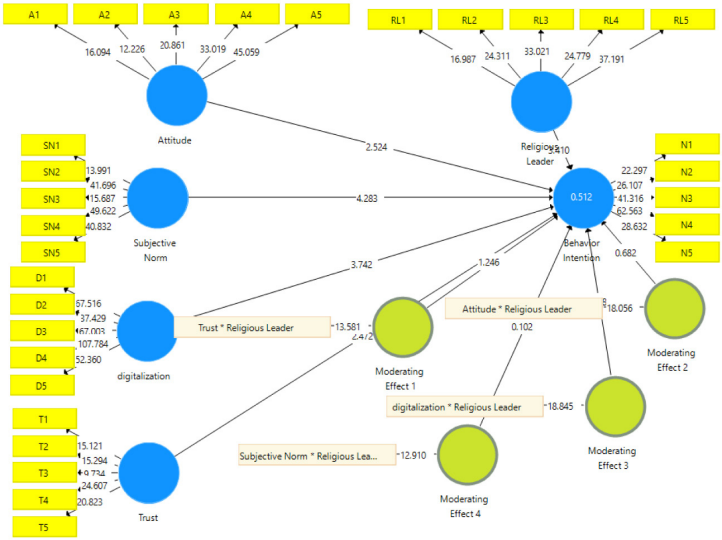

Figure 9: Processing Results with Bootstrapping Test

If the P value <0.05 then the effect that occurs is significant. Conversely, P value > 0.05, then it is not significant. If the path analysis value is positive, it means that the relationship is unidirectional, meaning that an increase in one independent variable will increase the dependent variable. Conversely, if the value is negative, it means that the relationship is best; an increase in one variable will decrease the dependent variable.

Path Coefficients

Mean, STDEV, T-Values, P-... | Confidence Intervals | Confidence Intervals Bias ... | Samples | Copy to Clipbo

	Original ...	Sample ...	Standard ...	T Statistic...	P Values
Attitude -> Behavior Intention	0.154	0.147	0.061	2.529	0.012
Moderating Effect 1 (trust) -> Behavior Intention	0.073	0.076	0.055	1.324	0.186
Moderating Effect 2 (Attitude) -> Behavior Intention	-0.053	-0.047	0.076	0.702	0.483
Moderating Effect 3 (Digitalization) -> Behavior Intention	0.122	0.130	0.055	2.240	0.026
Moderating Effect 4 (SN) -> Behavior Intention	0.007	-0.010	0.071	0.105	0.916
Religious Leader -> Behavior Intention	0.219	0.227	0.066	3.295	0.001
Subjective Norm -> Behavior Intention	0.224	0.232	0.052	4.312	0.000
Trust -> Behavior Intention	0.148	0.149	0.061	2.437	0.015
digitalization -> Behavior Intention	0.188	0.188	0.054	3.474	0.001

Figure 10: Bootstrapping Test Path Coefficients Results

Based on the figure above, it can be concluded that:

1. H1: X1 (attitude) → Y = 0.154 (positive), p value = 0.012 < 0.05 (significant)

2. H2: X2 (subjective norm) → Y = 0.224 (positive), p value = 0.000 < 0.05 (significant)

3. H3: X3 (digitalisation) à Y = 0.188 (positive), p value = 0.0001 < 0.05 (significant)

4. H4: X4 (trust) → Y = 0.148 (positive), p value = 0.015 < 0.05 (significant)

5. H5: Z (religious leader) → Y = 0.219 (positive), p value = 0.001 < 0.05 (significant)

Then to see the indirect relationship between variables X1, X2, X3, X4 on Y which is moderated by Z (religious leader), this can be seen through moderated regression analysis. This analysis is useful for

testing the effect of moderating variables in strengthening or weakening the relationship between dependent and independent variables.

The criteria are:

* If the p value> 0.05, then it is not significant, meaning that the moderation variable does not play a role in moderating the relationship of an exogenous variable to an endogenous variable.
* If the p value <0.05, then it is significant, meaning that the moderation variable plays a role in moderating the relationship of an exogenous variable on an endogenous variable.

a) X1 *Zà Y = - 0.053 (negative / weakening), p value 0.483> 0.05 (not significant)

   This means that the RL variable weakens the influence between attitude and behaviour intention of *waqif*, but not significantly (H5a).

b) X2 *Zà Y = 0.007 (positive / strengthening), p value 0.916> 0.05 (not significant)

   This means that the RL variable strengthens the influence between subjective norm on behaviour intention of *waqif*, but insignificantly (H5b).

c) X3 *Zà Y = 0.122 (positive / strengthening), p value 0.026 < 0.05 (significant)

   This means that the RL variable strengthens the influence between digitalisation on the behaviour intention of *waqif* significantly (H5c).

d) X4 * Zà Y = 0.073 (positive / reinforcing), p value 0.186 > 0.05 (not significant).

   This means that the RL variable strengthens the influence between trust on the behaviour intention of *waqif*, but not significantly (H5d).

To conclude these results, the following authors accumulate hypotheses that have been answered:

Table 3: Recapitulation of Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis	Original Sample	T Tabel	T *Statistics*	P *Values*	Description
H1:ATT→BI to cash *waqf*	0.154	1.972	2.529	0.012	Support
H2:SN→BI to cash *waqf*	0.224	1.972	4.312	0.000	Support
H3:D→BI to cash *waqf*	0.188	1.972	3.474	0.001	Support
H4: T→BI to cash *waqf*	0.148	1.972	2.437	0.015	Support
RL→BI to cash *waqf*	0.219	1.972	3.295	0.001	Support
H5a:ATT→ RL→BI to cash *waqf*	-0.053	1.972	0.702	0.483	Not Support
H5b: SN→ RLàBI to cash *waqf*	0.007	1.972	2.240	0.916	Not Support
H5c: D→RL→BI to cash *waqf*	0.122	1.972	0.105	0.026	Support
H5d: T→RL→BI to cash *waqf*	0.073	1.972	1.324	0.186	Not Support

Discussion

The results of this study indicate that the relationship between *waqif* behaviour intention for cash *waqf* using TPB and TAM is very instrumental. The findings of this study show several important results. First, in the direct relationship of all variables X (Attitude, SN, Digitalisation, Trust), variable Z (Religious leader) to variable Y (*waqif* behaviour intention) get positive and significant results. This means that all variables used in this study play a major role in determining the decision of *waqif* and prospective *waqif* to contribute to cash *waqf*. The results of this study are linear with the following studies.

1. Attitude Variable: This variable is positively significant and linear with research by Osman and Muhammed, (2017); Chaerunnisa and Kasri, (2018); Al-Harethi, (2019); Alifiandy and Sukmana (2020); Mujahidah and Rusydiana, (2023); where they claim that individuals' attitudes toward cash *waqf* affect

their behaviour intentions and contributions to the performance of cash *waqf*, which will be affected by their evaluation of the consequences or benefits of the behaviour.

2. The Subjective Norm Variable: this variable has a positive significant influence linearly with research by Al-Harethi, (2019); Farokhah, N *et al.*,(2019); Chaerunnisa and Kasri, (2018); Mahdiah, Hasanah and Nursyamsiah, (2019); Alifiandy and Sukmana, (2020), Mujahidah and Rusydiana, (2023); where they state that subjective norm is an individual's perception of social pressure to act or not to act which the individual feels bound to comply with that pressure. In other words, a person in an environment that is responsible for cash *waqf* or perceives that cash *waqf* is a good thing, so the individual tends to have the same mind, so the influence of the subjective norm is very important for the *waqif* to contribute to cash *waqf*.

3. Digitalisation Variable: The variable is also positive and significant. This result is a confirmation and is in accordance with the research by Shih and Fang (2004), Gopi and Ramayah (2007), Farokhah et al. (2019), Azhar (2022), Fianto et al. (2017), Farokhah et al. (2024), where they stated that there was a decision for cash *waqf* on the crowdfunding platform and the potential use of online payment. This shows that the *waqif* has now considered the factor of ease of use in transactions (if it is said that fulfilling the cash *waqf* is a transaction with Allah), and the perceived usefulness of media use helps the *waqif* to achieve its willingness to cash *waqf*. It also suggests that one can perform an act of worship without requiring much effort and difficulty because cash *waqf* can be done with online media that are very close to them.

4. Trust Variable: These variables are also positive and significant. This result is linear with research by Greenwood *et al.* (2005), Ihsan et al. (2017), Nuryitman (2022), where they stated that the reputation and accountability of *waqf* at the *waqf* management institution are very important for the management responsibility to the *waqif* (*waqf* providers). The reputation and integrity of the *waqf* institution had a direct impact on the *waqf* trust, which resulted in an increase in the behaviour of *waqf* intention in *waqf*.

5. Religious Leaders Variable: Religious leaders directly related to this variable are also positive and significant. This was supported by research by Arli et al. (2023), Christina et al. (2021), Masrizal et al. (2023), and Gustina. et al. (2024). Religious leaders strengthen the community's trust in the *waqf* institution. In addition, religious leaders are public figures who can provide motivation to the community, especially in the context of understanding cash *waqf*, and the existence of ulama is very clear and influential to the community.

In indirect relationships, this study uses variable moderation that the role of religious leader (the role of Ulama) is strengthening/weakening the influence of *waqif* behavior intention. The results showed that this variable strengthened its role only for the effect of digitalisation on *waqif* behavior intentions, while for variable attributes, subjective norms and trust; the Z variable did not strengthen. These results are also consistent and linear with studies by Chrisna et al. (2021) dan Gustina. et al. (2024), where they claim that religious leaders strengthen the influence of behavioral intentions of *waqif* in fulfilling cash *waqf*. This signals that there needs to be a policy that supports the process of implementing this cash *waqf* from the government and other policy makers (such as BWI) and a collaboration between the *waqf* management institution and the ulama which is the spearhead that directly connects with the community as potential *waqif* candidates.

Conclusion and Implication of Study

This study highlights the critical role of Ulama in moderating *waqif* behaviour and underscores the potential of digital platforms in increasing participation in cash *waqf*. The findings confirm that factors such as attitude, subjective norms, trust, digitalisation, and the role of religious leaders significantly influence the intention to participate in cash *waqf*. Specifically, the ulama serves as a key figure in shaping community perceptions and trust, reinforcing the importance of integrating traditional religious guidance with modern technological advancements.

Furthermore, this study emphasises that a synergistic approach—combining the influence of religious leaders with digital platforms—can optimise cash *waqf* mobilisation and enhance social development. By leveraging digitalisation, the accessibility and efficiency of *waqf* contributions can be improved, allowing for broader participation across

diverse donor groups. For implication, this study highlights the crucial role of cash *waqf* in fostering economic and social empowerment in Indonesia, emphasising the need for reforms to enhance its effectiveness. A key implication is the involvement of ulama in community education, as their trusted position can significantly influence public awareness and participation in cash *waqf*. Policymakers, *waqf* managers (*nazir*), and religious leaders should collaborate to design initiatives that strengthen trust and knowledge among potential donors. Additionally, the integration of digital platforms into *waqf* management presents an opportunity to improve accessibility, efficiency, and transparency in cash *waqf* practices. Future policies should encourage the adoption of fintech solutions to streamline donation processes and ensure accountability, ultimately contributing to a more sustainable and impactful *waqf* ecosystem.

Limitations and Future Research

This study has limitations, such as focusing only on the West Sumatra region. Geographically and in terms of governance, West Sumatra is somewhat different from other regions, such as Java, so the findings may not be fully generalisable to other parts of Indonesia or other countries. The potential for data bias exists, such as limitations in criteria and sample size. In addition, there are also differences in other factors for different regions, such as socio-economic, educational, and socio-cultural aspects, that may also influence the behaviour of the *waqif* itself.

As a contribution to the literature on Islamic philanthropy and financial behaviour, this study suggests several future research directions. Future research could explore the long-term impact of cash *waqf* contributions on community development, particularly in areas such as poverty alleviation, education, and economic empowerment. Additionally, studies could analyse the effectiveness of various digital strategies, including fintech innovations and blockchain technology, in enhancing transparency, trust, and donor engagement in *waqf* management. Given the influential role of religious leaders, further research could examine how they leverage digital platforms to promote *waqf* participation and how religiosity interacts with digital adoption in shaping donor behaviour. These directions would provide deeper insights into optimising cash *waqf* practices for greater social and economic benefits.

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The Role of Local Wisdom in Shaping Internationalisation Strategies of Islamic Higher Education Institutions in Indonesia

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Abstract: Local wisdom plays a pivotal role in the internationalisation strategies of Islamic Higher Education Institutions (IHEIs) in Indonesia, offering a unique approach to integrating global standards while preserving cultural and religious identity. This article explores how Indonesian IHEIs leverage local values, traditions, and practices to design and implement effective internationalisation frameworks. Using a qualitative research approach, this study analyses case studies, interviews, and document analysis from selected IHEIs. The findings reveal that local wisdom fosters inclusivity, adaptability, and distinctive identity, contributing to Indonesia's sustainable internationalisation of Islamic

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higher education. It concludes that the strategic incorporation of local wisdom strengthens the institutional identities of IHEIs and contributes to a more diverse and inclusive global academic community.

Keywords: Local Wisdom, Internationalisation, Islamic Higher Education Institutions, Cultural Identity

Abstrak: Kearifan lokal memainkan peranan penting dalam strategi pengantarabangsaan Perguruan Tinggi Keagamaan Islam (PTKI) di Indonesia, menawarkan pendekatan unik untuk mengintegrasikan piawaian global sambil mempertahankan identiti budaya dan agama. Makalah ini meneroka bagaimana PTKI di Indonesia memanfaatkan nilai-nilai, tradisi, dan praktis lokal untuk merancang dan mengimplementasikan kerangka kerja pengantarabangsaan yang efektif. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan penelitian kualitatif, makalah ini menganalisis kajian kes, wawancara, dan analisis dokumen dari PTKI terpilih. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan bahawa kearifan lokal mendorong inklusiviti, adaptabiliti, dan identiti yang khas, menyumbang kepada pengantarabangsaan pendidikan tinggi Islam yang berkelanjutan di Indonesia. Kesimpulannya, penggabungan strategi kearifan lokal memperkuatkan identiti institusional PTKI dan menyumbang kepada komuniti akademik global yang lebih beragam dan inklusif.

Kata Kunci: Kearifan Lokal, Pengantarabangsaan, Perguruan Tinggi Keagamaan Islam, Identitas Budaya

Introduction

The phenomenon of internationalisation is characterised by the integration of global academic standards (Knight, 2004). However, this global tendency often encounters challenges. For Islamic Higher Education Institutions (IHEIs) in Indonesia, internationalisation requires balancing the adherence to global academic standards with the preservation of their cultural and religious heritage (Abdullah, 2017). Indonesia consists of various cultures and traditions from about 1,300 ethnic groups and 700 languages (Eberhard et.al, 2025).

Indonesia, a Muslim-majority nation, offers a distinctive context for examining a unique framework for understanding local wisdom. This concept encompasses traditional customs, community values, and Islamic teachings, which collectively contribute to the identity formation of Islamic higher education institutions. Two key concepts that embody

this identity are *gotong royong*, which signifies cooperation, and *adat*, which refers to customary law (Geertz, 1960; Azra, 2006). Both concepts, along with the major religion in Indonesia – Islam – provide a diversity of cultures and perspectives.

Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim-majority nation, presents a unique tapestry where Islamic traditions harmoniously blend with diverse local cultures. This rich interplay has fostered a distinctive form of local wisdom, deeply rooted in community values, customs, and Islamic teachings (Rangkuti et al., 2021). Such wisdom not only enriches daily life but also serves as a foundational element in the philosophy and development of IHEIs across the country (Fauzi et al., 2023). These institutions embody the integration of spiritual and cultural heritage, ensuring that education remains deeply connected to the nation's multifaceted identity.

IHEIs in Indonesia have sought to integrate local wisdom into their internationalisation strategies to achieve a balance between global engagement and cultural preservation. For example, institutions have developed academic programmes that emphasise cultural immersion, established partnerships that respect local traditions, and encouraged community engagement rooted in Islamic and Indonesian values (Haryanto et al., 2020). These practices not only showcase Indonesia's cultural richness but also offer a model for culturally grounded internationalisation.

Despite these efforts, challenges remain. Western-centric academic paradigms often dominate international education, leading to the underrepresentation of non-Western perspectives, including those of Indonesia (Santoso et al., 2021). Additionally, misconceptions about the relevance of local wisdom in modern education persist, creating barriers to its broader integration in global academic frameworks (Abdullah, 2017).

Apart from that, the views or opinions of students in Indonesia regarding higher education internationalisation programmes cannot be ignored. They play a big role in planning and evaluating the programmes run by universities, apart from their role as actors in the programmes. From another perspective, local wisdom is seen as a key factor in cultural preservation, particularly within the context of the nation and region they inhabit. As the subsequent generation, their responsibility

is to perpetuate the existing traditions and cultural practices that have been handed down to them. Kayode (2024) stated that students can inspire community members to invest in educational resources, such as libraries, laboratories, and safe learning environments. Knowledge and implementation of local wisdom by students to internationalise universities influence the achievements of these universities in reaching the level of internationalised universities. With student thinking patterns that are reluctant to develop, it is impossible for university internationalisation programmes to be realised, which can be an obstacle in realising the internationalisation strategies.

Several studies have explored various strategies to internationalise universities, such as developing internationalised curricula and organising events that support foreign language use. However, there is still limited research connecting these strategies with the role of local wisdom.

This study aims to address these gaps by examining how local wisdom influences the internationalisation strategies of Indonesian IHEIs. It explores the ways institutions leverage local values to foster global collaborations, adapt global academic practices to local contexts, and create inclusive and culturally rich educational environments. Through this exploration, the study contributes to the understanding of local wisdom as a strategic asset in achieving sustainable and contextually relevant internationalisation.

Literature Review

Islamic Higher Education Institutions (IHEIs)

In the contemporary higher education landscape, there is a growing emphasis on academic excellence, the strengthening of research partnerships, and the promotion of cross-cultural understanding as international higher education continues to expand. The concept of internationalisation in Islamic higher education entails the integration of global academic standards while maintaining Islamic values and principles (Knight, 2004; De Wit & Hunter, 2015). IHEIs must meticulously adapt their curricula to align with global standards, adeptly manage significant cultural and religious variations, and surmount substantial limitations in resources and infrastructure (Hamid & Said, 2019). Noteworthy advancements have been witnessed in the realm of

international partnerships and study abroad programmes established by IHEIs. Furthermore, these institutions have fostered numerous research collaborations that are in alignment with their Islamic identity (Ziauddin, 2018).

IHEIs play a significant role in shaping a more comprehensive and equitable global education system by consistently demonstrating their commitment to academic excellence and fostering a profound cultural diversity (Abdullah, 2021). These institutions have been instrumental in developing diverse educational experiences that engage both local and international communities, integrating local knowledge into their global strategies (Rizvi, 2007).

This section highlights the crucial importance of balancing global assimilation with the preservation of local traditions. Key characteristics of local wisdom include mutual cooperation (*gotong royong*), customary laws (*adat*), and consensus-building discussions (*musyawarah*), with Islamic teachings significantly influencing daily life (Geertz, 1973; Alwasilah, 2017).

Local Wisdom

Local wisdom nurtures a strong sense of community and belonging in education while also promoting various moral values. One of the distinctive local wisdoms in Indonesia is *gotong royong* which encourages collaboration among students, faculty, and community members, fostering an environment of mutual support and shared responsibility. This culture shapes communication pattern for Indonesia people to be polite, friendly, and helpful. Likewise, *adat* provides a meaningful framework for maintaining harmonious relationships and deep respect within many institutional policies and practices (Huda & Kartanegara, 2015). The diversity in Indonesia creates various *adat* which bears various symbols and traditions.

Furthermore, an exploration of Indonesian traditions can offer novel perspectives on pressing global issues, such as sustainability and equity. The effective execution of collaborative research initiatives, complemented by the adept management of conflict in multicultural contexts, underscores the efficacy of principles such as *gotong royong* and *musyawarah* (UNESCO, 2020).

Numerous studies have demonstrated the significant impact of local wisdom, particularly within the framework of *Islam Nusantara*, on Indonesian education. A seminal study by Azra (2006) underscored the pivotal role of Islamic moderation (*wasaṭiyyah*) in Indonesian Islamic education, emphasising its significant contribution to fostering tolerance, pluralism, and interfaith dialogue. These components are of increasing value in many internationalisation strategies, enabling IHEIs to project an original identity that represents global academic values while maintaining cultural authenticity.

Rahman's (2019) work underscores the necessity of incorporating local knowledge into courses designed for international students. Institutions of Higher Education (IHEIs) are vital in preserving cultural heritage by blending local traditions into their global curricula. This thoughtful integration not only honours the unique identity of the region but also creates a welcoming space for international students. In these vibrant learning environments, students not only gain knowledge but also form meaningful relationships, making their time at IHEIs truly memorable and enriching.

Research by Haryanto et al. (2020) examined the dual objectives of internationalisation and cultural preservation in Indonesian universities. The study found that IHEIs in Indonesia adopt internationalisation strategies that align with their cultural and religious missions, such as organising cultural immersion programmes for international students and fostering community-based collaborations.

Furthermore, Wekke (2015) investigated how *pesantren*-based IHEIs (Islamic boarding school-affiliated universities) incorporate traditional Islamic teachings into global academic exchanges. The findings revealed that these institutions leverage their culturally grounded educational models to contribute to global conversations on religious tolerance and education, positioning them as key players in international academic networks.

Studies also highlight the challenges faced by IHEIs in integrating local wisdom into internationalisation strategies. For instance, Abdullah (2017) discussed the misalignment between Western academic paradigms and Indonesian cultural contexts, which often leads to underestimation of local wisdom in global academic settings. However, the study noted that institutions embracing their unique cultural and

religious identities have successfully navigated these challenges by emphasising the universal values of Islam Nusantara, such as peace, compassion, and social justice.

On the opportunities side, Santoso et al. (2021) explored how Indonesian universities' distinct cultural identity could be a competitive advantage in attracting international collaborations and students. The study suggested that programmes showcasing local traditions and Islamic teachings not only enhance institutional reputation but also contribute to global cultural understanding.

The reviewed studies collectively underscore the importance of integrating local wisdom into the internationalisation strategies of IHEIs in Indonesia. They highlight the value of Islamic moderation, cultural preservation, and community engagement as key elements that distinguish Indonesian Islamic universities in the global academic landscape. These findings provide a foundation for the current study, which aims to explore how local wisdom can be further leveraged to shape internationalisation strategies, address challenges, and seize opportunities.

Theoretical Framework

This article proposes a theoretical connection between IIHEIs and local wisdom in Indonesia. It explores how universities navigate the interplay between global engagement and local identity, highlighting the necessity for strategic and nuanced approaches to harmonise international aspirations with community responsibilities. The Indonesian landscape, characterised by its rich multiculturalism, serves as a backdrop for this discussion.

The Cultural Adaptation Model by Cheng (2004) can be applied to the integration of local wisdom in internationalisation strategies. The author of the model argues that internationalisation strategies should not be perceived as a way of transferring global practices to the local level but as a process of interaction between the two levels in which the local culture informs the global strategies of the organisations.

Several Indonesian Islamic higher education institutions have skilfully woven indigenous wisdom into their international outreach efforts. A prominent illustration is Universitas Islam Negeri (UIN) Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta, which has established itself as a trailblazer

in this initiative by advocating for the concept of *Islam Nusantara*—Islam from the Indonesian Archipelago. This term captures a significant idea that nurtures a harmonious relationship between Islamic teachings and the diverse cultural practices found throughout Indonesia (Schaefer, 2021). The vision, as articulated by Azra (2006), is to cultivate a vibrant and inclusive form of Islam shaped by local traditions. What makes UIN Sunan Kalijaga particularly fascinating is how this concept is intricately integrated across various levels, including the curriculum, scholar exchanges, and partnerships with foreign educational institutions.

UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta resonates with a series of distinctive initiatives that reflect its commitment to *wasaṭiyyah*, a strategy rooted in Islamic neutrality, serving as a cornerstone for their global interactions approached with seriousness and purpose (Latifa et al., 2022). Islam and moderation are intricately linked, enveloped in a tapestry of concepts that include pluralism, social justice, and practices of tolerance. By adopting these principles, UIN Syarif Hidayatullah fosters collaboration that transcends national boundaries, primarily building research partnerships with academic institutions across Southeast Asia and the Middle East. This dynamic promotion of Islamic values and regional ideologies raises the question of whether it truly represents integration. Within this context, a global approach takes shape, led by academic endeavours that celebrate cultural uniqueness, reflecting a deep-rooted commitment to both tradition and innovation.

These cases show how local wisdom can be incorporated into the internationalisation strategies of Islamic higher education institutions in Indonesia. By valuing local cultural traditions and aligning them with global academic practices, these institutions have established unique educational environments that appeal to international students, encourage global research partnerships, and strengthen their relationships with local communities.

This study investigated the strategies taken by the Islamic higher education institutions to promote university internationalisation. However, it focused on the actions involving local wisdom or traditions in the programmes, and correlated the strategies with the relevant previous researches and theories. The theoretical frameworks and examples presented in this section highlight the importance of integrating local wisdom into the internationalisation strategies of IHEIs in Indonesia. By

adapting global academic practices to local contexts, these institutions can enhance their global engagement while preserving their cultural and religious identities. This balance of local and global values not only strengthens the international standing of Indonesian Islamic higher education but also contributes to the diversity and richness of global academic discourse.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research methodology, aligning with Creswell and Poth's (2018) framework for exploring and understanding the meanings individuals or groups ascribe to social or human problems. Given the focus on the integration of local wisdom in the internationalisation strategies of IHEIs, a qualitative approach is appropriate for capturing the nuanced perspectives and experiences of stakeholders within their specific cultural and institutional contexts.

This study adopts a case study design. The case study approach (Creswell and Poth, 2018) facilitates an in-depth exploration of the complex interplay between local wisdom and internationalisation efforts within IHEIs, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of how cultural values and traditions influence institutional strategies. The selection of three IHEs as the primary cases in this article is based on a purposive sampling strategy that aims to capture a diverse and representative spectrum of approaches to internationalisation integrated with local wisdom within the broader landscape of Islamic Higher Education in Indonesia. The study complied with ethical standards for qualitative research, which involved obtaining informed consent from all participants, ensuring confidentiality, and respecting participants' rights to withdraw at any time. Approval from the relevant institutional review board was also secured.

The methods used to collect the data include interviews and document analysis. Interviews were used to gain the data of students' opinion regarding the international programmes conducted by the universities, while documentation was useful for gathering data of policies and programmes issued by the leaders. To gain specific insights into the university's internationalisation programmes, the researcher also interviewed the Head of the International Office in one of the IHEIs. Additionally, document analysis of institutional policies, strategic

plans, and programme descriptions were conducted to contextualise and corroborate interview findings.

The study employed thematic analysis to identify and interpret patterns and themes emerging from the data. This process involves coding the data, categorising codes into themes, and interpreting the significance of these themes in relation to the research questions. The analysis aims to elucidate how local wisdom is operationalised within internationalisation strategies and its impact on institutional practices.

To enhance the credibility and trustworthiness, this study employed triangulation as a key validation strategy. By comparing and contrasting the interview data and document analysis, the study identified common themes and discrepancies, thereby strengthening the validity of the findings.

Findings and Discussion

This section reveals the findings and examines the impact of local wisdom on the internationalisation strategies of Islamic Higher Education Institutions (IHEIs) in Indonesia. Specifically, it highlights how local values inform institutional goals and policies and explores examples of locally inspired programmes designed to integrate local wisdom into internationalisation efforts.

Local Values Informing Institutional Goals and Policies

At the core of goal and policy formulation in Indonesia's Islamic higher education institutions lies the concept of local wisdom, a role that becomes especially prominent in the realm of internationalisation. These institutions are increasingly aware of the critical importance of maintaining their cultural identity and sacred beliefs while participating in the global educational community. By weaving local wisdom—shaped by Islamic teachings and Indonesia's rich cultural heritage—into their frameworks, these institutions can achieve a harmonious balance between meeting global standards and honouring indigenous customs. This delicate equilibrium is essential, as it defines the unique value they contribute to the educational landscape. The following table shows the university's vision and realisation regarding local values and international programmes.

Table 1: Visions and realisation of international programmes of three Islamic universities

Institution	Vision	Realisation
UIN Sunan Kalijaga	Being superior and Leading in Integrating and Developing Islam and Science for Civilisation	- International student mobility - International conference - International community service - International guest lecture - International class
UIN Syarif Hidayatullah	Realising UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta as a Globally Reputable University with Excellence in Integrating Islamic, Indonesian, and Scientific Knowledge	- International student mobility - International conference - International research - International community service - International guest lecture - International class
UIN K.H. Abdurrahman Wahid pekalongan	Becoming an Islamic University that excels in developing knowledge for humanity based on national culture	- International student mobility - International conference - International community service - International guest lecture

The table above shows the differences of vision along with the similarity in the concept of bringing Islam as the local values. The term *Islam Nusantara* introduced by Azra in 2006, translates to "Islam from the Indonesian Archipelago," and its impact is evident in the international strategies of several Indonesian Islamic universities. The practice of Islam in Indonesia is uniquely characterised by a blend of Islamic beliefs and local cultural norms, which many educational institutions, including UIN Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta, embrace as a core principle. Local wisdom in education is in line with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and it has potentials to improve culture-based learning (Arjaya et al, 2024). While the connection may seem tenuous, it highlights a deeper narrative where the essence of Islam subtly shifts, making the idea of "going global" more complex. This fusion of universal ideals with local elements creates a distinctive flavour that invites reflection and challenges conventional thinking (Azra, 2006).

Similarly, UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta has embedded the value of Islamic moderation (*wasaṭiyyah*) in its internationalisation strategies. By promoting the principles of tolerance, pluralism, and social justice, the university ensures that its global partnerships are rooted in Indonesia's distinctive approach to Islam. These local values inform institutional policies, including those related to international collaborations, student exchanges, and curricula, enabling the university to create an international presence that is culturally sensitive and aligned with its educational philosophy.

Besides the two institutions, UIN K. H. Abdurrahman Wahid Pekalongan also provides local wisdom for international students by introducing moderate Islam for foreigners in various activities. According to an interview with the Head of the International Office at UIN K. H. Abdurrahman Wahid Pekalongan, the university has established prominent international programmes, notably the Cultural Camp 2024 and Edutourism 2025. These initiatives are designed to provide participants from European and Southeast Asian countries with immersive experiences in the cultural and religious life of the Linggoasri community in Kajen, Pekalongan Regency. The programmes encompass a range of activities, including traditional arts workshops—such as *gamelan* and *rebana* music, Javanese traditional dance, *batik*-making, and *wayang*-making. Additionally, they feature dialogues on interfaith economic cooperation with the Linggo community and discussions on the importance of promoting religious moderation in a diverse society.

Pekalongan, renowned as the "World City of Batik," serves as a compelling destination for international visitors interested in exploring the intricate processes of batik production. As the first Southeast Asian city to join UNESCO's Creative Cities Network in 2014, Pekalongan has seamlessly integrated batik into its creative economy and educational initiatives, thereby enhancing its global appeal (Andjanie, & Putro, 2023). The integration of local wisdom values in learning practice can also instil nationalism into students, and they must keep the values in their community where they come from (Darmayenti, et al, 2021).

Students from one of the Islamic Higher Educations argued that local wisdom can provide more opportunities to collaborate with other institution from other countries, because it attracts people from other countries to know more about local traditions. As one of them said,

> "When we show the uniqueness of our culture it can attract world or international attention. It can also be a source of new ideas, support international cooperation, and introduce local culture to the global level." (Rini, 2025).

Another student also even said that local wisdom can be one of foundation in designing curriculum to be internationalised,

> "By integrating local values and culture into the curriculum, universities can offer a unique and engaging educational experience for international students." (Ardi, 2025)

These perspectives showed that the goal of educational system can be achieved by introducing local wisdom to the world, which can attract people from other countries to know more about it. In addition, local wisdom can promote students' thinking skills, especially for problem-solving (Kristanto, Suharno & Gunarhadi, 2019). By having this attraction, collaboration with other institutions from different countries is easy to achieve. Albantani and Madkur (2018) said that local wisdom functioning as cultural identity is one of the factors causing cross-cultural interaction in foreign language teaching; it can be harmoniously implemented academically.

Related to the goal of educational institutions, it is undeniable that students need triggers to improve their skills and develop their competence for any programme. Having collaboration and values to introduce to other countries helps the students to be more motivated and ready to compete. Some of the students believe that the international programme conducted by the university strongly motivates them to be able to practice foreign languages, especially English. Surely, this is beneficial for the students and institutions, which indirectly forces them to prepare themselves for global competition. The use of local wisdom-related material in education can raise students' awareness of socio-cultural conditions which provokes them to provide a broad view of uniqueness and variety of cultures in their community (Prayudha S, 2023).

The implementation of local wisdom in internationalisation strategies is evident in the development of specific programmes designed for international students and faculty. These programmes are often designed to provide cultural immersion experiences, with the objective of exposing international participants to the unique traditions and values

of Indonesia. Initiatives such as these are essential for fostering cross-cultural understanding and ensuring that international students receive a comprehensive and holistic education that extends beyond academic learning.

The Cultural Immersion Programme at UIN Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta invites international scholars to truly connect with Indonesian culture in a meaningful way. Through hands-on experiences, students have the chance to wander through traditional villages, join in local ceremonies, and contribute to community service projects. This programme not only enriches their understanding of Indonesia but also fosters lasting memories and friendships along the way. These enriching activities foster a genuine appreciation for the intricate connections among cultural customs, religious practices, and social values that define Indonesia. Moreover, the programme encourages international students to reflect on the shared values that link Islamic teachings with Indonesian culture, enhancing their understanding of the global relevance of these teachings. This exploration of shared values not only broadens their perspective but also highlights the rich tapestry of multiculturalism interwoven with Islamic elements, even if the connections may not always be immediately apparent (Azra, 2006).

At UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta, the essence of moderation shines brightly, illuminating the practical aspects of Islam in a way that resonates deeply with students from diverse backgrounds. Their thoughts on faith are ignited as they navigate a space where academic boundaries blur, allowing for rich interactions with communities that shape contemporary interpretations of Islam. This dynamic exchange fosters a commitment to peace and social coexistence, transforming theoretical concepts into tangible realities. Meanwhile, global discussions about the relationship between faith and social rights continue to unfold, leaving some questions unanswered and highlighting the need for further exploration in this vital area (Al-Attas, 1980). Through these locally inspired initiatives, the university aids international students in understanding how local wisdom can address broader global challenges, thus contributing to a more inclusive and diverse international academic community.

In summary, the incorporation of local wisdom into internationalisation strategies is crucial for the success of Islamic higher

education institutions in Indonesia. Local values guide institutional goals and policies, ensuring that internationalisation efforts are culturally sensitive and aligned with each institution's unique identity. Programmes like cultural immersion and Islamic moderation initiatives further underscore the significance of local wisdom in fostering meaningful international collaborations and enriching educational experiences.

Strategies for Integrating Local Wisdom into Internationalisation

Integrating local wisdom into internationalisation strategies is essential for creating a distinctive educational experience that respects local traditions while engaging with global academic standards. One of the most effective ways to incorporate local wisdom into internationalisation efforts is through curriculum design. By embedding Indonesian culture and Islamic teachings into globally oriented programmes, Islamic Higher Education Institutions (IHEIs) in Indonesia can ensure that international students not only receive high-quality education but also gain an appreciation of the local context, which is crucial for their overall learning experience.

Curriculum Design: Incorporating Indonesian Culture and Islamic Teachings in Globally Oriented Programmes

A key factor to consider is the development of curricula that effectively incorporates local wisdom into global strategies. Such curricula equip students to engage with a global community while remaining firmly grounded in their cultural traditions and values of faith. This balance creates a distinctive educational experience that honours both global viewpoints and local identities.

A prime example of productivity is the incorporation of *Islam Nusantara* (Islam of Indonesia's Archipelago) into the curricula of various Indonesian Islamic universities. This syncretism, which interacts with local cultures such as Javanese, Sundanese, and Balinese traditions, embodies the essence of *Islam Nusantara*, offering a distinct perspective on Islam in Indonesia. As noted by Azra (2006), integrating this viewpoint into the curriculum helps international scholars understand how Islam has evolved within an Indonesian context, where religion intertwines with local traditions. This fusion of indigenous wisdom, when combined with the experiences of global students, fosters

a deeper understanding of Islam. In today's interconnected world, this understanding is crucial, as it often necessitates dialogue between different faiths and an appreciation of diverse cultures.

Based on the curriculum developed in the three universities, there are similarities in blending Indonesian culture and Islamic teaching. Those universities listed compulsory courses as their identity, which consist of several courses including Islamic studies, Indonesian language, and citizenship. By teaching citizenship and Indonesian language, students also learn about Indonesian culture. Knight (2007) stated that loss of cultural identity is the number-one risk attached to the process of internationalisation.

At UIN Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta, the educational approach is a dynamic blend that incorporates cultural elements from around the globe, historical insights, and Indonesia's diverse religious traditions. Many academic programmes are specifically tailored for international students, giving them a distinctive perspective on Islamic thought. Students engage deeply with the intriguing history of Islam in Indonesia, exploring its crucial contributions to promoting social justice and peace, all while gaining new viewpoints that enhance their global understanding. By integrating these topics into globally recognised subjects, such as Islamic studies, social sciences, and political science, the university ensures that international students are exposed to local wisdom in a way that enriches their academic experience (Azra, 2006).

Beyond incorporating local religious teachings, Indonesian culture is intricately woven into the curriculum through engaging courses on local languages, arts, literature, and traditions. UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta provides programmes that immerse international students in the vibrant cultural tapestry of Indonesia, featuring modules on traditional arts, the Indonesian language, and the rich history of cultural exchange between Islam and indigenous traditions. These courses not only cultivate a deep appreciation for Indonesian culture but also empower students with the intercultural skills essential for success in our increasingly interconnected world.

The curriculum design approach prioritises service learning and community-based projects, inviting students to work closely with local communities and learn from their experiences. According to Deardorff

(2009), such experiential learning opportunities enhance cross-cultural understanding and promote meaningful interactions between international students and the communities they engage with.

By designing curricula that incorporate local culture and Islamic teachings, IHEIs in Indonesia not only attract international students but also provide them with a learning experience that is both globally competitive and locally enriching. The integration of Islamic teachings and elements of local culture into the curricula of Indonesia's Islamic Higher Education Institutions (IHEIs) serves as a compelling strategy to attract students from around the globe. This approach not only fosters a competitive and enriching academic experience but also immerses students in the vibrant local context. Understanding is nurtured through the celebration of differences, and while the journey may not always be seamless, the pursuit of knowledge and understanding ultimately deepens students' connections with one another.

Integrating values of local wisdom-based subjects into the curriculum enables students to have opportunity to understand and analyse the steps to solve problems based on the situation faced. Thus, learners will master a foreign language in a comprehensive manner, not only able to communicate with a foreign language as well, but also understand the culture of the speakers of the language (Albantani and Madkur, 2018). Similarly, Eliza et al. (2024) stated that integrating local wisdom into curriculum are very helpful for the teachers and students because it provides affordable and context-specific way of teaching sustainability.

Community Engagement

Community engagement is an essential strategy for integrating local wisdom into the internationalisation efforts of Islamic Higher Education Institutions (IHEIs) in Indonesia. By leveraging community-based traditions, universities can foster meaningful global collaborations that enhance both local and international students' understanding of cultural diversity and create opportunities for cross-cultural exchange. Community engagement not only enriches the internationalisation process but also strengthens the relationship between universities and their local communities, creating a mutually beneficial environment for knowledge exchange (Sinaga & Syarief, 2024).

Community-based traditions, especially those that are deeply rooted in local beliefs and customs, have a significant impact on the integration of international perspectives into higher education. When international higher education institutions engage with local communities, they create a unique opportunity for students. This engagement allows international students to experience diverse learning environments enriched by the local culture, thereby enhancing their understanding of the values and customs of their host country.

In Indonesia's Islamic educational institutions, the preservation of *Islam Nusantara* is essential for weaving a strong connection between the university and the local community, much like a thread intricately stitched into a vibrant tapestry. The cultural practice of *gotong royong* resonates deeply within society and is actively embraced within university frameworks, encouraging students to immerse themselves in local customs and realities. Programmes that facilitate this engagement, especially those involving international scholars, become invaluable resources for fostering understanding. As Azra noted back in 2006, these initiatives offer crucial insights into the principles of respect, cooperation, and social justice that are deeply rooted in Indonesian culture.

Community engagement serves as a fundamental aspect of development at UIN Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta, illustrating how local customs and Islamic principles can foster significant global partnerships. This distinguished institution is recognised for its vibrant initiatives that actively involve students in community service activities. A particularly remarkable feature is the participation of international students. These projects also emphasise local heritage and community practices, offering invaluable insights into the rich complexities of Indonesian traditional life for students who often find themselves limited to classroom learning in their home countries (Azra, 2006). Ultimately, the pursuit of local harmony, guided by such wisdom, stands out as a commendable and inspiring path for development.

At UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta, community engagement is more than just executing service projects; it's an exciting journey into collaboration and connection. The university embraces the rich diversity of religion and culture as a catalyst for conversation, organising a wide array of events that bring together local religious and

cultural institutions. It encourages vibrant discussions where Islamic moderation (*wasaṭiyyah*) intersects with local traditions, fostering dynamic dialogues. The university's academic environment serves as a guide for building partnerships that extend beyond traditional learning, venturing into the areas of social impact and cultural interaction.

Additionally, community engagement initiatives centred around local customs play a vital role in enhancing international students' sense of belonging. Through their involvement in community activities, these students experience a sense of home in their new environment. Such practices facilitate their integration into the host society, fostering strong connections with local residents. The relationships they cultivate not only deepen their engagement with the community but also enrich their overall experience abroad. As noted by Deardorff (2009), these community engagement efforts are essential for promoting global cooperation, trust, and respect, which are critical for developing cultural competence across various intercultural contexts.

In conclusion, community engagement programmes that leverage community-based traditions offer significant opportunities for internationalisation, enabling universities to provide students with an immersive experience that reflects both local wisdom and global perspectives. By engaging in projects that combine local practices with global goals, IHEIs in Indonesia not only enhance the international experience of their students but also contribute to building global collaborations that are deeply rooted in local cultural values and traditions.

Partnership Development

Partnerships are essential in the internationalisation efforts of Indonesia's Islamic Higher Education Institutions (IHEIs), acting as a vital link to the global academic landscape (Munadi, 2020). By establishing connections with foreign organisations, these collaborations not only reflect a deep respect for local customs but also showcase the distinctive character of Indonesian culture. These alliances serve various functions: they align global educational standards with the richness of local wisdom, providing universities with effective means to exchange valuable knowledge, resources, and best practices. Additionally, these partnerships play a crucial role in preserving and promoting local culture and religious beliefs, ensuring they are celebrated on the international

stage and remain dynamic in an increasingly interconnected world (Kasdi et al., 2020).

In the context of internationalisation, one of the most important considerations for IHEIs in Indonesia is finding partners that not only align with global academic goals but also appreciate and incorporate local cultural and religious traditions. Cultural diplomacy plays a significant role in these alliances, which not only enhances the educational experience for international students but also strengthens the global standing of IHEIs by showcasing their unique contributions to global knowledge.

Internationalisation casts a broad net, bringing a wealth of ideas to the forefront and connecting partners who share similar aspirations—an essential pursuit for IHEIs. This effort transcends the mere achievement of academic goals; it is crucial to weave in local cultural and religious traditions. Institutions that celebrate cultural diversity and cultivate unexpected partnerships through cultural diplomacy truly stand out. Eager to collaborate, these institutions demonstrate a genuine respect for local values, making inclusivity a fundamental part of their mission. However, it is essential to recognise that this process may not always be clear-cut or easily grasped; it often requires a more nuanced understanding, which is a key element of these partnerships.

UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta has actively developed partnerships with universities in countries such as Malaysia, Saudi Arabia, and the United States. These collaborations are framed within the context of Islamic moderation *(wasaṭiyyah*). By promoting this value in international partnerships, UIN Syarif Hidayatullah creates an environment where local wisdom is respected and highlighted in academic and research collaborations. The university's commitment to Islamic moderation resonates with international partners who value inclusive education and the promotion of peace, which has led to joint research initiatives, faculty exchanges, and academic conferences focused on interfaith dialogue and conflict resolution (Al-Attas, 1980).

Building relationship with international parties do not only covers educational institutions, but also other institutions or foundations that actually support Islamic higher education institutions in achieving the goal. It has been conducted by UIN K.H. Abdurrahman Wahid Pekalongan. The results of the partnerships are various and embracing,

such as international guest lecture, foreign volunteers, student mobility, collaborative research, and others.

Universal dialogues form the foundation of global Islamic academies as they engage in impactful initiatives. Topics such as social justice, sustainable environmental practices, and peace are not only central to Islamic teachings but also resonate with the values of local traditions, as noted in Deardorff's research (2009). These partnerships provide a dynamic space for cultivating respect and understanding among diverse viewpoints, influenced by the different interpretations of Islamic principles in a global setting. However, it is worth mentioning that not every connection is straightforward; some examples within this context may lack clarity and coherence, creating a complex interplay of ideas and practices.

The link between IHEIs and their global counterparts acts as a crucial thread that binds successful partnerships together, creating a cohesive network of collaboration. This is far from a simple task; it necessitates the exchange of complex, in-depth scholarly discussions. Establishing partnerships with institutions that share a similar worldview is essential, as it enables IHEIs to foster an environment of collaboration. In the long run, this could enhance the visibility and impact of Indonesia's cultural and educational contributions on the global stage.

In conclusion, international connections are essential and should be established thoughtfully to honour and uplift local traditions. Islamic higher education institutions serve as the cornerstone of Indonesia's academic framework, highlighting the significance of outreach and global engagement. They aim for growth and resilience in their relationships with international organisations, fostering a commitment to inclusivity and embracing a diverse array of perspectives, often Eurocentric. These connections are not merely temporary; they pave the way for enduring contributions that benefit both local communities and international interactions. Although the process may appear chaotic and intricate, it ultimately clarifies the narrative, revealing the richness and depth of this vibrant engagement.

Challenges and Opportunities

In Indonesia, IHEIs face significant challenges in their pursuit of internationalisation. As they aim to engage with the global academic

community, these institutions must navigate a complex duality: balancing the need for modernisation with the preservation of their rich cultural heritage.

The challenges confronting IHEIs are among the most significant in the realm of internationalisation. These institutions must skilfully balance the imperatives of modernisation and the influences of globalisation while also safeguarding and promoting their rich local cultural traditions and core Islamic teachings. As they traverse this intricate landscape, universities are integrating international standards and enhancing their global reputation into the essence of their mission. Compromise is not an option; local wisdom must serve as the colourful decorative thread that enhances this tapestry, ensuring that their distinct identity is highlighted in an ever-more interconnected world.

Embracing Western-style educational practices can create significant pressures during the modernisation process, often clashing with the rich tapestry of indigenous Indonesian values, both cultural and religious. Islamic universities in Indonesia find themselves at the forefront of this delicate balancing act (Azra, 2006), navigating the demands of international academic standards while remaining deeply rooted in local culture and Islamic traditions. While modernisation offers the exciting prospect of accessing cutting-edge knowledge and fostering global collaborative partnerships, it poses a critical risk: the potential dilution of the uniqueness that defines Indonesian Islamic universities. This tension between global aspirations and local identity is a challenge that cannot be overlooked.

To address this challenge, IHEIs must find innovative ways to integrate local values into their modernisation efforts. As Al-Attas (1980) highlighted, the concept of Islamic moderation (*wasaṭiyyah*) is an important framework for balancing tradition and progress. By embracing this balanced approach, universities can foster an environment where modern academic practices are blended with locally rooted values, allowing students to benefit from both global knowledge and local wisdom. The opportunity here lies in the ability of IHEIs to showcase how cultural preservation and modernisation can complement one another.

Another significant challenge is the misconception that local wisdom, particularly in the context of Islamic teachings and cultural

practices in Indonesia, is outdated or irrelevant in global academic settings (Dinar, 2021). In many international academic environments, there is often a bias towards Western academic models, which may fail to fully appreciate the value of local knowledge systems and traditional practices. As IHEIs in Indonesia work to engage more actively with the global academic community, they must address these misconceptions and demonstrate the relevance of local wisdom in addressing global challenges.

The opportunity presented by overcoming misconceptions lies in the potential for cross-cultural knowledge exchange. By reframing local wisdom as a valuable and innovative perspective, IHEIs in Indonesia can foster global collaborations that respect cultural diversity and promote inclusive solutions to global challenges.

While the challenges of balancing modernisation with cultural preservation and overcoming misconceptions about local wisdom are significant, they also present valuable opportunities for Islamic Higher Education Institutions in Indonesia. By addressing these challenges thoughtfully, IHEIs can create educational environments that honour local traditions while embracing global knowledge, thus offering unique contributions to the international academic community.

To further enhance the internationalisation efforts of IHEIs in Indonesia, it is crucial to implement strategic recommendations that foster the integration of local wisdom with global academic standards. These recommendations focus on policy development that actively promote the inclusion of local cultural values, religious teachings, and traditional knowledge in internationalisation initiatives; capacity-building programmes and administrative practices; promoting local wisdom on global platforms, and strengthening research and documentation.

Implementing these recommendations can significantly transform the internationalisation strategies of IHEIs. These strategies serve a dual purpose: first, to establish a prominent presence on the global academic stage for universities that embody Indonesian identity, and second, to contribute meaningfully to international intellectual discourse. Additionally, fostering cultural understanding intertwined with religious tolerance enriches the landscape for global knowledge exchange. However, the phrasing may come across as somewhat vague,

lacking the precision needed to convey the core message effectively. Unfortunately, this is often the challenge we face when grappling with abstract concepts and ambiguous examples.

Indonesian Higher Education Institutions should actively develop programmes that celebrate this rich cultural heritage, allowing for the sharing of Islamic teachings and local values in an inclusive manner. This not only broadens the understanding of Islam for global audiences but also highlights the resilience and richness of Indonesia's cultural-religious heritage. By fostering environments for knowledge sharing, IHEIs can influence the global conversation surrounding Islam and culture, as highlighted by Azra (2006), ensuring that Indonesia's unique contributions are acknowledged and valued on the world stage.

Strengthening Research and Documentation

The impact of indigenous understanding on internationalisation outcomes is profound yet complex to articulate. Delving into this exploration reveals how local wisdom, in its vibrant essence, plays a crucial role in enhancing student success. It may sound almost too good to be true, but the cultivation of intercultural skills and the creation of global academic networks are indeed fruits of this local wisdom. A bold perspective shows how local traditions are closely connected to Islamic education in students' curricula. This is still an important topic to explore further. By looking at the results so far, we can find useful ideas to help develop future internationalisation strategies.

Moreover, publishing case studies to share best practices globally can contribute to the wider academic community's understanding of how local wisdom can be integrated into internationalisation strategies. Case studies from Indonesian IHEIs that showcase successful models of cultural integration can serve as examples for other institutions around the world. By documenting and disseminating these practices, IHEIs in Indonesia can position themselves as leaders in blending local cultural values with global academic standards, contributing to the ongoing dialogue on education in the 21st century (Deardorff, 2009).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the integration of local wisdom into the internationalisation strategies of IHEIs represents a multifaceted approach to balancing global academic standards with the preservation of cultural and religious

identity. This integration is evident in the ways IHEIs strategically incorporate local values into their institutional goals, policies, and programmes. By doing so, these institutions not only enhance their global engagement but also ensure that their unique cultural and religious perspectives are valued and understood within the international academic community.

The incorporation of local wisdom serves to enrich the educational experiences of both local and international students, foster cross-cultural understanding, and promote global collaborations that are deeply rooted in local traditions. As IHEIs in Indonesia continue to navigate the complexities of internationalisation, their commitment to these strategies not only strengthens their institutional identities but also contributes to the diversification of global academic discourse, offering valuable models for other institutions seeking to achieve culturally relevant and sustainable internationalisation. Future research should explore the long-term impact of these strategies on institutional and student success.

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Perceptions of Three U.S. Presidents (Obama, Trump, and Biden) – A Malaysian Perspective

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Abstract: This article presents findings from an extensive longitudinal study which examined how Malaysians perceived the performance of three U.S. presidents as global leaders. The investigation initiated six nationwide surveys aimed at assessing Malaysians' opinions regarding the performance of U.S. presidents during their respective terms. The initial surveys, executed in August 2010 and October 2013, collected responses from 1,367 and 1,439 participants, respectively, focusing on Barack Obama. Throughout Donald Trump's presidency, follow-up surveys were administered in April 2017 and March 2018, with 1,326 and 2,061 respondents, respectively. The current study extends this analysis to President Joe Biden, thereby continuing the longitudinal investigation into Malaysian perspectives on U.S. leadership. The issue was how Malaysians perceived these three presidents' ability to solve the global economic problem, the Palestinian-Israeli Issue, and the U.S.-China dispute.

Keywords: Obama, Trump, Biden, Gallup, Pew, Malaysia

Abstrak: Makalah ini membentangkan penemuan daripada kajian longitudinal yang mengkaji bagaimana rakyat Malaysia melihat prestasi tiga presiden A.S. sebagai pemimpin global. Kajian ini melibatkan enam tinjauan di seluruh negara yang bertujuan menilai pendapat rakyat Malaysia terhadap prestasi

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presiden A.S. sepanjang tempoh penggal mereka. Tinjauan telah dilaksanakan pada Ogos 2010 dan Oktober 2013, masing-masing mengumpul maklum balas daripada 1,367 dan 1,439 peserta yang memfokuskan Barack Obama. Tinjauan susulan telah dijalankan pada April 2017 dan Mac 2018, masing-masing dengan 1,326 dan 2,061 responden semasa penggal Presiden Donald Trump. Kajian terkini dilanjutkan dengan analisis terhadap Presiden Joe Biden, dengan itu meneruskan kajian longitudinal perspektif Malaysia ke atas kepimpinan A.S. Isunya ialah bagaimana rakyat Malaysia menganggap ketiga-tiga presiden ini mampu menyelesaikan masalah ekonomi global, Isu Palestin-Israel dan pertikaian AS-China.

Kata kunci: Obama, Trump, Biden, Gallup, Pew, Malaysia

Introduction

Individuals generally rely on the media for information about events occurring in foreign countries. Such coverage inevitably influences the perspectives of readers from other countries, considering their personal experiences are somewhat limited, thereby engendering the disparity between "real reality" and "media reality" (Kunck, 1993), or what is experienced directly versus what is perceived as the truth. Excluding media portrayals of other nations, what then influences the perceptions of readers towards foreign countries? Various studies on the flow of international news have identified that the coverage of developing nations has been predominantly negative, whereas the reporting on developed nations has been favourable. International news agencies have often opted to focus on adverse news concerning poverty, coups, and other issues as part of the narrative surrounding developing countries.

The knowledge and concepts of other nations derive from a multitude of sources, including personal knowledge and media portrayal. National leaders play a crucial role in shaping a nation's identity, which is often depicted, whether intentionally or unintentionally (Maylie, 2015). The public perception of contemporary presidents and prime ministers has a profound impact on global evaluations of countries, much like the portrayal of leaders' images by the news media. These dynamics are particularly evident in the divergent perspectives of the world's leaders as revealed by opinion polls. The survey, which involved 26,000 respondents across five continents, asked citizens from 30 states for their views on 10 influential national leaders with power on a global

scale. Key leaders mentioned included U.S. President Barack Obama, Russia's President Vladimir Putin, and China's President Xi Jinping. Saich (2014) notes that the data reveal two key trends: firstly, responses are heavily influenced by geopolitics and existing conflicts as well as interactions between states.

Research about perception has been acknowledged as a substitute for reality. Although analyses of media reports regarding other nations have been conducted, there have been few studies that focused on the perception of leaders in developed countries. There exist studies exploring how two distinct countries perceive one another, taking into account matters related to trade, the economy, defence, and leadership. Camilleri (2001) structured her study around the attitudes and perceptions between Australia and Malaysia by examining the media coverage provided.

The present study adopts an alternative approach by examining Malaysians' perceptions of the leaders of a developed nation, specifically the United States, on three principal issues. This research conducts an extensive longitudinal analysis to explore how Malaysians assess the performance of three recent U.S. presidents as global leaders in addressing three significant global challenges.

The United States has long been acknowledged as a global superpower, distinguished by unparalleled military capabilities and a substantial lead in power projection. Economically, it persists as the largest economy worldwide; however, China has been progressively narrowing this gap over the years. Notwithstanding its global pre-eminence, perceptions of the United States as a declining power have surfaced, attributed to a variety of domestic and international challenges. Extended military engagements, shifting global alliances, and challenges to the liberal international order have collectively contributed to this decline (Inbar & Rynhold, 2016). More recently, the crisis in Gaza has illuminated the limitations of the United States' influence in addressing intricate geopolitical issues. These developments underscore the evolving and contested nature of U.S. global power amidst a swiftly transforming international landscape.

Southeast Asia holds significant importance for the United States due to its strategic location, which includes the Straits of Malacca, a critical global trade route, as well as its status as the home of the

Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), a prominent economic and cultural bloc. Economically, Southeast Asia constitutes one of the most dynamic regions in the world, boasting a collective Gross Domestic Product (GDP) exceeding $3 trillion and a rapidly expanding middle class. The United States has served as a notable trade and investment partner for ASEAN, facilitating initiatives such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and, more recently, the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF). Such endeavours highlight the United States' interest in enhancing economic integration and countering China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). In terms of security, Southeast Asia assumes a critical role in the United States' efforts to maintain a rules-based international order. The region's strategic positioning and proximity to flashpoints such as the South China Sea render it a focal point for the United States' military presence, partnerships, and operations aimed at ensuring freedom of navigation.

U.S.-China Relations: The Defining Bilateral Relationship

The relationship between the United States and China is arguably the most fragile bilateral relationship of the 21st century. Although trade and diplomatic ties between the two nations have expanded over the decades, the relations remain fragile and volatile (Inbar & Rynhold, 2016). Public perceptions of this relationship are shaped by official actions, media portrayals, and the geopolitical narrative surrounding these two global powers. As observed by Tellis (2012), "managing the rise of China remains the central geopolitical challenge facing the United States" (p. 75). Tellis contends that China's rapid economic and military growth poses significant challenges to U.S. interests in Asia and globally. Nowhere are these dynamics more evident than in the differing perspectives of the world's two leading economic powers, and the relationship between the leaders of the United States and China, as suggested by Pew Research Center data (2022).

With the increasing competition between the United States and China, Southeast Asia has emerged as a battleground for influence. For the United States, establishing strong ties with ASEAN countries is crucial to counterbalancing China's dominance while fostering a stable and prosperous Indo-Pacific region. The goal of the United States is to maintain its status as a key partner in the region through ongoing diplomatic, economic, and military engagement efforts.

Malaysia's Position in the U.S.-China Relationship

Strategically situated in Southeast Asia, Malaysia occupies a distinctive position within the U.S.-China rivalry. Historically, Malaysia has maintained robust bilateral trade and investment relations with China. Existing literature underscores that China has been Malaysia's predominant trading partner since the latter part of 2017, while Malaysian enterprises have been proactive investors in China since the implementation of its "Reform and Open" policy in 1979 (The Edge Markets, 2017). Recent polling data conducted by Malaysia's Merdeka Centre and the Institute of China Studies at the University of Malaya reveals a favourable enhancement in public perceptions of China since 2016. Nevertheless, these perceptions remain polarised along ethnic lines and are contingent on economic and geopolitical factors.

The United States has endeavoured to cultivate stronger ties with Malaysia, partly as a strategic counterbalance to China's escalating influence in Southeast Asia. Diplomatic relations between the two nations were established in 1957, and the partnership has since been strengthened through trade, education, and strategic cooperation. From 2010 to 2013, bilateral trade averaged $35 billion annually, with the United States being Malaysia's largest source of foreign investment, contributing $1.9 billion in 2013 (The Edge Markets, 2017).

The Palestinian Cause

The relationship between the United States and the Muslim World is characterised by complexity and frequent tension, particularly in the aftermath of the events of September 11, 2001. U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East, notably its military interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan, along with its robust support for Israel, has contributed to widespread mistrust and resentment in numerous Muslim-majority countries. Throughout the years, the United States has faced challenges in rehabilitating its image, encountering accusations of bias, imperialism, and a deficiency in understanding Muslim culture and concerns. This unfavourable perception has hindered the United States' capacity to develop strong alliances within the Muslim World, thereby making it imperative for the U.S. to identify essential partners that can assist in enhancing its image and fostering goodwill. Among these partners is Malaysia, a predominantly Muslim nation with considerable influence in both Southeast Asia and the global Muslim community.

Malaysia's steadfast commitment to the Palestinian cause serves as a fundamental aspect of its foreign policy, grounded in international law, humanitarian law, and principles of human rights. Mustafa, Ahmad, and Nordin (2008) observed that a substantial majority of Malaysians perceive U.S. foreign policy as biased against the Muslim community, frequently linking Islam with terrorism. These views are influenced by U.S. policies that are perceived as discriminatory, which include its unwavering support for Israel in the Israel-Palestine conflict and its stringent stance on Iran's nuclear program. Such sentiments contribute to a broader mistrust of American foreign policy within Malaysia, raising doubts regarding the United States' capacity to lead impartially on matters relating to the Muslim world.

U.S. Presidents and Malaysia

Different administrations of the United States have ascribed varying levels of importance to Malaysia and the wider Asia-Pacific region. President Lyndon B. Johnson's engagement with Malaysia six decades ago was largely influenced by Cold War dynamics, particularly the necessity to unify Asian nations against communist Vietnam. However, diplomatic relations became strained during the tenure of Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamed (1981–2003), as his pronounced anti-Western stance cultivated a perception of the United States as an overbearing power that intervened in Malaysia's domestic affairs. This sentiment was further intensified by Mahathir's critiques of U.S. foreign policy, his commitment to promoting an independent Malaysian identity, and his alignment with non-Western nations, which frequently positioned Malaysia in opposition to American interests on the international stage. The rapport with American presidents improved during the administrations of Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak and President Barack Obama, particularly during the latter's visit to Malaysia in 2014. Conversely, President Trump adopted a different approach regarding Southeast Asia, focusing more on developments in the Middle East and Europe, while also being determined to curb the rise of China.

Obama's Pivot to Asia

President Barack Obama endeavoured to repair relations with Malaysia and Southeast Asia as part of his administration's "return to Asia" policy. Obama also brought back a favourable image of the American presidency globally after the tenure of President Bush. (Pew Research

Centre, 2014). The presidency of George W. Bush was marked by several calamities that significantly impacted the United States' image.

Obama's visit to Malaysia in 2014 was significant as it marked the first visit by a U.S. president to Malaysia in six decades, underscoring Malaysia 's importance as a prominent member of ASEAN and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). During this visit, Malaysia and the United States reached an agreement to elevate their relationship to a "comprehensive partnership," with Obama highlighting the significance of cooperation through the Trans- Pacific Partnership Agreement (TPPA) — a trade pact involving 12 Pacific Rim nations aimed at reducing tariffs and establishing common standards on labour, intellectual property, and environmental matters. However, numerous Malaysians opposed the TPPA, citing apprehensions regarding sovereignty and economic repercussions (The Malaysian Insider, 2016). In January 2016, a notable anti-TPPA rally took place in Kuala Lumpur, organised by a coalition of non-governmental organisations and political parties, including *Parti Amanah Negara* (National Trust Party) and *Parti Keadilan Rakyat* (People's Justice Party). The rally attracted thousands of participants who articulated their dissent against the agreement.

With respect to the Palestinian cause, Obama assumed office with a pledge to address negative stereotypes of Islam as a central tenet of his presidential agenda. His widely cited speech at Cairo University early in his term raised hopes that, following over 50 years of conflict, the United States might act as a genuinely neutral mediator in facilitating statehood for the Palestinians and resolving the Arab- Israeli conflict. This speech was perceived as a potential turning point, indicating a shift in U. S. policy towards a more balanced approach in the Middle East. Nevertheless, despite these initial commitments, many critics contend that Obama' s endeavours did not fully fulfil the expectations established during his Cairo address, particularly as the United States continued to uphold its strong support for Israel, thereby further complicating the Palestinian issue.

During the presidency of Barack Obama (2009–2017), a series of significant events related to the Palestinian cause unfolded, highlighting the complexities of the United States' involvement in the conflict. One notable event was Obama's endorsement of additional funding for

Israel's military, specifically for the Iron Dome missile defence system, amid the 2014 Gaza conflict. This decision was met with widespread condemnation from organisations such as the National Association of Malaysian Muslim Students (PKPIM), which interpreted it as indicative of partiality in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and a shortcoming of a global leader purporting to champion justice. Consequently, PKPIM articulated strong objections to Obama's visit to Malaysia for the ASEAN Summit in November 2015, citing his perceived lack of equity regarding the Palestinian issue as a primary motive for their disapproval.

Trump's "America First" Policy

In contrast, President Donald Trump's "America First" approach significantly disrupted the relations between the United States and Malaysia. In January 2017, President Trump withdrew the United States from the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement (TPPA) and initiated a trade war with China, resulting in considerable uncertainties in Malaysia's export markets and complicating its trade and diplomatic ties. President Trump's frequent absences from ASEAN-related summits, coupled with his failure to appoint a U.S. ambassador to ASEAN, undermined confidence in the United States as a reliable strategic partner.

Under President Donald Trump, the colonisation of Palestinian land accelerated markedly, particularly following his recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and the subsequent relocation of the U. S. Embassy there. Trump proclaimed himself the "deal-maker" (Dekkhakhena, 2021, p. 172), yet his policies often exacerbated the divide between the United States and the Palestinians. From the perspective of Malaysians, Trump's actions were perceived as further undermining the prospects for a just resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. His administration's support for Israel extended to cutting aid to Palestinian refugees and endorsing Israel's control of disputed territories, actions that were widely criticised for neglecting Palestinian rights. In response, Malaysian leaders, including then-Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, openly condemned Israel's actions and the U.S. policies that supported them. Addressing the issue, Mahathir articulated that Malaysia maintains amicable relations with nearly all nations, except for Israel due to its occupation of Palestinian land. "You can't seize others' lands and form a state. It's like a state of robbers," he remarked, denouncing Israel's policies (Al Jazeera, 2019). His comments

were in response to Trump's call for the recognition of Israel's control over the Golan Heights, a decision that further emphasised the Trump administration's strong alignment with Israeli interests. These policies contributed to heightened negative perceptions of U.S. foreign policy among Malaysians, who viewed the Trump administration as actively facilitating Israeli expansionism while neglecting Palestinian rights.

Biden's Indo-Pacific Engagement

The election of Joe Biden instilled renewed optimism for the enhancement of U.S.-Malaysia relations. The Biden administration has indicated a commitment to multilateralism and a deeper engagement with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). In May 2022, the Biden administration introduced the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), an initiative designed to counterbalance China 's economic sway. Malaysia, along with other ASEAN member states, has joined the IPEF, thereby expressing its endorsement for increased U. S. engagement in the region (The Edge Malaysia, 2022).

Biden' s foreign policy also incorporates elements of President Obama' s strategy, focusing on the restoration of trust among Southeast Asian nations. The United States continues to be a prestigious academic destination for Malaysian students, with a steady influx pursuing higher education in the U. S. (Thomas, 2021). However, Biden' s presidency has confronted significant challenges, particularly in relation to the management of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. He has publicly endorsed a two-state solution, advocating for peace and security for both Israelis and Palestinians. Nevertheless, the conflict that erupted in May 2021 between Israel and Hamas in Gaza posed a substantial challenge for his administration. Although the United States successfully facilitated a ceasefire following 11 days of intense hostilities, Biden faced criticism for a perceived lack of prompt action in urging Israel to halt airstrikes, which resulted in extensive destruction and considerable Palestinian casualties (The Guardian, 2021).

From the perspective of Malaysia, Biden' s policies are viewed with cautious scepticism. While his attempts to restore aid to the Palestinians and promote peace have been recognised, there exists a notable lack of trust in the United States' capacity to mediate the conflict impartially. Malaysian leaders have consistently criticised U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East for its ongoing bias in favour of Israel, often at the

expense of Palestinian rights. Such scepticism has endured under Biden' s administration, further entrenching doubts regarding the United States' impartiality in addressing the conflict. With the military actions undertaken by Israel against the Palestinians often referred to as the Palestinian Genocide, the Malaysian perception of Biden is less favourable in comparison to that of other presidents, primarily due to his perceived indifference to the situation.

Methodology on the Perceptions of U.S. Presidents Among Malaysians

A state's image holds substantial significance in the relationships between nations. Images manifest in various forms. As states engage with one another, citizens develop perceptions of the other nation; however, media representations of events significantly enhance these perceptions (Camilleri, 2001). Additionally, the leadership of nations plays a critical role in shaping these images. This article examines how Malaysians perceive three Presidents of the United States during distinct periods, specifically Donald Trump and his predecessor Barack Obama, as part of the image that Malaysians maintain of the United States. Moreover, Joe Biden, the most recent President in this study, is not well known to the Malaysian populace.

Malaysian perceptions were formed based on how they believed these presidents addressed the Palestinian issue and their ability to resolve global economic problems. This study examines how Malaysians' perceptions of U.S. presidents have evolved through a comparative analysis of Joe Biden's performance and his predecessors, Donald Trump and Barack Obama.

A nationwide study was conducted to gauge the perspectives of Malaysian voters on various issues, including the performance of three American presidents. Utilising quota sampling, in-person interviews were conducted with Malaysian voters aged 21 and above. The interviews encompassed inquiries into the demographic profiles of the respondents, as well as their concerns regarding current issues spanning economics, finance, and politics. However, for the purposes of this report, only the inquiries regarding the American Presidents will be addressed.

The surveys conducted in 2010 and 2013 assessed the perspectives of Malaysians regarding Barack Obama's management of global economic issues as well as the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, with sample sizes comprising 1,367 and 1,439 respondents, respectively. Similarly, surveys conducted in 2017 and 2018 evaluated the presidency of Donald Trump, featuring 1,326 and 2,061 respondents. Most recently, a survey conducted in June 2022, encompassing 1,000 respondents, analysed Joe Biden's approach to three critical issues: the global economic crisis, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and U.S.-China relations.

Findings

1. Solving the Global Economic Crisis

The study aimed to evaluate Malaysians' perceptions of the leadership qualities of three U.S. presidents—Barack Obama, Donald Trump, and Joe Biden—specifically in relation to their capabilities in addressing global economic challenges. The underlying premise of this inquiry posits that Malaysians believe that, as global leaders, these American presidents possess the potential to provide the necessary leadership to resolve the global economic issues.

Table 1 provides a detailed analysis of the perceptions regarding these issues among various ethnic groups in Malaysia over the years. Each president was monitored on two separate occasions: Obama in 2010 and 2013, Trump in 2017 and 2018, and Biden in 2021 and 2022.

Table 1: Malaysian Perceptions of U.S. Presidents' Ability to Solve the Global Economic Problem (2010-2022)

Global Economic Crisis Under President Obama (2010-2013):								
Respondents	2010 Malay	2010 Chinese	2010 Indian	2010 Total	2013 Malay	2013 Chinese	2013 Indian	2013 Total
No Confidence	54%	49%	45%	52%	74%	54%	47%	63%
Confidence	42%	48%	54%	45%	23%	44%	53%	34%
Global Economic Crisis Under President Trump (2017-2018):								
Respondents	2017 Malay	2017 Chinese	2017 Indian	2017 Total	2018 Malay	2018 Chinese	2018 Indian	2018 Total
No Confidence	77%	54%	63%	67%	82%	64%	66%	74%
Confidence	21%	44%	36%	31%	14%	32%	32%	23%

Global Economic Crisis Under President Biden (2021-2022):								
Respondents	2021 Malay	2021 Chinese	2021 Indian	2021 Total	2022 Malay	2022 Chinese	2022 Indian	2022 Total
No Confidence	66%	64%	65%	64%	78%	75%	82%	77%
Confidence	34%	35%	35%	35%	22%	23%	17%	22%

Malaysians perceived that President Obama possessed the capacity to provide a solution, or some solutions, to the economic challenges. In 2010, 45% of Malaysians expressed confidence that President Obama could effectively address global economic issues. However, by 2013, this figure had declined to 34%. This change in perception was most pronounced among individuals of varying ethnic backgrounds. While the Indian and Chinese communities demonstrated a relatively higher level of optimism (Chinese – 48%, Indian - 54%), confidence in President Obama's leadership diminished, particularly among Malays, with 54% expressing no confidence. By 2013, the percentage of Malaysians indicating "no confidence" had increased significantly, from 52% in 2010 to 63% in 2013.

The Malaysian perception of President Trump's capability to address global economic issues was notably lower compared to the other two presidents. Throughout his presidency, President Donald Trump experienced diminished levels of confidence. Upon assuming office in 2017, merely 31% of Malaysians believed he would effectively confront global economic challenges. By 2018, this figure had further decreased to 23%. This decline in confidence was apparent across all ethnic demographics, with Malays reporting 82%, Chinese at 64%, and Indian respondents at 66%, indicating a general scepticism among Malaysians regarding Trump's economic leadership. Although a degree of initial optimism existed within the Chinese community, as evidenced by 44% in 2017, support for Trump's management of global economic matters progressively waned over time.

Malaysians acknowledged that the global economic problem had worsened since President Biden assumed office. President Biden's confidence ratings reflected this trend. In March 2021, 35% of Malaysians expressed confidence in his capacity to address global economic issues; however, by June 2022, this figure had diminished to a mere 22%.

The proportion of Malaysians indicating "no confidence" in Biden's leadership escalated significantly, rising from 64% in 2021 to 77% in 2022. This trend highlights a growing frustration with U.S. leadership regarding the management of the global economy. This overall decline in confidence was noted across all ethnic groups, although the decrease was particularly pronounced among Malaysians of Indian descent, with only 17% expressing confidence in 2022. Confidence among Malaysians of Chinese descent decreased from 35% to 23%, while it fell among Malays from 34% to 22%, and among Indians, it plummeted from 35% to 17%. The proportion of Malaysians expressing "no confidence" in Biden's leadership increased substantially, from 64% in 2021 to 77% in 2022. This surge in scepticism was most pronounced among Indian respondents, where "no confidence" surged from 65% to 82%. Among Malays, the increase was from 66% to 78%; for the Chinese, it escalated from 64% to 74%. These statistics illustrate a growing frustration with U.S. leadership across ethnic groups in Malaysia, particularly as Biden's management of the global economy faced heightened scrutiny. In summary, the data underscores that confidence in U.S. economic leadership has consistently been low across all ethnic groups, with significant declines observed over time. From President Obama's tenure through those of Presidents Trump and Biden, public trust in the U.S. leadership's ability to address global economic challenges has steadily waned.

The study further explored the impact of age on perceptions regarding the economic leadership of U.S. Presidents. Younger Malaysians, specifically those aged 21 to 35, exhibited a heightened optimism towards President Biden, with 40% expressing confidence in his ability to address global economic challenges. Conversely, confidence significantly decreased among older Malaysians, particularly within the 36 to 50 age group and among seniors. A similar pattern was evident during President Obama's administration, wherein younger Malaysians initially demonstrated greater assurance; however, this confidence waned over time. Regarding President Trump, scepticism was prevalent across all age demographics, with a notable decline in confidence among middle-aged individuals. Throughout various ethnic and age categories, a discernible trend of diminishing faith in U.S. economic leadership emerged, reflecting a growing discontent with U.S. foreign policy and its role in global economic affairs.

2. *Finding a Solution to the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict*

Another matter of significant concern to Malaysians pertains to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, which has persisted for several decades. Malaysians recognise that the United States is positioned to assume a leadership role in proposing a resolution to this conflict. Regarding perceptions of the U.S. President's capability to address the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, the observed trends are similarly discouraging (Table 2). Confidence in all three presidents to effectively resolve the issue has declined over time, with a substantial majority of Malaysians indicating "no confidence" in their leadership concerning this matter. The data delineates three principal categories for each ethnic group: No Confidence and Confidence, illustrating the perceptions of these communities regarding the situation surrounding the Palestinian-Israeli conflict (Table 2).

Table 2: Malaysian Perceptions of U.S. Presidents' Ability to Solve the Palestinian-Israel Issue (2010-2022)

Palestinian-Israeli Conflict Under President Obama (2010-2013):								
Respondents	2010 Malay	2010 Chinese	2010 Indian	2010 Total	2013 Malay	2013 Chinese	2013 Indian	2013 Total
No Confidence	59%	54%	46%	56%	74%	67%	60%	70%
Confidence	38%	43%	53%	41%	23%	31%	40%	28%
Palestinian-Israeli Conflict Under President Trump (2017-2018):								
Respondents	2017 Malay	2017 Chinese	2017 Indian	2017 Total	2018 Malay	2018 Chinese	2018 Indian	2018 Total
No Confidence	82%	64%	68%	74%	85%	73%	66%	78%
Confidence	16%	34%	32%	24%	12%	23%	31%	19%
Palestinian-Israeli Conflict Under President Biden (2021-2022):								
Respondents	2021 Malay	2021 Chinese	2021 Indian	2021 Total	2022 Malay	2022 Chinese	2022 Indian	2022 Total
No Confidence	72%	77%	65%	73%	80%	73%	79%	77%
Confidence	28%	22%	34%	27%	20%	27%	20%	23%

Malaysians exhibited a greater confidence in the leadership of President Obama to identify a resolution to the Palestinian-Israeli

conflict. Initially, under President Obama, confidence levels began at 41% in 2010 but declined to 28% by 2013. Concurrently, the percentage of individuals expressing "no confidence" increased significantly, from 56% in 2010 to 70% in 2013. In 2010, perceptions of President Obama's capability to address the conflict varied amongst Malaysia's ethnic groups. Among the Malay community, 59% expressed "no confidence," whereas 38% demonstrated confidence in his leadership. The Chinese demographic displayed a moderately more favourable outlook, with 54% indicating "no confidence" and 43% signifying confidence. The Indian community appeared to be the most optimistic, with 53% expressing confidence in President Obama and 46% articulating "no confidence." Overall, 56% of Malaysians harboured doubts regarding U.S. efforts, while 41% placed their trust in President Obama's potential for progress. By 2013, these sentiments had undergone considerable change. The ratio of Malaysians articulating "no confidence" in President Obama's leadership concerning the Palestinian-Israeli conflict rose among all ethnic groups. Among the Malays, "no confidence" surged to 74%, with only 23% expressing confidence. The Chinese community similarly experienced a notable surge in scepticism, with "no confidence" climbing to 67% and confidence dwindling to 31%. Likewise, the Indian group expressed heightened doubt, with "no confidence" increasing to 60% and confidence dropping to 40%.

This decline in confidence underscores a mounting frustration among various ethnic groups regarding the ineffectiveness of U.S. leadership in resolving the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Notably, the Malay and Chinese communities exhibited particularly pronounced increases in disappointment, while the Indian community similarly manifested a shift towards heightened scepticism. The data indicates a widespread and escalating discontent with the role of the U.S. as a regional mediator.

The citizens of Malaysia harboured limited expectations regarding President Trump, based on his statements concerning the conflict. Upon his assumption of office, public confidence in his capacity to address the Palestinian-Israeli issue was notably low from the beginning. In 2017, a mere 24% of Malaysians conveyed confidence in his leadership, a figure that diminished to only 19% by 2018. Concurrently, the percentage of Malaysians expressing "no confidence" increased consistently, rising from 74% to 78%. The controversial policies of the United States during

Trump's presidency, notably the recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and the relocation of the U.S. embassy, likely fostered a growing dissatisfaction within Malaysia. Among all ethnic groups—Malays, Chinese, and Indians—the levels of "no confidence" were markedly higher than those expressing confidence, emphasising a pervasive sense of scepticism towards U.S. leadership during Trump's administration. In 2017, 82% of the Malay population expressed "no confidence" in Trump's handling of this issue, with only 16% indicating confidence. This reflects that the Malay community exhibited the highest level of scepticism, illustrating a profound lack of trust in U.S. initiatives under the Trump administration.

The Chinese community demonstrated a slightly greater sense of optimism compared to the Malays, with 64% expressing "no confidence" and 34% exhibiting confidence regarding the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Similarly, the Indian community presented a more balanced viewpoint, with 68% indicating "no confidence" and 32% showing confidence. Overall, in 2017, 74% of Malaysians communicated "no confidence" in Trump's capacity to resolve the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, while merely 24% expressed confidence, signifying a pervasive lack of faith in U.S. leadership. By 2018, public confidence in Trump's leadership experienced a further decline. Within the Malay community, the percentage of "no confidence" surged to 85%, while confidence diminished to a paltry 12%, highlighting an escalating sense of disillusionment. The Chinese community also exhibited increased scepticism, with "no confidence" rising to 73% and confidence decreasing slightly to 23%. Although the Indian community remained relatively more optimistic than the other two groups, similar trends were observable, with "no confidence" at 66% and confidence marginally falling to 31%.

The aforementioned trends distinctly indicate a mounting frustration at the international level pertaining to the global community, which appears to exhibit a lackadaisical commitment to the issue at hand. In 2017, 74% of Malaysians indicated "no confidence" in Trump's capacity to address the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, whereas only 24% retained confidence. By 2018, the proportion of those expressing "no confidence" escalated to 78%, while confidence diminished to a mere 19%. These findings underscore a significant disappointment among Malaysians with regard to Trump's handling of the issue. His

policies were extensively regarded as exacerbating divisions rather than fostering peace. The increasing scepticism manifesting across all ethnic groups signifies a collective erosion of trust in U.S. leadership as a just and effective mediator in the conflict.

Despite initial optimism regarding President Biden's leadership in addressing the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, confidence among Malaysians has remained notably low. In 2021, only 27% of Malaysians believed that President Biden could effectively manage the issue; by 2022, this figure had decreased to 23%. The proportion of individuals expressing "no confidence" remained significantly high, increasing from 73% in 2021 to 77% in 2022. Among different ethnic groups, Indians exhibited the most optimism, with 34% expressing confidence in President Biden's leadership, compared to 28% of Malays and 22% of Chinese respondents. Within the Malay community, 72% expressed "no confidence" in President Biden's ability to address the conflict, whereas the Chinese community demonstrated an even greater level of scepticism, with 77% indicating "no confidence." By 2022, scepticism had risen among all ethnic groups, reflecting a persistent decline in confidence. Among Malays, 80% expressed "no confidence" in the U.S.'s capacity to resolve the Palestinian-Israeli issue, while only 20% expressed confidence. The Chinese community maintained a high level of scepticism, with 73% indicating "no confidence" and 27% expressing confidence. For the Indian community, the percentage of individuals feeling "no confidence" rose to 79%, while confidence decreased to 20%. Overall, in 2022, 77% of Malaysians expressed "no confidence" in U.S. leadership, with only 23% remaining confident.

This trend of diminishing confidence reflects the broader disillusionment that has been observed over time. The Malay community consistently demonstrated the highest levels of "no confidence," reaching a peak of 85% in 2018 and 80% in 2022. The Chinese community, which has historically exhibited greater scepticism, sustained its elevated levels of doubt, while the Indian community, previously more optimistic, ultimately aligned with the rising scepticism of the other two groups. This escalating disappointment underscores a regional consensus that U.S. leadership has not succeeded in achieving meaningful progress in the resolution of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, resulting in frustration and a waning trust among all ethnic groups in Malaysia.

3. Ability to handle the dispute with China

China has emerged as a global power, making the United States wary of its role in the world community. Malaysians are curious to know how the United States would handle any dispute with China. Thus, the survey examined how Malaysians felt about President Biden's ability to handle the dispute with China (Table 3). In 2021, only 36% of Malaysians believed that Biden could resolve the issue. By 2022, confidence had dropped significantly, with only 21% believing he could manage it. In 2021, most Malaysians expressed doubts: 66% of Malays, 60% of Chinese, and 62% of Indians had "no confidence" in Biden's capacity to address the China dispute.

By the year 2022, scepticism significantly increased regarding the capability of the United States to manage the dispute with China. "No confidence" escalated to 78% among the Malay community, 75% among the Chinese community, and 82% among the Indian community. Additionally, confidence diminished across all groups, with only 22% of Malays, 23% of Chinese, and 16% of Indians expressing a positive outlook. The survey also indicated a decline in confidence among Malaysians of all ages concerning President Biden's capacity to resolve the China dispute. In the year 2021, 63% of Malaysians reported a lack of confidence, with younger individuals (ages 21-35) displaying slightly more optimism than their older counterparts. However, by 2022, scepticism had grown markedly. "No confidence" surged to 78%, particularly among those aged 36-50, and confidence levels decreased across all age groups, with merely 25% of younger Malaysians and 19% of those aged 36-50 maintaining belief in Biden's ability to effectively manage the dispute. A significant number of Malaysians perceived the China issue as too intricate for President Biden to address proficiently.

Table 3: Malaysian Perceptions of President Biden's Ability to handle the dispute with China (2021-2022)

Respondents Ethnicity	2021 Malay	2021 Chinese	2021 Indian	2021 Total	2022 Malay	2022 Chinese	2022 Indian	2022 Total
No Confidence	66%	60%	62%	63%	78%	75%	82%	78%
Confidence	34%	39%	37%	36%	22%	23%	16%	21%

Respondents Age	2021 21-35	2021 36-50	2021 >51	2021 Total	2022 21-35	2022 36-50	2022 >51	2022 Total
No Confidence	61%	65%	65%	63%	73%	81%	78%	78%
Confidence	38%	35%	35%	36%	25%	19%	21%	21%

This study offers insight into how Malaysians perceive the role and capabilities of the United States as a global leader capable of providing necessary guidance in addressing pressing global issues. In conclusion, the data reveal a notable shift in public perception of U.S. leadership in Malaysia, particularly regarding its capacity to resolve global economic issues and to address the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Although President Obama initially incited a degree of optimism, this sentiment gradually waned as his presidency progressed. Likewise, Presidents Trump and Biden consistently encountered low levels of public confidence, accompanied by increasing scepticism over the years. This trend suggests a growing discontent with U.S. foreign policy, particularly in addressing complex and long-standing global challenges. Across all ethnic and age demographics, Malaysians are increasingly regarding U.S. leadership as ineffective, signifying a deepening erosion of trust in the capability of American presidents to effectively manage global issues.

The relationship between the United States and Malaysia can be examined within a broader regional perception of U.S. leadership, which underscores a persistent pattern of fluctuating confidence and scepticism. Throughout various administrations, U.S. foreign policy has been shaped by geopolitical dynamics, ranging from Cold War strategies to contemporary endeavours aimed at countering China's influence. Despite this, American efforts to establish leadership in addressing global economic challenges and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict have often been regarded as inadequate, and at times, wanting, by Malaysians.

Confidence in the global economic leadership of the United States has consistently diminished within Malaysian society, reflecting an escalating discontent toward U.S.-led economic frameworks and trade agreements. Following a period of initial optimism during Barack Obama's presidency, trust has waned under the administrations of

Donald Trump and Joe Biden, particularly among ethnic groups such as Malays, who exhibit pronounced criticism of U.S. policies. Concerning the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, although Obama's early diplomatic efforts inspired hopes, his unwavering support for Israel undermined confidence, and Trump's pro-Israel posture further alienated the Malaysian populace. The Biden administration has not succeeded in instilling trust, as evidenced by the fact that 77% of Malaysians in 2022 expressed "no confidence" in U.S. initiatives. Analyses of ethnic and age dynamics reveal that scepticism towards U.S. leadership encompasses all groups; however, the Malays continue to represent the most disillusioned segment. The relations between the United States and Malaysia have experienced fluctuations throughout history, shifting from the Cold War outreach to Obama's pivot towards Asia, yet scepticism persists due to historical shortcomings. The ascendance of China and economic alliances such as BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) underscore the prevailing shift away from U.S. influence, with Malaysia increasingly seeking economic opportunities from China, thereby indicating the necessity for the United States to recalibrate its strategies within the Asia-Pacific region.

Conclusion

Media representations and individual experiences influence perceptions of nations; however, they are further refined by various economic, political, and social factors. Due to the limitations of personal experience, Malaysians have been significantly impacted by the media's portrayal of the United States as a dominant global power. A comprehensive approach conceptualises perceptions; nevertheless, as demonstrated in this study, it is imperative to focus on specific elements of perception to attain a more profound understanding of nations. This study has examined the leadership of the United States and evaluated its role in addressing three critical global challenges. Polling agencies such as Gallup and Pew International have frequently conducted opinion research on global leadership, consistently placing the leaders of the United States, Russia, and China at the forefront. This study has focused on the leadership of three U.S. presidents and examined their approaches to specific issues. By investigating these three global challenges, one can achieve a deeper understanding of how Malaysians perceive the complexities of leadership within a global power.

The United States finds itself at a critical juncture in its engagement with Malaysia and the broader region. In order to restore trust, U.S. policymakers must confront the underlying causes of disillusionment, which include perceptions of bias in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict as well as inconsistent approaches to global economic leadership. Malaysia's influence, especially concerning the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and its position on the Gaza situation, plays a crucial role in shaping regional perceptions of U.S. policy.

The increasing influence of China in Southeast Asia, coupled with the growing strength of BRICS as a counterbalance to Western dominance, indicates a potential realignment within the region. Malaysia's forthcoming policies may favour these emerging powers over its established alliances with the United States. This transition emphasises the necessity for the United States to reassess its foreign policy strategies to sustain its relevance and influence in the region. The United States has to provide leadership in handling the rise of China as a global power.

Ultimately, the future of U.S.-Malaysia relations will hinge upon the capacity of American leaders to exhibit a sincere commitment to mutual respect, impartial mediation in global conflicts, and equitable economic partnerships. Should the United States fail to address these critical concerns, it risks further alienating Malaysia as well as other nations that are increasingly gravitating towards non-Western powers for leadership.

As President Trump commences his second term in office, there are increased anticipations for a more pragmatic approach to international relations. The second presidency of Trump presents both an opportunity to repair U.S.-Malaysia relations and a challenge to prevent the escalation of existing tensions. For Malaysia and a significant portion of Southeast Asia, the United States must demonstrate its ability to balance its interests with a genuine respect for regional sovereignty, alongside a long-term commitment to resolving global conflicts fairly and sustainably. Based on the records available thus far, Malaysian expectations regarding the performance of the newly elected president are not optimistic.

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International Students' Direct and Parasocial Contact, and Attitude Towards Malaysian Host Nationals: The Mediating Roles of Cultural Identification and Islamic Identity

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Abstract: International students may find it challenging to adjust to a new environment. Based on the principles of intergroup contact, this study explored factors that influenced attitude towards Malaysian host nationals. Communication quality (CQ), parasocial interaction (PSI), cultural identification (CID), and Islamic identity (IID) are predicted to influence attitude towards Malaysian host nationals (ATT). It is also hypothesised that CID and IID will function as mediators. Eight hypotheses were proposed to test these relationships. A questionnaire was distributed online in 2024 among international students in Malaysia *(N* = 253). The Hayes PROCESS macro was used to test the parallel mediation analyses (model 4). CID and CQI had a significant positive direct effect on ATT. CID also mediated the relationship

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between PSI and ATT, and between CQ and ATT. However, IID is not a significant mediator. The repercussion of these findings on intergroup contact and acculturation of international students were also deliberated.

Keywords: Acculturation, cultural identification, direct and parasocial contact, intergroup contact and attitude, Islamic identity

Abstrak: Pelajar antarabangsa mungkin menghadapi kesukaran untuk menyesuaikan diri dengan persekitaran budaya yang baharu. Berdasarkan prinsip-prinsip hubungan antara kumpulan, kajian ini bertujuan untuk mengenal pasti faktor yang mempengaruhi sikap terhadap warga tuan rumah dari Malaysia. Hubungan langsung melalui kualiti komunikasi (CQ), hubungan parasosial (PSI), identifikasi dengan budaya Malaysia (CID), dan identiti Islam (IID) dijangka mempengaruhi sikap terhadap hubungan dengan warga tuan rumah (ATT). Ia juga dihipotesiskan bahawa CI dan IID akan berfungsi sebagai perantara. Lapan hipotesis dicadangkan untuk menguji hubungan ini. Satu soal selidik telah diedarkan secara dalam talian kepada pelajar antarabangsa yang sedang belajar di Malaysia ($N = 253$). Makro Hayes PROCESS digunakan untuk menguji analisis perantaraan selari (model 4). CID dan CQI mempunyai kesan langsung positif yang signifikan terhadap ATT. CID juga memediasi hubungan antara PSI dan ATT, serta antara CQ dan ATT. Walau bagaimanapun, IID tidak signifikan sebagai pengantara. Impak penemuan ini terhadap hubungan antara kumpulan dan akulturasi pelajar antarabangsa akan dibincangkan.

Kata kunci: Akulturasi, identiti budaya, identiti Islam, hubungan dan sikap antara kumpulan, hubungan langsung dan parasosial

Introduction

Malaysia prides itself on being a popular regional educational hub for international students. International students in Malaysia have become an increasingly important part of the country's higher education landscape. Malaysia is home to a diverse range of world-class universities that attract students from all over the globe, particularly from countries in Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and even Europe. With its affordable tuition fees, high-quality education, and multicultural environment, Malaysia has positioned itself as a popular destination for students seeking to pursue undergraduate and postgraduate studies abroad.

As of June 2023, there are reportedly more than 100,000 international students in Malaysia, with private universities and colleges being the

more popular option (Malay Mail, 2024). Based on data by Education Malaysia Global Services (EMGS), popular fields of study in Malaysia for international students include social sciences, business, law, science, mathematics, and computing (Rajaendram, 2024). By the end of 2023, EMGS reported that the number of international students applying to study in Malaysia increased from 10, 453 in 2020 to 65, 207 in 2023. Additionally, EMGS data also indicated that earning undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in Malaysia are equally sought after among international students. According to Siddharta (2024), the highest number of international students in Malaysia in 2023 comes from China, followed by Indonesia, Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan. Most recently, the Higher Education Minister of Malaysia, Datuk Seri Zambry Abdul Kadir cited that the target of enrolling 250,000 international students in Malaysia included both public and private higher educational institutions; thus, immigration procedures should be simplified to facilitate enrolment for international students (Malay Mail, 2024).

There are several factors that influence decision to study abroad in Malaysia (Hassandarvish, 2024; Malay Mail, 2024; Rajaendram, 2024; Rensch, 2024; Safrena & Abdul Latiff, 2023). For instance, the Malaysian government has made significant efforts to promote the country as a regional education hub, offering various incentives such as scholarships, visa programmes, and partnerships with international institutions. International students in Malaysia also benefit from a dynamic academic atmosphere, where they can experience a blend of traditional and modern cultural influences, as well as a safe and welcoming environment. Additionally, Malaysia's strategic location in Southeast Asia makes it an appealing base for students interested in exploring the region, especially for those living in the Asian continent. Others cite the affordable tuition fees and cost of living, high quality education offered, and good reputation as a multicultural and Muslim friendly country as attractive pull factors (Rajaendram, 2024; Rensch, 2024).

To attract international students to come to Malaysia, it is important to pay attention to how they adapt and interact with locals. Consequently, the main aim of this study is to examine whether direct or parasocial contact will influence attitude towards contact with host nationals via cultural and religious identity. Intergroup contact and adaptation are crucial for international students as it directly impacts their overall

experience, academic success and personal well-being while studying in Malaysia. For instance, when international students have positive contact with host nationals, they can learn about different cultures, worldviews, and social norms, and reduce some of their negative preconceived notions about the host culture (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008; Tropp et al., 2022). Consequently, this will foster mutual understanding, and reduce challenges related to intergroup contact, such as prejudice, racism, stereotyping and ethnocentrism, and will in turn facilitate them in building supportive social networks with host nationals.

Identification with Malaysian culture is also important to facilitate intergroup contact, whether through direct or parasocial contact. While direct contact via face-to-face interactions is well established in increasing positive contact with host nationals (i.e., Allport, 1954; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008), it would be interesting to examine the role of mediated interactions in encouraging intergroup contact and facilitating adaptation. For example, with the proliferation of social media, influencer culture and streaming platforms that promotes local culture, international students can increase identification and cultural learning via mediated interactions with local public figures, celebrities, or media characters that they have come to know and love.

Finally, this study will also extend current understanding on intergroup contact and adaptation by examining how shared religious identity can help influence attitude towards host nationals. Sharing a strong Islamic identity and being able to practice Islamic values in Malaysia can positively influence how Muslim students adjust to Malaysia, and how they interact with host nationals. The next section will provide a detailed review of related literature, specifically in identifying factors that influence attitude towards contact with Malaysians as host nationals, as well as the mediating role of culture and religion in the relationship between direct and parasocial contact, and attitude towards contact with host nationals.

Literature Review

International students' direct contact with Malaysian host nationals

Direct interactions with host nationals can have a positive impact on international students in Malaysia. Previous studies based on intergroup contact and acculturation theories suggest that frequent and positive

interaction with host nationals can help reduce uncertainty and anxiety and may lead to increased cross-cultural adaptation (Imran & Tengku Siti Aisha, 2021; Rui & Wang, 2015; Terigele et al., 2022). For instance, engaging with local host nationals can help international students learn informal language, slang, and cultural nuances that textbooks or other formal lessons may not be able to provide. Direct contact also helps in local culture immersion; immigrants and sojourners can gain information on local norms and expectations, customs, values, traditions, and behaviours. Further, direct engagement with host nationals helps international students feel more integrated and less isolated in their new environment. This will lead to reduced feelings of alienation and culture shock and in turn facilitate smoother adaptation. Thus, in the context of this study, international students who engage frequently with local Malaysians may find their transition into Malaysian culture smoother.

Additionally, the intergroup contact theory suggests that under appropriate conditions, frequent and positive encounters with individuals from different groups can increase one's overall perceptions of that group, reduce prejudiced attitudes, enhance mutual understanding and lead to more positive intergroup attitudes (Allport, 1954). Optimal conditions can include equal status, common goals and cooperation between sojourners and host nationals. Support from authorities will also encourage intergroup interaction. Further, regular and accumulated contact with an outgroup member may reduce intergroup biases (Allport, 1954). This is supported by a meta-analysis of over 500 studies by Pettigrew and Tropp (2008) who found that intergroup contact tends to decrease prejudice towards outgroup members.

Intergroup contact also has advantages in promoting positive interaction between host nationals and sojourners. In a recent study among Chinese university students, researchers found that face-to-face contact with local host nationals have a positive impact on willingness to form intercultural friendships (Tang & Zhang, 2023). Others found that having direct or good quality contact with host nationals can improve intergroup attitudes towards local host nationals (Tang & Zhang, 2023; Terigele et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2021). For instance, for international students in the United States, communication quality with their most frequent American contact has a significant and direct effect on their behavioural attitude towards Americans (Terigele et al., 2022).

Therefore, international students' contact with host nationals may not only reduce anxiety and uncertainty, but it will also help facilitate cross-cultural adaptation, forming intercultural friendships and aid in enhancing their intergroup attitude towards host nationals. In the context of this study, direct contact via high quality communication with local Malaysians may help international students develop positive attitude towards Malaysians and reduce prejudice or biases towards them as outgroup members. Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1: International students' communication quality with their most frequently contacted Malaysian acquaintance is positively associated with their attitude towards Malaysians

Further, cultural identification is a key factor that can lead to better cross-cultural adaptation and a more positive attitude towards local host nationals (Terigele et al., 2022; Zhou et al., 2008). When sojourners and immigrants identify with local culture through intergroup contact with host nationals, they are attempting to fully integrate in the host culture. Others argue that positive contact with host nationals can lead to stronger identification with outgroup members as these interactions tends to increase their inclusion of the host nationals in the self (Page-Gould et al., 2010; Paolini et al., 2004). Based on their intercultural interactions, stronger identification with host culture will lead to improved attitudes towards host culture in general (Ristić et al., 2019). Thus, when international students directly engage with local Malaysians through positive and friendly interactions, it facilitates them in forming stronger identification with Malaysian culture, and in turn lead them to have a more positive attitude towards outgroup members, such as frequently contacted Malaysian friends and acquaintances. Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H2: International students' identification with Malaysian culture is positively associated with their attitude towards Malaysians.

H3: International students' identification with Malaysian culture will positively mediate the relationship between communication quality and attitude towards Malaysians.

International students' parasocial interaction with Malaysian host nationals

Although the media can be an important source of cultural learning and in facilitating cross-cultural adaptation, there is still a lack of empirical research that focuses on the role of media in facilitating intergroup contact and aiding adaptation from the context of international students (Terigele et al., 2022). In this study, parasocial contact will be used to explore how mediated interactions can influence cross-cultural adaptations by improving attitude towards host nationals and facilitating identification with local culture. Parasocial interaction is a concept developed by Horton and Wohl (1956) and was used initially to describe the pseudo relationship formed by media users with traditional media personalities, such as television newscasters. In today's current media context, it has been expanded to understand the connection formed between media personalities and their fans on platforms such as social media and streaming channels. For instance, engaging with mediated personalities through social media or streaming platforms can lead to positive portrayals of host nationals in the media. Indirectly, it can also challenge stereotypes and present host nationals in a more relatable and multidimensional perspective.

Further, parasocial contact with mediated personalities also create opportunities for viewers to create emotional connections with host nationals portrayed in the media, whether public figures, celebrities, or media characters. When they sympathise or bond with a mediated persona, this may increase liking of the character's culture as well through repeated exposure to the media personae via social media or streaming platforms. Cultural learning can also occur when immigrants engage with media from the host country, as they can gain insights into customs, traditions, social norms and values of the host culture. Exposure to local media can also foster respect for and appreciation of the host culture's uniqueness, leading to better intergroup attitude and identification with local culture. Finally, others argue that it can help facilitate cross-cultural adaptation through enhancing intergroup attitude especially when direct contact maybe limited (Ortiz & Hardwood, 2007). Terigele et al. (2022) found that parasocial contact with favourite American movie/TV drama character indirectly influenced attitudes towards Americans via identification with the American culture. Similarly, Shim et al. (2011) found that for Korean young adults who

consume American dramas, mediated contact led to a positive effect on intergroup attitudes, especially when these adults did not have personal contact with Americans. Thus, for younger immigrants who did not have the opportunity to personally connect with individuals from the host culture, mediated contact can still influence intergroup attitudes towards host nationals.

Thus, in the context of this study, international students' parasocial contact with a Malaysian public figure or celebrity may lead to more positive attitude towards Malaysians. Their identification with Malaysian culture will also mediate the relationship between parasocial contact and attitude towards Malaysians. Consequently, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H4: International students' parasocial interaction with a Malaysian public figure or celebrity is positively associated with their attitude towards Malaysians.

H5: International students' identification with Malaysian culture will positively mediate the relationship between parasocial interaction and attitude towards Malaysians.

International Students' Islamic identity and interaction with Malaysian host nationals

Finally, this study aims to extend understanding on intergroup contact theory by examining the role of religious identity in cross-cultural adaptation. Researchers argued that religion can be an important marker of group identity (Verkuyten & Martinovic, 2012). Verkuyten and Yildiz (2007) further highlighted that religion is critical for most people, and religious groups can be a salient bolster of identity, and one of the more significant aspects in the experience of adaptation among ethnic minority groups and immigrants. For Muslims, having a strong Islamic identity means recognising their belongingness to the Islamic faith and the degree to which they espouse Islamic values. Having a strong Islamic identity requires that Islamic values be practised in all facets of life and these values should influence both public and private life (Shahbaz & Nadzrah, 2024).

For Muslims who identify with the Islamic faith, finding commonalities in their religious values practices with the host nationals (such as Muslim dietary restrictions, gender role and Islamic religious

observances), may facilitate positive, respectful and meaningful intergroup contact (whether direct or parasocial contact), and increase identification with Malaysian culture, and this in turn may ultimately lead to increased positive attitude towards the host nationals. Further, practicing Islam in a predominantly Muslim country like Malaysia should provide less struggle in terms of cross-cultural adaptation. Finally, when sojourners share similar moral and ethical principles with host nationals, this can help individuals recognise shared human experiences and lead to a more positive judgment towards the host culture and a more positive attitude towards interacting with the host culture.

Therefore, a similar situation is hypothesised where we predict that both cultural and religious identity may operate similarly in determining international students' attitudes towards local host nationals. Specifically, as international students share the same religious identity with host nationals, it is predicted that international students with stronger adherence to Islamic identity may experience more positive attitude towards Malaysian host nationals. Direct or parasocial intergroup contact with locals may also create positive impressions and attitude towards host nationals, as they experience belongingness to aspects of Malaysian culture, as it helps in reducing stereotypes and prejudices, and reinforce common goals, values and identities. Further, in sharing the same religious identities, they may also share similar values in perceiving relationships with others. For example, the concept of brotherhood in Islam encourages positive attitude towards others and principles of compassion, respect and kindness. These values should facilitate a more positive attitude towards local host nationals, regardless of their cultural, ethnic, or racial differences. Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H6: International students' adherence to the Islamic identity is positively associated with attitude towards Malaysians.

H7: International students' adherence to the Islamic identity will positively mediate the relationship between communication quality and attitude towards Malaysians.

H8: International students' adherence to the Islamic identity will positively mediate the relationship between parasocial interaction and attitude towards Malaysians.

Conceptual Framework

Overall, a conceptual framework based on previous literature and the theories of intergroup contact and acculturation, is displayed in Figure 1. Factors influencing attitude of international students towards Malaysian host nationals, are incorporated into the conceptual framework. In the proposed parallel mediation model, identification with Malaysian culture and adherence to the Islamic identity served as mediators in the study.

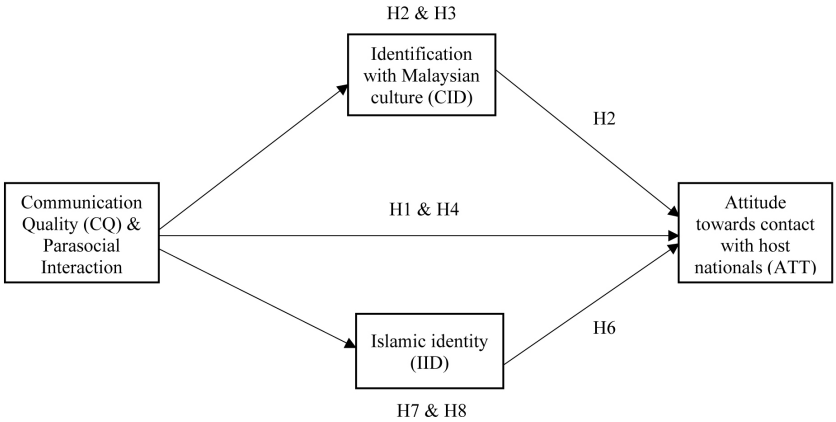

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of the Study

Methodology

Participants and procedures

This study used a cross-sectional survey design. A Google form was constructed to collect data and the questionnaire was distributed online. Respondents consisted of international students in a public, international university located in Klang Valley, Malaysia. Data collection took place from March to May 2024. Respondents were required to provide informed consent before filling in the survey questionnaire. All respondents were Muslims and selected from a social science faculty, because this faculty was the largest faculty in the university and had the highest number of international students.

Target respondents must be registered in that semester to participate. Throughout the survey, they were asked to think about a Malaysian acquaintance they frequently contacted, and a favourite

Malaysian celebrity or public figure they were familiar with. Using random sampling, based on the list of active undergraduate students in the semester, respondents were selected based on their level of study and major. Initially, the survey received 275 completed responses. After data screening, the final sample size totalled up to 253, after deleting duplicate and straight-lined responses. To ensure that the sample size met the requirements for data analysis, G*power was used to calculate the minimum sample size needed based on the following parameters: medium effect size (.15), alpha value of .05, medium power (0.80), and four predictors. The software determined that the minimum sample size to carry out data analysis was 129 and this was met in this study.

Descriptive analyses were carried out to provide background information on the study respondents. Based on the analyses, they were young (M = 22.98, SD = 4.56) and more than half were females (58%). They were also relatively newcomers to Malaysia, with an average of only three years in terms of length of stay in Malaysia (M = 3.16, SD = 3.58). Almost half were from Southeast Asian countries such as Thailand, Indonesia, Singapore, Brunei and Cambodia (49%). Slightly more than half were alone in Malaysia without the presence of any family members (57%). Close to half has never been to Malaysia prior to joining the university (41%). They were also active social media users and reported to spending at least five hours a day using various social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube (M = 5.24, SD = 3.47).

Measures

The following paragraph provides detailed description scales used in the study. Parasocial interaction is a one-sided relationship formed between a media performer and the audience (Horton & Wohl, 1956). To measure parasocial interaction, we used the ten-items Parasocial Interaction Scale from Rubin et al. (1985). The scale was adapted by substituting the word "celebrity" for "Malaysian public figure or celebrity." This scale used a 5-point Likert scale, with response items that ranged from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly Agree*). A sample item reads: "I would like to meet this Malaysian public figure or celebrity, in person." Direct contact with a Malaysian acquaintance is measured by examining communication quality with their most frequently contacted Malaysian

acquaintance. We adopted the scale developed by Ortiz and Harwood (2007), which has three items and is also measured on a 5-point Likert scale, with response items that ranged from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly Agree*). A sample item is as follows: "My contact with this person has been friendly."

Next, identification with the Malaysian culture is adapted from the scale by Terigele et al. (2022). It has five items and is measured based on a 5-point Likert scale, with response items that ranged from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly Agree*). We changed the term "American" to "Malaysian" to suit our study context. An example of an item from this scale is as follows: "I feel like a member of the Malaysian culture." Further, adherence to Islamic identity measures to what degree someone espouses Islamic values, and is adapted from the Islamic identity sub-scale developed by Bagasra and MacKinem (2019). This sub-scale contains five items and is measured on a 5-point Likert scale, with response items that ranged from 1 (*Not at all true)* to 5 (*Extremely True*). A sample item reads: "It is very important for me to raise my (future) children as Muslims."

Finally, attitude towards contact with host nationals is adapted from the scale by Ryder et al. (2000). It contains three items. A sample item is as follows: "I can well imagine having a local Malaysian friend." All items were measured based on a 6-point Likert scale, with response items that ranges from 1 (*Extremely Disagree*) to 6 (*Extremely Agree)*. Again, to suit the study context, the term "local German" was substituted with "local Malaysian." Overall, higher number for all scales indicated better communication quality, higher positive parasocial interaction, stronger adherence to Islamic identity, increased identification with Malaysian culture, and better attitude towards contact with host nationals.

After running a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), some items were dropped due to low loadings, i.e., values below 0.50. Table 1 displays specific information related to the scales used, where total number of items, means and standard deviation reflected values related to items that were retained after the CFA.

Table 1: Scales Used in the Study

No	Scale	Number of items	M	SD	Source
1	Parasocial interaction (PSI)	8	3.09	.68	Rubin, Perse & Powell (1985)
2	Communication quality (CQ)	3	4.00	.72	Ortiz & Harwood (2007)
3	Identification with Malaysian culture (CID)	4	3.65	.67	Terigele, Yan & Jiang (2022)
4	Islamic identity (IID)	5	4.52	.58	Bagasra & McKinem (2019)
5	Attitude towards contact with host nationals (ATT)	2	4.91	.89	Ryder, Alden & Paulhaus (2000)

Findings

Model fit, reliability and validity

All scales used in this study met the cut-off value of .70 based on recommendations by Hair et al. (2013). Values ranged from .71 to .89, which demonstrates good internal consistency for all scales. To establish the measurement model, the JAMOVI software was used to run the CFA. To assess convergent validity, several fit indices were examined. The model fit indices suggested good fit. The chi-square value for the default model was significant, X^2 (199) = 361, $p < .001$. The Comparative Fit Index (CFI) and the Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) was 0.934 and 0.923 respectively, indicating a relatively good model fit. Additionally, the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) was .055, suggesting that the model fits well in terms of error approximations. Overall, these indices indicate that convergent validity is established in terms of explaining the underlying factors that influenced attitude towards contact with Malaysian host nationals.

Further, in evaluating the measurement model, based on recommendation by literature (i.e., Gefen & Straub, 2005; Hair et al., 2013), items with low factor loadings (i.e., below .50) are recommended for removal. All items loaded based on their parent construct; however, items 1 and 3 from PSI, item 4 from CID, as well as item 2 from ATT were below the cut-off value of .50 and were subsequently removed.

Further, the values for composite reliability (CR) were assessed; it should be above .70 (Hair et al., 2011). All CR values were higher than the cut-off value. Finally, the average variance extracted (AVE) should be above the cut-off value of .50 (Hair et al., 2011). This criterion was also met for all constructs in this study, except for the AVE value for IID. However, scholars have reiterated that .40 and above is acceptable, if the CR is higher than 0.6, the convergent validity of the construct is still adequate (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Since the CR value for IID is .876, the convergent validity is still acceptable. Table 2 displays the factor loadings, reliability, and validity of each of the construct.

Table 2: Factor Loadings, Reliability, and Validity

Items	Loadings	CA	CR	AVE
Communication Quality (CQ)		**.883**	**.935**	**.723**
CQ1	.810			
CQ2	.910			
CQ3	.828			
Parasocial interaction (PSI)		**.893**	**.934**	**.514**
PSI2	.566			
PSI4	.721			
PSI5	.820			
PSI6	.708			
PSI7	.769			
PSI8	.665			
PSI9	.700			
PSI10	.726			
Cultural identification (CID)		**.800**	**.876**	**.522**
CID1	.738			
CID2	.863			
CID3	.705			
CID5	.549			
Islamic identity (IID)				
IID1	.634	**0.769**	**.861**	**.438**
IID2	.532			
IID3	.808			
IID4	.592			
IID5	.710			

Items	Loadings	CA	CR	AVE
Attitude towards contact with host nationals (ATT)		**0.716**	**.815**	**.559**
ATT1	.712			
ATT3	.782			

Note: CA = Cronbach Alpha, CR = Composite Reliability, AVE = Average Variance Extracted.

Further, to assess discriminant validity, the value of the Ö of AVE is compared with the correlation coefficient with each construct, in which the Ö of AVE values should be more than the correlation coefficient value between the constructs (Hair et al., 2011). This criterion was met in this study, and thus good discriminant validity was established. Table 3 displays the discriminant validity in this study.

Table 3: Discriminant Validity

Factor	CQ	PSI	CID	MI	ATT
CQ	***.850***				
PSI	.045	***.717***			
CID	.191	.457	***.722***		
IID	.283	.061	.315	***.661***	
ATT	.473	.274	.657	.383	***.747***

Note: CQ = Communication Quality, PSI = Parasocial Interaction, CID = Cultural Identification, IID = Islamic Identity, ATT = Attitude towards contact with host nationals

Hypotheses testing

Having accomplished acceptable reliability and validity, the next step of the analysis is hypotheses testing using the structural model (H1-H8). Prior to conducting the hypotheses testing, zero-order correlations analysis established significant and positive relationships between the independent variables, the mediators, and the dependent variable in the study. The only exception was PSI which was not significantly related to IID. Significant correlational values for other variables ranged from .19 to .52. Multi-collinearity was not present; all variance inflation factor (VIF) scores were below the cut-off value of 5.00 and the conditional index was less than the cut-off value of 30, as suggested in the literature (i.e., Hair et al., 2019).

Multivariate skewness and kurtosis were assessed, as suggested by Hair et al. (2017). The results revealed that the data collected was not multivariate normal, based on the Mardia's multivariate skewness (β = 754.84, $p < .001$) and Mardia's multivariate kurtosis (β = 2906.96, $p < .001$). Therefore, based on recommendations by scholars such as Hair et al. (2019), bootstrapping was invoked. The path coefficients, the standard errors, the *t*-values and the *p*-values in the structural model are reported. A sample resample of 5,000 bootstrapping procedures was used, as recommended by Ramayah et al. (2018).

Further, PROCESS macro by Hayes was used to test the hypotheses of the study (model 4). PROCESS models are suitable to examine mediating relationships (Hayes, 2018). The mediation analysis (model 4) was performed to test main association analyses (H1, H2, H4 and H6) and the parallel mediation analyses (H3, H5, H7 & H8). In the main association analyses model, communication frequency with a Malaysian contact (CF) was entered as a co-variate. Approximately 38% of the variance explained in ATT is attributed to CQ, PSI, CID, IID, and the co-variate (i.e., CF). There was a significant, positive direct effect of CQ on ATT (b = .296, SE = .065, t = 4.295, $p < .01$, 95% CI = [.160/.431]). Therefore, H1 is supported. Further, H2 is also supported as CID is significantly associated with ATT (b = .546, SE = .076, t = 7.176, $p <$ .01, 95% CI = [.396/.696]). However, PSI did not significantly predict ATT (b = .043, SE = .072, t = .596, p = .412, 95% CI = [-.098/.183]). Thus, H4 is not supported. Finally, H6 was also not supported as IID did not significantly predict ATT (b = .148, SE = .081, t = 1.827, p = .069, 95% CI = [-.012/.307]). The co-variate, CF also has a direct positive effect on ATT (b = .142, SE = .055, t = 2.562, $p < .05$, 95% CI = [.033/.251]). Detailed results for the main association analyses are in Table 4.

Table 4: Hypothesis Testing for Main Association Analyses

Hypothesis	Path coefficients	SE	t-value	p-values	BCI LL	BCI UL
H1: CQ -> ATT	.296	.069	4.295	< .001	.160	.431
H2: PSI -> ATT	.043	.072	.596	.552	-.098	.183
H4: CID -> ATT	.546	.076	7.176	< .001	.396	.696
H6: IID -> ATT	.148	.081	1.827	.070	-.012	.307

Note: PSI = Parasocial interaction, CQ = Communication quality, CID = Cultural identification, IID = Islamic identity, ATT = Attitude towards contact with host nationals

Next, to test the parallel mediation analysis, two separate mediation analyses were conducted using model 4. The first mediation analysis treated CQ as the independent variable, to examine if CID and IID mediates the relationship between CQ and ATT. PSI and CF were entered as co-variates. First, the results revealed a significant indirect effect of the impact of CQ on ATT, with CID as the mediator (b = .083, t = 2.371), supporting H3. Further, the study examined the mediating effect of in the relationship between CQ and ATT, through IID. The results revealed an insignificant indirect effect of the impact of CQ on ATT (b = .031, t = 1.631). Thus, H7 is not supported. The direct effect of CQ on ATT in the presence of both mediators (i.e., CID and IID) was significant (b = .296, t = 4.295). In sum, with CQ as the independent variable, for direct contact via communication quality, only CID functioned as a significant mediator. Table 5 displays a summary of the parallel mediation analysis results for CQ as the main IV, with CID and IID as mediators.

Table 5: Mediation Analysis Summary with CQ as the IV

Relationship	Total Effect	Direct Effect	Indirect Effect	Confidence Interval		t-statistics
				Lower bound	Upper bound	
H3: CQ -> CID -> ATT	.410 (.000)	.296 (.000)	(.083)	.022	.159	2.371
H7: CQ -> IID -> ATT	.410 (.000)	.296 (.000)	(.031)	-.001	.075	1.631

Note: CQ = Communication quality, CID = Cultural identification, Islamic Identity = IID, ATT = Attitude towards host nationals

The second mediation analysis treated PSI as the independent variable, to examine if CID and IID mediates the relationship between PSI and ATT. CF and CQ were entered as co-variates. First, the results revealed a significant indirect effect of the impact of PSI on ATT, with CID as the mediator (b = .212, t = 4.32), supporting H5. Further, the study examined the mediating effect of in the relationship between PSI and ATT, through IID. The results revealed an insignificant indirect effect of the impact of PSI on ATT, with IID as the mediator (b = .008, t = 0.8, and thus H8 is not supported. The direct effect of PSI on ATT in the presence of both mediators (i.e., CID and IID) was also not significant (b = .043, t = .596). In sum, H5 is supported and H8 is not supported. In

other words, only CID functioned as a significant mediator when PSI is treated as the independent variable. Table 6 displays a summary of the parallel mediation analysis results for PSI as the main IV, with CID and IID as mediators.

Table 6: Mediation Analysis Summary with PSI as the IV

Relationship	Total Effect	Direct Effect	Indirect Effect	Confidence Interval		t-statistics
				Lower bound	Upper bound	
H5: PSI -> CID -> ATT	.263 (.000)	.043 (.552)	(.212)	.124	.317	4.326
H8: PSI -> IID -> ATT	.263 (.000)	.304 (.552)	(.006)	-.011	.031	0.800

Note: PSI = Parasocial Interaction, CID = Cultural Identification, IID = Islamic Identity, ATT = Attitude towards contact with host nationals

Discussion

In the present study, we identified factors that influenced attitude towards contact with Malaysian host nationals among international students studying in a public international university in Malaysia from the perspective of intergroup contact and acculturation. To test the hypotheses, we used JAMOVI and PROCESS macro by Hayes (2018) to analyse the measurement and structural models. First, results indicated that communication quality and identification with Malaysian culture significantly influenced attitude towards Malaysians (H1-H2), but parasocial interaction and adherence to Islamic identity did not emerge as significant predictors towards attitude (H4 & H6).

Next, parallel mediation analyses were conducted. First, cultural identification emerged as a significant mediator in the relationships between communication quality with a Malaysian contact and attitude towards Malaysians (H3) and between parasocial contact with a Malaysian celebrity or public figure and attitude towards Malaysians (H5). However, in the second mediation analysis, adherence to Islamic identity did not emerge as a significant mediator in the relationships between communication quality with a Malaysian contact and attitude towards Malaysians (H7) and between parasocial contact with a Malaysian celebrity or public figure and attitude towards Malaysians

(H8). Thus, although our results contain mixed findings in highlighting factors that lead to positive attitude towards Malaysian host nationals, overall, the results do provide some support for the intergroup contact theory. The following paragraphs will discuss specific details related to the main findings of the study.

First, the significant and positive relationships between communication quality and attitude towards Malaysians (H1) and between cultural identification and attitude towards Malaysians (H2) are consistent with the predictions of intergroup contact theory by Allport (1954) and is in line with findings from current literature (i.e. Paolini et al., 2004; Terigele et al., 2022; Zhou et al., 2008). These findings emphasised that besides quantity, high quality communication matters in the direct contact between sojourners and host nationals. Friendly, positive and welcoming intergroup contact helps create a conducive environment for cross-cultural friendships and enhance positive attitude towards Malaysians as host nationals.

Further, those who experienced belongingness with Malaysian culture are more likely to embody good attitude towards Malaysians, as identification may help reduce stereotyping, biases or prejudice towards outgroup members, i.e., Malaysian host nationals. These findings also provide important input for university administrators who are attempting to attract more internationals students to their universities. It underscored the importance of providing a nurturing and conducive learning environment for international students in Malaysia. To facilitate cross-cultural adaptation, institutional support is needed from the university administration in creating initiatives such as cross-cultural student activities, or adopted family programmes, that create opportunities for international and local students to bond emotionally and form close intercultural friendships.

Further, since H4 and H6 were not supported, this appeared to minimise the role played by parasocial contact and religious identity in facilitating cross-cultural adaptation. First, the results highlighting the insignificant relationship between parasocial interaction and attitude towards host nationals contradicts previous literature (i.e., Ortiz & Hardwood, 2007; Shim et al., 2012; Terigele et al., 2022). However, these studies were conducted in the United States. In the present study context, this insignificant finding may not be surprising as it can be

argued that results in Malaysia are different due to under-representation of Malaysian public figures or celebrities in the global media. American movie/TV drama characters maybe well-known across the globe, but the same cannot be said for Malaysian public figures or celebrities. With the exception of a few well-known celebrities who has performed at the global stage (i.e. Siti Nurhaliza, Yuna, and Sheila Amzah), most Malaysian public figures and celebrities are only popular in Malaysia and are arguably not global icons. Thus, parasocial contact may not be as influential as direct contact in impacting attitude towards Malaysians as host nationals, as the interaction between international students and Malaysian public figures and celebrities maybe limited, sparse or infrequent.

Conversely, the result indicating religious identity does not influence attitude towards host nationals (H6) are indeed puzzling as both sojourners and host nationals were Muslims. As Islam is the main religion practised in Malaysia and the university is an Islamic university, international students with strong Islamic identity should respond more positively to the host nationals. However, this insignificant finding could be attributed to the fact that both groups still perceived each other as outgroup members despite being Muslims due to the different ways in which Muslims practise their religious identity. This study included a wide range of Muslim students from different countries that may have diverse ways of adhering to Islamic practices, and this would perhaps explain why adherence to Islamic identity did not significantly influence attitude towards Malaysian host nationals. In sum, this study suggests that perhaps Islamic identity is a multi-faceted construct, not reliant only on just a few common ways of espousing Islamic values. Perception of Islamic identity can also be dependent on what constitutes as Islamic lifestyle, faith or school of thought.

Consequently, it would be interesting if future studies could explore this further and examine how different categories of Muslims (e.g. *Shāfiʿī* versus *Hanafī* schools of thought) react to Muslim host nationals in their process of cross-cultural adaptation. Would international Muslim students belonging to the same school of thought with the host nationals, perceive each other as equals, and be more receptive to intergroup contact, which in turn lead to a more positive outlook towards host nationals as outgroup members? Sulistio et al. (2020) appeared to suggest that diversity in religious fundamentalism may interact with

intergroup contact and attitude. Specifically, they found that those with certain orientation (i.e., fundamentalists) may change their orientation after making contact with more moderate Islamic groups, and have a lower tendency to express prejudice against them.

Additionally, findings for H3 and H5 indicated that cultural identification functioned as significant mediators in the relationship between direct/parasocial contact and attitude towards Malaysians, as consistently predicted in previous literature (Page-Gould et al., 2010; Ristić et al., 2019; Terigele et al., 2022). Although the influence of direct face-to-face contact on attitude towards host nationals via cultural identification is quite well established in literature, but the same cannot be said for parasocial contact. In this study, parasocial contact does not directly influence attitude towards Malaysians. However, it indirectly impacts attitude towards Malaysians via identification to Malaysian culture. Thus, the university management could perhaps introduce relatable figures such as student influencers who can act as role models during orientation week in order to improve cross-cultural adaptation for international students. These student influencers could use their social media platforms to convey positive messages on Malaysian culture that could help international students familiarise themselves with Malaysia.

Additionally, findings also indicated that adherence to Islamic identity does not function as significant mediators in the relationship between direct/parasocial contact and attitude towards Malaysians (H7 and H8). This perhaps underlined the complexity of religious identity in facilitating the cross-cultural adaptation process. As Muslim communities are also very diverse and have different ways of practicing Islamic traditions, future studies could perhaps examine in greater detail how different categories of Muslims adjust to a new cultural environment. This includes how they react to host nationals, and how their religious values and practices may interact with contact with host nationals in influencing their behavioural and attitudinal reaction towards the host nationals, by controlling for other variables as suggested by Allport (1954), e.g., perceived institutional support (i.e. cooperation) or threat from host nationals, and perceptions on status equality between host nationals and international students.

Finally, it is important to note that the study has its limitations. Although a cross-sectional survey does have advantages in terms of

generalising the study findings to the population, it does not go into depth in terms of uncovering why international students react a certain way towards Malaysians as host nationals. Future studies could also extend the findings of this study by triangulating the methods (i.e. survey and focus group interviews) to qualitatively and quantitatively examine motives that may lead to positive attitude towards host nationals among international students studying in Malaysia. Experiments may also provide further clarity in terms of how Muslims from different groups perceive each other, and how this mediates the relationship between intergroup contact and attitude.

Conclusion

Overall, despite its mixed findings, this study has been able to identify significant factors that influenced cross-cultural adaption for international students in Malaysia, such as friendly and warm communication with host cultures and strong identification to Malaysian culture. Based on the study findings, to market Malaysia as a global education hub in the 21st century, it is important that higher educational institutions in Malaysia provide a welcoming environment to international students to facilitate their adjustment process.

In sum, this study also provides support for the intergroup contact theory, where direct interaction between host nationals and sojourners, identification to host national culture, and attitude towards host nationals interact in order to provide good adjustment for international students. Although parasocial contact appears to play a rather inconsequential role in this study, using a more relatable figure compared to public figures or celebrities, such as student influencers to promote the education in Malaysian can still be a pull factor in order to attract more international students to come to Malaysia.

As the world becomes increasingly connected, more international students are venturing outside of their countries to further their education. If Malaysian higher educational institutions do not want to be left behind, efforts must be invested not only to create an attractive curriculum, but also in providing an educational environment that is supportive, friendly, hospitable and inclusive to all.

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Artificial Intelligence in Sinar Harian: Embracing Readiness or Addressing Anxiety?

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Abstract: The infiltration of artificial intelligence (AI) in the newsroom has ignited several questions among media practitioners. Some of them believe this technology can improve journalistic work, regain trust among audiences, and sustain business prospect. Others doubt the use of this technology as some scholars have warned that AI can pose a threat to journalism because the technology has a potential to replace reporters in the newsroom. Due to this, some are ready to adapt and adopt the technology for journalistic work, but others are reluctant to embrace the technology in the newsroom because they worried AI will take their roles and leads to job loss. Hence, a study was conducted to measure the impact of AI in the newsroom. Using qualitative methods, this study involved ten reporters from *Sinar Harian*. Data gathered from in-depth interview were analysed thematically. As a result, three themes emerged: 'Aware,' 'Enhance' and 'Trust'. The first theme, 'Aware,' illustrates that reporters are not only familiar with AI but also well-equipped with relevant knowledge. The second theme, 'Enhance,' indicates that the integration of AI in the newsroom helps reporters produce higher-quality news. The final theme, 'Trust,' represents the willingness of reporters to embrace AI in the newsroom to enhance their work. By applying technological determinism to theorise this

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study, it is concluded that AI is inevitable for journalism as it will play a crucial role in shaping the future of journalism in accordance with technological advancements.

Keywords*:* AI, readiness, anxiety, technological determination, *Sinar Harian*, thematic analysis

Abstrak: Penembusan kecerdasan buatan (AI - artifical intelligence) dalam bilik berita telah mencetuskan beberapa persoalan dalam kalangan pengamal media. Ada yang percaya bahawa teknologi ini boleh meningkatkan mutu kerja kewartawanan, mengembalikan kepercayaan khalayak, dan mengekalkan prospek perniagaan. Namun, ada juga yang meragui penggunaannya apabila segelintir sarjana memberi amaran bahawa AI boleh menjadi ancaman kepada kewartawanan. Ini kerana teknologi ini berpotensi menggantikan wartawan di bilik berita. Disebabkan perkara ini, ada yang bersedia untuk menyesuaikan diri dan menerima penggunaan teknologi dalam kerja kewartawanan, dan ada juga yang keberatan untuk menerima AI di bilik berita kerana bimbang peranan mereka akan diambil alih, sekali gus membawa kepada kehilangan pekerjaan. Sehubungan itu, satu kajian telah dijalankan untuk mengukur impak AI dalam bilik berita. Menggunakan kaedah kualitatif, kajian ini melibatkan 10 orang wartawan dari Sinar Harian. Data yang diperoleh daripada temu bual mendalam telah dianalisis secara tematik. Hasil analisis menghasilkan tiga tema utama iaitu: 'Kesedaran,' 'Penambahbaikan,' dan 'Kepercayaan.' Tema pertama iaitu 'Kesedaran' menunjukkan bahawa wartawan bukan sahaja mengenali AI, tetapi juga mempunyai pengetahuan yang relevan mengenainya. Tema kedua, 'Penambahbaikan' menggambarkan integrasi AI dalam bilik berita membantu wartawan menghasilkan berita yang lebih berkualiti. Tema terakhir iaitu 'Kepercayaan' mencerminkan kesediaan wartawan untuk menerima AI dalam usaha mempertingkatkan mutu kerja mereka. Dengan menggunakan teori determinisme teknologi sebagai kerangka kajian, dapat disimpulkan bahawa AI merupakan satu perkembangan yang tidak dapat dielakkan dalam dunia kewartawanan. Teknologi ini akan memainkan peranan penting dalam membentuk masa depan kewartawanan selaras dengan kemajuan teknologi semasa. Yang pasti, penggunaan AI akhirnya akan membawa kepada satu transformasi.

Kata kunci: AI, kesediaan, kebimbangan, keazaman teknologi, Sinar Harian, analisis tematik

Introduction

Artificial intelligence (AI) is a technology that enables machines to imitate human intelligence to perform tasks. It can be defined as a machine with a human brain or a duplicate version of a human with similar or greater abilities, in the form of software, machines, or robots. The technology can think and act like human being on certain programming. It works using algorithms by gathering and processing data from devices, images, text, voices, and archives (Russell & Norvig, 2013; Hassani et al., 2020; Sheikh et al., 2023).

A clear interpretation of AI has been depicted via several Hollywood films over the years. It was first showcased in 1951 with the film *The Day the Earth Stood Still*. The list continues with more remarkable titles such as *The Terminator* (1984), *The Matrix* (1999), *I, Robot* (2004), *Her* (2013) and *Atlas* (2024). These films convey various narratives concerning AI. Some illustrate the technology in the form of software, programmes and operating system, others show it in robot, android, or humanoid.

Although AI is a new sensation in technology and a dear darling for tech savvy geek, but the technology is not a new item among researchers in Western countries. AI has been discussed since 1936. A mathematician from United Kingdom, Alan Turing was the man behind the innovative idea to invent a machine capable of human-like thinking. Turing presented the idea in a seminal paper titled "Computing Machinery and Intelligence" in 1950. He had faith that computer can think like human in the future (New Scientist, 2022).

Also known as machine or robot, AI has transformed the facade of many industries in the past few years. The technology has assisted banks in improving their customer services using chatbot (Ramola, 2023). Additionally, hospitals have introduced telemedicine to monitor patient conditions from remote locations (Sharma et al., 2023). More industries are reported utilising AI in their production processes. This phenomenon is highly encouraging as the technology offers significant opportunities for business growth.

Today, AI is also making its way into journalism industry. The technology is expected to shape journalistic work in the newsroom. According to de-Lima-Santos and Ceron (2022), the use of AI in

journalism benefits news agencies. The technology can perform journalistic work better than humans. However, the biggest concern is AI poses a threat to reporters. The technology is believed to replace their roles in the newsroom (Sadia, 2020). According to Qiran (2023), AI is a new monster that will devour job opportunities in the coming years. The excessive use of this technology can lead to significant job displacement.

Several scholars have discovered that many members of news agencies have doubted the use of AI in the newsroom. Some of them consider the technology can truly improve journalistic work, while others view AI as a destructive creation that can replace their roles (Miroshnichenko, 2018; Ali and Hassoun, 2019; Guanah et al., 2020; Santos, 2023; Cugurullo & Acheampong, 2023; Pena-Fernandez et al., 2023). This situation has alerted reporters to be cautious with the technology. Some of them worry that AI will cause another adversity like the digital disruption situation in 2006.

The rise of ChatGPT in 2022 has sparked concern among reporters worldwide. Its capability as a powerful writing tool has become a topic to debate. Reporters, scholars, and communication students view the tool as a destructive creation to the journalism industry and careers (Gutiérrez-Caneda et al., 2023). The advent of ChatGPT has indirectly supported few scholars' views that AI poses a threat to the journalism industry. The tool does not only replace reporters' roles in the newsroom, but also impacts the process of news production, including collecting, processing, producing, and disseminating news (Manjoo, 2023).

Therefore, a study of AI in a newsroom should be conducted to measure the impact of AI on journalistic work. *Sinar Harian,* a leading Malay language daily newspaper, was opted as a case study on this phenomenon. This is because the news agency has been experimenting with the technology for both their print and online newspaper. The news agency commonly automates their news, with most of it published in the form of infographics (*Sinar Harian*, n.d.). Moreover, *Sinar Harian* has also used AI image generator to produce the front and inside pages (Dall-3, 2023; Hazemi & Hafezdzullah, 2023).

Sinar Harian is a Malay language newspaper published in Shah Alam, Selangor. The newspaper met their readers for first time in 2006. Known for championing communities' issues previously, *Sinar*

Harian is now joining the position of mainstream newspapers such as *Utusan Malaysia* and *Berita Harian*. Owned by Karangkraf Sdn. Bhd, this newspaper is available in printed and online versions. For printed version, it records a daily circulation of 85,000 copies while the online version records around 60 million monthly page views (Advertising, n.d.).

Three research questions and research objectives have been outlined to guide the entire study in attaining meaningful findings. Accordingly, the findings will be used to measure local reporters' standpoint towards the use of AI in the newsrooms. It can also be used as a guide for them to adapt and adopt the technology in their journalistic work. Moreover, the outcomes of the study can be used as references by any news agencies in Malaysia to embrace AI in their newsrooms.

Research Questions

1. What is the current level of knowledge among journalists regarding AI in the newsroom?
2. How does the integration of AI impact newsroom and journalistic practices?
3. How ready are journalist to adopt AI technologies in the newsroom?

Research Objectives

1. To evaluate journalist's knowledge of AI technologies in the newsroom.
2. To assess the impact of AI integration on newsroom and journalistic practices.
3. To examine journalist' readiness to adopt AI in the newsroom.

Literature Review

AI can be defined as the most celebrated technology of this era. It is anticipated to assist humans in facilitating their daily routines, from household chores to job tasks. However, its arrival has triggered polemics among people worldwide. Different opinions about the technology have consequently divided people into two camps. One is ready to use AI according to their needs, while the other is feeling anxiety about integrating the technology into their daily lives. Hence, these two factors—readiness and anxieties—have become significant in

determining the integration of AI into numerous industries, including journalism.

Readiness

AI readiness is a situation where organisation has completely prepared to use AI. It takes efforts from people, technology, and data. The combination will benefit organisation because it facilitates their operation as well as generating income (Massey, 2024). AI-readiness is important because it will determine an organisation's prospect. Reaching this degree can simply assist them to meet their demands. Furthermore, the situation can empower skills, enhance job quality, and improve life. As a result, AI will be fully integrated into various aspects of human life (Luckin et al., 2022). Thus, AI readiness is anticipated to lead organisation in utilising the technology.

Johnk et al. (2021) stated that AI-readiness relies on management decisions of certain organisation. The study found that their support plays an important role in enabling members of organisation to use AI. Management decisions will lead the entire organisation to transform as well as encouraging members to transform themselves in adapting and adopting the new technology. Usually, the decision depends on the organisation's business prospect. This qualitative study was conducted in Germany. It employed in-depth interview involving 25 AI experts from the country. The data was interpreted using MAXQDA.

A study conducted by Kelly et al. (2023) found that trust is the most important factor encouraging the adoption of AI in organisations. Trust motivates members of organisations to learn, adopt, and use the technology in their daily routine tasks. Without trust, they cannot make AI as a priority in their job list. This study, conducted in Australia, employed a systematic literature review and followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines. It involved 7,912 articles searched from credible databases such as EBSCOhost, Embase, Engineering Village Host (Inspec), Scopus, and Web of Science.

A qualitative study conducted by Jan et al. (2024) confirmed that the adoption of AI is influenced by organisational capability. The findings identified technology and financial resources as the main enablers in ensuring AI readiness among organisations. These factors will

determine the acceleration in adapting to and adopting the technology. Employing thematic analysis, this study was conducted in Pakistan and involved 27 informants from different universities. Jan et al. concluded that resourceful organisations appeared to be more susceptible to implementing AI.

Anxieties

AI anxiety is a situation where people worry about the rapid use of AI in organisations. This feeling is often experienced by certain people who are concerned about the impact of the technology. They may fear being replaced and invaded by machines in their organisation (Cox, 2023). The anxiety grows among people when they know that AI can potentially assist criminals in waging war by formulating lethal weapons, committing crimes by hacking or sabotaging national security, and taking over the world by reprogramming themselves (Jammot, 2023, Peyton, 2024). Consequently, it will decelerate AI development and trigger people to reject the technology.

One of the biggest worries associated with the adoption of AI is job displacement. This was confirmed by Lemay et al. (2023). Their study found that AI instigates fear among people regarding the potential of job loss. The possibility of job displacement appeared to be higher when organisations aggressively automated their operations to meet production needs. Anxiety and fear related to AI increase when discussions arise about robots replacing humans in various professional fields. The study was conducted in the United States of America and used a cross-sectional survey involving 65 participants with an average age of 23.8 years old. It was aimed to investigate the relationship between AI-readiness and anxiety.

Furthermore, the impact of AI itself can cause anxiety among people who are about to integrate the technology into daily life. A study conducted by Sayed et al. (2023) highlighted several negative impacts of adopting AI. They found that AI contributes to human laziness, the inability to make decisions independently, and increased safety issues. These impacts have consequently caused anxiety among people because the results of adopting AI are not what they expected. This qualitative study was conducted in Pakistan and China and employed in-depth interviews involving 285 participants from different universities in both countries.

The rapid use of AI in daily life can also contribute to psychological problems. A study conducted by Alkhalifah et al. (2024) uncovered that the technology can create unforeseen circumstances among human beings. The technology can trigger unwanted feelings like fear of death, fear of condemnation and fear of domination. These fears instigated by excessive guilt and ethical concerns resulting from the integration of AI into daily life and working ecosystem. This study was conducted in Saudi Arabia. It employed survey involving 300 participants from the country aged between 20 to 60 years old. It gauged public anxiety about the technology.

Based on the literature reviews, the public is not ready for AI adoption. Some of them are still bound by anxiety. They are worried that the technology will negatively affect their daily lives. Only those with courage are ready to adapt and adopt AI, yet their transformation remains conditional. Some integrate due to the policy stipulated by the organisation while others transform because the technology facilitates their job. Thus, improvement is required to convince people and achieve the degree of AI readiness. Only then will humans be ready to adapt and adopt AI. Additionally, AI anxiety should be mitigated by enlightening people about the needs of AI in modern world.

Technological determinism

Presenting AI-related research is not complete without presenting a theory. It is like a body without a soul because the research seems empty and cannot be thoroughly measured due to the missing link. Hence, technological determinism is applied to theorise this study. By including theory, findings presented are well-informed and explained. This is because the theory employed can guide the study, strengthen the methodology, and interpret results comprehensively (Giles & Harrison, 2023).

Technological determinism is a reductionist theory initiated by the American sociologist and economist Thorstein Veblen in the 19th century. He formulated the theory by vindicating complicated phenomena into understandable concepts. Veblen believed that technology causes social changes (Hauer, 2017). This theory emphasises that technology leaves a huge impact on human life. It shapes, influences, and changes their environment in accordance with advancement (Ticau & Hadad, 2022).

According to Munalim (2021), technological determinism is inevitable due to the advancement process led by technology. In fact, this process is iterative because society and technology rely on each other. The definition suggested by scholars clearly shows that technology is one of the reasons the world keeps changing. It has shaped society to move forward according to the progression of the environment.

Though many opposed the ideas of having technology as an autonomous force that determine society, the reality is different. This is evident in today's situation where technological advancement has shaped human behaviour. The way they interact, work, and socialise is unusual compared to previous era where technology is considered as an alien. Fiona (2017) noted that technology has changed the way people live, work, and communicate. As a result, humans tend to rely on technology to complete their tasks.

In linking this theory with the present study, this strategy aims at utilising AI in newsrooms. The theory illustrates that reporters employ robots because of technological advancements. This situation has encouraged them to reskill and upskill to meet the demands of the industry as AI can transform journalism. Reluctance to change will cause them to fall behind. In fact, they will regress to a state where technology is considered an alien concept. As a result, news organisations will be deserted and lost its credibility. This situation will cause them to face deterioration in many aspects such as circulation, advertisement, and revenue.

This study advocates technological determinism because it can theorise the transformation of newsroom. Besides, it is also used to mitigate the anxiety among reporters who are about to make the shift. This is because technological determinism drives changes in human behaviour. Reporters will witness a significant transformation in newsrooms. The way they gather, process, and disseminate information will experience a complete 360-degree change. The result will impress and motivate them to embrace changes. Hence, the framework below (Figure 1) is to visualise the outcome of the research.

Figure 1 illustrates the role of AI in transforming newsrooms, influenced by technological determinism. Two predicted consequences of AI integration in journalism are increased readiness and heightened anxiety about the future of the profession.

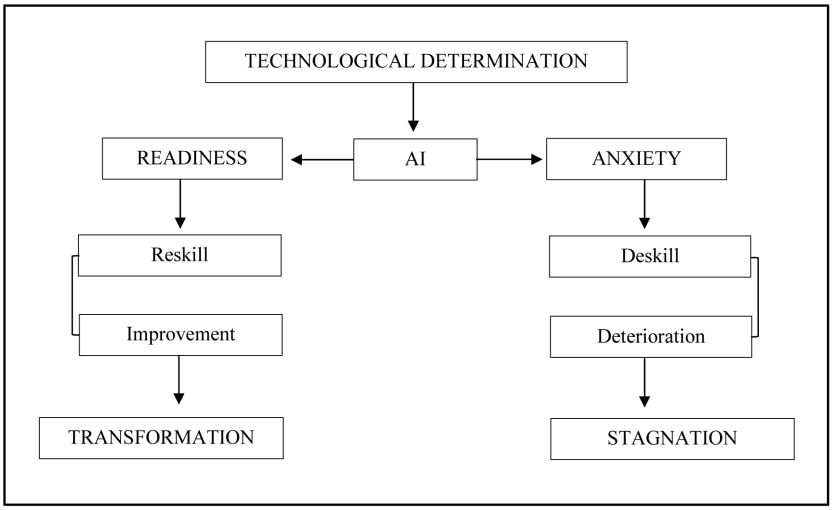

Figure 1: Integrating Artificial Intelligence (AI) in Newsroom

Methodology

Qualitative research is applied to measure reporters' knowledge and perception towards the use of AI in the newsroom. It enables researchers to collect new insights to pursue the objectives of this study. It is because the method plays a significant role in discovering human qualities ranging from perception, experiences, and behaviour. Moreover, this method can also assist researchers in understanding unknown or well-known circumstances among people, organisations, and society (Hafezdzullah & Awan, 2022).

As qualitative research involves collecting non-numerical data as well as generating new insights, an in-depth interview was employed to conduct this study. It is because the technique allows researchers to delve deeper in the quest of detailed information regarding reporters' knowledge and perception towards AI. In fact, this interview technique allows researcher to explore unusual or novel theme to secure extensive data (Rutledge & Hogg, 2020). Due to this, unexpected insights also can be found through the data obtained.

Therefore, a semi-structured interview is employed to gather primary data. It is an appropriate method because it allows participants to answer questions flexibly. Consequently, this approach encourages them to provide meaningful insights that can yield significant findings for the

journalism industry (Creswell, 2007). Interviews were conducted face-to-face to gather information from participants. Before the interviews, appointments were made to ensure the participants could agree to be interviewed considering their busy work schedule. This is because most of them are bound with hectic schedules and loads of works.

The participants were selected using purposive sampling because this type of non-probability sampling allows researchers to select a useful sample for this study. It will assist researchers in discovering individuals who can provide information according to the objectives of this study. Essentially, this type of sampling is preferred because it is best used for qualitative research methods (Nikolopoulou, 2023). Moreover, purposive sampling allows researchers to engage with experts who are reporters, graphic artists, editors, producers, and academics in the local journalism industry.

This study was conducted in Selangor and Kuala Lumpur from May 25th to June 25th, 2024. It engaged 10 informants, comprising employees from various departments at *Sinar Harian* including editorial, graphic design, social media, online, and video production. All of them were selected based on their experience, credibility, and professionalism in journalism. They come from various position ranging from head of department (HOD) to content creators. Their involvement in this study was expected to provide rich information for the research.

Table 1*:* Informants' Background

NO	GENDER	AGE	EDUCATION	EXPERIENCE (YEARS)	POSITION
1	Female	38	Degree	10	Producer
2	Male	38	Diploma	17	HOD of Social Media
3	Male	37	Diploma	16	Senior Graphic artist
4	Male	52	SPM	30	HOD of Graphic
5	Male	35	Degree	12	Assistant Chief Reporter
6	Male	30	Degree	3	Reporter

NO	GENDER	AGE	EDUCATION	EXPERIENCE (YEARS)	POSITION
7	Female	28	Master	1	Reporter
8	Female	26	Degree	1	Reporter
9	Female	24	Degree	1	Reporter
10	Female	24	Degree	1	Content creator

Note. The table shows informants' background from different department at *Sinar Harian*.

Data Analysis and Result

Thematic analysis was employed to evaluate data obtained from the interviews conducted. This method is widely used to understand the behaviours, experiences, and knowledge of participants. It is applied to identify, organise, describe, analyse, and report themes discovered from the data. Furthermore, it is appropriate for analysing extensive qualitative data, ranging from interviews to focus groups. Employing thematic analysis is beneficial because the retrieved data can be transformed into analyses, reports, and patterns (Terry et al., 2017).

Thematic analysis was selected for this study due to its flexible nature. It can be performed without being restrained by any methodologies. Therefore, the researchers have the freedom to steer this study according to the established goals. Indeed, it is adaptable and capable of establishing a clear correlation between the research objectives and the findings. Even though it is easy to use, employing thematic analysis allows researchers to present a precise and organised final report (Nowell et al., 2017).

This study employed the framework described by Braun and Clarke (2006) for the effective implementation of thematic analysis. The framework involves six stages: 1) familiarising with the data; 2) generating initial codes; 3) searching for themes; 4) evaluating themes; 5) defining and naming themes; and 6) producing a report. Researchers perform the procedure iteratively to understand the data provided by the informants. It is to ensure that thematic analysis is executed effectively.

For data analysis, this study applied an inductive approach to guide the coding process. This approach was selected because it allows the researcher freedom to explore data in order to obtain meaningful

and unexpected insights. This is because the inductive approach is not constrained by existing theory or concept. In fact, it allows the researchers to engage with the data accurately when generating themes. According to Mumtaz Begam (2023), inductive approach relies on data-driven process. It generates code organically from the data analysed.

Three themes were found after performing the rigorous thematic analysis procedure suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006). The themes consist of Aware, Enhance and Trust in demonstrating the responses of reporters of *Sinar Harian* towards the integration of AI in their newsrooms. The themes were derived from qualitative data obtained through in-depth interview conducted. After conducting a thorough examination, the themes emerged to illustrate the reporters' though on AI integration in the newsroom.

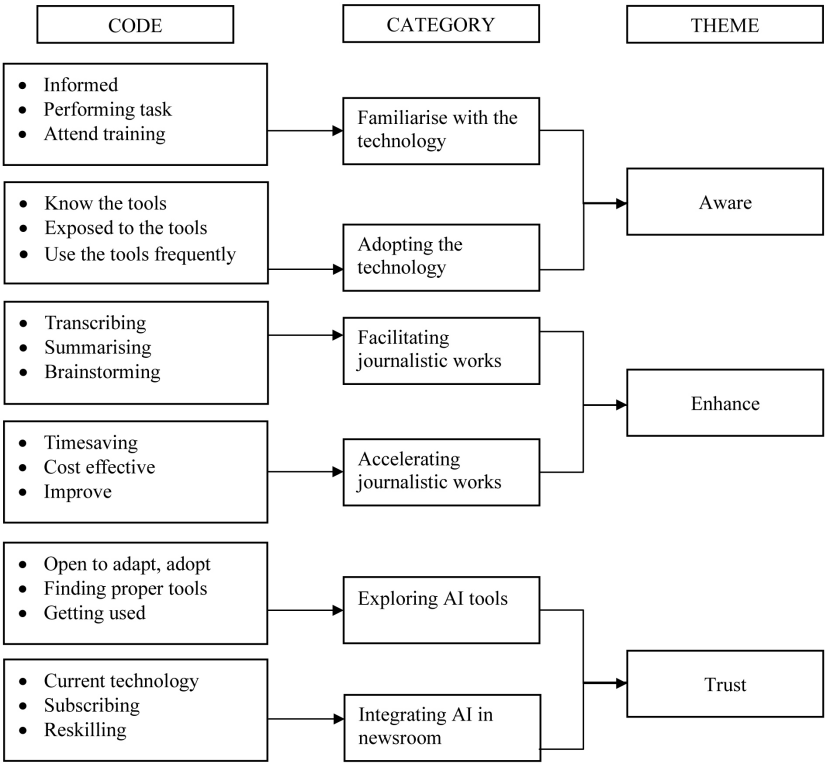

Figure 2: Thematic Analysis Map

Note. The figure shows thematic analysis map according to the framework suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006).

Aware

This theme refers to reporters' level of understanding and knowledge regarding the use of AI in the newsroom. It illustrates that reporters are well-informed about this technology. They are familiar with AI and its application in the newsroom, including various tools crafted for journalistic works. They can effectively use these tools to perform daily tasks. Moreover, they can clarify the technology's use within their respective news organisation. The theme is equivalent with RQ 1: What is the current level of knowledge among journalists regarding AI in the newsroom?

- *Familiar with the Technology*

Most of the informants possess good knowledge about AI and its use in newsroom. Most of them also can explain about the technology soundly.

Informant 2 informed that AI is developed to assist reporter in providing news and collecting data effectively, *"Basically, AI is artificial intelligence, and it is a platform to facilitate reporters in performing tasks. The technology is being used to help reporters to collect information."* Informant 4 indicated that AI is a machine that help reporters streamline their work in the newsroom according to their preferences, "*AI is a tool to facilitate task. Type whatever you want if you use certain software or tool. For example, as a graphic designer, just mention what type of concept you want. Machine will help with what you want. So, it is needed to complete my task."*

Informant 7 stated that AI is a software that can help reporters facilitate their routine in news production, *"AI is a tool that can ease journalistic work such as transcribing recording and simplifying summarisation."* Informant 8 understood that AI is developed to assist various industries in completing their task efficiently, *"AI is a technology used by many in various industries. It depends on what they are doing for example reporters use AI for news making and graphic artists use AI for drawing or graphic purpose. AI is used according to end user's needs."*

- *Adopting the Technology*

Most of the informants understand the significance of using AI in the newsroom to complete their task effectively and meet the objectives of their news organisations.

Informant 1 informed that she uses a tool called play.ht to perform tasks in producing news every day, *"The tool is used for voice over recording to read the news provided. We use paly.ht every day to do voice over. We choose to use the tools because not all our reporters can do voice over as they need time to undergo training."* Informant 3 stated that he uses various of free and paid tools to complete his daily task in newsroom, *"Yes, I'm using and exploring the technology. Mainly I use co-pilot and ChatGPT as well as Mid Journey. I use every day for doing my artwork. Sometimes I use AI for my side jobs or research."*

Informant 5 indicated that he uses AI tool to perform journalistic task but does not use the technology on a daily basis, *"Yes, I'm familiar with AI tool and currently used ChatGPT to perform task. Usually, I use ChatGPT for brainstorming when working on special report or summarising gathered information. I use the tool about two or three times a week."* Informant 6 said that he frequently uses AI tool for various works in news production such as fact checking and translating articles, *"Commonly, I use ChatGPT to perform journalistic works. I use the technology to search and verify information. It helps me translate information from English into Malay. Yes, I'm familiar with AI and often use ChatGPT in my work."*

- *Enhance*

Enhance is the second theme that emerged from the analysis. This theme represents AI as a cooperative technology. It is not only facilitating the journalistic works performed by reporters but it is also accelerating tasks handled in the newsroom. Enhance illustrates that AI is an anticipated technology by reporters in the newsroom. The technology can improve journalistic works, regain audience trust and sustain business prospects. It aligns with de-Lima-Santos and Ceron's (2022) findings. Both cited that the technology can perform journalistic work better than human. The theme is equivalent with RQ 2: How does the integration of AI impact newsroom and journalistic practices?

- *Facilitating journalistic works*

Most of the informants acknowledge that AI simplifies their dull journalistic daily routine which is unavoidable.

Informant 6 indicated that AI ease him in performing journalistic task especially in translating news, *"Yes, AI facilitate my work in producing*

news. It helps me in translating information from English into Malay." Informant 8 stated that using AI has saved her time in producing news more efficiently than before, *"AI facilitates and accelerates my task in the newsroom. Using AI can shorten my time to write news from 1 hour to 30 minutes only."* Informant 9 said that AI has assisted her in generating idea to produce higher-quality news than ever before, *"AI changes the way I'm writing the news. The technology always gives me some ideas to write better news as well as to improve my work."* Informant 10 informed that AI has assisted her in generating ideas for producing news to ensure they are captivating, *"AI gives me idea to write a story since I'm still new in the newsroom. Besides, it helps me rephrasing and translating news to make it more interesting."*

- *Accelerating Journalistic Work*

Most of the informants admit that AI assist them in saving times and delivering their works on time.

Informant 1 informed that AI helps her complete voice-over recording faster than using a human voice.

> "*Using AI help me to do voice-over recording faster. Usually, about five to six takes are made which is around half an hour needed when recording voice over using human voice. With the help of AI, I can save recording time but need to monitor the recording process because AI still cannot surpass human ability in projecting voice over*."

Informant 3 said AI saves time and helps him complete work on time and change his work efficiently, *"AI changes the way I work, and it facilitates in producing artwork, even it is helping to accelerate the work. I can say that AI can save your time and allow you to meet your deadline timely."* Informant 4 indicated that AI is timesaving and cost-effective, making the technology appropriate for use in newsroom to produce higher-quality news, *"A lot of differences can be seen especially saving the time and do some experiment to get the best result."* Informant 7 confirm that adopting AI helps her complete task assigned in the newsroom earlier than expected, *"Making my work faster but you need to be careful because AI tends to do a lot of mistakes."*

Trust

Another significant theme that emerged from this study is trust. It suggests the readiness of reporters to integrate AI into the newsroom.

The technology is considered as a 'tool box' for reporters to perform their task effectively. Based on the data analysed, some of them have shown excitement to adapt and adopt the technology. They even attended training and explored more tools to fit their daily routine such as transcribing, summarising and translating. According to Kelly et al. (2023), trust leads news organisation to learn, adopt, and use the technology in their daily routine tasks. The theme is equivalent to RQ 3: How ready are journalist to adopt AI technologies in the newsroom?

- *Exploring AI Tools*

Most of the informants reveal that they are ready to adapt and adopt AI in the newsroom because they had faith the technology can enhance their performances and news quality.

Informant 3 said that AI is essential for everyone because it has been utilised in various fields, *"Yes, because AI is inevitable. By any means, you need to learn the tools as many fields have started using the technology. I want to learn ChatGPT because it is more stable."* Informant 5 said that he is ready to adopt AI in his work and wants to learn the tools to perform tasks efficiently, *"So far so good, we have no problem in using AI for completing daily task. I want to learn ChatGPT because it can help me to perform my task better, but I have not much time though it was already downloaded on my phone."*

Informant 6 indicated that he is ready to use AI with meticulous steps due to the technology's weakness, *"Yes, I'm ready. As a reporter I need to adapt with current technology but cannot rely on the technology because of its weaknesses like lack of human touch and uncertain information."* Informant 8 informed that AI is needed for her journalistic work and she wanted to learn more about the technology, *"Yes, now I realised it is important in my career to use AI. So far, I want to learn Cockatoo because it helps me a lot in doing my transcription with ease."*

- *Integrating AI in Newsroom*

Most of the informants ready to integrate AI in the newsroom because the technology in inevitable in the newsroom because it offers quality in their works.

Informant 2 stated that AI not only ease his work, but it also makes him relied on the technology to produce news, *"Last time I was so*

relied on primary data to perform my task. With the help of AI, now I'm relying on secondary data provided by AI." Informant 8 indicated that AI is necessary in the newsroom as long as it benefits reporters in performing their tasks, *"Yes, we should integrate AI in the newsroom, but it must be efficient and user friendly for reporters to perform their task in the newsroom."*

Informant 9 informed that AI should be adopted because the technology can speed up the news production process, *"Newsroom need to speed up the way they produce and spread the news if they can ensure the information provided to the audience is accurate."* Informant 10 said that AI should be integrated into the newsroom because it offers more benefits than drawbacks, *"Yes, it should be integrated in the newsroom. I can see AI has more advantages than disadvantages."*

Conclusion

This study found that three themes – which are Aware, Enhance and Trust – demonstrated that AI is not a destructive creation as claimed by a few scholars (Miroshnichenko, 2018; Ali and Hassoun, 2019; Guanah et al., 2020; Santos, 2023; Cugurullo & Acheampong, 2023; Pena-Fernandez et al., 2023). In fact, the technology is assistive in various fields such as finance and healthcare (Ramola, 2023; Sharma et al., 2023). This aligns with the study by Luckin et al. (2022) which found that AI has the potential to enhance skills, job quality, and life. Therefore, many industries are racing against their competitors to embrace this technology. The potential of the technology truly pushes them to go beyond in benefitting people at large.

The emerging themes illustrate that AI is inevitable. It has the potential to transform the face of journalism. This aligns with a study conducted by de-Lima-Santos and Ceron (2022), who found that using AI in journalism benefits news agencies. The technology can perform journalistic work better than humans. The findings are also supported by data gathered from informants. Most of them view AI as a tool or technology that can facilitate and accelerate their works in the newsroom. The tools used can assist them in producing quality news and regaining trust among audiences. This is contrary to the opinion that AI is a threat that can replace the role of reporters in newsroom (Sadia, 2020; Qiran, 2023).

Apart from that, the findings have met the objectives of this study to measure the level of knowledge possessed by reporters about AI. Based on the information gathered, most of the informants are aware of the advent of the technology. They are aware that AI is widely used across various industries, including journalism. They are also aware of various tools designed for delivering tasks in the newsroom. However, most of them are familiar with ChatGPT because the tool is largely designed for producing news, acquiring information, and verifying facts. Their knowledge of AI encourages them to adapt and adopt the technology in executing numerous tasks related to news production.

Based on the data gathered from informants, most of them acknowledge that using AI has transformed the way they work in the newsroom. The technology has improved news production in several important aspects such as time-saving, cost-effectiveness, and productivity. Tools used such as ChatGPT, Cockatoo, Eleven Labs and Bing have facilitated and accelerated their tasks. The tools also lessen their burden by helping them cope with dull and repetitive tasks. Due to this, AI can be hailed as a saviour rather than a destroyer for reporters. The technology enriches and enhances their works to meet the quality expected by the audiences. Simply, these findings have fulfilled the objectives of this study on measuring impact of AI in newsroom.

As AI infiltrate various fields, most informants agree on integrating the technology into newsrooms. Most of them are ready to use various tools designed for producing news. They use the tools because they believe that the technology can assist them better in performing journalistic works. Apart from improving news quality, the tools also help lessen their burden in automating dull and repetitive tasks. Based on the data gathered, they opt to use the technology due to trust, which motivates them to adapt, adopt and use the technology efficiently (Kelly et al., 2023). These findings have fulfilled the objectives of this study on gauging reporters' readiness to adopt AI in the newsroom.

The result shows that reporters at *Sinar Harian* are ready to integrate AI in the newsroom. They embrace the technology because it can help them improve their works in producing news, attracting audiences, and growing business prospect. This is in line with studies conducted by Ramola (2023) and Sharma et al. (2023), which found that AI may change the façade of many industries. The result also can

be linked with theory of technological determinism which encourages the use of technology as it can shape society, organisation, and people. As theorised, AI changes reporters' routine, outcomes, and behaviours in the newsroom. The use of this technology in journalism has resulted in transformation, or positive changes (Fiona, 2017).

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Healthcare Workers' Challenges in Managing Disease Outbreaks: A Systematic Review from an Islamic Perspective

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Abstract: Healthcare workers (HCWs) are prone to be at risk to health and safety hazards, particularly during disease outbreaks. This study examined the challenges confronted by HCWs in providing care and service during disease outbreaks. A systematic literature review (SLR) was adopted as the

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main approach of this study. A total of 61 articles were retrieved from two databases, Scopus and Web of Science, and analysed. Knowledge deficit and communication issues were identified as among the major challenges confronted by HCWs during disease outbreaks. These challenges were later analysed from an Islamic perspective by examining the responses provided in the Qur'ān and Ḥadīths. This study puts forward relevant Islamic guidelines on dealing with challenges during a disease outbreak that have been scarce in the literature. The study received approval from the IIUM Research Ethics Committee (IREC). It is also part of a research project on preventing and controlling disease outbreaks, as well as dealing with emergencies, funded by the Islamic Advisory group (AIG).

Keywords: disease outbreak, healthcare workers (HCWs), Islam, systematic review, knowledge deficit, communication issues

Abstrak: Petugas kesihatan (*healthcare workers*, HCW) terdedah kepada risiko bahaya kesihatan dan keselamatan terutamanya semasa penularan wabak penyakit. Kajian ini mengkaji cabaran yang dihadapi oleh HCW dalam usaha mereka untuk menyediakan penjagaan dan perkhidmatan semasa wabak penyakit berlaku. Tinjauan literatur sistematik (*systematic literature review*, SLR) digunakan sebagai pendekatan utama kajian ini. Sebanyak 61 artikel diperoleh daripada dua pangkalan data, iaitu Scopus dan Web of Science, dan dianalisis. Defisit pengetahuan dan isu komunikasi merupakan antara cabaran utama yang dihadapi oleh HCW ketika penularan wabak. Dapatan ini kemudiannya dianalisis daripada perspektif Islam dengan mengkaji panduan yang termaktub dalam al-Qur'ān dan Hadis. Kajian ini antara lain mengemukakan garis panduan tentang cara menangani wabak penyakit daripada perspektif Islam yang jarang dibincangkan dalam literatur. Kajian ini telah mendapat kelulusan daripada Jawatankuasa Etika Penyelidikan UIAM (IREC) dan merupakan sebahagian daripada projek penyelidikan mengenai pencegahan dan kawalan wabak penyakit serta pengurusan kecemasan yang dibiayai oleh Islamic Advisory group (AIG).

Kata kunci: wabak penyakit, pekerja penjagaan kesihatan (HCW), Islam, kajian sistematik, defisit pengetahuan, isu komunikasi

Introduction

Disease outbreaks have been occurring more frequently than ever. A prolonged and highly contagious disease outbreak may disrupt the economy, political stability, education, and social well-being of communities. A disease outbreak occurs when a number of infected

cases exceeds what is normally expected in a specific geographical region and eventually turns into an epidemic once it spreads to a broader geographical area. More than 1,100 epidemic events have been verified by the World Health Organization (WHO) since the beginning of the year 2000 (World Health Report, 2007). An infectious disease that spreads at an unprecedented rate to a wider population across the globe would eventually cause a pandemic. In recent years, the rapid spread of a novel coronavirus known as COVID-19 had pushed WHO to declare it as a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) within a month after it started as an outbreak in the city of Wuhan, China. A coordinated international response was called to contain the transmission. The disease was later announced as a pandemic in March 2020, and to-date, it has caused millions of fatalities worldwide.

Healthcare workers (HCWs) play an instrumental role in any public health emergencies, including disease outbreaks, epidemics, or pandemics, as they are the frontliners who provide care and services directly or indirectly to patients. In addition to doctors and nurses, HCWs also include those managing medical equipment, laboratory technicians, ambulance drivers, and even medical waste handlers. The Health Protection Surveillance Centre (2021) defined HCWs as anyone who works in a healthcare or social care setting, including healthcare students on clinical placement, frontline healthcare workers, and other healthcare workers not in direct patient contact.

HCWs are the backbone of the healthcare institutions, and yet, their health and safety tend to be at risk (Joseph & Joseph, 2016). They put their lives at risk, particularly when dealing with a novel disease of which little is known concerning how it spreads or how to contain its transmission. Any public health emergencies impose a great challenge to HCWs, necessitating them to secure adequate support beyond resources and facilities that extends to mental and spiritual support in order to keep them going. Understanding the actual challenges HCWs encounter during disease outbreaks or any other public health emergencies would help agencies and communities to render the right support to them in order to sustain their resilience and preparedness so that they can continue to provide care to patients during such challenging times.

This study used a systematic literature review (SLR) to examine the challenges confronted by HCWs in preventing and controlling disease

outbreaks. The dominant themes that emerged from the SLR were then analysed from an Islamic perspective by examining how the Qur'ān and Ḥadīth *address* these challenges. Even though guidelines from the Qur'ān and Ḥadīth are more encompassing and transcend national or cultural barriers, they appear to be less dominant in the literature. This study hopes to fill the void of what science and healthcare experts have yet to explain and resolve at present in order to benefit HCWs in navigating challenges during public health crises.

Disease outbreaks from the Islamic perspective

Many verses in the Holy Qur'ān and Ḥadīth of the Prophet (PBUH) demonstrate the preventive measures that can be taken to avert the transmission of infectious diseases. However, the guidelines on disease outbreaks based on the Holy Qur'ān and Ḥadīth, scholarly consensus, and analogical reasoning have received limited recognition and are scattered. In Arabic, the term "*wabā'*" is mainly used to refer to an epidemic, especially one with a large-scale impact. In addition, the term "*ṭāʿūn*" (plague) is commonly used by Muslim scholars to describe a situation involving the deaths of many people as a result of an outbreak. However, the Holy Qur'ān does not use these terms; instead, it uses the word "*rijz*," especially to describe the calamities sent to earlier nations. For example, the Qur'ān mentions, "Hence, we stroke upon the evil-doers a *rijz* from heaven for their evil-doing." (Qur'ān 2:59)

The word "*rijz*" has several connotations, including sin, punishment (ʿadhāb), plague, idolatry, and insinuating whispers (*waswasah*). A Ḥadīth explains,

> Narrated 'Amir bin Sa`d bin Abi Waqqas: That he heard Usama bin Zaid speaking to Sa`d, saying, "Allah's Messenger (PBUH) mentioned the plague and said, 'It is a means of punishment with which some nations were punished and some of it has remained, and it appears now and then. So, whoever hears that there is an outbreak of plague in some land, he should not go to that land, and if the plague breaks out in the land where one is already present, one should not run away from that land, escaping from the plague." (Al-Bukhari: 6974)

The Ḥadīth and Qur'ānic verse above explain the reason Allah SWT sends down a plague, which serves as an affliction to transgressors and

as a reminder and a lesson to others to remain steadfast in adhering to His commands. In addition, the Ḥadīth emphasises the importance of not exposing oneself to a disease by avoiding the place where the infection has spread; as for those who are already at the place, they are prevented from leaving as they would likely infected others if they were to travel. This Ḥadīth thus provides a clear guideline on how to prevent an infectious disease from spreading to other places.

Being inflicted with an infectious disease also serves as a test to the Believers in terms of their patience and trust in Allah SWT. The Believers who pass this test by being patient and maintaining a strong belief that nothing will be inflicted upon them without the will of Allah SWT have been promised a reward similar to that awarded to martyrs. 'Aisha narrated,

> (The wife of the Prophet) asked Allah's Apostle about plague, and Allah's Apostle informed her saying, "Plague was a punishment which Allah used to send on whom He wished, but Allah made it a blessing for the believers. None (among the believers) remains patient in a land in which plague has broken out and considers that nothing will befall him except what Allah has ordained for him, but that Allah will grant him a reward similar to that of a martyr" (Al-Bukhari: 5734)

Similarly, in another Ḥadīth, Anas bin Malik narrated the Prophet (PBUH) as saying, "Plague is the cause of martyrdom of every Muslim (who dies because of it)" (Al-Bukhari: 2830). This Ḥadīth indirectly inspires Muslims to be strong and optimistic and to always have good thoughts towards Allah SWT in dealing with any hardship, as it is a trial to assess one's faith that comes along with a great blessing from Him for those who are patient.

Furthermore, those who suffer from a disease should neither be in despair nor blame their fate but to seek the right treatment and strictly adhere to all public health directives and regulations provided by dedicated state agencies to prevent further harm. The Qur'ān and Ḥadīth provide information and guidelines on how to prevent and control disease outbreaks, as well as how to deal with public health emergencies. Usamah bin Sharik said in a Ḥadīth narrated by at-Tirmidhi,

> "Some Bedouins asked, 'O Messenger of Allah (PBUH) shall we treat (our ill)?' He said, 'Yes, O worshipers of Allah! Use

> remedies. For indeed Allah did not make a disease but He made a cure for it' - or - 'a remedy. Except for one disease.' They said, 'O Messenger of Allah (PBUH)! What is it?' He said, 'Old age.'" (Jami` at-Tirmidhi: 2038)

The role of HCWs in providing care to those affected by a disease outbreak is fundamental and challenging at the same time. Thus, this study aimed to address the challenges encountered by HCWs and subsequently provide guidelines to help them navigate disease outbreaks and emergencies from an Islamic lens.

Methods

This study concurs to a widely cited definition of a SLR by Fink (2005), which defines it as "a systematic, explicit, comprehensive, and reproducible method for identifying, evaluating, and synthesising the existing body of completed and recorded work produced by researchers, scholars, and practitioners" (cited in Okoli & Schabram, 2010, p.1). A SLR was used to address this study's specific research questions, namely:

(a) what are the major challenges experienced by healthcare workers in preventing and controlling disease outbreaks and in dealing with emergencies?
(b) to what extent does the existing literature address the prevention and control of disease outbreaks and the dealing with emergencies? and
(c) to what extent do the holy Qur'ān and Ḥadīth address the prevention and control of disease outbreaks and emergencies?

The research questions were constructed using the PICo formula, which addresses a specific population, interest, or context. The population of this study refers to the HCWs where the interest and context refer to the challenges they face in preventing and controlling a disease outbreak during a public health emergency. The SLR enabled the researchers to understand the breadth and depth of the existing body of knowledge. It also helped the researchers in identifying the gap related to healthcare providers' challenges in preventing and controlling a disease outbreak, as well as in dealing with emergencies (Xiao & Watson, 2017). Compared to other conventional style of literature reviews, the SLR offers a transparent article retrieving process, a wider area of research, and significant objectives to mitigate research bias (Shaffril et al., 2019).

To ensure a transparent research process, the study developed a review protocol that explains the entire process of conducting the SLR.

Review protocol and publication standard

A review protocol is essential in conducting a SLR as it enhances the methodological transparency, transferability, and replicability of the work (Shaffril et al., 2020; Mengist et al., 2020; Xiao & Watson, 2019). Similarly, the publication standard provides useful information for others to assess the quality and rigour of a review (Shaffril et al., 2020; Wong et al., 2013, p. 2). This study adopted the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Review and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) as its publication standard. PRISMA is widely accepted and endorsed by several editorial organisations, including Cochrane, the World Association of Medical Editors, and 180 bio-medical journals (Haddaway et al., 2018). PRISMA 2020 was adopted in this study as it has been designed primarily for the systematic review of studies that evaluate the effects of health interventions, irrespective of the design of the included studies (Page et al., 2021, p. 2).

Resources

The Scopus and Web of Science databases were used to obtain the relevant literature for the review. The former originates from Europe and has the largest abstract and citation database of peer-reviewed journals. Web of Science originates from the United States, and it covers the oldest publications as its indexed and archived records dated back to 1900 (Falagas, Pitsouni, Malietzis, & Papas, 2008, p. 339). The SLR process adopted in this study entailed the following steps:

i. Identification
ii. Screening
iii. Eligibility
iv. Data extraction
v. Data analysis and synthesis

Identification

The SLR process started by the identification of keywords, followed by the process of searching for related and similar words obtained from thesaurus, dictionary, and past research. The search strings for Scopus and Web of Science were developed on 24 March 2022 using

the following syntax: TITLE-ABS-KEY ((challenge* OR constraint* or problem*) AND ("healthcare giver*" OR "healthcare worker*" OR "healthcare provider*" or "doctor*" OR "nurse*") AND (prevent* AND control*) AND ("disease outbreak" OR "epidemic*" OR "pandemic*" OR "endemic*") AND (deal* OR "manage*" OR "handle*") AND ("emergency*" OR "health crisis" OR "health crises" OR "public health cris*")). The keywords were extended with synonyms, alternative spellings, and related terms. For example, the frequently used synonyms of "healthcare giver" in the literature are "healthcare provider" and "healthcare worker". Additional keywords representing healthcare workers, such as "doctor" and "nurse" were also used to generate more articles. At this stage, the study retrieved a total of 103 articles from the two databases, with 86 articles from Scopus and 17 articles from Web of Science.

Screening

All the articles were screened based on several inclusion and exclusion criteria. The first criterion was related to language, where only articles published in the English language were selected. Three papers were removed as they were published in French and Italian languages. Next, the type of literature the researchers decided to exclude were gray papers, books, conference proceedings, non-systematic and narrative literature review articles, and editorial notes. Articles that were found to be redundant were also removed. However, the articles retrieved were not limited to any specific timeline and geographical area in order to increase the possibility of obtaining more related articles. The articles were derived from a wide area, mainly from the fields of medicine, nursing, and social sciences. A total of 24 articles were removed at this stage, resulting in 79 articles retained. Then, the full articles were downloaded for further examination.

Eligibility

The 79 remaining papers were prepared for the eligibility stage to determine if the articles were fit for the purpose of the study. At this stage, the researchers thoroughly examined the title, abstract, and main content of each article to ensure the articles addressed the research objectives. Finally, 18 articles were excluded, as 12 articles were not within the scope of the study and 6 articles did not answer any of the research questions. The study thus had 61 articles remaining for analysis (Figure 1).

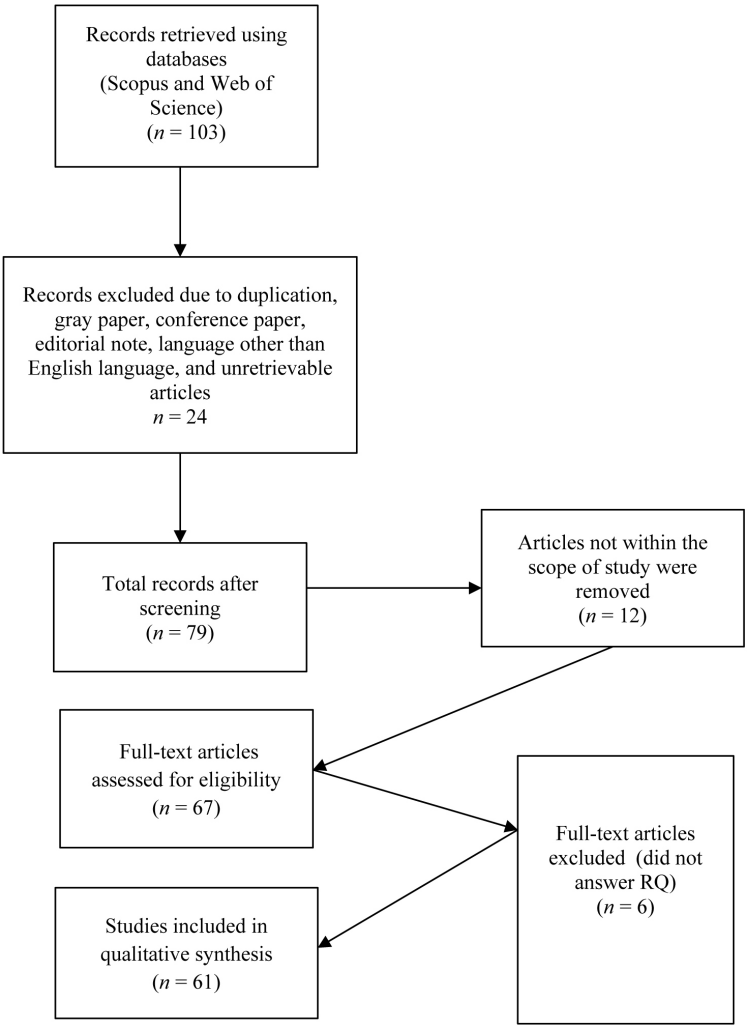

Figure 1: Flow diagram of the study (adapted from Shaffril et al., 2019)

Data abstraction and analysis

This study adopted an integrative review, a technique that analyses and synthesises diverse research designs (quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods). Thematic analysis was adopted to develop themes and sub-themes. Before developing the themes, the study examined all 61 articles by extracting statements that answer the research questions. All extracts were further analysed using a coding method, where the

researchers coded keywords based on the statement found in the extract. Next, similar codes were grouped together. Several dominant themes emerged from this process. This research is supported by the Qur'ān *and* approved Ḥadīth in Islamic jurisprudence, i.e. *ṣaḥīḥ* or *hasan* Ḥadīth, and it avoids *ḍaʿīf* (weak) Ḥadīth. The translation by a reputable Islamic scholar, Mufti Muhammad Taqi Usmani, was used due to the following reasons:

i. The English language used is modern and simple English, rather than archaic forms of the language (such as the pronouns "thee," "thou," and "thy") or poetic English;
ii. The work is an interpretation of the Qur'ān rather than a mere literal translation of Arabic words into English. Even though his work is an interpretation, he kept the original construction of the Arabic text when possible;
iii. The work is considered a translation of the Qur'ān and not a lengthy tafsir or commentary of the Qur'ān; and
iv. The translation avoids using substantial interpretations that are usually placed within brackets or lengthy footnotes, which could disrupt the reading flow.

Findings

The SLR analysis produced a total of five themes on the challenges faced by HCWs in managing disease outbreaks and dealing with emergencies. The main themes are knowledge deficit, communication issues, psychological health, hospital management, and administration. However, this article only presents an in-depth discussion of the first two themes, namely, knowledge deficit and communication issues.

Knowledge deficit

An outbreak creates an unfamiliar situation, causing a high level of uncertainty among HCWs due to the scarcity of information about the infectious disease. Not knowing how the disease spreads leaves HCWs uncertain about what to do to protect themselves while providing care to patients in healthcare facilities. Several factors were found to contribute to the knowledge gap, including inadequate training received by HCWs on the proper way to manage an infectious disease. This issue was highlighted in more than 20 studies conducted across various countries, such as South Africa (see Scott, Smit, & Jenkins, 2021), Uganda

(see Martins et al., 2020), Liberia (Oji et al., 2018), United Kingdom (Hoernke et al., 2021), China (Cai et al., 2022), and the United States (Aruru, Truong, & Clark, 2021), which highlighted the lack of training in infection, preventive, and control (IPC) among HCWs. For example, the SLR revealed that despite having the highest tuberculosis (TB) incidence rate in the world, South Africa did not impose mandatory national training on managing the disease to HCWs in the country. A study stated that,

> "...it became evident that the nurses had received no training on how to use the TB screening tool and were therefore uninformed regarding the criteria for a TB 'screen-positive' patient and the appropriate actions required." (Scott, Smit, & Jenkins, 2019, p. 556)

Likewise, the HCWs in Liberia did not receive adequate IPC training to deal with Ebola Virus Disease (EVD) when it was declared as PHEIC in 2014. IPC training is instrumental not only to contain an outbreak but also to reduce HCWs' infection while providing care to patients (Oji et al., 2018). In this context, in addition to being vulnerable to be infected by the virus, HCWs could also be part of the transmission chain in the healthcare facility and to a wider community outside the facility. Furthermore, a lack of training affected their ability to provide optimal care to COVID-19 patients, as experienced by primary care nurses in South Africa (Crowley et al., 2021). Interestingly, several articles highlighted the importance of in situ training or simulation-based training, which takes place in the actual clinical environment in order to increase HCWs' confidence to execute their tasks during a public health emergency (see Wong et al., 2020; Goh et al., 2020). Simulation and scenario-based training are useful to prepare HCWs to provide care during high-pressure situations. Such training optimises work flows and helps in the implementation of protective details through simulation of a real emergency situation. Some countries even integrate simulation training for the management of infectious disease response with disaster response (particularly in countries that are prone to natural disasters).

Insufficient knowledge to manage an outbreak would not only limit HCWs' ability to provide quality care to patients but also induce fear in carrying out their tasks. Fear of contracting the disease has created resistance among HCWs to engage and treat patients. Thus, adequate knowledge and skills in dealing with public health emergencies is

paramount in order to empower HCWs and communities to protect themselves from infections and subsequently reduce the fear and myth associated with an outbreak.

The value of knowledge in Islam

Knowledge holds a high and special position in Islam. Allah SWT has created humankind and entrusted them with the ability to manage their lives. This requires humans to acquire knowledge to make informed decisions in all their dealings. In the context of managing disease outbreaks, it is imperative for HCWs to be equipped with updated knowledge that would empower them to provide care safely and effectively. The importance of knowledge is highlighted in the first ***āyah*** revealed to the Prophet (PBUH), in which Allah SWT gave clear instructions to read in order to acquire knowledge,

> "Read with the name of your Lord who created (everything), He created man from a clot of blood, Read and your Lord is the most gracious, who imparted knowledge by means of the pen, He taught man what he did not know" (Qur'ān 96:1-5)

Those who possess knowledge would understand their purpose of creation and their relationship with Allah SWT, enabling them to become better servants of Allah SWT. Hence, all Believers should strive to seek knowledge not only for their success in this world but more importantly to obtain the pleasure of Allah SWT. In a Ḥadīth, Abu Hurayrah narrated**,**

> The Prophet (PBUH) said: If anyone acquires knowledge that should be sought seeking the Face of Allah, but he acquires it only to get some worldly advantage, he will not experience the arf, i.e. the fragrance, of Paradise" (Abi Dawud: 3664).

Allah SWT elevates the status of those who are knowledgeable, mentioning them in many verses in the Qur'ān, "...And Allah will raise those, in ranks, who have believed and are given knowledge. Allah is well-aware of what you do" (Qur'ān 58: 11), and "…And among humans and beasts and cattle, there are those having different colours as well. Only those of His slaves fear Allah who are knowledgeable. Surely Allah is Mighty, Forgiving." (Qur'ān 35: 28)

The significance of possessing knowledge on dealing with disease outbreaks is derived from the story of *Ṭāʿūn ʿAmawās* during the reign

of ʿUmar bin al-Khaṭṭāb in 17H. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān bin ʿAuf affirmed ʿUmar's decision to stay away from the city of Shām after he sought advice from the companions,

> "I have with me a knowledge of it, that I heard Allah's Messenger peace be upon him as saying: If you hear of its presence (the presence of plague) in a land, don't enter it, but if it spreads in the land where you are, don't fly from it." (Sahih al-Bukhari: 5729)

Even though he was a caliph, Umar al-Khattab decided to listen to the advice given by ʿAbd al-Raḥmān bin ʿAuf, who was knowledgeable about the plague. It is only with knowledge that mankind is capable of making the right decisions that will save lives. Disease outbreaks are sudden events that require healthcare facilities to be proactive in preparing their health personnel with relevant knowledge and skills. In this context, empowering HCWs with a new set of skills and knowledge is pivotal to ensure they know how to protect themselves while treating patients. Islam emphasises taking proactive measures to mitigate the negative effects of undesirable events. Allah SWT gives a clear reminder in the Qur'ān, commanding, "O you who believe, be on your guard, and march in groups, or march all together." (Qur'ān 4: 71)

The importance of being prepared for hard times is highlighted in the Qur'ān in the story of Yūsuf, who suggested to the Egyptian king a strategy to overcome famine and drought by saving grain for seven years:

> "You will grow crops for seven years consecutively. So, what you have harvested, leave it in its ear, except a little which you eat. Then seven hard years shall come after that, which shall eat up what you have stored for them, except a little which you preserve (to sow)" (Qur'ān 12: 47-48).

Hence, Islam highly encourages the believers to be proactive, as it enables them to be prepared to face any calamity or, at the very least, to minimise the undesirable impact of such calamity. Adequate knowledge reduces the uncertainty, fear, and myth associated with an outbreak and improves one's preparedness in the midst of an emergency. Thus, healthcare facilities should be proactive in providing training to upskill HCWs, enabling them to provide quality care to patients and minimise the risk of infection during a public health emergency.

Communication issues

The ultimate goal of communication during a public health emergency is to ensure the people, including HCWs, have access to crucial information that empowers them to take the appropriate action to protect themselves. In view of its importance, the WHO and Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) have produced communication guidelines, manuals, and training as guidance during public health emergencies (see WHO, 2005; 2017; CDC, 2018). However, this study found multiple barriers that impede effective communication during an emergency, including media hype and poor technology adoption.

Media hype

The media play an essential role in ensuring accurate and timely information reaches everyone in the community during an outbreak. Breaking the chain of infection requires a collective effort. Hence, every individual must know how to protect themselves from the disease. However, managing information during a volatile and uncertain situation, such as a disease outbreak, appears to be a struggle. Like the virus, information spreads rapidly, including fake information that could hamper an effective public health response. The articles reviewed show that media hype has created misconceptions and incited fear, subsequently influencing public opinion and the behaviour of the community and HCWs during public health emergencies.

Media hype is a deliberate and sustained effort by the media to exaggerate a particular subject in order to gain audience attention or to make them behave in certain ways. For example, during the EVD outbreak in West Africa, people refrained themselves from going to healthcare centres due to fear of contracting the disease at the healthcare facilities as a result of media hype (Mase et al., 2017; Koenig, Majestic, & Burns, 2014). Similarly, media hype created fear, stigma, and apprehension among health care providers, causing them to resist engaging and treating patients due to fear of contracting the disease, leading to the closure of many healthcare facilities (Ansumana et al., 2017). Media hype can distort public understanding of a disease, amplify misinformation, and impede the effectiveness of preventive measures established by health authorities. This scenario could lead to a surge in cases that would cripple healthcare facilities, as HCWs might not be able to cope with the influx of patients. Therefore, the media

should be cautious in reporting a disease outbreak, aiming to educate the community, enhance their preparedness, and subsequently break the chain of infection in order to save lives.

The importance of verifying information in Islam

Islam prohibits the believers from spreading false information, lies, or hype, or slandering, or simply gossiping as these acts bring harm to the people. This prohibition also applies to the messages created without referring to reliable sources. Verifying the source of information is mandatory before one believes or shares it with others. Allah SWT makes this clear in the following verse of the Qur'ān: "O you who believe, if a sinful person brings you a report, verify its correctness, lest you should harm a people out of ignorance, and then become remorseful on what you did" (Qur'ān 49:6).

At present times, media users are engulfed with information that comes not only from the mainstream media but also from social media platforms owned by unknown sources. This scenario highlights the need to be more vigilant and critical in assessing any information received and not believing or sharing it with others before verifying the information with credible sources. The Qur'ān states that regulations should be established to govern the dissemination and sharing of information during a crisis. The establishment of supervision teams at national and international levels is deemed necessary. It is mentioned in the Qur'ān that for any unknown occurrences, Muslims are required to consult those who have specific knowledge (qualified specialists) about it. The Qur'ān states that, "We did not send (messengers) before you other than men whom We inspired with revelation. So, ask the people (having the knowledge) of the Reminder (the earlier Scriptures), if you do not know." (Qur'ān 16: 43).

The following verse also shows that referring to scholars, experts, or people with authority is also a part of Islamic teaching: "O you who believe, obey Allah and obey the Messenger and those in authority among you..." (Qur'ān 4: 59). In this regard, consultation with credible health authorities or agencies who have specific knowledge (qualified) is deemed necessary before one makes a major decision. Receiving information consistently from health experts would enhance HCWs' preparedness in facing a severe disease outbreak, especially if it is caused by a new virus. For example, in the case of COVID-19, the virus

continues to mutate resulting in the emergence of new variants, and scientists have yet to reach a concrete conclusion about its nature. Thus, HCWs need to be alerted of any additional information or changes taking place from time to time.

Islam also prohibits the believers from distorting facts, as the religion emphasises the importance of honesty and truthfulness in communicating messages. The Qur'ān states, "But those of them who were unjust substituted another word for the one that was said to them. So, We sent down upon them a scourge from the heavens, because they had been transgressing" (Qur'ān 2: 59)

During the recent COVID-19 crisis, the struggle was not only in managing the pandemic but also in addressing the infodemic, as too much information including false and misleading information was circulating both in digital space or offline. As a result, it was difficult to discern accurate guidance that affected decision making. The spread of misinformation posed significant threats to public health and wellbeing, particularly when the public were being misled into actions against the standard operating procedures (SOP) set by the authority.

Poor technology adoption

An airborne disease such as COVID-19 requires physical distancing in order to reduce the risk of infection. As a result, during the COVID-19 pandemic, healthcare facilities had to minimise physical contact among HCWs and limit the interaction between HCWs and patients. Regular physical face-to-face communication was replaced by virtual meetings via online platforms to reduce the risk of exposure to infection. Adhering to the SOP, such as isolation, physical distancing, and wearing personal protective equipment (PPE), required the use of mediated communication as a substitute for in-person communication.

Technology adoption is also vital to facilitate information exchange that would mitigate the risk of infection. During a public health emergency, a patient's information needs to be obtained prior to admission or treatment, as such information is essential to help HCWs decide whether the patient needs to be isolated. In this context, electronic medical records (EMR) have been useful, particularly for inter and intra hospital transfer in which patients' medical records can be easily shared online. However, challenges emerged when different

healthcare facilities or departments did not use the same EMR system (Meyer et al., 2021). There were situations where patients were not aware of their status, and hence, were unable to provide updates of their health conditions during admission. The lack of information could cause a delay in admission and affect HCWs' readiness to provide appropriate treatment to the patients. In the recent COVID-19 pandemic, the application of information technology was extended to the remote monitoring of patients for COVID-19 symptoms, where the data were sent to the physician through WiFi technology (Li et al., 2021). This arrangement enabled data to be transferred effectively and minimised infection in the healthcare centre.

Technology in Islam

Technology helps people in various aspects of life, including saving the time at work, facilitating knowledge transfer, and providing better education and advanced medical treatment. Islam promotes goodness and encourages the Believers to be creative and innovative in their worldly affairs, as highlighted in the following Ḥadīth: "Whoever introduces a good practice that is followed after him, will have a reward for that and the equivalent of their reward, without that detracting from their reward in the slightest." (Ibn Mājah: 207)

In addition, Anas reported in the following Ḥadīth that Allah's Messenger happened to pass by people who had been busy in grafting trees:

> Thereupon he said: "If you were not to do it, it might be good for you. (So they abandoned this practice) and there was a decline in the yield. He (the Holy Prophet) happened to pass by them (and said): What has gone wrong with your trees? They said: You said so and so. Thereupon he said: You have better knowledge (of a technical skill) in the affairs of the world." (Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim: 2363)

The above Ḥadīths illustrate the benefits of adopting innovation, including good practices that would bring great value in human life and would be rewarded by Allah SWT. In this context, online communication helps HCWs to protect themselves from being exposed to infectious diseases and to adopt good practices at work during an emergency. Technology integration in communication expedites the process of information transfer by facilitating interpersonal communication through mediated

channels and apps when face-to-face communication is not possible. This enables communication to occur within a safe environment, thus helping to break the chain of infection in health facilities and communities.

Conclusion

Islam is a *din* that covers all aspects of human affairs, and it greatly emphasises the well-being of the people. This study found two major challenges confronted by HCWs in managing disease outbreaks. The challenges impede their ability to provide quality care to patients and hinder their effectiveness in implementing preventive measures to control the outbreaks. Both knowledge and communication are significant aspects that should not be ignored in managing a public health crisis, as both elements are intertwined and deeply valued in Islam. Knowledge refers to the information one acquires that improves his/her understanding about a particular subject or issue. In Islam, knowledge is fundamental as it guides people in their actions and decisions that would bring goodness in this life and the hereafter. In the context of disease outbreaks, access to knowledge is mandatory as it helps HCWs to not only provide quality care to those in need but also to protect their own lives. Therefore, HCWs should be equipped with relevant knowledge and skills that would help them navigate complex and critical health-related scenarios during disease outbreaks. However, inadequate training was found to be a major factor contributing to HCWs' knowledge deficit, thus compromising their effectiveness and safety at work. The lack of knowledge also creates high levels of uncertainty leading to fear, which affects HCWs' motivation and performance. This study thus underscores the importance of providing sufficient training to HCWs aimed at reskilling and upskilling them in order to increase their preparedness in dealing with public health emergencies.

The second challenge is related to communication issues where media hype and access to technology appear to be among the major impediments of HCWs' effectiveness at work. Islam prohibits any form of exaggeration, hype, misinformation, or lie in view of their detrimental implications on individuals or communities. This study thus urges the media to be more accountable to ensure the information about a disease outbreak is communicated cautiously in order to prevent unnecessary panic as a result of exaggerated reporting. The government should

also ensure that key public health messages are not overshadowed by sensational stories that could create misconceptions among the public. Finally, Islam promotes and values innovation that brings goodness to human lives. The use of advanced technology facilitates communication and health information exchange in a safe environment during a disease outbreak. Since access to technology is fundamental, more investment is required to equip healthcare facilities with appropriate systems and equipment that enable HCWs to work efficiently during critical times. This study has also highlighted that Islam provided guidelines on disease outbreak prevention and control much earlier than scientific interventions. The preventive measures such as quarantine and isolation, physical distancing, and effective communication principles mentioned in the Qur'ān and Ḥadīth are useful to be applied during disease outbreaks.

Other major challenges found in this study encompassed psychological health, clinical management, and, finally, hospital management and administration. The sudden disease outbreak and the increased workload and risk perception affected the mental health of HCWs. Furthermore, dealing with major outbreaks posed a challenge to containing the disease in the healthcare facilities that required HCWs to make adjustment to clinical management effectively. This includes strategies to contain nosocomial infection, management of patients, disruption of routine practice, and rearrangement of manpower in specific units or departments. The study also found hospitals worldwide were not prepared for the surge of the disease and a high rate of mortality during major outbreaks.

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Faith-Based Approaches to Vaccine Misconception: A Systematic Literature Review of Religious Messaging

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Abstract: Since more and more individuals rely only on the internet for information, falsehoods on health-related matters are spreading more quickly. When it comes to a religious stance around vaccinations, false information may be more difficult to change since it affects an individual's faith. To combat religious vaccine misconception, this research explored Scopus, Google

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Scholar, MyCite, EBSCOhost, and *Fatwā Mujamma'* databases using a systematic literature review (SLR) procedure. 5076 studies on vaccination and religion were identified between 2016 and 2021. After a thorough screening process, only 25 studies reflecting religious discussion on vaccination were extracted for analysis. Designed to synthesise religious sources, this SLR identified *Qur'ānic* passages and *Hadith* supporting vaccine uptake. The results were also synthesised according to *fatwā* across types of vaccination. This paper followed PRISMA in reporting the SLR study. In short, this study is significant as it provides evidence supporting the need for vaccination to safeguard the welfare and prosperity of the Muslim community. It should be noted that religious messages must be incorporated into health communication intervention strategies for educators, religious leaders, and advocates to inform the public about the importance of vaccinations. This review further offers the Malaysian Health Ministry a reference to be included as part of its strategies from Islamic perspectives in combating vaccine refusal and anti-vaccination movement among the Muslim community, as they compose the majority of the population.

Keywords: Health Communication, Misconception, Religious communication, Systematic Literature Review, Vaccine.

Abstrak: Semakin ramai individu bergantung kepada internet untuk mendapatkan maklumat, semakin mudah dan cepat maklumat palsu berkaitan kesihatan merebak. Salah faham terhadap isu vaksinasi yang berkait rapat dengan pendirian agama juga agak sukar diubah kerana ia melibatkan kepercayaan individu. Untuk memerangi salah faham terhadap isu vaksin berkaitan agama, kajian ini meneroka pangkalan data Scopus, Google Scholar, MyCite, EBSCOhost, and Fatwa Mujamma' menggunakan prosedur kajian literature sistematik (SLR). Sejumlah 5076 bahan berkaitan vaksinasi dan agama telah dikenal pasti antara tahun 2016 dan 2021. Selepas proses saringan menyuluruh, hanya 25 bahan penyelidikan yang mencerminkan perbincangan agama berkaitan vaksinasi telah diekstrak untuk analisa. Bertujuan untuk mensintesis sumber agama, SLR ini telah mengenal pasti petikan al-Qur'an dan hadis yang menyokong pengambilan vaksin. Hasil kajian ini turut disintesis mengikut fatwa berdasarkan jenis vaksinasi. Kertas kerja ini menggunakan kaedah PRISMA dalam melaporkan hasil kajian SLR. Ringkasnya, kajian ini penting kerana ia menyediakan bukti yang menyokong keperluan vaksinasi untuk menjaga kebajikan dan kemaslahatan masyarakat Islam. Penting untuk diingat bahawa mesej agama perlu dimasukkan sebagai sebahagian strategi internvensi komunikasi kesihatan untuk digunakan oleh pendidik, pemimpin agama, dan advokat untuk memaklumkan orang ramai tentang kepentingan vaksinasi. Kajian ini selanjutnya menawarkan Kementerian Kesihatan Malaysia

rujukan strategi dari perspektif Islam bagi memerangi penolakan vaksin dan gerakan anti-vaksinasi dalam kalangan masyarakat Islam yang merupakan majoriti penduduk di Malaysia.

Kata kunci: Kesalahfahaman, komunikasi kesihatan, komunikasi keagamaan, kajian literatur sistematik, vaksin

Introduction

Health communication is characterised by the production and dissemination of "health-related information, health-related interactions among individual social actors and institutions, and their effects" on various audiences such as institutions and social groups (Viswanath, 2008, p. 1). Health communication includes the process of mass and interpersonal communication efforts geared towards enhancing public well-being. Despite having its roots in doctor-patient communication, health communication has expanded to include topics that are often associated with public communication (Wanta and Myslik, 2019). Consequently, the media has appeared to be a powerful tool for advancing health-related agendas. However, the emergence of social media has posed a challenge in health communication efforts. Many unfounded information has been circulating, often driven by deliberate disinformation and misinformation, aiming at swaying public opinion. These false narratives can cover vast topics, but a particularly concerning area is vaccine hesitancy and rejection. Arguably, global vaccine resistance stems from a frequent misunderstanding regarding vaccine-related concerns.

Vaccine hesitancy is defined by the World Health Organisation (WHO) as delaying or refusing immunisations notwithstanding the availability of vaccination services. This phenomenon began as a small movement in Malaysia in 2012 and was seen to be increasing in 2016 (Kusnin, 2017). As reported in The Star (2019) newspaper, Selangor's government clinics recorded 1,603 incidents of vaccine refusal in 2016, up from 637 cases in 2013. Pahang also documented the same problem between 2014 and 2016, with an increase in parent reluctance to vaccinate their children reaching 178 cases. Malaysia's Health Ministry stated that several vaccine-preventable diseases such as measles, diphtheria, tetanus, pertussis, and tuberculosis, among others, showed

a sharp upsurge in association with vaccine refusal (The Star, 2019). Ghazali et al. (2023) also made the same observation that Malaysia has seen a comeback of polio, which was previously eradicated in the 1990s. Just recently, hand, foot, and mouth disease (HFMD) were also reported as having an increase in Terengganu with 533 cases between January to 8 March 2025 (Bernama, 2025).

The spread of inaccurate information has affected immunisation programmes when vaccine-refusal individuals openly influence the public using online media. Social media information sharing has accelerated the spread of the vaccine refusal phenomenon (Kusnin, 2017). Up until today, vaccine-related concerns are still being disseminated through more inventive communication channels. Anti-vaxxers – identified as persistent, moderate, and uncertain – were also found to be active on social media discussing vaccination (Ghazali et al., 2021). The employment of strong and convincing anti-vaccine messaging makes it harder to refute vaccination concerns, even by medical professionals (Mohamed et al., 2022). Compared to the diseases they have prevented and controlled; vaccinations have been accused of having more negative side effects. According to Alsuwaidi et al. (2023), the major causes of vaccine hesitancy include sociocultural differences, media disinformation, distrust of public health message, and misunderstanding of the insignificant and coincidental adverse effects of vaccination.

Therefore, this review is undertaken to explore faith-based messages in dealing with vaccine misconceptions to increase vaccine literacy among the Muslim community in Malaysia. This review is important as it can be used by the Malaysian Health Ministry as part of the strategies in combating vaccine refusal and anti-vaccination movement among the Muslim community, as they compose the majority of the population. Further, it will contribute to provide scholars and researchers with key resources such as Islamic evidence supporting vaccine uptake and a guide for preachers, teachers, and community leaders to educate the public about vaccination in an effort to increase vaccine literacy in the community.

Religious Misinformation

People without any training in health or science use bogus religious information to confuse the Muslim community on matters related to

vaccination (Zainudin et al., 2018). These ideas have had negative effects on society's well-being by discouraging people from getting vaccinated. An example of this is the case of Covid-19. Despite the obvious negative effects that Covid-19 has had on the world population, some people continue to be reluctant to acquire vaccines. They continue to spread misleading information on Covid-19 vaccination notwithstanding the decline in the number of Covid-19 cases and severity after its rollout.

It could be argued that low vaccination rates in Muslim countries are due to confusion brought by anti-vaccination movement and misunderstanding. Specifically, the coexistence between religion and science has become a barrier to successful completion of vaccination. For example, the issue of misinterpretation of Islamic law has led to vaccine refusal among the people in Pakistan (Perveen et al., 2021). Wester et al. (2022) and Corcoran et al. (2021) claimed that individuals with stronger religious values tend to refuse vaccination. Consistent with this view, Zakar et al. (2020) disclosed that some Muslims believe that they should give more to charity instead of getting vaccinated to prevent Covid-19, as the disease is considered a result of Allah's wrath. Permissibility appears to be another reason as to why Muslims remain hesitant to take vaccine, particularly on how vaccine is produced and ingredients used. Doubts surrounding vaccine manufacturing is also claimed to be contributing to this issue. For these reasons, Muslims tend to refuse vaccination despite its ability to eradicate harmful infection.

To eliminate the ambiguity and misunderstanding over the need of vaccination among the Muslim community, this paper argues that Muslims should understand that following an immunisation schedule provided by health institutions is one of the efforts to develop people's immunity against diseases. Therefore, to increase their comprehension of the correct notion of vaccination and so encourage vaccination, an effective communication strategy based on Islamic sources should be implemented.

Scarcity of Religious Understanding on Vaccine

Based on the researchers' search, many studies have been conducted to address vaccination issues such as communication about vaccination, campaign strategies for childhood vaccination, vaccine communication intervention for parents, strategies to address vaccine hesitancy, communication intervention for certain types of vaccine, vaccine

communication in a digital society, and many others (e.g., Lu et al., 2017; Oku et al., 2015; Kaufman et al., 2017; Thomas et al., 2020). A number of studies have also documented numerous vaccine communication strategies to tackle vaccine hesitancy issues. However, communication using Islamic sources and arguments to address vaccine misconceptions has been a neglected area of study. Further, systematic Islamic intervention in matters of health and science has been uncommon, as most of them tend to be separated. This review is a response to Larson et al.'s (2022) recommendation that addressing the grounds for vaccine hesitancy, that is, religious concern, could become an effective means to increase vaccine literacy within the community. Indeed, returning to Islamic sources (Shaleh & Islam, 2024) is considered fundamental in addressing this global challenge.

This paper analyses the existing literature that uses authentic Islamic sources to explore the importance of vaccination. Aiming to increase vaccine literacy by correcting vaccine religious misconceptions, this article reports a literature review of key Islamic sources from databases between 2016 and 2021. Dominant Islamic messages will be discussed in relation to vaccine-preventable diseases as reported in the reviewed studies. The objectives of this paper are:

1) To identify primary Islamic sources, *Qur'ān* and *Hadith*, as evidence to support vaccine uptake.
2) To synthesise the *fatwā* arguments used to legitimise vaccination.

To potentially control the spread of vaccine-preventable diseases, this SLR study provides scholars and researchers with three key resources: 1) Islamic evidence supporting vaccine uptake; 2) a guide for preachers, teachers, and community leaders to educate the public about vaccination; and 3) an instrument to increase vaccine literacy.

Methodology

Systematic Literature Review (SLR) could contribute to the advancement of different fields like social sciences, health care, technology (Ahmad et al., 2023). The methodological approach in SLR enables researchers to investigate the formulated questions more closely. Two main research questions guided this SLR study:

1) What are the Islamic sources that have been used to address vaccine related issues?

2) What is the *fatwā* for specific vaccines?

By addressing these research questions, this SLR study can be synthesised with other religious perspectives, specifically, Islamic justifications, to combat vaccination myths and promote vaccine literacy.

Prisma

The SLR process is guided by a tool called PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses). It gives researchers an organised framework for efficiently conducting, summarising, and evaluating systematic reviews and meta-analyses. In order to guarantee transparency, rigour, and clarity throughout the review process, the researchers in this study created a checklist of items using PRISMA (Liberati et al., 2009). The use of PRISMA effectively guided and helped the researchers to make evidence-based decisions while navigating the complexity of SLR on Islamic vaccination strategies.

Developing Review Protocol

Based on Butler et al. (2016), the study developed a structured review protocol using the PICo framework (Population, Interest, Context). Research questions focused on identifying Islamic evidence and fatwās related to vaccine misconceptions. The review protocol helped determine which databases to use, who would conduct the search, how many reviewers were needed, and the right keywords. It outlined a clear search strategy, ensuring all key elements were covered to make the SLR repeatable and trustworthy.

Databases Selection

Databases such as Scopus, Google Scholar, MyCite, EBSCOhost, and Fatwā Mujamma' were used to search for relevant literature in both English and Arabic. These databases were selected to ensure a broad and inclusive review.

Study Selection Process

The review followed a three-stage process: keyword identification, screening, and eligibility assessment before final selection. From 329 initial studies, 25 were retained after screening for relevance to human vaccination and Islamic sources. The SLR was conducted between February and June 2022.

In keyword identification, keywords related to Islamic discussions on vaccination, such as "vaccine and Islam," "vaccine Islam misunderstanding," "vaccine and religion," and "Quran, Hadith, and vaccine" were identified for searches in Google Scholar, EBSCOhost, MyCite, and Fatwā Mujamma'. While in Scopus, some of the keywords used were:

> (("mitigat*" OR "reduc*" OR "alleviat*" OR "correct*" OR "crystaliz*" OR "lessen*") AND ("confusion" OR "uncertainty" OR "indecision" OR "misinformation" AND ("communication intervention" OR "communication strategy" OR "communication planning" OR "communication activity" OR "communication campaign") AND ("islamic evidence" OR "muslim principles" OR "quranic rules" OR "revealed approaches" OR "revealed knowledge" OR "syariah proof" OR "religious sources" OR "fatwa" OR "fatwa document" OR "spiritual guideline" OR "hadith element" OR "hadith")

Several searches were performed to find relevant studies, including manual and citation searches.

Next, studies were screened to include those published from 2016 to 2021, focusing on journal articles and grey literature. The review excluded books, theses, and websites. Only studies in English and Arabic were considered, ensuring global relevance and consistency. In this stage, 272 out of 329 studies were removed after screening their titles and abstracts. In the third stage, another 32 studies were excluded after reviewing their content, as they did not address human vaccination, lacked Islamic sources, or mentioned unsupported fatwās.

In the eligibility assessment, quality of studies was assessed to make sure the selected literature/articles only consist of related and relevant articles to determine whether they could answer the RQs fully/better/clearly or partially/some part or not at all. This part was performed by review authors appointed for each database concurrently and independently so that when discrepancies in findings found between reviewers, they can immediately be discussed and resolved. At this stage, the full text was evaluated according to quality and eligibility of the study and could serve as a final check on inclusion/exclusion strategy.

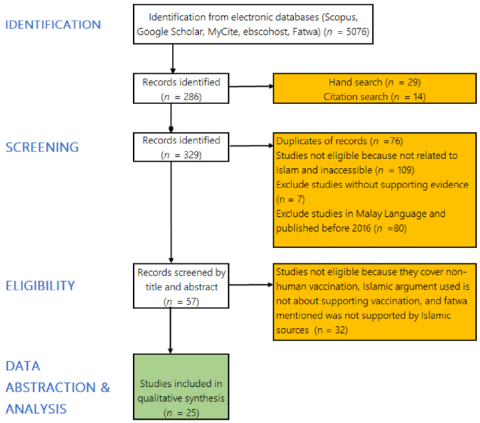

Figure 1: Flow Diagram of the Study Selection Process

Articles that do not meet the quality criteria will be excluded for the next stage. During the assessment, the researchers labelled the studies by quality—high (answering both research questions) or moderate (answering one research question), and not eligible (not answering RQs at all). Any discrepancies will be resolved through discussion. All in all, 25 studies were selected. The process of the selection of the studies in this research is summarised in Figure 1.

Data Abstraction & Analysis

To reduce bias (Shaffril et al., 2020), data were extracted by two reviewers each for English databases and Arabic databases in parallel and independently on the same articles. The extracted data were later compared to see the reliability. Reviewers also discussed with the lead researcher for any difficulty found in extracting data from articles. In validity checking, the lead researcher then presented the data to other researchers to be further discussed. The extracted data included types of Islamic sources, vaccine misconceptions, and fatwās. Thematic analysis was employed to synthesise the findings.

Findings and Discussion

Characteristics of the studies included in the SLR

From 25 studies, 19 came from Google Scholar, two each from Fatwā Mujamma' and Scopus, and each one from MyCite and EBSCOhost. As shown in Table 1, among the characteristics of the studies included were type of database, year of publication, language, type of vaccine mentioned, quality, design, and region.

Table 1: Characteristics of Studies Reviewed

No.	Studies	Year	Language	Types of Databases	Study Design	Region	Types of Vaccines Discussed	Quran	Hadith	Fatwā	Islamic Legal Maxims
1	Ahmed et al.,	2018	English	Scopus	O	Malaysia	MMR, PL, I		/	/	
2	Alam,	2021	Arabic	Fatwa	O	Egypt	C19	/			
3	Ali et al.	2017	English	MyCite	QL	Malaysia	RV	/		/	/
4	Alwi & Akbar,	2019	English	Google Scholar	QL	Indonesia	MC	/	/		
5	Asni et al.,	2021	English	Google Scholar	QL	Malaysia	C19	/		/	
6	Aziz et al.,	2021	English	Google Scholar	MM	Malaysia	PB, C19	/		/	
7	Dar Ifta' Urduniah,	2021	Arabic	Fatwa	O	Jordan	C19	/	/	/	
8	Eid,	2021	Arabic	EBSCOhost	QL	Saudi Arabia	C19, CV	/	/	/	/
9	Fateh & Islamy,	2021	English	Google Scholar	QL	Indonesia	C19, SV	/	/	/	/
10	Hannan et al.,	2021	English	Google Scholar	QL	Indonesia	C19, SV, MD, PB, AZ	/	/	/	
11	Harahap & Siregar,	2021	English	Google Scholar	QL	Indonesia	MR	/		/	
12	Jamaludin & Ramli,	2021	English	Google Scholar	O	Malaysia	PB	/	/	/	
13	Mardian et al.,	2021	English	Google Scholar	O	Indonesia	C19, SV, AZ, PB, MD, JJ, SKV, CS, SM	/	/	/	
14	Museliza et al.,	2020	English	Google Scholar	MM	Indonesia	TB, M, DTP, PL, HB		/	/	

No.	Studies	Year	Language	Types of Databases	Study Design	Region	Types of Vaccines Discussed	Quran	Hadith	Fatwā	Islamic Legal Maxims
15	Nedjai & Ouinez,	2021	Arabic	Google Scholar	O	Malaysia	C19, PB, MD		/	/	/
16	Nordin,	2016	English	Google Scholar	O	Malaysia	RV, PL	/		/	
17	Ouhab & Harbi,	2021	English	Google Scholar	O	Saudi Arabia	CV		/	/	/
18	Ros et al.,	2020	English	Google Scholar	O	Malaysia	I	/			
19	Rosman et al.,	2020	English	Google Scholar	O	Malaysia	BX, RV	/	/	/	
20	Sangaji et al.,	2021	English	Google Scholar	QL	Indonesia	C19, SV, AZ	/		/	
21	Sanusi et al.,	2020	English	Google Scholar	QL	Indonesia	MR	/		/	/
22	Sholeh & Helmi,	2021	English	Google Scholar	QL	Indonesia	C19, SV	/	/	/	/
23	Zahari et al.,	2021	English	Google Scholar	QL	Malaysia	C19, PB, PL	/	/	/	/
24	Zain & Hasanudin,	2021	English	Google Scholar	O	Indonesia	C19, SV, R	/			
25	Zainudin et al.,	2018	English	Scopus	QL	Malaysia	DTP, RV, MMR, BX, PL		/	/	

R: Rubella
TB: Tuberculosis
I: Influenza
M: Measles
SKV: Sputnik V
AZ: AstraZeneca
HB: Hepatitis B
BX: Biothrax
C19: COVID-19
MC: Meningococcal
SV: Sinovac
CV: Child Vaccination
SM: Sinopharm
CS: CanSino
MD: Moderna
RV: Rotavirus
JJ: Johnson & Johnson
MMR: Measles, Mumps, Rubella
MR: Measles, Rubella
PB: Pfizer-BioNTech
PL: Poliomyelitis
DTP: Diphtheria, Tetanus, Pertussis

Figure 2 provides the breakdown of the studies included in the SLR and contributed to the final report. Regarding study locations, there were two in Saudi Arabia, 10 in Indonesia, 11 in Malaysia, and only one in each of Egypt and Jordan. Some studies did not include study locations; instead, such studies were mapped using the primary authors' places of origin. In terms of the year of publication, 17 studies were published in 2021, three studies in 2020, two studies in 2018, and one study each in 2016, 2017, and 2019.

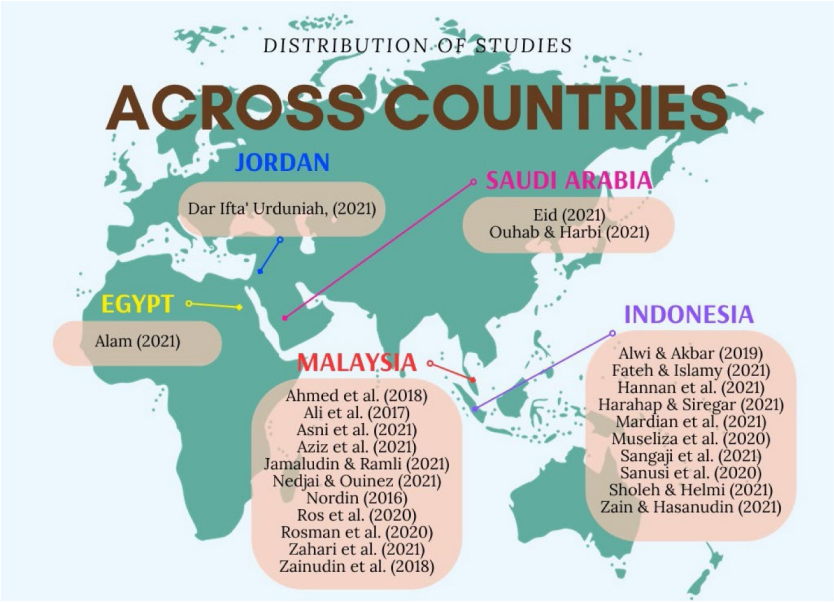

Figure 2: Distribution of Studies Across Countries

Most of the studies (21) were in English with four in Arabic. To minimise misunderstandings and challenges with translating the articles into English, those authored in Malay were excluded from this evaluation. The researchers decided to include studies written in Arabic as this study involved seeking *Qur'ānic* and *Hadith* sources and publications in that language are therefore expected. When it comes to the study design, 12 studies used the qualitative method, two used the mixed-method, and 11 were classified "others". Studies referred to as "others" were non-empirical due to the lack of primary data collection and lack of original research. Opinion pieces, reviews, fatwās, viewpoints, commentary, Islamic talks, and similar materials were included in this category.

Themes from Qur'ān and Hadith

This part addresses RO1 that reported over the period of 6 years of studies reviewed, 18 verses from the *Qur'ān* and 12 *Hadiths* were used to address vaccine misconception and promote vaccine uptake. Some *Qur'ānic* verses and *Hadith* were mentioned several times in different studies to argue why vaccination is needed. Religious scholars have utilised the *Qur'ān* and *Hadith*, which do not specifically mention vaccination, to support their position that vaccination is both necessary and lawful in Islam. This method indicates the dynamism of Islamic jurisprudence, permitting decisions to be derived on novel matters by interpreting foundational texts in light of current needs and contexts. This procedure is a reflection of a broader methodology within Islamic scholarship, which uses *Qur'ān* and *Hadith* that entail legal and moral guidance on issues related to vaccination. Table 2 shows a total of 20 and 15 studies used *Qur'ān* and *Hadith* respectively in establishing the law related to vaccination.

Table 2: The Charting of *Qur'ānic* Verses and *Hadith* across Reviewed Studies

No.	Studies	Region	Types of Vaccines Discussed	*Qur'ānic* Verses	*Hadith*
1.	Ahmed et al. (2018)	Malaysia	MMR, PL, I	-	Sunan Abi Dawud, 29:3874
2.	Alam (2021)	Egypt	C19	2:195	-
3.	Ali et al. (2017)	Malaysia	RV	2:195	-
4.	Alwi & Akbar (2019)	Indonesia	MC	2:173	Sunan Abi Dawud, 29:3874
5.	Asni et al. (2021)	Malaysia	C19	4:59	-
6.	Aziz et al. (2021)	Malaysia	PB, C19	2:173	-
7.	Dar Ifta' Urduniah (2021)	Jordan	C19	5:32	Sunan Abi Dawud, 29:3855; Sunan Ibn Majah, 13:2341; Sahih Muslim, 46:2664; Sunan Abi Dawud, 41:4587;

No.	Studies	Region	Types of Vaccines Discussed	*Qur'ānic* Verses	*Hadith*
8.	Eid (2021)	Saudi Arabia	C19, CV	2:195	Al-Bukhari, 76:5779
9.	Fateh & Islamy (2021)	Indonesia	C19, SV	2:173 6:145	Sunan Abi Dawud, 29:3874; Al-Bukhari, 76:5678; Sunan Abi Dawud, 29:3855; Sunan Abi Dawud, 1:63;
10.	Hannan et al. (2021)	Indonesia	C19, SV, MD, PB, AZ	10:57	Sunan Abi Dawud, 29:3874
11.	Harahap & Siregar (2021)	Indonesia	MR	44:38	-
12.	Jamaludin & Ramli (2021)	Malaysia	PB	5:32	Jami` at-Tirmidhi, 37:2416
13.	Mardian et al. (2021)	Indonesia	C19, SV, AZ, PB, MD, JJ, SKV, CS, SM	2:173	Sunan Abi Dawud, 1:63;
14.	Museliza et al. (2020)	Indonesia	TB, M, DTP, PL, HB	-	Al-Bukhari, 76:5678
15.	Nedjai & Ouinez (2021)	Malaysia	C19, PB, MD	-	Sunan Abi Dawud, 29:3855; Muwatta Malik, 36:1435
16.	Nordin (2016)	Malaysia	RV, PL	5:32	-
17.	Ouhab & Harbi (2021)	Saudi Arabia	CV	-	Al-Bukhari, 76:5779
18.	Ros et al. (2020)	Malaysia	I	2:195	-
19.	Rosman et al. (2020)	Malaysia	BX, RV	6:145	Sunan Abi Dawud, 1:63; Sahih Muslim, 36:2051a
20.	Sangaji et al. (2021)	Indonesia	C19, SV, AZ	2:195	-
21.	Sanusi et al. (2020)	Indonesia	MR	2:173 6:119	-
22.	Sholeh & Helmi (2021)	Indonesia	C19, SV	10:57	Sunan Abi Dawud, 29:3874
23.	Zahari et al. (2021)	Malaysia	C19, PB, PL	2:195 5:32	Sunan Ibn Majah, 13:2340

No.	Studies	Region	Types of Vaccines Discussed	*Qur'ānic* Verses	*Hadith*
24.	Zain, & Hasanudin (2021)	Indonesia	C19, SV, R	2:195	-
25.	Zainudin et al. (2018)	Malaysia	DTP, RV, MMR, BX, PL	-	Al-Bukhari, 76:5779; Al-Bukhari, 76:5678; Sunan Abi Dawud, 29:3855; Sahih Muslim, 46:2664

The Synthesis of Fatwā by Vaccine Types

This section presents the synthesis of *fatwā* issued by different countries in promoting vaccine uptake to address RO2. In synthesising the reviewed studies, the researchers only included those that comprehensively discussed the process of *fatwā* derivation. Studies that merely mentioned the gazette of *fatwā* is not accounted for analysis since it did not provide detail explanations. *Fatwā* is the outcome of *ijtihad* or legal views among jurists. It refers to "a collection of decisions or legal opinions made together by the Muftis appointed as the members of the National Fatwa Council" (Aziz et al., 2021, p. 420). *Fatwā* contributes to the Islamic legal system by conveying religious legal concerns to society (Muslimin et al., 2021). Table 3 summarises the *fatwā* issued across types of vaccine in 15 studies.

Table 3: *Fatwā* on Different Vaccine Types

Fatwā	Studies
Biothrax vaccine and Rotateq vaccine	Rosman et al. (2020); Zainudin et al. (2018)
Covid-19 vaccination	Asni et al. (2021); Aziz et al. (2021); Dar Ifta' Urduniah (2021); Fateh et al. (2021); Jamaludin et al. (2021); Mardian et al. (2021); Sholeh et al. (2021); Zain et al. (2021)
Measles and Rubella Vaccine	Harahap et al. (2021); Sanusi et al. (2020)
Oral Polio Vaccine	Nordin (2016); Zainudin et al. (2018)
Polio vaccine	Rosman et al. (2020)
Sinovac vaccine	Fateh et al. (2021); Hannan et al. (2021); Sangaji et al. (2021); Sholeh et al. (2021); Zain et al. (2021)

Biothrax vaccine and Rotateq vaccine

The use of BioThraxTM (anthrax vaccine) and RotaTeq (rotavirus vaccine), which involve porcine in their manufacturing, is prohibited, according to a March 2008 meeting of the Malaysian *Fatwa* Committee National Council of Islamic Religious Affairs (Rosman et al., 2020). The decision was made because, firstly, there is no urgency or necessity (*ḍarūrah*) around these two diseases in the country, and secondly, other options are available without using porcine. If necessary, the Islamic rule on this matter may be modified, provided that the vaccination is only administered when necessary.

Covid-19 Vaccination

The resolution of the discussion (*muzakarah*) of the *Fatwa* Committee of the National Council for Islamic Religious Affairs in 2020, determined that Covid-19 vaccinations are permissible and mandatory for groups that have been identified by the government. This decision will be adopted by the Office of the Mufti of the Federal Territories (PMWP) (Jamaludin et al., 2021).

Measles and Rubella Vaccine

According to Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI), the use of MR vaccine is impermissible (*ḥarām*). However, a *fatwā* permitting its usage in the event of an emergency or necessities (*ḍarūrah*) is decided. This decision is based on a greater benefit for the community to avoid rubella which is deadly according to experts. But if another vaccination that is considered ḥalāl is discovered, its (MR vaccine) use will be outlawed.

Oral Polio Vaccine

The use of oral polio vaccine was made permissible due to the insignificant amount of trypsin in the vaccine preparation. Studies revealed that the final vaccine contains filtered trypsin that is undetectable. In addition, in the state of necessity, what is forbidden (*ḥarām*) could become permissible.

Polio Vaccine

The European Council of *Fatwa* and Research, representing the second school of thought, agreed that the polio vaccine containing pig-derived trypsin (enzyme) is ḥalāl during the 11th Conference of the Islamic

Centre in Stockholm, Sweden, from July 1–7, 2003. The decision was made because *istihlāk* took place. *Istihlāk* has occurred as a result of its little composition, which makes other ḥalāl substances more prevalent. Additionally, *istiḥālah* also occurred, in which trypsin is no longer regarded as a component of pigs.

Sinovac vaccine

Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) viewed Covid-19 as a serious public health threat in Indonesia, which could be prevented through a vaccination programme (Fateh et al., 2021). According to MUI, the use of Sinovac vaccine, which tries to shield the body from viruses, is acceptable in Islam as long as the ingredients are pure and legal. As interpreted above, when substances of the impermissible materials have undergone the process of *istiḥālah* and *istihlāk* that their original substances could not be found, the vaccine can be considered pure.

Discussions

This SLR was conducted to identify the *Qur'ānic* verses and *Hadith* that were used to prescribe the regulations on vaccination as well as to map out the *fatwā* linked to vaccination across various vaccine types. This study commenced at the end of 2021 by covering all types of vaccination not limited to Covid-19. Studies published between 2016 to 2021 were thematically synthesised. This study incorporated as many studies as possible. However, the search led to studies from the Middle East (Jordan, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia) and Asia (Indonesia and Malaysia). Language and article accessibility were the primary causes of the restricted search results. The vast majority of the studies that were assessed were conceptual and qualitative that included commentary, reviews, opinions, and discussions on the formation of *fatwās* in relation to Islam.

Much of the effort in this research was examining the available Islamic sources and materials. This is vital because understanding how Islamic legal rules were determined requires a careful reading and comprehension particularly those in the *Qur'ān* and *Hadith*. Reference and discussion were also made with the researchers who had thorough understanding of the issue being researched. This process was important, particularly in maintaining the authenticity and trustworthiness of the results being reported as it involved the derivation of Islamic rulings.

This SLR identified a useful guideline for comprehending the significance of vaccination to preserve a healthy community. The presented *Qur'ānic* verses and *Hadiths* provide strong evidence that although vaccine is not directly mentioned, with the interpretation from religious scholars, the sources could still be used as a foundation to support vaccine uptake. This suggests that vaccination is seen as a religious and ethical obligation to protect the health of the community (*ummah*), in addition to being a medical need. The way *Hadith* and *Qur'ānic* verses are used to explain the benefits of vaccination is one of the examples of how Islamic teachings are applied to modern health practices. Vaccine was only invented in 1976 and was absent from the *Qur'ān* and *Hadith*. In spite of this, the studies that were evaluated saw vaccination as acceptable as long as it did not contain ingredients that were prohibited in Islam (e.g., Ahmed et al., 2018; Ali et al., 2017; Eid, 2021; Museliza et al., 2020; Nedjai et al., 2021; Hannan et al., 2021; Ouhab et al., 2021; Zahari et al., 2021).

The concept of *ḥalāl* emerged as the most carefully considered when determining whether or not a vaccine is permissible. The term *ḥalāl* does not just relate to food and beverages. It also covers a wide range of practices that adhere to *sharīʿah* as a way of life (Aziz et al., 2021). The majority of research that examined the relationship between vaccination and *ḥalāl* took into account both scientific information and the many Islamic sources that were presented in this paper. As discovered in this SLR study, before reaching a legal provision, Muslim scholars had presented and debated differences in opinions, demonstrating the meticulousness of their deliberations. For instance, Islamic jurists have typically backed the Covid-19 immunisation on the basis of life preservation, necessity, public interest, and damage prevention.

It can be argued that, the broad discussion of scientific information in relation to Islamic sources helped to develop deeper understanding on the issues related to vaccination. This method is useful to invite people to decide on matters related to their health not simply by relying unreliable information, rather to look up for evidence that is genuine and trusted. For example, a *fatwā* states that vaccinations are permissible even during fasting. As Eid (2021) mentioned, a person who is fasting does not break their fast by receiving a vaccination injection because vaccinations do not involve eating or drinking. This demonstrates that vaccinations during fasting are permitted, reflecting an understanding

that the injection does not contradict the core principles of fasting, which are abstaining from food and drink. Additionally, it also recognises the harmony between religious and medical practices that infers the Islamic jurisprudence can adapt to contemporary needs. However, without the interpretation from Islamic scholars or experts, this understanding could not be produced. Therefore, it is vital to reiterate that in addressing modern medical practices from religious perspectives, religious experts must be present.

Further, by mapping the *fatwā* across vaccine types, the researchers discovered a wide-ranging coverage of Islam in addressing people's concerns regarding vaccine uptake. The review underscores that under crucial circumstance, the impermissibility status of a vaccine could change. As reviewed in most studies, several requisites should be fulfilled before a legal provision related to vaccines could be made. This practice negates the notion that Islam promotes backwardness because the religion always comes up with up-to-date proof, rationale, and decisions that are in accordance with urgent and relevant requirements. For instance, before a *fatwā* is decided as binding a community, Muslim scholars (*mujtahid*) use *ijtihād* to find answers to issues that are not addressed or addressed in the *Qur'ān* and *sunnah* but require a thorough understanding of the texts. Muslim scholars use *istinbāṭ* (deriving technique) to carefully extract a legal provision from Islamic scriptures (*Qur'ān* and *Hadith*). Ouhab et al. (2021), for example, explored that under normal conditions the use of gelatine is prohibited for Muslims. Aziz et al. (2021) and Ouhab et al. (2021) argued that, on the basis of emergency, when the gelatine in producing a vaccine has undergone a chemical transformation process known as *istiḥālah*, the vaccine becomes permissible.

The results of this research strengthen the academic contribution in health communication, which can be situated in the Health Belief Model (HBM). As posited by HBM, changes in behaviour can occur only when messages address risks, barriers, threats, and benefits (Jones et al., 2015). When delivered within cultural and religious frameworks, faith-based messages will meaningfully influence individual and communal health behaviours. As presented earlier, Islamic scholars employed *ijtihād* and *istinbāṭ* as tools to interpret and derive rulings that position vaccination as *ḥalāl*, permissible, and obligatory depending on certain contexts. In line with HBM, this approach successfully removes

obstacles (such as concerns related to impermissible substance), confirms perceived vulnerability of the community or individuals, and highlights advantages by fulfilling religious obligations.

Limitations

Though this review tries to assemble an overview of vaccine-related fatwā, the language and timeframe of the selected reviewed studies pose some limitations. Studies not included such as those that were not accessible during data collection and beyond the selected timeframe may have caused exclusions of views that could contribute to the richness of discussions related to vaccination fatwā in Islam. The exclusion of studies not related to religion and Islam may further eliminate non-Muslim perspectives that could provide differing views. Therefore, this paper suggests that future research should include non-accessible sources using various databases to ensure a more globally representative understanding of Islamic perspectives on vaccines.

Conclusion

Vaccine hesitancy and rejection have been linked in large part to religious views (Alsuwaidi et al., 2023; Yusoh et al., 2023). According to Yusoh et al. (2023), Muslims are more likely to decline or be reluctant to receive vaccinations than non-Muslims, who may be more concerned about the safety of the vaccine. With the complexities of the current issues that contribute to this, health communication research should explore every possible area to provide well-rounded information to the public in keeping them informed. This is pertinent since health decision making should not be made based on limited knowledge and misunderstanding. In the context of Muslims in Malaysia, religious perspectives could offer differing accounts as to why vaccination is pertinent for their well-being. Hence, religious perspectives should be explored and communicated to address peoples' concerns related to their belief. This SLR has contributed to provide a clear narrative that Islam cannot be dismissed in life that its guidance could spread out to existing and novel health-related matters. As much as technological development leads to religious growth (Fajrie et al., 2023), this paper enhances the perspectives regarding the role of religion in advancing the health of community.

Recommendation

This research proposes that information synthesised in this paper should be communicated so that it will become a resource that brings benefit to humankind. The synthesis of the reviewed studies could serve as a decent source of information for communicators like teachers, religious and community leaders, and health professionals to correct the misunderstanding related to vaccination. Through consistent communication, people will develop knowledge on health-related matters more profoundly (Manan et al., 2023). This research further recommends that close collaboration between religious and community leaders with health ministry and professionals should be established and maintained through health campaigns such as health-related themes sermon (Padela et al., 2018), mosque-based exercise intervention (Banerjee et al., 2017), and Muslim for better health Islamic discourse in mosques (Mdege et al., 2021) so that the gap between religious beliefs and medical recommendations could be reduced.

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Book Review

Jerome Drevon (2024). *From Jihad to Politics: How Syrian Jihadis Embraced Politics.* Oxford University Press. pp. 261. ISBN 9780197765159.

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On December 8, 2024, Syrian rebel forces led by *Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham* (HTS) successfully overthrew former President Bashar al-Assad in a swift military operation. Many had previously thought that the Syrian crisis had subsided, as Assad maintained control over most of the country, except for the north and east, where Sunni rebels and leftist Kurdish groups held power. It was widely believed that Assad had emerged victorious from the civil war and would dictate Syria's future. Contrary to this prevailing narrative, HTS not only succeeded in ousting Assad and dismantling his security apparatus but also established a de facto government led by Ahmad Al-Sharaa, a former jihadist who transitioned into a statesman. These developments raised a puzzling question: How were the leaders of HTS able to evolve from being jihadist rebel forces to political leaders, and what contributed to this transformation? Drevon's '*From Jihad to Politics,*' published just a few months before HTS's rise to power, explains how and why jihadists transformed into politicians during the Syrian civil war. As such, this book offers revealing insights into the evolution of jihadist movements in the Syrian conflict.

Drevon's main argument in the book is that the politicisation of jihadists is not solely a result of ideological revisionism; rather, it is shaped by their internal and external relationships. The ideological shifts they undergo arise from their complex interactions with other actors in the ground, which Drevon refers to as 'internal and external

institutionalisation' (pp. 08-14). Interestingly, Drevon notes that politicisation did not begin with *Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham* (HTS). In his perspective, the dynamics were initially set in motion by *Ahrar al-Sham*, a Salafi militant movement that played a significant role in the early stages of the Syrian civil war. HTS is viewed simply as the next phase of this developing trend, making the understanding of *Ahrar al-Sham*, the earliest anti-Assad rebel group, more fundamental than that of HTS itself. Therefore, the book focuses more on the politicisation of *Ahrar al-Sham* than on HTS.

In his analysis of formation and evolution of *Ahrar al-Sham*, Dervon discusses several factors that contributed to the politicisation of the movement from the beginning. Unlike jihadists in other parts of the world, Syrian Jihadists are compelled to fight for a cause that is local, making it essential to seriously consider domestic factors and dynamics. This focus on local considerations significantly influenced their behaviour in terms of garnering local support for their struggle (pp. 50-54, p.165). Furthermore, the local nature of jihad in Syria is tied to the lessons learned by jihadi groups from their experiences in fighting the U.S. occupation in Iraq. *Ahrar's* popular leaders carefully studied past experiences of jihadist movements and analysed reasons for their failures—particularly in Iraq—during their time as prisoners in Syrian jails. They concluded that Al-Qaeda-linked jihadists had failed to establish a strategic objective for their actions and had alienated themselves from the people by becoming elite fighters. For the new leaders of *Ahrar al-Sham*, even with their commitment to jihad, it is essential to operate as politically manageable actors and as part of a broader popular movement if they want to achieve meaningful political gains (p.172-180). This understanding has been influenced by the dynamics of the Syrian conflict itself as it unfolded. For example, the rise of the Islamic State pushed *Ahrar al-Sham* to adopt a more moderate stance in order to garner local and international support. Additionally, Russia's intervention in 2015 forced rebel groups into a defensive position, highlighting the necessity for a united front disregarding ideological differences. The situation was further complicated by Turkey's shift, from supporting Syrian opposition forces to confronting Kurdish armed groups along its borders (pp.130-150). In navigating the rapidly changing landscape, *Ahrar al-Sham* had to maintain its relationships with other opposition groups and external partners. As

a result, it tempered its Salafi jihadist tendencies and made it more nuanced, politically strategic decision makers (pp.175-185).

Dervon writes that as *Ahrar al-Sham* began to weaken due to Russian airstrikes and the regime's counteroffensives in 2017, HTS emerged as a significant counterforce. Unlike *Ahrar al-Sham*, HTS possesses ideological coherence, organisational cohesion, and a selective approach to recruitment and training. This structured strategy gave HTS a competitive advantage in influencing the dynamics of the Syrian conflict after 2018 (pp. 145-150). Initially, HTS criticised *Ahrar al-Sham* for its ideological openness to attract support from radical fighters of the *Ahrar*. However, HTS eventually adopted a similar strategy after it become a dominant governing force replacing *Ahrar al-Sham*. Already HTS demonstrated extreme pragmatism when it officially disassociated itself from Al-Qaeda, collaborated with other rebel groups to combat ISIS, and refrained from attacking foreign countries (pp. 125-140). In line with this trend, HTS eventually became *politicised* by engaging with public sentiment, addressing demands for stable governance, and communicating with external partners like Turkey, after it took over *Ahrar's* role in Northeast Syria.

All in all, one of the major strengths of the book is that the author situates the dynamics of these jihadist groups within socio-political, geopolitical, and ideological contexts, explaining how each of these factors encourages them to become manageable political actors while still believing in armed resistance as a means of struggle. In other words, the author emphasises that jihadists are political actors who evolve and adapt in response to socio-political and external influences. In addition to that, this multifaceted perspective on Syrian jihadists has profound implications for understanding and countering jihadism as a phenomenon. Conventional wisdom suggests that these jihadists are ideologically driven fanatics who further radicalise as conflicts escalate, with the only way forward being to silence their leaders and supporters to eradicate the problem. However, the Syrian case offers a different approach: engaging with them, addressing the root of the problem, and providing incentives to encourage them to become accountable actors in a political conflict while acknowledging partly at least the legitimacy of their demands. The greater question is whether these strategies that worked in Syria would also be effective with other groups, such as the Houthis in Yemen, Al-Shabaab in Somalia, and other places. Moving

ahead, one of the significant limitations of the book is that it addresses the politicisation of *Hayat Tahrir al-Sham* (HTS) to a lesser extent than that of *Ahrar al-Sham*. As a result, readers seeking to understand HTS after its rise may find the content somewhat lacking. However, the author seems to acknowledge this limitation, as he will be publishing a follow-up book exclusively focused on HTS in July 2025. The new title will be '*Transformed by the People: Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham's Road to Power in Syria,'* to be published by Hurst. It seems that the book would be an in-depth study on HTS's role in governing Northern Syria and its impact on their politicisation and experience in statecraft.

Zouhir Gabsi (2024). Muslim Perspectives on Islamophobia: From Misconceptions to Reason. Palgrave Macmillan.

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In the context of a post 9/11 world and increased immigration into the Global North by Muslims and those perceived to be Muslim, there are bound to be clashes between the hosts, and the unwelcome guests. Such hate pertains to the notion of 'Islamophobia,' a term recently coined, but with historical antecedents. *Muslim Perspectives on Islamophobia: From Misconceptions to Reason* by Zouhir Gabsi of Deakin University is a timely exposition of the origins of Islamophobia, and the many ways it is actualised in both politics and praxis.

The book contains nine chapters which is broken into four parts. Chapters I, II, III, and IV pave the way for the conceptualising and contextualising of the term 'Islamophobia.' Citing Āli ʿImrān *āyah* 120, Zouhir hits the ground running with a bold statement that intolerance towards Islām has been predicted by both the Qur'ān, and Ḥadīth (Prophetic tradition). Such a statement sets the stage for a convincing engagement with the dichotomy between the East and West, where Samuel Huntington's (in)famous 'Clash of Civilizations' is referenced. Historically, Islamophobia is rooted in colonialism and amalgamates

around a specific idea of 'religion.' It is deployed as a political tactic and serves to silence Muslim voices, especially in the public discourse during election cycles. Chapter II sees the author discussing the need for an internal Islamic perspective on Islamophobia. This emic approach – looking at the beliefs, practices, and values of a particular culture from the perspective of the people who live within that culture – allows a shift from Orientalist methods in perceiving Islam, and the associated hate that might ensue from it. This shift allows Muslim academics to scrutinise the notion of 'Islamophobia' on their own terms.

Zouhir highlights the fact that if one examines the various interpretations of 'internal' versus 'external' views of Islamophobia, *one finds no common ground between the two*. He contends that Muslim perspectives on Islamophobia ought to avoid apologetic narratives, and that conversations of the faith must be conducted through less emotive and reactionary bases. Next, Zouhir assesses how language is used in the global discourse on Islamophobia. Citing numerous scholars, the author points out how the Western narrative on Islam is very different to that of the narrative formed in the Arab world – both through speech and the written word. The example provided is the so-called 'War on Terror' where words have been chosen over others to hide their 'real' meaning – 'insurgents' used instead of 'freedom fighter', 'collateral damage' instead of 'dead civilians', and so on. Against this backdrop, it is imperative for both Muslims and non-Muslims alike to question how language is applied to construct reality.

Zouhir then discusses the fascinating Orwellian term 'unperson' – "*describing anyone who does not exist in the sense that they are not seen, or valued, or may be excluded, scapegoated, and unworthy*" (Gabsi, 2024: 274). Zouhir mentions that history is filled with examples of aggression towards Muslims (which also touches on the idea of the 'unperson'), with 'Islamophobia' being an updated version of such animosity. Providing the example of the Crusades, the European attitude towards Islam seems to be set in stone, that is of a perpetual enemy that needs to be destroyed. In its modern guise, what strikes the author most is how Western governments – through their cadre of academics and policymakers, have focused almost entirely on Muslims, studying their behaviour and 'religiosity,' which appears almost voyeur-like. Numerous deradicalisation programs by Western governments are also

introduced in regions like Southeast Asia,[1] while conveniently forgetting the threat posed by supremacists of an Anglicised form.

Further chapters see Zouhir delving into the narratives surrounding Islamophobia, which are often peddled based on myths and misrepresentations of Islam's various tenets and philosophy – including *ʿibādah* (worship), *muʿāmalāt* (transactions, relationship with the other), jihad, and the *Sharīʿah* (Sacred Law). What underpins such misrepresentations is the simple fact that Islam is seen as unreasonable. The perception that Islam is 'suffering from a reason deficiency' drives the point of an assumed backwardness inherent within all Muslims. This is of course such a simplistic take, since Muslims (generally speaking) are respectful of the boundaries that come with the acquiring of knowledge. Zouhir argues that 'the everyday Muslim' is able draw a demarcation between the application of intellect and the counter-intuitiveness of argumentation for the sake of argumentation. As such, Islamophobes are of the belief that Islam is a closed and dogmatic system; the perfect enemy of free speech (Gabsi, 2024:157).

A surprising theme found in the text is an elaborate explanation of Sufīsm and how it could be viewed as an 'alternative face of Islam.' The author makes the link between Sufīsm and Islamophobia by mentioning that the former can reduce the latter by debunking the myth that Islam is devoid of spirituality, unlike other monotheistic traditions. The argument goes that if Islam is stripped off its spiritual dimension, rigid literalism would take place – a literalism applied by Islamists in their battle against Western institutions and ideologies. In their concerted efforts to establish their notion of Sharīʿah, one just needs to observe how the Islamic State (IS) has misappropriated Qur' ānic verses in legitimising their actions. Zouhir's argument is that Sufīsm as a practice, allows the believer to be at peace with himself and those around him. The theme

1 Nanyang Technological University (NTU) houses the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research (ICPVTR), a centre for counterterrorism research and analysis in the region that has a close relationship with The National Bureau of Asian Research – which works closely with the US government on matters of security. If we are to call a spade a spade, 'espionage' is the term to be used – a pursuit which undermines the security of ASEAN itself, while emboldening US influence in the region and shaping the narrative of 'Islamophobia'.

of tolerance in Islam is significant, and the move towards Sufism is appreciated as it opens the conversation on love, peace, and tolerance within the Islamic faith. In the final chapter, Zouhir summarises his findings, highlighting the shift in focus from the micro-level analysis to the macro-level analysis, which includes its idiosyncrasies and challenges. According to him, there needs to be a constant awareness of how bias and prejudice inform decision-making processes in the West. This point also relates to how counter-terrorism operations are conducted. Unlike war – which has traditionally been understood to have a starting point and an end – counter-terrorism measures embody a paradox that is both 'abiding' or 'continuing' (necessitating constant surveillance) and 'imminent' (necessitating urgent action), creating perpetual, self-justifying violence with no clear endpoint. It must be noted that Muslims of different skin tones and denominations have been on the receiving end of such violence.

If there is any criticism of the book is that a few of the chapters are too detailed, and the examples offered do not add much to the argument. There is also a tendency to digress from the topic engaged with, which causes the reader to be perplexed by elaborate details that could be used as content for another publication instead. When one engages from a 'Muslim perspective,' what kind of Muslim is the perspective being derived from? From here, we see a lack of representation of the Shi'i point of view on Islamophobia.[2] The same can be said of the Ibadi perspective. An engagement with the perspectives of such different denominations, would have provided for a more diverse engagement with Islamic history and *siyāsah*, making the argument from a 'Muslim perspective' more compelling.

Overall, *Muslim Perspectives on Islamophobia: From Misconceptions to Reason* is a text worthy of praise for its originality. It is indeed a valiant effort in combating prevalent misconceptions of the Islamic faith and the concomitant phobia that follows from such false impressions. This text is recommended for those who are interested to explore the origins of hate, and how it manifests in both thought and action.

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[2] The author clarified this omission was only a matter of editorial constraints during a webinar discussing the book, organised by the PEDIXS (Peace, Dialogue and Xenophobia Studies) Centre.

GUIDELINES FOR AUTHORS

Intellectual Discourse is an academic, refereed journal, published twice a year. Four types of contributions are considered for publication in this journal: major articles reporting findings of original research; review articles synthesising important deliberations related to disciplines within the domain of Islamic sciences; short research notes or communications, containing original ideas or discussions on vital issues of contemporary concern, and book reviews; and brief reader comments, or statements of divergent viewpoints.

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Book

In-text citations:

Al-Faruqi & al-Faruqi (1986)

Reference:

Al-Faruqi, I. R., & al-Faruqi, L. L. (1986). *The cultural atlas of Islam*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company.

Chapter in a Book
In-text:
Alias (2009)

Reference:
Alias, A. (2009). Human nature. In N. M. Noor (Ed.), *Human nature from an Islamic perspective: A guide to teaching and learning* (pp.79-117). Kuala Lumpur: IIUM Press.

Journal Article
In-text:
Chapra (2002)

Reference:
Chapra, M. U. (2002). Islam and the international debt problem. *Journal of Islamic Studies, 10*, 214-232.

The Qur'ān
In-text:
(i) direct quotation, write as 30:36
(ii) indirect quotation, write as Qur'ān, 30:36

Reference:
The glorious Qur'ān. Translation and commentary by A. Yusuf Ali (1977). US: American Trust Publications.

Ḥadīth
In-text:
(i) Al-Bukhārī, 88:204 (where 88 is the book number, 204 is the ḥadīth number)
(ii) Ibn Hanbal, vol. 1, p. 1

Reference:
(i) Al-Bukhārī, M. (1981). *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*. Beirut: Dār al-Fikr.
(ii) Ibn Ḥanbal, A. (1982). *Musnad Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal*. Istanbul: Cagri Yayinlari.

The Bible
In-text:
Matthew 12:31-32

Reference:
The new Oxford annonated Bible. (2007). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Transliteration of Arabic words should follow the style indicated in ROTAS Transliteration Kit as detailed on its website (http://rotas.iium.edu.my/?Table_of_Transliteration), which is a slight modification of ALA-LC (Library of Congress and the American Library Association) transliteration scheme. Transliteration of Persian, Urdu, Turkish and other scripts should follow ALA-LC scheme.

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In This Issue

Note from the Editor

Research Articles

Zubaida Nusrat & Adibah Binti Abdul Rahim
The Existentialist Conception of Man: A Comparative Analysis between Muhammad Iqbal and Jean-Paul Sartre

Nuzulul Qadar Abdullah
Equal Before Allah, Unequal Before the Prophet? Ongoing Discourse on *Matn* Criticism and Its Influence on Muslim Feminist Thought

Bachar Bakour & Homam Altabaa
Critical Thinking as a Mechanism for Situation Handling and Problem Solving: Examples from Ḥadīth Literature

Nath Aldalala'a & Syaza Shukri
Shifting Geopolitics: The Gaza War and the Contours of a Nascent Middle East Security Community

Nadira Brioua & Rahmah Binti Ahmad H. Osman
Power of Knowledge vs. Self-Knowledge Production: The Protagonist's Journey towards Embracing Islam in Umm Zakiyyah's *If I Should Speak*

Raihan Rosman
A Muslim Female Bildungsroman: Quest for Identity and Sisterhood in Islam in Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* (2005)

Amrah Abdul Majid
Freedom as Connection to God: An Analysis of Two Novels by Muslim Women's Writers in the Western Diaspora

Norhafiza Mohd Hed
'The Politics of Fear': How It Affects Youth Political Participation in Malaysia?

Norhaslinda bt Jamaiudin
Perceived Determinants of Child Poverty in Malaysia: A Preliminary Analysis

Burcin Demirbilek
Türkiye's Climate Change Policy: An Evaluation of Its Transition to Low Carbon Policies

Gustina, Syukri Lukman, Muhammad Rizki Prima Sakti & Mohamad Fany Alfarisi
The Role of *Ulama* in Shaping Attitude, Subjective Norms, Digitalisation and Trust Towards Cash *Waqf* Behaviour

Moh. Sugeng Sholehuddin, Isriani Hardini, Muhammad Jaeni, Eros Meilina Sofa & Thi Thu Huong Ho
The Role of Local Wisdom in Shaping Internationalisation Strategies of Islamic Higher Education Institutions in Indonesia

Syed Arabi Idid & Rizwanah Souket Ali
Perceptions of Three U.S. Presidents (Obama, Trump, and Biden) – A Malaysian Perspective

Tengku Siti Aisha Tengku Mohd Azzman Shariffadeen, **Aini Maznina A. Manaf** & **Nerawi Sedu**
International Students' Direct and Parasocial Contact, and Attitude Towards Malaysian Host Nationals: The Mediating Roles of Cultural Identification and Islamic Identity

Hafezdzullah bin Mohd Hassan, Rizalawati binti Ismail & Awan binti Ismail
Artificial Intelligence in Sinar Harian: Embracing Readiness or Addressing Anxiety?

Zeti Azreen Ahmad, Aini Maznina A. Manaf, Mazni Buyong, Sofiah Samsudin, Fuad Sawari & Hanani Ahmad Yusof
Healthcare Workers' Challenges in Managing Disease Outbreaks: A Systematic Review from an Islamic Perspective

Wan Norshira Wan Mohd Ghazali, Ahmad Muhammad Husni, Shafizan Mohamed, **Mohd Helmi Yusoh, Kamaruzzaman Abdul Manan & Nur Shakira Mohd Nasir**
Faith-Based Approaches to Vaccine Misconception: A Systematic Literature Review of Religious Messaging

Book Reviews

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