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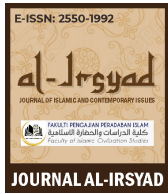
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The role of mainstream media and Christian organisations in shaping South Korean views on Islam and Muslims: A historical study

[Peranan media arus perdana dan organisasi Kristian dalam membentuk pandangan masyarakat Korea Selatan terhadap agama dan komuniti Islam: Satu kajian sejarah]

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ABSTRACT

The media in the West has portrayed Islam and Muslims negatively after tragic events like 9/11, accusing them of being barbaric and terrorists. Not only has this portrayal affected the views of Western people but also those in Far Eastern countries like Japan and South Korea. In South Korea, the anti-Muslim stance of media and Christian organizations has deteriorated further the reputation of Islam and Muslims in the eyes of the general population. Utilizing qualitative and library research methods, this paper seeks to explore the longstanding relationship between Islam and South Korea, starting with a historical overview then followed by the attitude of South Korean media and Christian organisations like Christian Television System and Korean Christian Council towards Islam and Muslims in the country which aim to tarnish their image and prevent their acceptance in the country. Moving to the 21st century, the paper will then give insight on the South Korean young generation's views on Islam and Muslims, and the role played by social platforms such as *YouTube* that spread Islamic related content as an attempt to counter Islamophobia. The findings will show that South Korean media, influenced by Western media, and Christian organizations, contributed significantly to the negative perception of Islam and Muslims in the country. Notwithstanding this, there arise a new generation of South Koreans, who, out of their curiosity, seeks out and disseminate accurate information about Islam and Muslims via social media hence, made a positive impact from their sharing. This paper ends with a few recommendations for combating the misleading information about Islam and Muslims spread by the media and Christian organisations in South Korea.

Kata Kunci:

Media, Kristian, Islam, Muslim, Korea Selatan

ABSTRAK

Media di Barat telah menggambarkan Islam dan umat Islam secara negatif selepas peristiwa 9/11, menuduh mereka sebagai kaum barbar dan pengganas.

Gambaran ini tidak hanya mempengaruhi pandangan masyarakat Barat tetapi juga di negara-negara Timur Jauh seperti Jepun dan Korea Selatan. Di Korea Selatan, sikap anti-Muslim media dan organisasi Kristian seperti Sistem Televisyen Kristian dan Majlis Kristian Korea telah memburukkan lagi reputasi Islam dan umat Islam di mata masyarakat Korea Selatan. Dengan menggunakan kaedah penyelidikan kualitatif dan perpustakaan, artikel ini bertujuan untuk menyelidik hubungan Islam dan Korea Selatan yang telah lama berlangsung, bermula dengan gambaran sejarah dan kemudian diikuti dengan sikap media Korea Selatan dan organisasi Kristian terhadap Islam dan umat Islam di negara itu yang bertujuan untuk mencemarkan imej mereka dan menghalang penerimaan mereka di negara tersebut. Berpindah ke abad ke-21, artikel ini kemudian memberikan gambaran tentang pandangan generasi muda Korea Selatan terhadap Islam dan umat Islam, dan peranan yang dimainkan oleh mereka menggunakan platforms sosial seperti YouTube yang menyebarkan kandungan berkaitan Islam sebagai percubaan untuk menentang Islamophobia. Hasil akhir artikel ini akan menunjukkan bahawa media Korea Selatan, yang dipengaruhi oleh media Barat, dan organisasi Kristian, menyumbang secara signifikan kepada persepsi negatif tentang Islam dan umat Islam di negara itu. Walaupun demikian, terdapat generasi baru orang Korea Selatan yang, kerana rasa ingin tahu mereka, mencari dan menyebarkan maklumat yang tepat tentang Islam dan umat Islam melalui media sosial seterusnya menghasilkan kesan yang positif daripada perkongsian mereka. Artikel ini diakhiri dengan beberapa cadangan untuk menangani maklumat yang salah tentang Islam dan umat Islam yang disebarkan oleh media dan organisasi Kristian di Korea Selatan.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Located in Korea Peninsula bordering North Korea, South Korea is one of the countries in East Asia together with Japan and China (Yu, Lee, Lew, Ick, & Im, 2023). South Korea had gone through a lot of hardship especially during the World War II, having been occupied by Japan (1910-1945) and later fell into a civil war, known as Korean War (1950-1953) which devastated many at that time. Today, South Korea is widely known across the globe especially as the spread of Korean Pop Culture has garnered a lot of attention from people around the world which put South Korea as one of the top countries people want to visit (Yonhap, 2020). The popularity of Korean Pop Culture was not only inviting non-Muslims but also Muslims who immersed into the culture.

Although Islam and Muslims are seen as foreign to the current general population of South Korea, the history of Islam and Muslims in the country can actually be traced back to earlier centuries as early as 9th century AD as recorded by a Persian geographer, Ibn Khurdadhbih in his book entitled *Kitab al-Masālik wa al-Mamālik* (Book of Roads and Kingdoms) about the contact between Arab traders and Silla dynasty (661-935 AD) in the Korean peninsula (Lee, 2014). Most scholars however, agreed that the contact between the Korea peninsula and Muslim world took off particularly in the 11th century via trade (Yoon, 1983). The trading activities continued

throughout the Goryeo dynasty (918 to 1392 AD) after the fall of Silla, during which, it was believed that some Muslims had resided in Korea as immigrants or government officials. For instance, it was recorded that a Muslim man of Uighur origin named Samga had married a Goryeo woman, and their descendants used the surname Jang which is still being used by some South Koreans nowadays (Ali, 2011). The relationship between Muslims and Koreans thrived during the Joseon dynasty (1392 to 1897 AD) and lasted for 40 years between it halted following the establishment of Chinese hegemony i.e., the influence of Ming dynasty over the Joseon dynasty (Lee, 2014). Since there is no record of further activities or contact between the Muslim world and Korean Peninsula, it was believed that the suspension continued until the 20th century.

The connection between the Muslim world and Korean Peninsula resumed in the mid of 20th century after the Second World War which saw the separation of the Korean peninsula into two parts, namely North Korea under communist rule and South Korea led by pro-democracy group. This followed the invasion of the south by the north on the 25th June 1950. Interestingly, it was during this tumultuous period that Islam was re-introduced to South Korea, this time by Turkey (a Muslim country) which, together with other countries joined the Allied Forces led by the United States to stop the invasion of South Korea (Ohn, 2010). After the war ended in 1953, several Turkish armies decided to stay in South Korea leading to the formation of a small Muslim community in South Korea led by Imam Adul Gafur Karaismailoglu (Mohd Ghazi, 2016). Later, the community joined by some South Koreans who were interested in Islam after listening to the lectures and sermons delivered by the Turkish imam. Hence, the first officially documented South Korean conversion to Islam began with Umar JinGyu and Muhammad DuYoung Yoon who later became the main force in the dissemination of Islam in South Korea (Mohd Ghazi, 2016). Currently, there are around 45,000 Korean Muslims living in places like Busan, Kwangju, Anyang and Jeju. Not only do these places have their own Muslim community, but also several mosques and Islamic centres which are meant for various socio-cultural and religious activities (Mohd Ghazi, 2016).

In comparison to other countries, the number of South Korean Muslims is relatively low, and this can be attributed to several reasons, one being misunderstanding and ignorance among South Koreans about Islam and Muslims caused partly by the role played the media and Christian groups in the country. In conjunction with that, this study focuses on the influence of media and Christian organisations in shaping the views of South Koreans towards Islam and Muslims which indirectly explains the slow conversion of South Koreans (Mohd Ghazi, 2016).

Another reason is the absent of recorded history on the contact between Islamic world and Korean Peninsula had led South Koreans to perceive Islam and Muslims as foreign to the country. In addition, only at the end of 20th century that they began to be in touch with information about Islam and Muslims coming from the Western media but then, the process of disparaging Islam and Muslims already took place in the West. Hence, in the eyes of South Koreans, it seems that Islam and Muslims have a bad reputation since the beginning, and it continues to get worst when the 9/11 event happened leading to the widespread of Islamophobia throughout the world (Mohd Ghazi, 2016).

Lastly, the South Koreans failed to identify or highlight the Turkish army's involvement in the Korean War as a Muslim country, possibly causing many not to realize that Turkey is a Muslim country. It is possible there are many new generations South Koreans who did not know that Turkey is a Muslim country. Yet, looking into history of the 1950s, it is not surprising that the South Koreans missed out the Islamic identity of Turkey as the latter back then was a secular country which banned a lot of Islamic practises (Göle, 1997).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In recent times, there has been a growing concern about the spread of Islamophobia in South Korea, influenced by detrimental representations of Muslim in the mass media. Study has shown that the media can play a crucial role in shaping public attitudes towards marginalized groups. In the case of Islamophobia, negative portrayals of Muslims in the media can reinforce stereotypes and contribute to the spread of anti-Muslim sentiment. There are several published articles and journal which are quite valuable to understand the spread of Islamophobia in South Korea via media, one being the journal written by Koo (2018) entitled "Islamophobia and the Politics of representation of Islam in Korea" that studied the correlation between Korean mass media and online media in spreading Islamophobia. Its findings indicate that the mass media and online media coverage of Islam was overwhelmingly negative, where the author stated that in South Korea, Islamophobia sentiments can be described as an "imaginary fear", in which prejudices are formed without any actual circumstantial factors, but rather are instigated by the Korean media who project negative stereotypes of Muslims by linking Islam and Muslims to terrorism, extremism, and the oppression of women (Koo, 2018). The author added that media in South Korea often rely on the Western media as a source for reporting on Islam and Muslims, which result in

similar biases and stereotypes being perpetuated in Korean media. This can contribute to the spread of Islamophobia and negative attitudes towards Muslims in South Korea (Koo, 2018).

With regards to Islam and Muslims in South Korea in general, most scholars who wrote about the topic tend to dwell on the coming of Islam in South Korea in length especially in relation to the establishment of Muslim community in South Korea after the end of Korean War in 1953. Several scholars extensively discussed the challenges faced by the religion and its followers as a minority in a homogenous society in terms of education, religious practises, halal produces and others, but not much discussion being done pertaining to the role played by the media and Christian organisations in shaping South Korean views on Islam and Muslims. Therefore, there is still gap in the existing literature to be filled up especially when the gap is mostly due to language barriers leading to the usage of, by the researchers, sources written in English, Malay, Indonesian and translated versions.

One literature worth mentioning here is a book written by Hee entitled *The Advent of Islam in Korea: A historical Account*, which ventured into the coming of Islam to the Korean peninsula in details including the establishment of Muslim community after the Korean War (1950-1953). Pertaining to the role of media he did mention some points where he claimed the media contributed to the misconception on Islam and Muslims especially those related to polygamy, Prophet Muhammad, and Islamic fundamentalism (Lee, 1997). In addition, the author mentioned about how the education system in South Korea, as with the media, taught students about Islam and Muslim with false information. This information provided by the author, however, is a bit outdated since the research was done during the period when the idea of Islamophobia was still not present during that time despite the growing apprehension among the non-Muslims regarding Islam and Muslims because of the wars that happened in the Middle East (Lee, 1997).

Another valuable literature is a dissertation entitled *Islam in South Korea: Progress and Challenges of Da'wah Activities Since the 1950s* by Mohd Ghazi (2016) which thoroughly discussed the da'wah activities in South Korea. He highlighted on the challenges faced by Muslim da'i emanating from Christian organisations like the Korean Christian Council (The Korean Christian Council, KCC, was established in 1989 comprising of 69 denominations and 20 Christian organisations throughout South Korea with 12 million members.) or KCC and mainstream media like CTS TV (CTS TV stands for Christian Television System that has been broadcasting since 1994 and became the main Christian propagation television in South Korea with 10 million subscribers.). While the dissertation provided substantial information regarding the clash between Muslim and Christian communities in South Korea as of 2016 over some issues, yet it contained some general information on the role of social media in spreading Islamophobia. Hence, this paper will look deeper into the importance of social media in relation to Islamophobia and how some South Korean YouTubers played their role in clearing up misunderstanding about Islam.

A book entitled *Jejak-jejak Jaringan Kaum Muslim: Dari Australia hingga Timur Tengah* written by Azra (2007) briefly emphasised on the 9/11 incident, albeit in brief, which promptly worsened the situation of Muslims in South Korea where Muslim women started to be gazed upon and situation deteriorated for the da'wah activities in the country. His book also mentioned about the steps taken by the Korean Muslim Federation (KMF) in dealing with the Islamophobia upon the tragedy that happened in the America. This work, however, failed to discuss in depth regarding the role played by the media which led to the hatred toward Islam and Muslim community in South Korea after the 9/11.

Equally relevant literature was an article by Baker (2006) entitled "Islam Struggles for a Toehold in Korea: Muslims in Land Dominated by Monks and Ministers" which discussed the coming of Islam and Muslim to the Korean peninsula since 11th century. He listed down several reasons for the slow conversion rate in South Korea such as the strict teaching of Islam and how the overwhelming number of foreign nationals in Mosques and Islamic centres make the places unapproachable and seen as foreign by locals. Despite the mentioning of the word monks and ministers in the title, the article provided very limited information on the kind of struggle that the Muslims faced due to the domination of Christianity in the country. Thus, this leaves a gap in the study regarding the relations between the Muslim and Christian communities in South Korea.

Lastly, an article by Song (2015) entitled *Islam and South Korea's Middle East Diplomacy* mentioned extensively about the diplomatic history between the Middle East and South Korea. The author discussed their strong connection in economy especially in relation to construction and oil industry. Song however, ignored some of the issues that might have affected the relations between the two particularly those related to the misconception of Islam and Muslims among South Koreans. Nor did he attempt to dwell on some measures taken by South Korea and Middle Eastern countries to reduce the sentiment of Islamophobia among people of the former.

3. METHODOLOGY OF STUDY

Being a historical study, for this paper, a qualitative method will be deployed by using sources from articles, theses, journals, and books pertaining to the involvement of Media and Christian organisations in shaping the views on Islam and Muslims from 1970s until 2000s. The 1970s was chosen as it marked the beginning of real interests shown among South Koreans to know more about Islam and Muslims following the improved relations between the country and the Middle East, and the substantial number of Muslim migrations to South Korea either for work or study.

The goal of a historical study is to gain insight into the past and to use this knowledge to possibly shape present-day decision-making or understanding of current issues. Hence, content-analysis approach will be used in order to bring forth information needed in this research from relevant sources. Content analysis involves a systematic examination and interpretation of these sources to identify patterns and themes related to a particular research question or topic. However, the research will not involve any collection data from filed studies including survey or statistic using SPSS since most data will be taken from secondary sources like articles, books and others. The choice of information was based on the most active platforms through which anti-Islam or anti-Muslims postings or remarks were made such as online newspapers and media social like *YouTube*. Online newspapers i.e., local newspapers like *The Korean Herald* and *The Korea Times* which are essentially primary sources, will also be used to obtain information on for instance, the confrontation between Muslims and Christian community regarding Muslim-friendly policies devised by local authorities (Jung, 2016). By examining a diverse range of primary and secondary sources, researchers can gain insight into different perspectives and viewpoints, and identify changes and continuities over time. However, content analysis is also subject to limitations, such as potential bias in the selection of sources used for analysis. To mitigate these limitations, researchers must exercise careful judgment and transparency in their methodology and interpretation of results.

In addition, several content from *YouTube*, for instance, *YouTube* channels like Daud Kim (<https://www.youtube.com/@JaehanKim66>), Syaikhoni (<https://www.youtube.com/@syaikhoni4895>) and others will be resorted to in order to collect information on the response of Muslims in South Korea including locals towards the anti-Islam and anti-Muslims statements made by the mainstream media and Christian organisations. Additionally, this *YouTube* channels provide information on the state of affairs of Muslims as well as a few hints on the growth of Islam in South Korea.

As for theoretical framework, 'media effects theory' is relevant to this study it implies that media content can have a significant impact on individuals' attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours (Valkenburg, Peter, & Walther, 2016). This theory suggests that exposure to media messages can shape how people think about and perceive the world around them. Media effects can take many forms, including cognitive effects (changes in knowledge or understanding), affective effects (changes in emotions or feelings), and behavioural effects (changes in actions or behaviours) (Valkenburg et al., 2016). For instance, media coverage of terrorist attacks committed by Muslim extremists in other countries can contribute to negative attitudes towards Islam and Muslims in South Korea. In fact, the 9/11 attacks in the United State, South Korean media outlets often portrayed Islam and Muslims as barbaric and dangerous. This portrayal could have had a cognitive effect on the South Korean public, shaping their understanding of Islam as a religion and their perception of Muslims as a group (Koo, 2018). In turn, this could lead to affective and behavioural effects, such as fear and prejudice towards Muslims, or discriminatory behaviour towards Muslim individuals or communities. Using the framework as a basic guide, the study may explore how media coverage of Islam and Muslims in South Korea has influenced public opinion, particularly given the dominance of conservative media outlets in the country.

4. INFLUENCE OF MEDIA AND CHRISTIAN ORGANISATIONS

In the 21st century, media is indeed a powerful tool to be used in spreading propaganda or one's agenda. The influence of media in shaping views towards Islam and Muslims is quite lethal where the spread of hate and lies took place causing the non-Muslim world population especially in Western countries to adopt an anti-Islam and anti-Muslim attitude. Things became worst after the 9/11 incident where Islam and Muslims worldwide have to endure the antagonism of the West for what happened (Mohd Ghazi, 2016). Having a strong connection with the United States ever since the Korean War, naturally South Korea was influenced by the Western media, and this consequently affected their perception towards Islam and Muslims (Mohd Ghazi, 2016). The term Islamophobia (Islamophobia according to Collins online dictionary is 'hatred or fear of Muslims or of politics or culture') (Islamophobia, n.d.) hence became widespread in the country and the brainwashing process began by

implanting the bad image of Islam and Muslims in the minds of the locals claiming the religion and its followers as barbaric and uncivilized (Ghani, 2018). Islam and Muslims are thus, to be feared and condemned.

Looking at the Islamophobia trend that began in the 20th century, there were several events in the Middle East that contributed to the South Koreans' negative views towards Islam and Muslims. Its beginning can be traced back to the end of 20th century, when the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) (Swearingen, 1988) and the Gulf War (1990-1991) (Finlan, 2008) happened which portrayed the Middle East as a region filled with aggressive people or groups who were prone to fight for power. On economic side, the wars had affected many South Koreans in that they had lost their opportunity to have a better life, hence made the wars painfully memorable for them and anything or anybody associated with the wars to be condemned and chastised (Sohn & Faraj, 2004). Before the wars, many South Koreans went to the Middle East to work in construction and oil industry. Due to the good economic prospects, mosques in South Korea like Seoul Mosque and Al-Fatah Mosque in Busan were regularly visited by South Koreans back then and sometime the number reached up to 1000 people. Apparently, what motivated these South Koreans at that time was mainly economic reason rather than religion Islam. Many went to the mosque with the hope to be able to get the opportunity to work in the Middle East, and along the way, some converted to Islam superficially. That said, one thing for certain, based on their visits to the mosques at that time, Islam and Muslims were far from being seen as threats (Mohd Ghazi, 2016).

By the 21st century, the situation deteriorated further due the occurrence of a couple of events, namely the 9/11 incident and the kidnap of a South Korean interpreter and Christian missionary, Kim Sung Il by Iraqi insurgents in 2003 in retaliation against South Korean government plan to send 3000 South Korean soldiers to Iraq to support to the United States (Sohn & Faraj, 2004). The South Korean government responded stating that the deployment was not to join the war but more to rebuild Iraq. However, the explanation was rejected, and Kim was beheaded which sparked anger in South Korea leading to anti-Islam and anti-Iraqi sentiment to ensue (Sohn & Faraj, 2004). Four years later, another event took place in 2007 involving South Korean missionaries from Saemmul Prebyerian Church in Afghanistan. 23 hostages were taken by Taliban, after which several conditions were laid down by the Taliban including ransom payment, withdrawal of South Korean army from Afghanistan and the release of 23 Taliban militants from prison. As the South Korean government refused to pay the ransom, 2 out of the 23 hostages were killed causing the South Koreans back home to rally against the action ("South Korean hostage", 2007). After 43 days, the remaining hostages were released following the mediation by Afghanistan and Indonesian governments ("South Korean hostage", 2007).

The last two events involving South Koreans have greatly enhanced the negative views towards Islam and Muslims and coupled with the wide media coverage of the incidents, it has intensified the Islamophobia in the country. Alongside with the propaganda played by the media, Christian groups in South Korea also did not miss this opportunity to disparage Islam and Muslims even further especially after the events involving Christian missionaries. Hence, starting from 2008, the Christian groups began to use the media and their influence in spreading the misconceptions about Islam and Muslims. For instance, in 2008, the Christian Television System (CTS TV), a South Korean major Christian channel had aired a television program about the danger of Islam with the claim that the 'terrorist ideology' will be disseminated in South Korea if Islam and Muslims are allowed to roam free in the country (Lee, 2011).

Instinctively, this continuous exposure to the media has an impact on the audience in that it developed a negative attitude among South Korean towards Muslims, demonstrated in the deep perception of Islamophobia, the negative attitude shown towards Muslim immigrants and the call for stringent anti-Muslim policies (Shin, 2021) overall, this study found that the media can play a significant role in spreading Islamophobic attitude in South Korea. Negative portrayals of Muslims in the media can contribute to the spread of stereotypes and reinforce existing prejudices. It is important for media professionals to be aware of the impact their reporting can have on public attitudes and to strive for a balanced and accurate coverage of marginalized groups (Koo, 2018).

Before continuing further with the discussion, it is noteworthy to look into how the Christian organisations have a strong foothold in South Korea even though the country previously predominantly inclined to Confucianism and Buddhism. Before 1945, only 2% (Connor, 2014) of the population are Christians but later, between 1945 to 1953, the number increased significantly around 8 to 10 percent. This development mostly attributed to the role played by the USA which was seen as a saviour of South Korea especially in defending the country against communism. Moreover, both the presidents of the USA and South Korea, Harry S. Truman (1945-1953) and Syngman Rhee (1948-1960) at that time displayed a strong conviction in Christianity thus causing the South Koreans to view the religion in a positive light (Karadere, 2016). The increment after 1953 or after the Korean War meanwhile, took place as South Koreans were drawn to the religion as a mechanism to cope with the prevalent despair caused by the Korean War i.e., the faith to many, was a salvation. Thus, after the War, Christianity started to disseminate with the support of the USA and European countries that funded the building of churches, and even involved largely with the development of the media, education and healthcare systems in the country.

“Christians supported by European countries and the USA continue their activities in many areas today thanks to the churches they have popularized throughout the country, the educational institutions and hospitals they have established and even the media organs they possess and their representative power in parliament. Today, there are many political pressure groups formed by Christians in South Korea.” (Karadere, 2016).

This shows how deep has Christianity infiltrated the South Korean society in every possible sector contributing to the subsequent hostile confrontation against Islam and Muslims, exemplified especially in the spread of Islamophobia and maltreatment towards the religion and its followers. Following decades of missionaries work and proselytization, by 2022, it is estimated that 31 percent of South Korean population affiliated themselves with Christianity or 16 out of 51 million people (Yoon, 2023). Meanwhile, it is estimated that around 57,000 churches are currently active in South Korea to cater with the growing number of worshipers (Rausch & Park, 2020). In addition, there are around 375 active Christian organisations as of 2018 where they involved in missionary activities throughout the country (Yoon, 2021). Currently, it can be said that Christianity is the most dominant religion in South Korea compared to other religions especially Islam whose number of followers among locals totalled up to only 45,000 while Mosques and Islamic Centres not more than 50 (Kettani, 2010).

Although there were several attempts by Muslims to explain about Islam using mainstream media, most got cancelled or terminated due to the strong influence enjoyed by both the South Korean media companies and Christian organisations. For instance, in 2008, a documentary about Jesus from an Islamic perspective broadcasted by Seoul Broadway Station (SBS) received a backlash from the largest Christian group in South Korea, namely the Korean Christian Council (KCC) which insisted the SBS to cancel the documentary. Not enough with the demand, the KCC even produced a 10-minutes video disparaging Islam by associating the religion with terrorism (Lee, 2011). Another attempt to explain about the teaching of Islam and counter the lies spread by Christian groups was done by a *Hankyoreh Daily* reporter, who wrote an article by using sources from interviews with some Muslim scholars. The backlash was instant as the Christian groups started to insult and launch a cyber-attack towards the Muslim scholars (Lee, 2011).

5. 21ST CENTURY GENERATION AND SOCIAL MEDIA

Fortunately, although the mainstream media monopolised the main news and propagandas towards Islam and Muslims, the development of social media has slowly opened a door for the new generation of South Koreans to learn about Islam. This is made possible as social media is more open compared to mainstream media which is controlled by certain groups or peoples who can cancel or terminate any program that contradict their agendas. Indeed, the development of Internet and social media has opened a new chapter for Islam and Muslims as it is a readily open source through which people can search for knowledge and information by themselves without having to depend on the mainstream media (Newman, 2009).

It is undeniable that the 21st century young generation heavily relied on Internet and social media in their life be it in South Korea or some other countries in the world. With the introduction of social media like *Facebook*, *YouTube* and others, it is easier more than ever to seek information on the unknown especially about other cultures, religions and countries. Since majority of South Koreans are literate and educated, most are able to use internet and with the advancement of technology, the usage of internet is quite high where there are 50.29 million internet users in the country accumulated to 98 percent of the total population (Kemp, 2022). Out of 50.29 million, 46.81 million are avid user of social media which equivalent to 91.2 percent of the total population. From these number, the young Koreans between the age of 13 to 34 are around 25.4 percent which is a quarter of the population. In terms of *YouTube* users, in early 2022, it is estimated that around 46 million South Koreans are using the platforms. That said, it can be concluded here that majority of South Koreans regularly watch *YouTube* hence, the possibility of them to come across channels related to Islamic contents by *YouTube* algorithm is quite high (Kemp, 2022Kemp).

Although it seems that the media social can partly counter the Islamophobia and negative perspectives brought about by the mainstream media and Christian organisations, it is a double-edge sword where it can also become a powerful tool for spreading Islamophobia in South Korea through the circulation of false information, rumours, and conspiracy theories by those who harbour prejudice or hatred towards Islam and Muslims. Such instance can be seen in the strong anti-refugee sentiment directed towards the Yemenis (Muslims) who arrived in Jeju Island since April 2018 to seek an asylum due to the unceasing civil war in their country (Song, 2018). Not only was their arrival not welcomed, but a string of false information and rumours about the effects of the coming

of the refugees to the country were widely spread in the social media following the government's strict immigration policies (Ghani, 2018). The growing anti-Islam and anti-Muslims stance of the mainstream media and conservative Christian groups in the country undoubtedly, has further intensified the Islamophobia and anti-refugee sentiment in South Korea (Koo, 2018).

There are currently around 10 to 15 *YouTube* channels posting Islamic or Muslims related contents both by Korean Muslims and non-Muslim YouTubers. Several popular South Korean YouTubers like Yong Lee Seong, Song Bora, Jay Kim, Joong Hwang Woo and many more have their own *YouTube* channels through which they mostly talked about foreign cultures and religions especially related to Islam and the Middle East (Benke, 2022). For Instance, Yong Lee Seong with his *YouTube* channel called Youngsworld, was interested in Arab culture hence, he shared a lot of videos pertaining to the Middle East and videos on Islam and Muslims there. While Jay Kim with his Jay Kim Channel was also heavily interested in Islam and Muslim people and after a few years of dealing with such topics had led him to eventually convert to the religion of Islam in September 2019 and change his channel's name to Daud Kim (Benke, 2022).

All these YouTubers have a similarity where they tried to at first learn more about Islam and Muslims and ascertain whether Islam and Muslims conformed to what the mainstream media claimed to be. They also confessed that initially they had the same prejudiced attitude against Islam and Muslims, for which reason they decided to go and visit Muslim countries like Malaysia, Indonesia, Tunisia, and others to experience and witness Islam and Muslims there first-hand. For many, it turned out that what they saw was totally different from what had been mentioned in the mainstream media or news back home (Senin, 2019). Daud Kim said that:

“During my fan meeting in Jakarta, Indonesia, I was so surprised. My prejudice was completely broken - there were no scary men or mysterious women. They were just cheerful, kind and nice unlike what I thought..... The Muslims I met broke my prejudice with their kindness and love and that's why I love them too. This is how started studying about Muslims and to know more about them. I started to read children's books on Islam (It's very helpful!). I also started to read the Quran (in Korean translation as I can't read Arabic) (Daud Kim had a fan meeting in Indonesia on 12 August 2017).” (Senin, 2019).

In a way, through their channels, these famous social media figures have opened up the opportunity for South Koreans to learn more about Islam and Muslims as they not only educated themselves by searching for and creating Islamic-related contents, but at the same time, their followers. Unfortunately, some of the YouTubers did experience a setback where they were criticised and condemned for their contents by non-Muslim members of the society who harbour a deep resentment towards Islam and Muslims. Surprisingly, not all the criticisms came from non-Muslims as there were also Muslim viewers who argued that the YouTubers were simply trying to increase their followers so that they could make a living from the posting of Islamic contents. Notwithstanding this setback, one positive outcome of the efforts made by the social media influencers is that several of them have converted to Islam and even some of their followers have showed increasing interest in learning about Islam and Muslims. Given the popularity of social media in recent years especially among young generations, the Muslims should seize the opportunity using these new platforms to educate the viewers and readers the truth about Islam and to reduce, if not eliminate completely the Islamophobia and false propagandas against Islam and Muslims alike. It is worth noting that the Islamic content created by the YouTubers also serves as a means to promote cultural understanding and diversity where non-Muslim viewers would be able to learn about other cultures and accept cultural differences in their country without passing biased judgements to those belonged to different races and creeds.

That said, the efforts by the Muslim YouTubers are not without impediments as shown in the negative and critical comments by some of their viewers. For instance, Daud Kim in one of his videos entitled 'Daud Kim Reacts to Korean Hate Comments' (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PWA64kKR-hg>) read some of the negative and critical comments hurled against him for promoting Islam in South Korea. These negative reactions are to be expected especially from those who hold prejudiced views towards Islam or Muslims.

Apart from Muslim YouTubers, many Mosques and Islamic organisations in South Korea also use social media and have their own websites. Unfortunately, most of these Islamic organisations' websites are outdated which is disappointing as the platform can play a very big role in disseminating Islam and negate the misconception towards Islam and Muslims. Currently, most of the Mosques and Islamic organisations utilized the social media platforms like *Facebook* and *YouTube*. For instance, the Korean Muslim Federation (KMF) use both platforms where most of the contents focus on the activities that happened mainly at the Seoul Central Mosque (<https://www.youtube.com/@koreamuslimfederation>). While in Busan, the second Imam named

Syaikhoni has created a *YouTube* channel under his name with contents related to the activities in the Busan Al-Fatah Mosque. Unfortunately, he stopped posting any new contents 2 years ago and no information has been uploaded since (<https://www.youtube.com/@syaikhoni4895>). Several other Muslim organisations are PUMITA Busan, Salama Nuri and others also employ social media platforms to update on their activities for the information of the public.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

There are several suggestions on dealing with misconception and misleading information about Islam and Muslims. Firstly, Muslims and Islamic organisations in South Korea should take a proactive role by organising a peaceful dialogue between Muslims and Christians to look for a better way to live together and to clear any misunderstanding about Islam (Aini, Don, Mokhtar, & Ahmad Fauzi, 2019; Mat Nor & Mohamad Ramli, 2021). Secondly, Muslims should be role models showing the beauty of Islam through their actions by avoiding any aggressive behaviours that could tarnish the image of Islam, and following the Islamic teachings and examples laid down by the Prophet Muhammad.

Thirdly, in view of the current popularity of the social media, Muslims should seize the opportunity by creating more Islamic contents in fighting against Islamophobia. Currently, there is not much information about Islam and Muslims in Korean language which attributed to the widespread ignorance among non-Muslim population since majority of the Koreans are not fluent in English. Hence, contents in Korean language is a must in order to get the attention of and educate the locals. Fourthly, the mosques and Islamic centres need to organise open day for the South Koreans to approach them and learn about Islam, asking questions directly to qualified Muslims such as imams or religious individuals. During such meetings or sessions, some information on the history of the relationship between the Korean peninsula and Muslim world could be provided for the visitors. In dealing with information via websites and social media platforms, the institutions should hire content creators to do the job in making sure that the necessary and information are regularly updated. Lastly, Muslims in South Korea need to be more eloquent in voicing out their disagreement about any propagandas and false information regarding Islam and Muslims. This is to avoid any misconception about Islam and Muslims being freely spread by the irresponsible groups (Kim, 2018).

Finally, it would be beneficial for future research to examine the specific strategies and tactics used by social media platforms like *YouTube* to counter Islamophobia in South Korea. By exploring the impact of social media campaigns and initiatives on public perception and attitudes towards Islam and Muslims, such research or study could provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of these efforts in combating prejudice and discrimination.

7. CONCLUSION

Having been influenced by Western media, South Korean mainstream media and Christian groups naturally project unnecessary fear towards Islam and Muslims and this in turn has unfortunately shaped the views of majority people of the country. With the spread of misinformation, lies and negative sentiments pertaining to Islam and Muslims, this has influenced the South Korean views especially when the elements of Islamophobia being repetitively shown and projected through the mainstream media and education. Moreover, there were events that equally damaging to the image of Islam and Muslims such as the Iran-Iraq War, Israel-Palestinian Issues and isolated acts of aggression like the kidnapping of South Koreans which, having been highlighted in a bad light by the media, caused lasting impacts on how the non-Muslim population in South Korea perceived Islam and Muslims in general. The advancement of technology and internet has nonetheless, to a certain extent, brought about positive outcome following the efforts by certain groups and individuals to portray the real picture of Islam and Muslims using the social media amidst relentless allegations made by the mainstream media. The *YouTube* channels have so far showed encouraging results, and hopefully with the disseminating of truthful information about Islam and Muslims via these alternative platforms, this will significantly reduce the Islamophobia as well as the anti-Islam or anti-Muslim propaganda in South Korea.

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