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Collegiate Media Literacy on the Muslim Community

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Introduction

All feminists hate men. All white people are privileged. All Latinos are illegal immigrants. All Muslims are terrorists. These are some of the blanket assumptions prevalent even in modern day America. The concept of stereotypes seems to be embedded in the very fabric of the society. Now, the question arises, from where do these widely held but fixed and oversimplified images pertaining to a specific race or religion stem? And what is the extent of their consequences? Most importantly, do these stereotypes find their way into an average person's belief system?

The aim of our project was to answer these very questions. However, in order to keep the focus of the project and the research survey, we handpicked the stereotype pertaining to the Muslim community in particular. The term '*Islamophobia*' and '*Islamist extremists*' has seen unfortunately superfluous use. According to a survey conducted by the Pew research Center, there is "a substantial gap between what the general public believes about Muslim-Americans and what U.S. Muslims themselves usually believe." The results of this survey gives credence to the words of Daniel Burke, a CNN Religion Editor, when he remarked, "Muslims live in fear that they will be attacked. Americans live in fear that Muslims will attack them." Therefore, it is impossible to disregard the role played by the media in reinforcing such biases.

A study titled, *The British media and Muslim representation: the ideology of demonization*, maintains that Hollywood has a critical part in influencing the public's views about the Muslim community and '*Islamophobia*.' Case in point, '*Zero Dark Thirty*, a movie released in 2013 that follows the hunt for the notorious Osama Bin Laden, portrays Muslims as pathologically malevolent terrorists with an intent to destroy America. When a community is perceived through such a harsh lens, it is bound to instill some prejudices in the audience.

According to the *'Theory of Media Cultivation'*, people view the world through the prism of media, which also relates to the *'Mean World Syndrome'*, whereby violent content makes viewers believe that the world is more dangerous than it actually is. Our project aimed to understand how much of the perception of Muslims portrayed by the media affects the people's personal perception of the community and whether the average student at Murray State University is media literate enough to distinguish between reality and the media bias.

Furthermore, we tried to measure the effectiveness of James Tanker's *'Framing Theory,'* which states mass media has the power to direct people's thinking in a certain direction regarding a specific matter. Through our survey, we intended to figure out to what extent does that theory apply to the students on campus regarding the Muslim community.

Methodology

We determined that the portion of the populace that would be surveyed were people who were enrolled in college. Their age ranges did not particularly matter, they could be traditional or non-traditional students, but we predicted that many of the respondents would fall into the millennial age range, namely ages 18 – 24. With this target audience in mind, we determined that a survey distributed through social media would be the best way to reach said age range, so we opted to use Facebook as our survey medium. We put together a survey through the platform Survey Monkey consisting of twelve questions and a single media clip.

The media clip that was selected needed to both be controversial enough to incite the respondent to react strongly with their opinions one way or the other and to show the heavy bias that the media shows against the Muslim community. A news report, aired November 15, 2015 on CNN, showed a religious expert named Reza Aslan speaking to reporters under the slogan, "DOES ISLAM

PROMOTE VIOLENCE?” The entire video is nine minutes long and the argument tends to circle around the same argument. The reporter cycled through asking questions about specific countries in the Middle East with Islam as the primary religion and those countries’ tendencies toward female and child mutilation and radical terrorism as the primary subject. Aslan responds to each of those questions with a variation of ‘your logic of putting the entire religion into a box is incorrect for multiple reasons.’ This media clip was excellent to show our respondents for it pushed controversy between two supposed authorities, a religious expert and the media, and it showed the two sides of the argument very clearly.

Seven of the ten questions in the survey were demographic in nature, so we could get a profile on the respondents before asking them the central questions. First we asked where the respondents consume their news, so that we could have a read on the types of media bias they would be running into on a daily basis. Six responses were given for the respondents to select: Social media, Television, Newspaper, Radio, Word of Mouth, and Other.

Second, we asked about the race and ethnicity of the respondent in order to see if there was a specific bias of a certain race or ethnicity. There were seven offered responses to this question: American Indian or Alaskan Native, Asian/Pacific Islander, Black or African American, Hispanic, White/Caucasian, Middle Eastern, Multiple ethnicity/Other (please specify). With the final response, a text box was offered for the respondent to specify their ethnicity.

The third question asked the major of the respondent, leaving a comment box for the many kinds of majors offered at schools and universities. With this question, we wished to see if a type of major leaned to one perspective or another on the topic.

The fourth question asked the country or state that the respondent was from. This was left as a comment box for the purpose that we could not put every

city and country in the world (there are many international students who had the potential to take the survey). This question was asked to see if a certain part of the country or world had a certain view of the topic.

Fifth, we asked the age of the respondent, knowing that many of the respondents' answers would fall between the 18-24 year range of the millennial generation. However, we were curious if older respondents might have a different view on the topic.

Sixth, we asked the gender of the respondents, listing four options: Male, Female, other, and Prefer Not to Answer. With this demographical question we wished to answer if the responses had a gender bias to them.

The final demographic question went to answering the political party that the respondents affiliated with. There were five responses given to the respondents: Republican, Democrat, Independent, Other, and Prefer not to answer. This question was crucial to ask, especially since we were conducting this research in light of the political season and the fast approaching elections.

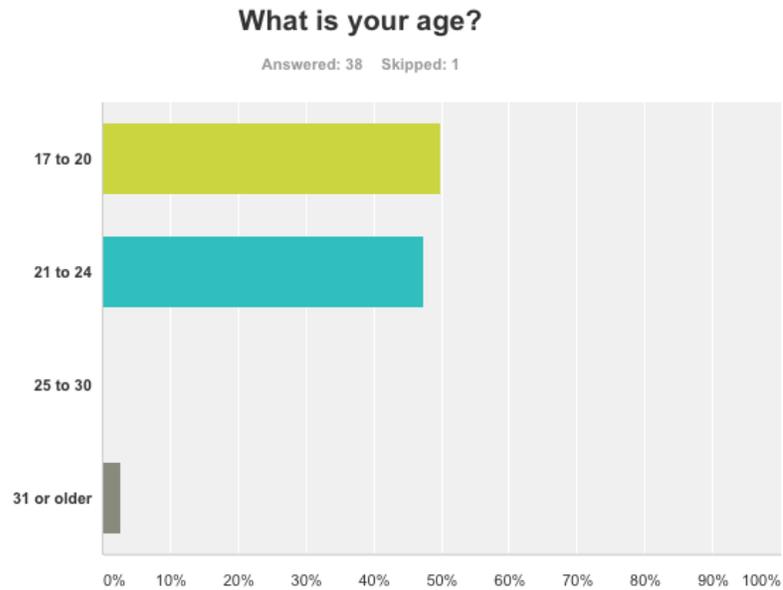
The eighth question was the first to gauge our respondents' opinions about our subject material by asking the person's view on Muslims. This question got the respondents thinking about the topic itself and showed a baseline for whether or not the respondents had a higher or lower media literacy rate. If they responded by saying that the topic was more complicated than the simple two sides, then they must be researching their news and getting it from multiple sources. If they responded with a strong bias toward the reporters, we would know that they would trust media and its inherent bias against Muslims more.

The ninth question provided a link to the media clip and asked the respondents to type their reactions into a comment box. This revealed the real time reactions of the respondents to the two sides of the argument and would show us if the respondents had a leaning toward one side or the other in the topic.

The tenth and final question asked the respondents whether they agreed with the reporters or with the religious expert and why they agreed with one or the other. This final question asks point blank the opinions of the respondent and is the question that the entire research survey is looking to answer.

Results

The media literacy survey garnered 39 responses total. Of the respondents, 36 were Caucasian, one Middle Eastern and one respondent was of mixed ethnicity.



Answer Choices	Responses
17 to 20	50.00% 19
21 to 24	47.37% 18
25 to 30	0.00% 0
31 or older	2.63% 1
Total	38

The ages of the respondents ranged from 17 to 31 and over, with 19 respondents aged between 17 and 20. There were 18 respondents whose ages fell

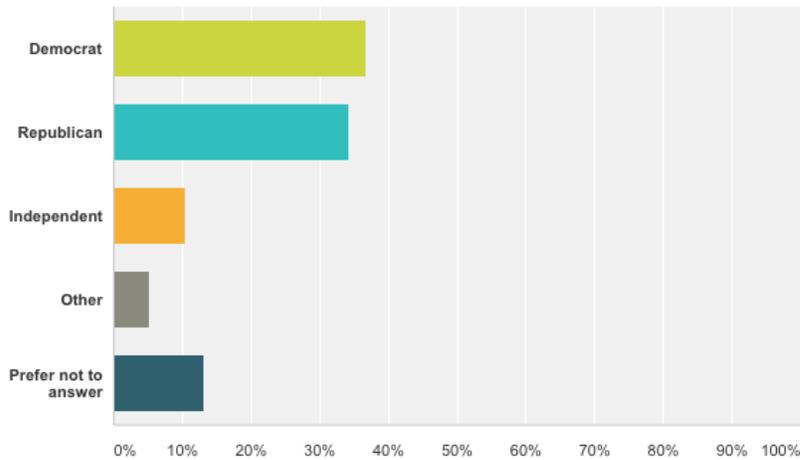
between 21 and 24, while one respondent was aged over 31. This means that exactly 50 percent of our respondents were aged 17 to 20 while 47.37 percent were aged 21 to 24 and 2.63 percent were aged 31 or over.

The gender makeup of the respondents goes as follows: 25 female, 12 male and 1 considered themselves neither one nor the other. This means that 65.79 percent of the respondents were female while 31.58 percent were male and 2.63 percent were classified as other.

As far as academic diversity, the respondents came from 23 majors, representing seven academic colleges and 18 departments. The respondents lived in six states: Kentucky, Illinois, Michigan, Indiana, Alabama, and Missouri. One respondent was from Syria.

Which political party do you affiliate with?

Answered: 38 Skipped: 1



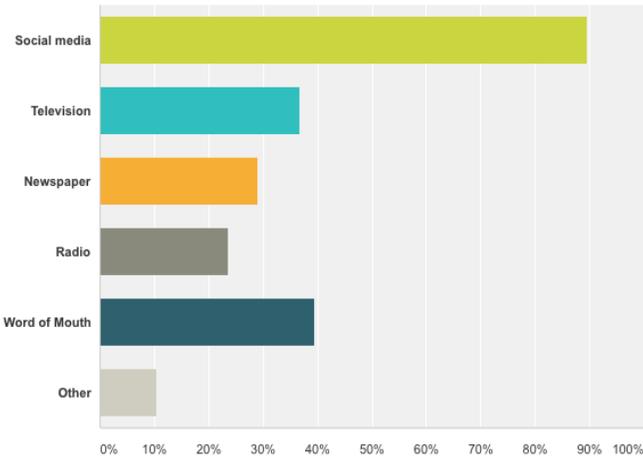
Answer Choices	Responses
Democrat	36.84% 14
Republican	34.21% 13
Independent	10.53% 4
Other	5.26% 2
Prefer not to answer	13.16% 5
Total	38

Politically speaking, the respondents represented the Democrat, Republican and Independent parties. There were 14 Democrats, 13 Republicans and 4 Independents. There were two respondents who considered themselves something other than the three aforementioned options. There were five respondents who preferred not to answer. This means that 36.84 percent of our respondents were Democrat, 34.21% were Republican, 10.53 percent were Independent, 5.26 percent were Other and 13.16 percent preferred not to answer.

In *“Was It Something I Said?” “No, It Was Something You Posted!” A Study of the Spiral of Silence Theory in Social Media Contexts* by Gearhart Sherice and Zhang Weiwu from the University of Nebraska at Omaha, social media may heighten the strength of the spiral of silence, a theory where the majority perceives themselves as the minority and commits themselves to silence. Especially in this age, spiral of silence occurs where employers are practicing social media screenings of candidates for most positions. Revealing political ties, even in an anonymous survey, may seem detrimental due to the fact that the survey was distributed through social media and privacy is a large issue in today’s digital culture.

Where do you consume your news?

Answered: 38 Skipped: 1



Answer Choices	Responses
Social media	89.47% 34
Television	36.84% 14
Newspaper	28.95% 11
Radio	23.68% 9
Word of Mouth	39.47% 15
Other	10.53% 4
Total Respondents: 38	

When asked where the respondents consume their news, the respondents had the options of Social Media, Television, Newspaper, Radio, Word of Mouth, and Other. This question allowed for multiple responses. A total of 34 respondents consumed news via Social Media. Television was consumed by 14 respondents. Newspaper garnered 11 respondents' news consumption. There were nine respondents who consumed news through Radio and 15 respondents who consume news through Word of Mouth only. There were four respondents who consumed news through Other media.

Further analysis of the consumption of news revealed that 89.47 percent of the respondents consume news through Social Media. Meanwhile, 36.84 percent of respondents consume news through Television. Newspaper garnered 28.95 percent respondents who consume news through that media. Word of Mouth is a

media of news consumption for 39.47 percent of respondents while 10.53 percent of respondents consume media through Other media as well.

Conclusion

The results revealed that 23 of the respondents agreed with the religious expert while 9 of the respondents agreed with neither or both the religious expert and the news expert. Of the responses, there were no respondents that agreed with the news expert solely. By evaluating the opinions and comments of those within the media clip and comparing those with the responses of those participating in the survey, we were able to conclude that the majority of the respondents recognized the media's bias against the Muslim community and agreed with the religious expert on the issues presented in the video. Many of those issues presented by the religious expert included Islamophobia and generalities about the Muslim population as a whole. Through the survey results, it was also concluded that there was a lack of overall knowledge about the Muslim religion. While the respondents did not show a bias towards Muslims, they expressed a lack of education about the true nature of the culture and an interest in learning more. Moreover, respondents also expressed the need for respect for all religions. While the overall consensus showed no bias towards the Muslim community, the respondents ultimately portrayed no bias towards any religion, only further supporting the conclusion that millennial collegiate students are media literate. One respondent gave the following response:

I feel like Americans just like attacking other countries and different religions. We blame everything on a difference of culture and religion when in reality it's a lack of positive diplomatic ties between the U.S. and other countries primarily in the Middle East.

In conclusion, we see that college educated students of the millennial generation have a high media literacy on the topic of the Muslim community and recognize, even before being shown the interview, that there is media bias on the topic. In the survey results, the ideology of the respondents was consistent between responses before and after being shown the video. The video did not change the opinion or initial views of any of the respondents but simply reiterated or exemplified the views that many were already expressing. Those that agreed with the religious expert had already portrayed ideas against media bias before being shown the video. Upon watching the video, many of those who were in agreement with the effects of media bias and the stereotypes against the Muslim community further elaborated on the issues at hand. In expressing their reasoning behind agreeing with one expert or another, many elaborated on not only their views on the Muslim community, but their views on the topic of media bias as a whole. It was from the responses after watching the video that the results of the research were ultimately concluded. Not only did the respondents appear to be media literate before watching the video, but they also exemplified the idea that millennial college students are media literate, even more so after they watched the media clip. Therefore, the respondents, those within the college community and of the millennial generation, have a concluded high rate of media literacy and are individuals that show an expressed interest of hoping to combat the biases that currently exist against the Muslim community.

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