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The Monster at The End of This:
A Feminist Media Analysis of Coverage of Representative Ilhan
Omar

By
Emma L Schlei

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree of
Master of Science
in
Gender and Women's Studies

Minnesota State University, Mankato

Mankato, Minnesota
May 2020

7 May 2020

The Monster at The End of This: A Feminist Media Analysis of Coverage of Representative Ilhan Omar

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This thesis has been examined and approved by the following members of the student's committee:

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Acknowledgements

I would like to first thank and acknowledge my thesis committee Dr. Maria Bevacqua, Dr. Laura Harrison, and Dr. Jameel Haque for spending countless time talking through ideas with me, editing drafts, and providing feedback. I am very grateful to my committee for their inspiration and for helping make my thesis a reality. Additionally I would like to acknowledge Dr. Ana Perez for all her guidance and support during my 6 years at MSU.

Next, I want to thank and acknowledge my Mom Wendy, and my friends and family who supported me through this writing process. They were an ever-present sounding board and always available to listen and help me stay motivated.

Finally I would like to acknowledge my cohort: Courtney Kittock, Paidia Chikate, Sandra Nambangi Kruch, Minara Nazmin, Ashley Parent, Shadow Rolan, Alena Joseph, and Hunter Beckstrom. You have all inspired me, challenged me, and help me to grow outside my comfort zone. Thank you for the countless thought provoking discussions, hours studying in the library, and endless support throughout this process.

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Abstract

An abstract for the thesis of Emma L Schlei for the Master of Science in Gender and Women's Studies at Minnesota State University, Mankato, Minnesota.

Title: The Monster At The End of This: A Feminist Media Analysis of Coverage of Representative Ilhan Omar

With the impending 2020 election and the upcoming centennial anniversary of the 19th amendment, the topic of women in politics is more relevant than ever. Ilhan Omar is a Representative elected to the 2018 United States House of Representatives and is one member of the "squad," a group of four women of color under the age of 50 who identify as part of the left wing of the Democratic Party. Ilhan Omar has been the focus of many liberal and conservative media outlets. In this research I focus on the tropes of Islamophobia that Omar faces to examine how political discourse and media coverage have represented the Congressperson this way. I examine this discourse and media representation that ultimately influences public opinion and perception of this Congressperson. This qualitative approach will use feminist media analysis that builds from three main bodies of knowledge: institutionalized barriers and structures that people of color in politics face, the impact of Islamophobia on Muslim American women in politics, and media representation of women of color in politics. I examine media coverage, public responses, and the intersectional factors that are at play in Omar's case. I will analyze the case of Ilhan Omar to demonstrate how political discourse frames media coverage of women in politics.

Chapter One: Introduction

Ilhan Omar is a Congresswoman elected to the 2018 United States House of Representatives and makes up one part of the “squad,” a group of four women of color under the age of 50 who identify as part of the left wing of the Democratic Party. Omar has represented many firsts in her political career, becoming the first Somali-American Muslim legislator in the United States in 2016 and in 2018 was one of the first two Muslim women in Congress and the first woman of color elected to represent Minnesota (Ilhan for Congress). Representative Ilhan Omar has faced strong backlash in her short time in office and has been the focus of many liberal and conservative media outlets. Political discourse and media coverage of the Congressperson has circulated both overtly and covertly racist media. I examine this discourse and media representation, which reflects opinion and perception of the Congressperson. I aim to examine political discourse and media coverage to analyze how the tropes of Islamophobia that Omar faces have embodied the Representative in this way. Ilhan Omar faces a specific type of racism that intersects nationalism, misogyny, and Islamophobia. As a naturalized citizen, her citizenship is often called into question and she has repeatedly faced comments that she should “go back where she came from.” This unique set of barriers is a factor that has played a role in her political career. Ilhan Omar shares certain experiences with other women of color in Congress, but she also faces many obstacles that are unique to her as a Muslim American woman. I examine the unique intersectional factors that have played a role in her political career.

Many media sources refer to the Representative’s age, race, and “radical” beliefs. But how accurate are these depictions? Does a medium create the biases that we see

against this Congressperson, or do media outlets reflect the bias that political discourse creates about this Representative? I explore these questions throughout this research. This qualitative approach will use feminist media analysis that builds from three main bodies of knowledge: institutionalized barriers and structures that people of color in politics face, the impact of Islamophobia on Muslim American women in politics, and media representation of women of color in politics. This research had multiple objectives, the first objective was to examine how political discourse frames representation of women in politics. The second objective was to analyze how the tropes of Islamophobia are applied to Ilhan Omar in media representation. Finally, my last objective was to gain insight on the intersectional factors that have played a role in Ilhan Omar's political career. I will use feminist media analysis to examine media coverage, public responses, and the intersectional factors that are at play in Omar's case. I will analyze the case of Ilhan Omar to demonstrate how political discourse frames media coverage of women in politics.

I chose to focus my research on this topic because it is timely, relevant, and significant for many reasons. As U.S. relations with the Middle East continue to be a tumultuous topic in the media, Muslim Americans often face the brunt of oppression that follows. The existing Islamophobia has been present within American culture for decades. This Islamophobia stems partially from U.S. relations with the Middle East and has created a culture of racism and oppression for Muslim Americans. At this moment, the United States' relationship with certain Middle Eastern countries is a frequent topic of many media outlets. While Omar is from Somalia, not the Middle East, political discourse often homogenizes these regions. From social media memes, to television news

coverage, U.S. relations with the Middle East is a hot topic, and Representative Ilhan Omar has been scrutinized for her comments on the situation. The Islamophobia that Ilhan Omar faces is seen prevalently through her coverage in the media and within political discourse.

Additionally, with the impending 2020 election and the centennial anniversary of the 19th amendment, the topic of women in politics is more relevant than ever. There are more women in politics today than ever before and it is important to acknowledge the intersectional identities that they each hold. Throughout this research, I dive into the theory of intersectionality and use it as an analytical tool to help examine the experiences that women of color face in politics. Using this theory helps to unpack the varying degrees of oppression that Ilhan Omar faces within media coverage of her.

Intersectionality is helpful to demonstrate how Omar faces a unique set of barriers because of the sexism, racism, and Islamophobia that she is presented with.

This research is also situated at an interesting moment in history because of the emergence of the #MeToo movement which has given women across all platforms access to have a voice to speak out about gender violence perpetuated against them. Omar has been vocal about the gender violence that she has faced in her life and her connection to this violence reiterates why this topic is so timely. Highlighting political discourse and media coverage of Ilhan Omar demonstrates the gendered violence that she is faced with every day. Furthermore, my research is significant because Ilhan Omar represents Minnesota in Congress and I am creating my research in Minnesota and using Minnesotan new sources. It is important for Minnesotans to be familiar with their Representatives and to critically examine the political discourse and media produced

about them. My research adds to the existing knowledge pool by providing scholarly research on a topic that is unfolding while I write it.

One key term that is important to establish is Islamophobia. Islamophobia has been defined as, “Both a prejudice and hostility toward Muslims that manifests as a distorted simplification of Islam and the Muslim world, and as an irrational hatred, alarmism, dread, and fear of the faith and it’s followers. Most formulations of the term emphasize fear as a key component that leads people to make blanket judgments of Islam and Muslims as a dangerous other” (Elman 146). An understanding of this specific form of oppression is very important because most of the backlash that Omar faces in her career stems from the tropes of Islamophobia used against her.

Another key term that I use throughout this research is discourse. Discourse is defined as a form of knowledge that is a social construction of reality (Harrison 10). Harrison states that, “discourse consists of both what is said and what is silenced, and while capable of transmitting and producing power, it can also reveal the mechanisms of power and provide strategies for resistance” (Harrison 10). Throughout my own research, I analyze discourse to examine how Omar is portrayed in politics, media representation, and public opinion.

This research is organized by starting with a review of the existing literature on the topics of institutionalized barriers and structures that people of color in politics face, the impact of Islamophobia on Muslim American women in politics, media representation of women of color in politics, and intersectionality. Throughout the literature review, I use black feminist thought and intersectionality to guide me to take an in-depth analysis of the unique challenges women of color within politics face. I then

move into the methodology of my research, using a feminist media analysis to come to my findings. Finally, I move onto my findings on the topic and discuss political discourse, media coverage, and public opinion of Ilhan Omar. Supporting the growing number of women in politics is extremely important to the advancement of our society. However, before we can do that, we need to understand how political and media discourse influences their careers. My research does so by using the case of Ilhan Omar to analyze how political discourse frames and influence media coverage and representation of the Congressperson.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

In this literature review, I analyze the debates written on the topic of representation of women in politics. The question that guides this review is: How does political discourse frame media representations of Ilhan Omar? I have divided it into four main sections to aid in examining that question: 1.) Intersectionality 2.) The institutionalized barriers and structures that people of color in politics face 3.) The impact of Islamophobia on Muslim Americans 4.) Media representation of women of color in politics. I use black feminist thought and intersectionality to take an in-depth analysis of the unique challenges women of color within politics face. I explore these themes by analyzing scholarly work written about them and then applying this literature to my own research question and discussion.

Intersectionality

When examining the interlocking systems of oppression that women in politics face, it is important to be able to conceptualize them. Intersectionality as a theory is a concept that aids in better understanding how these factors affect individuals and groups differently. Nash defines intersectionality stating, “The notion that subjectivity is constituted by mutually reinforcing vectors of race, gender, class, and sexuality, has emerged as the primary theoretical tool designed to combat feminist hierarchy, hegemony, and exclusivity... This important theoretical contribution has become the gold standard multidisciplinary approach for analyzing subjects’ experiences of both identity and oppression” (194). This theory has given voice to marginalized groups and is a tool to help people in privileged positions understand experiences that they have not had themselves. Two authors have described intersectionality as, “A product of seeking to

have our voices heard and lives acknowledged” (Thorton Dill and Enid Zambrana 183). The term, coined by Kimberle Crenshaw in 1989, refers to the ways in which our identities privilege us in some ways and are the cause of our oppression in others. Patricia Hill Collins, in her book *Intersectionality*, offers a deeper understanding of this term. She states, “Intersectionality is a way of understanding and analyzing the complexity in the world, in people, and in human experiences. The events and conditions of social and political life and the self can seldom be understood as shaped by one factor. They are generally shaped by many factors in diverse and mutually influencing ways” (Hill Collins 2). These interlocking factors include gender, race, class, sexuality, and other identity categories that an individual may hold. Author Jennifer Nash sees the value of intersectionality as an analytical tool, stating, “The destabilization of race/gender binaries is particularly important to enable robust analyses of cultural site or spectacles that implicate both race and gender. Because intersectionality is attuned to subjects who exist...within the overlapping margins of race and gender discourse and in the empty spaces between, it’s a tool particularly adept at capturing and theorizing the simultaneity of race and gender as social processes” (194). While each person’s identity is complex, it is important to recognize the structural implications and the societal inequalities that women of color experience.

Hill Collins demonstrates that intersectionality can be used as a tool to better understand the realities of the world around us. Hill Collins states, “When it comes to social inequality, people’s lives and the organization of power in a given society are better understood as being shaped not by a single axis of social division, be it race or gender or class, but by many axes that work together and influence each other.

Intersectionality as an analytical tool gives people better access to the complexity of the world and of themselves” (2). By using an intersectional approach to understanding women’s experience in politics, we can further recognize the unique challenges that they each encounter. Although the term did not find a name until the late 1980s, examples of the effects of intersectionality can be seen throughout history. Hill Collins establishes that by stating, “In the 60s and 70s African American women activists confronted the puzzle of how their needs simply fell through the cracks of anti-racist social movements, feminism, and unions organizing for worker’s rights” (29). As Hill Collins demonstrates, women of color in the United States have historically found themselves and their needs left out of social and political movements. Nash adds to this idea by stating,

The notion that identity is formed by interlocking and mutually reinforcing vectors of race, gender, class, and sexuality has pervaded black feminist scholarship for decades... Myriad feminist scholars have destabilized the notion of a universal woman without explicitly mobilizing the term intersectionality, arguing that woman itself is contested and fractured terrain, and that the experience of woman is always constituted by subjects with vastly different interests. To that end, intersectionality has provided a name to a pre-existing theoretical and political commitment. (195)

In the case of black women in the United States, their unique needs as women of color were not addressed sufficiently in the feminist movement and their needs as women were not addressed sufficiently in the Civil Rights Movement. Hill Collins offers, “Because African American women were simultaneously black and female and workers, these single focus lenses on social inequality left little space to address the complex social

problems that they face. Black women's use of intersectionality as an analytic tool emerged in response to these challenges" (3). Using intersectionality as an analytical tool demonstrates how those two identities in their lives created a distinction between them and other members of society. Nash suggests that, "Ultimately, intersectionality seeks to demonstrate the racial variations within gender and the gendered variations within race through its attention to subjects whose identities contest race-or-gender categorizations" (195). Although the theory of intersectionality is useful in feminist pedagogy, it is important for the theory to continue to evolve as the feminist movement does. Nash challenges users and producers of intersectionality to continue to refine its goals, stating, "This paper suggests questions and challenges that might help expose the assumptions that underpin intersectionality, so that both feminist and antiracist theorists can continue working to dismantle essentialism, to craft nuanced theories of identity and oppression, and to grapple with the messiness of subjectivity" (195). Intersectionality demonstrates the importance of highlighting how certain groups have been excluded and marginalized. Nash suggests that we as a movement need to continue to develop and refine this theory. Nash states, "Now that intersectionality itself has become an institutionalized intellectual project, and the dominant tool for excavating the voices of the marginalized, it is incumbent upon intersectional scholars to critically interrogate the goals of the intersectional project as they determine how to chart the future of this theoretical and political movement" (202). My research does this by critically analyzing how intersectionality plays a role in the experiences that women of color have in politics.

So how can we continue to use intersectionality as a tool when examining the experience of women in politics? We can do so by being cognizant of the intertwined

aspects that create intersectionality. These, “Six core ideas appear and reappear when people use intersectionality as an analytical tool: social inequality, power, relationality, social context, complexity, and social justice” (Hill Collins 29). By understanding how all of these aspects work together within our society, we can start to have a better grasp on how certain populations face multiple intersections of oppression. This is especially applicable to understanding how marginalized groups of women experience careers in politics differently. It is important to have an understanding of these truths when thinking about women in politics and the barriers, stereotypes, and representation that they face. Hill Collins suggests using intersectionality as a tool along with black feminist thought to help further explain these experiences and to bring them to light. She says, “I suggest that black feminist thought consists of specialized knowledge created by African American women which clarifies a standpoint for black women. In other words, black feminist thought encompasses the theoretical of black women’s reality by those who live it” (Hill Collins 22). This reality is lived by Ilhan Omar, and is exemplified in her political career.

Institutionalized Barriers and Structures to People of Color in Politics

Women in politics face institutional structures and barriers throughout their careers. In the following section, I examine some of these structures and barriers. Women in politics face misogyny in different forms every day. However, in addition to thinking about the misogyny that women deal with, I will also focus on race, class, status, and education. All of these factors play a role in the lives and careers of women of color in politics. Institutionalized racism is a factor that has been an obstacle for many women of color who enter politics. Hunter states, “White racism is the fundamental building block of colorism, or skin color stratification, among people of color. The maintenance of white

supremacy in this country is predicated on the notion that dark skin represents savagery, irrationality, ugliness, and inferiority. White skin, and thus whiteness itself, is defined by the opposite: civility, rationality, beauty, and superiority” (2). These institutions uphold beliefs about the roles that women of color should play within our society. By examining these structures, we can identify the institutionalized barriers that certain populations face. Hunter says, “Sociological research reveals that lighter-skinned people of color earn more money, complete more years of education, live in more integrated neighborhoods, and have better mental health than do darker-skinned African Americans and Mexican Americans” (2). This skin color stratification has deeply rooted history in the colonization and enslavement both of these groups endured from Europeans (2).

The 2018 Congressional election was groundbreaking because of the number of women of color who were elected. Dittmar and Carr state, “Fifty years to the day that Shirley Chisholm became the first Black woman elected to the U.S. Congress, five new Black women won seats in the U.S. House. In January, they will join 17 other incumbent Black women Representatives, two Black women delegates, and one Black woman Senator to represent the largest cohort of Black Congresswomen to ever serve in Congress” (1). However, institutionalized racism was apparent during this election, even though many women of color did have success in their campaign. Dittmar and Carr demonstrate this, stating, “None of the five new Black Congresswomen had an easy path to success in 2018. Three challenged incumbent officeholders in the primary or general election, two won their primary nominations without the endorsement of their party, and another challenged stereotypes of not only race, but also religion in becoming one of the first Muslim women elected to Congress” (1). Each of these candidates encountered

intersectional, structural barriers present in our political system. Another structure of the institutionalized racism that women of color in politics confront, is the belief that they will not appeal to non-minority voters. However, this is not the case for, “Representative-elect Lauren Underwood (D-IL), who defeated a four-term Republican incumbent in an Illinois House district where 86% of constituents are white. In addition, despite falling just short of success, Stacey Abrams (D-GA) won a greater percentage of Georgia voters than any other (white male) Democratic nominee since 1998” (Dittmar and Carr 1).

Although the 2018 election saw more women of color win than ever before, there is still institutionalized inequality when it comes to representation in American politics. Dittmar and Carr state,

While their success is worthy of celebration, the fact that we are still celebrating firsts for Black women in Congress five decades after Chisholm’s win, also reflects the persistent under-representation of Black women in American politics - and that underrepresentation was not remedied in this record-setting year for women. Black women were about 5% of all House nominees in 2018 and will be just 4.1% of members of Congress in 2019, despite representing nearly 8% of the U.S. population. And consider this: after new members are sworn in next year, just 43 Black women will have ever served in Congress (of more than 12,000 members who held Congressional office in U.S. history). (1)

Although we continue to elect more and more women of color into our political system, as demonstrated by those numbers, it will take time before there is equitable representation. Until that time, authors Dittmar and Carr express that, “Their resilience and determination in the face of these challenges mirrors that of Chisholm, who described

her motivation to run for president in 1972 in the face of seemingly insurmountable obstacles in this way: ‘The fact of the matter is we cannot continue to take things as they are...when we see around us that government is not responsive to certain segments of the population.’ ” (qtd in Dittmar and Carr 1) Chisholm’s quote reminds us how important it is to continue to challenge the status quo and to support women of color in politics.

Another prevalent stereotype of women in politics is the association with women and their relationship to the home. Women in politics are often reprimanded for not spending enough time with their families while they are campaigning, or for spending too much time in the office, while their male counterparts are rewarded for putting in long hours. Because we live and vote within a patriarchal society, men are often thought of as the default for office holders. Male candidates are seen as the norm or the standard, while female candidates who are breaking through, are seen as revolutionary and brave. Sex, gender, and race are deeply intertwined within the world of politics and women face this in ways that are unique from male candidates. Hunter demonstrates this by saying, “It is imperative to understand how race and gender interact in their lives and create specific kinds of racial and gendered oppression... Oppression is not simply additive as in “race + gender,” but instead it is multiplicative in the sense that race and gender multiply and create new systems of oppression, and different manifestations of oppression that do not exist for others” (10). This truth is complicated further when intersections of a person’s identity, like race, are taken into account. Traister writes, “The racist allusions that dogged Obama, and the nastiness about Clinton’s appearance, testified to the endurance of certain stereotypes about black men and women” (81).

Falk challenges the use of language to demonstrate how structures and institutions that we treat as inherently natural were created and are perpetuated by the language we use. We often are wrapped up in the expectations of what a politician should look, act, and sound like. The obsession with these traits makes us believe that they are natural rather than imposed on us. Falk states, “We become accustomed to seeing life in the categories given to us by our language. We are, for the most part, unaware that these categories have been imposed and inherited. Rather we believe that the divisions and boundaries in language only reflect the true nature of our environment” (18). These expectations imposed on our society have created institutionalized barriers to certain populations of people being successful in politics. Race and class are powerful institutions that inhibit many people from succeeding in politics. This is especially true of people of color, and furthermore women of color.

Hill Collins demonstrates that while women in politics do face misogyny, this institutionalized oppression is amplified to disproportionately affect women of color. Hill Collins states, “Women do share common experiences, but the experiences are not generally the same type as those affecting racial and ethnic groups. While expressions of race and gender are both socially constructed, they are not constructed in the same way. The struggle for an afro-centric feminist consciousness requires embracing both an afro-centric world view and a feminist sensibility and using both to forge a self-defined standpoint” (27). Hill Collins brings up the topic of race and gender both being socially constructed, but having different repercussions. The construction of race has left people of color widely marginalized. This marginalization has become institutionalized to the point that many people of color face extreme racism while entering and maintaining a

political career. It is vital to understand the institutional structures and barriers that women, and especially women of color face while working in politics.

In *Black Feminist Thought*, Patricia Hill Collins challenges the reader to recognize and redefine stereotypes as controlling images for women of color. Hill Collins contests the idea of stereotypes and redefines them as being tools of control stating,

As part of a generalized ideology of domination, these controlling images of black womanhood take on special meaning because the authority to define these symbols is a major instrument of power. In order to exercise power, elite white men and their representatives must be in a position to manipulate appropriate symbols concerning black women. (68)

By redefining stereotypes as tools of control against women of color, Hill Collins highlights the intersections of race, gender, and class. She continues by saying,

They may do so by exploiting already existing symbols, or they may create new ones relevant to their needs. The objective of stereotypes is not to reflect or represent a reality but to function as a disguise or mystification of objective social relations. These controlling images are designed to make racism, sexism, and poverty appear to be natural, normal, and an inevitable part of everyday life. (Hill Collins 68)

We need to dismantle those stereotypes and acknowledge how they are used as tools of control over many marginalized people. For example, Representative Tammy Baldwin is someone who is working to break down those controlling images and redefine what it means to be a woman in politics. In the book *Women's Political Discourse*, the authors discuss the case of Tammy Baldwin, who was not only the first woman sent to the House

from Wisconsin, but also the nation's first openly homosexual candidate in Congress (Mayhead and Marshall 101). Baldwin stated, "If I do my job well to represent all of the people in the second congressional district and work really hard on the agenda that we've spelled out, I'll do more to challenge stereotypes that people might have about progressives, about young people, about women, about lesbians" (qtd in Mayhead and Marshall 102). Baldwin represents a demographic of politicians who recognize these controlling images that Hill Collins talks about and works to dismantle them.

These controlling images are prevailing within our society so it is important to challenge them rather than to accept them as inevitable and to elect representatives that do the same. Mayhead and Marshall demonstrate how Tammy Baldwin is an example of someone doing this by stating that she

Creates a political discourse that addresses issue traditionally of concern to women and simultaneously embodies a gender-neutral rhetorical strategy. While the ideograph is not exclusively feminine, women are often discredited for seeking cooperation rather than confrontation as an emotional response and a means of avoiding difficult decision-making. Baldwin however clearly places cooperation within the context of international diplomacy. (110)

Dittmar and Carr offer advice about how to support women of color in politics. They state, "Recruit and support Black women candidates. Push back against the biases that doubt Black women's electoral viability. And help us to move beyond first and only Black women across levels and types of office" (1). Breaking down the roots of stereotypes and redefining them as controlling ideologies helps us understand how they structure our lives. By exposing controlling images and how they inhibit women of color

politicians, we can create new expectations of how women of color are received and treated in politics.

Impact of Islamophobia on Muslim Americans

In this research, I focus on the tropes of Islamophobia that Omar faces to examine how political discourse and media coverage have symbolized the Representative in this way. It is no secret that women in politics face a unique set of challenges and perceptions about them. This holds especially true for Muslim American women within politics. The term “Muslim Americans” encompasses a wide group of people. Dana states that, “Muslim Americans are not a monolithic group, nor can they be described in terms of one common experience. Nonetheless, it is a term that millions of Muslims living in the U.S. use to identify themselves. Muslims in the U.S. originated from at least 77 countries and include native-born African Americans and other converts to Islam” (631). Because it is a term used by so many people within the United States to identify as, it is important to recognize the vast population that the term Muslim American really represents. Each individual who identifies with this group classification cannot be assumed one specific way or another. Therefore, we can understand the term Muslim American to encompass a wide variety of Muslim identifying Americans. Islamophobia is a prevalent ideology within American culture and research has found that Muslim Americans are viewed by the American public more negatively than all other racial, ethnic, or religious groups (Dana 630). As the feminist movement continues to become increasingly intersectional, this topic deserves attention.

Acknowledging the difference of experience, even within the Muslim American community, is important to give individuals the voice to speak out about injustices. Zaal

argues, “It is imperative not to homogenize or essentialize the experiences of Muslims across the country. I employ the category of ‘Muslim Americans’ to situate a growing Islamophobic trend within its historical, social, and political context, and to generate discussion and interrupt the pedagogical practices that contribute to further oppression of Muslim students” (556). Ignoring the immense diversity that exists within the Muslim American community creates space to circulate racist and Islamophobic beliefs that are applied to the community as a whole. Within this community, black Muslims experience Islamophobia differently than non-black Muslims. Author Erik Love writes about the racial paradox that exists with the Muslim community. Black Muslims face this oppression in an intersectional way, facing both skin color stratification as well as religious discrimination against them. However, many people are slow to define Islamophobia as racism. Love states, “The takeaway from all of this is that the slipperiness with which racism has been redefined not only enables Islamophobia to pass as legitimate discourse, but it also helps Americans avoid talking about racism even when it is patently obvious... In a society where racism is considered abhorrent, it is quite unusual for openly bigoted statements like these to remain socially acceptable and even promoted” (Love 22). It is important to acknowledge how different members of the community can experience Islamophobia in different and intersecting ways.

These beliefs often perpetuate controlling images that are ultimately internalized by members of the community. Naderi and Vossoughi explore the idea of identity and self esteem within the Muslim community. They state,

The course and character of Islamophobia following 9/11 suggests that gender ideologies, reference groups, and social contexts all affect the construction of

Muslim identities in Western contexts. Research on gender and self-esteem generally supports this suggestion, for example, showing how peers and media representations are apparent in women's negative attitudes and feelings toward themselves, compared to men. (Naderi and Vossoughi 111)

Muslim women in the United States and across the world are inaccurately portrayed, perpetuating these Islamophobic ideologies. Naderi and Vossoughi establish, "Depictions of Islam in the West continue to cast devout Muslim women as passive and programmed - at best, they are poor, oppressed creatures with few rights in their communities and little say in their relationships; at worst, they are complicit in their own oppression and the nefarious activities of radical Muslim men" (114). They continue stating, "These depictions belie the diversity and agency of Muslim women around the world, instead suggesting that following Islam and adhering to Muslim ways of doing gender is monolithic and incompatible with Western norms and values. Not surprisingly, the *hijab* (the Muslim practice of veiling) featured prominently in participants' accounts of this stigma process" (Naderi and Vossoughi 114). Examining how gender intersects with this type of discrimination is an important piece of unpacking the Islamophobia felt by many Muslim Americans. Author Dana writes, "We should note that the relationship between gender and discrimination is more complicated than it appears" (636). It is important to think about how gender plays a role in this specific intersectionality and that both men and women experience the oppression, just in different ways. Dana continues, saying, "One perspective is that Muslim men may be subjected to greater discrimination than their female counterparts because men are more likely to be viewed as 'radical outsiders,' ready to engage in violence" (636). The author says that part of the reason people view

Muslim men as “radical outsiders” comes from their gender expression such as their, “dress choice, beard, and skin color which are markers that identify young men in Western Europe as Muslim, and therefore as a threat” (Dana 636). Pointing out how Muslim men experience this oppression is vital to understanding how gender difference plays a role in the oppression experienced. Dana argues that Muslim men might experience more hostility than Muslim women. However, Dana continues that when you take intersectionality into account, it is Muslim women who wear the hijab that are portrayed as radical, foreign, and threatening. Dana states, “The hijab is a highly relevant indicator of Muslim identity, perhaps more so than wearing a beard or other male cultural markers of Islamic affiliation. Thus, while the average woman may not perceive as much discrimination as the average man, veiled women may experience more discrimination than both men and non-hijabi women” (636). It is important to acknowledge the intersectionality that is at play in this scenario for Muslim American women who wear the hijab, like Ilhan Omar.

While there is much debate about whether male or female Muslim Americans face more racism and oppression, it is clear that many members of the community are affected daily by Islamophobia. This is fact is demonstrated further within the political realm. Zaal demonstrates that by expressing, “These demonized and dehumanizing images (often depicted in seemingly harmless ways...) have served to desensitize the U.S. populace and to legitimize fear and hatred against Muslims and Islam. Moreover, the persistent discourse in the media and in politics that equates Muslims with terrorism and violence perpetuates Islamophobia” (556). The public use of Islamophobia can be seen readily throughout American politics and is aimed at both everyday Muslim American

citizens, and Muslim American politicians. Dana states, “Politically, Muslim Americans have been racialized through their perceived connection to terrorism, which policymakers are eager to preempt” (633). In the post 9/11 era, circumstances for Muslim Americans have been overall hostile and racist. These conditions were exacerbated once again during the 2016 election cycle. Some factors that aggravated this Islamophobia again, and may have worsened conditions for the Muslim American community were the 2016 election where Trump used anti-Muslim rhetoric, continued occurrences of terrorism around the world, and the unrelenting War on Terror (Dana 630). Perpetuating these controlling images of Muslim Americans has led to deep-rooted Islamophobia that many Americans uphold. Even though many Muslim Americans engage in mainstream American ways, Dana argues that Muslim Americans are seen as a uniform group that is violent, dishonest, and threat to the American way of life. This existing objection is rooted in racist beliefs about certain racial superiority and inherent inferiority (633).

Islamophobia is a prevalent form of oppression within American culture and it informs the experience of many Muslim people in politics. Elman states, “It is in this contemporary time period that a biased projection of Islam as a violent religion has worked to brand Muslims as terrorists, traitors, non-Democrats, and threats to social cohesion and global peace” (145). This Islamophobia has created an inaccurate depiction of Islam and Muslim people. Author Dana points out this fact as well, stating, “For Muslim Americans, their cultural and religious values have been portrayed as anti-American, perpetually foreign, misogynistic, and violent” (634). It is important to understand this unique intersection of oppression to understand the experience that

Muslim American people face throughout their life, and furthermore, if they enter the world of politics. Dana ascertains,

In sum, Muslim Americans have historically been racialized as foreign, violent, and as a threat to national security and to the American way of life. The process of racialization has occurred along the vector of religion, aided by 9/11, other terrorist attacks in the United States and Europe, and the reaction of political elites and the news media to these attacks. This racialization is also distinctly gendered, since wearing the hijab makes women's Muslim identity highly visible, and the hijab has been crudely reduced to signify women's oppression within Islam. Yet, little systematic evidence exists about the experiences of Muslim Americans with discrimination, and even less is known about the intersection of religion and gender in shaping these experiences. (638)

This topic provides context to their experiences is important to keep unpacking as it affects the lives of many Americans and Muslims worldwide.

Media Representation of Women of Color in Politics

Representation of women within the political realm is often one extreme or another. Women are hyper-sexualized, hyper-feminized, or defeminized all together. Past cases of women running for office have shown the struggle that they face with how they are portrayed in political discourse and within the media. Women who come across as "too feminine" are reprimanded that they would not be able to lead, while women who embody traits that are more "masculine" are scolded for trying too hard. An author offers, "In as much as a female candidate could exercise choice in how to present herself, the decision was often to try to pass as masculine. To come across as traditionally female and

thereby not traditionally powerful was to call into question an ability to command, to defend the nation, to be taken seriously by world leaders” (Traister 70). This association with the need to be masculine presenting is a challenge that many female candidates have had to face. This representation infiltrates language that is used to describe female candidates, as demonstrated through this example about Hillary Rodham Clinton. Traister writes, “The language that they used about her, that she was tough, ready to stand up to Republicans, inevitable, the front runner, the establishment candidate, a hawk and part of a political dynasty, reinforced the notion that she was a competent masculine norm rather than a nut cracking or lily livered feminine exception” (72-73). Here we see that masculine characteristics are considered an advantage and feminine characteristics would be a perceived hindrance to her campaign. The biases created by discourse are then reflected by media representation. When examining representation between men and women candidates, we need to acknowledge the present gap. This gap can be seen in many political races when, “Women received less campaign coverage than their male counterparts; the coverage they received was more negative, emphasizing their unlikely chances of winning. Women received consistently less issue attention than their male counterparts and finally the news media seemed more responsive to the messages sent by male candidates” (Whitaker 93). This gender disparity is prevalent throughout media representation.

U.S. media often portrays Muslim women in contradicting ways. Often, Muslim women are shown as passive, submissive, and docile. Karim argues, “Using images of passive veiled Muslim female bodies to suggest eastern backwardness and western emancipation efforts for eastern freedom is a common trend in popular representations of

Muslim women” (1). Muslim women are shown as being void of autonomy and severely repressed by their religion. This representation of Muslim women is complicated by a contradicting view of their sexuality. Muslim women’s sexuality is often demonstrated as a dichotomy where they are portrayed as either sexually promiscuous or sexually repressed all together (Frye 11). U.S. media commonly relies on the stereotype of “far-away Muslim women as non-resistive passive victims stuck in religion-based fanaticism and turmoil” (Karim 1). This representation intersects misogyny and racism, creating an oppressive portrayal of Muslim women.

Should we be concerned about media representation? Falk suggests that yes, we should be concerned about how the media represents women and their political career. Falk states, “Studies show that language affects how we perceive and think about the world and that the mass media help create our society. Together these ideas suggest that women candidates should be concerned about how the media portray them and that we as a society should be interested as well” (Falk 17). This portrayal of women candidates and women in office is perpetuated by political discourse that informs media coverage and representation. Falk continues by arguing, “Why worry about the press? There is a large body of evidence from social science demonstrating that the world we live in is created by the language we use to describe it. Language is important and the words we use and hear, especially in media, affect not only how we perceive the world but also how we judge, remember, and act in it” (Falk 17). Public perception of candidates and people in office is informed by the discourse that surrounds them. We need to critically analyze the discourse and media we consume to be conscious of their representation. As Falk argues, language and discourse shape the culture and society that we live in. These

representations directly affect our perception and opinion on the candidates. Falk argues that in order for a candidate to gain widespread traction, they have to be covered in national media. Falk argues that if they are not present within the national spotlight, the chances of their candidacy being successful are incredibly low. Falk states, “The media not only tell us who our national candidates are, but they are also instrumental in creating our common conceptions of them” (28). When examining media coverage between candidates, we have to acknowledge the exposure that certain candidates are given over others. Falk establishes that this coverage and discourse have the power to influence public perception that ultimately affects voting outcomes. Falk argues that using certain words, categories or labels can affect the associations that voters make. Falk states that, “By featuring gender or by differentiating between men and women, reporters inform the thoughts of the reader. The reporter’s discourse will be a factor in building the receiver’s mental representations of the world and therefore their understanding of the world” (Falk 22). Although “the media” is an umbrella term that covers many different outlets, ultimately, “The sociological and cultural influences of the individuals making these decisions will always be a human determination” (Whitaker 95). While we often are told to believe that this discourse comes from an objective place, complete objectivity in our society is unachievable. This objectivity is unachievable because of the ideology that each person holds that creates personal opinion and bias, causing racism and sexism. Whitaker argues, “In addition, mass media professionals bring their own culture, their own social norms, and their own political views and preferences to the news making procedure. Despite the professionalism of the individual reporter and their organization’s views, the final news product will be influenced by any number of internal and external

factors” (95). Finally, it is important to be aware of how political discourse and media portrayal can be effective on such a large platform. Falk states, “What is powerful about our mediated experiences is that they are uniform in a way that personal experiences are not” (28). Although we each experience life in vastly different ways, even within the same community, political discourse and media representation provide a commonality shared within our culture. Finally, Falk establishes,

Certain ideas about our society can be construed as common conceptions in part by the media. This is not to suggest that a person’s individual or even collective experiences do not also contribute to our thinking about our society... However, what we watch on TV and read in the newspaper also count as experiences. But, unlike individual experiences, these are collectively shared and therefore have the power to structure reality en masse. (28)

Media representation is a unique form of experience that we as a collective have. It differs from individual experience because even though we all interpret it differently, we are exposed to the same kinds of representation.

Conclusion

In order to conduct this research on the topic of women in politics it is first important to examine the scholarly work that has already been done on it. My bodies of knowledge have been informed by these writings and they continued to aid in my process of research. Women in politics face a distinct set of challenges, and the institutional structures and barriers that women of color face within politics are unique to each individual. This is further complicated by the stereotypes and unequal representation that women within politics face, especially those that Muslim Americans face. Certain factors

such as, “Institutional practices that target Muslim Americans, political rhetoric that unequivocally equates Islam with radicalization, unfavorable media coverage, and anti-Muslim rhetoric espoused by public figures entrench negative stereotypes in the American society through the process of racialization” (Dana 634). We can understand these unique sets of challenges using intersectionality as an analytical tool to help us unpack the complexity of layers that each person’s identity holds. As we continue to move forward and elect more and more women into office, understanding the interrelation between the various identities in our lives will continue to be more and more important. Mayhead and Marshall state,

As the number of women in the U.S. House of Representatives increases, their impact on government increases as well. The consideration and accommodation of feminist confers have altered the agenda, changed the content of policy debate and affected legislative outcomes. In no small part, public policy advances have been achieved because of the commitment to surrogate representation - the sense of obligation felt by Congresswomen to act for women beyond their geographic constituency. (82)

Supporting the growing number of women in politics is extremely important to the advancement of our society. However, before we can do that, we need to understand and acknowledge how political and media discourse influences their careers.

Chapter Three: Methodology

This chapter of my research is devoted to the methods used to conduct my study. Throughout the chapter, I will outline my research statement, research questions and objectives, methodology, data sources, rationale, and reflexivity. I will break down every section to give detailed explanations of why I made each decision.

Research Statement

Ilhan Omar has faced immense public scrutiny because of her political stance. Through this research, I examined how the intersections of race, class, and gender influence how Omar is portrayed and received in the public eye. These powerful discourses frame media representations that reflect negative bias and perception of this Congressperson. Recognizing how political discourse frames media bias of women in politics is important as we enter an election year and continue to elect more women into office than ever before. The purpose of this study is to explore and observe the political discourse that frames media representation, and to unpack how that representation reflects opinion and perception of Omar. In order to conduct this research, I examined media coverage, public responses, and the political rhetoric that is at play in this case. I analyzed the case of Ilhan Omar to demonstrate how political discourse frames media coverage of women in politics. I hypothesized that I would find many different mediums using the tropes of Islamophobia to portray Omar.

Research Questions and Objectives

My research and methodology are guided by this main research question: How does political discourse frame media representation of Ilhan Omar? My research continues with these supplemental questions: 1. How has the public interacted with these

representations? 2. What do these depictions reveal about how women of color are received in politics? 3. Are women of color always perceived to be radical in politics? These questions guided and informed my research to be critical of political discourse and to be cognizant of how it influences media representation. I laid out three main objectives to focus on within my research. The first objective was to examine how political discourse frames representation of women in politics. I achieved this by examining the political discourse that surrounds the Representative, and by examining how media interacts with this discourse in their coverage of Omar. The second objective was to analyze how the tropes of Islamophobia are applied to Ilhan Omar in media representation. I was able to complete this objective by examining news sources and using a critical feminist lens to analyze their portrayal. This objective was necessary to understand how public opinion and perception of her is created and perpetuated. My last objective was to gain insight on the intersectional factors that have played a role in Ilhan Omar's political career. This objective was very important because it is necessary to take an intersectional approach when examining oppression. Omar faces oppression at multiple intersections of her life, and this objective was pivotal to understanding the larger societal context of the oppression that she encounters.

Methodology

This qualitative research style uses feminist media analysis to demonstrate how political discourse frames media coverage of women in politics. By using a feminist media analysis approach, I conducted an examination of text and print media. I examined Minnesota news and journalistic sources to analyze how Omar is portrayed in media. Additionally, I used a hypothesis theory approach, which means that I hypothesized my

findings before starting my research, to examine tropes that are applied to Omar. This feminist media analysis method guided my research to explore how political discourse frames media coverage and representation of Ilhan Omar. The method of feminist media analysis combines content, media, and discourse analysis. A large part of my methodology was to collect media productions to provide the foundation for comparison and analysis.

A key part of using feminist media analysis revolves around identifying the themes of the content. McIntosh and Cuklanz break down the use of themes, stating, “Key themes become the primary means of engaging a text, and determining these themes becomes the next step. A theme is an idea that repeats throughout a text and can be suggested by previous scholarship on a particular medium, genre, or example. A theme is not random, though it might appear so in initial inquiries. After further inquiry a theme begins to form a pattern that fluctuates in different ways throughout the text” (285). The authors establish that clearly defining these themes is important in order to demonstrate how they are connected to a larger social context. They state, “While themes appear within a text, they also connect to cultural ideas outside texts. A text never emerges from a vacuum. Instead, it becomes the product of multiple content including industrial, national, cultural, social, and political ones. These contexts influence not only a text’s production and the ideas it represents, but also its uses and receptions” (McIntosh and Cuklanz 284). In my research, I structured my results first by separating the content into three main sources: political discourse, media representation, and public opinion. Within these three sources, I identified themes and demonstrated how these themes were present within each source category.

Intersectionality and black feminist thought educated my theoretical framework to create informed and analytical feminist research. Within my research, I identified three key bodies of knowledge that are integral to creating this research. My bodies of knowledge were, the institutionalized barriers and structures that people of color in politics face, the impact of Islamophobia on Muslim Americans, and media representation of women of color in politics. These bodies of knowledge produce the framework for the collection of my data sources.

Data sources

Data sources originate from many different media sources, including tweets, photographs, images, and polling data. The use of social media is a relatively new outlet of news and data that has become increasingly popular over the last decade. For the purpose of this research, I focused on text and type media news sources. The political media that I use are integral to understanding this case. They offer another clear example of the biases that are present against women in politics, and especially against women of color. Because Ilhan Omar is a globally recognized politician, there is an incredible amount of media written about her and her every action. A basic search of her name yields tens of thousands of news articles. In order to narrow down my search I chose to use only U.S. based news sources, written in Minnesota. To further narrow the search results, I only used the database *Nexis Uni* to find my data sources for this research. Within this database, I identified two main Minnesotan news sources to focus on, *The St. Paul Pioneer Press* and *The Minneapolis Star Tribune*. Within these two sources, I set my search parameters from January 2018-January 2020. A simple search of the words “Ilhan Omar” in these two sources during that time frame yields 679 results, 412 of them

from the *Pioneer Press* and 267 from the *Star Tribune*. In order to further narrow and find relevant sources, and since many news sources will not explicitly name their Islamophobia and racism, I used the search terms “experienced” “inexperienced” “radical” “unqualified” “un-American” and “disloyal.” After using those key words to narrow down my search, I read each of the articles that the key word search produced. While reading through each article, I determined if it would be part of my data by deciding if the content was relevant to my research and hypothesis. Ultimately, after using those specific search parameters, I came to have 30 articles between the two newspaper sources. These 30 articles are what I based my research and results on. I was able to examine public opinion of the Congressperson by using a section of the *Star Tribune* called “Readers Write” where readers can write in their opinion on topics. Although I cannot conclude that their opinions have been directly influenced by this news media, I was still able to analyze public perception.

Rationale

I selected to focus on Ilhan Omar because she represents a new dynamic of powerful female voices in our government. Additionally, she has been the focus of many media outlets, and is a good example of how political discourse frames and informs media representation. I chose to use only United States based sources because I wanted to examine how U.S. discourse and media created and portrayed images of Ilhan Omar. Although Islamophobia is worldwide, this specific construction of Ilhan Omar is pervasive to U.S. culture. I decided to focus on strictly Minnesotan news sources because I thought it would be noteworthy to examine the media coming from the state Omar represents. Additionally, Minnesota is home to a large population of Somali immigrants.

It is important to be critical of how media and political discourse inform public perception, and how that perception can be translated into Islamophobia on a more widespread and everyday level experienced by the Somali people living within Minnesota. I picked the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* and *Minneapolis Star Tribune* because they are both widespread Minnesotan media outlets. Both sources have national scope and are frequently cited nationally. I elected to limit my period to January 2018-January 2020 in order to examine media coverage and political discourse that surrounds Omar's career since being elected to the House of Representatives in November 2018. I expanded it to include up to January of 2020 to have access to the most up to date media that is being produced about her.

I chose to use feminist media analysis as my methodology because it required analyzing aspects of this Congressperson in a systematic way to understand the interaction of discourse and ideology. Other researchers who have done research on this type of content have chosen feminist media analysis as well because it gives the space to conduct and create research in a way that can encompass many different perspectives and understandings. Authors McIntosh and Cuklanz suggest using feminist media research in *Feminist Research Practice*, because it offers a unique way of examining data. They state, "Media analysis offers a key way to uncover multiple meanings within and around texts. While texts might appear to suggest just one meaning, they are in fact considered polysemic which means they offer multiple meanings. Media analysis offers the means to get to those meanings and show how they interrelate" (McIntosh and Cuklanz 288). This method was useful in my case because many of the articles that I examined had layers of discourse that needed unpacking. Using feminist media analysis gave me the tool to

understand how one quote has multiple meanings and interpretations, and to locate how it intersects with other quotes. Another advantage of using feminist media analysis as my method is that there is a plethora of options for studying, and these mediums already exist rather than needing to be created by the researcher. McIntosh and Cuklanz continue,

This method is flexible in that it works with a wide variety of texts available...

Media analysis is also considered to be unobtrusive, instead of observing or interviewing people as part of gathering data, texts already exist and require minimal, if any, interaction with people in order to study them. The process of gathering data from people gets influenced both by researchers and by participants, whereas data exists without these layers of influence interfering.

(289)

It is because of these three main points, understanding multiple meanings of text, flexible options, and unobtrusive research, that feminist media analysis was the best option for my research method.

Reflexivity and Limitations

I am a white, middle class, liberal identifying, Midwestern woman, and each of these identities brings certain beliefs and biases that I have about this topic coming into my research. My background is in History and Gender and Women's Studies, so my research will come from an interdisciplinary understanding. My feminist positionality informs my biases about the topic of the treatment of women in politics, however, because I am not a politician, woman of color, or Muslim, there are limitations to my own understandings of these identities. As a researcher, I understand that it is impossible to be completely objective and to remove oneself entirely from societal beliefs and

practices. Keeping that in mind, I focused on staying aware of my own biases, beliefs, and limitations throughout my research. Although I am not a part of creating media, I interact with media on a daily basis, and it is important to be conscious of the media that we consume. We need to continue to question and critique media as it informs our everyday lives. One limitation to the method of media analysis is similar to an advantage of it,

The very polysemy of texts that makes media analysis an appealing method, can in another way, be considered a limitation. Because texts are polysemic, it is important to acknowledge at some point within each work of media analysis that other readings or interpretation can be generated from the same text and thus that the writer's interpretation is not to be taken as the absolute truth. (McIntosh and Cuklanz 289)

How I interpret the articles that I dissect in the next chapter is just that, an interpretation based on my hypothesis, research, and positionality. This is a limitation to my methodology because other researchers could interpret the articles differently based on their own positionality.

Chapter Four: Results

In this chapter, I examine the 30 newspaper articles that I identified as my data collection, and through it, I examine how political discourse frames media representation of Ilhan Omar. I explore both overt and covert forms of Islamophobia present, and examine the coinciding tropes that affect Omar. I identify this Islamophobia and concurring oppressions such as racism, sexism, and nationalism, by separating the content into three main categories all demonstrated through the newspaper articles. These three source categories are: political discourse, media representation, and public opinion. I further dissect the categories by identifying reoccurring themes within each of them. Through the three categories, it is apparent how they all work together to spread and perpetuate a negative narrative of Ilhan Omar. According to Gladstone, the media does not shape but rather reflects public opinion (xxi). Ilhan Omar has been presented in the media as inexperienced, un-American, and disloyal. In this chapter, I will demonstrate how that presentation is a reflection of American Islamophobia.

Within my data collection, Omar's experience is mentioned repeatedly, and her status as the first Somali American representative is mentioned numerous times as well. Within this dialogue, words like experience or inexperience are tools to mask sexism and to diminish Omar's accomplishments. In the political realm, and even within their own party, political discourse has portrayed Omar, Ocasio-Cortez, Pressley, and Tlaib, the four Congresswomen who make up the "squad," as radical. Many of the articles I examined address this radicalization of their images. How does the public interact with these claims that the Congresswomen are all radical? When the public is repeatedly reading that the women are radical, what are they led to believe?

Throughout this chapter, I investigate political discourse in conjunction with media representation and public opinion. The remarks made by politicians about Ilhan Omar are extremely polarizing because the content forces the person receiving the messages to choose a side. Many times, when Trump and other politicians have publicly made racist and Islamophobic comments, other Republican politicians have refused to comment on or condemn them. This perpetuates the harmful discourse that is circulated about Omar, informing public opinion of the Representative. Islamophobia is the trope that props up the other forms of oppression that Omar faces in her political career. Overt Islamophobia is apparent in the political discourse and public opinion that surrounds Ilhan Omar. Although it is not as clearly demonstrated within public media sources like the newspapers I examined, it is still present in media representation, just in a much more covert way. Through this data collection, we can see the tropes of Islamophobia being demonstrated through political discourse, media representation, and public opinion, all through the medium of newspaper articles. These articles inform how political discourse frames media representation of Ilhan Omar.

Political Discourse

The political discourse that circulates about Ilhan Omar is widely polarized. Author Brooke Gladstone speaks to discourse and media, stating, Speech itself, inevitable and unrelenting, is the wind. It can dance like a zephyr. It can roar or shriek or wail. But it can't be stopped. Everything we hate about the media today was present at its creation: its corrupt or craven practitioners, its easy manipulation by the powerful, its capacity for propagating lies, its penchant for amplifying rage. Also present was everything we admire - and require - from the

media: factual information, penetrating analysis, probing investigation, truth spoken to power. Same as it ever was. (20)

This quote reminds us that although there is a large amount of dialogue in present media about “fake news,” this system of producing and spreading information has been present throughout history. In this section, I analyzed the newspaper articles that highlight political discourse surrounding Ilhan Omar by breaking it into three themes: experience, citizenship, and how Omar is portrayed as un-American or disloyal.

Experience

One theme that is continuously present surrounding discourse about Ilhan Omar is her political experience, or lack thereof. Her experience level has been called into question repeatedly. For example, an article in the *Star Tribune* highlights a Minneapolis lawyer who will be running against Omar for her seat. He is quoted saying, “I think there’s a deep hunger from residents of this district for someone who is deeply engaged and has experience building community and coalitions and being effective, and that’s what I want to bring back to this office” (qtd in Van Oot 1). This political commentary insinuates that Omar is inexperienced, a term that is often used to diminish her accomplishments. The tropes of Islamophobia are not always overt; sometimes they take a covert approach like this article. Although these approaches are different, ultimately they do the same thing: perpetuate oppression onto Omar, and create a perception of her that is widely accepted by American and Minnesotan voters. To date, at least seven challengers, including one other Democrat, have filed paperwork to run for Omar’s seat next year (Van Oot 1).

Trump is another politician who criticizes Omar's level of experience to diminish the work that she has done and to undermine her authority. The *St. Paul Pioneer Press* covered a story in which Trump pushed for Omar and the "squad" to be denied entrance to Israel using words like, "outspoken freshmen" and "critical liberal newcomer" to describe their positionality (Zion and Mascaro 2). The Israeli government, demonstrating how influential and powerful political discourse can be, granted this request. The repeated questioning of her experience is misogynistic and is used as a tactic to establish doubt in her ability. Author Traister speaks about how language used about female candidates often reinforces a masculine norm rather than accepting femininity as an equitable option (70).

Citizenship

Another theme that came out of the political discourse that surrounds Omar is the repeated mentioning of her citizenship. Trump's tweet telling Omar to go back to where she came from, is an example of the most widely recognized political discourse about Omar. An article from July 2019 in the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* is entitled, "Leave the U.S., Trump Tells Liberal Congresswomen of Color." This article covers how President Trump said that the four women who make up the "squad," should go back to the "broken and crime infested countries they came from" ("Leave the U.S." 2). This comment blatantly ignores the fact that the four women are all American citizens. This article continues by highlighting that three of the four women were born in the United States, and refers to Omar as foreign-born ("Leave the U.S." 2). The article goes on to mention how this rift continued with Trump tweeting, "So interesting to see 'progressive' democrat Congresswomen who originally came from countries whose governments are a

complete and total catastrophe... Now loudly and viciously telling the people of the United States, the greatest and most powerful nation on earth, how our government should be run” (“Leave the U.S” 2). These hateful comments open the door for other politicians to speak this way about Omar. It informs public perception about the Congressperson by demonstrating that our President feels this speech is acceptable. The *St. Paul Pioneer Press* continued covering this story, stating that Trump would not apologize for his overt racist and xenophobic remarks about Omar and the other three women of the “squad” because he stated that many people agree with him. This demonstrates how racist and harmful public opinion is informed and supported. The author of the article writes, “Trump, who won the presidency in part by energizing disaffected voters with incendiary radical rhetoric, has no intention of backing away from this strategy going in to 2020” (“Trump Digs In” 2). The article concludes that ultimately Trump and his staff do not believe themselves to be racist or say racist things. The article cites Chief of Staff, Short, saying that he, “defended Trump’s comments stating that he isn’t racist because his transportation secretary is a woman of color who was born outside of the United States” (“Trump Digs In” 2). The continued questioning and ignorance about Omar’s citizenship demonstrates how the tropes of Islamophobia are ingrained in American politics.

Un-American/Disloyal

The third theme that presented itself from this content was how Omar is portrayed in political discourse as being Un-American or disloyal. This political discourse spread by media gives the public the groundwork to say similar Islamophobic remarks and to feel the right to defend them. Another example of polarizing Islamophobic commentary

from the President comes from an article by the *Star Tribune* entitled, “Trump Says Omar Should Resign.” This article demonstrates Trump capitalizing on Omar’s comments about Israeli-US relations being all about money, ultimately calling for her to resign, and questioning her loyalty to American politics (Condon 1). The *St. Paul Pioneer Press* also covered these remarks with multiple articles, one of them titled, “Trump: Any Jew Voting Democrat is Uninformed or Disloyal.” The President claims this statement because of remarks that Omar has made about being openly discontent with Israeli-US relations. This problematic article title highlights an even more disturbing political remark where the President is attempting to create a hateful ultimatum for Jewish Americans. The author quotes Trump saying that, “Any American Jew who votes for a Democrat show either a total lack of knowledge, or great disloyalty” (Lemire and Superville 1). This type of dialogue polarizes already marginalized populations, Muslim Americans and Jewish Americans, and pits them further against one another. This marginalization exhibits nationalism, a concurring trope of Islamophobia present in American culture that Omar faces.

Although the many comments made by Trump may be the most well known backlash that Omar faces, he is not the only politician who has publicly made Islamophobic comments toward her. The *St. Paul Pioneer Press* documented an article about a Florida Congressional candidate whose fundraising letter stated, “anti-American radical Democrats should be hung for treason,” mentioning Omar specifically (Lush and Farrington 1). The candidate said that we should hang Omar and other traitors for “abusing our system to destroy our country” (Lush and Farrington 1). He said, “For all their false, tinfoil hat accusations of President Trump, the Democrats have foreign assets

among their most outspoken leadership, we should hang these traitors where they stand” (qtd in Lush and Farrington 1). And while the chair of the Republicans in this county in Florida condemned this type of rhetoric, saying it has no place in politics, the candidate’s hateful words were still heard far and wide. This extreme, overtly Islamophobic rhetoric, is not the most frequent form of racism that we hear demonstrated publicly by politicians these days. However, it is important to recognize that this level of extreme comments is still made and believed by many Americans.

Another example of blatant Islamophobia was demonstrated through an article written in the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* about Jeanine Pirro, a Fox News anchor suspended for making comments about Omar’s loyalty because of her hijab (Bauder 1). The network faced much backlash from both political sides because of the comments that were made. Far right viewers and a Republican group “Act for America,” called for people to be outraged that Fox, “caved to pressure from the radical left” (Bauder 1) for suspending the anchor. “Act for America,” which is known for their anti-Muslim rhetoric, said more than 20,000 people responded to their request to email a Fox representative with their dissatisfaction. Meanwhile, Fox also faced backlash from the left, stating that they wanted the anchor to be fired rather than just suspended. This example of overt Islamophobia within political discourse and its response from both sides demonstrates how polarized many Americans are about Omar. It can be argued that the root of this polarization came about as soon as Omar entered the political scene. It continues currently as she serves her term in Congress and has her capability constantly questioned.

Media Representation

While I argue that media does not create bias rather it reflects bias, it is important to critically analyze how media plays a role in the depiction of Ilhan Omar. Gladstone mentions this reflection in *The Influencing Machine*, stating,

The media machine is a delusion. What we are really dealing with is a mirror: an exalting, degrading, tedious, and transcendent funhouse mirror of America.

Actually, media is a plural noun: we are dealing with a whole mess of mirrors. They aren't well calibrated; they're fogged, and cracked. But you're in there, reflected somewhere, and so is everyone else (including people you dislike). The media landscape is so cluttered with mirrors facing mirrors that we can't tell where an image begins or ends. (Gladstone xxi)

In this section, I will analyze how the media represents and portrays Ilhan Omar, supplementing the political discourse that I have already examined. I do this by identifying three themes within media representation: experience, controlling images, and portrayal of her as un-American and disloyal. An article, written by Jason Lewis, who represented Minnesota's second district in Congress, was published in the *St. Paul Pioneer Press*. It was titled, "Journalists Brought Fake News War Upon Themselves." This article starts by mentioning the media bias that politicians have to face. The overall tone throughout the article is very sarcastic and covers how bias is created and circulated solely through the media (Lewis 1). However, his opinion disregards the pivotal connection between political discourse and media representation. Although media does circulate bias, I agree with Gladstone that it does not create the bias; rather, it reflects the bias that is created by political discourse. I will continue to demonstrate that theme and pivotal connection throughout this section.

Experience

Similar to political discourse, within media representation, the theme of Omar's experience was noticeably present. This theme is demonstrated through an article written in June 2018 when Omar was still campaigning for her seat. The article demonstrates how media representation portrays Omar's qualifications in a questionable way. This article in the *Star Tribune* says that Omar may have an edge in national exposure because she has appeared on the *Daily Show*, the cover of *Time Magazine*, and a music video for Maroon 5 (Rao 1). Instead of highlighting the political and professional ways that she has gained national exposure, they instead focus on rather trivial ways, such as her appearance in a music video. The article goes on to say that she has the least legislative and political experience out of the four candidates who are running. Furthermore, a candidate who Omar was running against reiterated her lack of experience by saying that the person who would win the seat they were running for needed experience to be successful (Rao 2). Another Senator was quoted in the article, stating, "Washington is very complicated and we need to make absolutely sure that we send a person who has enough experience in the policy process, in the political process, in the coalition building process that is required to do the work in that environment" (qtd in Rao 3). This quote insinuates that Omar does not have enough experience in any of those fields to be successful in this role. However, as the article continues, it also highlights a former Democratic-Farmer-Labor chair who said, "Primary voters will decide on something bigger than experience, they're looking for candidates who represent the spirit of the party. And Omar's national profile will help with fundraising" (Rao 3).

This narrative covers up how it discredits Omar's experience by claiming that this inexperience will not sway voters because they are looking for someone who can relate to them the way Omar can. The topic of Omar's experience in media representation is apparent, as demonstrated by this quote in an article saying, "A first term legislator, Omar has the least legislative and political experience of the three candidates. But as the first Somali American elected to a state legislature, she'd offer a new unique voice in Congress" (Smith 1). While the author seems to be intrigued by the chance for more representation, they cannot help but preface it with how little experience Omar has compared to her competitors. This theme of questioning her experience, and whether that matters, can also be seen through the article, "DFL Choice in 5th District: Experience vs. Symbolism." The author says, "State Rep. Ilhan Omar is still a newcomer to state politics, but her status as a onetime refugee and the first Somali-American member of the Minnesota legislature quickly made her a national political celebrity... The primary will test what kind of value fifth district DFLers put in political resumes" (Rao 1). The article discusses that there is a shift happening where voters no longer look for experience alone. The author writes, "People are saying everything's so screwed up, forget it, were voting for the person who resonates with us. That incumbency edge, that experience edge is disappearing" (Rao 2-3). Therefore, while Omar's personal amount of experience is in question, many people are questioning how much weight experience actually holds.

In an additional article, the author refers to the Minnesota Congressional delegation as "different, freshman, dramatic, new," quoting a political science professor stating, "This is pretty dramatic because we have a lot of new faces, and you know in Congress, party and seniority decide power.... This is going to be a pretty significant

shift for the state of Minnesota not having this degree of seniority and influence that they've had in the past" (qtd in Faircloth 2). The article claims that sending this many new people has pros and cons, a con being that, "The delegation as a whole will lose significant clout and years of seniority in Washington" (Faircloth 2). Throughout the core of these articles, the underlying theme is the amount of experience that Omar has in the political field and how it will affect the party as a whole.

An additional article says, "The chance to send the first Somali American to Congress undoubtedly appealed to fifth district DFL convention delegates," (*Star Tribune* Editorial Board 1) implying that this is why Omar won her spot, rather than stating that she earned it. The article says that her achievements are lean when compared to the people she was running against for her seat, and the author claims that her accomplishments are over-exaggerated (*Star Tribune* Editorial Board 3). Another example of discrediting Omar and her career comes from an article in the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* that gave updates about the Minnesota midterm election as they were coming in. This article references Omar winning her seat to Congress in 2018. The sections about each winner have about five to ten sentences about them and their political career. When it comes to Omar's blurb, it says she has become the first Somali-American, and one of the first Muslim women elected to Congress. From there, it says, "Omar was dogged during the campaign by allegations first raised by conservative media two years ago that she married her brother and committed immigration fraud. She denounced those claims as disgusting lies" (The Latest 5) and that is the end of Omar's section. In a small paragraph that announces her victory, instead of highlighting her achievements and political goals as the author did for the other winners, the author

immediately goes back to vicious and racist rumors about her that have come up in the past and that she has already publicly denounced. What is the reason for doing so? While the article starts out celebrating her accomplishment and victory, it quickly shifts the focus to racist discourse, pulling the reader back to the Islamophobic political discourse with which they are familiar.

Controlling Images

As Patricia Hill Collins argues, stereotypes about women of color are often used as a tool to control them. Throughout my analysis of data, I found controlling images of Omar to be a common theme within media representation. One trope of Islamophobia that is often applied to Ilhan is the belief that she is too loud, too opinionated, and too angry. Those statements are all controlling images that have been applied to women of color throughout history. These controlling images are applied to Omar specifically in an article published in the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* written by Eli Lake, who is a Bloomberg Opinion columnist. This article starts by stating that Omar has many opinions, and the author claims that she sees a conspiracy where other “rational” politicians just see a longstanding alliance. The overall tone of the article is that Omar is an immigrant who calls for acceptance, yet has repeatedly made comments about Israel and their politics. Lake states, “It’s odd, here is a Somali-American refugee success story, a woman who embodies the American ideal of citizenship not based on race, creed, or religion. And yet, in barely two months in office, the Minnesota Democrat has repeatedly questioned the loyalty of Zionists” (Lake 1). This quote erases the struggles she has dealt with, and undermines the intersectional obstacles that Omar has had to face. The author covers this up by calling her the American dream. What he is erasing is the incredible racism and

Islamophobia that she faces on a daily basis. The author's interpretation translates into: she has gained citizenship; she should just be quiet and be happy.

The article continues by saying, "The latest example of Omar's self-appointed policing of the national interest," (Lake 1) diminishing her authority as a Congressperson and reaffirming that she has too many outspoken opinions. This plays into the trope of women of color being loud, outspoken, radical, and angry. The author continues with, "At this point, Omar's musings should no longer be a surprise, what is surprising is that many Democrats are still demanding an apology. Why do they think a third apology will make a difference?" (Lake 1) This dialogue reaffirms the controlling image that women, and especially women of color in politics, should be quiet, complacent, and sincerely apologetic, or there will be backlash. This controlling image intersects with prevalent stereotypes about Muslim women being submissive and passive. Omar is violating common gender roles in an intersectional way because she faces both controlling images about black women being angry and about Muslim women being submissive and silent. Lake then compares Omar to Trump, saying that how she speaks, and the comments that she makes are as radical as his are. The author states, "Like Trump, Omar claims she is a victim when she faces criticism, and that her words were willfully misunderstood. If the party wants to make a credible case against a nativist president, it cannot look the other way at the nativism of its own members" (Lake 2). However, the difference, and what the author is not considering between these two cases, is what matters. Omar is a woman of color, using her voice to speak for those whose voices have perpetually been ignored and silenced.

As the article goes on, the author insinuates that Omar should be taken off the House Foreign Affairs Committee just as they did when a Republican representative was making white nationalist comments. However, once again, the difference in these cases is being ignored. Omar's intersectionality is completely left out and it needs to be considered. Something noteworthy in the articles is how multiple news stories pit Democratic Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi and Omar against each other often highlighting how much they disagree with one another. The one argument they had was mentioned repeatedly as evidence that they do not get along and that Pelosi is constantly rebuking Omar's comments. This is an example of media representation pitting two powerful women against each other.

Another controlling image prevalent in media representation of Omar is the idea that she is not genuine. Take this article from the *Star Tribune* for example, the first line says, "Many of the widely denounced things Rep. Ilhan Omar has said since taking Washington D.C. by storm have had an element of truth in them. It's her occasional apologies that seem inauthentic" (Tice 1). Both political discourse and media coverage bring up repeatedly this common theme. First, the author says that Omar makes many radical comments and then her apology for them is inauthentic. The way they write about her, and her need to apologize more genuinely, is framing her in a childlike way. The article continues, "Omar has swiftly passed the toughness test. Her series of belligerent tweets and remarks...all but paralyzed the new Democratic majority in the U.S. House in early March at a time when House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and company wanted the focus to be on their metastasizing investigations of the Trump administration and their big election reform bill" (Tice 1).

This quote and many others like it throughout the article need to be unpacked. The beginning of the quote uses the word belligerent to describe her thoughts and actions. The author feels so strongly that Omar's beliefs are radical that he chose to use a word that means hostile and aggressive to describe her. This is problematic because of the connotations those words have with Muslim people being hostile and aggressive. As the quote continues, it makes Omar seem like she is a nuisance to her party, and that her ideas hold them back and halt their plans. Rather than evaluating how her voice adds to the party, this author defaults to insulting her. The author insinuates that Omar takes the focus away from what is important and puts it onto herself for no reason. As the article goes on, the author describes Omar using a variety of other adjectives. For example, in this quote, "Unable to discipline their millennial militant, establishment Democrats stumble" (Tice 2). The author refers to her as militant, making even her "established" superiors stagger. Alternatively, in this quote, when the author says, "Why wouldn't Omar and other young radicals think money explains everything in American politics Or at least every policy they don't like? Liberal leaders have been telling them as much for decades" (Tice 2). The author describes her as a young radical, then undermines why she feels the way she does. This article reiterates that the four Congresswomen of the "squad" are radical, and that Omar ignited a bipartisan uproar with her actions (Tice 2). Another article that mentions Omar, calls her, "defiant, outspoken, and an exception to how the rest of the Democrats feel" (Van Oot 1). With all this coverage about how radical she is, does Omar think of herself as radical? When talking about impeaching Trump Omar said, "This is not a radical position, it is our responsibility as lawmakers" (Van Oot 1).

The amount of times that Omar is referred to as radical begs the question of whether women of color in politics are always perceived to be radical. Taking in historical context, one can conclude that more often than not, women of color in politics are represented as radical. This is definitely the case when thinking about Ilhan Omar. Her thoughts, ideas, and opinions are perceived to be radical because she is entering a space where no one like her has been before. She represents intersectional populations of people who deserve to be heard, and she is using her voice to make sure that happens. As demonstrated through these examples, media representation is an important piece in understanding how political discourse frames representation and public opinion.

Un-American and Disloyal

The aforementioned Fox News anchor case demonstrates how media can channel political discourse and be very influential. The anchor questioned whether Omar's thoughts on Israel were rooted in her Islamic beliefs and repeatedly questioned her loyalty to America because of her hijab (Bever 1). Whether or not the author of the article believes that Omar's remarks were anti-Semitic, when they examine political discourse, this author and many other authors with the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* and *Star Tribune*, frequently quote political discourse that calls her anti-Semitic. Understandably, after reading and hearing this rhetoric frequently, it demonstrates how public opinion is supported and influenced. Repeating the political rhetoric without being critical of it is harmful.

Author Gladstone comments on how ever-changing technology has had an impact on media representation and how the public receives it, saying, "New media types say that in the age of links, journalists can hold the trust of their audience only if they

disclose their views, values, process, and whenever possible, their sources. Transparency is the new objectivity. Transparency gives the reader information by which she can undo some of the unintended effects of the ever-present biases. Transparency brings us to reliability the way objectivity used to” (113). Gladstone continues this idea by quoting author David Weinberger, saying, “Why should we trust what one person, with the best intentions, insists is true, when we instead could have a web of evidence, ideas and argument? Objectivity is a trust mechanism you rely on when your medium can’t do links. Now our medium can” (qtd in Gladstone 113). This quote demonstrates how the evolution of technology continues to complicate media objectivity. Understanding how media representation plays a role is important to acknowledging the Islamophobia that is present in American culture.

Public Opinion

The final piece of this research is to put public perception of Ilhan Omar together with political discourse and media representation. While it is outside the scope of my research to conclude that the opinions I will be examining have been impacted directly by the previous articles, we can deduct that political discourse and media representation are knowledge producers in our society. In the following section, I examine public opinion of Ilhan Omar using the themes of experience, personal bias, and un-American and disloyal to examine a section of the *Star Tribune* where readers can write in on a certain topic and have their pieces published in the newspaper. This section of the paper is intriguing for this topic because it depends on the media granting the publication of free speech to the people who write in. Gladstone considers this idea stating,

Of course, governments reasonably argue that when the nation faces a mortal threat, certain rights must be suspended, and in such times many citizens agree. But civil libertarians argue back that the nation is equally threatened by the suspension of rights that defines us. Their argument is not just about what we learn of the conduct of government when speech is free, but what we learn of ourselves. Even more it's about what we *think* of ourselves when speech is free.

(21)

Experience

The theme of Omar's experience level is as present within public opinion as it is in political discourse and media representation. Similar to the search within journalistic writing, there are many results in the *Readers Write* section about Ilhan Omar. Within my search of pieces written by the public about Omar, I found far more negative pieces than positive ones. For example, in one *Readers Write* article titled, "What is Peaceful, Just Settlement?" the writer says that he encourages Omar to, "Look into the other side of current conditions in Israel and the rest of the Middle East and become familiar with Israel's history and then reconsider her position" (Perlman 1). This kind of dialogue suggests that Omar is uninformed and makes her decisions and opinions for how she votes without considering both sides.

Another reader who seems to reflect popular political discourse, talks about their opinion on Omar. They said,

I was pleased to see the January 30 commentary by a Venezuelan on our policy on Venezuela and rebuking U.S. Rep. Ilhan Omar of Minnesota's fifth district. Omar's naive and ill-advised tweet based upon a complete lack of knowledge of

the situation there, speaks to her inexperience and unfortunately her willingness to tweet on subjects she apparently knows little about. Unfortunately, she has been assigned to the House Foreign Affairs Committee. One hopes she keeps quiet and listens and learns for a while before she sounds off again. (Cutler 2)

This loaded quote exemplifies how political discourse and media representation may inform public opinion. First, the reader plays into that idea that Omar has little political experience and therefore should not talk on certain matters. This theme is incredibly prevalent throughout both media and political representation of Omar. Second, the reader is repeating a trope that is applied to Omar often, that she should keep quiet and listen, rather than voice her opinion. This is a clear example of how influential these producers of knowledge can be. Another example of this comes from a *Readers Write* titled, “Shout it From the Rooftops.” The author says,

I hope the DFL is shopping for a candidate for the fifth Congressional district to succeed Ilhan Omar. I am angry at Trump’s reprehensible twitter behavior toward her, but that doesn’t obscure the fact that she does not represent the district; she represents herself. She makes too much noise and is disruptive. Her behavior harms the issues she claims to support. And, take note - the DFL needs to look to the rules for candidate endorsement. Omar was endorsed over other more qualified candidates in a packed/stacked district convention. Let’s try to bypass the convention and go to a primary where the voters have a voice in candidate selection. (Olson 2)

This writer again illustrates political discourse that Omar is inexperienced, she does not represent what the people want, and that she is equatable to Trump. Within this section, it is apparent how her level of experience is questioned and used against her.

Personal Bias

Another theme that is present within the public opinion section of my research was the personal bias that people seem to hold against Ilhan Omar. In another edition of *Readers Write*, two readers wrote in expressing their dissatisfaction with Omar for not voting to pass the bill recognizing the genocide of Armenians. The readers said she was outright wrong for her position and vote (Wolf and Pannell 2). The public perception of Omar moves past disagreeing with her stance, and goes into asserting that her beliefs and opinions are wrong. Another section of the *Readers Write* highlights an additional reader who believes Omar to be wrong. Walter Mondale, who was a Minnesotan Senator and Vice President, wrote in to the *Star Tribune* in a *Readers Write* titled “There’s Danger - Be Responsible.” This article condemns Omar’s comments about Israel, stating that what she believes is not representative of how her constituents feel. He writes, “They confuse support for the right of Israel to exist, with support for the policies of its current leaders. In fact, Israel is a strong Democracy amid a region that refuses to accept the principles of Democracy... Israel deserves our respect, a position for which Minnesota is known, despite what the Congresswoman is saying” (Mondale 1). His advice to Omar and her constituents: “Broaden your circle of advisers to include people who work with Israelis fighting for the rights and living conditions of Palestinians, and visit Israel and Palestine, because walking in the shoes of those living in the Middle East is necessary” (Mondale 2). The way he talks about Omar insinuates she is unfamiliar with global political issues,

which is inaccurate. Additionally, if his advice to her is simply to travel to the Middle East, then he neglects that Trump does everything he can to keep her out of Israel.

Another reader wrote-in saying,

As a middle of the road Democrat, I deplore Omar's defining herself as the face of the Democratic part. But as a believer in equal opportunity, I'm happy to see her involved in personal life drama. We all knew that many of our male political figures had and have colorful personal lives. The Kennedys were notorious; our current President has a trail of extramarital involvements. It is good to see that women have the same chances to mess up that men have. Welcome to the 21st century. (Frankowski 2)

This reader masks her ingrained sexism by claiming she is glad women can have affairs the way men can, when in actuality, she is bringing back up rumors Omar has disputed widely. Additionally, she feeds into the idea that Omar is radical and should not be the face of the Democratic Party since she does not represent how the majority feels. This sentiment sounds like the majority of the political discourse that surrounds Omar. The way writer's go beyond being critical of her political involvement and move into criticism of her personal life demonstrates the widespread negativity that encompasses Omar's persona.

Un-American and Disloyal

The final theme I explored throughout public opinion indicates many writers' beliefs that Omar is un-American or disloyal to the United States. This public opinion of Omar reflects the political discourse circulated about her. This particular reader reflected the ideology that Omar is un-American. They wrote, "The political world was shocked by

the recent killing of Iran's Quds General Soleimani. Patriotic Americans were pleased, while lesser intellects, like my state's Rep. Ilhan Omar...severely criticized the action. Soleimani's killing must be placed in historical perspective - one incident in the millennial war between radical Islam and western civilization" (Doyle 2). This quote demonstrates overt Islamophobia in multiple factions. The first form is directed at an individual, Omar, by stating that she is un-patriotic because of her opinion on the political move. The second form is directed at the Middle East, by calling this region "radical Islam" and comparing it to the west that is much more "civilized." Many Americans demonstrate this type of Islamophobic beliefs, and while one author wrote it, unfortunately his opinion is representative of a larger audience of Americans who feel the same way. I speculate the entitlement this author felt to openly write Islamophobic comments was fueled by political discourse where they make similar remarks. It is not only people who identify as part of the right wing of politics that make comments like these or hold these beliefs. Many readers who wrote in stated they identify as Democrat or moderate, yet still perpetuate such harmful ideologies. The policing of Omar, by both sides, demonstrates how widespread sexism, racism, and Islamophobia are in American culture. Continuing with this idea, similar to some of the political discourse that I examined earlier in the chapter, one *Readers Write* compares Omar's comments to Trump. The reader felt Omar has been given more leniencies stating, "This is a plea to the Democrats in Congress to at least display a modicum of intellectual consistency about these things" (Spevacek 2). The tone between the *Readers Write* and journalistic articles is quite different. It is interesting to examine these two different types of sources because Islamophobia is present in both, just in different ways. The journalistic sources do a

better job of being faux politically correct by masking their true intentions. The public opinions, however, resemble the political discourse in a more obvious way. Both public opinion and political discourse are more blatant and overt with their problematic and Islamophobic commentary. It is remarkable to note the similarity between how the public writes and speaks about Omar and how our political discourse does as well, signifying how these mediums reflect American Islamophobia.

Conclusion

This research aims to point out the intersectional racism, sexism, and Islamophobia that we, as a culture, consume on a daily basis through political discourse and media representation. Through the articles that I examined in my data collection, we can see how political discourse frames media representation of women in politics, and in particular, Ilhan Omar. While I do not claim that these specific articles in my data collection have influenced public opinion in a certain way, they are representative of a larger system of knowledge production and a reflection of the Islamophobia that is present in American culture. Although many articles paint Omar in one way or another, it is important to remember that she is first and foremost a human being. An article I want to highlight was written in the *Star Tribune*, and is titled, “Omar Seeks Mercy for Man Who Made Threat.” It is about a man who called Omar’s office threatening to kill her. He called her office questioning, “Do you work for the Muslim Brotherhood? Why are you working for her she is a [expletive] terrorist. Somebody ought to put a bullet in her skull. Back in the day, our forefathers would have put a bullet in her [expletive]” (“Omar Seeks Mercy” 2). The man was put on trial and faced a prison sentence and heavy fine. In response to this, Omar sent a letter to the judge asking for mercy for this man. She said

that a lengthy fine or prison sentence would only make him angrier, when what he needs to be shown is love and education to be rehabilitated (“Omar Seeks Mercy” 2). Often, Omar is made out to be a monster, but even in the face of extreme Islamophobia in her everyday life and career, she still shows up and fights for what she believes in. A final article that I want to highlight was published in the *Star Tribune*. This article encourages readers to be critical of the media and discourse they consume. The article titled, “Who’s the Monster at the End of the Book?” is about how Omar’s words are often twisted and taken out of context by political discourse and reworded to portray her to be evil or anti-American. The article quotes Omar saying,

Ramadan can be a struggle, a struggle to talk when your mouth is too dry to swallow, a struggle to move when your limbs feel impossibly weak from hunger. That word, 'struggle,' for many Muslims has a heavier meaning. You will hear extremists, terrorists, Islamophobes talk about the word 'jihad.' For many of us, the word jihad simply means to struggle... The struggle to better ourselves, the struggle to better our communities, the struggle to be righteous. (qtd in Brooks 2)

The article argues that the Islamophobia that Omar experiences is widespread, and readers and consumers of media and political discourse need to be critical of what they believe. Finally, the author ends with, “If all you remember from this story is that Ilhan Omar said jihad, the monster at the end of this book might be you” (Brooks 2). This quote is significant because, although political discourse frames media representation that eventually impacts public opinion, it is still ultimately up to each one of us to be conscious consumers. Author Brooke Gladstone suggests that we can do this by, “Playing an active role in our media consumption, trusting reporters who demonstrate fairness and

reliability over time, offering corrections when they get something wrong, and when we care enough, reading the original documents they worked from” (Gladstone 150).

Chapter Five: Discussion and Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, I continue the discussion of the results from chapter four, and conclude my findings and research. When I started this study, I created three key objectives. My first objective was to observe how political discourse frames representation of women in politics. I was able to accomplish this objective first by investigating the political discourse that surrounds Congressperson Ilhan Omar, then by examining how media interacts with this discourse in their coverage of her. My second objective was to discover how the tropes of Islamophobia pertained to Ilhan Omar and the media representation of her. I completed this objective by surveying news articles and using a critical feminist lens to analyze the portrayal. This objective was vital to understanding how public opinion and perception of her is created and perpetuated. My third, and final objective, was to gain insight and acknowledge the intersectional factors that have influenced Ilhan Omar's political career. This objective was imperative because in feminist research, it is essential to take an intersectional approach when examining oppression. Omar faces oppression at multiple intersections of her life, and this objective was central to understanding the larger social context of the oppressions that she encounters. Throughout the course of my research, I was able to accomplish my three key objectives and will take away a new understanding of this topic because of them.

This research started with the interest to examine women's involvement in politics. After the devastating 2016 election, I wanted to analyze perception and representation of women in politics. As I continued thinking about the topic, I decided to specifically highlight women of color in politics to examine their intersectional struggles. The case of Ilhan Omar presented itself, at first, with me planning to survey treatment of

the entire “squad.” However, after further examination, I found that it would be more interesting and achievable to do a deep dive into one single member of their group. Since I am writing in Minnesota, and Omar receives a large portion of the scrutiny that the “squad” faces, I chose to focus my research solely on her. By using feminist media analysis as my methodology, I was able to assess how discourse and representation come together to influence public opinion. My methodology used hypothesis theory to examine the tropes of Islamophobia that are applied to Omar. Before starting my research, I hypothesized that I would find examples of political discourse, media representation, and public opinion that made Islamophobic remarks about Omar. Together, my hypothesis and collection of data helped me come to my conclusion that political discourse frames how the media represents individuals and situations.

My research used the case of Ilhan Omar to analyze how political discourse frames and influence media coverage and representation of the Congresswoman. The literature review of this study focused on four main sections to supplement the content and give vital context to the main objectives of this research. I reviewed literature on the topics of intersectionality, the institutionalized barriers and structures that people of color in politics face, the impact of Islamophobia on Muslim Americans, and media representation of women of color in politics. By examining this literature, I was able to evaluate the existing text on this topic and determine how my research could add to the knowledge pool. My research brought a new perspective to the offered literature by establishing the connection between political discourse and media representation demonstrated through contemporary sources. A limitation to my research was that I was not able to directly correlate public opinion with the articles in my data collection.

Additionally, my positionality limited my personal knowledge and experiences about the oppression that women of color in politics face.

As has been for decades, U.S. relations with the Middle East continue to be tumultuous. Political discourse and media representation of this relationship has created a hostile zeitgeist that has unfortunately been pressed upon many Muslim Americans, whether they have connection to the Middle East or not. The depictions of this relationship through discourse and media have created a climate of Islamophobia that is prevalent in American society. Islamophobia is a, “Distorted simplification of Islam and the Muslim world, and an irrational hatred, alarmism, dread, and fear of the faith and its followers” (Elman 146). Although this inaccurate depiction of Islam has been present for centuries, it became more widespread post 9/11 (Elman 144). Through the data that I collected, it is apparent that Representative Omar has been the target of this Islamophobia. This research addressed how Islamophobic rhetoric spread by political discourse and media representation impacts Muslim Americans in their lives and careers. The theory of intersectionality was especially useful in this case because of the identities Omar holds. Omar is Muslim, she is a woman, she is Somali-American, she is a mother, and so much more. All of those identities hold different experiences behind them. Using the theory of intersectionality as a tool, helps explain how Omar experiences oppression in a complex way. Not only does she face obstacles that women in politics do, she also has to navigate that institutionalized oppression as a black and Muslim woman. Throughout this research, the data continued to point to her intersectional identities.

This study examined how political discourse frames media representation using the case of Representative Ilhan Omar as example. Using the database *Nexus Uni*, I was

able to identify two data sources, the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* and the *Star Tribune* to collect my data. I divided my content into three sections and analyzed the data in a thematic way. By dividing the content into three sections, I broke down each portion of my hypothesis and examined examples that supported my findings. The first source of information I examined was political discourse. This discourse came from various politicians, including President Trump. Overt Islamophobia was present and apparent within the political discourse that I considered. This blatant Islamophobia branched off to additionally support sexism and nationalism. The political discourse that surrounded Omar in this section of documents was overwhelmingly negative and perpetuated hateful ideologies about the Representative. The presence of hateful discourse from politicians is problematic because it informs the bias that media circulates and informs public opinion on the topic.

The next source I examined was media representation of Ilhan Omar. I gathered this source of information by examining content, which came directly from a newspaper writer. Within this section of data, the present Islamophobia was much more covert than how it was in the political discourse. This form of Islamophobia was often masked in ways that did not seem apparent until further examination. Although overt racism and Islamophobia is more obvious, covert forms are equally damaging and dangerous. As the media continues to reflect the biases circulated by political discourse, it is vital for readers to be critical of the information and to think analytically before creating their opinion.

The final source of information I analyzed in my data was public opinion. Using a section in the newspaper that highlights reader entries, I could assess some public

perception of Omar. What I found to be interesting and affirming about this section was how similar the content was to the previously examined political discourse. The way the public spoke about Omar mirrored the political discourse that is distributed about her. As I hypothesized, the Islamophobia present was overt, blatant, and very problematic. Readers who wrote-in referred to Ilhan in terms that are often used by politicians and paralleled their worry about her loyalty and experience level. Although I am not claiming that the exact articles I analyzed informed these specific opinions, their perception of Omar and the way they mirror political discourse proves my hypothesis that political discourse frames media representation and informs public opinion. Ultimately through this research, I am able to conclude that the political discourse that circulates, influences and frames media representation of individuals and events. This framing and reflection influence the public perception and opinion on the topic. In my research, this was evident through the case of Representative Ilhan Omar.

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