

Negotiating Neutrality on Collaborative Knowledge Platforms: Discursive Strategies and Ideological Bias in Wikipedia's Portrayal of Prophet Muhammad

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Abstract: This study examines how the English Wikipedia article on Prophet Muhammad negotiates neutrality and epistemic authority. Using a single-case design, it analyzes an archived revision through Critical Discourse Analysis, drawing on Fairclough's three-dimensional framework, Entman's framing theory, and Van Dijk's socio-cognitive model. The analysis was organized around six categories: foregrounding of controversy, backgrounding of spirituality, epistemic distancing, agency allocation, source hierarchy, and naming and editorial governance. The findings reveal recurrent, though not uniform, asymmetries in the treatment of contested episodes, religious claims, and source authority. Political and disputed events receive elaboration, whereas prophetic and spiritual dimensions are more often attributed, qualified, or positioned within Islamic belief. Modern academic historiography tends to function as the principal evaluative framework for classical Islamic accounts. However, positive representations, Islamic perspectives, and scholarly disagreement remain present. The study therefore supports a qualified interpretation of negotiated epistemic hierarchy rather than complete exclusion or consistently hostile representation, and demonstrates how collaborative digital knowledge platforms can reproduce culturally situated assumptions through apparently neutral editorial practices.

Keywords: ideological bias, media framing, Orientalism, Prophet Muhammad, secular bias, Wikipedia

1. Introduction

Digital platforms have transformed the production, circulation, and legitimation of knowledge. Among them, Wikipedia occupies a particularly influential position because its articles are widely consulted as accessible and ostensibly neutral accounts of historical, political, and religious subjects. Its collaborative model, however, does not operate outside relations of power. Wikipedia's editorial architecture, sourcing conventions, and standards of verifiability have been shown

to privilege forms of knowledge associated with Western academic and secular institutions, while religiously grounded and non-Western epistemologies may receive more limited recognition (Jemielniak 2014; Tkacz 2014; Ford and Wajcman 2017). These tensions are especially significant in articles concerning religious figures whose identities cannot be separated easily from the theological traditions through which they are understood.

The English Wikipedia article on Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) provides a useful case for examining how a collaborative encyclopedia negotiates modern historiography, classical Islamic sources, and editorial neutrality. The analysis considers how political, controversial, prophetic, ethical, and spiritual dimensions are selected, attributed, and given relative prominence, and whether this produces an epistemic hierarchy between secular historical interpretation and Islamic perspectives.

Neutrality is therefore treated in this study not as the complete absence of perspective but as an institutional and discursive strategy. Wikipedia's Neutral Point of View (NPOV) policy is implemented through decisions about source reliability, proportionality, attribution, terminology, and editorial consensus. As Wodak (2014) observes, apparently neutral language remains embedded in social relations and dominant assumptions. Similarly, Van Dijk (1995, 1998, 2014) demonstrates that ideological meanings operate through thematic emphasis, lexical selection, agency allocation, and the differential presentation of in-group and out-group knowledge. Fairclough's (1995a, 1995b) framework further connects these textual choices to processes of discourse production and broader institutional practices. Entman's (1993) framing theory complements these approaches by explaining how selection and salience make particular aspects of a subject more prominent and encourage preferred interpretations. Said's critiques of Orientalism and Western representations of Islam provide the wider historical context in which these discursive choices are interpreted (Said 1978, 1981).

The study does not define ideological bias as every difference between Wikipedia and traditional Sunni accounts, nor does it assume that classical Islamic texts constitute a single, uncontested standard of historical truth. Islamic historiography is itself internally diverse, and differences between Ibn Hisham, al-Tabari, hadith traditions, and contemporary Muslim scholarship must be recognized. Ideological bias is instead operationalized as a recurrent representational asymmetry in thematic salience, epistemic attribution, agency allocation, source authority, and editorial terminology. A pattern becomes analytically significant when one epistemic tradition is repeatedly granted greater certainty, prominence, or evaluative authority, while another is consistently marked as belief, tradition, or culturally bounded knowledge. Classical Islamic sources are consequently used as comparative epistemic reference points rather than as unquestioned measures against which all historical claims are judged.

Although previous research has examined Wikipedia's editorial culture, participation inequalities, sourcing practices, and management of controversial subjects (Jemielniak 2014; Graham, Straumann and Hogan 2015), comparatively little attention has been given to the interaction between linguistic framing, editorial

governance, and epistemic authority in its representation of major religious figures. Much research on representations of Islam has focused on journalism and mass media (Poole 2002; Richardson 2004; Saeed 2016), while collaboratively produced encyclopedic discourse has received comparatively less attention. This study addresses that gap by treating the Wikipedia article on Prophet Muhammad as a site in which competing understandings of religion, history, and legitimate knowledge are negotiated. It connects textual patterns with source selection, Talk-page discussions, and wider inequalities in digital knowledge production.

The study makes three contributions. Empirically, it provides a systematic analysis of an influential but underexamined representation of Prophet Muhammad. Theoretically, it integrates Fairclough's three-dimensional framework, Entman's framing theory, and Van Dijk's socio-cognitive model to connect linguistic choices with editorial processes and epistemic hierarchies. More broadly, it contributes to debates on digital Orientalism, Islamophobia, religious representation, and the capacity of collaborative platforms either to reproduce or challenge dominant systems of knowledge. As Machin and Mayr (2012) argue, critical examination of digital discourse is necessary to reveal how apparently ordinary linguistic and representational choices participate in wider structures of ideology and power.

Accordingly, the study addresses the following questions:

1. What discursive strategies are employed in the English Wikipedia article on Prophet Muhammad to construct his identity and to foreground or background his prophetic, ethical, political, and historical roles?
2. To what extent do recurrent patterns of salience, attribution, agency, and source authority reflect culturally situated secular or Orientalist assumptions?
3. What implications do these representations have for global understandings of Prophet Muhammad and Islam?

By combining macrostructural analysis, close linguistic examination, source comparison, and analysis of editorial practices, the study investigates how Wikipedia's claim to neutrality is produced, negotiated, and potentially limited within a globally influential environment of collaborative knowledge construction.

2. Theoretical background and literature review

2.1 Media discourse, ideology and knowledge

Critical discourse research has long examined how media language constructs social reality and reproduces relations of power rather than merely transmitting neutral information (Fairclough 1995b; Van Dijk 2014). Representations of religious and cultural groups are especially consequential because repeated patterns of selection, attribution, and evaluation can normalize dominant understandings while marginalizing alternative perspectives (Poole 2002; Richardson 2004). Althusser's (1971) account of ideological apparatuses provides an early explanation of how institutions sustain dominant systems of meaning, while Fairclough (1995a, 1995b) demonstrates how media discourse presents particular viewpoints as natural, legitimate, or commonsensical.

Van Dijk's (1995, 1998, 2014) socio-cognitive approach connects discourse structures with socially shared knowledge and group-based representations. His

“ideological square” explains how discourse may emphasize positive features of the in-group and negative features of the out-group while backgrounding the reverse. This framework is relevant to representations of Islam because political conflict, violence, and controversy have often received greater media salience than spirituality, ethics, and religious experience (Poole 2002; Richardson 2004). Such imbalances do not necessarily arise through explicit hostility; they may operate through thematic organization, lexical choices, attribution patterns, and unequal access to epistemic authority.

2.2 Wikipedia, negotiated neutrality and epistemic power

Wikipedia is not simply a repository of established facts but a collaboratively governed knowledge infrastructure in which competing interpretations are negotiated. Its Neutral Point of View (NPOV) and verifiability policies are designed to prevent partisan endorsement, yet their implementation depends on institutional definitions of reliable sourcing, proportionality, and acceptable terminology (Jemielniak 2014). Neutrality is therefore better understood as an editorial accomplishment than as the absence of perspective. Wikipedia’s NPOV, verifiability, and reliable-source policies establish the platform’s principal standards for attribution and evidential acceptability (Wikipedia contributors 2026f, 2026g, 2026h).

Research on Wikipedia’s culture supports this interpretation. Reagle (2010) shows that its content emerges through norms of consensus, openness, leadership, and good-faith collaboration. Morgan, Mason and Nahon (2012), examining the *Jyllands-Posten Muhammad Cartoon Controversy* article, demonstrate how contributors negotiate tensions between freedom of information and multicultural inclusivity within an editorial environment shaped by particular cultural assumptions. Similarly, Graham et al. (2015) show that participation in Wikipedia is geographically and socially uneven, affecting whose knowledge and priorities become most visible.

Recent research further conceptualizes Wikipedia as part of a global knowledge infrastructure. McDowell (2024) emphasizes its continuing importance for representation and advocacy in an increasingly AI-mediated information environment, while Jankowski, Ford, Iliadis and Sidoti (2025) call for closer examination of Wikimedia’s power relations, epistemology, cultural plurality, and tensions between policy and practice. Together, these studies suggest that editor demographics, community norms, and sourcing conventions can influence selection, salience, and framing even when contributors formally follow NPOV.

For articles on religion, the distinction between primary and secondary sources is particularly consequential. Classical religious texts may be treated as historical materials requiring evaluation, whereas modern academic scholarship is granted the authority to determine their reliability and significance. This hierarchy partly reflects normal encyclopedic practice, but it may privilege Western secular historiography when contemporary Muslim, Arab, or Global South scholarship is comparatively underrepresented. The critical question is therefore not whether

Wikipedia cites modern scholarship, but whether one intellectual tradition becomes the unmarked standard through which other traditions are interpreted.

2.3 Orientalism, secular knowledge and Islamic historiography

Said's (1978) concept of Orientalism provides a broader historical framework for understanding how Western discourse has represented Islam. Orientalism is not merely a collection of inaccurate descriptions but an epistemic structure that distinguishes the rational, knowing West from an East positioned as an object of study. In media representations, this distinction may appear when Islam is framed primarily through political conflict, cultural difference, or historical controversy rather than through its internal spiritual and ethical traditions (Poole 2002; Richardson 2004).

Asad (1993) further challenges the assumption that secular discourse constitutes a universally neutral framework for representing religion. Modern definitions of religion emerged through historically specific Western institutions and relations of power. Consequently, presenting secular historiography as objective while consistently marking Islamic accounts as belief may reproduce a culturally situated genealogy of knowledge rather than a neutral distinction between fact and faith.

At the same time, Islamic historiography should not be treated as a uniform body of uncontested religious claims. Ibn Hisham's recension of Ibn Ishaq's prophetic biography and al-Tabari's historical chronicle preserve overlapping but non-identical accounts of the life of Prophet Muhammad (Ibn Ishaq 1955; al-Tabari 1988). Their differences in selection, transmission, organization, and genre are especially evident in the treatment of disputed reports such as the so-called "Satanic Verses," preserved by al-Tabari but absent from Ibn Hisham's extant recension. This internal diversity prevents a simplistic opposition between a single "Islamic tradition" and a unified "Western history."

The present study therefore does not use classical Islamic sources as unquestioned theological standards. Instead, they function as comparative historiographical resources through which differences in selection, attribution, agency, and evidential positioning can be examined. The issue is not whether Wikipedia departs from traditional Muslim biography, but whether secular academic evaluation consistently occupies the position of final interpretive authority.

2.4 Integrated analytical framework

The study combines Fairclough's three-dimensional framework, Entman's (1993) framing theory, and Van Dijk's socio-cognitive model. These approaches address complementary dimensions of discourse. Van Dijk's framework explains how textual structures enact, reinforce, or challenge socially shared representations and ideological divisions (Van Dijk 1995, 1998, 2014). It guides the analysis of thematic emphasis, ideological polarization, attribution, and the distinction between knowledge presented as universally valid and knowledge marked as belonging to a particular group.

Fairclough's (1995a, 1995b) three-dimensional model connects three levels of analysis: textual form, discursive practice, and social practice. At the textual level, the study examines lexical selection, modality, nominalization, active and passive constructions, and agency allocation. At the level of discursive practice, it considers Wikipedia's collaborative authorship, sourcing rules, Talk-page negotiations, and editorial policies. At the level of social practice, it relates these patterns to wider structures of Orientalism, secular epistemology, and inequality in global knowledge production.

Entman's (1993) framing theory clarifies how neutrality operates textually through selection and salience. Frames foreground some aspects of a subject while backgrounding others and may define problems, identify causes, convey evaluations, and encourage particular interpretations. In the Wikipedia article examined here, framing is operationalized through the prominence of controversial episodes, the relative treatment of spiritual and ethical dimensions, differential attribution of Islamic and secular claims, agency allocation, source hierarchy, and editorial naming practices.

These frameworks enable the study to connect micro-level linguistic choices with macro-level thematic organization and institutional processes. They also prevent isolated features from being treated automatically as evidence of bias. Hedging, passive constructions, historical criticism, and religious attribution are interpreted only in relation to their recurrence, contrastive distribution, textual placement, and interaction with Wikipedia's broader sourcing and editorial practices. This integrated approach therefore treats the article on Prophet Muhammad as a site where neutrality, identity, and epistemic authority are continually negotiated.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research design

This study employed a qualitative single-case design informed by Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). The English Wikipedia article entitled "Muhammad" was treated as a bounded case of collaboratively produced and continuously negotiated digital discourse. The analysis integrated Fairclough's three-dimensional framework, Entman's framing theory, and Van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach to examine textual organization, linguistic choices, sourcing and attribution practices, editorial processes, and their broader ideological implications.

The purpose of the analysis was not to adjudicate the theological or historical truth of individual claims concerning Prophet Muhammad. Rather, it investigated how competing knowledge claims were selected, attributed, organized, foregrounded, backgrounded, and linguistically framed within Wikipedia's collaboratively governed knowledge environment.

3.2 Data sources and collection period

The principal dataset consisted of the complete English Wikipedia article entitled "Muhammad," retrieved and archived on 9 July 2026 under revision identification number 1363285100 (Wikipedia contributors 2026c), available at <https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Muhammad&oldid=1363285100>.

The archived revision comprised nine substantive main sections and 33 subordinate headings. Using the counting protocol detailed in Supplementary Table S1, the rendered article contained 13,248 words of substantive prose, including the 494-word lead; the sectioned body excluding the lead contained 12,754 words. The count excluded the title, infobox, navigation boxes, image captions, tables, citation markers, notes, references, source lists, “See also,” and external links. Supplementary Table S2 presents the corresponding aggregated thematic distributions.

The Talk-page corpus covered archived contributions available between 2 January 2002 and 9 July 2026. The archive was systematically searched for discussions concerning honorifics, religious terminology, source reliability, the NPOV, disputed historical episodes, and the representation or attribution of Islamic knowledge claims. Thirteen discrete Talk-page contributions met these criteria and were included under the category of naming and editorial governance. Discussions concerned exclusively with vandalism, page maintenance, formatting, technical templates, automated procedures, or unrelated administrative matters were excluded. The analyzed Talk-page materials were drawn from the archived Talk page and its archive index (Wikipedia contributors 2026d, 2026e).

The English Wikipedia articles on Jesus and Moses were consulted only for limited contextual orientation concerning naming and attribution practices. They were not subjected to the systematic coding, section-level measurement, or detailed discourse analysis applied to the article on Prophet Muhammad. Accordingly, observations concerning these articles are treated as exploratory and are not used as independent evidence of systematic cross-article differences. These observations were based on the archived Jesus and Moses articles listed in the references (Wikipedia contributors 2026a, 2026b). The complete archived English Wikipedia article analyzed in this study is provided as Supplementary Appendix A, allowing readers to examine the primary textual dataset directly.

3.3 Units of analysis and selection criteria

The complete archived article was examined at the macrostructural level; consequently, the analysis was not restricted to the illustrative quotations reproduced in the Findings section. The units of analysis included section and subsection headings, paragraphs, thematically coherent passages, clauses, lexical items, attribution expressions, modality markers, grammatical constructions, source clusters, and relevant Talk-page contributions.

Passages were included in the close analysis when they addressed the prophetic, political, ethical, marital, military, social, or religious identity of Prophet Muhammad, or when they displayed analytically relevant patterns of sourcing, attribution, agency allocation, modality, foregrounding, backgrounding, or editorial governance. Navigation menus, technical metadata, citation templates, unrelated administrative exchanges, and reference-list entries were excluded unless their position, wording, or sourcing function was directly relevant to the analysis.

The counting unit varied according to the analytical category. A clause or independent attribution expression constituted the basic unit for epistemic

distancing and agency allocation. A paragraph, section, source cluster, or thematically coherent passage constituted the basic unit for foregrounding, backgrounding, and source hierarchy. A discrete Talk-page contribution constituted the basic unit for naming and editorial governance.

Repeated occurrences of the same feature within one coding unit were counted once under the relevant category. A unit could receive more than one code when it independently met the operational definitions of different categories. The category frequencies therefore represent coding assignments rather than mutually exclusive or unique textual passages.

3.4 Coding framework

The initial coding framework was developed deductively from the three analytical models underpinning the study. Entman's framing theory guided the identification of selection, salience, problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and preferred interpretation. Van Dijk's socio-cognitive framework informed the analysis of ideological polarization, foregrounding, backgrounding, and in-group/out-group representation. Fairclough's framework guided the examination of textual features, processes of discursive production and circulation, and their relationship to broader institutional and social practices. During repeated examination of the dataset, the initial concepts were refined into six operational categories:

1. Foregrounding of controversial or disputed episodes;
2. Backgrounding of spirituality;
3. Epistemic distancing and differential attribution;
4. Agency allocation through active, passive, and nominalized constructions;
5. Hierarchy in the selection, attribution, and presentation of sources; and
6. Naming and editorial governance.

The operational definitions, units of analysis, and descriptive counts are presented in Table 1.

3.5 Analytical procedure

The analysis proceeded in four stages. First, the complete archived article was mapped according to section length, thematic ordering, topic placement, and the distribution of cited sources. This stage established the macrostructural organization of the page and identified subjects receiving comparatively prominent or limited treatment.

Second, eligible clauses, paragraphs, passages, and source clusters were coded for lexical, grammatical, semantic, and epistemic features. Particular attention was paid to belief markers, hedging, evidential qualification, attribution verbs, active and passive constructions, nominalization, agent deletion, explicit agency, and differences in the presentation of secular historical and Islamic sources.

Third, the selected Talk-page contributions were analyzed to determine how editorial policies and contributor negotiations shaped naming practices, sourcing decisions, and the wording of contested claims. This stage focused on references to NPOV, verifiability, reliable sourcing, honorifics, religious titles, and terminology used to represent Islamic knowledge claims.

Fourth, a negative-case analysis was conducted to identify evidence that challenged or qualified the emerging interpretation. This included passages that presented Prophet Muhammad positively, foregrounded Islamic interpretations, attributed authority to Islamic sources, emphasized ethical or spiritual dimensions, or complicated the proposed distinction between secular historiography and religious knowledge. Such evidence was retained and incorporated into the interpretation rather than excluded. The reported frequencies were used descriptively to demonstrate recurrence and distribution and were not treated as inferential statistical evidence.

Coding decisions were recorded in a shared ledger. Following calibration, two coders independently coded an approximately 25% stratified subset, comprising about 24 coding decisions across the six categories. They agreed on approximately 20 decisions, yielding 83% simple agreement. Disagreements and overlapping cases were resolved through discussion, and category definitions were clarified where necessary. The percentage is reported as a descriptive indicator of coding consistency rather than an inferential reliability coefficient. Internal consistency was further monitored through the shared coding ledger by reviewing overlapping cases against the operational definitions and checking disputed assignments for consistent application of category boundaries. Where definitions were clarified during calibration, the clarified criteria were applied consistently across the coded dataset.

3.6 Coding transparency

A coding ledger was maintained for every included instance. It recorded the location of the evidence, the relevant article section or Talk-page date, the textual passage, the assigned category or categories, the applicable unit of analysis, and a brief justification for the coding decision. Table 1 presents the operational definitions, category-specific units of analysis, and descriptive counts.

Table 1. Operational coding framework, units of analysis, and descriptive counts

Analytical category	Operational definition	Unit of analysis	<i>n</i>
Foregrounding of controversy	Extended, prominent, repeated, or structurally salient treatment of a disputed or potentially controversial episode	Paragraph, section, or thematically coherent passage	9
Backgrounding of spirituality	Limited, subordinated, or comparatively less prominent treatment of prophetic, spiritual, theological, ethical, or compassionate dimensions	Section or thematically coherent passage	15
Epistemic distancing	Use of belief markers, hedging, evidential qualification, distancing labels, or differential attribution that positions a claim as belief, tradition, report, or contested knowledge	Clause or independent attribution expression	21

Agency allocation	Use of active or passive constructions, nominalisation, agent deletion, or explicit agent identification in ways relevant to the representation of action or responsibility	Clause	17
Source hierarchy	Differential assignment of evidential authority, certainty, prominence, or attribution to secular historical and Islamic sources	Paragraph or source cluster	7
Naming and editorial governance	Discussion of honorifics, naming practices, NPOV, verifiability, source acceptability, religious terminology, or the editorial representation of Islamic claims	Discrete Talk-page contribution	13

Note: The categories employed different units of analysis and are therefore not directly comparable. The counts are descriptive and were not combined into a single total or converted into percentages. A textual unit could receive more than one code when it independently satisfied the operational definitions of different categories. Naming and editorial governance was coded from the Talk-page corpus, whereas the remaining categories were coded principally from the archived article. Repeated occurrences of the same feature within a single coding unit were counted once within the relevant category.

3.7 Researcher positionality and reflexivity

The authors' disciplinary backgrounds in language, discourse, and cultural analysis, together with their location within an Arab academic context, informed their engagement with Islamic terminology, Arabic historiography, and representations of Prophet Muhammad. This positioning provided contextual and linguistic familiarity with the subject but could also heighten sensitivity to secularizing language, unequal attribution, or culturally asymmetrical representations.

To address this possibility, the analysis maintained a clear distinction between evaluating the truth of religious or historical claims and examining how those claims were discursively selected, attributed, and positioned. Reflexive notes were maintained throughout the coding process to document interpretive decisions, emerging assumptions, uncertainties, and plausible alternative explanations.

Evidence that challenged or complicated the developing interpretation was retained through negative-case analysis. Interpretations were also considered in relation to secular historical scholarship, classical and contemporary Islamic historiography, Wikipedia's published editorial policies, the archived wording of the article, and the selected Talk-page discussions.

The analysis therefore does not assume that every instance of hedging, attribution, secular terminology, historical criticism, passive voice, or nominalization constitutes ideological bias in isolation. Interpretations were based

on the recurrence, distribution, textual placement, contrastive use, and combined operation of these features across the bounded dataset. These procedures were intended to reduce selective interpretation, distinguish textual evidence from the authors' evaluative positions, and make the basis of the study's conclusions more transparent.

4. Findings and analysis

4.1 Overview of coded patterns

Entman's dimensions were operationalized through foregrounding and backgrounding as manifestations of selection and salience, agency allocation as a form of causal interpretation, epistemic distancing and source hierarchy as forms of evaluation and preferred interpretation, and naming and editorial governance as forms of problem definition and institutional framing.

As summarized in Table 1, the analysis identified recurrent patterns of epistemic distancing, agency allocation, backgrounding of spirituality, foregrounding of controversial material, source hierarchy, and naming and editorial governance. Because the categories employed different units of analysis and drew on the archived article and the related Talk-page corpus, the counts are used only to demonstrate recurrence within each category. They are not interpreted as a directly comparable frequency distribution. The following subsections therefore combine the descriptive counts with close analysis of the relevant textual and editorial evidence.

4.2 Foregrounding of controversy and backgrounding of spirituality

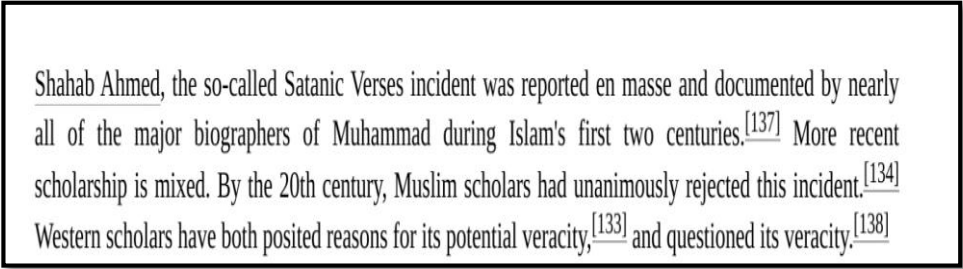
The macrostructural analysis identified a contrast between the prominence given to disputed biographical and political episodes and the comparatively limited treatment of prophetic, spiritual, and ethical dimensions. In Entman's (1993) terms, this contrast concerns selection and salience: the organisation, placement, and elaboration of topics influence which aspects of the life of Prophet Muhammad become most cognitively available to readers. The findings do not suggest that spiritual or positive representations are entirely absent. Rather, they indicate a difference in the amount of detail, textual positioning, and epistemic framing assigned to different dimensions of his identity.

Of the 12,754 words of sectioned substantive prose, military and intergroup-conflict sections accounted for 3,602 words (28.2%). Sections focused on religious mission, opposition, and migration accounted for 2,334 words (18.3%), while sections focused primarily on prophetic or spiritual experience and devotion accounted for 2,095 words (16.4%). The section devoted specifically to Islamic social reforms contained 232 words (1.8%). These categories are analytically distinct, and their distributions do not establish ideological bias independently of the discourse analysis. These distributions are treated only as indicators of relative textual space. Their analytical significance depends on how that space is linguistically organized through attribution, modality, evaluative detail, source positioning, and narrative sequencing in the passages examined below.

4.2.1 Foregrounding of controversial episodes

Nine coding assignments concerned the foregrounding of controversial or disputed episodes. Particularly prominent examples involved the so-called “Satanic Verses,” the marriage of Prophet Muhammad to Aisha, military conflicts, and relations with Jewish tribes. These episodes were not merely mentioned; they were accompanied by historical detail, scholarly disagreement, numerical information, or explicit evaluation.

The treatment of the “Satanic Verses” illustrates this pattern. The article reports the view that the episode was widely documented in early biographical literature, notes its rejection by twentieth-century Muslim scholars, and subsequently presents disagreement among modern Western scholars. The passage therefore does not advance a completely unified Western interpretation or suppress Muslim rejection of the narrative. Nevertheless, the episode is accorded distinct textual salience and is framed principally through questions of historical authenticity and scholarly dispute. Figure 1 reproduces the passage in which claims concerning early documentation, Muslim rejection, and disagreement within modern scholarship are juxtaposed.



Shahab Ahmed, the so-called Satanic Verses incident was reported en masse and documented by nearly all of the major biographers of Muhammad during Islam's first two centuries.^[137] More recent scholarship is mixed. By the 20th century, Muslim scholars had unanimously rejected this incident.^[134] Western scholars have both posited reasons for its potential veracity,^[133] and questioned its veracity.^[138]

Figure 1. Framing and attribution in the discussion of the “Satanic Verses”

Note. The passage juxtaposes claims concerning early documentation, rejection of the episode by twentieth-century Muslim scholars, and disagreement within modern scholarship regarding its historical veracity. Source: Wikipedia contributors (2026c).

The ideological significance of this passage lies less in the mere inclusion of the episode than in its relative elaboration and placement within the overall biographical narrative. A disputed report that directly concerns prophetic authority is made highly visible and surrounded by competing claims to historical expertise. Through this organisation, controversy itself becomes a salient component of the representation of Prophet Muhammad.

The “Household” section demonstrates a comparable but more internally complex pattern. It opens with precise numerical information concerning Aisha’s reported age at marriage and consummation, which the Wikipedia text attributes to ‘Islamic sources’. The analysis concerns the framing and placement of this reported information within Wikipedia rather than independently adjudicating the

underlying historical claim or generalizing it across classical Islamic historiography. Such detail may carry considerable moral salience for contemporary readers. Figure 2 reproduces the opening of the section and illustrates the textual prominence accorded to this contested biographical information.

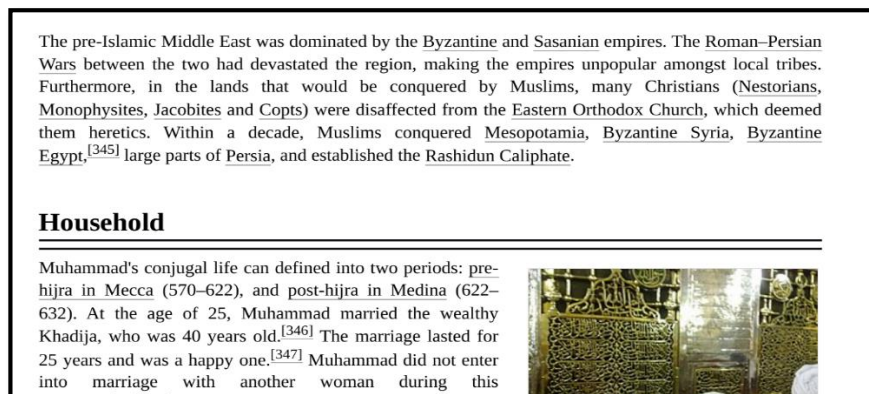


Figure 2. Marital-age information at the opening of the “Household” section
Note. The excerpt reproduces the opening of the “Household” section, where Aisha’s reported age at marriage and consummation is presented with precise numerical detail and attributed to classical sources. Source: Wikipedia contributors (2026c).

The reproduced passage does not, by itself, establish a uniformly negative representation. Elsewhere in the same section, the article presents favourable descriptions of the domestic conduct of Prophet Muhammad, including his participation in household work, attentiveness to his wives, and tolerance of disagreement. Although these later descriptions provide countervailing positive material, they are not reproduced in Figure 2. The representational asymmetry instead concerns the prominent placement and numerical specificity of the contested marital information, together with the comparatively limited historical contextualisation accompanying it. The favourable account of domestic conduct partly counterbalances this material but does not receive comparable historical elaboration. From the perspective of Van Dijk’s (1998, 2014) ideological square, the structural prominence of potentially objectionable information may influence interpretation even when positive material is also included elsewhere in the section.

Political and military episodes are similarly described in substantial narrative detail. Accounts of the Battle of Badr, the Treaty of Hudaibiyyah, the Constitution of Medina, and the conquest of Mecca foreground military mobilisation, legal agreements, political negotiation, and state formation. These passages establish Prophet Muhammad as a consequential historical and political actor. The issue is not that such topics are irrelevant to his biography, but that their cumulative detail may position political and military leadership as a major framework through which his historical identity is understood.

4.2.2 Backgrounding of spirituality

Fifteen coding assignments concerned the backgrounding of spiritual, prophetic, ethical, or compassionate dimensions. Backgrounding was identified when these themes were treated briefly, subordinated to political or military narratives, placed in less prominent sections, or introduced through stronger attributional qualification.

The section on the first revelation, for example, summarises the foundational event through the formulation “According to Islamic tradition.” The event is included, but the attribution places it within a specifically religious account rather than within the article’s unmarked historical voice. Although the first revelation receives substantial narrative treatment within the broader “Beginnings of the Quran” subsection, its epistemic framing remains explicitly attributed to Islamic tradition. The analytical issue is therefore not simple textual brevity but the contrast between attributed religious claims and comparatively unmarked historical narration.

A similar pattern appears in the discussion of *Isra* and *Mi‘raj*. The event is introduced through a belief construction that attributes the account specifically to Muslims, followed by an evaluation of its Qur’anic basis. The episode is therefore framed primarily as a contested religious proposition rather than explored as a central experience within Islamic understandings of prophecy, worship, and sacred history.

The placement of positive assessments also contributes to backgrounding. The “European appreciation” material includes favourable evaluations by figures such as Rousseau, Goethe, and Carlyle. These representations acknowledge the intellectual, moral, literary, and political importance of Prophet Muhammad. Their position near the later part of the article, however, gives them less structural prominence than the earlier and more extensive accounts of political conflict, marriage, and disputed historical episodes.

4.3 Epistemic distancing and differential attribution

Epistemic distancing was identified in 21 clauses or attribution expressions. It was realised through expressions such as “According to Islam,” “Muslims believe,” “according to Islamic tradition,” and “Islamic sources claim.” These formulations are not inherently inappropriate in an encyclopaedic text. Attribution is often necessary when representing religious propositions that are not universally accepted. Their analytical significance arises from their repeated contrast with less qualified representations of secular historical claims.

The lead of the article provides a clear example. Prophet Muhammad is directly categorised as an Arab religious, political, and military leader and as the founder of Islam. His prophetic status and divine inspiration, by contrast, are introduced through formulations such as “According to Islam” and “believed by Muslims.” Figure 3 illustrates this contrast between relatively unmodalized historical description and explicitly attributed religious claims.

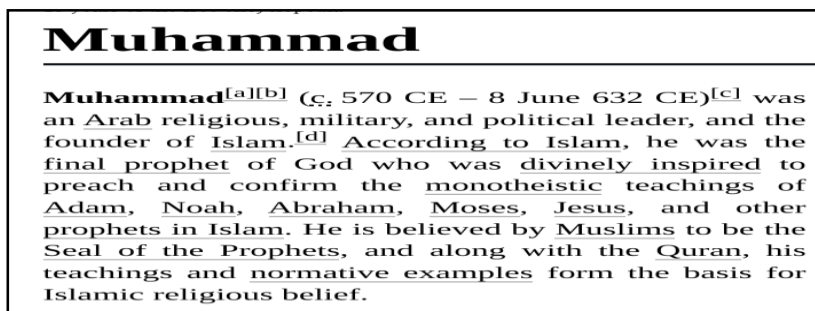


Figure 3. Differential epistemic attribution in the lead of the English Wikipedia article

Note: The passage presents historical, political, and military characterizations through relatively unmodalized declarative constructions, whereas religious propositions are introduced through explicit attribution, including “According to Islam” and “believed by Muslims.” Source: Wikipedia contributors (2026c).

The contrast does not mean that the historical characterisation is necessarily false or that the theological description should be presented as universally established fact. Rather, it demonstrates two different epistemic registers. Secular historical description functions as the comparatively unmarked narrative position, whereas the religious interpretation is marked as belonging to a particular community of belief. From Fairclough’s perspective, this contrast operates simultaneously at the textual and discursive-practice levels. Relatively unmodalized declaratives and agentive scholarly verbs help construct modern academic historiography as the comparatively unmarked evaluative voice, whereas belief and tradition markers explicitly situate Islamic accounts within a particular epistemic community. The point is not that one position is inherently objective and the other inherently subjective, but that Wikipedia’s discursive conventions naturalize different degrees of markedness and authority.

A comparable distinction appears in the treatment of early Islamic biography. Claims associated with Muslim tradition are frequently introduced through belief, tradition, or report markers. Modern historians, by comparison, are often presented through direct scholarly verbs such as “argues,” “states,” “suggests,” or “concludes.” This variation can assign different forms of authority to the two bodies of knowledge: Islamic accounts are represented as culturally or theologically situated, whereas modern academic interpretations are more readily positioned as evaluative assessments of the historical record.

Machin and Mayr (2012) describe such choices as forms of epistemic positioning through which discourse assigns different degrees and types of certainty to competing claims. The issue is therefore not the presence of attribution alone but its unequal distribution. When religious claims are regularly attributed to Muslim belief while secular interpretations function as the article’s principal evaluative voice, the distinction between “historical knowledge” and “religious belief” becomes discursively institutionalised.

The pattern was not completely consistent. The article occasionally attributes secular claims to named historians and acknowledges disagreement within modern scholarship. It also presents some Islamic claims without extensive qualification. These counter-patterns demonstrate that epistemic distancing is not absolute. The finding concerns its recurrence and contrastive distribution across the article.

4.4 Agency allocation

Agency allocation accounted for 17 coding assignments. It involved passive constructions, nominalisations, agent deletion, explicit agent identification, and differences in the visibility assigned to historical actors and scholarly interpreters.

The discussion of Banu Qurayza illustrates the interaction between grammatical agency and historiographical attribution. The reported consequences are initially represented through passive constructions in which the men are described as having been killed and the women and children as having been enslaved. These constructions reduce the immediate visibility of the agents responsible for the reported actions. The surrounding passage subsequently introduces Ibn Ishaq as a source and identifies modern scholars who dispute or defend aspects of the account. Figure 4 reproduces the relevant passage and illustrates its movement from passive description to named scholarly disagreement.

The Banu Qurayza eventually surrendered; according to Ibn Ishaq, all the men apart from a few converts to Islam were beheaded, while the women and children were enslaved.^{[239][240]} Walid N. Arafat and Barakat Ahmad have disputed the accuracy of Ibn Ishaq's narrative.^[241] Arafat believes that Ibn Ishaq's Jewish sources, speaking over 100 years after the event, conflated this account with memories of earlier massacres in Jewish history; he notes that Ibn Ishaq was considered an unreliable historian by his contemporary Malik ibn Anas, and a transmitter of "odd tales" by the later Ibn Hajar.^[242] Ahmad argues that only some of the tribe were killed, while some of the fighters were merely enslaved.^{[243][244]} Watt

Figure 4. Agency allocation and scholarly attribution in the Banu Qurayza passage
Note. *Passive constructions initially reduce the visibility of the agents responsible for the reported actions, while the surrounding text identifies Ibn Ishaq as a source and names modern scholars who dispute or defend aspects of the account. Source: Wikipedia contributors (2026c).*

This evidence supports a qualified interpretation. Passive grammar reduces immediate agent visibility, but the subsequent scholarly discussion restores a degree of attributional complexity. The ideological effect cannot therefore be attributed to passive voice in isolation. It emerges from the sequence in which actions, actors, sources, and scholarly evaluations are introduced.

Nominalisation produces a related effect. Expressions such as “the conquest of Mecca,” “the siege of Medina,” and “the migration to Abyssinia” transform processes into bounded historical events. Such constructions are conventional in historical writing and are not intrinsically ideological. Nevertheless, they can suppress questions of agency, motivation, responsibility, and perspective by presenting contested actions as stable historical objects.

Active constructions also distribute authority. Named modern scholars frequently appear as active epistemic agents who “argue,” “maintain,” “reject,” or “conclude.” Islamic tradition, by comparison, may be represented through impersonal formulations such as “it is believed,” “it is reported,” or “according to tradition.” The contrast provides named scholars with visible interpretive agency while representing religious knowledge as a more diffuse body of inherited claims.

Agency allocation therefore contributed to ideological framing when combined with attribution, thematic placement, and source hierarchy. No single passive construction or nominalisation was treated as evidence of bias independently of its broader textual context. In Van Dijk’s socio-cognitive terms, this differential allocation of agency can contribute to epistemic dominance: named scholarly actors repeatedly occupy the position of authorized interpreters, whereas religious knowledge is more often represented through diffuse or impersonal attribution. Through repetition, such distributions may normalize particular forms of interpretive authority.

4.5 Source hierarchy

Seven source clusters displayed differences in the authority and evidential roles assigned to modern academic scholarship and classical Islamic materials. In the archived article, modern historians frequently function as interpreters who assess the reliability or historical plausibility of early Islamic narratives. Hadith collections and prophetic biographies, by contrast, generally function as primary materials whose claims are subsequently evaluated through modern secondary scholarship.

This distinction partly reflects standard encyclopaedic practice, which relies on secondary sources to interpret primary materials. It becomes analytically significant when modern academic historiography consistently occupies the position of final evaluator, while Islamic textual and historiographical traditions are represented mainly as religious reports or theological positions. The treatment of the “Satanic Verses,” hadith, and *sira* illustrates this pattern, although the article also acknowledges disagreement within both Muslim and modern academic scholarship.

The identified hierarchy does not mean that citing Western historians is inherently biased. The relevant issue is whether the article’s secondary scholarship represents a sufficiently diverse range of contemporary approaches and whether different intellectual traditions are granted comparable opportunities to evaluate the historical record. Viewed through Van Dijk’s framework, source hierarchy therefore concerns not only citation frequency but access to epistemic authority. When particular scholarly traditions repeatedly occupy the position from which other accounts are evaluated, institutional sourcing practices can reproduce unequal authority over what counts as legitimate historical knowledge.

4.6 Naming and editorial governance

Thirteen coding assignments concerned naming practices and editorial governance. These instances were drawn principally from Talk-page contributions addressing

honorifics, religious titles, NPOV, verifiability, reliable sourcing, and the wording of Islamic knowledge claims.

A recurring issue involved whether the title “Prophet” should precede the name Muhammad. Editors opposing the title generally justified their position through the NPOV policy, arguing that an unqualified religious designation could imply Wikipedia’s endorsement of a theological claim. Other contributors viewed the omission of the title as culturally insensitive or as insufficiently representative of the centrality of prophethood to Muslim understandings of Muhammad.

The dispute demonstrates that naming is not a purely stylistic matter. The use or omission of “Prophet” activates different assumptions about encyclopaedic neutrality. Within a secular editorial framework, the unmarked personal name may appear neutral because it avoids affirming a religious claim. Within an Islamic framework, the same choice may appear to detach the figure from the identity through which he is principally understood. The Talk-page dispute can therefore be understood as a struggle over epistemic authority rather than simply terminology. Read through Van Dijk’s ideological framework, the issue concerns which community’s categories can function as unmarked description and which must be explicitly attributed as group-specific belief. This does not require treating editors as fixed ideological in-groups and out-groups; rather, it shows how competing epistemic positions seek legitimacy through Wikipedia’s institutional rules.

Wikipedia’s verifiability and reliable-source policies also influenced the formulation of contested material. The selected Talk-page contributions showed that editors repeatedly appealed to institutional rules when determining whether religiously situated terminology, Islamic scholarly interpretations, or honorific expressions should be retained. These appeals demonstrate how editorial policies shape not only what information is included but also the linguistic form in which it becomes acceptable.

This does not mean that NPOV necessarily functions as a deliberate mechanism of exclusion. Its purpose is to prevent the encyclopedia from endorsing one religious or ideological position. The critical finding is that its implementation is negotiated within an editorial community whose default assumptions about neutrality, evidence, and appropriate terminology may themselves be culturally situated.

4.7 Comparison with classical Islamic historiography

To examine whether Wikipedia systematically privileges modern secular historiography, three central episodes were compared with their treatment in Ibn Hisham’s recension of Ibn Ishaq’s *sira* and al-Tabari’s historical chronicle. The comparison focused on selection, attribution, narrative sequencing, agency, and evidential positioning. It did not treat either classical source as an unquestioned theological standard or assume that they represented a single, internally uniform Islamic account. The comparison was conducted at the level of episode-level narrative treatment and relied on paraphrastic summaries rather than direct textual quotation. Table 2 summarizes the broad differences in selection, attribution,

narrative sequencing, agency, and evidential positioning identified across the three sources.

Table 2. Comparative framing in Wikipedia and classical Islamic historiography

Episode	Wikipedia	Ibn Hisham's recension	Al-Tabari	Discursive significance
First revelation	Introduced as an account derived from Islamic tradition and evaluated within modern historical discussion	Narrated as the foundational beginning of prophethood within an integrated sacred biography	Preserved through attributed historical reports and variant transmissions	Demonstrates differences between encyclopaedic qualification and sacred-historical narration
"Satanic Verses"	Presents early documentation, later Muslim rejection, and disagreement among modern scholars	The extant recension does not preserve the disputed episode	Preserves versions of the disputed report	Shows that classical Islamic historiography is internally diverse and cannot be reduced to a single position
Banu Qurayza	Presents the reported outcome, attributes it to early sources, and includes modern scholarly disagreement	Narrates the event within the developing conflict in Medina	Preserves reports within a broader chronological history	Reveals differences in agency, narrative context, source attribution, and modern historiographical evaluation

Note: The entries provide paraphrastic, episode-level summaries of the English editions of Ibn Ishaq's biography as transmitted through Ibn Hisham (Ibn Ishaq 1955) and al-Tabari's historical chronicle (al-Tabari 1988). No direct quotations are reproduced. Because the table provides broad, paraphrastic summaries of episode-level treatment rather than quotations or close paraphrases of particular passages, the sources are cited at the work level. The comparison is intended to identify broad differences in selection, attribution, narrative framing, and evidential positioning rather than to establish line-by-line textual correspondence.

The comparison demonstrates that the relationship between Wikipedia and Islamic historiography is more complex than a binary opposition between Western history and Muslim belief. Ibn Hisham and al-Tabari differ in the reports they preserve, their narrative organisation, and their historiographical purposes. In the editions consulted, the disputed "Satanic Verses" episode is not included in Ibn Hisham's extant recension, whereas versions of the report are preserved in al-Tabari's chronicle (Ibn Ishaq 1955; al-Tabari 1988). This difference illustrates the internal diversity of classical Islamic historiography and the distinct processes of selection, transmission, omission, and evaluation represented by the two works.

Wikipedia draws on classical Islamic materials but places them within a modern critical-historical framework. Early reports are introduced as evidence to be assessed, compared, or qualified through contemporary academic scholarship. This is consistent with the conventions of a modern encyclopedia, but it also gives modern secular historiography the role of final evaluator. This process can be described as discursive recontextualization: classical reports are removed from their original sacred-historiographical settings and repositioned within an encyclopedic framework in which modern historical criticism supplies the principal evaluative criteria. From a Saidian perspective, such recontextualization may function as an Orientalizing re-engineering of epistemic status—not through textual falsification, but through changes in attribution, sequencing, evidential status, and the location of interpretive authority.

The comparison therefore does not establish bias merely because Wikipedia differs from traditional Muslim biographies. Instead, it identifies an epistemic hierarchy in which classical Islamic sources tend to function as objects of analysis, while modern academic historiography functions as the principal framework of analysis. The distinction is particularly consequential when the available modern scholarship is drawn disproportionately from Western institutions or when Islamic scholarly criticism is represented mainly as theological rejection.

4.8 Exploratory cross-article observation and negative cases

A limited reading of the English Wikipedia articles on Jesus and Moses provided contextual orientation concerning naming and religious attribution. These articles also combine religious traditions with modern historical discussion, but they appear to employ somewhat different naming and attribution practices. Because the comparison was not based on systematic coding, equivalent textual measurements, or matched extracts, it is treated only as an exploratory observation. It does not establish systematic differential treatment across the three biographies.

The systematic negative-case analysis within the Muhammad article provided a stronger basis for qualifying the interpretation. The article acknowledges the prophetic status, teachings, and exemplary role of Prophet Muhammad, presents positive descriptions of his domestic conduct, discusses Islamic social reforms, and includes favourable European assessments. Positive and Islamic perspectives are therefore not absent.

The findings consequently concern patterned differences within the archived Muhammad article rather than a demonstrated contrast among the three Wikipedia biographies. Individual features such as attribution, passive constructions, or the inclusion of controversial episodes are not ideological in isolation; their significance emerges through recurrence, textual placement, and contrastive distribution within the principal dataset. Overall, the evidence supports a qualified interpretation of negotiated epistemic hierarchy in which political and disputed episodes receive substantial elaboration, religious claims are more frequently attributed, and modern academic historians often occupy the position of evaluative authority.

5. Discussion

The findings indicate that Wikipedia's neutrality is not simply a textual property but an institutional accomplishment shaped by sourcing rules, attribution conventions, editorial consensus, and culturally situated standards of evidence. The recurrent asymmetries in salience, epistemic positioning, agency, and source authority are consistent with Jemielniak's (2014) account of Wikipedia as a negotiated knowledge system and with Ford and Wajcman's (2017) argument that apparently procedural infrastructures may reproduce established inequalities in participation and knowledge recognition. At the same time, the negative cases and acknowledged scholarly disagreements caution against interpreting the article as uniformly hostile. The more defensible conclusion is that its representation of Prophet Muhammad reflects a negotiated epistemic hierarchy in which secular historiography more often occupies the position of evaluative authority.

The findings point not to the exclusion of Islamic perspectives but to their differentiated epistemic treatment. Contested political and biographical episodes receive comparatively extensive elaboration, whereas prophetic and spiritual claims are more often attributed to Muslim belief. This contrast reflects what Machin and Mayr (2012) describe as epistemic positioning and is consistent with Van Dijk's (2014) account of dominant perspectives being presented as comparatively unmarked. Read through Said (1978) and Saeed (2016), the pattern may also be understood as a form of digital Orientalism, in which Islam is subjected to secular evaluation within an ostensibly neutral platform. Wikipedia's reliable-source policy does not itself constitute bias, but it may reinforce epistemic asymmetry when modern Western historiography functions as the principal evaluative framework while Islamic accounts are represented mainly as culturally or theologically situated knowledge.

These micro-level patterns of attribution and agency connect to the broader institutional organization of source authority. The source hierarchy identified in the article can therefore also be understood through the colonality of knowledge, which concerns the unequal institutional recognition granted to different intellectual traditions (Quijano 2000). The recurrent prominence of scholars associated with Western academic historiography, including Watt, Crone, Welch, and Wansbrough (Wikipedia contributors 2026c), does not in itself invalidate their scholarship or establish ideological bias. The more consequential issue is that modern Western academic evaluation often functions as the unmarked framework through which classical Islamic reports are authenticated, qualified, or rejected, whereas Islamic intellectual traditions are more frequently presented as theological, traditional, or culturally situated knowledge. This asymmetry reflects broader inequalities in scholarly visibility and epistemic authority on global knowledge platforms (Graham, Hogan, Straumann and Medhat 2014; Ford and Wajcman 2017; Ford and Wajcman 2017). From a decolonial perspective, therefore, the concern is not simply who is cited, but whose methods of interpretation are treated as universally authoritative and whose interpretations require explicit cultural or religious attribution. Such differentiation may contribute to what Spivak (1988)

describes as epistemic marginalization, even when it results from apparently neutral sourcing and verifiability procedures.

Wikipedia's linguistic and organisational choices have significant representational consequences. Given its visibility as a digital reference platform, the recurrent emphasis on political conflict and violence may contribute to reductive understandings of Islam. These patterns may also be interpreted through Fricker's (2007) concept of epistemic injustice insofar as they assign unequal credibility and authority to competing knowledge traditions. However, because the study did not collect audience-response data, it does not claim that readers necessarily interpret or experience the article in this way.

These findings call for greater reflexivity in the representation of sacred and historically consequential figures on global digital platforms. Editorial standards should recognise the plurality of epistemic traditions and the cultural and affective significance of religious claims rather than assuming that all forms of knowledge can be evaluated through identical standards of detachment and contestation. As Said (1981) argues, representations of Islam are produced within historically situated relations of knowledge and power; representations of religious and historical figures on globally influential platforms are therefore shaped by broader ideological and epistemic structures.

6. Conclusion

This study examined how neutrality, identity, and epistemic authority are negotiated in the English Wikipedia article on Prophet Muhammad. The findings identified recurrent, but not absolute, asymmetries in thematic salience, epistemic attribution, agency allocation, source authority, and naming practices. Political and contested episodes received greater elaboration, while religious claims were more frequently marked through explicit attribution and evaluated within modern historical frameworks.

These patterns do not mean that positive or Islamic perspectives are absent, nor that every instance of hedging, passive voice, or historical criticism is ideological. Negative-case analysis showed that the article acknowledges prophetic status, Islamic social reforms, positive domestic conduct, and disagreement within modern scholarship. The study therefore supports a qualified interpretation of negotiated epistemic hierarchy rather than complete exclusion or uniformly hostile representation.

The principal contribution lies in connecting linguistic form with editorial governance and wider structures of knowledge production. Wikipedia's NPOV and reliable-source policies are intended to promote fairness, but their implementation may privilege intellectual traditions already recognized within dominant academic infrastructures. Greater transparency about attribution, source diversity, and contested epistemic standards could support more culturally responsive representations of religious figures. Because this study analyzes one archived article and a bounded set of Talk-page contributions, future research should compare multiple language editions, religious biographies, and revision periods.

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