Does Islamophobic rhetoric undermine collective self-esteem among Muslim Arab immigrants?

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Table of Contents

Introduction

After the twin towers collapsed on 9/11 and the ashes of destruction settled over the streets of New York City, the world would be forever transformed. Though the terrorist attacks were immediately experienced as posing a realistic threat to the national security of the United States (US), many Americans were left with the feeling that the attacks were also symbolic – an attack on American identity and the values constituting it more generally (Hitlan et al., 2007; Oswald, 2005). As it consequently became known that the terrorists behind the attacks were associated with an extremist Arab Islamic group, a fervent wave of prejudice and discrimination swept across American public opinion and was directed towards Arabs and 'Arab-looking' individuals at large (Oswald, 2005).

While this has motivated many political scientists to study anti-Arab reactions post-9/11 and provide explanations regarding the various psychological mechanisms undergirding them (Gerteis, Hartmann, and Edgell, 2020; Hitlan, et al., 2007; Kam and Kinder, 2007; Oswald, 2005), the issue of how Arab immigrants respond to such anti-Arab attitudes has been somewhat overlooked. This is unfortunate and quite surprising, given that these trends do not seem to be on the decline. On the contrary, in the US discriminatory acts towards Arabs have been steadily increasing with each successive year since 2001 (Council on American Islamic Relations, 2005), with reports even claiming that the discrimination levels of 2001 had been surpassed after the election of President Trump in 2016 (Kishi, 2017).

Furthermore, the spread of anti-Islamic sentiment has not solely been a US phenomenon, as can be seen from across the Atlantic (Marinov and Stockemer, 2020). Ever since the 1980s, Western Europe has been witnessing the rise of radical far-right parties opposed to the 'Islamisation of Europe' (Yilmaz, 2012), with a prominent example found in the way France's National Front Party warned Europe against the dangers posed by Muslim

immigration and "the 'awakening' of Islam" (p. 405, Marinov and Stockemer, 2020; Zuquete, 2008). Adding to this, the occurrence of terrorist attacks throughout Western Europe, such as those in Paris 2015 for example, has only intensified the increase of anti-Islamic rhetoric, leading to a ripple effect of spikes in hate crimes and anti-Muslim biases across the Old Continent (Mondon and Winter, 2017).

Several studies have examined the psychological implications that the post-9/11 reality has had on the well-being of Arab and Muslim immigrants, finding a link between discrimination and diminished self-esteem (Alsaidi et al., 2021; Amer and Hovey, 2012; Atari and Han, 2018; Every and Perry, 2014; Moradi and Hasan, 2004; Sirin, Choi, and Tugberk, 2021). Yet, there remains a dearth in the literature when it comes to understanding how diminished self-esteem, on the personal level, translates into broader collective self-esteem issues for Arab and Muslim immigrant groups overall. When studying minority groups, collective self-esteem warrants important consideration because it is central to their survival, as shown in how personal self-esteem acts as a catalyst for political participation (Carmines, 1991; Cohen, Vigoda, and Samorly, 2001). Additionally, collective self-esteem has also been shown to act as buffer against social stigma (Crocker and Major, 1989) and perceived ethnic discrimination (Kong, 2016), whereby such buffering serves to protect the ingroup's self-concept through the strategies of ingroup-enhancement and ingroup-serving attributions (Branscombe, Schmitt, and Harvey, 1999; Crocker and Major, 1989; Kong, 2016).

Among the various ramifications behind the discrimination that many Arab and Muslim immigrants have faced since September 11, the impact that such discrimination has had on their collective self-esteem and, in turn, their identity, is important to consider, given that it was not only American identity that was threatened by the terrorist attacks but also

Muslim Arab identity as well. The negative stereotypes of Arabs as uncivilised, radical Muslims who are either supportive of terrorism, or terrorists themselves (Johnson, 1992); the cynical demonisation and vilification of Muslims in media portrayals (Bazian, 2018; Ciftci, 2012; Jaspal and Cinnirella, 2010); the anti-Muslim rhetoric engendered by Western politicians (O'Brochta, Tavits, and Aksoy, 2022); and the broader cultural orientation that views 'the Muslim world' as an antithetical 'Other' that is opposed to 'the West' and its way of life (Said, 1978), are all primary examples of how the image of Muslim Arab identity has been misrepresented, either before or after the dawn of the 21st century. A subtle, but more insidious threat to Muslim Arab identity even, finds its footprint in the way many scholars working on Islamophobia have used the terms 'Muslim' and 'Arab' interchangeably (Selod, 2015). The racialisation of religion, or the religionisation of race for that matter, is a perfect reflection of how the identities of many Arabs and Muslims have been thrown asunder and coerced into an overarching superordinate identity – an identity which, notwithstanding, is erroneous considering the vast ontological differences between the intersecting identities of being Arab or Muslim (Gerteis, Hartmann, and Edgell, 2020; Roccas and Brewer, 2002).

Thus, understanding the nature of anti-Arab sentiment, and how such sentiment affects Arabs collectively, necessitates the requirement that we understand how "Islamophobia can itself be analysed as a form of racism" (p. 722, Gerteis, Hartmann, and Edgell, 2020). Bearing these considerations in mind, the purpose of this paper is to better understand the psychological implications that Islamophobic rhetoric has on its targets' collective self-esteem, and how such implications play out with regards to group identification processes. These strivings could most aptly be summarised in the following research question (RQ): "Does Islamophobic rhetoric undermine collective self-esteem among Muslim Arab immigrants?".

It is worth mentioning that the focus of this paper will be directed towards a specific subset of Muslims – Muslim Arabs. One reason for why this subset was specifically chosen can be attested to by the previous paragraphs with regards to the erroneous conflation of Muslim and Arab identities in previous literature (Selod, 2015). The second reason lies in my conjecture that Muslim Arab identity should, by dint of it combining overlapping identities, be subject to more instances of discrimination, or, at the very least, produce higher rates of affective responses within constituents of such an identity when compared to similar other samples, such as Christian Arabs or Asian Muslims, for instance.

In arriving towards an answer to the RQ, this study makes use of an online survey experiment designed though Qualtrics. This survey was administered on a sample of Muslim Arab immigrants living in various countries in which Muslim Arab identity is a salient topic for immigration discourse (Marfouk, 2019). To assess whether Islamophobic rhetoric influences collective self-esteem, respondents were randomly assigned to one of two groups: an Islamophobic rhetoric condition or a control group. In the former group, respondents were exposed to a political statement that denigrates their identity and calls for a ban on Muslim immigration, while in the latter group participants were not exposed to this treatment.

I found that Islamophobic rhetoric does undermine collective self-esteem among Muslim Arab immigrants, albeit at a non-significant level. Interestingly, however, immigrants who identified highly as Muslim Arab exhibited *increased* collective self-esteem when faced with Islamophobic rhetoric – a trend which was diametrically different than that of low identifiers, statistically significant, and consistent with Tajfel and Turner's (1979) ideas on ingroup identification processes and the various theories followed by them (Branscombe, Schmitt, and Harvey, 1999; Perez, 2015). These findings are important because they illustrate one of the many ways by which the threat to Muslim Arab identity is manifest.

Islamophobic Rhetoric: A Conceptualisation

Before providing a review of the literature on the topic of Islamophobia, a conceptualisation of the term 'Islamophobia' is warranted. Using Bravo Lopez's (2011) definition of Islamophobia, the term is to be understood as "a hostile attitude towards Islam and Muslims based on the image of Islam as the enemy […] irrespective of how Muslims are identified, whether on the basis of religious or ethnic criteria" (p. 570, Bravo Lopez, 2011). Likewise, and in line with Perez's (2015) definition of *xenophobic rhetoric*, it is assumed that Islamophobic rhetoric is a form of political communication, a type of *religious stigma*, "that raises the salience" of Muslim Arab identity "while simultaneously impugning its worth" (p. 550, Perez, 2015).

Islamophobia and its Effects on Muslim Arabs: What We Know and Do Not Know

An extensive body of literature has been dedicated to understanding the nature of Islamophobia and the effects it has on its targets (Alsaidi et al., 2021; Amer and Hovey, 2012; Bastug and Akca, 2019; Every and Perry, 2014; Kunst et al., 2012; Sirin, Choi, and Tugberk, 2021). In these studies, Islamophobia has generally been defined as "systemic discrimination against Muslims and the lived experiences of discrimination against people who are perceived as Muslim" (p. 46, Sirin, Choi, and Tugberk, 2021). By and large, the literature depicts how Muslim Arab immigrants are psychologically susceptive to the adverse effects of Islamophobia, whether manifest in diminished self-esteem (Every and Perry, 2014), the internalisation of negative stereotypes (Alsaidi et al., 2021), or the significantly higher rates of anxiety and depression that they experience in comparison to other normative groups (Amer and Hovey, 2012). Moreover, among the political impacts of Islamophobia, studies have documented a link between Islamophobia and the emergence of extremist radicalisation in young European Muslims (Doosje, Loseman, and van de Bos, 2013; Mitts, 2019;

O'Brochta, Tavits, and Aksoy, 2022). These studies found how anti-Muslim rhetoric by Western politicians was inadvertently exploited by extremist organisations as a radicalisation tool for recruitment purposes (Lyons-Padilla et al., 2015), on the pretext that such Islamophobic rhetoric constituted a threat to Muslim identity (Ingram, 2017).

Although these studies capture the direct negative effects that Islamophobia has on its targets, scholarship remains scant when it comes to understanding how these effects translate onto ingroup identification processes for Muslim Arab immigrants – how Islamophobia affects one's willingness to identify as Muslim Arab. One prominent line of research focuses on the impact that Islamophobia has on Muslim minorities' national identification with their host country (Bastug and Akca, 2019; Kunst et al., 2012). Although research on this topic has shown mixed results, it was found that religious stigma was negatively correlated with national affiliation for Muslim Turks residing in Germany but was positively correlated with national identification for Norwegian-Pakistanis (Kunst et al., 2012). In a similar study conducted on a sample of Turkish Canadians, Bastug and Akca (2019) observed no significant relationship between perceived Islamophobia and national identification. While these studies neither consist of Arab immigrants, nor capture ingroup identification processes apropos Muslim Arab identification per se, their findings still yield valuable insights with regards to how Islamophobia, as religious stigmatisation, affects identification processes, albeit on the national level with the immigrants' host country.

While relatively understudied in the context of Muslim Arabs, plenty of research has been done on ingroup identification processes with other social groups, including ethnic minority groups (Armenta and Hunt, 2009; Branscombe, Schmitt, and Harvey, 1999; Ellemers, Spears, and Doosje, 1997; Ethier and Deaux, 1994; McCauley and Posner, 2019; Perez, 2013, 2015; Simonovits and Kezdi, 2016; Spears, Doosje, and Ellemers, 1997). For

instance, in his study on Latino immigrants in the US, Perez (2015) found an important difference in the way high and low identifying Latino members responded to outgroup derogation. In the face of identity threat, high identifiers were motivated to engage in political behaviours that served to assert their group's worth, whereas low identifiers shunned away from such opportunities by dissociating from their ingroup (Perez, 2015).

In a similar vein, Ethier and Deaux (1994) studied how Hispanic students negotiated their ethnic identity in the context of Anglo universities – a context which, the authors argue, raises the salience of Latino ethnic identity and challenges it. They observed a difference between high and low identifiers, wherein students who identified strongly with their cultural background demonstrated more involvement in Hispanic cultural activities, *as well as higher levels of self-esteem*, which was opposite to the trends demonstrated by low identifiers (Ethier and Deaux, 1994).

Even when it comes to arbitrary social categorisations, such as psychology students, similar patterns of differences between high and low identifiers have been shown (Spears, Doosje, and Ellemers, 1997). When compared to physics and art students, it was ingroup identification that determined psychology students' responses to perceived identity threats (Spears, Doosje, and Ellemers, 1997). For instance, in the face of threat, high identifying psychology students displayed collectivistic traits, such loyalty to their group membership, and were not affected by perceptions of themselves as being less intelligent than physics students, whereas low identifiers displayed the opposite, resorting to individualistic strategies of dissociation from their ingroup (Spears, Doosje, and Ellemers, 1997).

In sum, what these studies on ingroup identification serve to illustrate is the clear-cut link between self-esteem and group membership, as demonstrated by the divergent strategies adopted by high and low identifiers. Yet, extant research on this phenomenon has been

predominantly US-centric, focusing primarily on African Americans or Latino Americans (Branscombe, Schmitt, and Harvey, 1999; Perez, 2013, 2015). As a result, there have not been enough studies on how outgroup derogation affects ingroup identification processes within the context of Muslim Arab immigrants, and, in turn, how such processes consequently translate onto their collective self-esteem. Thus, in the following section, the theoretical underpinnings explaining the interplay between Islamophobic rhetoric and collective self-esteem will be provided[1], with this study being an important expansion on both the literature on ingroup identification processes and Islamophobia.

How Muslim Arab Immigrants React to Islamophobic Rhetoric: Theory

To explain how Islamophobic rhetoric interacts with collective self-esteem among Muslim Arab immigrants, I make use of the social identity approach (Spears, 2011) – social identity theory (SIT; Tajfel and Turner, 1979) and self-categorisation theory (Turner et al., 1987) – along with various sub-theories that are either consistent with or inform this approach.

The Social Identity Approach

A central claim made by SIT is that individuals derive positive value from group membership, insofar as they can favourably compare their ingroups with other groups (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). This attainment of *positive group distinctiveness* (Spears, 2011) is what motivates individuals to partake in efforts that serve to uphold their group's positive self-image (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). It is the embodiment of such efforts, therefore, which makes SIT a theory of social change, one that explains how social competition is "a means for disadvantaged groups to challenge the status quo, helping to explain social change" (p. 201,

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[1]It is worth mentioning that this paper has greatly been inspired by Perez (2015) and his psychological framework that captures the different ways in which high and low identifiers react to xenophobic rhetoric.

Spears, 2011). Acknowledging one's group as being disadvantaged, as being interwoven by a sense of linked fate and a shared commonality with similar others, and ultimately desiring collective action that would change that status (Sanchez and Vargas, 2016), is one of the main reasons why individuals derive positive value from identifying with their ingroup(s).

However, the fuel for such impetus is contingent on one's level of identification with their ingroup (Armenta and Hunt, 2009; Branscombe, Schmitt, and Harvey, 1999; Ellemers, Spears, and Doosje, 1997; Ethier and Deaux, 1994; McCauley and Posner, 2019; Perez, 2013, 2015; Simonovits and Kezdi, 2016; Spears, Doosje, and Ellemers, 1997). According to SIT, perceiving the dominant outgroup as prejudiced and discriminatory against one's ingroup should lead to increased identification with said ingroup (Tajfel and Turner, 1986). However, as per Tajfel's (1981) predictions, low self-esteem associated with one's group membership should lead one to distance themselves from the group.

This was illustrated by the literature on ingroup identification in the previous section, whereby differences between high and low identifiers were of particular importance when assessing individuals' reactions to group identity threat (Ethier and Deaux, 1994; Perez, 2015; Spears, Doosje, and Ellemers, 1997). When threatened with outgroup devaluation, high identifiers were more likely to partake in efforts directed towards maintaining their sense of positive group distinctiveness (Ethier and Deaux, 1994; Perez, 2015), whereas low identifiers were more likely to incur damage to their self-esteem and, consequently, to dissociate from their respective group altogether (Ethier and Deaux, 1994; Spears, Doosje, and Ellemers, 1997). A fundamental reason as to why these differences between high and low identifiers occur is because the former attach greater significance to their ingroup as a reflection of their personal self-image, whereas the latter do not have their group assume such centrality (Perez, 2015).

The Rejection-Identification Model

One prominent model that explains these dual pathways of ingroup identification is the rejection-identification model (RIM), which postulates that perceiving prejudice as trans-contextual can simultaneously produce both negative and positive effects on well-being among members of stigmatised groups (Branscombe, Schmitt, and Harvey, 1999). Per the authors' words: "the generally negative consequences of perceiving oneself as a victim of racial prejudice can be somewhat alleviated by identification with the minority group" (p. 135, Branscombe, Schmitt, and Harvey, 1999). In other words, when confronted with outgroup devaluation, perceived discrimination leads to an increase in ingroup identification, which consequently helps maintain group self-esteem (Armenta and Hunt, 2009). However, as established by Cronin et al. (2012), when identification with one's ingroup is weak, the coping strategy of identifying with the ingroup is substituted for the more individualistic approach of dissociating from the devalued group altogether.

As predicated on these insights, I argue that Islamophobic rhetoric will affect collective self-esteem among Muslim Arab immigrants depending on one's prior level of identification (Armenta and Hunt, 2009; Branscombe, Schmitt, and Harvey, 1999; Ethier and Deaux, 1994; Perez, 2015). Collective self-esteem here "pertains to self-worth derived from membership in larger social groups" (p. 2, Du, King, and Chi, 2017), and is the extent to which one views their group positively (Luhtanen and Crocker, 1992). This embodies the aforementioned idea of *positive group distinctiveness* (Spears, 2011), whereby individuals derive value from their group memberships insofar as they can compare their groups positively with others, and, in turn, attain some form of group distinctiveness as a result.

Having already expanded upon this idea in more depth, sufficient grounds have now been provided to introduce this paper's hypotheses. In general, I expect that Islamophobic

rhetoric will, on average, lead to lower levels of collective self-esteem among its group members overall. This is explicated in the following hypothesis:

H1: On average, Islamophobic rhetoric will lead to lower levels of collective self-esteem among Muslim Arab immigrants.

Such an expectation seems axiomatic, echoing deeply with the decades-long literature about the negative effects of prejudice and discrimination on self-esteem (Crocker and Major, 1989). However, based on the social identity approach and the RIM, the negative effects of Islamophobic rhetoric on collective self-esteem should, in theory, be moderated by the degree to which one identifies as Muslim Arab; the degree to which one, by virtue of identification with the derogated group, reaps the self-protective benefits on self-esteem that the group provides oneself against social stigma (Crocker and Major, 1989). These assumptions will be tested by the following hypothesis and are conceptually illustrated in Figure 1.

H2: Level of identification will moderate the relationship between Islamophobic rhetoric and collective self-esteem.
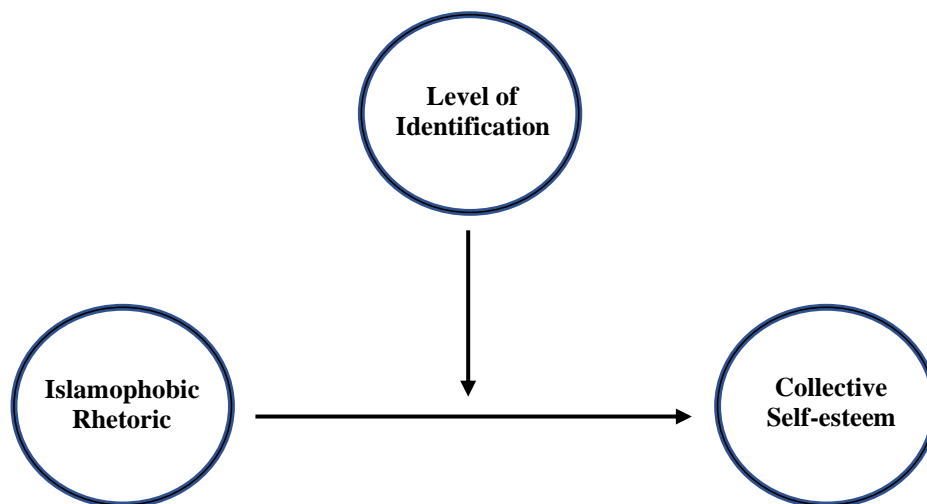

Figure 1. Conceptual illustration of how Level of Identification moderates the relationship between Islamophobic rhetoric and Collective Self-esteem.

Research Design and Methodology

Case Selection and Data

To test this paper's hypotheses, a survey experiment was designed via Qualtrics software. The survey was conducted online and administered on a small sample of 80 Muslim Arab immigrants, aged 16 and above. Considering the focus of this study, participants were selected based on two criteria: (1) that they were born Muslim Arab, and (2) that they are currently living as an immigrant. Muslim Arab immigrants living in North America and Europe are, therefore, the specific population I am interested in, for they personify the typical case under which Islamophobia contextually exerts its influence onto its targets. These respondents were recruited organically via personal networking and snowball sampling, meaning that the recruited participants were asked to assist in identifying other potential respondents by also sending them the survey. This renders the data collection process a convenience sample, with the fielding for this survey beginning on the 27th of November 2022 and ending on December 4th, 2022.

Though convenience sampling is generally thought to compromise the validity of research (Emerson, 2015), there are a couple of reasons to assume that the convenience element of this study will not bias the results. For one, the goal of this study theoretically enables the use of a convenience sample, since it focuses on Muslim Arab immigrants as a *collective community* – a community which essentially involves global networks of people who share a common identity and are connected to one another by virtue of that identity. Secondly, the sample is highly multidimensional (Druckman and Kam, 2011), in that it is geographically dispersed across ten different countries, as well as inclusive of a diverse set of Muslim Arabs from various ages, backgrounds, and occupations. Such contextual variety in

the sample should protect the results of this study against the influences of non-random error, influences which are all too familiar when using convenience samples (Emerson, 2015).

Most respondents were in the age range of 18-24, high school educated and currently students, with 51.2% being female. In terms of ethnic origin, 70% were of Lebanese ancestry, followed by Syrian at 11.2%, and Moroccan, Tunisian, and Yemeni at 3.8% each. More than half of the individuals reported living as an immigrant in Bulgaria (56.3%), with the Netherlands coming in at second (13.8%), and France in third (10%). While concerns for external validity might be raised when observing some of these sample characteristics, it is worth mentioning that almost equal amounts of respondents were also aged 25-34, had a bachelor's degree or higher, and were employed either part-time or full-time. Such 'dual sampling' (Druckman and Kam, 2011) within the overall sample serves for minimising the threats to external validity and, hence, for generalising the results beyond the domain of this experiment. On the following page a descriptive table of the respondents' demographic profiles is provided.

Survey Structure

The experimental survey consists of three separate stages, with the overall survey lasting no longer than 10 minutes altogether. When beginning the survey, respondents are instructed to answer a few preliminary demographics, after which they are required to complete a battery of three items regarding their *level of identification* as Muslim Arab, the battery of which constitutes the substantive part of stage 1. Having done so, in stage 2 half of the respondents are randomly assigned to an Islamophobic rhetoric treatment, wherein they are exposed to an Islamophobic political statement made by a prominent international figure. After reading the statement, respondents from both the control group and the experimental condition are asked to conclude the survey by answering a battery of four item statements that measure their

Table 1. Demographic Profile of the Respondents

Description	Frequency	Percentage
Age Group		
Under 18	12	15.0
18-24	28	35.0
25-34	27	33.8
35-44	3	3.8
45-54	8	10.0
Over 55	2	2.5
Gender		
Male	39	48.8
Female	41	51.2
Schooling		
Less than a high school degree	5	6.3
High school degree	28	35.1
Bachelor's degree (e.g., BA, BS)	24	30.0
Master's degree (e.g., MA, MS)	20	25.0
Doctorate (e.g., PhD, EdD)	3	3.8
Employment		
Employed full-time	28	35.0
Employed part-time	10	12.5
Unemployed (currently looking for work)	4	5.0
Unemployed (not looking for work)	2	2.5
Student	32	40.0
Other	3	3.8
Retired	1	1.3
Country of Ethnic Origin		
Egypt	2	2.5
Lebanon	56	70.0
Libya	1	1.3
Morocco	3	3.8
Palestine	1	1.3
Sudan	1	1.3
Syria	9	11.2
Tunisia	3	3.8
United Arab Emirates	1	1.3
Yemen	3	3.8
Country as Immigrant		
Albania	1	1.3
Belgium	2	2.5
Bulgaria	45	56.3
Canada	3	3.8
France	8	10.0
Germany	3	3.8
Netherlands	11	13.8
Spain	2	2.5
Sweden	1	1.3
United Kingdom	4	5.0

collective self-esteem. Upon completing this battery of items, stage 3 of the survey ends, and the participants are debriefed with regards to what the topic of the research at hand is, the specifics of the experimental procedure, and whether they would like to add some comments of their own.

Variables

'Islamophobic rhetoric' is the independent variable (IV) of this study and is captured in stage 2 of the survey – considered to be the actual experiment. This experiment consisted of randomly exposing half of the respondents to a political statement highlighting the dangers of Islam, the various threats that Muslim immigrants pose to society, and the need to ban immigration. Before reading the statement, said participants were informed that a 'prominent international figure' had made the comments. The purpose of such a disclosure was to increase the credibility of the statement but both the comments and the person making them were strictly fictitious, intended only to capture stereotypical examples of Islamophobic rhetoric. This statement, modelled after Perez's (2015) *xenophobic rhetoric* statement used in his study, was constructed in such a way so that it taps into the various elements of Islamophobia (Ciftci, 2012). In addition, after reading the statement, respondents were also given the opportunity to write down how such statements made them feel, though this was optional. Below is provided the political statement shown to respondents in the Islamophobic rhetoric treatment:

"The rise of Islamisation in the West needs to be addressed because Muslim immigrants present various threats to our society. Muslim immigrants are against our way of life, against integrating into our culture, and dangerous to our national security. We must close our borders now".

The purpose behind randomly dividing respondents along these treatment conditions is to truly assess whether Islamophobic rhetoric is a sufficient predictor of the variance in collective self-esteem. This Islamophobic condition should, if proven to be theoretically consistent with the conceptualisation of Islamophobic rhetoric, raise the salience of Muslim Arab identity, while simultaneously diminishing its value (Perez, 2015). Moreover, by assessing respondents' level of identification prior to the experimental condition, this study is allowed a precise examination on whether high and low identifiers exhibit different reactions to identity threat – the Islamophobic rhetoric condition. For the analysis, the IV was coded into a dummy variable, such that (1 = treatment; 0 = control group).

Proceeding with the next variable, 'Level of Identification' is the variable hypothesised to have a moderating effect on the relationship between Islamophobic rhetoric and collective self-esteem. This moderator variable was measured via the battery of identification items that respondents had to answer in stage 1 of the survey, with this stage being essential for determining whether one can be typically classified as a high or low identifier. Below are provided the item statements for which the participants were asked the extent to which they agreed or disagreed:

"Being Muslim Arab is important to my sense of what kind of person I am".

"When I speak about Muslim Arabs, I usually say 'we' instead of 'they'".

"In general, identifying as Muslim Arab is an important part of my self-image".

The selection of this battery of items was motivated by Luhtanen and Crocker's (1992) identity measures from their Collective Self-esteem Scale. The measures used in this paper subsequently were reformulated to be framed towards Muslim Arab identity. All three items were gauged on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*

and were coded so that higher values indicate stronger identity as Muslim Arab. Such coding permits averaging the scores from each item into an identification scale later, which subsequently proved to result in these values (mean = 4.17, median = 4.33, SD = .93, alpha = .848). Thereupon for the analysis, to accurately assess whether one could be considered a high or a low identifier, a dummy variable was created, such that (1 = high identifiers; 0 = low identifiers). This dummy variable was based on the median split of the Identification scale, so that respondents scoring 4.33 and above were classified as high identifiers, and those scoring below 4.33 were classified as low identifiers. The logic behind splitting the data lies in the fact that the median was very high, meaning there would have been fewer observations had the split been from the middle (only 6 respondents scored below 2.5).

Finally, the dependent variable (DV) – 'Collective self-esteem' – was measured through the battery of four item statements that respondents had to answer in stage 3 of the survey. The DV – which taps into the extent to which respondents view their group in positive terms – was operationalised through positive and negative formulations, wherein the participants were asked the degree to which they agreed or disagreed with the following items:

"In general, I am glad of my identity as Muslim Arab".

"Sometimes, I regret that I belong to my identity as Muslim Arab".

"I feel good about being part of the Muslim Arab community".

"Overall, I often feel that being Muslim Arab is not worthwhile".[2]

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[2]Similar to the battery items in stage 1, the dependent variable 'Collective Self-esteem' was operationalised and reformulated along the terms of the Collective Self-esteem Scale created by Luhtanen and Crocker (1992).

Following a 5-point Likert scale, items framed in positive terms were coded so that higher values indicate higher levels of agreement with the respective statement *(strongly agree = 5)*, whereas items stated in negative terms were coded such that higher values indicate higher disagreement in relation to the corresponding item *(strongly disagree = 5)*. This relational coding of values serves the purpose of effectively measuring collective self-esteem, which was later indexed into a scale by averaging the 4 items together (mean = 4.25, median = 4.25, SD = .72, alpha = .750).

Statistical Model

Considering that the interaction between Islamophobic rhetoric and collective self-esteem is hypothesised to be moderated by one's level of identification, such that higher levels of identification are associated with higher collective self-esteem, the statistical model that I use to test this relationship is a hierarchical linear regression model. Within this hierarchical model, the explanatory variables that are expected to predict collective self-esteem are divided into three blocks: (1) the main IV – Islamophobic rhetoric; (2) Islamophobic rhetoric and Level of identification; (3) Islamophobic rhetoric, Level of identification, and their interaction term. As can be deduced, block 1 is dedicated to answering H_1, whereas the latter two blocks are related to H_2. Additionally, it is worth mentioning that collective self-esteem was regressed separately on Islamophobic rhetoric to accurately assess how the differences between high and low identifiers play out within the first hypothesis.

The utility behind using a hierarchical regression model is that it allows for a precise examination on whether the variance in the outcome variable can be predicted as a function of the explanatory variable, while simultaneously examining if such an effect is moderated by other confounding factors, such as Level of identification. For this study, such precision is doubly reinforced by virtue of the survey's experimental design – i.e., having randomly

divided respondents into a treatment and control group – which should greatly facilitate an assessment on whether the variation in the outcome variable indeed primarily results from the explanatory variable, or is perhaps influenced by Level of identification alone, for instance.

Given the experimental design of the survey, the subsequent analysis will be structured in accordance with how the survey progresses. In other words, the analysis will be organised in a way that not only reflects the effect on collective self-esteem after the experimental treatment but, also, how collective self-esteem may be affected *pre-treatment* (Clifford, Sheagley, and Piston, 2021). While the focus of H_1 is mainly concerned with what happens after respondents are exposed to the experimental condition, there is added value in investigating how Level of identification – as a predictor variable – impacts collective self-esteem *before* the treatment. As per the sections above, existing theory suggests that, in general, there should be a strong relationship between level of identification and self-esteem (Branscombe, Schmitt, and Harvey, 1999; Spears, 2011). Therefore, the utility of evaluating how one's level of identification is related to collective self-esteem, absent the experimental condition, should allow for a more precise measurement of the treatment itself when put to the test (Clifford, Sheagley, and Piston, 2021). After conducting this strategic investigation, the analyses presented will then veer into the domain of H_2, which will be provided lastly.

Analysis

Beginning with H_1, I expect that Islamophobic rhetoric will, on average, lead to lower levels of collective self-esteem (CSE) among Muslim Arab immigrants. This expectation was put to the test by conducting a hierarchical linear regression. The first block of the regression tests the overall relationship between the predictor and outcome variable for respondents who were either in the experimental or the control group, whereas the second block includes Level of

identification in relation to the link between Islamophobic rhetoric and CSE. Table 1 presents the results generated by both models (excluding block 3, which is provided later).

Table 1. Linear regression models on the effect of Islamophobic rhetoric on CSE

	Model 1	Model 2
(Constant)	4.319***	3.718***
	(0.114)	(0.143)
Islamophobic rhetoric	- 0.119	0.150
	(0.162)	(0.145)
Level of identification		0.828***
		(0.146)
R^2	0.007	0.300
Adj. R^2	- 0.006	0.281
N	80	80

Note: OLS regression coefficients with standard errors in brackets.

***$p < 0.001$, **$p < 0.01$, *$p < 0.05$

As shown per the table, in model 1 the unstandardised coefficient for Islamophobic rhetoric is - 0.119, meaning that, on average, respondents who were exposed to the experimental condition reported a CSE score that was 0.119 points lower than individuals who were not exposed to the Islamophobic statement. Though the impact of Islamophobic rhetoric on CSE was not statistically significant, it nevertheless did produce an overall negative relationship apropos collective self-esteem among Muslim Arab immigrants. However, the weakness of this relationship could be demonstrated by the model's R^2, with model 1 managing only to explain a mere 0.7% of the variance in the outcome variable. All in all, provided the findings regarding non-significance, these results do not warrant sufficient statistical support to reject the null for H_1.

Turning to the results presented by model 2, one can observe that the unstandardised coefficient for Islamophobic rhetoric changes to 0.150 after introducing Level of identification as a predictor variable. Hence, after accounting for the role that one's prior level of identification plays with regards to CSE, it can be maintained that respondents exposed to the treatment report an average CSE score of 3.868, 0.150 points higher than individuals in the control group. Although not statistically significant, these results corroborate the contention that ingroup identification buffers one's self esteem against outgroup derogation (Branscombe, Schmitt, and Harvey, 1999; Crocker and Major, 1989). Furthermore, the inclusion of Level of identification in the model not only boosted the explanatory power of the model overall, but also showcased a statistically significant impact on CSE that was below the 0.001% threshold ($p < 0.001$). Recalling that the identification variable is binary (1 = high identifier; 0 = low identifier), from this model one can deduce that, on average, high identifiers report a CSE score that is 0.828 points higher than that of low identifiers.

While this does not demonstrate how Islamophobic rhetoric differentially impacts high and low identifiers per se, these results still provide valuable information on how prior identification is associated with collective self-esteem in general. Table 2 on the following page fills this omission, however, and provides results on how high and low identifiers react to Islamophobic rhetoric, as well as the interaction term between the Islamophobic rhetoric treatment and Level of identification (block 3 of the hierarchical linear regression).

In this paper, it was hypothesised that Level of identification will moderate the relationship between Islamophobic rhetoric and collective self-esteem (H_2). As displayed by the results in table 2, when analysing the results for low identifiers in model 1, the

unstandardised coefficient is - 0.128, a result which is not statistically significant. Despite

non-significance, this coefficient indicates that, on average, low identifiers exposed to the

Table 2. Linear regression models on the moderating effect of Level of identification

|	Model 1 (Low Identifier)	Model 2 (High Identifier)	Model 3
(Constant)	3.909***	4.474***	3.909***
	(0.214)	(0.094)	(0.182)
Islamophobic rhetoric	- 0.128	0.354*	- 0.128
	(0.259)	(0.158)	(0.220)
Level of identification			0.565**
			(0.214)
Interaction term			0.482
			(0.290)
R^2	0.007	0.104	0.324
Adj. R^2	- 0.023	0.083	0.297
N	35	45	80

Note: OLS regression coefficients with standard errors in brackets.

***$p < 0.001$, **$p < 0.01$, *$p < 0.05$

Islamophobic rhetoric condition report a CSE score of 3.781, a result that is 0.128 points

lower than the average levels reported by low identifiers in the control group. In comparison,

when examining the results for high identifiers in model 2, one is met with results that reflect

quite different trends. In model 2, the unstandardised coefficient for Islamophobic rhetoric

(0.354) predicts a statistically significant impact ($p < 0.05$) on the CSE of high identifiers

exposed to the treatment. In other words, on the high identifiers exposed to it, Islamophobic

rhetoric produced an average CSE score of 4.828, a significant 0.354 points higher than the

scores demonstrated by high identifiers in the control group. These results are consistent with

the literature on ingroup identification processes – namely, that "threats to a group's worth

elicit specific reactions from group members – reactions that depend on one's level of identification with a group" (p. 551, Perez, 2015). Moreover, although models 1 and 2 in table 2 are not directly related to H_2, the trends displayed by them seem to suggest that Level of identification will play an important role when moderating the relationship between Islamophobic rhetoric and collective self-esteem among Muslim Arab immigrants. Figure 2 presents a graphic representation of how high and low identifiers reacted to the treatment:

Figure 2. The effect of Islamophobic rhetoric on the CSE of high and low identifiers
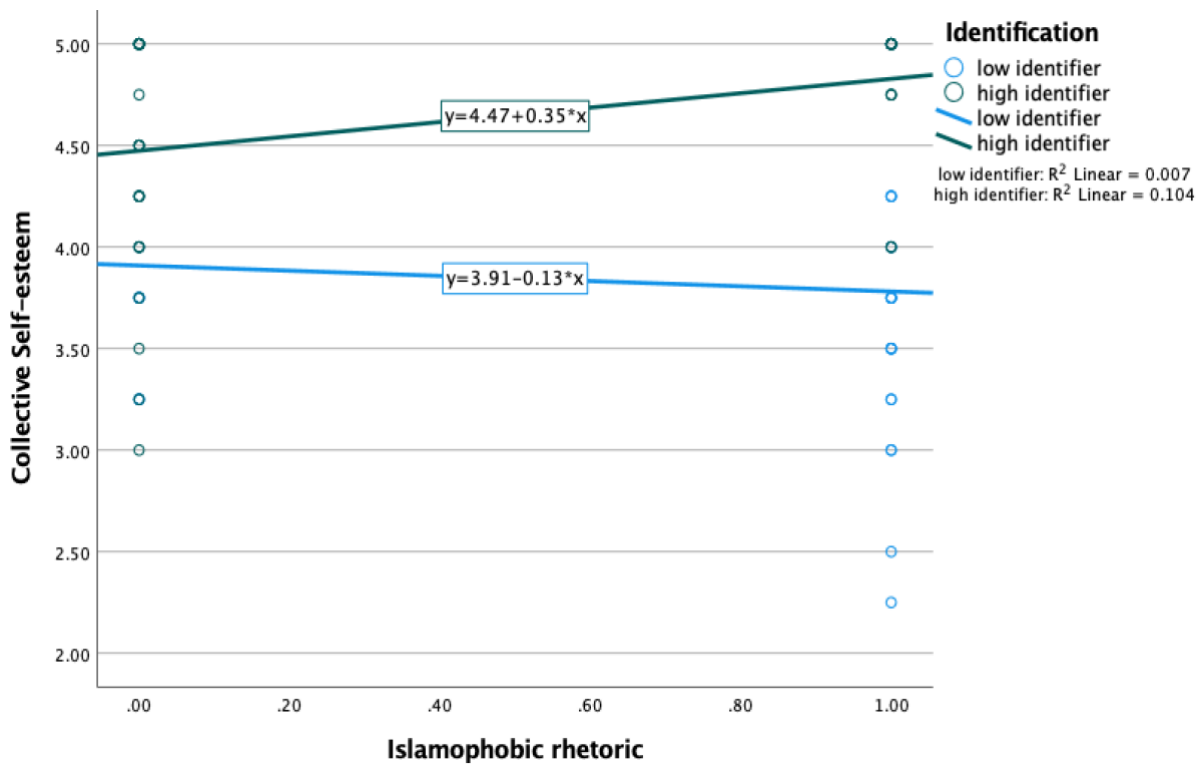
When observing the results in model 3, one notices that Level of identification is once again statistically significant, albeit at a lower threshold of confidence ($p < 0.01$). However, what is of primary interest in model 3 is the coefficient value for the interaction term, which is 0.482. When recalling model 1, the coefficient for low identifiers in the treatment condition indicated that they would have an average CSE score that was - 0.128 points lower than low identifiers in the control group. Therefore, what the interaction term suggests here is that the

effect of Islamophobic rhetoric on CSE will be more positive by 0.482 points among the high identifiers. Indeed, this was the case since the reported coefficient for high identifiers in the experimental condition was 0.354, a statistically significant result below the 5% threshold. Expressed in an equation, the moderating effect of Level of identification on the relationship between Islamophobic rhetoric and collective self-esteem is as follows:

$$CSE = -0.128 + 0.482 = 0.354$$

While the moderating effect of Level of identification is consistent with the second hypothesis and has proven to have a positive impact on the relationship between the IV and DV, this moderating effect is not statistically significant, and, thus, is not sufficient to reject the null. However, it is perhaps worth mentioning that model 3, when compared to all other models, has the most explanatory power, in that it manages to explain 32.4% of the variance in collective self-esteem. This equates to a 31.7% increase when compared to a model which neither accounts for the effect of identification, nor for this effect's moderating interaction with Islamophobic rhetoric (table 1, model 1).

General Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this study was twofold: (a) to determine whether Islamophobic rhetoric undermines collective self-esteem among Muslim Arab immigrants; and (b) to estimate the influence that one's prior level of identification might have on such a relationship. Using an experimental survey that manipulated exposure to Islamophobic rhetoric, these strivings were tested on a small convenience sample of Muslim Arab immigrants in North America and Europe. Through several regression analyses, I found that Islamophobic rhetoric undermined collective self-esteem, albeit at a non-significant level. This effect can be depicted with a few comments which some of the respondents, who reported lower levels of collective self-

esteem proportional to their level of identification, shared after their exposure to the Islamophobic rhetoric condition:

"It makes me feel very judged and uncomfortable".

"I don't feel okay with this, but I do understand them. It's so because the media is spreading fake news about Muslims all over the world".

"I find it frustrating, and it makes me feel uncomfortable".

Furthermore, high identifying Muslim Arab immigrants displayed increased levels of collective self-esteem when faced with Islamophobic rhetoric – a trend which was opposite that of low identifiers, statistically significant, and consistent with social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). Although some results, such as the trends displayed by high identifiers, proved to be statistically significant, the broader results were not sufficient to reject the null for either of the two hypotheses. This could potentially be due to some of the limitations of this study, which will be discussed in the remainder of this conclusion.

Firstly, the small sample size used to conduct this study presents inherent difficulties in determining whether the null hypotheses are to be correctly accepted. Given that the size of the sample consisted of less than 100 respondents, the possibility of a type II error should be considered when assessing the validity of the findings. Had the fielding for the study been longer and, thus, consisting of a larger number of participants, perhaps the null hypotheses could have been rejected, though this would have been more likely for H_2 than for H_1.

Secondly, it would be imprudent to disregard the possibility of a selection bias. Although the survey made use of a randomised manipulation to the experimental treatment, 70% of the respondents were of Lebanese ethnic origin. Additionally, most respondents reported living in Bulgaria – a country which is fraught with "historical prejudices vis-à-vis

local Muslim communities, perceived as unwanted heritage of the Ottoman Empire" (p. 567, Zhelyazkova, 2014). What this latter point implies is that, notwithstanding the Islamophobic discrimination that respondents living in Bulgaria might have been subject to, the source behind this specific discrimination is essentially different than that for respondents living elsewhere. For example, this contextuality of discrimination can be represented by the case of the Netherlands (the second most reported country of immigration in this study), where exclusionary reactions to minorities, including Muslim ones, are not dominated by historical prejudices, but by the perception that Dutch *culture* is being threatened (Sniderman, Hagendoorn, and Prior, 2004). Thus, while the contextuality of discrimination is difficult to equalise for, it is nonetheless important to take into consideration when making broader inferences regarding the effects of Islamophobic rhetoric across different contexts.

Thirdly, it is worth mentioning that the sourcing of the Islamophobic rhetoric statement may have inadvertently influenced the reactions it elicited from the respondents. Had the statement been made by a real politician, such as President Trump or Marine Le Pen, for instance, it is quite possible that the reactions evoked could have been different. Specifically, if respondents had been told that the statement they were reading was extracted from a real speech made by Trump, their reactions might have been more affectively polarised, hence producing different results for this research paper. Although purely speculative, such affective polarisation could have probably arisen because of Trump's notoriety with regards to his anti-Muslim political stances and his proposal to ban Muslim immigration (Pertwee, 2020).

Finally, having observed the results of this study, it would be worthwhile to mention that although one's level of identification was hypothesised to moderate the effect that Islamophobic rhetoric has on collective self-esteem, it is highly possible that such a

relationship could additionally have been moderated by other external factors, especially when concerning the delicate case of Muslim Arab identity. The plausibility of such moderators is informed by Crocker and Major's (1989) article – *'Social Stigma and Self-Esteem: The Self-Protective Properties of Stigma'*.

In their psychological review, Crocker and Major (1989) establish how, contrary to conventional wisdom, prejudice against members of stigmatised minority groups need not necessarily lead to lowered self-esteem among said group members. On the contrary, the authors provide several mechanisms by which ingroup membership buffers one's self-esteem against prejudice and stigma such as, for instance, attributing negative feedback or poor outcomes as resulting from the prejudiced attitudes others hold against one's group (Crocker and Major, 1989). However, as Crocker and Major (1989) importantly lay out, members of stigmatised groups cannot always rely on such self-protective strategies against prejudice, as this is dependent on several moderating factors, ranging from (a) the internalisation of the negative attitudes towards the stigmatised group to (b) the perceived sense of responsibility for the stigmatising condition, among others (Crocker and Major, 1989).

Bearing these considerations in mind, it is incumbent to entertain the idea that, when applied to the case of Muslim Arab identity, such moderating factors could have potentially influenced the findings of this research paper. In trying to understand why Muslim Arab immigrants may feel divided in their sense of identity, I speculate that many Muslim Arab immigrants could possibly feel responsible for the stigmatising condition, to the point where they somehow justify Islamophobic prejudice (Crocker and Major, 1989). This speculation is exemplified by the way in which many Muslim Arab immigrants feel "burdened […] to speak on behalf of all Muslims following a terrorist attack" (p. 6, Alsaidi et al., 2021), which results in them having to constantly self-monitor to present all Muslims in a positive light

(Alsaidi et al., 2021). Compounded by this example, I conjecture that such statements may be formed as a by-product of the internalisation of negative attitudes towards Muslim Arabs writ large (Alsaidi et al., 2021; Crocker and Major, 1989), as Muslim Arab immigrants may have difficulty finding conciliation with the idea that they should be prideful of their group, while simultaneously acknowledging that some radical extremists, who nonetheless claim to speak in their name, continue to commit mass atrocities.

Thus, this possibility of a dynamic, and possibly unconscious, interplay of having internalised negative stereotypes about oneself, and thinking they are somewhat legitimate, should be considered when assessing the degree to which ingroup identification manages to buffer the collective self-esteem of Muslim Arab immigrants against Islamophobic rhetoric. Perhaps these intragroup processes should be investigated more thoroughly in future research, for while I have demonstrated that ingroup identification does indeed strengthen the fabric that binds Muslim Arab immigrants together, there may be other, more insidious threats to Muslim Arab identity that originate from deeper within. Understanding how these covert threats ingrain themselves psychologically within Muslim Arab diasporas would be a worthwhile contribution in potentially helping them better deal against the multifarious dangers of Islamophobia.

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Appendix A – Hierarchical linear regression assumption checks

Autocorrelation

Table A1. Durbin Watson value – No autocorrelation

	Durbin Watson
Model 3	1.633

In the model summary of the SPSS output, the Durbin-Watson test is 1.633. Although this result is below 2, a score above 1.5 is nonetheless within the acceptable bounds of dependence of errors (DW > 1).

Multicollinearity

Table A1. VIF values – No multicollinearity

Model 1	VIF
Islamophobic rhetoric	1.000
Model 2	
Islamophobic rhetoric	1.120
Level of identification	1.120
Model 3	
Islamophobic rhetoric	2.652
Level of identification	2.469
Interaction term	2.938

There is no concern for multicollinearity in the data set given that all the values, including that of the interaction term, are below 5.

Linearity

Given that the main IV – Islamophobic rhetoric – is binary (1 = treatment; control = 0),

linearity is not a concern as I am only comparing the mean between the two groups.

Normality of the errors – Not violated

Although there is little deviance, the errors generally are centred around the centre line.

Outliers and influential cases

Table A2. Cook's distance

	Cook's distance greater than 1
Frequency	0
Percent	0%
Maximum	0.089
N	80

Appendix B – The experimental survey

Thesis Project – The Experimental Survey

You are invited to take part in a survey on immigrant experiences.

This study is being conducted by Ali Basha as his bachelor's thesis for the University of Leiden.

There are 2 qualifications to participate in this survey: (1) that you were born Muslim Arab; and (2) that you are currently living as an immigrant.

You are under no obligation to participate in this survey. Participation is voluntary and completely anonymous, and if you agree to participate in this survey, you will be interviewed for about 10 minutes. You may find answering some of the questions upsetting, although it is expected that such questions would not be different from topics you may have already discussed with family or friends.

You may now decide whether you would like to participate in this survey or not.

Would you like to participate in this survey?

○ Yes

○ No

What is your age?

○ Under 18

○ 18 - 24

○ 25 - 34

○ 35 - 44

○ 45 - 54

○ Over 55

Page Break

What is your gender?

☐ Male

☐ Female

☐ Prefer not to say

Page Break

What is the highest degree or level of school you have completed?

○ Less than a high school degree

○ High school degree

○ Bachelor's degree (e.g. BA, BS)

○ Master's degree (e.g. MA, MS)

○ Doctorate (e.g. PhD, EdD)

○ Other (please specify) _____

Page Break

What is your current employment status?

○ Employed full-time (40+ hours a week)

○ Employed part-time (less than 40 hours a week)

○ Unemployed (currently looking for work)

○ Unemployed (not currently looking for work)

○ Student

○ Retired

○ Other (please specify) _____

Page Break

What is your country of ethnic origin?

▼ Algeria ... Yemen

Page Break

What is your country of birth?

▼ Afghanistan ... Zimbabwe

Page Break

What is your citizenship?

▼ Afghanistan ... Zimbabwe

Page Break

End of Block: Demographics

Start of Block: Stage 1

Now you will be asked a few questions regarding your identity as Muslim Arab.

Page Break

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement(s)?:

"Being Muslim Arab is important to my sense of what kind of person I am".

○ Strongly agree

○ Somewhat agree

○ Neither agree nor disagree

○ Somewhat disagree

○ Strongly disagree

Page Break

"When I speak about Muslim Arabs, I usually say 'we' instead of 'they'".

○ Strongly agree

○ Somewhat agree

○ Neither agree nor disagree

○ Somewhat disagree

○ Strongly disagree

Page Break

"In general, identifying as Muslim Arab is an important part of my self-image".

○ Strongly agree

○ Somewhat agree

○ Neither agree nor disagree

○ Somewhat disagree

○ Strongly disagree

In which country do you currently live as an immigrant?

▼ Afghanistan ... Zimbabwe

Have you lived most of your life in (above-stated answer)?

◯ Yes

◯ No

`X→`

In which country have you lived most of your life? (Question was asked if 'No' was selected above)

▼ Afghanistan ... Zimbabwe

What is your immigrant generation status in (selected country of immigration)?

○ First generation (born outside of (selected country of immigration))

○ Second generation (born in (selected country of immigration) with foreign-born parents)

○ Third generation (born in (selected country of immigration) with parents born in (selected country of immigration))

How integrated would you say you are with the culture of (selected country of immigration)?

○ Highly integrated

○ Moderately integrated

○ Somewhat integrated

○ Weakly integrated

○ Not integrated

Page Break

Do you speak the official language of (selected country of immigration)?

◯ Yes

◯ No

On the next page, you will read some comments made by a prominent international figure. You may feel free to write down how the statement makes you feel, though this is optional.

Page Break ——————————————————————————————————

Recently, this prominent international figure said the following:

"The rise of Islamisation in our country needs to be addressed because Muslim immigrants present various threats to our society. Muslim immigrants are against our way of life, against integrating into our culture, and dangerous to our national security. We must close our borders now".

How does this make you feel? (optional)

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Page Break ——————————————————————————————————

Finally, we would like you to end this survey by briefly answering a few questions about yourself.

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement(s)?:

"In general, I am glad of my identity as Muslim Arab".

○ Strongly agree

○ Somewhat agree

○ Neither agree nor disagree

○ Somewhat disagree

○ Strongly disagree

"Sometimes, I regret that I belong to my identity as Muslim Arab".

○ Strongly agree

○ Somewhat agree

○ Neither agree nor disagree

○ Somewhat disagree

○ Strongly disagree

"I feel good about being part of the Muslim Arab community".

○ Strongly agree

○ Somewhat agree

○ Neither agree nor disagree

○ Somewhat disagree

○ Strongly disagree

Page Break ———

"Overall, I often feel that being Muslim Arab is not worthwhile".

○ Strongly agree

○ Somewhat agree

○ Neither agree nor disagree

○ Somewhat disagree

○ Strongly disagree

Page Break ———

Finally, we would like you to end this survey by briefly answering a few questions about yourself.

Page Break

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement(s)?:

"In general, I am glad of my identity as Muslim Arab".

○ Strongly agree

○ Somewhat agree

○ Neither agree nor disagree

○ Somewhat disagree

○ Strongly disagree

Page Break

"Sometimes, I regret that I belong to my identity as Muslim Arab".

○ Strongly agree

○ Somewhat agree

○ Neither agree nor disagree

○ Somewhat disagree

○ Strongly disagree

Page Break

"I feel good about being part of the Muslim Arab community".

◯ Strongly agree

◯ Somewhat agree

◯ Neither agree nor disagree

◯ Somewhat disagree

◯ Strongly disagree

Page Break

"Overall, I often feel that being Muslim Arab is not worthwhile".

◯ Strongly agree

◯ Somewhat agree

◯ Neither agree nor disagree

◯ Somewhat disagree

◯ Strongly disagree

Page Break

We sincerely thank you for your time and patience in participating in this survey. The goal of this study was to understand how Islamophobic rhetoric affects collective self-esteem among Muslim Arab immigrants, and whether such a relationship is influenced by one's level of identification as Muslim Arab.

To test this relationship, half of you were instructed to read an Islamophobic political statement, while half of you were asked to simply proceed completing the survey without reading the statement. To those who were exposed to the statement, we would like to inform you that it was purely fictional and solely intended for us to understand different reactions to Islamophobia.

If you have any questions, or simply have some thoughts you would like to share, please feel free to write them down below.

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____