

# **The best person for the job is the most qualified, right? An experimental study about Islamophobia in hiring practices**

Yassmeen El Maohub

*BeCHANGE Research Group, Institute of Public Communication,  
Faculty of Communication, Culture and Society,  
Università della Svizzera Italiana, Lugano, Switzerland*

Natalie Rangelov

*BeCHANGE Research Group, Institute of Public Communication,  
Faculty of Communication, Culture, and Society, Università della Svizzera Italiana,  
Lugano, Switzerland and APS AG, Zurich, Switzerland, and*

L. Suzanne Suggs

*Social Marketing, BeCHANGE Research Group, Institute of Public Health and  
Institute of Communication and Public Policy, Faculty of Communication,  
Culture, and Society, Università della Svizzera italiana, Lugano, Switzerland*

## **ABSTRACT**

*Purpose.* Islamophobia is a growing social problem that leads to the discrimination of Muslims. Using Group Conflict Theory and the Integrated Threat Theory as the theoretical frameworks, this Social Marketing research study aims to measure the presence of Islamophobia in the hiring practices of the most southern state of Switzerland.

*Methods.* An experimental study was conducted with employees. Based on CVs for two positions, back-office and front-office, candidates selected for interviews and reasons provided. Two variables were manipulated to represent the “Muslim appearance” on the CVs: the picture and the name. A content analysis of reasons was conducted in addition to descriptive statistics of survey responses.

*Results.* A negative perception of Muslim candidates emerged from the answers with a clear difference between the two scenarios: candidates perceived to be Muslim were not rejected from the back-office position, but they were from the front-office position.

*Conclusion.* Results demonstrate that hiring practices in Ticino Switzerland are, in some cases, based on a prejudicial attitude. As long as Muslims were “not seen as Muslims to the customers”, they were judged as acceptable for the job. This has implications for social marketing research and practice aimed to change this discrimination behavior. A next step could be to understand if it is fear of Muslims or fear of what the public might think of Muslims that cause the selection difference between the two jobs. Systems-wide and macro level social marketing research is well suited to investigate such problems and test solutions, in a local context, following the methodology used in this study.

**Keywords:** Islamophobia; discrimination; social marketing; experiment, Realistic Group Conflict Theory, Integrated Threat Theory

## **INTRODUCTION**

An escalation of Islamophobia has emerged in Europe and the phenomenon is considered “a main challenge to the social peace and to the coexistence of different cultures, religions and ethnicities in Europe” (Bayrakli et al., 2016, p. 8). Particularly, discrimination in hiring practices has become a challenge for Muslims and real obstacle of obtaining work. This experimental study focuses on measuring the presence of Islamophobia in hiring practices in Ticino, the most southern state of Switzerland - where Muslims account for only 2% of the population but are perceived as a threat – and argues that Social Marketing should be used to foster the inclusion of minorities in the workplace. Discrimination is a multifaced social problem involving many actors, political and social factors (Churchman, 1967; Yassim, 2019), thus, it is considered a wicked social issue. Duffy et al. (2017, p.4) define wicked problems as “complex social issues that involve networks of actors and entities that reflect commonly held beliefs or norms that result in ineffective, inefficient, unequitable, or unfair social marketing systems. A wicked problem is likely to be dynamic, resilient against intervention, influenced by the associated strategic action field, driven by social mechanisms and will have consequences, singularly or simultaneously at the micro, meso or macro level of the system”. In this case, traditional, individually focused, social marketing techniques are not sensitive enough to deal with the complexity of wicked problems and a more comprehensive systems-wide social marketing approach should be considered (Domegan et al., 2017; Flaherty et al., 2020). The aim of the study is to understand Islamophobia in hiring practices to inform social marketers and set a new agenda that is currently missing in the literature.

### *Hiring discrimination*

Discrimination against minorities in the labor market is a global wicked issue. A meta-analysis shows that discrimination against Arab and Muslim groups happens more in actual hiring contexts than in laboratory settings and Europe shows more prejudice against Muslims than other minorities (Bartkoski et al., 2018). In the US labor market, Bertrand & Mullainathan (2003) found white applicants received 50 percent more interviews than African American applicants.

Basing judgments on identity characteristics is what causes the unfair and inequitable treatment of candidates with the same skills. Field experiments demonstrate the reliance on identity characteristics of applicants belonging to minority groups. A study in Ireland sent out 500 equivalent CVs of fictitious applicants with different ethnic backgrounds in response to advertised

vacancies. Candidates with Irish names were twice as likely to be invited for an interview than applicants with African, Asian, or German names (McGinnity & Lunn, 2011). Arabic names received a lower job suitability rating than white names in another Irish study (Derous et al., 2009, 2012). In Germany, three fictitious job applications of females with photographs included in the CV were sent in response to advertisements: one German name, one Turkish name, and one Turkish name applicant wearing a Hijab (Weichselbaumer, 2016). A high discrimination of Turkish female applicants wearing a Hijab was found; to receive the same number of callbacks as a German applicant, Hijabi candidates must apply 4.5 more times (Weichselbaumer, 2016). In Europe, Canada, and Australia anonymous job applications showed that the callback rates of minority applicants did not differ from those of majority groups if identity characteristics were excluded (Rinne, 2018).

In Switzerland, studies show discrimination in the labor market especially affects second-generation immigrants (Fibbi et al., 2006; Zschirnt, 2020; Zschirnt & Fibbi, 2019). Two experimental studies conducted in the French-speaking and German-speaking parts of Switzerland used fictitious candidates, who differed only by country of origin, to apply to job advertisements (Fibbi et al., 2006; Zschirnt & Fibbi, 2019). Young people from non-EU countries holding Swiss qualifications face more discrimination compared to Swiss-born candidates: they need to send 30% more applications to receive the invitation an interview (Fibbi et al., 2006; Zschirnt & Fibbi, 2019). A study in 2020 compared Swiss-named candidates with those from three different ethnic origins: Germany, Kosovo, and Turkey (Zschirnt, 2020). They found that German-named applicants experienced no discrimination, Kosovar-named candidates experienced the most discrimination followed by Turkish-named applicants (Zschirnt, 2020).

The literature shows a high presence of discrimination of minorities (including Muslims) in hiring practices. Nevertheless, Muslims received little attention in Switzerland where the focus is merely on immigrants. This study tries to fill this gap by considering Muslims situation in Ticino's labor market.

### *Social marketing*

Social marketing focuses on tackling social problems, including social justice, gender equality, and intergroup hostility, by influencing behavior for the social good. The discipline is considered to be especially effective in reaching large numbers of people with appropriate messages and value propositions, predicting long-lasting attitudinal changes, eliminating prejudices and increasing social inclusion (Campbell & Brauer, 2020; Corrigan, 2011). In 2021, Brauer *et al.* p.1, suggested it is a new way to “advance diversity, equity and inclusion through promoting inclusive and reducing

discriminatory behavior”. Using extensive qualitative, quantitative, and observational research that depicted the intergroup climate of a university, their social marketing research identified target segments of students to promote inclusion and celebrate diversity (Brauer et al., 2021).

Social marketing has demonstrated its effectiveness in addressing prejudice and discrimination of people with mental health problems and people living with HIV/AIDS (Ashwood et al., 2017; Cunningham et al., 2017; Evans-Lacko et al., 2013; Sampogna et al., 2017; Warner, 2005). The “Time To Change” social marketing intervention in England was successful in combating stigma of people with mental health issues by encouraging social contact between non-affected and affected individuals (Evans-Lacko et al., 2013; Sampogna et al., 2017). In California, exposure to a Social Marketing project aimed to reduce stigma and discrimination associated with mental illness resulted in a higher level of treatment seeking for mental health challenges compared with those not exposed (Ashwood et al., 2017). *Like Minds, Like Mine* social marketing project against discrimination and stigma of mental illness in New Zealand, showed a reduction of discriminatory behavior and an increase in social inclusion of people with mental health challenges (Cunningham et al., 2017). HIV/AIDS social marketing campaigns successfully reduced discrimination of infected individuals by increasing knowledge about the meaning and modes of transmission and promoting similarities between non- and infected persons (Ayikwa & de Jager, 2017; Rimal & Creel, 2008).

Improving intergroup relations is a multidimensional concept, and thus a wicked problem, involving different actors, political, and social aspects, and includes social change, belonging, resilience, and integration, among others (Churchman, 1967; Yassim, 2019). To tackle such problems, social marketing has been extended to systemic and macro levels (Brychkov & Domegan, 2017; Domegan et al., 2016, 2017; Flaherty et al., 2020; Hamby et al., 2017; Kennedy, 2016; Kubacki et al., 2019), by considering the “forest beyond the trees” (Kennedy, 2016, p. 8). Traditional research is not sensitive enough to deal with the complexity and multidimension of wicked problems (Domegan et al., 2017; Flaherty et al., 2020). Hamby *et al.* (2017) highlight the importance of “top-down” causality of a social marketing approach to provide access to quality education for low-income Kenyan youth. Yassim (2019) suggests that contact theory and participatory approaches using a bottom-up social marketing approach would be an effective way to address social cohesion.

As a wicked social problem, understanding and addressing Islamophobia requires a systems-wide approach. Although evidence demonstrates the applicability of social marketing in the context of intergroup hostility, Islamophobia has not previously been tackled through these lenses.

### *Social problem*

“Islamophobia” is a systemic social problem resulting in discrimination against people simply because of misinformation and bigotries. It includes 1) the anti-Muslim sentiment, which refers to the social reality in which Muslim people are negatively stereotyped (Bleich, 2011), and 2) the fear of the Islamic faith that is not linked to the “phobia” of Muslims as individuals. This latter is “a widespread mindset and fear-laden discourse in which people make blanket judgments of Islam as the enemy, as the other, as a dangerous and unchanged, monolithic bloc that is the natural subject of well-deserved hostility from Westerners” (Zúquete, 2008, p. 323).

Islamophobia emerged and increased in the last two decades with anti-Muslim sentiment stemming from the 9/11 attack in the United States that brought many consequences such as systemic acts of violence and discrimination, including traffic stops, detentions, airport screenings, deportations, and hate crimes (Allen & Nielsen, 2002; Cherney & Murphy, 2016; McQueeney, 2014; Rytter & Pedersen, 2014; Zine, 2004). An increase of 66 percent of hate crimes, mostly against Muslims, was observed in 2001 in Canada (Zine, 2004). At schools, Muslim students have faced bullying and harassment by classmates, teachers, and administrators (Hossain, 2017), and Muslims who experienced discrimination suffer from high levels of psychological distress (Samari et al., 2018).

Drivers of Islamophobia include political projects that have an interest in negatively influencing the public opinion about Islam and Muslims (Cole, 2007; McQueeney, 2014; Saeed, 2007). In fact, mass media is believed to play a leading role in constructing and fueling the anti-Muslim rhetoric (Cole, 2007; McQueeney, 2014; Saeed, 2007). The negative perception of Muslims cannot be considered a natural corollary of 9/11: in 2002, polls did not show an inclination of people to negatively describe Muslims; whereas, in 2006, a Gallup poll showed extreme anti-Muslim views (Cole, 2007). In an examination of British press, Saeed (2007) affirms a portrayal of Muslims as the “alien other” which fuels a racial view, namely Islamophobia, within the media. According to empirical studies in the USA and Europe, Muslims are treated as a homogeneous group and viewed as foreigners, excluding them and those who “look like” them based on physical appearance, clothing, names, accent, or nation of origin (Garner & Selod, 2014). This racialization of Muslims is a consequence of media’s continuous representation of a negative Muslim image shaping and construction of a binary concept: “we”, the civilized West, and “they”, as an uncivilized and violent population (McQueeney, 2014).

By definition, Islamophobia is a multifaceted issue, that includes a two-sided negative perception, the one of Muslim individuals and the one of the religion. Moreover, it involves social and political drivers that makes it a complex and multidimensional issue. It is a negative sentiment that reflects itself in the everyday life bringing social injustice. Although Islamophobia and its

consequences on society are clear, a dearth of studies focuses on how to address it. This study does not aim to fill that gap, but rather understand the phenomenon using experimental research methodology that can be used to inform social marketing actions.

### *Context*

This study takes place in the Italian-speaking and most southern state of Switzerland, Ticino, where Muslims account for 2% of the population. Data show that Swiss people are more likely to attribute negative stereotypes to Muslims than to other minorities (Ufficio Federale di Statistica, 2016). Muslim people are perceived as a threat to the Swiss identity and to national security resulting in acts of discrimination, including work discrimination (Cheng, 2015).

Some cultural traits and behaviors (e.g., Hijab, halal food, minarets) became national political issues in 2004, 2009, and 2021. In 2004, a referendum was held about the naturalization of second and third generation immigrants (Cheng, 2015). The Swiss People's Party (SVP) tried to persuade the Swiss population to vote against the initiative through posters showing Osama Bin Laden holding a Swiss identity card and hands with various skin shades grabbing at Swiss passports (Cheng, 2015). In 2009, the population was called to vote on the construction of minarets in Switzerland: 57.5% of Swiss voters agreed to ban the construction of the minarets in Switzerland (four already existing) resulting in a constitutional article (Art. 73, Section 3: "The building of minarets is prohibited") (Cheng, 2015). In March 2021, Switzerland banned face covering in public, targeting the Islamic faith by focusing on the burqa and the niqab. Again, the SVP promoted the campaign using posters that feature a woman wearing a black niqab accompanied by the phrase "Stop extremism!" ("Switzerland Referendum: Voters Support Ban on Face Coverings in Public," 2021). In Ticino, the same initiative was previously approved by 65.4% of the population, and a law was made to outlaw on facial covering imposing a fine of 100-10,000 CHF (~100-100,000 USD) (Lob, 2015).

The negative perception of Muslims also affects the labor market. According to the International Labor Office, Europe suffers from discrimination at work; based on gender, race, ethnic origin, religion, and age that primarily affects immigrants and minorities (International Labor Office, n.d.), including Muslims.

### *Theoretical framework*

Two theories from social psychology address the prejudicial attitude of an ingroup towards an outgroup: Realistic Group Conflict Theory (RGCT) and Integrated Threat Theory (ITT). Both help understand the phenomena of intergroup hostility and their consequences, such as Islamophobia.

RGCT illustrates that intergroup hostility and misperception stems from the competition over scarce tangible (e.g., a job) or intangible (e.g., political power) resources (Bobo, 1983; Jackson, 1993; McLoud, 2020). Muzafer Sherif tested the theory in 1954 through the *Robbers Cave* experiment where, in a summer camp, 22 children were divided into two groups and engaged in competitive and cooperative activities (Jackson, 1993; Riek et al., 2006). Competition between the groups strengthened ingroup solidarity while creating hostility towards the outgroup (Jackson, 1993; Riek et al., 2006). Introduction of common goals unachievable without cooperation decreased hostility and generated harmony between the groups (Hewstone, 2015; Jackson, 1993; Riek et al., 2006). Bobo (1983) added that the impact of a threat on both the individual and group level raises the hostility towards the outgroup. That is, members of an ingroup are threatened when the interest of their ingroup is (Bobo, 1983).

RGCT has been applied in many studies to address phenomena that prompts group hostility, such as immigration and diversity. Brief et al. (2005) argue that dysfunctions in work relationships within diverse organizations are moderated by the communities in which employees live: the more diverse their community, the more tension arises from competition over scarce resources, thus, the more negative attitudes towards the outgroup occur in the workplace (Brief *et al.*, 2005). Studies by Brief et al. (2005) confirm that more racially diverse organizations report poorer quality-work relationships than less diverse organizations (Brief *et al.*, 2005).

Using RGCT, a study of anti-immigration attitudes in 17 European countries between 2002 and 2007 found sudden growth of the outgroup size and rapid change of the economic conditions of a country to fuel competition (Meuleman et al., 2009). In countries with high levels of immigration a more restrictive reaction occurs towards immigrants and in countries where unemployment rates did not increase, a more immigration-friendly climate was observed (Meuleman et al., 2009). An investigation of discrimination in hiring towards minorities with felony backgrounds intended to extend the theory by demonstrating that a negative behavior towards the outgroup occurs even when the resources are not tangible and the respondents do not directly benefit from their attitude (Goldman et al., 2019). Results show that job applicants of color who have a prior felony conviction are more likely not to be hired than white applicants with the same background (Goldman et al., 2019).

According to ITT, the prejudicial attitude of an ingroup towards an outgroup has four major explanations: realistic threat, symbolic threat, intergroup anxiety, and negative stereotype (Stephan & Stephan, 2000). Similar to RGCT, realistic threats include the perception of competition and conflicting goals, as well as threats to the physical and economic well-being of an ingroup. Symbolic threat is given by the feeling that the ingroup values (morals, values, and beliefs) are

being threatened (Riek et al., 2006; Stephan & Stephan, 2000). Intergroup anxiety involves feelings of uneasiness and awkwardness experienced during social interactions with the outgroup members given by the uncertainty of how to behave towards them (Riek et al., 2006; Stephan & Stephan, 1996, 2000). Lastly, negative stereotypes create conflictual expectations about the behavior of the outgroup and, consequently, they negatively influence emotions of the ingroup (e.g., fear, anger) (Riek et al., 2006; Stephan & Stephan, 2000). The focus is on the “perceived” threats by the ingroup, and thus “the greater the threat of the outgroup is perceived to pose to the ingroup, the more negative attitudes toward the outgroup are expected to be” (Stephan & Stephan, 1996, p. 418).

ITT has been largely used and tested in studies to predict attitudes toward racial, gender, and ethnic groups (Gonzalez et al., 2008; Riek et al., 2006). In a meta-analysis of intergroup threat literature, Riek *et al.* (2006) showed that all four explanations of ITT were significantly related to outgroup attitudes. A study in the Netherlands examined adolescents’ prejudice toward Muslims using different types of intergroup threats of ITT as possible mediators of anti-Muslim attitudes: half of Dutch teenagers held negative feelings towards Muslims and symbolic threat was more perceived than realistic threat (Gonzalez et al., 2008). In United Kingdom, France, and Germany, symbolic and real threats were significantly related to the belief that Muslims were not adequately assimilating in the country (Croucher, 2013). Uenal (2016) focused on explaining Islamophobic conspiracy theories emerging in Germany, namely, the idea of a secret Islamization of Europe, from an intergroup perspective. They showed a direct relationship between symbolic and conflict threat perception and the belief in conspiracy theories (Uenal, 2016).

Both RGCT and ITT were largely applied to social problems related to minorities. However, they have not been applied to Islamophobia in the hiring context where both theories would be helpful to better understand Muslim candidate discrimination.

### *Purpose and research questions*

The aim of this study was to measure the presence of Islamophobia in hiring practices in Ticino as a first step in a social marketing process that starts with research aimed to understand a problem and the causes of it before proposing solutions.

The research questions are:

Q1: Does Islamophobia of the employer influence hiring practices?

Q2: Does the color of the skin of the applicant influence hiring practices?

Q3: Does gender of the applicant influence in hiring practices?

Islamophobia is measured by the refusal of choosing qualified candidates who appear as Muslim in their resumes (CVs) by the picture and/or the name. It was hypothesized that:

H<sub>1a</sub>: If the picture **and** the name suggest that the candidate might be Muslim, then he/she will not be invited for an interview.

H<sub>1b</sub>: If **neither** the picture **nor** the name suggests that the candidate might be Muslim, then he/she will be invited.

H<sub>1c</sub>: If **either** the picture **or** the name suggests that the candidate might be Muslim, he/she will not be invited.

H<sub>1d</sub>: The front-office position will show more rejection of applicants perceived to be Muslim than the back-office one.

H<sub>2</sub>: Candidates with a dark skin are more likely not to be invited.

H<sub>3</sub>: Female candidates are more likely not to be invited.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### *Study design*

An experiment was conducted to measure Islamophobic behavior in the hiring process of employees with focus on resume (CV) screening. It was based on a scenario where a manager of a grocery store needs to hire two employees: a cashier and an accountant. The choice of these types of jobs is due to their different nature: a front office – implying direct contact with customers - and a back-office position.

Participants were informed that they were going to take a survey about decision making in hiring practices. To avoid social desirability, participants were not aware of being part of an experiment about Islamophobia.

### *Experimental design and procedure*

The online, survey-based experiment was accessed by participants through a link included in the invitation email. They were presented with an overview of the study explaining what they were going to be asked to do. They had to consent to participate before providing any data. Next, a nine-item survey collecting gender, age, education, current job position and length of employment, nationality, religion, and length of residence in Switzerland, and, if applicable, country of residence before living in Switzerland was presented.

Participants were then presented with a task: to imagine being a manager of a grocery store who must select one or more candidates to invite for an interview for two positions: an accountant and a cashier. For each position, four resumes – randomly displayed among the 32 options - appeared and participants were asked to state a) if they were qualified for the job and why, b) if they would

choose the candidate for an interview and why, and c) the likelihood of calling him/her back for an interview, on a seven-point scale. After viewing all four CVs, participants were asked to choose one or more applicants and explain the reason for their choice.

### *Sample*

Ticino is a small canton of ~350,000 inhabitants and 222 large, medium, and small grocery stores representing six companies. All of them have cashier positions, but most back-office accountant positions are centralized at headquarters. Participants in this study were employees who work in Ticino. Due to the difficulty of reaching managers who agreed to take part, any employee could participate. Using a snowball method, participants were recruited contacting major companies in Ticino: the directors were contacted through email or phone to ask for permission and for help in distributing the study information. Additionally, family and friends who had direct contact with the companies helped distribute the study invitation.

### *Survey*

Six items measured Islamophobic behavior of participants in choosing the candidates. Three were presented after viewing each resume: “Do you think that the candidate is suitable for the position of a cashier/accountant of a grocery store?” (yes/no), “Why?” (free-text explanation), “How likely would you invite him/her for an interview?” (seven-point scale). Upon completion of the review of applicants, all 4 CVs were presented again, and participants were asked three more questions: “Which, if any, of the 4 candidates would you invite for an interview?”, “Why would you choose that/those candidate/s?” (free-text explanation), “Why would you not choose the other candidate/s?” (free-text explanation). The free-text explanations of participants were recorded for the content analysis.

### *Resumes*

Each participant reviewed 4 CVs that were randomly displayed from 32 options. A total of 64 resumes were created, 32 for each position. Half of the candidates appeared not to be Muslim, and the other half could be perceived as Muslim, based on appearance (presence of a beard, dark skin, the Hijab) and name (e.g., Mahmood, Fatima). Sixteen profiles included dark skin and 16 non-dark-skin (see Table 1).

**Table 1:** Resume combinations based on the manipulation of the three variables: look, name and skin color.

Gender	CV	L+	L-	N+	N-	ND	D
Men/Women	1	x		x		x	
	2	x		x			x
	3			x		x	
	4			x		x	x
	5	x				x	
	6	x				x	x
	7			x	x		x
	8			x	x		x

\*L+ =looks Muslim, L- = does not look Muslim, N+ = Arabic sounding name, N- = non-Arabic name, ND =does not have a dark skin, D=dark skin

Each resume included identifying information, expertise, work experience, education, languages, and interests. All candidates were eligible and qualified for the job they applied for. The place of birth was randomly chosen from countries of all around the world, with particular attention to the relation between the name and the country of origin. The expertise section included interpersonal skills and computer skills and the specific requirements for the jobs. For example, the cashier position requires the European Computer Driving License, ability to work in teams, communication skills with customers, and good knowledge of Microsoft Office (*Esempio di Curriculum Vitae Professionale*, 2018). The accountant position required a cantonal certificate of accounting (*Contabilità – CPA (DECS)*, 2018). Candidates had the required training from local universities. All candidates spoke Italian as their mother tongue and had fluency in at least one other Swiss national language (German or French). For those born abroad, a third language was listed. (see Figure 1 and Figure 2).

## RESULTS

Thirty-two people participated in the survey with an age range of 26 - 75 years and 59.4% being female. A sample of 32 human resource managers represents approximately 14.5% of individual grocery stores and an over representation of companies and headquarters (~530%). Work positions included office workers, bank and commercial clerks, human resources department, general managers, teachers, nurses, departmental managers, and retirees. 46.9% had over 15 years of experience in the company. (see Table 2)

**Table 2:** Participant characteristics.

	Demographics	Percentage (%)
<b>Gender</b>		
Male		40.60
Female		59.40
<b>Highest degree</b>		
High School or equivalent		46.90
Bachelor's degree		12.50
Master's degree		21.90
Doctoral degree		3.10
Professional degree		15.60
<b>Work period</b>		
Less than 1 year		3.10
1-5 years		34.40
6-10 years		9.40
11-15 years		6.30
More than 15 years		46.90
<b>Religious affiliation</b>		
Christian		66.00

Muslim	6.00
Hinduist	3.00
Atheist	9.00
Other	16.00

The likelihood of a callback for each of the eight conditions is shown in Table 3. Overall, Muslim women were less desirable if they appeared to be Muslim by their look and/or wearing the Hijab (L+). For Muslim men, they had a lower probability of callback if they had an Arabic name (L-, N+). These results support H<sub>1a</sub> and H<sub>1c</sub>. Considering the two positions, results do not show a higher likelihood of choosing non-Muslim candidates, hence H<sub>1b</sub> is rejected.

**Table 3:** Applicant desirability in each condition.

Condition	<i>n</i>	Desirability (mean)	<i>SD</i>
<b>Cashier position</b>			
Woman - L+, N+	14	5.47	1.41
Woman - L+, N-	11	4.92	1.30
Woman - L-, N-	19	4.30	1.82
Woman - L-, N+	15	5.27	1.63
Man - L+, N+	15	5.06	1.40
Man - L+, N-	16	5.24	1.17
Man - L-, N-	12	4.69	1.44
Man - L-, N+	19	4.80	1.39
<b>Accountant position</b>			
Woman - L+, N+	13	4.93	1.14
Woman - L+, N-	8	4.44	1.22
Woman - L-, N-	10	5.27	1.54
Woman - L-, N+	8	5.11	1.20
Man - L+, N+	12	5.31	1.23
Man - L+, N-	8	5.33	0.87
Man - L-, N-	9	4.40	1.37
Man - L-, N+	11	4.54	1.44

*Note:* "Desirability" refers to the likelihood of calling back the candidate for an interview: on a seven-point scale, a higher score indicates a higher likelihood.

A thematic analysis of reasons showed five themes: 1) appearance and/or origin, 2) work experience, 3) education and career path, 4) skills, and 5) others. A clear difference between the two positions was noticed confirming the fourth hypothesis (H<sub>1d</sub>), where a different behavior between the front- and back-office position was expected. In general, the color of the skin and the gender was not a reason for the candidate to not be chosen. Hence, H<sub>2</sub> and H<sub>3</sub> are rejected. H<sub>1b</sub> is not confirmed in this study: there is no clear majority in the final choice of the candidates that indicates that those who appear as non-Muslim are considered more suitable to the job.

*Cashier position.* For the cashier position, the appearance and work experience mattered more than education and skills. Several reasons why they would or would not choose a candidate were appearance-based and referred to the confidence that the applicant's look inspired. Applicants who appeared to be Muslim were negatively perceived. Applicants who are not originally Swiss and, especially, non-Swiss female candidates who appeared to be Muslim (L+, N+), received negative comments. Male candidates who did not have Muslim traits but did have an Arabic sounding name (L-, N+) showed more rejection than male applicants with a "Muslim look" and an Arabic sounding name (L+, N+). Hence, the first (H<sub>1a</sub>) and the third hypotheses (H<sub>1c</sub>) are partially confirmed since the behavior occurred only for one of the genders.

*Accountant position.* The majority of comments regarded the experience and the education of applicants. The comments referred to the suitability of the candidate, judging their skills, education, and experience. No reference to the Muslim look or name was provided. Reactions of participants can be summarized in the following two expressions: "good qualifications and experience", "too qualified, deserves better".

Nationality was a common factor of candidates' selection for both positions. Even if the candidates demonstrated that they have lived and worked in Switzerland, some participants referred to the origins as an explanation of the rejection of a candidate. Three comments referred to it directly: "he is not originally from Switzerland", "because of the appearance and the origins", "for the fact that she is Italian and wears a veil".

## **DISCUSSION**

Despite the Islamophobic attitude expressed by some participants, the influence of Islamophobia in hiring practices in the state of Ticino is not confirmed in this study. However, the results demonstrate that judgments are associated with the two types of jobs: if the job requires contact with customers, candidates are judged based on their appearance; if the job is a back-office position, skills, education, and experience matter more. For the cashier position, many comments referred to personal features versus the skills, while the accountant position did not receive comments about the appearance, suggesting that "what customers might think", a perceived threat, could influence decisions about hiring people who will interact with customers. According to Realistic Group Conflict Theory, a prejudicial attitude is given by a real or perceived threat to the safety of the group, to the economic interest, to the political advantage, to the military consideration or to the social status (Bobo, 1983; Jackson, 1993; McLoud, 2020). From the point of view of the employer,

it may be inferred that in some cases hiring a Muslim woman who wears the Hijab is a threat to their economic interest and, through the eyes of the customers, she is considered a threat to the Swiss society. In the case of the accountant position, customers' thoughts no longer matter, hence female Hijabi candidates and Muslim male candidates are judged based on experience and/or skills. Since Muslims are perceived as "different" from the Swiss population, and several referendums confirm them as a "threat" to Swiss society, this finding is not surprising.

For male applicants, the name was more influential on decisions than the appearance: a male candidate with a Muslim name was more negatively stereotyped than a "Muslim-looking" candidate who bears a "western" name. An explanation could be related to the mass media's role in constructing an anti-Muslim image by highlighting Muslim male names when reporting terrorist attacks (Cole, 2007; McQueeney, 2014; Saeed, 2007). Consequently, as ITT explains, this negative stereotype creates unpleasant and conflictual expectations about the behavior of the outgroup and it negatively influences the emotions of the ingroup (Riek et al., 2006; Stephan & Stephan, 1996). For both job positions, nationality was in some cases a reason for the rejection of an applicant, suggesting that the feeling of a threat towards the ingroup's values – the "symbolic threat" (Riek et al., 2006; Stephan & Stephan, 2000) - might drive decisions in hiring practices.

In conclusion, in this study, rejection of Muslim candidates in particular conditions can be explained by the impact of a threat on both the individual and group level, consistent with Realistic group conflict theory (Bobo, 1983): feeling that personal and/or group related interests are touched raises hostility towards the outgroup (Bobo, 1983), and, in this case, it influences hiring decisions. A next step in a social marketing project would be to test solutions to minimize or eliminate discrimination and improve inclusion.

#### *A social marketing approach to correct the misperception of Muslims*

Islamophobia in hiring practices is a social problem that can be addressed through social marketing. Evidence shows the importance and effectiveness of social marketing in tackling discrimination (Ashwood et al., 2017; Cunningham et al., 2017; Evans-Lacko et al., 2013; Sampogna et al., 2017; Warner, 2005). Increasing social contacts, knowledge, and awareness could improve social cohesion (Corrigan, 2011; Evans-Lacko et al., 2013; Sampogna et al., 2017; Shawky et al., 2019). However, according to RGCT, Contact Theory is not effective in reducing the hostility and distrust (Aronson et al., 2012). On the contrary, six conditions of contact bring a change of stereotype and prejudice (Aronson et al., 2012): 1) one or more situations of interdependence between the groups: should be put in a situation where they need to cooperate in order to achieve a common goal; 2) sharing a common goal; 3) same status of the group members in order to let informal interactions take place; 4) friendly and informal situations where a personal interaction

takes place between members; 5) realization of the members of the ingroup, thanks to interactions with the outgroup, of their incorrect negative perception; and 6) existence of social norms that promote equality between groups (Aronson et al., 2012). This demonstrates the complexity that such an intervention involving a sizable number of aspects must address. According to literature, the focus would be using a macro social marketing approach that goes beyond individual behavior change (Brychkov & Domegan, 2017; Domegan et al., 2016, 2017; Flaherty et al., 2020; Hamby et al., 2017; Kennedy, 2016; Kubacki et al., 2019).

A social marketing campaign within a systems-thinking approach is needed. However, more formative research is needed in these populations, perhaps using a qualitative methodology, to understand the source of the problem and what different stakeholders would appreciate and respond well to in a multi-level campaign built to correct the misperception of Muslims in this society, and specifically in hiring practices. This would inform social marketers not only about messaging and who to target (policy makers, employers or the population), but also types of interventions such as educational or legislative ones. By definition, Islamophobia is a wicked problem that requires a comprehensive, multi-level approach targeting the different stakeholders involved and is unlikely to be adequately addressed by public communication campaigns with positive messaging about Muslims.

### *Strengths and Limitations*

A limitation of this study is the sample. Feasibility required any employee to participate, and thus included people without hiring authority. Also, the size is too small to be statistically representative, hence further research is needed to confirm the findings. Another limitation is the influence of other factors of the CVs in selecting the candidates. Some of their details should have been more similar, for instance, in the language section, German should have been included in each curriculum as it is the main language in Switzerland and thus considered important for jobs, even in the Italian speaking part of Switzerland.

A major strength of this study is that it establishes an agenda of further research in social marketing. As illustrated, social marketing is well suited to address stigma and discrimination and promote inclusion. This study shows the first application of social marketing research in understating discrimination of Muslims. Prior research that focused on hiring discrimination of immigrants has done so without specific regard to Muslims (Fibbi et al., 2006; Zschirnt, 2020; Zschirnt & Fibbi, 2019). Finally, this study focused on hiring discrimination of Muslims considering facial traits and names that are ascribable to the Muslim stereotype. Previous research

has inaccurately treated Muslims and Arabs as one group (Bartkoski et al., 2018).

## **CONCLUSION**

Using Realistic Group Conflict Theory (RGCT) and Integrated Threat Theory (ITT), we used experimental methods to examine the presence of and drivers of discrimination in hiring practices of people who are perceived to be “different” and a “threat” resulting in exclusion from the labor market. The results demonstrate that hiring practices in Ticino Switzerland are, in some cases, based on a prejudicial attitude. The fact that the candidates perceived to be Muslim were rejected in the front-office position and not from the back office-position suggests that manager’s actions may not be related to their own level of Islamophobia but to their perception of their customers Islamophobia. However, more research is needed with a representative sample to understand the extent to which Islamophobia impacts employment opportunities for Muslims in Switzerland and other Muslim minority countries, as well as why. Systems-wide and macro level social marketing research is required for the development of effective anti-discrimination and pro-inclusion interventions and policies.

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**Figure 1:** Examples of the fictitious resumes of female candidates with the different combinations of the two variables (look and name; see *Table 1*).



**Huda  
Bougazali**

Date of birth: 17.09.1992  
Place of birth: Bahrain  
huda\_bg@gmail.com

---

**Expertise**

- Excellent communication skills and relationships with customers and suppliers
- Excellent problem-solving skills and work organization based on business needs

- Cantonal Certificate of Accounting
- Excellent knowledge of Microsoft Office package
- Excellent knowledge of major accounting and management software

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**Experience**

MARCH 2015 - DECEMBER 2017  
**Accounting Clerk at Helsinn Healthcare SA**

APRIL 2013 - DECEMBER 2014  
**Clerk of commerce at Basilese Insurance**

---

**Education**

JANUARY 2013  
**Bachelor's degree in Economic Sciences**  
Università della Svizzera Italiana (USI) - Switzerland

JUNE 2010  
**High school diploma**  
Cantonal School of Commerce - Switzerland

---

**Languages**

- Arabic: mother tongue.
- Italian: mother tongue.
- English: very good level of understanding, writing, reading and speaking (B2).
- German: school level (B1).

---

**Interests**

- Learning new languages
- Latin American Dance
- Yoga

Conditions: L+, N+.



**Rana  
Ibrahim**

Date of birth: 04.03.1991  
Place of birth: Egypt  
rana.ibrahim@ gmail.com

---

**Expertise**

- Management of business accounts
- Excellent organizational skills and time management
- Excellent knowledge of major accounting and management software

- Cantonal Certificate of Accounting
- Excellent knowledge of Microsoft Office package
- Excellent communication skills

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**Experience**

JANUARY 2015 - DECEMBER 2017  
**Accounting Clerk at TicinoOnline SA**

SETTMEBRE 2012 - DECEMBER 2014  
**Accounting Assistant at the State Bank**

---

**Education**

JANUARY 2012  
**Bachelor's degree in business administration**  
Scuola universitaria professionale della Svizzera italiana (SUPSI) - Switzerland

JUNE 2009  
**Professional Certificate**  
Professional Sales Center - Switzerland

---

**Languages**

- Italian: mother tongue
- English: very good level of understanding, writing, reading and speaking (B2).
- German: good level, oral and written (B1).

---

**Interests**

- Embroidery
- Skating
- Acquagym

Conditions: L-, N+.



**Chiara  
Abbondio**

Date of birth: 16.07.1991  
Place of birth: Switzerland  
chiara91@hotmail.com

---

### Expertise

- Cantonal Certificate of Accounting
- Ability to manage business accounts
- Autonomy and time management
- Great calculation and analysis capabilities
- Excellent knowledge of Microsoft Office and e-mail client
- Excellent knowledge of the major accounting programs

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### Experience

AUGUST 2015 - DECEMBER 2017

**Accounting Clerk at City Point**

JANUARY 2013 - JANUARY 2014

**Accounting Assistant at Recotax SA**

---

### Instruction

SEPTEMBER 2012

**Degree in Business Administration**

Scuola universitaria professionale della Svizzera italiana (SUPSI) - Switzerland

JUNE 2009

**High school diploma**

Liceo Cantonale Chiasso - Switzerland

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### Languages

- Italian: mother tongue
- English: very good level of understanding, writing, reading and speaking (B2).
- German: school level (B1).

---

### Interests

- Yoga
- Hip Hop dancer
- Reading

Conditions: L+, N-.



**Lia  
Ceppi**

Date of birth: 11.06.1990  
Place of birth: Switzerland  
lia.ceppi@gmail.com

---

### Expertise

- Work organization independent
- To accept and respond to the different demands of customers
- Excellent knowledge of the major accounting programs.
- Excellent knowledge of Microsoft Office and e-mail client
- Cantonal Certificate of Accounting
- Ability to problem-solving

---

### Experience

AUGUST 2015 - DECEMBER 2017

**Accounting Clerk at Fideconto consulting SA**

JANUARY 2012 - JANUARY 2014

**Accounting Assistant at OCST**

---

### Instruction

SEPTEMBER 2011

**Bachelor's degree in business administration**

Scuola universitaria professionale della Svizzera italiana (SUPSI) - Switzerland

JUNE 2008

**High school diploma**

Liceo Cantonale Lugano - Switzerland

---

### Languages

- Italian: mother tongue
- English: very good level of understanding, writing, reading and speaking (B2).
- French: school level (B1).

---

### Interests

- Swimming
- Yoga
- Fitness

Conditions: L-, N-.

**Figure 2:** Examples of the fictitious resumes of male candidates with the different combinations of the two variables (look and name; see *Table 1*).



**Francesco  
Bordononi**

Date of birth: 22.11.1991  
Place of birth: Italy  
bordononi.f@hotmail.com

---

**Expertise**

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Excellent knowledge of Microsoft Office package</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Flexibility in working hours</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Excellent communication skills with customers and colleagues</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> European Computer Driving License (ECDL)</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Ability to manage inventory.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Ability to work independently and accurately.</li> </ul>
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**Experience**

JANUARY 2016 - DECEMBER 2017  
**Cashier at Migros**

NOVEMBER 2014 - DECEMBER 2015  
**Salesman at Interdiscount**

JANUARY 2011 - JUNE 2014  
**Cashier at SPAR Express**

---

**Education**

JUNE 2010  
**Professional Certificate**  
Centro Professionale Commerciale - Switzerland

---

**Languages**

- Italian: mother tongue.
- English: good written and oral (B2).
- German: school level (B1).

---

**Interests**

- Hiking
- Reading
- Cycling

Conditions: L-, N-.



**Abdul-Rahmaan  
Jalil**

Date of birth: 22.07.1992  
Place of birth: Switzerland  
A-r.jalil@hotmail.com

---

**Expertise**

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Ability to work in a group and independently</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Ability to manage inventory, the supplies and the shelves</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Friendliness and good communication and interpersonal skills</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> European Computer Driving License (ECDL)</li> </ul>
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**Experience**

FEBRUARY 2016 - DECEMBER 2017  
**Salesman at Aramis Footwear**

AUGUST 2014 - DECEMBER 2015  
**Cashier at Belotti Sport**

JANUARY 2011 - JUNE 2014  
**Cashier at Coffee Bortolomeo**

---

**Education**

JUNE 2010  
**Professional Certificate**  
Centro Professionale Commerciale - Switzerland

---

**Languages**

- Italian: mother tongue.
- French: good level of comprehension and oral expression (B2).
- English: school level (B1).

---

**Interests**

- Travelling
- Tennis
- Volunteer with Amnesty International

Conditions: L-, N+.



**Ahmed  
Mansour**

Date of birth: 16.06. 1990  
Place of birth: Eritrea  
a.mansour@gmail.com

---

### Expertise

- Excellent organizational skills
- Ability to work in a team and independently
- Excellent communication with customers
- Excellent knowledge of Microsoft Office package
- European Computer Driving License (ECDL)
- Flexibility in working hours

---

### Experience

FEBRUARY 2016 - SEPTEMBER 2017  
**Cashier at Zappa Sport**

JUNE 2014 - DECEMBER 2015  
**Cashier at H & M**

APRIL 2009 - DECEMBER 2013  
**Cashier at Migros**

---

### Education

JUNE 2008  
**Professional Certificate**  
Centro Professionale Commerciale - Switzerland

---

### Languages

- Italian: mother tongue
- English: good oral and written level (B2).
- German: school level (B1).

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### Interests

- Water sports (swimming, surfing, diving)
- Passionate about travelling
- Photography

Conditions: L+, N+.



**Giuseppe  
Ferrara**

Date of birth: 25.06.1991  
Place of birth: Italy  
email: giuseppe.f@gmail.com

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### Expertise

- Ability to work in a team and independently
- Great flexibility
- Excellent communication skills with customers
- Competent with Microsoft Office programmes
- European Computer Driving License (ECDL)

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### Experience

JANUARY 2016 - DECEMBER 2017  
**Cashier at Migros**

JULY 2013 - DECEMBER 2015  
**Cashier at Denner**

APRIL 2010 - JANUARY 2013  
**Cashier at Residential Furniture SA**

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### Education

JUNE 2009  
**Professional Certificate**  
Centro Professionale Commerciale - Switzerland

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### Languages

- Italian: mother tongue
- German: good level of comprehension and written and oral expression (B2).
- English: school level (B1).

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### Interests

- Squash
- Piano player
- Passion for travelling

Conditions: L+, N-.