

From value protection to value recognition: How majority perceptions of minority values inform anti-Muslim attitudes

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ABSTRACT

In liberal democracies, perceptions of illiberal values among minority groups can spark intergroup tensions. This study investigates when perceived Muslim illiberalism concerning gender equality and sexual minority rights predicts anti-Muslim attitudes among majority members. Drawing on probability-based data from the 2019–2020 Belgian National Election Study ($n = 1363$ ethnic majority respondents), we tested: (1) whether attributing illiberal values to Muslims goes hand in hand with anti-Muslim attitudes; (2) whether this association is stronger among majority members who hold more liberal values in these domains; and (3) whether support for multiculturalism weakens this association. Findings reveal that perceptions of Muslims as not respecting gender equality and sexual liberties significantly relate to anti-Muslim attitudes. As expected, perceived illiberalism relates more strongly to negative attitudes among individuals with more liberal values. In contrast, the association between perceived illiberalism and anti-Muslim attitudes weakens or disappears among individuals endorsing multiculturalism. These findings were more pronounced in the domain of sexual minority rights than in the domain of gender equality. In line with hypothetical value protection, our results suggest that perceived minority values inform intergroup attitudes, in particular among more liberal majority members. In contrast, multiculturalism may buffer the effect of perceived minority values on anti-Muslim attitudes as an intergroup ideology that promotes value recognition. Our study has implications for intergroup relations in diverse societies, pointing to majority perceptions of minority values as potential leverage for reducing prejudice.

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Introduction

In these times of sustained global migration and increased Islamophobia, European liberal democracies face the challenge of integrating diverse cultural, religious, and political values (Foroutan, 2020). Widespread anti-Muslim attitudes (cf. Bayrakli & Hafez, 2016) are driven in part by perceived competition over material resources and in part by concerns over actual or perceived differences in values—what has been termed ‘deep diversity’ (Verkuyten & Yogeeswaran, 2019). Whether in daily encounters or media debates, people are exposed to different worldviews and ways of life and may perceive others’ values as incompatible with their own. The presence of Muslim minorities in European societies epitomizes this challenge of value diversity (O’Brien, 2016): Islamic values and practices are commonly presented as violating majority cultural values (Van Acker et al., 2014)⁷ and as a threat to liberal democracies (Van der Noll, 2014). Consequently, promoting acceptance of diversity in (post)migration societies is not only about reducing prejudice and challenging stereotypes but also about promoting tolerance and recognition of potentially different values, beliefs or practices among fellow citizens (Lamont, 2018).

We investigate how majority group perceptions of Muslim minority values may function as a value-based justification for negative attitudes toward Muslims. By doing so, we extend research on value-based accounts of intergroup attitudes (Verkuyten & Yogeeswaran, 2019) and differentiate disapproval of alleged Muslim values from more general prejudice against ethnic minorities. Specifically, we focus on the role of majority members’ commitment to liberal values (i.e., gender equality and sexual minority rights) and support for multiculturalism (i.e., acceptance of cultural diversity) as hypothetical moderators of the association between perceived Muslim illiberalism and anti-Muslim attitudes. We ask three research questions:

RQ1. : Are perceived illiberal values among Muslims—i.e., rejecting gender equality and sexual minority rights—related to anti-Muslim attitudes?

RQ2. : Is perceived illiberalism more strongly related to anti-Muslim attitudes among majority members who are more committed to liberal values, i.e., more supportive of gender equality and sexual minority rights?

RQ3. : Does support for multiculturalism as an inclusive diversity ideology mitigate the association between perceived illiberalism and anti-Muslim attitudes?

We expect that when majority members perceive Muslim values as illiberal, they may morally disapprove of those values and hence reject Muslims as a group (Dangubić et al., 2024) (Hypothesis 1), in line with a theoretical intergroup value protection mechanism (Van Zomeren et al., 2023). If anti-Muslim attitudes are indeed value-based, the association of perceived illiberalism with anti-Muslim attitudes should be particularly pronounced for more liberal majority members (Hypothesis 2). In line with a hypothetical value protection mechanism (Verkuyten et al., 2020), majority members who are most committed to liberal values should be most motivated to protect gender and sexual equality against outgroup threats. At the same time, we hypothesize that this association between perceived illiberal values and anti-Muslim attitudes will be weaker among majority members who endorse multiculturalism (Hypothesis 3). Indeed, as multiculturalism embraces diverse cultural traditions, it implies value recognition and should hence be related to lower perceived value conflict or threat from Muslim minorities (Verkuyten & Yogeeswaran, 2019).

Perceived illiberal values and anti-Muslim attitudes (RQ1)

Widespread and persistent anti-Muslim attitudes are well-documented in European societies (Bayrakli & Hafez, 2016) and extend beyond general anti-immigrant attitudes (Meuleman et al., 2019). Anti-Muslim attitudes or so-called Islamophobia are conceived as negative intergroup attitudes towards a specific group. However, compared to other minoritized groups, Muslim minorities face a distinctive form of hostility, rooted in value-based disapproval (Verkuyten et al., 2023). In Western contexts, Muslim beliefs and practices are often portrayed as violating equality principles such as egalitarian gender roles and as posing a threat to liberal values, including sexual minority rights (Dangubić et al., 2024; Okin, 1998). Importantly, scholars identify discursive double standards in Western societies. On the one hand, sexism is downplayed or individualized and structural forms of gender inequality are obscured. On the other hand, Muslim women are construed as uniquely oppressed, while Western women are represented as emancipated (Al-Saji, 2018; Volpp, 2001). Such perceptions of Muslim illiberalism may fuel anti-Muslim attitudes, in line with a well-documented intergroup value protection mechanism (Van Zomeren et al., 2023). Parallel to this genuine concern, however, research has shown that claims about Muslim illiberalism are strategically mobilized by antiegalitarian segments of the majority populations (Van Oost et al., 2023) and by political and opinion leaders who invoke the protection of women’s and LGBTQ+ rights as an alibi for exclusionist anti-Muslim or anti-immigration agendas, strategies known as ‘femonationalism’ and ‘homonationalism’ (Ammaturo, 2015; Farris, 2017). Of course, this does not imply that no value differences exist between Muslims and non-Muslims. Drawing on data from several European countries, including Belgium, Eskelinen and Verkuyten (2020) demonstrate that Muslims are, on average, less supportive of liberal sexual norms than non-Muslims, an effect largely attributable to higher levels of religiosity and weaker national belonging. Similarly, Röder and Spierings (2022) find that Muslims in Europe tend to express more negative attitudes toward homosexuality, which they link to socialisation within more conservative religious communities and, in part, to experiences of perceived hostility in

⁷ Although we are aware of the multidimensional and intersectional nature of minority group membership, we will use the term ‘culture’ in its broadest possible sense to indicate any ethnic, linguistic, religious or other markers of cultural difference in intergroup relations between ethnic majority and minority group members.

the host society. At the same time, research suggests that such value differences are frequently overestimated or misperceived in intergroup contexts (Eyal & Epley, 2017), leading to exacerbated outgroup hostility (Chambers et al., 2013).

In line with value protection in intergroup relations (Van Zomeren et al., 2023), we expect that majority members who attribute more illiberal values to Muslim minorities will express stronger anti-Muslim sentiments. Applied to the domains of gender roles and sexual orientations, the more majority members perceive Muslim minorities as opposed to sexual minority rights or gender equality, the stronger their anti-Muslim attitudes (Hypothesis 1).

The role of personal commitment to liberal values (RQ2)

Perceived cultural distance is a well-established predictor of anti-immigrant attitudes (Mahfud et al., 2015), with perceived differences in social values (Albada et al., 2021; Guan et al., 2011), human values (Wolf et al., 2019), political ideologies (Chambers et al., 2013) and moral convictions (Hirsch et al., 2019; Obeid et al., 2017) playing a particularly important role. Integrating intergroup processes with moral concerns, the notion of intergroup value protection suggests that individuals look for signs of value sharedness in outgroups as a moral compass in intergroup relations (Van Zomeren et al., 2023). When ingroup values are perceived as threatened or violated, ingroup members will be more prone to outgroup rejection. Consistent with this mechanism, perceived value incongruence or conflict have been shown to predict negative intergroup attitudes (Chambers & Melnyk, 2006; Guan et al., 2011), aggression against outgroups (Sidanius et al., 2016), and support for aggressive foreign policies (O'Brien et al., 2017). Conversely, emphasizing shared values has been found to improve attitudes among majority populations and increase perceptions of morality attributed to minority groups (López-Rodríguez et al., 2023).

Echoing research on personal value conflict and ideological reasoning (Tetlock, 1986), individuals may endorse multiple values that can come into tension, for example, when freedom of religion is perceived to conflict with gender equality if a minority religion is seen as violating women's rights. Accordingly, empirical research shows that negative intergroup attitudes are not restricted to individuals with a conservative worldview: both liberals and conservatives tend to favor social groups that share their own values and may express intolerance toward groups whose values are perceived as threatening or incompatible with their own (Brandt et al., 2014; Chambers et al., 2013; but see Stern & Crawford, 2021; Stern & Ruisch, 2024). Importantly, this implies that even individuals who are more generally accepting of outgroup members may become less accepting when they perceive them as violating values that are central to their moral or ideological worldview. Thus, the desire for a coherent and consistent worldview may produce intolerance even among individuals who are low on generalized prejudice.

Applied to Muslim minorities, Islamic values are commonly represented as conflicting with majority values and have been framed as a 'clash of cultures' (Albada et al., 2021; Eskelinen & Verkuyten, 2020) or 'colliding ways of life' (Sniderman & Hagendoorn, 2007). Prior research has demonstrated that perceived discrepancies between majority values and those attributed to Muslim minorities are related to anti-Muslim attitudes (Verkuyten & Yogeeswaran, 2019). Also among majority members who are generally low in prejudice, there is evidence of value-based disapproval of Islamic practices, such as headscarf wearing in Québec and Belgium (Saroglou et al., 2009; Turgeon et al., 2019), religious education in Western European schools (Dangubić et al., 2020), or authoritarian childrearing in the Netherlands (Sniderman & Hagendoorn, 2007). Survey experiments confirm this pattern: in the UK, Helbling and Traummüller (2020) reported more negative attitudes against Muslim fundamentalists and devout Muslims among left-leaning versus right-leaning participants. Similarly, in Germany, Van der Noll (2014) found support for restricting Muslim religious rights even among those who reported generally positive attitudes toward Muslims. Such opposition to Islamic religious expressions has been tied to personal values such as universalism and egalitarianism (Saroglou et al., 2009; Van der Noll, 2014), secularism (Van Oost et al., 2025), and civic liberties (Dangubić, 2020; Turgeon et al., 2019). In the domain of gender equality, Kuppens and Yzerbyt (2012) further showed that Belgian female students reported stronger negative emotions toward Muslim men when their gender identity was made salient.

Taken together, these findings suggest that perceptions of Muslim illiberalism should be especially associated with anti-Muslim sentiment among majority members who strongly endorse liberal values. In line with a value conflict hypothesis, we therefore predict that the link between perceived illiberal Muslim values in the domains of gender and sexual equality and anti-Muslim attitudes will be stronger among majority members who endorse gender and sexual equality to a greater extent (Hypothesis 2).

The role of support for multiculturalism (RQ3)

Beyond the above relationships, our study examines the less explored role of multiculturalism in exacerbating or mitigating value protection in response to cultural diversity. One way to mitigate the detrimental impact of intergroup value protection is to reframe cultural diversity not as a threat to ingroup values but in terms of recognition. Multiculturalism—defined here as an inclusive diversity ideology, akin to integration, interculturalism, or tolerance (Guimond et al., 2013)—promotes acceptance of culturally different others as fellow citizens and human beings (Lamont, 2018). It mandates equality-based respect by accepting that ethnic minorities maintain a distinct cultural heritage and recognizing different cultural values, beliefs, and practices. Importantly, value recognition inherent in multiculturalism does not necessitate value sharedness, which may be unrealistic when values are grounded in different moral frameworks of truth and goodness. Instead, value recognition allows for substantial value-based disapproval (Verkuyten & Yogeeswaran, 2019), without requiring majority members to forsake their own values.

Because multiculturalism embraces cultural diversity in values, beliefs, and practices as a matter of principle, we would argue that it may defuse value protection as a driver of outgroup rejection and instead promote value recognition. Indeed, robust evidence links multiculturalism—both as an individual diversity attitude and as a public policy—to less negative intergroup attitudes (Guimond et al., 2013; Whitley & Webster, 2019). Moreover, preliminary findings suggest that multiculturalism may buffer value protective responses

to perceived minority values. For example, Guan et al. (2011) showed that perceived value differences between Mainland and Hong Kong Chinese were less strongly associated with negative intergroup attitudes among participants endorsing multiculturalism. Similarly, Mahfud et al. (2015) showed that in France, multiculturalism attenuated the relationship between perceived cultural distance and negative intergroup attitudes towards several minority groups, though this effect was not tested for anti-Muslim attitudes. Relatedly, Simon et al. (2019) found that respect for Muslims—the belief that Muslims should be treated as equal citizens—predicted tolerance of outgroup beliefs or practices. Note that respect promotes equality, whereas multiculturalism goes further by recognizing and accommodating cultural differences.

Building on this preliminary evidence, we tested whether multiculturalism serves as a buffer against value-based justifications of outgroup rejection. Specifically, we hypothesize that the association between perceived illiberal values among Muslims and anti-Muslim attitudes will be weaker when individuals endorse multiculturalism more strongly (Hypothesis 3).

The Belgian Case

We conducted the current study among majority Belgians. In Belgium, relatively high levels of migration-related diversity, especially in urban centers and among younger generations, coexist with relatively stable public resistance against the integration of immigrants and the accommodation of cultural diversity in civil society (Billiet et al., 2021). In this context, we investigate how majority Belgians perceive the values of Turkish- and Moroccan-origin minorities as the largest established Muslim communities in Belgium (Adam & Torreken, 2015). We focus on perceived values in the politically contested domains of gender equality and sexual minority rights, where Muslims are generally perceived as less liberal and egalitarian than the majority (Glas, 2023; Röder & Spierings, 2022). Originally recruited as migrant workers in Belgium in the 1960s, Turkish and Moroccan Muslims and their descendants face persistent socioeconomic disadvantage (Phalet et al., 2007) as well as pervasive prejudice and discrimination, in particular following terrorist attacks that took place in Belgium in 2016 (Phalet et al., 2018). In public opinion research, ethnic minorities of Turkish and Moroccan descent are revealed as ‘the Belgian archetypical object of Othering’ (Meuleman et al., 2019, p. 233) and Muslims as the prototypical immigrant group (Dangubić et al., 2024). This makes Belgium a research context of choice to study the role of value protection, conflict, and anti-Muslim prejudice.

Data & Methods

Data

We relied on data from the 2019–2020 Belgian National Election Study (BNES), a probability-based survey of the Belgian electorate. The dataset comprises 1659 respondents (response rate 32.8%), randomly selected based on the national population register by means of a two-stage sample (municipalities–individuals⁸), who were interviewed mostly face-to-face (via Computer Assisted Personal Interviewing, 75.8%) or by means of video-interviews (4.4%), telephone interview (0.2%), and web survey (19.5%) (due to physical distance measures imposed at the time of data collection⁹). The survey contains an extensive module on intergroup relations with questions designed specifically for this study. To correct for selective non-response, we applied weighting coefficients, adjusting for gender, age, and education.¹⁰ For this study, we only selected (ethnic majority) respondents whose parents were both born in Belgium (final sample, $n = 1363$).

Measurement

Anti-Muslim attitudes—our outcome variable—were assessed with six items reflecting the sentiments that Islam is a geopolitical threat, including beliefs about Islam’s alleged violence and Muslims’ alleged influence in Belgian society (O’Brien, 2016), about cultural incompatibility between Islam and Western society (Sniderman & Hagendoorn, 2007), and about the trustworthiness of Muslims (see items in online Appendix 1). The scale included both positively and negatively worded items. Responses ranged from 1 (‘completely disagree’) to 5 (‘completely agree’). The positively worded items were recoded so that high scores reflect negative attitudes toward Muslims. After testing the reliability (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .867$), we calculated the average score for the respective item

⁸ The sampling frame consisted of residents aged 18 years or older who were living in Belgium one month before the election on May 26, 2019, were residing in Belgium when the sample was drawn, and had voting rights on the election date.

⁹ Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns starting in March 2020, fieldwork was temporarily halted. It resumed in June 2020, with video, phone, or web survey options. However, a second outbreak in fall 2020, forced fieldwork to end on October 31, resulting in an incomplete contact procedure. Despite these challenges, the response rate of 32.8% remains reasonable.

¹⁰ The post-stratification weights were calculated using population benchmarks for age, gender, and education derived from the EU Labour Force Survey. Deviations between the sample and population distributions were small, with slight underrepresentation of women, younger respondents, and those with lower education. Further details: see Abts et al., 2021.

batteries, treating the scale as a manifest rather than a latent indicator to reduce complexity of the models.¹¹

Our main predictor variable—illiberal values attributed to Muslims—was operationalized by assessing **perceived minority illiberalism concerning sexual rights and gender equality** with the following single items for each: ‘According to you, how many Moroccan/Turkish Belgians¹² think gays and lesbians should have the same rights as straight people?’ (reverse-coded) for perceived illiberalism concerning sexual rights; ‘According to you, how many Moroccan/Turkish Belgians think it is normal that when the man has a job, the woman stays home for the children?’ for perceived illiberalism regarding gender equality. The response scale: 1 (*‘almost none’*), 2 (*‘a small minority’*), 3 (*‘a minority’*), 4 (*‘approximately half’*), 5 (*‘a majority’*), 6 (*‘a large majority’*), 7 (*‘almost all’*). We reversed the scale for sexual rights, such that high scores correspond to more perceived illiberal values about sexual and gender equality.

Our two moderator variables—personal commitment to liberal values and multiculturalism—were operationalized as follows: Majority respondents **personal support for sexual rights** was measured with three 5-point scale items about the acceptance of homosexuality, openness to homosexuals, and equal rights for homosexuals (Cronbach’s alpha = .654). **Personal support for gender equality** was also captured with three items referring to normative gender roles in the household and at work, such as the acceptance of women in leadership positions (Cronbach’s alpha = .684). Higher scores indicate more liberal personal values (online Appendix 2).

Multiculturalism was assessed with a single item probing respondents’ support for public recognition of migrants’ cultural heritage: ‘Migrants should be allowed to preserve their culture of origin at school/work’ (5-point scale). Higher scores indicate a stronger endorsement of multiculturalism.

Control variables included region (0 *‘Flanders, Dutch-speaking region’* versus 1 *‘Wallonia, French-speaking region and Brussels’*), gender (0 *‘male’*, 1 *‘female’*), age, and highest education level (5 categories from *‘no formal education level’* to *‘University degree’*, treated as a continuous indicator because we expected a linear relationship).¹³ We also controlled for perceived *majority* illiberalism to sexual rights and gender equality in the model, which we measured identically to perceived minority illiberalism, replacing [Moroccan/Turkish Belgians] with [Belgians],¹⁴ and reverse-coding the item about sexual rights so that higher scores indicate more perceived illiberal majority values in the Belgian majority population. We included this control variable only when evaluating H1 to disentangle perceived illiberalism in Muslims from a well-established general ‘conservative bias’ in social cognition research whereby individuals tend to see themselves as less conservative than ‘most others’ (Varadi et al., 2021).

Analytic Strategy

We estimated three regression models (for each domain of sexual and gender equality; six models in total). The first model tested whether majority members who perceive Muslims to hold illiberal values have stronger anti-Muslim attitudes (RQ1) by including perceived Muslim illiberalism as a predictor (with controls and multiculturalism). A positive association with anti-Muslim attitudes would support H1. A second model added personal support for sexual rights and gender equality as a moderator (RQ2) to examine value conflict in anti-Muslim attitudes among liberal majority members. We predicted significantly stronger relationships between perceived minority illiberalism and anti-Muslim attitudes among respondents with more liberal personal values (H2). The third model introduced multiculturalism as a moderator to test value recognition as a hypothetical buffer (RQ3). To confirm the hypothesis, relationships between perceived minority illiberalism and anti-Muslim attitudes should be weaker or non-significant among majority members who endorse multiculturalism (H3).

To facilitate the interpretation of results, we plotted the effects of the predictor variable (perceived minority illiberalism) on the outcome variable (anti-Muslim attitudes) at various levels (–1 SD, mean, +1 SD) of the moderator variables (i.e., personal support and multiculturalism), and provided 95% confidence intervals to evaluate the significance of the conditional effects. Prior to analyses, all numerical variables were mean-centered, and categorical variables (i.e., region and gender) effect coded, so that the intercept of the regression models refers to the estimated value for anti-Muslim attitudes for people with an average (i.e., 0) score on all variables included in the model. We estimated the regression models with R (version 2025.05.1), the conditional effects with the R package *sdmmod*, and the visualizations of the moderation effects with the R package *interactions*.

¹¹ All latent scales were validated with Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA); see online Appendix 1 and 2. Additionally, we tested a two-factor CFA distinguishing between attitudes toward Islam as a belief system (including the three items about ‘Islam’) and attitudes toward Muslims as a group (including the three items about ‘Muslims’). The CFA showed that both factors were very highly correlated ($r = 0.954$) and can thus be considered as essentially measuring the same latent concept.

¹² A random 50% of the sample received the question referring to Moroccan Belgians, and the other 50% to Turkish Belgians. In the eyes of majority Belgians, ‘Turkish’ and ‘Moroccan’ minority groups are typically amalgamated as a (falsely) homogeneous Muslim outgroup. Mean scores for perceived minority illiberalism against sexual and gender equality did not significantly differ when probed about Moroccan ($M = 5.46$) or Turkish Belgians ($M = 5.51$).

¹³ We acknowledge that the inclusion of control variables (‘covariates’) will isolate the effect of the predictor variable(s) on the outcome variable, by controlling for the effects of other variables that might be related to the outcome variable, but will not remove potential bias from moderation effects (Yzerbyt et al., 2004).

¹⁴ In the Belgian context, the ethnic group “Belgians” does not necessarily correspond to respondents’ perceived *ingroup* (Billiet et al., 2021). Given Belgium’s complex institutional structure and the salience of alternative (and for some incompatible) identities, such as the Flemish identity in the Dutch-speaking region, we therefore refer to “perceived *majority* illiberalism” rather than “perceived *ingroup* illiberalism.”

Results

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

Fig. 1 shows the relative frequencies of the answer categories of perceived minority illiberalism. Overall, Belgians tended to assign relatively illiberal values to Muslim minorities, attributing relatively high levels of aversion to sexual rights and gender equality to either Turkish or Moroccan minority groups ('Moroccan/Turkish Belgians'). Specifically, over 55% of respondents thought that '(almost) none' or 'only a small minority' of Moroccan and Turkish Belgians were in favor of equal rights for gays and lesbians (versus only 5% when applied to 'Belgians' for perceived majority illiberalism – see online Appendix 3) and over 55% that '(almost) all' or 'a large majority' thought that it was normal that a man has a job, while the woman stays home for the children (versus only 6% when applied to 'Belgians'). Second, perceived illiberal minority values were positively correlated with anti-Muslim attitudes ($r = .19$ for sexual rights; $r = .14$ for gender equality). Third, multiculturalism was weakly positively correlated with personal support for sexual rights ($r = .17$), uncorrelated with personal support for gender equality ($r = .05$) and moderately negatively correlated with anti-Muslim attitudes ($r = -.38$). Fourth, a moderate correlation between personal support for sexual rights and gender equality ($r = .45$) aligns with more general liberal values, challenging homophobia as well as traditional gender roles (Meuleman et al., 2019).

(Moderated) Regression Analysis

Sexual Rights

Turning to sexual rights first (see Table 2), Model 1 confirmed H1: The more respondents perceived Moroccan and Turkish Belgians to be against equal sexual minority rights, the stronger their negative attitudes toward Muslims ($b = 0.09, p < .001$). Respondents who more strongly supported sexual minority rights also held less anti-Muslim attitudes, but the relationship was only moderate ($b = -0.24, p < .001$). Not surprisingly, the stronger respondents supported multiculturalism, the lower their levels of anti-Muslim attitudes ($b = -0.22, p < .001$).

Regarding the control variables, Model 1 also revealed a small but significantly negative relationship between perceived majority beliefs and anti-Muslim attitudes ($b = -0.04, p < .01$), suggesting that the more respondents perceived Belgians to be in favor of sexual minority rights, the stronger their anti-Muslim attitudes. In other words, the more they believed that the majority endorsed equal rights for gays and lesbians, the more they rejected a group stereotypically seen as not sharing these values. There were no significant regional differences in anti-Muslim attitudes. In contrast, older people ($b = 0.004, p < .001$), those who completed lower levels of formal education ($b = -0.17, p < .001$), and women ($b = 0.29, p < .01$) showed more anti-Muslim attitudes. With an overall explained variance of 35%, this model had relatively high explanatory power, with especially own personal support for sexual rights and multiculturalism predictive of anti-Muslim attitudes.

In Model 2, we added the interaction between perceived minority illiberalism and personal support (both regarding sexual rights) to evaluate the hypothesized value conflict mechanism of anti-Muslim attitudes (H2). The moderation was significant and positive ($b = 0.07, p < .001$). We decomposed this interaction as a function of respondents' personal support for sexual minority rights. As Fig. 2 shows, the relationship between perceived minority illiberalism regarding sexual rights and anti-Muslim attitudes was more pronounced among respondents with more support regarding sexual rights (i.e., 1 SD above the mean), $b = 0.15, p < .001$, than among their less supportive counterparts (i.e., 1 SD below the mean), $b = 0.05, p = .005$. In other words, respondents' perception of minority group illiberalism regarding sexual rights played a larger role in predicting their anti-Muslim attitudes when they were more supportive of sexual minority rights, reflecting value conflict.¹⁵

In Model 3, we added multiculturalism and its interaction with perceived minority illiberalism (and removed the interaction between perceived minority illiberalism and personal support). Both the main and moderation effects for multiculturalism were significant, $b = -0.23, p < .001$ and $b = -0.06, p < .001$, respectively. Confirming H3, the relationship between perceived minority illiberalism and anti-Muslim attitudes was less pronounced among respondents who favored rather than opposed multiculturalism. In fact, the positive relationship between perceived minority illiberalism and anti-Muslim attitudes was significant among respondents endorsing multiculturalism weakly (1 SD below the mean), $b = 0.14, p < .001$, and only borderline significant among those endorsing multiculturalism more strongly (1 SD above the mean), $b = 0.04, p = .047$ (see Fig. 3).¹⁶

The association between perceiving Muslim minorities as not respecting gender equality and sexual liberties and anti-Muslim attitudes was weaker or nearly absent among majority members who strongly endorsed multiculturalism compared to those who endorsed it less strongly (Hypothesis 3).

Gender Equality

As indicated above, we tested the same three models for beliefs regarding gender equality (Table 3). As was the case for sexual rights, and confirming H1, the more respondents perceived Moroccan and Turkish Belgians to be against gender equality, the more negative were their attitudes toward Muslims ($b = 0.09, p < .001$; Model 1). Echoing what we found for sexual rights, those who

¹⁵ We also decomposed the moderation as a function of perceived minority beliefs (online Appendix 4).

¹⁶ We also decomposed the moderation for perceived minority illiberalism concerning sexual rights and gender equality as a function of multiculturalism by calculating the conditional effects for every value on the 5-point multiculturalism scale (see Online Appendix 5 for the plot and conditional effects).

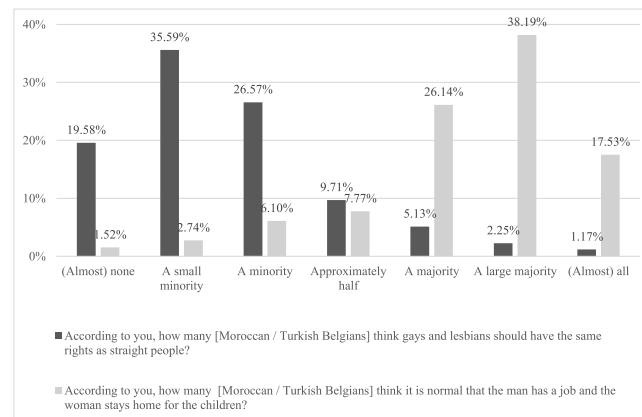


Fig. 1. Perceptions of Minority Illiberalism regarding Sexual Equal Rights (black bars) and Gender Equality (grey bars).

expressed more support for gender equality also held less negative attitudes toward Muslims ($b = -0.21$, $p < .001$; Model 1). Regarding control variables, contrary to sexual minority equal rights, individuals' perceived majority beliefs regarding gender equality were not significantly related to anti-Muslim attitudes; all else remained the same, with the exception of region that achieved significance: Walloon respondents were slightly more negative toward Muslims compared to Flemish respondents, $b = 0.16$, $p = .03$.

Turning to the value conflict mechanism (H2), and contrary to what emerged when looking at sexual rights, the interaction between perceived minority illiberalism and personal support of gender equality included in Model 2 was not significant ($b = -0.02$, $p > .05$).

Confirming H3, the interaction effect between perceived minority illiberalism and multiculturalism was significant, $b = -0.03$, $p = .05$ (Model 3). Consistent with the pattern we found for sexual rights, multiculturalism had a buffering effect such that the positive relationship between perceived minority illiberalism and anti-Muslim attitudes was significantly stronger among respondents endorsing multiculturalism less strongly (1 SD below the mean), $b = 0.10$, $p < .001$, compared to those endorsing multiculturalism more strongly (1 SD above the mean), $b = 0.08$, $p < .001$ (see Fig. 4).

Robustness Check: Anti-Immigrant Attitudes as the Outcome Variable

To evaluate whether our theoretical predictions extend to a related outcome variable, we re-estimated all models with anti-immigrant attitudes instead of anti-Muslim attitudes as the dependent variable. We measured anti-immigrant attitudes by means of eight items regarding the trustworthiness of immigrants, economic and social security threat posed by immigrants, and the impact of immigration on cultural life (Cronbach's $\alpha = .894$). A CFA indeed suggested that anti-Muslim attitudes and anti-immigrant attitudes loaded on two separate dimensions, despite that both scales were highly correlated, $r = 0.79$ (more details in online Appendix 1). The analyses largely confirmed the patterns found for anti-Muslim attitudes with one exception (for full results see online Appendix 7): The two-way interaction between perceived minority illiberalism concerning gender equality and multiculturalism was no longer significant. However, the interaction trended in the same direction as reported above.

Discussion

Examining the effects of perceived Muslim minority group values in relation to sexual minority equal rights and gender equality is both socially and analytically relevant, as these highly contested issues directly test how liberal democracies apply principles of equal rights and non-discrimination within contexts of deep diversity in (post-)migrant societies. In line with intergroup value protection (Van Zomeren et al., 2023) (hypothesis 1), results show that anti-Muslim attitudes do not solely derive from generalized prejudice against minorities. Perceptions of Muslims as rejecting sexual minority rights and gender equality can provide a moral justification for anti-Muslim attitudes.

As predicted, we found that value conflict was *particularly* pronounced among participants who supported sexual minority rights (hypothesis 2). In other words, people with strong liberal and egalitarian values in the domains of gender equality and sexual minority rights expressed negative attitudes toward Muslims when they perceived Muslims as not respecting sexual liberties. This finding aligns with results from Chambers et al. (2013) and resonates with Helbling's (2014) argument that, in the spirit of postmodern relativism, not everything is tolerated by liberals. In other words, liberals, who are generally characterized by tolerance and openness, are likely to have positive attitudes towards Muslims so long as Muslims are not perceived to violate liberal values protecting sexual minority rights (Sniderman & Hagendoorn, 2007). Indeed, when outgroup practices and beliefs are seen as causing harm to others or as restricting their freedoms (e.g., sexual minority rights) it can trigger forms of so-called 'reasonable' intolerance (Verkuyten et al., 2020, p. 246). Thus, while stereotypes of Muslims as sexists and homophobes are typically evoked by conservative majority members to justify rejection of Muslims, value-based disapproval of Muslim minorities has also been found among liberals. For majority members who are strongly committed to liberal values, value conflict thus refers to a morally charged divide: on one side, progressive and egalitarian

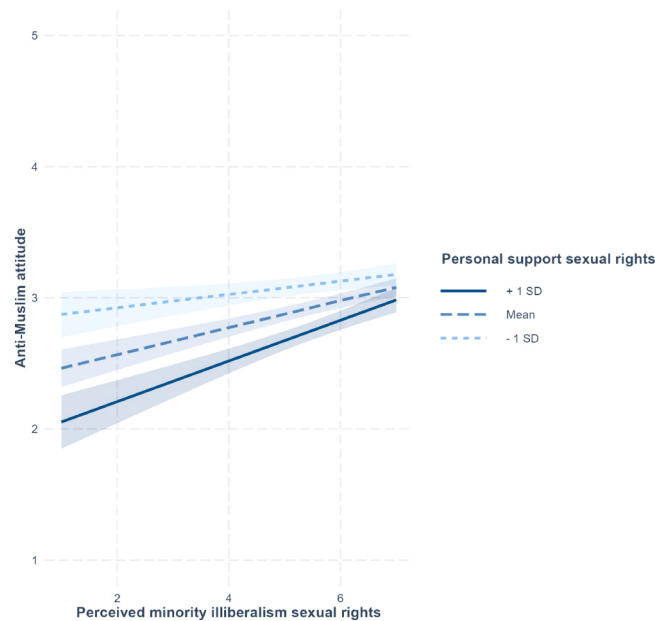
Table 1*Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations.*

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Range</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Anti-Muslim attitude	2.99	0.77	1–5											
2. Perceived <i>minority</i> illiberalism sexual rights	5.43	1.28	1–7	.19**										
3. Perceived <i>minority</i> illiberalism gender equality	5.39	1.32	1–7	.14**	.19**									
4. Personal support sexual rights	3.59	0.75	1–5	-.40**	-.03	-.14**								
5. Personal support gender equality	3.98	0.69	1–5	-.31**	.06*	.07**	.45**							
6. Multiculturalism	2.40	0.96	1–5	-.38**	-.14**	-.12**	.17**	.05						
7. Region	0.32	0.47	0–1	.03	-.12**	-.10**	-.07	-.01	.06*					
8. Gender	0.45	0.50	0–1	.01	-.01	.02	.14**	.10**	.05	-.01				
9. Education	3.27	1.13	1–5	-.38**	-.02	.07**	.30**	.26**	.12**	-.02	.03			
10. Age	53.38	18.62	18–97	.33**	.08**	-.06*	-.37**	-.24**	-.22**	-.02	.02	-.29**		
11. Perceived <i>majority</i> illiberalism sexual rights	3.65	1.15	1–7	.01	.17**	.02	-.15**	-.03	.01	.07**	-.02	.02	.07*	
12. Perceived <i>majority</i> illiberalism gender equality	3.83	1.20	1–7	-.00	.04	.22**	.01	-.12**	.03	.05	-.04	.04	-.11**	.14**

Note. Values for ‘perceived majority/minority illiberalism regarding sexual rights’ were reverse-coded for this table and in all subsequent analyses. Higher scores reflect more conservative attributed attitudes. *M* and *SD* represent mean and standard deviation, respectively. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Table 2*Regression Parameters: Perceived Minority Illiberalism, Personal Support Sexual Rights and Multiculturalism as Predictors of Anti-Muslim Attitudes.*

	Model 1 – Hypothesis 1				Model 2 – Hypothesis 2				Model 3 – Hypothesis 3			
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>Beta</i>	η_p^2	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>Beta</i>	η_p^2	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>Beta</i>	η_p^2
Intercept	2.92***	0.03			2.92***	0.03			2.91***	0.03		
Perceived minority illiberalism sexual rights	0.09***	0.02	0.15	0.03	0.10***	0.01	0.17	0.04	0.09***	0.01	0.16	0.04
Personal support sexual rights	-0.24***	0.03	-0.24	0.06	-0.25***	0.03	-0.24	0.07	-0.24***	0.03	-0.24	0.06
Multiculturalism	-0.22***	0.02	-0.27	0.09	-0.21***	0.02	-0.27	0.09	-0.23***	0.02	-0.29	0.10
Perceived minority illiberalism * Personal support					0.07***	0.02	0.10	0.02				
Perceived minority illiberalism * multiculturalism									-0.06***	0.01	-0.11	0.02
CONTROLS												
Region (ref. Flanders)	0.13	0.08	0.03	0.003	0.14	0.08	0.04	0.003	0.13	0.08	0.04	0.003
Gender (ref. Male)	0.29**	0.08	0.09	0.01	0.28**	0.07	0.09	0.01	0.28**	0.09	0.07	0.01
Age (in years)	0.004***	0.001	0.10	0.01	0.004***	0.001	0.10	0.01	0.004***	0.001	0.10	0.01
Education	-0.17***	0.02	-0.24	0.08	-0.17***	0.02	-0.24	0.07	-0.17***	0.02	-0.25	0.08
Perceived majority illiberalism sexual rights	-0.04**	0.02	-0.05	0.005	-0.05**	0.02	-0.07	0.01	-0.03*	0.02	-0.05	0.005
R ²	0.35				0.36				0.36			

Note. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.**Fig. 2.** Relationship Between Perceived Minority Illiberalism Concerning Sexual Rights and Anti-Muslim Attitudes Moderated by Personal Support Sexual Right.

views on sexuality and gender; on the other, the perception of Muslim minorities as collectively holding illiberal beliefs in these domains.

As anticipated, the endorsement of multicultural ideology buffered the associations of perceived illiberal minority values with negative intergroup attitudes (hypothesis 3). Specifically, the relationship between perceived minority group values and anti-Muslim attitudes was weaker among individuals who supported immigrants' heritage culture maintenance. Our findings therefore highlight the potential of multicultural ideology to mitigate negative attitudes and intergroup conflict, even in the event of a perceived clash of values in culturally diverse societies. Importantly, these results suggest that individuals who support multiculturalism may both experience positive attitudes towards Muslims, while still condemning conservative views on gender and sexual minorities. This suggests that, contrary to what [Okin \(1998\)](#) implied in her essay 'Is multiculturalism bad for women?', multiculturalism (at the individual level) fosters positive intergroup attitudes, but not at the expense of women and gender minorities. Furthermore, Okin's argument omits that feminism, women, and gender minorities exist within, and for minorities, too ([Volpp, 2001](#)).

Although hypotheses 1 and 3 regarding gender equality were confirmed, the effect sizes were comparatively weaker when compared to those related to sexual rights. Thus, although both cases provided support for our theoretical expectations, the impact

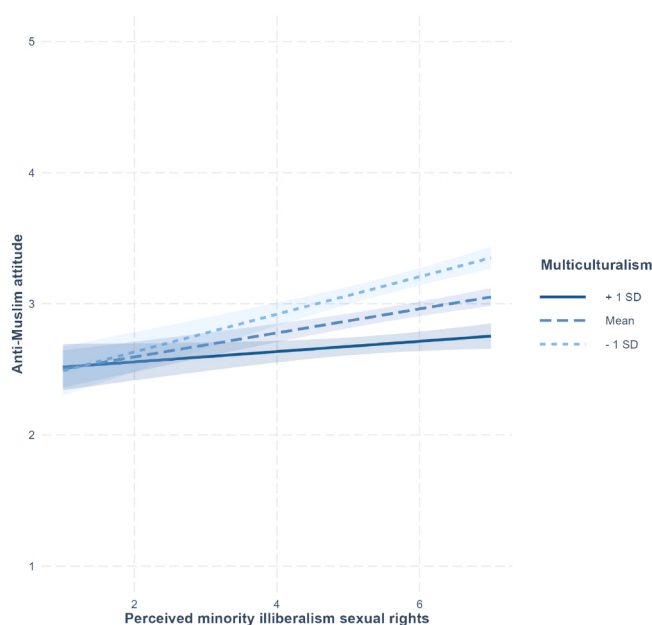


Fig. 3. Relationship Between Perceived Minority Illiberalism Concerning Sexual Rights and Anti-Muslim Attitudes Moderated by Multiculturalism.

Table 3

Regression Parameters: Perceived Minority Illiberalism, Personal Support Gender Equality and Multiculturalism as Predictors of Anti-Muslim Attitudes.

	Model 1 – Hypothesis 1				Model 2 – Hypothesis 2				Model 3 – Hypothesis 3			
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>Beta</i>	η_p^2	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>Beta</i>	η_p^2	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>Beta</i>	η_p^2
Intercept	2.93***	0.03			2.93***	0.03			2.93***	0.03		
Perceived minority illiberalism	0.09***	0.01	0.19	0.03	0.09***	0.01	0.15	0.03	0.09***	0.01	0.15	0.03
gender equality												
Personal support gender equality	-0.21***	0.03	-0.15	0.05	-0.21***	0.03	-0.19	0.05	-0.22***	0.03	-0.19	0.05
Multiculturalism	-0.24	0.02	-0.30	0.11	-0.24***	0.02	-0.30	0.11	-0.24***	0.02	-0.30	0.11
Perceived minority illiberalism * Personal support					-0.02	0.02	-0.02	0.001				
Perceived minority illiberalism * Multiculturalism									-0.03*	0.01	-0.05	0.003
CONTROLS												
Region (ref. Flanders)	0.16*	0.08	0.05	0.004	0.16*	0.08	0.05	0.005	0.16*	0.08	0.05	0.005
Gender (ref. Male)	0.21**	0.08	0.07	0.01	0.21**	0.08	0.07	0.01	0.20*	0.07	0.07	0.007
Age (in years)	0.01***	0.001	0.15	0.03	0.01***	0.001	0.15	0.03	0.01***	0.001	0.15	0.03
Education	-0.18***	0.02	-0.25	0.08	-0.18***	0.02	-0.25	0.08	-0.18***	0.02	-0.25	0.08
Perceived majority illiberalism gender equality	-0.03	0.02	-0.04	0.003	-0.03	0.02	-0.04	0.004	-0.03	0.02	-0.04	0.003
R ²	0.34				0.34				0.34			

Note. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

appears to be more pronounced in the context of values concerning sexual minority rights. This may be due to the nature of the empirical questions themselves: the sexual minority equal rights item reflected granting rights in the public sphere, whereas the gender equality item reflected the division of tasks at home, in the private sphere. If the latter also concerned the public inclusion of a minority in society, perhaps results would have been even more consistent (and strong). Indeed, majority members have various expectations regarding the adoption of majority values: while it is often expected from ethnic minorities to assimilate in the public domain, this is less the case for the home context (Árnadóttir & Meeusen, 2024). Nevertheless, this also suggests that the specificity of the attitude or value being examined may play a role in influencing the strength of the observed effects. Similar conclusions were drawn by Wolf et al. (2021) and Albada et al. (2021) in their respective studies on the effects of individual values, perceptions of immigrants' values, and intergroup value dissimilarity on intergroup attitudes. They found that the impact of value dissimilarity varied depending on the specific dimension of values being considered. The stronger the moral convictions regarding the societal issue, the harder it is to overcome the perceived value conflict (Verkuyten et al., 2020).

Our robustness check showed that the observed patterns on value protection and multiculturalism largely hold when looking at anti-immigrant sentiment, rather than anti-Muslim sentiment. This was not surprising, as in the Belgian intergroup context, sentiments toward immigrants and Muslims are indeed closely related. In a previous study, Meuleman et al. (2019) found that although attitudes

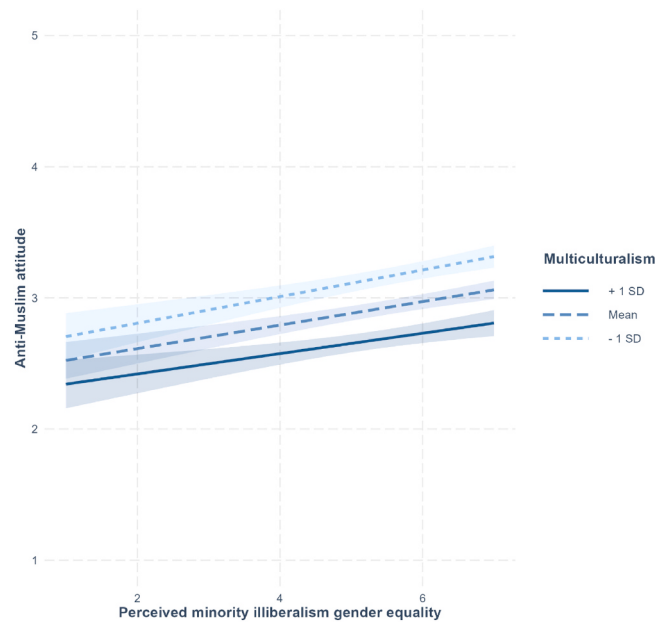


Fig. 4. Relationship Between Perceived Minority Illiberalism Concerning Gender Equality and Anti-Muslim Attitudes Moderated by Multiculturalism.

toward immigrants and Muslims should be distinguished—they form two separate dimensions of prejudice—they are also part of a second-order generalized prejudice factor, with a strong additional (error) correlation between the two. Indeed, in Belgium, the notion of ‘immigrants’ is predominantly associated with Turkish and Moroccan communities that have their roots in post-war labor migration and are predominantly Muslim (Adam & Torrekens, 2015). As such, these categories often overlap. Nevertheless, we do find empirically that people do not always equate ‘immigrants’ with ‘Muslims’. While Muslims can be classified as ‘deviant’ outgroups in the Belgian context, considered to challenge/threaten cultural norms; immigrants are rather ‘dissident’ others, not only challenging the cultural order, but also competing for the same resources as the majority group (Meuleman et al., 2019). In this way, it is not surprising that the same pattern of results showed for both anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant sentiment, even though Muslims and immigrants may not constitute the same group in peoples’ minds.

Examining the impact of perceptions of minority values on attitudes towards Muslims holds significant societal and practical implications. Perceived group values may play a crucial role in fueling intergroup conflict in case of value incongruence (Yzerbyt & Demoulin, 2011). While altering deeply ingrained and morally grounded *personal* values on a large scale is challenging, *perceptions* of group values are malleable, offering potential leverage to modify stereotypes and improve intergroup attitudes and behavior (Portelinha & Elchereth, 2016). Consequently, understanding and influencing misperceptions of minority values can be an efficient approach to addressing radicalization, an area currently underexplored (Murrar et al., 2020).

It is important to acknowledge, however, that there may be an *actual* value conflict between the majority and Muslim minority group, but at the same time a misperception regarding the prevalence of conservative values among members of the minority. Although not the focus of this paper, it is interesting to compare *perceptions* of minority values concerning sexual minority equal rights and gender equality to the *actual* values on those issues in Belgian society among the respective groups (here, the ‘actual dominant values’ regarding equal rights for sexual minorities and gender equality among Moroccan and Turkish Belgians). To examine this issue, we looked at data from the probability-based survey of the Belgian Ethnic Minority Election Study 2014 (BEMES; Swyngedouw et al., 2016) for gender equality and BEMES 2021 (Abts et al., 2023) for sexual minority equal rights. In 2014, 52.3% of the Turkish and Moroccan Belgian sample agreed with the statement, ‘when a man has a job, the woman should stay home for the children’, while over 80% of majority Belgians believed a (large) majority of Turkish and Moroccan Belgians would agree with the statement. Along similar lines, in 2021, 76% agreed with the statement ‘gays and lesbians should get the same rights as straight people’, when not even 10% of majority Belgians believed a majority (or more) of Turkish and Moroccan Belgians would endorse this right. As such, overall, Moroccan and Turkish Belgians seem to be more liberal regarding sexual minority rights, and less conservative concerning gender equality, than the Belgians give them credit for. Nevertheless, we do observe an actual value conflict, as only 17% of majority Belgians agree with the statement ‘when a man has a job, the woman should stay home for the children’ (versus 52.3% among Turkish and Moroccan minorities) and 92% of the Belgian population is in favor of equal rights for gays and lesbians (versus 76% among Turkish and Moroccan Belgians). So, although majority Belgians and Belgians of Turkish and Moroccan descent do differ in opinions regarding traditional gender roles and homosexuality (see own calculations; Van Droogenbroeck et al., 2016), our findings suggest that this value conflict may be substantially overestimated. Importantly, biased and inaccurate beliefs have real consequences, as they influence people’s feelings towards groups and potentially affect their behavior towards those groups, too.

Before drawing any definitive conclusions, it is essential to acknowledge the lack of causality in this study. It is therefore impossible

to determine whether perceived Muslim illiberalism leads to anti-Muslim attitudes or if negative attitudes towards Muslims distort the perceived stereotypes and attitudes attributed to this group. This distortion may occur implicitly because negative feelings discourage intergroup interactions, limiting knowledge about the actual norms and values of the group. It may also occur explicitly when conflicting values are used as a justification for negative attitudes. Previous experimental research explored the question of causality in relation to values and found support for the causal direction of value dissimilarity influencing outgroup rejection (Wolf et al., 2021). A recent study among Belgians has also highlighted the use of gender equality as justification for Islamophobia (Van Oost et al., 2023). On the other hand, work by Sindic et al. (2018) has shown that the majority can strategically modify outgroup stereotypes to reach their anti-immigration agenda. Further work is required to shed light on the precise causal relationship between conflicting values and anti-Muslim attitudes in our specific context.

Another suggestion for future research is to approach the conflict of values as a two-way street (Sniderman & Hagendoorn, 2007) and also study the perceptions of Muslim minorities about the position of the majorities regarding sexual minority rights and gender equality, and how they think their fellow ingroup members think about these issues. Will these perceptions influence how minorities feel about the host country and their preferences to integrate and fully commit to the liberal norms, values and politics of the host country? Moreover, one may wonder what processes underlie the buffering effect of multiculturalism on anti-Muslim attitudes in the context of value conflict. Indeed, while we suggested multiculturalism may prompt value recognition as an opportunity for pluralism, what precisely happens in individuals' minds remains unclear. In the same vein, tolerance literature suggests that individuals may tolerate others' values they disapprove of when they engage in higher levels of self-categorization (Simon, 2023). Next to this, several studies have shown negative associations between multiculturalism and intergroup threat (e.g., Mahfud et al., 2015). Thus, future research could focus on value recognition, threat, or tolerance as mediators of this buffering effect of multiculturalism. In addition, future research could more explicitly examine perceived relative illiberalism by focusing on the extent to which individuals believe Muslims are less supportive of liberal values than national majorities. Such an approach would allow scholars to test whether value protection also operates at the group level of analysis and to assess potential overestimations of value discrepancies between groups as another predictor of intergroup attitudes.

Data accessibility statement

The data used in this manuscript will be made publicly and freely available in the online data archive DANS once the project embargo expires. However, data can be shared with academic researchers under certain conditions upon request. The research was not preregistered.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Karen Phalet: Writing – review & editing, Funding acquisition, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Pascaline Van Oost:** Writing – review & editing, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Vincent Yzerbyt:** Writing – review & editing, Funding acquisition, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Cecil Meeusen:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Emanuele Politi:** Writing – review & editing, Conceptualization. **Jessica Gale:** Writing – review & editing, Conceptualization.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

During the preparation of this work the author(s) used Microsoft Co-pilot (institutional version) and ChatGPT in order to check language. After using this tool/service, the author(s) reviewed and edited the content as needed and take(s) full responsibility for the content of the publication.

Declaration of Competing Interest

none

Appendix A. Supporting information

Supplementary data associated with this article can be found in the online version at [doi:10.1016/j.ijintrel.2026.102435](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2026.102435).

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