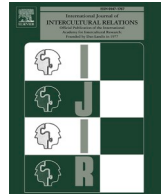




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## Tolerance of the Muslim headscarf: Perceived reasons for wearing a headscarf matter

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## ABSTRACT

In many West European countries, debates about Muslim women wearing a headscarf in public positions evolve around the question whether the reason for wearing it is personal choice, religious freedom or community pressures. This study uses national samples of Dutch and German majority group members ( $N = 3734$ ) and an experimental design to investigate whether their tolerance of the headscarf worn by a civil servant depends on four perceived reasons for wearing it. The findings indicated that a headscarf that is perceived to be worn out of personal choice was tolerated the most, and for reasons of normative community pressures was tolerated the least, with perceived reasons of religious and cultural identity enactment in between. Additionally, we found that higher (versus lower) authoritarian individuals were less likely to differentiate between the different reasons. In conclusion, perceived motives and authoritarianism are important to consider in understanding majority group members' tolerance of the headscarf.

## Introduction

Over the past decades, many West European debates about the Muslim headscarf evolve around the question whether a secular state conflicts with Muslim women wearing a headscarf in public positions (e.g., civil servants, police officers, teachers). In these public and political debates, questions are raised about whether women wear a headscarf out of their own free choice or rather because of religious community pressures (Howard, 2012). For instance, liberals as well as some feminists have opposed the headscarf because it allegedly would symbolize gender inequality and Muslimas' lack of free choice (Everett et al., 2015; Fasel et al., 2013; Gustavsson et al., 2016; Lettinga & Saharso, 2014; Nussbaum, 2014). In addition to considerations of personal choice and community pressures, the debates also involve questions related to religious freedom and cultural traditions, as Muslim women are also considered to wear a headscarf for reasons of religious or cultural identity enactment (Howard, 2012).

The perception whether a headscarf is worn out of free choice, community pressure or for religious or cultural reasons is likely to matter for the public's tolerance or intolerance of the headscarf. However, research on people's attitudes toward the Muslim headscarf

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(e.g., Fasel et al., 2013; Gustavsson et al., 2016; Unkelbach et al., 2010; Van der Noll, 2010) has not systematically examined whether these reasons have an impact on people's acceptance. Yet, such reason-related variance would indicate that anti-veil attitudes are not solely based on, for instance, prejudicial feelings towards Muslims, but also depend on the perceived reasons that Muslim women have for wearing a headscarf.

Using a well-powered survey-embedded experiment among large national samples of German and Dutch majority group members, we examine their perceptions of four main reasons that Muslim civil servants may have for wearing a headscarf (Droogsma, 2007; Motivaction, 2011; Zempi, 2016): reasons of personal choice, normative expectations from their Muslim community, cultural identity enactment, and religious identity enactment. Considering the western liberal emphasis on individual autonomy and self-determination, we expected that perceiving the wearing of a headscarf as a personal choice will be tolerated the most and for reasons of normative pressure the least, with reasons of cultural and religious identity enactment in between. Additionally, we examined whether the effect of the perceived reasons for wearing a headscarf on tolerance depend on individual differences in authoritarian predisposition. Authoritarian individuals can be expected to generally be less tolerant of the headscarf as they are more likely to perceive it to be threatening to existing cultural norms and social cohesion, independently of what the perceived reason is for wearing the headscarf (Crawford & Pilanski, 2014; Duckitt, 2006). We thus expected that higher, compared to lower, authoritarians are less likely to differentiate between the perceived reasons in their tolerance judgements.

This research aims to make a novel empirical contribution to the literature on intergroup tolerance and tolerance of Muslim minority practices in particular (Adelman & Verkuyten, 2020; Gieling et al., 2010; Helbling, 2014; Van der Noll, 2014). This literature has examined general tolerance (Velthuis et al., 2021) as well as practice-related and situation-related variance in tolerance, showing that tolerance depends on the type of practice that people are asked to tolerate (e.g., the wearing of a headscarf, or not shaking hands with someone of the opposite gender; Adelman & Verkuyten, 2020; Dangubić et al., 2022) and the situation (e.g., public, private) in which a particular practice occurs (Stouffer, 1955; Velthuis et al., 2022). However, research has not investigated whether majority group members consider in their tolerance judgments the perceived reasons that minority members have for engaging in particular practices. We focus on majority group members' perceptions of Muslim women as civil servants, because the wearing of a headscarf in public positions tends to be contested most in Western societies (Human Rights Watch, 2009; Pew Research Center, 2005), and many majority members have negative feelings towards the headscarf and towards Muslims (Strabac & Listhaug, 2008; Strabac et al., 2016). For instance, the Netherlands has seen many debates on the national and local level about whether the headscarf should be allowed for police or investigating officers (Dutch Broadcasting Foundation, 2021). Therefore, the wearing of headscarves by civil servants provides a relevant context for investigating whether perceptions about the reasons for wearing a headscarf matter for majority members' tolerance. Furthermore, this focus implies that we can make a novel contribution to the literature by systematically examining whether there is reason-related variance in tolerance while keeping the specific practice and situational context constant.

### Tolerance and perceived reasons for wearing a headscarf

Muslim women tend to have different and often multiple reasons for wearing a headscarf. Qualitative research has shown, for example, that Muslimas indicate autonomous motivations as well as reasons related to cultural traditions, religious beliefs and community expectations (e.g., Hoekstra & Verkuyten, 2015; Howard, 2012; Legate et al., 2020; Ruby, 2006; Safdar & Jassi, 2021; Wagner et al., 2012). Our focus, however, is not on the perspective of Muslimas but rather on how reasons for the wearing of the headscarf are presented in public and political debates and considered by majority group members. For example, politicians tend to emphasize one particular reason to frame the wearing of the headscarf, such as 'submissive' compliance with normative community pressures or in terms of self-determination and freedom of choice (Lettinga & Saharso, 2014). These perceived reasons are also found among majority group members. For instance, an investigation in the Netherlands showed that 70% of Dutch young women think that Turkish-Dutch and Moroccan-Dutch Muslimas wear a headscarf because it is "part of their Moroccan or Turkish culture" (Motivaction, 2011). Furthermore, they also think that it is obligatory within Islam or part of Muslimas' identity, and 30% of the Dutch women think that Muslimas are forced by their community to wear a headscarf (Motivaction, 2011). This indicates that majority members perceive different reasons that Muslimas can have for wearing a headscarf and we systematically examined whether these perceived reasons matter for their tolerance.

How majority group members in western societies evaluate these different reasons might partly be based on whether these resonate less or more strongly with liberal values. Values such as personal autonomy and self-determination are key to liberal democracies (Gustavsson, 2015; Putnam, 2000; Welzel & Inglehart, 2008), and an alleged lack of individual autonomy is used in public debates to criticize the Muslim headscarf as a symbol of oppression of women (cf. Galeotti, 2015). Based on these liberal values and self-determination theory that argues for the critical importance of individual autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 2012), we reason that people will accept the Muslim headscarf for a civil servant the most if it is considered to reflect personal freedom and autonomous choice (Legate et al., 2020). There are a few empirical studies which indicate the importance of perceived reasons for the tolerance of Muslim minority practices. For example, Gieling et al. (2010) found that Dutch adolescents were more tolerant of minority practices which they interpreted in terms of personal autonomy (e.g., students in school wearing a headscarf) than those interpreted in terms of social conventions (e.g., the founding of Islamic schools). Further, Everett et al. (2015) found that wearing a full-face veil for reasons of self-expression led to more positive attitudes (i.e., rating communication and quality of imagined contact) among British students compared to when it was framed as a symbol of submission. In the current study we focused on different perceived reasons for wearing a headscarf and we expected higher tolerance for the headscarf that is considered to be worn by a civil servant for reasons of personal choice compared to the other three reasons (normative, cultural, religious; *Hypothesis 1a*).

In Western Europe, the Muslim headscarf is sometimes portrayed as a symbol of community oppression of women, and women

being socially pressured into wearing a headscarf is a key argument put forward in favor of a ban on headscarves (Howard, 2012). People being pressured, controlled and sanctioned by community members goes against the liberal principle of individual autonomy and choice. Perceiving a headscarf to be worn because of community norms and sanctions can be expected to elicit relatively low tolerance because it most clearly involves a lack of personal self-determination. In contrast, wearing a headscarf for reasons of cultural or religious identity enactment implies the wish to express one's traditions or beliefs. Although this can also involve expectations of community members, it does not have to involve outward compliance and social sanctions. Thus, we expected lower tolerance for the headscarf considered to be worn by a civil servant because of normative community expectations than for reasons of cultural or religious identity enactment (*Hypothesis 1b*).

Lastly, we explored whether there is a difference in tolerating the wearing of a headscarf for perceived reasons of cultural or religious identity enactment. On the one hand, it might be that people are more willing to accept religious than cultural identity enactment because the former raises considerations of religious freedom, which is a key aspect of liberal democracy (Ahdar & Leigh, 2013). On the other hand, it might be the case that both religious and cultural identity enactment are evaluated similarly, because majority group members consider both to be comparable from the perspective of recognizing and celebrating diversity, inclusion and multiculturalism.

### Authoritarian predisposition

There is a large literature that links the concept of (right-wing) authoritarianism to outgroup prejudice, intolerance of minority groups (e.g., Crawford & Pilanski, 2014; Duckitt, 2006) and also anti-veil attitudes (Fasel et al., 2013). The literature on authoritarianism is broad and focuses on various dimensions and aspects (Stenner, 2005). However, recent conceptualizations of authoritarianism are based on the notion of a general underlying tension between the goals of personal autonomy on the one hand and social conformity on the other (Feldman, 2003; Stenner, 2005). Specifically, authoritarians are considered to emphasize and value conformity and cohesion over personal autonomy and self-direction (Feldman, 2003; Stenner, 2005). Their striving for conformity typically implies that they try to minimize diversity in beliefs, norms and values. Indeed research has shown that authoritarian individuals display stronger reactions in the face of events they perceive to be threatening, such as cultural diversity (Kauff et al., 2013). As a result, they tend to be intolerant of groups that are dissimilar to them in norms and values, and especially of minority groups that are considered to undermine social conformity and the normative order of society (Feldman, 2020; Kauff et al., 2013; Van Assche et al., 2019). Authoritarians are less concerned about personal autonomy and can be expected to perceive a Muslim civil servant wearing a headscarf as challenging dominant cultural norms and values (Gieling et al., 2010). This means that authoritarians might be less likely to take the specific reasons that Muslim women can have for wearing a headscarf into account. They may thus be rather intolerant of the headscarf no matter what the perceived reasons are for wearing it. We therefore expected that higher, compared to lower, authoritarians differentiate less in their tolerance of the different perceived reasons for the wearing of a headscarf (moderation effect of authoritarianism; *Hypothesis 2*). Importantly, we tested this hypothesis using an experimental design which means that we can systematically examine whether higher and lower authoritarians respond differently to the various reasons, rather than authoritarianism causing different perceptions of why Muslim civil servants wear a headscarf.

### The two countries

The expectations were tested among majority group members in the Netherlands and Germany. In these neighboring countries there are Muslim minority groups that have a history of 'guest worker' migration originating, for example, from Turkey. Both countries are historically Christian nations that have increasingly become secular (De Hart, 2014), and Islam is the second largest religion with Muslims comprising approximately 5% to 6% of the population (Hackett et al., 2019; Haug et al., 2009; Huijnk, 2018). In political and public debates in both countries, reference to a Judeo-Christian national identity and tradition, especially in contrast to Islam, has become increasingly common (Van den Hemel, 2014). The presence of Islam and its religious practices in public spaces has been contested (Cinalli & Giugni, 2013). For instance, a majority of the public in Germany and the Netherlands has been found to favor a ban on headscarves in public places (Van der Noll, 2010).

However, there are also some differences between the countries with regard to citizenship regimes and regulations on the wearing of headscarves in public positions. Whereas in the Netherlands, civil servants are allowed to wear a headscarf (Lettinga & Saharso, 2014; Selby, 2015), in Germany there have been differences between the regional states, some of which (temporarily) banned the headscarf for teachers and government officials (Human Rights Watch, 2009; Selby, 2015). Such country differences in regulation make it especially relevant to explore whether there are differences between Dutch and German majority members in the relationships between perceived reasons for the wearing of a headscarf and their tolerance levels. As a robustness check and for exploring country similarities and differences, we examined whether the effect of the perceived reasons for wearing a headscarf on tolerance generalizes across both countries.

### Method

#### Data and participants

The measures used for this study were part of a large-scale survey in which a group of researchers was involved and different topics related to cultural diversity and intergroup attitudes were examined (e.g., attitudes towards disruptive protest actions, self-

affirmation). After receiving approval from the Faculty of Social and Behavioral Sciences at Utrecht University (FETC20-057), data were collected among majority members (i.e., both parents born) in the Netherlands ( $N = 1688$ ) and in Germany ( $N = 2046$ ). Twenty-eight people who indicated they were Muslim were removed from the data set, leaving  $N = 3734$  in total.

In the Netherlands, in 2019 initially 3800 respondents were invited to take part in an online survey, of which 1688 non-Muslims completed the survey. The response rate was 44% which is common in large scale survey research (Stoop et al., 2010). The sample was drawn from the *Kantar NIPObase* panel and was representative of the Dutch adult population in terms of gender, age, level of education, size of household and region. At the same time, a German sample was drawn from the *Lightspeed GMI's MySurvey* panel via a stratification procedure on the basis of population ratios of gender, age, and level of education. Participants were on average 51 years old ( $SD = 17$ ; range 18-100), 50% female, and 47% was not religious. With regard to education, 30.5% of the participants was lower educated, 32.6% had an average level of education, and 36.9% was higher educated.

### Design and measures

To manipulate the perceived reasons for wearing a headscarf, we used a survey-embedded experiment, which is recognized as a powerful mean for combining the internal validity of an experimental design with the possibility to draw generalizable conclusions about social attitudes and beliefs (Schlueter & Schmidt, 2010; Sniderman, 2018). A between-subjects experimental design with four randomly assigned conditions was used to manipulate the perceived reason why a headscarf was worn by a civil servant. Based on previous research (e.g., Hindriks et al., 2017), vignettes with concrete situations were used to enhance the ecological validity of the experiment (Steiner et al., 2016). Each vignette introduced a fictitious interview about “being Muslim in [the Netherlands/Germany], which was recently published in a well-known newspaper”. The fictitious interview was with a thirty-year-old woman called Fatma who was born in [the Netherlands/Germany]. In the interview she indicated that she wears a headscarf and was asked to explain “why she always wears a headscarf, also at work as a civil servant at the municipality”. The vignettes differed in terms of the reason Fatma gave for wearing a headscarf (the full text of the vignettes can be found in the [Supplementary material](#)). After completing the survey, participants were debriefed about the nature of the study.

In the *personal choice* condition ( $n = 945$ ), the wearing of the headscarf was explained in terms of individual choice and self-determination: “That is a purely personal choice, my own choice. I just think it is beautiful and that it suits me. It is a part of who I am and want to be as a person, and you should always be able to show that, such as with a headscarf”.

In the *normative expectations* condition ( $n = 895$ ), Fatma stated “That is because of the expectations in my community. If you do not wear a headscarf, people will gossip and talk bad about you. So that is why I wear a headscarf”.

In the *religious identity enactment* condition ( $n = 933$ ), Fatma emphasized that she wears a headscarf to express her religious identity: “That is because of my religion. Your religion teaches you what is good and bad, and shapes your identity. It is your identity and you should always be able to show that, such as with a headscarf”.

In the *cultural identity enactment* condition ( $n = 961$ ) and for making the distinction with religious identity enactment clear, she explained that she wore a headscarf by answering “it is not because of my religion, but because of the traditions in my culture. Your culture defines who you are, is your identity, and you should always be able to show that, such as with a headscarf”.

*Tolerance of the headscarf* was assessed with two items based on previous research (e.g., Velthuis et al., 2022) which explicitly assessed tolerance as acceptance despite objection (Verkuyten & Yogeeswaran, 2017): “To what extent do you think that wearing a headscarf by civil servants for this reason should be accepted, even when one is negative about it?” (response scale ranged from 1 = *certainly not accept it* to 7 = *certainly accept it*). The other item was: “Do you think it is OK that Muslim civil servants like Fatma wear a headscarf for this reason?” (response scale ranged from 1 = *totally not OK* to 7 = *totally OK*). The items were averaged into a single score ( $r = .82$ ).

*Authoritarianism* was measured before the experimental manipulation with an extended version of the “child-rearing preference” measure (Feldman, 2003, 2020; Stenner, 2005; Velez & Lavine, 2017). This measure is a trade-off between stimulating the value of social conformity versus autonomy in socializing children (Feldman, 2003). The items do not make reference to any social groups, events or actors, which means that the scale is not confounded with the attitudes towards minority groups and practices that one wants to explain (Stenner, 2005). Participants were presented with four pairs of qualities children could be taught (for instance, ‘obey the rules’ versus ‘follow own conscience’) and for each of the pairs they were asked which one they considered to be more important. Subsequently, participants ranked how much more important they found this quality on a 3-point scale (*slightly more important*, *more important*, or *much more important* than the other quality). Combining the answers to both questions for a given pair of qualities created a six-point response scale. The four items were averaged to create a scale ( $\alpha = .69$ ) on which a higher score indicated a stronger authoritarian disposition.

## Results

### Preliminary analyses

First, we found that the four experimental groups of participants did not differ significantly ( $p_s > .053$ ) in gender, age, level of education (nine categories comparable to the international ISCED measure), religious affiliation (0 = *no*, 1 = *yes*), authoritarianism, and general feelings towards Muslims as a group of people (measured on a ‘feeling thermometer’ ranging from 0° to 100°, with 50° explicitly indicated as neutral feelings, Alwin, 1997). This indicates that the experimental randomization was successful and that any differences found in tolerance between the four experimental conditions cannot be attributed to condition differences in these

variables, including general feelings towards Muslims.

Second, we conducted confirmatory factor analysis [CFA] in *Mplus* (version 7.3, Muthén & Muthén, 1998–2012) to check whether the items loaded on the respective constructs they were expected to measure: tolerance and authoritarianism. The proposed two-factor model had a good fit to the data,  $\chi^2(8) = 45, p < .001$ ; CFI = 0.99; TLI = 0.99; RMSEA = 0.04 [0.03–0.05]; SRMR = 0.02. No modifications were made, and all standardized factor loadings were above .50 (Kline, 2016). An alternative one-factor model had a worse fit,  $\Delta\chi^2(1) = 3967, p < .001$ .

Third, we tested for measurement invariance in *Mplus*, to examine whether the constructs had a similar meaning in both countries. We consecutively tested for configural, metric, scalar and full uniqueness invariance by means of a multiple-group CFA (Van de Schoot et al., 2012). The model in which scalar invariance was assumed indicated a good fit (see Table 1). This implies that measures were similarly interpreted in both countries and that we could use a pooled sample (Germany and the Netherlands) for the analyses. Thus, the results below are reported for the pooled sample of Dutch and German participants.

### Descriptive findings

On average tolerance of the headscarf ( $M = 3.66, SD = 2.02$ ) was significantly below the neutral midpoint of the scale,  $t(3733) = -10.43, p < .001$ , implying that people were generally intolerant of a Muslim woman wearing a headscarf as a civil servant. Further, people were somewhat authoritarian in their orientation, as the mean ( $M = 3.95, SD = 1.01$ ) was significantly above the neutral midpoint of the scale,  $t(3733) = 26.95, p < .001$ . The correlation between tolerance and authoritarianism was negative but not very strong,  $r = -.18, p < .001$ .

### Tolerance and perceived reason for wearing a headscarf

A one-way ANOVA was performed in SPSS (version 24.0) with ‘reason’ as an experimental between-subjects factor. The findings indicated that tolerance of the headscarf did significantly differ by the perceived reason for wearing the headscarf,  $F(3, 3730) = 17.60, p < .001, \eta^2 = .01$  (see Fig. 1). Subsequently and to test the specific hypotheses, we used three planned (orthogonal) contrasts. We first (*H1a*) compared the personal choice condition (+3) with all other conditions (three times, -1). Second (*H1b*), we compared the normative condition (-2) with the religious (+1) and cultural conditions (+1) combined (personal choice = 0). The last contrast explored the difference between the religious (+1) versus cultural (-1) condition (other two conditions = 0). Since the first two contrasts were planned and involve directional hypotheses, one-tailed *p*-values were considered (Field, 2009).

As expected (*H1a*), the wearing of a headscarf that was considered as a personal choice ( $M = 3.94, SD = 2.11$ ) was tolerated significantly more than (the average of) the other three reasons ( $M = 3.55, SD = 1.97$ ),  $t(1542) = 4.98, p < .001, d = 0.19$ . Second, and also as expected (*H1b*), considering a headscarf to be worn out of normative community pressures ( $M = 3.27, SD = 1.86$ ) led to lower tolerance compared to reasons of religious and cultural identity enactment ( $M = 3.70, SD = 2.03$ ),  $t(1895) = -5.46, p < .001, d = 0.22$ . Lastly, there was no significant difference in tolerance between religious ( $M = 3.70, SD = 2.04$ ) and cultural reasons ( $M = 3.69, SD = 2.01$ ),  $t(1888) = -0.20, p = .840, d = 0.00$ .<sup>5</sup>

### The role of authoritarianism

We performed an ANCOVA to test the moderating role of individual differences in authoritarianism (mean-centered score). The experimental condition was entered as a between-subjects factor, and authoritarianism as a covariate. First, the findings showed that participants who had a stronger authoritarian disposition were less tolerant of a civil servant wearing a headscarf,  $F(1, 3729) = 118.32, p < .001, \eta^2 = .03$ . More importantly, adding the interaction term between experimental condition and authoritarianism demonstrated that there was a small but significant interaction effect between authoritarianism and reason,  $F(3, 3726) = 4.39, p = .004, \eta^2 = .00$  (see Fig. 2). Simple slope analyses (Aiken et al., 1991), exploring the previously defined planned contrasts, demonstrated that there was a weaker effect of the perceived reasons on tolerance for high (+ 1 *SD*) authoritarians,  $F(3, 783) = 3.63, p = .013, \eta^2 = .01$ , than for people low (-1 *SD*) in authoritarianism,  $F(3, 563) = 7.94, p < .001, \eta^2 = .04$ . Thus as expected (*H2*), higher authoritarian individuals differentiated less in their (generally lower) tolerance of the perceived reasons to wear a headscarf.

For people with a lower authoritarian orientation, the pattern of findings for the different planned contrasts was similar to that of the total sample. However, for high authoritarians, the pattern changed, with cultural identity enactment ( $M = 2.92$ ) eliciting lowest tolerance and religious identity enactment ( $M = 3.42$ ) eliciting highest tolerance (significant difference,  $p = .010$ ). Perceiving a headscarf as a personal choice ( $M = 3.39$ ) was tolerated only marginally more than for the other reasons combined ( $M = 3.10, p = .080$ ), and considering it a normative community motive ( $M = 2.97$ ) was not tolerated less than for reasons of cultural and religious identity enactment together ( $M = 3.17, p = .264$ ). Since the mean scores for all conditions were below the midpoint of the scale, higher authoritarian individuals were intolerant of the headscarf in all cases.

<sup>5</sup> Additionally, as a robustness check, we investigated whether the results for *H1* were different for religiously affiliated and non-affiliated participants, as the headscarf is a religious practice, which might be evaluated differently by both groups of people (Fasel et al., 2013; Sleijpen et al., 2020). The findings of a two-way ANOVA (including religious affiliation as an additional factor, and the interaction between religious affiliation and reason) indicated that the effect of reasons on tolerance was not different for religiously affiliated ( $n = 1691$ ) compared to non-religiously affiliated participants ( $n = 1930$ ) (see Table A1 in Supplementary material).

**Table 1**  
Measurement invariance comparing six items (tolerance and authoritarianism) across the two countries (N = 3734).

	$\chi^2$	df	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	BIC	AIC
Configural invariance <sup>a</sup>	57 <sup>***</sup>	16	0.99	0.99	0.04	78,193	77,956
Metric invariance	77 <sup>***</sup>	20 <sup>b</sup>	0.99	0.99	0.04	78,180	77,968
Scalar invariance	131 <sup>***</sup>	24 <sup>c</sup>	0.98	0.98	0.05	78,200	78,013
Full invariance	302 <sup>***</sup>	30 <sup>d</sup>	0.96	0.96	0.07	78,322	78,173

For the German sample (n = 2046), the proposed two-factor structure had a good fit to the data,  $\chi^2(8) = 28, p < .001$ ; CFI = 0.99; TLI = 0.99; RMSEA = 0.04 [0.02–0.05]; SRMR = 0.02 (AIC = 43,977, BIC = 44,094). All standardized factor loadings were above .45.

Note. CFI = Comparative Fit Index; TLI = Tucker-Lewis Index; RMSEA = Root Mean Square Error of Approximation; BIC = Bayesian Information Criterion; AIC = Akaike Information Criterion.

\*\*\* p < .001.

<sup>a</sup> Two CFAs were also conducted separately for each country, and the model had a good fit in both groups: For the Dutch sample (n = 1688), the proposed two-factor structure had a good fit to the data,  $\chi^2(8) = 30, p < .001$ ; CFI = 0.99; TLI = 0.99; RMSEA = 0.04 [0.03–0.06]; SRMR = 0.02 (AIC = 33,979, BIC = 34,082). All standardized factor loadings were above .56.

<sup>b</sup>  $\Delta\chi^2(4) = 20, p < .001$  indicates that there was a significant difference between the configural and metric measurement invariance models.

<sup>c</sup>  $\Delta\chi^2(4) = 54, p < .001$  indicates that there was a significant difference between the metric and scalar measurement invariance models.

<sup>d</sup>  $\Delta\chi^2(6) = 171, p < .001$  indicates that there was a significant difference between the scalar and full measurement invariance models.

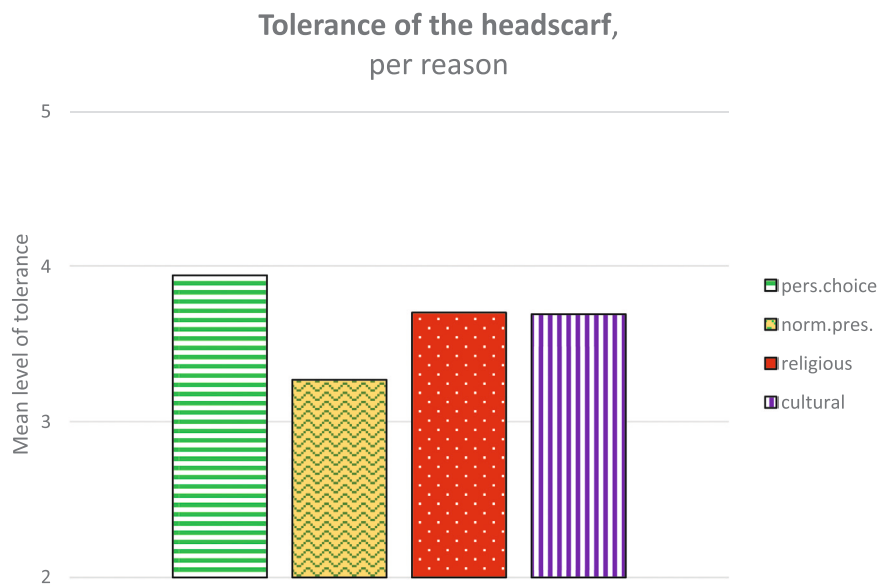


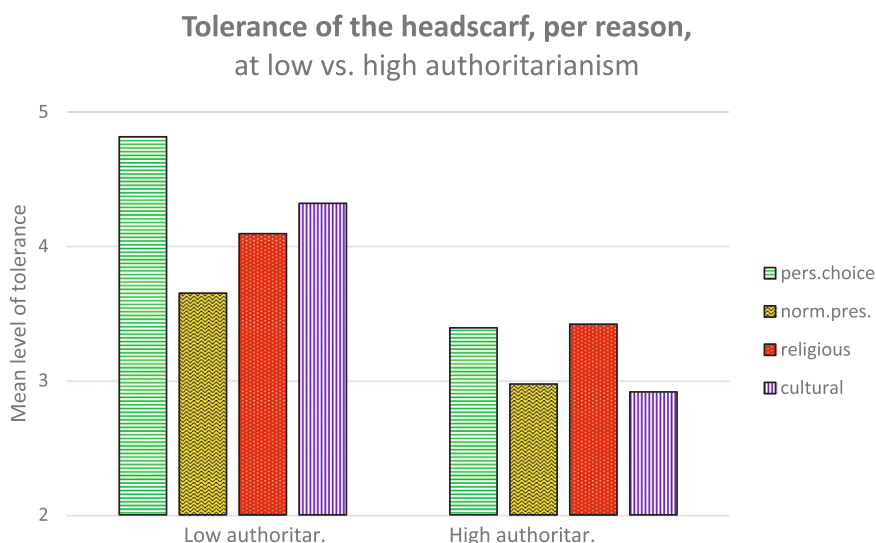
Fig. 1. Mean levels of tolerance of the headscarf, per reason.

The same interaction broken down reversely (i.e., authoritarianism-tolerance relation per condition) demonstrated that when the headscarf was perceived to be worn for religious reasons and out of normative pressure, the negative authoritarian-tolerance relation was weaker ( $\beta = -.13^{***}$  and  $\beta = -.11^{**}$  respectively) than when the headscarf was worn because of cultural traditions ( $\beta = -.24^{***}$ ) or as personal choice ( $\beta = -.24^{***}$ ). This implies that the degree of authoritarianism matters more for tolerance when the latter two reasons (personal and cultural) are salient compared to the former two (normative and religious) reasons.

*Country comparison*

As a robustness check we examined whether the results differed per country. First, we performed a two-way ANOVA with country and reason as factors and including its interaction term (exploring the previously defined contrasts). The findings showed, first, that there was no significant effect of country on tolerance,  $F(1, 3726) = 0.63, p = .429$ . Importantly, the interaction between the experimental manipulation and country also was not significant,  $F(3, 3726) = 1.53, p = .205$ , which indicates that the effect of the perceived reasons on tolerance was similar in both countries. The findings for the three contrasts were also the same in both countries. Thus both in the Netherlands and Germany, tolerance of the headscarf perceived to be worn for reasons of personal choice was highest and tolerance was lowest for normative community expectations, with no significant differences between reasons of religious and cultural identity enactment.

Second, we conducted a two-way ANCOVA with country and reason as factors and authoritarianism as covariate, including all two-way interactions and the three-way interaction (country x reason x authoritarianism). The results demonstrated that there was no



**Fig. 2.** Mean levels of tolerance of the headscarf per reason, as a function of authoritarianism.

significant three-way interaction effect,  $F(3, 3718) = 0.25, p = .861$ , which indicates that the role of authoritarianism for tolerance of the different reasons to wear a headscarf was similar in both countries.

## Discussion

In many European societies, minority practices such as Muslim women wearing a headscarf in public positions have become hotly debated issues. In public and political debates the headscarf has often been either rejected as a symbol of community oppression or accepted as a sign of personal choice and self-determination (Everett et al., 2015). Furthermore, majority group members often think that Muslimas wear a headscarf because it is part of their cultural identity, or because of religious reasons, or rather that they do so for reasons of community pressures (Motivaction, 2011).

Using a well-powered experiment in two countries, the current study tried to provide a more nuanced understanding of majority group members' tolerance of the headscarf by examining the influence of perceived reasons for a Muslim civil servant wearing a headscarf (personal choice, normative community expectations, religious and cultural identity enactment). Previous research has investigated people's attitudes toward the headscarf (e.g., Fasel et al., 2013; Gustavsson et al., 2016; Unkelbach et al., 2010; Van der Noll, 2010), and some research has considered motives to wear the headscarf and its effect on intergroup attitudes (Everett et al., 2015; Gieling et al., 2010; Legate et al., 2020). In the current study we experimentally examined the effect of four different reasons for wearing a headscarf on tolerance of majority members in the Netherlands and Germany.

The findings revealed that on average people expressed low tolerance of a Muslim civil servant wearing a headscarf, which corresponds to the anti-Muslim feelings that exist in Western Europe (Strabac & Listhaug, 2008; Strabac et al., 2016). However, the perceived reason for wearing a headscarf had an impact on the degree of tolerance. Specifically, and as expected, a headscarf that was perceived to be worn out of personal choice was tolerated significantly more than for other reasons, which is largely in line with Gieling et al. (2010) who found that Dutch adolescents were more tolerant of minority practices interpreted in terms of personal autonomy versus social conventions. Further, wearing a headscarf because of normative pressures from the community elicited significantly lower tolerance than for reasons of religious and cultural identity enactment. The finding that people were most tolerant of the headscarf when it was perceived as a personal choice and least accepting when it allegedly involved community pressures, is in line with personal autonomy being a central liberal value in western societies (Gustavsson, 2015; Putnam, 2000; Welzel & Inglehart, 2008) and with self-determination theory which posits that individual autonomy is a central concern for most people (Deci & Ryan, 2012). The reason-related variance in tolerance indicates that anti-veil attitudes are not solely based on, for instance, negative feelings towards Muslims (Dangubić et al., 2022) or the public or private situation in which women wear a headscarf (Velthuis et al., 2022), but also depend on the perceived reasons that Muslimas have for wearing a headscarf. Thus, the findings demonstrate the importance of considering the perceived reasons for engaging in specific minority practices for people's tolerance (Litchmore & Safdar, 2016). Dutch and also German officials (e.g., in government policy and regulation) tend to make claims about why Muslimas wear a headscarf. Also, in political and public debates and the media specific reasons are put forward (Lettinga & Saharso, 2014). Our findings show that these claims and the framing of these debates matter for majority members' tolerance.

However, there were no differences in tolerance between reasons of religious or cultural identity enactment. Apparently, participants perceived these two forms of identity enactment similarly, even though in the experimental manipulation both were explicitly contrasted. A likely reason is that both forms of minority identity enactment are perceived through the same lens of cultural diversity recognition. Yet, it is also possible that participants in the cultural identity enactment condition were responding more to the sentence

“that is not because of my religion...”, than specifically to “...because of the traditions in my culture”. Thus we cannot be fully certain that the tolerance of the headscarf worn out of religious and cultural identity enactment is similar, or, partly, due to the experimental manipulation that made participants differentiate less between those two conditions. Nevertheless, we used this manipulation because this enabled us to clearly distinguish between the vignettes about cultural and religious identity enactment.

Furthermore, our results indicated that for authoritarian participants the difference between the two forms of identity enactment did matter for their tolerance. We found that high authoritarians were less tolerant of a headscarf for perceived reasons of cultural identity enactment compared to religious identity enactment. The finding that authoritarians were more negative of minority practices that they perceive as cultural traditions potentially threatening social cohesion (versus religious practices), is in line with previous research showing that authoritarians value group cohesion, cultural conformity and tend to be religious (Feldman, 2020; Stenner, 2005). Furthermore, high authoritarian individuals were not less tolerant when the headscarf was perceived to be worn for normative community reasons compared to identity enactment. This is in line with the literature that shows that authoritarians are conventionalists who adhere to societal norms (Stenner, 2005). Also, authoritarians tolerated a headscarf as a personal choice only marginally more than the three other perceived reasons to wear a headscarf, which is in line with their previously established preference of social conformity over personal autonomy (Feldman, 2003). Thus, in general and as expected, higher compared to lower authoritarians were not only less tolerant but also differentiated less in their tolerance of the perceived reasons to wear a headscarf. These findings support the notion that more authoritarian people value social conformity and cohesion over diversity and personal autonomy (Feldman, 2020; Kauff et al., 2013; Van Assche et al., 2019). We built on this literature by using an experimental design which enabled us to systematically examine whether higher and lower authoritarians respond differently to the reasons, rather than their predisposition causing different perceived reasons why Muslims would wear a headscarf.

Additionally, we explored possible country differences in tolerance, in the effect of the reasons on tolerance, as well as in the moderating role of authoritarianism. Since there were no significant country differences, it can be concluded that the Dutch and German majority group members endorsed similar tolerance levels, and similarly considered the reasons for their tolerance of the headscarf, and that authoritarianism played a similar role in both countries.

## Limitations

The current study is the first to systematically examine the importance of various perceived reasons for people’s tolerance of a Muslim civil servant wearing a headscarf and thus makes a novel contribution to the literature. However, there are several limitations which may give directions for future research. First, the effect sizes of the findings were small (Lakens, 2013), which might be due to the use of survey experiments that have relatively subtle experimental manipulations (Sniderman, 2018). Participants simply were asked to read a fictitious interview in which only a few sentences differed per condition. However, compared to laboratory experiments, survey experiments with national samples are recognized as a powerful means for combining the internal validity of an experimental design with the possibility to draw generalizable conclusions about social attitudes and beliefs (Schlueter & Schmidt, 2010; Sniderman, 2018). Furthermore, small effects can be of theoretical and practical importance (Götz et al., 2021). The fact that our manipulation showed the expected effects, and consistently in both countries, suggests that even simple online information about underlying motivations can influence the degree to which individuals tolerate Muslim civil servants wearing a headscarf. It is likely that more extensive procedures with more vivid (visual, auditory) manipulations yield stronger effects. However, small effect sizes also indicate that there are other factors at play. Future research could for instance examine the role of endorsing liberal and secular values, open-mindedness, as well as frequency and quality of the contacts one has with Muslim citizens, for tolerance of Muslim civil servants wearing a headscarf.

Second, the four experimental vignettes described four different motivations for wearing a headscarf, but in practice Muslimas can have multiple and possibly intersecting reasons – including exhibiting modesty (Ruby, 2006), more political reasons (Afshar, 2008), or a sense of belonging to the transnational Muslim community (Zempi, 2016), which we did not examine. However, we studied the perceived reasons from a majority perspective, focusing on the ways in which majority members respond to the different reasons. We concentrated on four main reasons, informed by previous research among Muslimas (Droogsma, 2007; Ruby, 2006; Wagner et al., 2012; Zempi, 2016), as well as by public and political debates in which people typically present and consider one particular reason for making a claim or framing the issue about the wearing of a headscarf (Lettinga & Saharso, 2014; Motivaction, 2011). Our findings show that the different reasons matter for majority members’ tolerance, but we did not have a control condition in which no reasons were mentioned. This means that we do not know whether mentioning a reason per se has an effect on people’s tolerance compared to their tolerance of the headscarf regardless of the reasons for wearing it. Furthermore, the vignettes specifically concentrated on a civil servant wearing a headscarf, which is an important but also specific situation. We focused on this situation because much of the heated public and political debate is about the wearing of a headscarf in these sorts of public positions and in similar institutions, and, moreover, it allowed us to systematically examine the importance of perceived reasons without introducing context-variation (Velthuis et al., 2022). However, future research could examine whether the perceived reasons for wearing a headscarf matter in a similar way for tolerance in other (e.g., educational) contexts.

Third, although we studied large national samples from the Netherlands and Germany and found no substantial differences between the countries, this does not have to mean that the findings generalize to other European countries. For example, the pattern of results could be different in countries such as France in which the debate on the Muslim headscarf in relation to liberal and secular values is especially strong, or in the United Kingdom in which the Muslim population has a different ethnic background and the emphasis is more on multicultural accommodation. Thus it is possible that in some countries there are less, or more, pronounced differences in tolerance depending on the perceived reasons to wear a headscarf, and future research could examine country



differences.

## Conclusion

In an experimental study among large national samples from the Netherlands and Germany, we found that the perception of the reasons that Muslim civil servants have for wearing a headscarf matter for majority members' tolerance of the headscarf. A headscarf perceived to be worn as a personal choice elicited highest tolerance and out of normative community pressure elicited lowest tolerance, with reasons of religious and cultural identity enactment in between. Furthermore, for higher (versus lower) authoritarians the perceived reasons mattered less for their, generally lower, tolerance of the headscarf. The findings provide a more nuanced understanding of majority members' tolerance of the Muslim headscarf and thereby make a novel contribution to the research literature on attitudes towards Muslim minorities and the continuing debate about the accommodation of Muslim minorities in western liberal democracies.

## Declaration of interest

None.

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## Appendix A. Supplementary material

Supplementary data associated with this article can be found in the online version at [doi:10.1016/j.ijintrel.2022.07.009](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2022.07.009).

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