



Belonging amidst bias: The impact of perceived discrimination on Muslim youth in Aotearoa/New Zealand

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Abstract

As Aotearoa's Muslim immigrant population grows, this study investigates how perceived discrimination affects sense of belonging among Muslim youth. Using the Rejection-Identification Model (RIM), we surveyed 258 Muslim immigrants between the ages of 16 and 29 in urban settings. Hierarchical linear regression and mediation analyses revealed that perceived discrimination negatively affects sense of belonging with the larger society of Aotearoa, aligning with RIM predictions. However, contrary to RIM expectations, experiencing discrimination did not enhance belonging to the Muslim community but rather diminished it. These findings challenge RIM's universal applicability by suggesting the relationship between discrimination and belonging is more context-dependent than previously theorised. Such understanding underscores the importance of targeted interventions to reduce discrimination and promote inclusivity among Muslim youth in Aotearoa.

Keywords: sense of belonging, Muslim youth, immigrants and refugees, Aotearoa, perception of discrimination, rejection-identification model

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Introduction

Discrimination in various forms—from explicit bias or prejudice to more subtle, harmful expressions, poses a significant risk to young Muslims in various regions of the Western countries (Stuart & Ward, 2018; Berry & Sabatier, 2010; Brinbaum et al., 2018).

Discrimination can profoundly affect individuals across multiple facets of their lives, including mental health, physical well-being, social connections, economic prospects, and overall sense of belonging (Tineo et al., 2021; Berry & Sabatier, 2010). It can engender feelings of alienation, marginalisation, and disempowerment, eroding trust and confidence in the host society (Van Heelsum & Koomen, 2018; Moscato et al., 2014). Discriminatory experiences impact various areas such as education, employment, housing, and social interactions (Ward et al., 2019; Salahshour & Boamah, 2020). Perceived discrimination is a complex, multifaceted phenomenon that extends beyond overt acts of bias or prejudice; it involves an individual's subjective interpretation of unequal treatment based on inherent attributes such as ethnicity, race, religious beliefs, or gender (Liu et al., 2014). This perception can lead to significant detrimental effects on mental and physical health—including depression, anxiety, stress, and cardiovascular complications—and can substantially diminish an individual's feeling of acceptance and value within a broader social group or community (Berry & Sabatier, 2010; Ward et al., 2019; Allen et al., 2021).

The sources and types of discrimination can vary from interpersonal interactions to institutional policies and practices, which can range from overt bias to subtle or covert discrimination (Fibbi et al., 2021). Various factors can shape how individuals perceive discrimination, including their awareness and sensitivity to discrimination, knowledge and beliefs about their rights, and exposure to information and narratives about discrimination (Slootman, 2018; Boamah & Salahshour, 2022). It can also be influenced by their personal experiences, observations, interactions with others, and how they interpret and evaluate these experiences and observations (Lutterbach & Beelmann, 2021; Berry & Sabatier, 2010). When dealing with discrimination, these individuals tend to negotiate their belonging to their ethnic-religious communities and the wider society (Stuart et al., 2020; Maliepaard & Verkuyten, 2018; Verkuyten & Yildiz, 2007) to reduce the adverse consequences of discrimination and promote their well-being. The next section will explore the responses of Muslim immigrants to discrimination, focusing on how perception of

religious discrimination shapes their sense of belonging.

Belonging to a religious group provides emotional support, a sense of identity, and a buffer against discrimination (Jasperse et al., 2012). It helps maintain self-esteem and well-being (Haslam & Reicher, 2006). For Muslim immigrants, their sense of belonging is particularly influenced by cultural and religious practices, (Antonsich, 2022; Rizzo et al., 2020; Repke & Benet-Martinez, 2019), but also by their belonging to the wider Aotearoa/New Zealand society. Creating the challenges to navigate their multiple identities (Colombo & Rebughini, 2012) and foster a sense of inclusion and acceptance in a multicultural environment.

What happens when minorities experience discrimination, such as based on their religious group membership? The Rejection-Identification Model (RIM), a psychological theory that explores how perceived discrimination affects group identification (Branscombe et al., 1999), suggests that discrimination leads to a dual process: on one hand, it decreases the individual's identification with the broader society, and on the other hand, it increases their identification with their in-group (e.g., ethnic or religious group) as a coping mechanism. For example, Branscombe et al. (1999) found that African Americans who perceived racial discrimination were more likely to identify strongly with their racial group. This increased group identification serves as a buffer against the negative psychological impacts of discrimination, providing emotional support and a sense of belonging (Haslam & Reicher, 2006; Jasperse et al., 2012).

Responses to Discrimination and Prejudice: Sense of Belonging to the Wider Society and the Muslim Community

The RIM model suggests that although discrimination being perceived as unfavourable, it has the potential to strengthen an individual's sense of belonging to their ethno-religious groups (Branscombe et al., 1999). It serves as a defence mechanism against the detrimental impacts of discrimination (Haslam & Reicher, 2006; Jasperse et al., 2012). Over time, the RIM has evolved through contributions from several scholars (Verkuyten, 2007; Jasinskaja-Lahti et al., 2009). Initially, the RIM was associated with an increased sense of identification with one's ethnic or religious communities due to exclusion (Branscombe et al., 1999). Nonetheless, the advancement of RIM has fostered a greater feeling of connection to one's community and indicated a decrease in association



with national identity as a consequence of exclusion (Verkuyten & Yildiz, 2007). In summary, the RIM now demonstrates both an increased connection with the ethnic/religious community and a decreased identification with the wider country of residency identity.

Prior research has shown that experiencing discrimination can lead individuals to feel less attached to the national culture and identity, but more connected to their ethnic or religious communities (Dingoyan et al., 2022; Barlow et al., 2012). It is evident that immigrants who suffer discrimination based on their cultural background are unlikely to feel a sense of belonging in their new society. Further, a study within the Arab-American community suggests that Arab-Americans who perceived social rejection tended to reject identification with their host society and instead strongly associated themselves with their religious community.

However, recent studies have questioned the validity of the RIM's projection, indicating that perceived discrimination does not necessarily lead to heightened identification with one's own group or diminished identification with the host society ((Bender et al., 2022, Dingoyan et al., 2022; Barlow et al., 2012). For example, Stuart et al. (2020) examined how discrimination affects the identities of young Muslims in the UK concerning their British and Muslim heritage. Their findings revealed that individual discrimination did not affect Muslim identity. However, they found that group-based discrimination improved Muslim identity. Similarly, studies conducted by Wiley et al. (2013) and Giuliani et al. (2018) have challenged the notion that perceived discrimination invariably strengthens in-group identification. These authors argue that discrimination and group identification are more complex and context-dependent than the original propositions of the Rejection-Identification Model (RIM) suggest. They propose that multiple mediators may influence how and when perceived discrimination affects an individual's sense of belonging to the broader society. Factors such as coping mechanisms, the type and severity of discrimination, and the social and cultural context play a crucial role in shaping this relationship (Bender et al., 2022).

Nevertheless, despite these challenges of the RIM, the theoretical framework remains a valuable tool for studying the experiences of young Muslims in Western societies, especially since previous studies have highlighted the importance of specific personal and contextual elements that can lessen or influence

the effect of perceived discrimination on feelings of inclusion.

In summary, the literature highlights the complex and multifaceted nature of perceived discrimination and its significant impact on mental and physical health, as well as the sense of belonging among individuals. The Rejection-Identification Model (RIM) provides a valuable framework for understanding how perceived discrimination affects group identification, suggesting a dual process where discrimination decreases identification with the broader society and increases identification with one's in-group. However, the literature also reveals gaps and inconsistencies, indicating that the relationship between discrimination and group identification may vary across different socio-cultural contexts, influenced by factors like cultural diversity, openness, and public perception (Stuart, 2014). This study aims to address these gaps by exploring the specific experiences of Muslim immigrant youth in Aotearoa, contributing to the ongoing discussion on immigration, integration, and the psychological processes shaping their sense of belonging.

The Case of Aotearoa

Aotearoa is esteemed for its multiculturalism and diversity, maintaining a longstanding custom of receiving immigrants from all corners of the globe (Sibley & Ward, 2013; Multiculturalism Policy Index, 2010). Nonetheless, Muslim immigrants, representing about 1.5% of the population in the country (Statistics New Zealand, 2023), face numerous challenges, such as prejudice, which affect their sense of belonging and well-being (Stuart & Ward, 2018; Ward et al., 2019; McCoy et al., 2016).

A key barrier involves the issue of perceived religious discrimination, which involves individuals feeling that they are being treated unfairly or differently because of their religious beliefs (Salahshour & Boamah, 2020; Greaves et al., 2020; Stuart, 2014). While overt discrimination is legally prohibited in Aotearoa New Zealand through legislation such as the Bill of Rights Act (1990) and the Human Rights Act (1993), proving instances of subtle discrimination remains challenging. Nevertheless, even when discrimination cannot be definitively proven, the mere perception of being discriminated against can have significant negative impacts on individuals. This study therefore focuses on perceived discrimination rather than documented cases of overt discrimination, acknowledging that subtle prejudices continue to affect people's lived experiences despite legal protections (Salahshour &



Boamah, 2020). Notably, the Community Perception Report on migrants and immigration revealed that most New Zealanders believe Muslims (43%), Chinese (41%), and Indians (40%) are the most discriminated groups in Aotearoa (Ministry of Business, Innovation & Employment, 2020).

While New Zealand often prides itself on multiculturalism and tolerance, the tragic Christchurch Mosque shootings on 15 March 2019 that claimed the lives of 51 Muslim worshippers (Salahshour & Boamah, 2020) starkly showed the extent of hate and discrimination towards the Muslim community. These attacks, orchestrated by a white supremacist terrorist, were the first act of terrorism and the deadliest mass shooting in Aotearoa's history (Weir, 2021). These events laid bare the vulnerability and marginalisation of the Muslim community in a nation that is proud of its multiculturalism and tolerance (Kolig, 2022; Ward et al., 2019; Drury, 2020).

In response to the Christchurch Mosque shootings, some New Zealanders rallied around the country's Muslim community (Bulbulia et al., 2023), and there was a renewed commitment to countering extremism and racism (Salahshour & Boamah, 2020; Greaves et al., 2020). There was a wave of national and international solidarity and support for Aotearoa's Muslim community. Meanwhile the Labour government at that time swiftly and decisively enacted some countermeasures. Such measures included the prohibition of military-style semi-automatic weapons (Radio New Zealand, 2019), and provision of financial aid and psychological support to the victims and their families. In addition, a Royal Commission of Inquiry was initiated by the Labour Government to investigate the security agencies' inability to prevent the attacks (Royal Commission, 2020). However, the National coalition Government decided not to progress the final eight recommendations of the Royal Commission (Radio New Zealand, August 2, 2024). Moreover, the public as well as community and religious groups displayed their compassion and empathy towards the Muslim community through collective acts of solidarity. These actions included organising vigils, rallies, interfaith services, laying flowers and conveying messages of condolence. Additionally, gestures such as donning headscarves and broadcasting the Islamic call to prayer were observed (Greaves et al., 2020).

However, these commendable measures may not completely lessen the trauma and pain inflicted by the attacks, nor address the deep-seated issues of discrimination and prejudice that persist within society, whether overt or subtle. As predicted by the

Rejection-Identification Model, these experiences of discrimination might impact Muslims' sense of belonging in Aotearoa, especially among the younger generation who are most likely to consider Aotearoa their permanent home. Understanding the dynamic of perceived discrimination on belonging among young Muslims is crucial as the nation moves forward towards building social cohesion and a more inclusive and accepting society.

Research Questions

This study's overarching research question is: How does the perception of discrimination affect the feeling of belonging among young Muslim immigrants in Aotearoa, in their Muslim community and society at large, and how do they cope with it?

This study suggested the following hypotheses, drawing from the Rejection-Identification Model (RIM) approach:

Hypothesis 1: Young Muslim immigrants and refugees in Aotearoa may have a weaker sense of belonging to the broader society if they perceive discrimination.

Hypothesis 2: Young Muslim immigrants and refugees are more likely to identify with their community when they face discrimination from the larger society.

Positionality

As a refugee and member of the Muslim community in New Zealand, I (the first author) am deeply connected to the participants of this study. My personal journey as both an outsider and insider in New Zealand society motivated me to explore the lived experiences of young Muslims, particularly focusing on identity formation, belonging, religion, and experiences of discrimination. This shared identity and experience created a foundation of trust and enabled genuine connections with participants, allowing us to explore sensitive topics that are often only discussed within close-knit community spaces. My motivation stems from a desire to amplify the experiences of young Muslims in New Zealand and contribute to a deeper understanding of their experiences in the academic literature. However, I am keenly aware of potential blind spots; my personal experiences could inadvertently shape the findings. To address these power dynamics, I practiced reflexivity throughout the research, reflecting on how my views might influence data interpretation (Rafferty, 2017). By seeking feedback from individuals outside the Muslim community and adhering to rigorous quantitative analysis, I aimed to



mitigate biases and ensure that the participants' perspectives remained central, preventing my gaze from dominating the research.

The second author, serving as the PhD supervisor, brings a different yet complementary perspective to this work. As an immigrant to Aotearoa themselves, though not a member of the Muslim or minority community, they contribute an understanding of the immigration experience while maintaining a degree of analytical distance from the specific religious and cultural context of the study. This combination of insider and outsider perspectives strengthens the research by balancing deep community knowledge with broader academic perspectives.

By combining my insider perspective as a Muslim refugee with my supervisor's experience as an immigrant academic, we strive to produce research that is both academically rigorous and deeply respectful of the communities we study. Our aim is to create space for voices that have historically been marginalized in academic discourse.

Methods

Sampling Procedure

This small fraction of the Muslim population spreading across Aotearoa presents unique challenges for data gathering. We employed snowball sampling to engage with this dispersed population. Data collection involved using an online questionnaire developed on the Qualtrics platform. This paper extends the first author's PhD thesis, submitted to the University of Otago in June 2024, and was approved by the University of Otago Ethics Committee (Approval No. 20/082).

Participants

This study examined Muslim youth in Aotearoa. All participants were characterized by two distinct aspects: their entry pathway into the country (as either refugees [37%] or voluntary immigrants [63%]) and their current legal status (as either residents [30.4%] or citizens [69.6%]). Thus, each participant was simultaneously categorised by both their entry pathway and their legal status. Participants ranged in age from 16 to 29, with a mean age of 20.23 years ($SD = 4.34$). The sample consisted of 56% men and 44% women.

The study sample consisted of individuals residing in urban areas across both the North and South Islands of Aotearoa. The majority ($n = 124$; 69.66%) lived in the North Island. Participants were drawn from diverse ethnic backgrounds, including Afghans

(21.2%), Indians (17.3%), Fijians (13.1%), Malays (9.2%), and other ethnicities (40%). The majority of the 191 participants who reported their employment status were high school students (37.2%, $n = 71$), while university students constituted the second highest group (20.9%, $n = 40$). Furthermore, 19.9% ($n = 38$) of participants were employed full-time, 8.4% ($n = 16$) part-time, 6.8% ($n = 13$) were self-employed, 5.8% ($n = 11$) were unemployed, and 1.0% ($n = 2$) were homemakers.

Measures

Dependent Variables

Sense of Belonging to the Broader Aotearoa Society and the Muslim Community. The dependent variable measured sense of belonging using an adapted scale from the International Comparative Study of Ethno-cultural Youth (ICSEY) (Berry et al., 2006). Two separate scales assessed participants' feelings of belonging, one for the Muslim community and one for Aotearoa society via four statements: "I feel that I belong to the Muslim community"; "Belonging to the Muslim community is important to me"; "Feeling embarrassed about being part of the Muslim community"; "Being part of the Muslim community is uncomfortable". These statements were replicated by replacing "Muslim community" with "wider New Zealand society", ensuring an identical approach to measuring both types of belonging. Responses were recorded on a 7-point Likert scale (1=Strongly disagree, 7=Strongly agree), with negative items reverse-coded. The scale demonstrated good reliability for both Muslim community ($\alpha = .795$) and Aotearoa/New Zealand society ($\alpha = .726$) belonging.

Independent Variable

Perception of Discrimination. The International Comparative Study of Ethno-cultural Youth (ICSEY) scale was adapted to examine how discrimination is perceived by Muslim youth in Aotearoa. It was adjusted to capture the specific experiences of Muslim youth regarding their experience as Muslims in Aotearoa society. The scale contained five statements assessing Muslim youth's experiences in Aotearoa: "As a Muslim, I feel accepted by New Zealanders"; "I feel that New Zealanders have something against the Muslim community"; "I feel that New Zealanders have behaved in a negative way towards the Muslim community"; "I have been made fun of or been insulted because I am a Muslim"; and "I have been harassed or attacked because of my religion". Responses were recorded on a 7-point Likert scale (1=Strongly disagree, 7=Strongly agree), with



negative items reverse-coded. The scale demonstrated good reliability ($\alpha=.816$).

Frequency and Context of Negative Treatment. The survey included two questions to capture the participants' experiences of discrimination in both frequency and context. The first assessed frequency: "How often do New Zealanders treat you negatively because of your religion (Islam)?" using the following options: *Never, Rarely, Occasionally, Often,* and *Very Often*. The second question asked about locations: "At which of the following places are you viewed negatively?" The options provided include "On the street, In stores, Offices, Bus and public transport, Applying for a job, Work, Police, Dealing with court, Never, and Other". These questions assessed both the prevalence of discrimination and its spatial context, providing crucial insights for developing targeted interventions to reduce discrimination and promote inclusivity.

Covariates

Residency Status. Participants were categorised into two distinct groups: permanent residents (individuals granted the right to reside in Aotearoa indefinitely but do not possess full citizenship privileges, such as the ability to run for office or obtain a New Zealand passport) and citizens of Aotearoa. Among the surveyed population, 69.2% ($n = 126$) were citizens, while 30.8% ($n = 56$) were residents.

Gender. Participants were provided with the following gender options for self-identification: male, female, transgender-female, transgender-male, or prefer not to disclose. Most participants identified as either male (56%, $n = 107$) or female (44%, $n = 84$), while three identified as transgender male. For this study, these three respondents were coded as males.

Immigration Entry Status. Respondents were asked to choose from the following options: refugee, economic immigrant, refugee familial reunification, and others (which could include students or those migrating for marriage). These responses were then grouped into two broader categories: voluntary and forced immigrants. *Voluntary Immigrants* includes economic immigrants and individuals in the 'other' category. *Forced Immigrants* includes refugees (22.8%; $n = 43$; fled their countries of origin to escape violence, conflict, and persecution) and those involved in refugee familial reunification (14.3%; $n = 27$ migrated to join their settled family members).

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics bivariate correlation, and hierarchical regressions were conducted in SPSS 26.

This regression method enables me to add variables in steps, which helps in understanding the incremental contribution of each set of variables (Petrocelli, 2003).

Additionally, the study applied Hayes' mediation model 4 (Hayes, 2013) to explore more deeply the significance of how the perception of discrimination influences both types of belonging and their interplay. This model was instrumental in examining how perceived discrimination indirectly affects individuals' sense of belonging to the broader society, mediated by their belonging to the Muslim community. It offers a greater understanding of the importance of perceived discrimination. Incomplete questionnaires were excluded systematically from the mediation analysis, leaving a subset of 202 responses.

Results

The first descriptive result offers an overview of where and how respondents experience discrimination. Most reported infrequent negative encounters, with 43% ($n = 86$) stating they "Rarely" face such treatment and 24% ($n = 48$) indicating "Never".

Figure 1. How often do New Zealanders treat you negatively because of your religion (Islam)?

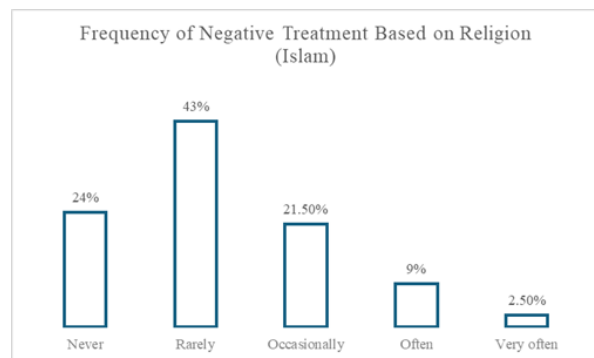
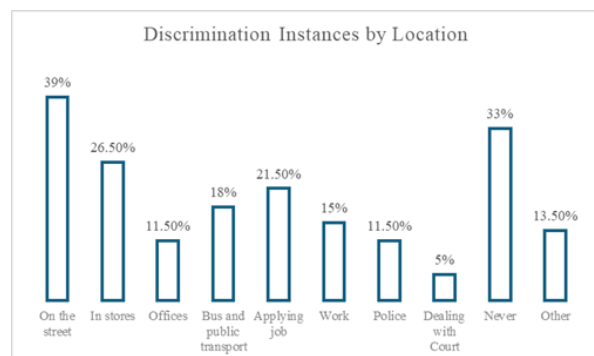


Figure 2. At which following places are you viewed negatively?



The most common location for such negative encounters was on the street, where 39% ($n = 78$) of respondents reported incidents, followed by in stores with 26.5% ($n = 53$) (See Figure 2). These findings capture only visible discrimination instances, overlooking the more pervasive subtle, systemic forms of discrimination that significantly impact individuals' experiences but often remain undetected in traditional reporting methods.

Bivariate Correlations

Pearson correlation analysis showed a moderate and positive link between belonging to the wider Aotearoa society and belonging to the Muslim community, $r = .38$, $p < .01$. Additionally, a moderate inverse relationship was found between the feeling of being part of the larger Aotearoa society and the perception of discrimination, $r = -.24$, $p < .01$. Likewise, there was a moderate negative correlation between the sense of belonging to the Muslim community and the perception of discrimination, $r = -.21$, $p < .01$.

Hierarchical Regression Analysis: Aotearoa Society

The influence of variables including immigration entry status, gender, and residency status and the main independent variable (perception of discrimination) on the sense of belonging with the wider society of Aotearoa was assessed using hierarchical multiple regression.

In the first step of the analysis, three variables were input into the model, which accounted for considerable amount of the variation in the dependent variable, with $R^2 = .068$, $F(3, 169) = 4.13$, $p = .007$. Among the variables, only forced immigration (reference group (ref): voluntary immigration) was significantly associated with belonging to the wider society ($\beta = .25$, $SE = .16$, $t(169) = 3.32$, $p = .001$). Female gender (ref: males) and citizenship (ref: permanent residence) were not significantly related to the dependent variable.

In the next step, the model included the independent variable, perception of discrimination. The model accounted for a greater proportion of the variability in the outcome variable, with $R^2 = .103$, $F(4, 168) = 4.81$, $p = .001$. The difference in R^2 was also statistically significant, $\Delta R^2 = .034$, $F(1, 168) = 6.44$, $p = .01$, indicating that the perception of discrimination improved the model fit. The data suggest that individuals who feel discriminated against are less likely to feel a sense of belonging to the broader Aotearoa society ($\beta = -.19$, $SE = .01$, $t(168) = -2.54$, $p = .01$). Even though gender and

residency status did not have a significant impact on the dependent variable, forced immigrant status remained significantly connected to belonging to the broader society ($\beta = .25$, $SE = .16$, $t(168) = 3.36$, $p = .001$).

The results support the Hypothesis 1 that young Muslim immigrants and refugees in Aotearoa have a weaker sense of belonging to the broader society if they perceive discrimination.

Hierarchical Regression Analysis: The Muslim Community

Hierarchical multiple regressions were used to analyse the effects of immigration entry status, gender, residency status, and perception of discrimination on individuals' sense of belonging to the Muslim community.

Firstly, the three variables were input into the model. The model only captured a small proportion of the variability in the dependent variable with $R^2 = .011$, $F(3, 169) = .63$, $p = .59$. These variables did not show a significant association with the dependent variable. Immigration entry status, gender, and residency status anywhere not significantly correlated with feeling of belonging to the Muslim community.

Then, perceived discrimination was included in the model. The model explained greater variation in the dependent variable, with $R^2 = .054$, $F(4, 168) = 2.38$, $p = .05$. The alteration in R^2 was statistically significant, $\Delta R^2 = .043$, $F(1, 168) = 7.55$, $p = .007$. Higher levels of perceived discrimination was associated with a decreased sense of belonging to the Muslim community ($\beta = -.21$, $SE = .01$, $t(168) = -2.75$, $p = .007$). In contrast, other variables such as gender, forced immigrant status, and residency status did not display a significant connection with the feeling of belonging to the Muslim community. The results do not support the Hypothesis 2 that young Muslim immigrants and refugees are more likely to identify with their community when they face discrimination from the larger society. Instead, higher levels of perceived discrimination are associated with a decreased sense of belonging to the Muslim community.

Mediation Analysis

The mediation model incorporated discrimination perception as the independent variable (X), with being part of the Muslim community as the mediator (M) and being part of Aotearoa society as the dependent variable (Y).



Discrimination was found to have a meaningful and immediate influence on individuals' sense of belonging to Aotearoa society ($b = -.03, t = -2.42, p = .02$). Furthermore, belonging to the Muslim community (the mediator) affected belonging to Aotearoa ($b = .41, t = 6.52, p < .001$), demonstrating a positive mediating effect. In addition, the significant indirect impact of discrimination on

belonging to Aotearoa society through belonging to the Muslim community was significant ($b = -.01, CI95\% [-.025, -.006]$). Thus, this finding confirmed the presence of mediation in the model. Additionally, perceived discrimination linked to their religious identity significantly weakened the feeling of being part of the Muslim community ($b = -.04, t = -3.15, p = .002$).

Table 1. Regression analysis results for predicting a sense of belonging to the wider Aotearoa society

Predictor	B (Step 1)	95% CI	B (Step 2)	95% CI
Constant	5.07**	[4.75, 5.39]	5.57**	[5.07, 6.07]
Forced immigrants (RC: voluntary immigrants)	.53**	[.22, .85]	.53**	[.22, .84]
Females (RC: males)	.21	[-.10, .51]	.27	[-.03, .58]
Citizens (RC: permanent residents)	.02	[-.32, .35]	.03	[-.30, .37]
Perception of discrimination	-	-	-.03*	[-.056, -.007]
$R^2 = .068, \Delta R^2 = .068$			$R^2 = .103, \Delta R^2 = .034$	

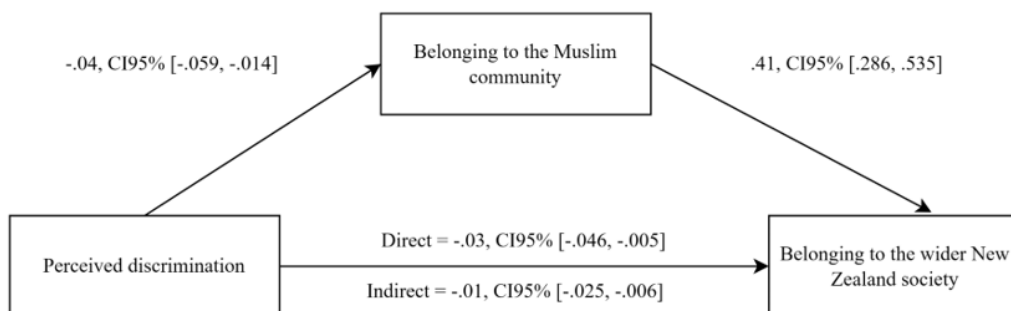
Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$; RC = Reference Category

Table 2. Regression analysis results for predicting a sense of belonging to the Muslim community

Predictor	B (Step 1)	95% CI	B (Step 2)	95% CI
Constant	5.96**	[5.64, 6.27]	6.49**	[5.99, 6.98]
Forced immigrants (RC: voluntary immigrants)	.09	[-.23, .40]	.09	[-.22, .39]
Females (RC: males)	.20	[-.11, .50]	.27	[-.03, .57]
Citizens (RC: permanent residents)	.02	[-.32, .35]	.03	[-.30, .36]
Perception of discrimination	-	-	-.03*	[-.06, -.009]
$R^2 = .011, \Delta R^2 = .011$			$R^2 = .054, \Delta R^2 = .043$	

Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$; RC = Reference Category

Figure 3. Mediation Analysis



Discussion

This study explores the impact of perceived discrimination on the sense of belonging among immigrant Muslim youth in Aotearoa.

Perceived Discrimination and Sense of Belonging

The findings revealed that perception of discrimination significantly affects the participants' feeling of belonging to the wider society. This suggests that Muslim immigrant youth who perceive increased discrimination from the wider society are more likely to feel less connected and valued and may feel alienated and excluded. This aligns with the Rejection-Identification Model (RIM), which argues that discrimination can undermine the psychological attachment and identification of minority groups with the dominant society (Branscombe et al., 1999). Furthermore, this result supports previous studies that found perceived discrimination to have a negative influence on the sense of belonging of Muslim immigrants in Western nations such as the United States and certain European countries (Maliepaard & Verkuyten, 2018; Verkuyten & Yildiz, 2007; Stuart et al., 2020).

Group Identification and Coping Mechanisms

The regression analysis results revealed an unexpected pattern. Contrary to the first prediction hypothesised by the RIM theory, individuals did not exhibit a stronger feeling of belonging to the Muslim community in response to feelings of exclusion and marginalisation; instead, a negative association was found. Therefore, the second Hypothesis is not supported. Notably, this finding contradicts the RIM, which states that discrimination can intensify identification with an individual's group as a source of support and self-esteem. There were some studies discovering that the perception of discrimination does not always significantly correlate with ethno-religious identity or belonging (Bender et al., 2022; Bastug et al., 2019; Wiley et al., 2013). Some cases showed that feeling discriminated against was linked to decreased sense of belonging to ethnic or religious communities. For example, Bobowik et al. (2017) found Iranian refugees in the Netherlands reacted differently to discrimination compared to other groups. When they felt discriminated against, they distanced themselves from their ethnic identity and felt less connected to the society they lived in, rather than becoming more attached to their ethnic group.

Dissimulation Approach

A possible explanation for the observed negative association between perceived discrimination and belonging to the Muslim community might be the adoption of dissimulation strategies. Dissimulation involves concealing one's religious or ethnic identity

to blend in with the dominant group and avoid negative treatment (Branscombe et al., 2012). This approach is feasible when the boundaries between dominant and minority groups seem penetrable (Howes & Hammett, 2016). For example, individuals may adjust their clothing, appearance, or even names to align with the prevailing trends or norms of the majority (Kang et al., 2016). Based on a study conducted with young American Muslims aged 16-20, One in three participants did not want to tell others that they were Muslims and One in Six would sometimes pretend not to be Muslims (Suleiman, 2017). This strategy allows Muslim immigrant youth to navigate their position in societies that may not fully accept them, offering temporary security and opportunities. However, it may also cause emotional strain and potentially affect their self-perception and cultural roots.

In conclusion, the findings highlight the complex interplay between perceived discrimination, sense of belonging, and coping strategies among Muslim immigrant youth in Aotearoa. The dissimulation approach provides an alternative explanation for the observed patterns, suggesting that some individuals may choose to moderate their religious identity to avoid negative treatment, which in turn affects their sense of belonging to both their religious community and the broader society.

Applications and Practical Implications

Drawing from the study's insights, it is evident that combating discrimination and fostering inclusivity for Muslim immigrant youth in Aotearoa requires a multifaceted approach. Policymakers and community leaders should initiate targeted interventions—educational programmes that not only highlight the detrimental effects of discrimination but also promote cultural sensitivity and acceptance. Establishing robust support services like counselling and mentorship can alleviate psychological stress and strengthen these youths' connection to both their own community and the broader society. Encouraging active community engagement through multicultural events can weave a stronger social fabric, creating platforms for dialogue between different cultural and religious groups, and fostering mutual understanding and respect. On a policy level, crafting inclusive environments across various sectors—education, employment, and public services—is crucial. Implementing and enforcing anti-discrimination measures in schools and workplaces can transform these spaces into safer, more welcoming environments where Muslim youth feel valued and included.

Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. Firstly,



the cross-sectional design of the study limits the ability to draw causal inferences. While the study provides valuable insights into the relationship between perceived discrimination and the sense of belonging among Muslim youth in Aotearoa, it does not allow for the examination of changes over time or the directionality of these relationships. Future research should consider longitudinal designs to better understand the temporal dynamics of these associations. Secondly, the use of self-reported measures may introduce response biases, such as social desirability bias. Thirdly, the sample was limited to Muslim youth residing in four major cities in Aotearoa (Auckland, Wellington, Christchurch, and Dunedin). This may limit the generalisability of the findings to Muslim youth in other regions or to other immigrant groups. Future studies should aim to include a more diverse and representative sample to enhance the generalisability of the results.

Conclusion

The results of this study offer partial support for the Rejection-Identification Model (RIM), suggesting that experiences of discrimination can weaken an individual's connection to the wider society. On the contrary, this research also contests the RIM hypothesis by proving that feeling discriminated against does not consistently enhance one's sense of belonging to the Muslim community; rather, it can reduce it. This finding suggests that the correlation between perceived discrimination and belonging is complex and context-specific. Thus, it interrogates the universally applicability of RIM.

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