Measuring Attitudes Towards Islam

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In recent years, the rhetoric surrounding individuals who are Muslim has resulted in severed freedoms of expression, violations of basic human rights, stereotypic labeling, and the stripping away of the dignity of Arab and Muslim Americans (Lajevardi, & Oskooii, 2018). Within such a negative overall climate, it is important to benchmark current attitudes related to Islam as a religion as well as Muslims as the representatives of a faith community.

As witnesses to the negative treatment of Muslims and prejudicial attitudes towards Islam in overall society, Christians can be vehicles for reconciliation and change. Christians are called to follow the example of Christ to love and respect others (Ephesians 4:32). God created all people in God's image (Genesis 1:26-27). Therefore, it is against Christ's teachings of love to ignore the vilification of the Muslim community that continues in Western society (Cagle, Cox, Luoma, & Zaphiris, 2011). However, before we can work for change, we must know where to start.

**Research Questions**

As discussed above, the prejudicial views of Muslims are at an all-time high. However, there is little research regarding the attitudes towards Muslims or Islam at Christian colleges. This research evaluated the attitudes in the Milligan College community towards Islam. The central research questions for this study were, 1) What are the attitudes at Milligan College towards Islam? 2) Are the attitudes towards Islam positive, neutral, critical or prejudicial? 3) What personal demographics correlate with positive, neutral, critical, and prejudicial attitudes towards Islam?

**Literature Review**

In the literature, a variety of themes illustrated the current perspectives many individuals within society hold concerning individuals who are Muslim. One theme is the prevalent belief that individuals of Arab background are more irrational and less intelligent than other groups of people (Regier, & Khalidi, 2009). Long before the events of 9/11, Arab Americans have faced unjustified prejudice. Many who represent privileged identities cast Arab looking individuals out of the "elite" and mask their islamophobic tendencies as a secular criticism of the Arabic community as a whole (Imhoff, & Recker, 2012). British-Czech philosopher Ernest Gellner claimed a civil society is the product of the western world and is not achievable to the Middle East due to Islam being a "secularization-resistant" religion, lacking a true separation between government and religion (Anjum, 2012). Gellner and others fail to view civility through a non-western lens, creating a sense of societal superiority.

In America, a political divide exists in regards to views on Muslim Americans. A survey conducted by the Pew Research Center found left-wing individuals to have more positive views of Muslims than their right-wing counterpart (Lipka, 2015). Some argue that the current political climate contributed to the rise of Islamophobia in the United States (Foran, 2016).  California State University-San Bernardino's Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism (2015) reported anti-Muslim hate crimes reached peak levels unseen since the aftermath of September 11, 2001. Another report by Georgetown University (The Bridge Initiative, 2016) confirmed the increasingly hostile environment towards Muslim individuals. However, Akram (2002) argued that the United States steadily targeted Arab and Muslim individuals as terrorists since the 1970s. Research by Gallup spanning 2007-2011 confirms this steady incline of anti-Muslim sentiment.

Data from 2007-2009 highlights that Americans who identify as Republican self-report the most prejudice towards Muslims (Gallup, 2011).

News sources represent the spectrum of political ideologies ranging from far left to far right. Many news outlets strive to represent the political center in an effort to be unbiased. However, there is little difference in how liberal, conservative or centrist sources portray the Muslim community. Cagle, Cox, Luoma, and Zaphiris (2011) found there was little discrepancy between the way left leaning and right leaning sources portrayed Muslims Americans. The news broadcasting companies offered a representation of Muslims as overwhelmingly more negative than positive.

In the realm of education, specifically college and university settings, students who are Muslim, are from countries where Islam is the dominate religion, or are perceived by others to look Muslim face Islamophobia (Ali, 2014; Cole & Ahmadi, 2003). Students who are Muslim face not only stereotypes, but in some cases are harassed to the point of leaving school. These experiences can cause distress and negatively influence academic performance and relationships (Ali, 2014; Cole & Ahmadi, 2003).

**Methodology**

This non-experimental exploratory study utilized the Islamopositivity items and revised English-language version of Scale for Islamoprejudice and Secular Critique of Islam (SIPSCI) to measure attitudes towards Islam at Milligan College. This version of the SIPSCI utilized a 9 point scale measuring statements from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (9). The scale measured Islamophobia/prejudicial (19 items), critical (16 items), and positive attitudes towards Islam (11 items). In addition to the SIPSCI, the researcher asked respondents to complete some demographic information including academic discipline, gender, political party affiliation, and

preferred news source.  Furthermore, before completing the SIPSCI instrument, participants

submitted the first word they thought of when they hear the word Islam. These words were

inserted into a word cloud to provide a visual representation of the frequency a word was

submitted (see figure 1).

The SIPSCI and the demographic questions were combined into one anonymous

Qualtrics survey. After receiving approval from the college's Institutional Review Board,

participants were recruited. Recruitment occurred through email communication, flyers, and

personal invitation to participate. The Qualtrics link was distributed via email as well as a QR

code on flyers around campus. Once data collection was complete, the information was exported

into SPSS for analysis.

**Participants**

Respondents were students, faculty, and staff at a small, private, Christian, liberal arts

college in the southern United States. The researcher invited all members of the community to

participate in the study. A total of 139 individuals completed the survey, 106 were students, 20

were faculty, and 13 were staff. Each of the following academic disciplines were represented by

the faculty and students, Arts and Humanities (14), Education and Social Sciences (37), graduate

programs (29), School of Bible (7), School of Business (17), School of Sciences and Allied

Health (21). There were 80 female respondents, 58 male, and 1 who preferred not to disclose.

The political affiliation of participants included 38 Progressives (Democrat, Socialist, and Green

Party), 30 Independent, 38 Conservatives (Republican), 23 with no political affiliation, and 10

Libertarians.

## Results

### Data Analysis

To determine internal consistency, the researcher ran a Cronbach's Alpha. The reliability of each scale was strong. The Islamophobia scale had $\alpha = .914$. The Islamopositivity scale was $\alpha = .945$.

The minimum possible score for the Islamophobia scale is 19, the maximum is 171. The minimum score for the Islamopositive scale is 11, the maximum is 99. The overall mean for the Islamophobia scale was 69.9 with the lowest score of 23 and the highest of 169. For the Islamopositivity scale the mean was 76.3. The lowest positivity score was 11 and the highest was 99.

Using a one-way ANOVA, I compared the scores on the SIPSC Islamophobia subscale and the Islamopositivity subscale and there was no significant difference by gender. However, political affiliation showed significant differences (see figure 2). Individuals who identified as politically conservative scored significantly higher scores on the Islamophobia scale in comparison to the other political affiliation groups (differences between conservatives and each of the other political affiliations was p. = .000). Additionally, conservatives scored lowest on the Islamopositivity scale. The difference was statistically significant in comparison to the other political groups (differences between conservatives and each of the other political affiliations was p. = .000).

Analysis by new source was limited to a calculation of Islamophobia and Islamopositivity scores by mean. The researcher utilized the following categories, local new outlet, Washington Post, Fox News, CNN, New York Times, Major Networks (NBC, CBS, ABC), and NPR. Based on news source, individuals who reported preferring Fox News had the highest Islamophobia

score at 96.9 and the lowest Islamopositivity score at 59.4. Individuals who indicated a

preference for NPR had the lowest Islamophobia score at 56.9. Those who reported a preference

for the Washington Post had the highest Islamopositivity score at 84.7. See figures 3 and 4 more

complete new source breakdown.

The researcher categorized the responses to the word prompt, when you think of Islam,

what is the first word that comes to mind, by descriptive, obviously positive, and obviously

negative. A majority of the word responses were descriptive in nature at 108. There were 19

negative responses and 10 positive. An ANOVA revealed that the differences between each of

these word categories and the mean scores for each scale were statistically significant (p. = .000

& p. = .000). The Post Hoc test (Tukey HSD) showed significance in the differences on the

Islamophobia scale between descriptive words and negative words (p. = .000), descriptive words

and positive words (p. = .039), and positive words and negative words (p. = .000). For the

Islamopositivity scale the Post Hoc test also showed significant differences between each word

category, descriptive words and negative words (p. = .003), descriptive words and positive words

(p. = .042), and positive words and negative words (p. = .000).

## Discussion

After careful evaluation of the results of this study, there are several important findings.

Respondents were asked for the first word that comes to mind when they think of Islam. After

tabulating the words by category, the results show that original comments appeared to show low

levels of explicit bias based on the large number of descriptive words. However, after further

analysis the differences between mean scores on both scales for each category, negative,

descriptive, and positive, showed significant differences. This may indicate that implicit bias

may influence one's effort to appear neutral. Research that includes an implicit bias scale can

help provide a more complete understanding of participant attitudes toward Muslim individuals (Imhoff & Bonn, 2012).

Using the SIPSCI scale, the researcher was able to obtain a base score for the level of Islamophobia that exist at Milligan College. On a 19-171 point scale, the average score of Islamophobia at Milligan was a 69.9.  Knowing the base level of Islamophobia provides a foundation for moving forward with further research. While this is a good starting place. The research was unable to obtain studies that that would allow for comparison between Milligan and other populations. The majority of research that utilized the SIPSCI is from non-English speaking countries.

In regard to the Islamopositivity scale, scores can range from 11- 99. The range of islamopositivity score represented in the participants from this study was 11-99. At Milligan, the average score of islamopositivity was a 76.3. A similar challenge related to comparison exists for the Islamopositivity scale.

The research hypothesized that there would be significant differences between the attitudes of female and male respondents. Specifically, the researcher believed female attitudes would rate lower on the Islamophobia scale and higher on the Islamopositivity scale. However, that there was no significant difference on either scale based on gender. This result was surprising in light of research that indicated men have a slightly higher likelihood to self-disclose as prejudicial toward Muslims as women (Montopoli, 2010).

Another hypothesis was that individuals from the social sciences would have lower Islamophobia scores and those in the hard sciences would have higher scores. While there are differences between disciplines, the only one that resulted in significance was between the School of Arts and Humanities and the School of Business. This was because their respective

means were largely difference. However, since the sample sizes for each discipline were small there are not enough respondents to provide a reliable measure between groups.

Perhaps the strongest finding from this study was the differences in the attitudes of individuals who are politically conservative in comparison to the attitudes found in all other political affiliations represented. As presented above, political conservatives scored significantly higher in Islamophobia and significantly lower in Islamopositivity than the other political groups. This finding aligns with previous research that found Republicans were more likely to hold and exhibit prejudicial attitudes towards individuals who are Muslim than other political affiliations. (Alibeli & Yaghi, 2012; Pew Research Center, 2010).

## Limitations

The study provides the groundwork for understanding attitudes of Islam, but multiple limitations emerged. Firstly, the time frame for data collection was limited. The research only had a few weeks to gather data once IRB approval was obtained. Due to the time constraint, participant recruitment occurred solely through email and flyers. The researcher was unable to set up physical recruitment locations across campus as originally planned. A more extensive period of data collection may have offered a larger respondent pool, which would provide a more complete representation of the institutional community overall.

 Additionally, as an anonymous survey, there is a possibility the representation of the college was skewed. The majority of respondents were students. While there were both faculty and staff who completed the survey, those numbers were too small to provide a representative picture of the attitudes each group has toward Muslims. In addition, there was no way to determine if respondents took the assessment more than once.

There was also no available data on the validity of the Islamopositivity Scale. This scale

was constructed by different researchers than those who develop and tested the original version

of SIPSCI. While the scale was reliable with a high alpha score (.945), the research could not

find any studies that utilized this updated version of the scale.

## Conclusion

Although this study provides insight on the attitudes of Islam at a small, private,

Christian, liberal arts college in the southern United States, additional research at similar schools

is necessary to determine if the attitudes towards Islam are comparable at other similar

institutions. In addition, the researcher suggests a study exploring how the level of personal

exposure to individuals who are Muslim influences an individuals' attitudes towards Islam. It

may also be useful to utilized assessments designed to measure subtle or implicit bias.

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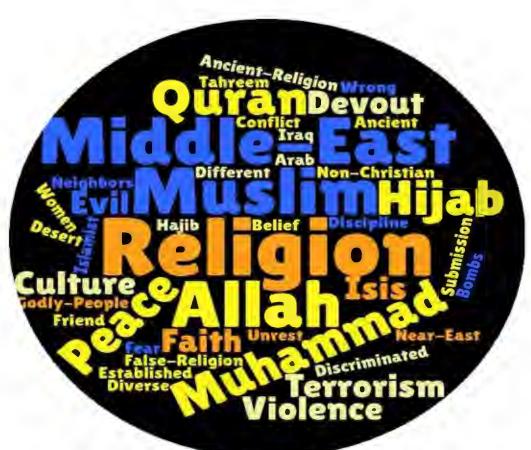
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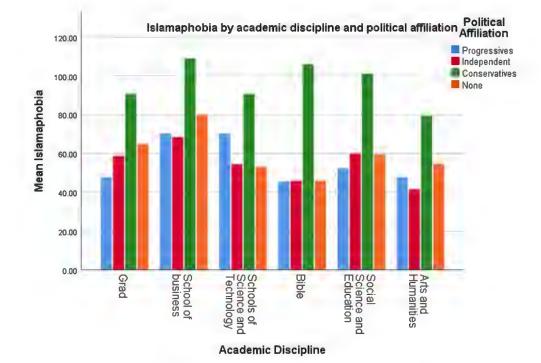
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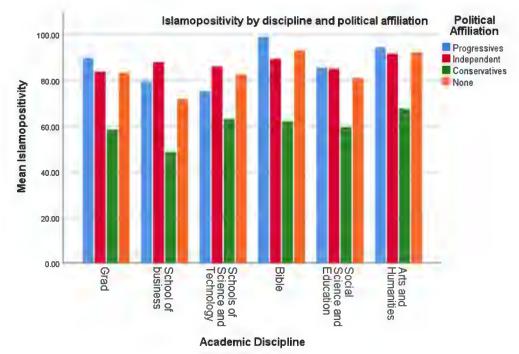
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Figure 1

*Word Cloud*



| Word response scores | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Scale** | | **N** | **Minimum** | **Maximum** | **Mean** |
| Islamophobia | Descriptive | 108 | 23 | 155 | 67.6* |
| | Negative | 19 | 44 | 169 | 94.8* |
| | Positive | 10 | 31 | 67 | 46.2* |
| | Total | 137 | | | |
| Islamopositivity | Descriptive | 108 | 11 | 99 | 77.4* |
| | Negative | 19 | 19 | 99 | 62.6* |
| | Positive | 10 | 67 | 99 | 91.8* |
| | Total | 137 | | | |
| *. The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level. | | | | | |

Figure 2

*Political Affiliation*

Figure 3

*Islamophobia Scores by News Source*

| Islamophobia Scores by News Source | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Source** | **N** | **Mean** | **SD** | **Median** | **Range** |
| Local News Outlet | 28 | 85.5 | 6.8 | 82.0 | 37-169 |
| Washington Post | 22 | 57.6 | 4.2 | 48.5 | 35-105 |
| Fox News | 32 | 96.9 | 5.1 | 94.0 | 35-169 |
| CNN | 29 | 71.7 | 5.6 | 67.0 | 23-169 |
| New York Times | 29 | 61.5 | 4.3 | 63.0 | 30-109 |
| Networks (ABC, CBS, NBC) | 30 | 71.4 | 4.3 | 75 | 23-131 |
| NPR | 46 | 56.9 | 3.8 | 49 | 31-155 |

Figure 4

*Islamopositivity Scores by News Source*

| Islamopositivity Scores by News Source | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Source** | **N** | **Mean** | **SD** | **Median** | **Range** |
| Local News Outlet | 28 | 65.5 | 4.8 | 68.5 | 11-99 |
| Washington Post | 22 | 84.7 | 2.8 | 87.0 | 45-99 |
| Fox News | 32 | 59.4 | 3.4 | 61.0 | 11-97 |
| CNN | 29 | 77.8 | 3.3 | 81.0 | 19-99 |
| New York Times | 29 | 82.4 | 2.9 | 85.0 | 19-99 |
| Networks (ABC, CBS, NBC) | 30 | 75.0 | 3.4 | 74.5 | 33-99 |
| NPR | 46 | 83.5 | 2.7 | 87.0 | 11-99 |