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Compulsive religious practices in the workplace: through the looking glass and back in search of authenticity among Iranian women

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ABSTRACT

Over the last four decades, employees' adherence to Islamic rules, even if they do not follow Islam, became necessary in Iran's organizational environment. As a result, Iranian employees, especially women, are required to conform to religious norms and regulations at work, despite their non-Islamic identity. In this study, we extend identity theory and social identity theories to examine the Islamic-based identity threat experienced by Iranian women and its effect on women's authenticity at work, turnover intentions, and job satisfaction. We also predict that accepting external influence, as an individual trait, will moderate the effect of Islamic-based identity threat on authenticity at work. Surveying 177 Iranian women, we examine a moderated mediation model. Our findings show that women's perceptions of Islamic-based identity threat driven by their organizations' religious rules, policies, and norms prevent them from expressing their authentic core values, resulting in increased turnover intentions and decreased job satisfaction.

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During the past decade, government restrictions on religious freedom have increased significantly around the world (Research Center, 2019). According to the Pew Research Center's survey-based data, the Government Restrictions Index (GRI), which measures the degree of governments' constraints on religious practices, increased from 1.8 in 2007 to 2.8 in 2018. This trend has been significantly stronger in Middle Eastern countries, where Islam plays a central role in the political agenda, government regulations, and international affairs (Belhaj, 2018; Tessler, 2015). For example, Iran has a score of 8.5 on the GRI, considered very high (Research Center, 2020).

Increased governmental restrictions on religious freedom have implications in organizations regarding rules, policies, and norms (Sabzehzar et al., 2020). Notably, this trend has a more significant impact on women in organizations where Islamic regulations and norms dominate (Syed, 2010). Overall, women's status in Muslim dominant societies is reported to be relatively poorer than the world standard (Foroutan, 2009). Islamic rules are closely intertwined with various aspects of women's personal and professional identities in Muslim countries (Halrynjo & Jonker, 2016; Masood, 2019), and some interpretations of "Islamic modesty" (e.g., wearing the chador or purdah) may create challenges for women in Muslim-dominated workplaces (Foroutan, 2009; Masood, 2019; Syed, 2010). Such interpretations of Islamic modesty may challenge women's workplace experience by restricting their physical appearance, segregating them from male-dominated workplaces, and limiting their participation in public affairs (Masood, 2019; Syed, 2010). As a result, women in Muslim-majority countries may encounter more employment obstacles and career advancement impediments

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(Foroutan, 2009; Syed, 2010) compared to men's experiences in these countries. For example, women in Muslim countries are often inclined to choose occupations that mostly involves working with other females or children (e.g., high school teachers, nurses) (Clarke & Beyer, 2008; Foroutan, 2009). Indeed, the Global Gender Gap Report (World Economic Forum, 2020) ranks Muslim-majority countries as among the lowest in terms of the Global Gender Gap Index.¹ For example, Iran is ranked 148 out of 153 countries globally, indicating vast gender-based inequality in employment prevails there.

Given the growing religious restrictions on employees worldwide, and especially in Muslim-majority countries, it is alarming that few management researchers have explored the intertwined effects of religion on people's identity and workplace experience (Gebert et al., 2014), including in high-GRI countries. When researchers have studied religion as intersecting with identity at work, most have focused on Muslim women's experience in Western or non-religious contexts (e.g., Everett et al., 2015; Jasperse et al., 2012). However, to the best of our knowledge, the identity literature has failed to clearly explain how mandatory Islamic rules impact women's identity in workplaces in Muslim-majority countries. This gap is crucial: While employees' commitment to religious rules and practices is considered an individual choice in Western countries, Islam is deeply embedded in organizations' social context in countries with dominant Muslim policies (Masood, 2019). In some countries, this entanglement happens as a result of cultural and social conventions, while in other countries Islamic norms are enforced by the government. For example, in Iran, Islamic rules are mandated by the state government largely in public sectors and to a lesser degree in private sectors (Majbouri, 2016). Such social context could threaten the identity of those who do not identify as Muslim or have less salient Muslim identities. In an effort to address this gap, we focus on Iran as an appropriate context for three main reasons. First, given the socio-economic and cultural importance of Iran and the Middle East, more research is needed to shed light on the unique experience of Iranian workers (Apicella et al., 2020). Second, Iran has a very high GRI, and it numbers among the countries with an official state religion. Lastly, over the last four decades, adherence to Islamic rules became mandatory in Iranian workplaces (Foroutan, 2009).

Our study examines Iranian women's perceptions of identity threat driven by their organization's Islamic rules, policies, and norms. With a predominantly Muslim culture, Iran is considered an honor-oriented society in which members strive to build and maintain social status by abiding collective norms (Gupta et al., 2014; Razavi et al., 2023). However, the mandatory Islamic practices have created religious in-groups and out-groups among Iranian workers, such that nonbelievers and believers with less strict standards (e.g., out-group members) may experience identity threats when working in organizations with salient Islamic identities. The majority of nonbeliever Iranians experience contradictions between the Islamic regulations imposed at work and their lack of religious affiliation outside of work, creating an inauthentic work environment and making it hard for employees – women, in particular – to assimilate.

Drawing on identity theory and social identity theory, we aim to explore how perceptions of Islamic-based identity threat affect Iranian women's authenticity in the workplace. Authenticity reflects an individual's perception of fit between the true self and mindfulness about potential behavior choices (Kernis, 2003). Even once people become mindful about their true selves, they will feel authentic only if they work within an organization where they can freely behave in line with their core beliefs. To align their behavior with their authentic selves, people need the freedom to express their true selves. Without this freedom, individuals' identity can be threatened, forcing the concealment of their identity and leading them to demonstrate a less authentic self (Petriglieri, 2011).

Understanding how threats to their identity affect employees is vital for both those individuals and their employing organizations (Petriglieri, 2011). At the individual level, identity threat can affect people by diminishing their self-value (Petriglieri, 2011; Tajfel & Turner, 2004), lowering their self-esteem (Taylor & Brown, 1988), and reshaping their identity, such that the identity no longer represents the person. To a lesser degree, such threats could prevent individuals from freely expressing their identity (Petriglieri, 2011). At the organizational level, existing research reveals the extensive adverse outcomes of identity threat in regard to organizational performance (e.g., Amiot et al., 2012;

Korf & Malan, 2002), employees' conformity with their organization (Elsbach, 2003), and turnover (Petriglieri, 2011).

We seek to establish and test a moderated mediation model that examines the mechanism by which Islamic-based identity threat negatively relates to women's authenticity at work and predicts two organizational outcomes – turnover intentions and job satisfaction. The differences between men and women in Iranian workplaces and the uniqueness of women's experiences related to their religious freedom in Iran were the rationale underlying our decision to restrict our sample to women. Indeed, Islamic rules both explicitly and implicitly shape women's experiences in the Iranian organization. For example, the compulsory practice of wearing the hijab (a dress code for covering everything except the face and hands) (Shirazi, 2017) in Iranian organizations creates many challenges for women, particularly those who would otherwise choose not to do so based on their personal beliefs.

This study makes several contributions to the identity threat and authenticity literatures. First, we highlight mandatory Islamic rules as a source of threat to employees' identity, and we explore the outcomes related to workplace Islamic-based identity threat. Indeed, little is known about how individuals' identity content relates to organizations' values, norms, and expectations (Horton et al., 2014). We conceptualize how (in)authenticity as a mechanism links Islamic-based identity threat to increased turnover intentions and decreased job satisfaction. To date, despite the existence of several studies exploring the outcomes of perceived identity threat (Falomir-Pichastor et al., 2009; Logel et al., 2009; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006; Uz & Kimmelmeier, 2014), scholars have largely overlooked the role of (in)authenticity as an outcome for identity threat as proposed here.

Second, in a recent issue of *Academy of Management Annals* focused on authenticity in the workplace, Cha et al. (2019) state that the authenticity literature lacks a clear understanding of how experienced inauthenticity influences external outcomes. Despite the extant research on the antecedents and consequences of inauthentic experiences, the role of individual differences and contextual factors remains under-researched. Specifically, the literature needs a more comprehensive grasp of the contextual organizational constraints and cultural elements that deprive individuals of authentic experiences. We address these gaps by examining the antecedents and outcomes of inauthentic displays in the context of Iran, a Muslim-majority country.

Third, we examine how an individual trait, accepting external influence, serves as a boundary condition that influences the strength of the relationships between Islamic-based identity threat and (in)authenticity at work. Thus, this study contributes to the understanding of the outcomes of perceived identity threat and elucidates how an individual trait might exacerbate the negative consequences of perceived identity threat.

Study context

Islam has been spread over numerous countries with various cultures (Jasperse et al., 2012). Nowadays, this religion is ranked as the second-largest religion in the world after Christianity (Carter, 2008). Islam comprises of numerous rules and guidelines. However, local traditions, social class, and context also impact the implications of Islamic norms differently in various societies (Esposito, 1998; Shirazi, 2016). An example is the diversity of expectations regarding women's dress code amongst Muslim countries (Foroutan, 2019). For instance, Muslim women in Saudi Arabia traditionally cover their full body while Muslim women in Southeast Asia are not following the same tradition (Foroutan, 2019).

Islam has been an inseparable part of Iran's government (Hoodfar & Sadr, 2010) and Iranian culture for the past 1400 years (Ghorbani & Tung, 2007); Nevertheless, the level of commitment to the Islamic faith and Islamic practices has undergone significant changes among both the government and citizens of Iran during the past few decades (Esfandiari, 1997; Shirazi, 2017). The Pahlavi monarchy (1925–1979) implemented reforming movement toward a Europeanized and modernized country crowding out the practice of traditional Islamic practices in the society (Foroutan, 2021). After the Islamic Revolution in 1979, Islamic regulations were imposed on

people by the government, impacting every aspect of their individual and social lives (Shirazi, 2017). In subsequent years, however, many Iranians lost their commitment to Islamic faith and the practice of Islamic rules (Ghorbani & Tung, 2007). Unfortunately though, the government of Iran still holds an absolute power over the implementation of Islamic rules in the society and reinforces this power by incorporating Islam in various aspects of people's lives such as the education system, workplace norms, etc. (Foroutan, 2021).

Women in Iran

The significant socio-cultural shifts during the past century have made Iran a unique context to study how traditional and modern social values impact women (Foroutan, 2014, 2019). Ever since the Islamic revolution, the Islamic Republic of Iran has been infusing an Islamic gender ideology (Foroutan, 2021). This gender ideology is being dictated using male-dominated interpretations of Islamic rules (Fadel, 1997) that determine the expected social appearances and ethical behavior for women (Shirazi, 2010), eventually creating gender inequality (Hoodfar & Sadr, 2010). Notwithstanding, the existence of gender inequality also stems from a lack of democratic state structure in Iran that takes a conservative radical approach to gender policies (Hoodfar & Sadr, 2010).

One of the most prominent gender expectations for Muslim women is “Haya” (Boulanouar, 2006), characterized as “collection of moral characteristics such as religious commitment, modesty, and self-respect” (Baboli & Karimi-Malekabadi, 2020, p. 8). A pious woman is expected to uphold “Haya” as a gender role, and dress modestly in public (Shirazi, 2020). On the other hand, a pious Muslim man is hold responsible for the way his female relatives are appearing in public and should enforce Islamic expectations regarding female dress code (Razavi et al., 2023; Shirazi, 2004).

In Iran, the mandatory hijab rules have been enforced by revolutionary guards and moral police through abusive and violent practices (Shirazi, 2017). Adherence to government regulations that dictate covering most of the hair and body is mandatory for women in general. However, Iranian women are demanding more freedom and have been rebelling against the strict hijab rules by loosening their hair cover, wearing fashionable colorful outfits, and posting photos unveiled in the social media (Shirazi, 2012; 2017). Furthermore, organizations differ in their more specific expectations regarding workplace clothing and appearance. While some organizations, especially in the private sector, have no internal policies regarding women's hijab, in other organizations (e.g., some government sectors) employees' religious affiliation may help determine whether a woman would be the right candidate for a job. For instance, wearing the chador, a full-body-length semicircle of black fabric that is open down the front, is highly encouraged in some workplaces. Indeed, wearing the chador is a mandatory requirement for recruitment in some organizations.

Policies that require wearing of the hijab in Iranian organizations create many challenges for women, particularly those who would otherwise choose not to wear the hijab. Many Iranian women believe in the freedom to choose to wear (or not) the hijab based on their personal beliefs (Hoodfar & Sadr, 2010; Shirazi, 2020). To be clear, many women in Iran do not perceive religion as a dichotomous, universal phenomenon. Instead, they perceive religion as a dialectic where one's religious views exist along a continuum. This proposed continuum of religious beliefs poses a considerable conundrum for women in the workplace, because the much more macro view states that one is either entirely Muslim or not.

Moreover, Iranian men are legally responsible for providing life necessities for their family, a duty called “Nafagheh” (Shahidian, 2002). Although this expectation was established to support women in society, it implicitly pushed Iranian women toward “home-maker duties” as mothers and as wives, undermining their potential to gain employment outside the home. Further complicating women's employment opportunities, married women need their husbands' permission to work in any workplace or to leave the country. Such spousal permissions may limit Iranian women's ability to pursue international business ventures.

Such limitations have influenced the low employment rate for Iranian women. The employment ratio² for women is 12.8, compared to 57.9 for men, which is indicative of a vast disparity in the working population of the country (Statistical Center of Iran, 2018). Unsurprisingly, in the public sector, women account for only 3% of the Iranian Parliament (Dehghan, 2016)—an imbalance that illustrates the barriers that prevent women from taking an active role in political events.

Theoretical background

This study uses social identity theory (e.g., Tajfel & Turner, 1986) and identity theory (e.g., Stryker & Burke, 2000) to explore how Iranian women employees react upon perceiving a Islamic-based threat to their identity. These identity theories are used to conceptualize employee experiences and self-concept embedded within social contexts (Hogg et al., 1995), including the workplace. Scholars view one's identity as a dynamic structure and emphasize the continual interplay between self and society, while also considering the existence of multiple identities bound by social norms and ascribed roles (Hogg et al., 1995). Identity often reflects the person's answer to the question "Who am I?" (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Tajfel (1978) defines identity as "that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from [one's] knowledge of [one's] membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership" (p. 63). People as human beings see themselves within the context of the world around them – a reflection that helps them develop and define their core, individual self (Collinson, 2003). An individual creates identities via social relationships and interactions through which the person describes, shapes, ascribes, and even denies meanings and values related to the identity (McMullen, 2000). Because individuals are rooted in changing social interactions throughout their lives, they cannot be perceived separately from their current context (Giddens, 1979).

Identity researchers unanimously agree that people have a desire to maintain positive individual and social identities (Brockner, 1988; Steele, 1988; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Karelala and Guillen (2014) defined positive social identity as "positive – negative valence of one's affective and evaluative judgment of the social category in question" (p. 205) and further argued that people create a positive social identity not only through establishing personal, favorable appraisals regarding their association with a social group, but also as a result of others' favorable views about their association with these groups. Indeed, individuals tend to preserve a positive social identity when they both have positive group appraisals and also view group evaluations as part of their own self-evaluation (Hogg et al., 2004).

In this study's context, Iran's unique political system strongly influences Iranian women's sense of self-understanding and how they develop and enact their identities in their employing organizations specifically, as well as in society in general. We refer to women's identity as their values, including their religious affiliations. In contrast, identity threats, often imposed by religious mandates, epitomize experiences that restrict or hinder the valued self.

Islamic-Based Identity Threat

In her seminal research, Breakwell (1983) distinguished between these two distinct types of threat to one's identity. A threat to the content of an identity targets the description of the identity which comprises of the core characteristics that people use to describe themselves (i.e., spiritual self, material self, social self, and bodily self). On the other hand, a threat to the assessment of an identity devalues an identity because of changes in social norms in the environment. For example, employees with a salient organizational identity may experience a threat as a result of a merger with another organization (Amiot et al., 2012).

To generate a precise definition of identity threat, it is critical to specify the nature of the experience and the root of the threat and explain the process through which a threat could affect the individual's

identity (Petriglieri, 2011). For this reason, different studies view and define identity threat through different lenses. Breakwell (1983) defined identity threat as “Any thought, feeling, action, or experience that challenges the individual’s personal or social identity” (p. 13). People may perceive identity threat when they face harm to their personal or social identity in some capacity. Specific to the workplace, Elsbach (2003) refers to identity threat as any workplace impediment that limits a person’s ability to demonstrate some characteristics of the identity.

Organizations with strong or demanding identities may also impose a threat to those whose identities are not aligned with organizational values (Albert & Whetten, 1985). At the societal level, a threat may be imposed on people’s identity based on the values, beliefs, and prejudices of that society (Petriglieri, 2011), which can percolate through the organization as a frame of reference for setting policies and procedures regarding how to behave, in this case according to Islamic religious practices.

Identity threat may even be triggered through daily social interaction in a workplace (Logel et al., 2009). For instance, interaction with sexist men resulted in a social identity threat being triggered in female engineers (Logel et al., 2009). Parenthetically, it is crucial to note that social changes propose a threat to an individual’s identity when they are perceived as out of one’s control and thusly unpredictable (Breakwell, 1983). Organizational identity threat can originate from considerable environmental changes (Ravasi & Schultz, 2006). For example, Amiot and colleagues (2012) looked at employees’ identity threat that originated from a clash of organizational cultures as a result of merging two hospitals together.

Similarly, Esfandiari (1997) discussed the political and social changes followed by the Islamic revolution in 1970 in Iran and explored how these changes affected women’s identity in the workplace. Through a qualitative approach, she explored Iranian women’s reflection of how the Islamic revolution affected their experience in the workplace and society in general. According to her findings, women who perceived themselves as a valued member of their organization before the Islamic revolution experienced devaluation by religious employees and management after the revolution.

The current study focuses on Iranian women’s perception of identity threat resulting from their inability to enact their non-Islamic identity in their Muslim-dominated workplace. Specifically, Iranian women may perceive threats to the content of their identity and the evaluation of their identity in the workplace due to Islamic regulations.

Islamic-based identity threat and authenticity at work

Authenticity revolves around higher-order psychological needs and the desire to fulfill them by taking either positive or negative actions. Indeed, expressing an authentic self is one such psychological need that can lead to higher well-being (Ménard & Brunet, 2011), workplace engagement (Reis et al., 2016), and career satisfaction (Matsuo, 2020). Authenticity evaluates to what degree individuals behave in congruence with their core values. A perfect match between one’s conscious awareness and actual behavior leads to authentic living. Yet, the social dynamics in the surroundings may not always create the necessary means for holding one’s authenticity consistent (Sheldon et al., 1997). For example, employees who hide their core values due to imposed identity threat in the organization will not be happy at work and may find their work environment less attractive (Petriglieri, 2011). In essence, the emotional burden of hiding their true self at work could make employees unhappy and result in their decision to eliminate the source of harm by leaving the organization.

Social identity theory posits that people seek to maintain a stable, continual, and positive identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). In turn, this desire to maintain a positive self-concept drives individuals to protect their identity from potential harm (Petriglieri, 2011). As such, individuals’ first response to evaluating an experience as threatening to their identity is to deploy a coping mechanism that protects their identity from any potential harm (Petriglieri, 2011). Individuals who experience identity threat may respond to the threat by concealment, wherein individuals hide their threatened identity.

Using a concealment strategy may have important implications for Iranian women at work, where they must adhere to Islamic legal directives. Building on Petriglieri’s (2011) conceptualization of the

strategies that individuals may implement in response to identity threats, we suggest that Iranian women hide their identity at work when they perceive it as being threatened because of the organization's demanded Islamic identity. Consistent with previous research, we suggest that hiding one's true self is a survival mechanism in the organization and helps employees demonstrate their legitimacy as members of the organization (Cha et al., 2019; Hewlin, 2003), albeit at the cost of preserving their authenticity. Iranian women who suppress their values that are in opposition with their organization's Islamic context (Cha et al., 2019; Hewlin, 2003) and who hide their non-religious identity will attain religious in-group status and receive the benefits associated with being a member of the in-group (Phillips et al., 2016). The potential for losses and being relegated to the out-group threatens women's ability to maintain their authentic selves. Thus, Iranian women who perceive a Islamic-based identity threat will conceal their identity, diminishing their sense of authenticity at work. Thus,

Hypothesis 1: *Islamic-based identity threat is negatively related to authenticity in the workplace.*

Accepting external influence as a moderator

Up to this point, we have considered employees' beliefs and perceptions about their workplace identity and their perceived authenticity at work. Despite the adverse effects of inauthenticity on personal well-being (Erickson & Wharton, 1997), employees may alter their behavior and act inauthentically to gain favorable organizational outcomes in the face of organizational pressures (Hewlin, 2003). Some employees are predisposed to seek acceptance by the in-group and conform to organizational pressures (Tajfel & Turner, 2004); others may be more resistant to group norms. Choosing to act inauthentically in the face of identity threat may be more comfortable for those who can withstand environmental influences. Differences in individual traits predicate these individual differences. To advance our understanding of the boundaries of the relationship between Islamic-based identity threat and authenticity in the workplace, we examine the role of "accepting external influence" as a moderating trait.

Accepting external influence is a trait construct (Münster Halvari et al., 2020) characterized by individuals' ongoing desire to abide by others' expectations and meet others' needs (Neff & Harter, 2002). While some researchers have examined this construct as a state variable (e.g., Akdol & Kazakoglu, 2019), in this study we consider "accepting external influence" to be an individual trait that varies "between" people (Wood et al., 2008). Compared to men, women appear to have a stronger tendency to maintain interpersonal relationships (Kennedy et al., 2017) and meet others' expectations (Neff & Harter, 2002). Given our focus on women employees, we argue that the role of accepting external influence warrants consideration in our study's milieu.

Individuals who conform more frequently in response to environmental demands may be more willing to compromise their authenticity at work to meet the organization's expectations (Neff & Harter, 2002). Extending earlier research, we contend that accepting external influence can magnify the negative impact of Islamic-based identity threat on Iranian women's authenticity at work. We propose that "accepting external influence," as an individual trait, interacts with Islamic-based identity threat to shape women's authenticity at work. Specifically, we hypothesize that Iranian women who have a higher inclination to be influenced by external factors will display more inauthentic behaviors at work in response to Islamic-based identity threat. Thus:

Hypothesis 2: *Accepting external influence moderates the negative relationship between Islamic-based identity threat and authenticity in the workplace, such that the relationship is stronger when accepting external influence is higher rather than lower.*

Islamic-based identity threat, authenticity at work, and organizational outcomes

Employees' perceptions of identity threat may compromise their workplace outcomes even beyond exacerbating their feelings of inauthenticity. Earlier research has shown that employees who experience identity threat express increased feelings of inferiority (Logel et al., 2009), self-stereotyping (Uz & Kemmelmeier, 2014), decreased organizational identification (Selenko & Witte, n.d.), psychophysiological strain and a decreased sense of well-being (Doyle & Molix, 2014; Rothausen et al., 2017). Imposed identity threat may impede employees' ability to work (McGonagle & Barnes-Farrell, 2014) and decrease their job performance (Logel et al., 2009). In addition to these negative outcomes and specific to this study, we examine employees' intentions to leave the organization (Petriglieri, 2011) and their job satisfaction (Brockner & Hoon Kim, 1993) as the two most relevant organizational outcomes of perceived identity threat in the workplace.

The extant literature on identity threat reveals that employees face a dilemma – should they stay in the organization or quit their job?—when they appraise their identity as threatened in the workplace (Petriglieri, 2011). Such dilemmas can emotionally drain employees (Rothausen et al., 2017) and make them unhappy with the organization. Specific to this study, Iranian women who work in organizations where Islamic values are imposed or strongly encouraged (Esfandiari, 1997) may encounter a chronic identity threat. Islamic values can create a chronic threat that is imposed explicitly (e.g., obligations to engage in public prayers) or implicitly (e.g., favoring more religiously fervent employees over others) in the workplace. This chronic religious identity threat then triggers an identity-protecting response, such as leaving the organization in an attempt to eliminate the source of threat (Petriglieri, 2011). Furthermore, Islamic-based identity threats disrupt employees' identity resources and lure them into repeated cycles of maladaptive coping with the threat. Such cycles include incessant employee rumination and indecisiveness about how to manage the threat (e.g., leave versus stay) until they are strained and dissatisfied, and ultimately decide to leave the organization (Rothausen et al., 2017). In this study, we expand Petriglieri's theoretical framework by examining (in) authenticity as a particular coping mechanism that women employees use in response to Islamic-based identity threat in their workplace.

Following this logic, organizations' religious context in Iran requires women to engage in specific Islamic behaviors such as public praying and maintaining Islamic appearance vis-à-vis their garments. We argue that Iranian women who work under imposed Islamic values that run counter to their values will have to hide their authentic, true selves, which will result in loss of identity resources. This loss then leads to job dissatisfaction and increases their intentions to leave the organization in favor of working in a more tolerant organization.

We posit that Islamic-based identity threat harms women' authenticity in the workplace. Hence, we suggest that through its negative influence on the individual's authenticity, Islamic-based identity threat is likely to increase Iranian women's turnover intentions and decrease their job satisfaction:

Hypothesis 3: *Islamic-based identity threat will indirectly relate to (a) decreased job satisfaction and (b) increased turnover intentions through decreased authenticity at work.*

Figure 1 depicts our theoretical model.

Method

Given our research emphasis, we restricted our sample recruitment to Iranian women who currently work in an organization in Tehran, Iran.³ We recruited participants through a “snowball,” or chain

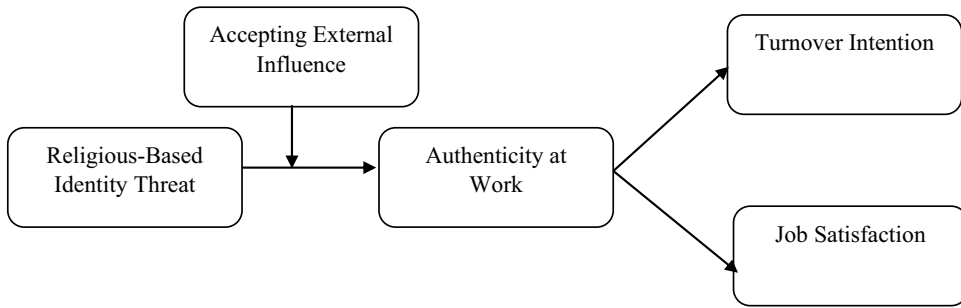


Figure 1. Theoretical model.

referral, technique (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). Due to the study's sensitivity, we took further precautions to ensure participants' anonymity.⁴ Specifically, online surveys were distributed via Telegram, a secure communication application that is popular among Iranians and is not under the Iranian government's surveillance. Initially, we distributed the survey in multiple Telegram channels with members employed in multitude of industries. In our invitation, we asked that employed women would fill the survey and send it to other employed women in their network. We received 177 completed surveys during the two-week data collection process. We conducted a *a-priori* power analysis using G*Power to calculate the minimum sample size (Faul et al., 2009). We opted for a minimum power of .80 and an effect size of .2 (J. Cohen, 1988). Results showed that a minimum of 150 participants was required for a power of .80 with an alpha level of .05. Our final sample consisted of 177 participants exceeding the minimum required sample. Minute data processing and analysis school

Participants aged between 18 and 62 years ($M = 31.41$, $SD = 6.55$). The majority (51.4%) had a bachelor's degree, 9.4% had a high school degree, 34.1% had a master's degree, and 4.9% had a doctoral degree. Of these women, 79.2% worked full-time at their current organization, and 71.2% worked in a private organization. Their organizational tenure ranged from less than a year to 30 years ($M = 6.33$, $SD = 5.73$).

Survey translation method

The surveys were translated from English to Farsi, the native language of Iran. To do so, we adopt the forward – backward translation method commonly used in international research (Bates & Khasawneh, 2005).

Measures

All measures asked participants to rate the extent to which they agreed with each statement on a seven-point scale, where 1 = strongly disagree and 7 = strongly agree.

Islamic-based identity threat

To address the potential limitations in the existing scales (Petriglieri, 2011), we adopted measures from two scales that best represent this study's conceptualization of identity threat. We used three items from Amiot et al. (2012; e.g., "I feel like my personal values are threatened at work due to Islamic regulations") and five items from Korf and Malan (2002; e.g., "It has become a negative attribute to be a non-practical Muslim these days"). We modified the original wording to add the religious component to measure perceived identity threat ($\alpha = .92$).

Authenticity at work

We used a 10-item measurement from van den Bosch and Taris (2014). The items tap into individual's state of authentic behavior in the workplace. Example items are "I am true to myself at work in most situations" and "I behave in accordance with my values and beliefs in the workplace." Participants were asked to think about their most recent work situation for the past four weeks. Then, they were instructed to indicate their agreement with each statement based on their recollection of the past four weeks at work ($\alpha = .88$).

Accepting external influence

To measure "accepting external influence" as a personal trait, we used the five-item measurement from van den Bosch and Taris (2014). We asked participants to indicate the degree to which they agreed with each statement about their personal trait. An example item is "I am often strongly influenced by the opinions of others" ($\alpha = .79$).

Turnover intentions

We adopted a four-item scale (Meyer et al., 1993) to measure turnover intentions. A sample item is "I want to quit my job" ($\alpha = .80$).

Job satisfaction

We used a three-item scale to measure job satisfaction (Rich, 1997). A sample item is "In general, I like working at my company" ($\alpha = .82$).

Control variables

We included several control variables to eliminate alternative explanations for the hypothesized relationships (Bernerth & Aguinis, 2016). Organizational tenure was incorporated as a control variable because employees who have been working in an organization for a long time may be less inclined to leave that organization (Noe & Wilk, 1993). Age and education level were also used as demographic control variables because older women and women who have higher education levels are more likely to display their authentic selves at work (O'Neill & Jepsen, 2019). We also controlled for the type of organization (private versus public) given the heightened adherence to Islamic rules in Iran's public organizations (Majbouri, 2016). Lastly, we controlled for employees' Muslim identity because we think that employees' Muslim identity salience may impact their experience of Islamic-based identity threat.

Table 1. Means, standard deviations, and correlations between variables.

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Muslim identity	4.31	.94	(.76)									
2. Identity threat	3.93	1.44	-.28**	(.92)								
3. AEI	3.64	1.15	.05	.40**	(.79)							
4. Authenticity	5.54	.94	.21*	-.43**	-.39**	(.88)						
5. Turnover intentions	3.75	1.59	-.14	.30**	.23**	-.41**	(.80)					
6. Job satisfaction	5.05	1.39	.19*	-.36**	-.05	.50**	-.68**	(.82)				
7. Age	2.03	.83	.00	-.05	-.13	.17*	-.14	.10	-			
8. Org Tenure	1.94	1.21	.04	.04	-.02	.07	-.29**	.15	.62*	-		
9. Org type	1.58	.50	-.13	-.35**	-.15	.17*	.02	.02	-.10	-.22**	-	
10. Education	2.65	.71	-.08	.17*	.05	-.11	.08	-.08	-.36**	-.21*	-.22*	-

Note: n ranges from 143 to 177. Cronbach alphas appear on the diagonal.

* $p < .05$, two-tailed.

** $p < .01$, two-tailed.

AEI = Accepting external influence.

We measured age, education, organizational tenure, organizational type as a categorical variables. Age 1 = (18–24), 2 = (25–34), 3 = (35–44), and 4 = (55–64).

Education: 1 = high school, 2 = bachelor's degree, 3 = Master's degree, 4 = doctoral or higher.

Organizational tenure: 1 = (1–3 years), 2 = (3–6 years), 4 = (6–10 years), 5 = (More than 10 years)

Organizational type: 1 = private sector, 2 = public sector.

While women who strongly identify as Muslim may still perceive a threat, we suspect that those with a less salient Muslim identity may encounter more challenges adapting Islamic expectations at work and experience more threat. We measured Muslim identity salience using 11 items from Jasperse et al. (2012) scale. A sample item is “Being a Muslim is an important reflection of who I am” ($\alpha = .76$).

Analysis and results

The descriptive statistics and correlations among variables are shown in Table 1.

Confirmatory factor analysis

We conducted confirmatory factor analyses (CFA) on all items using Mplus 8–4 to assess the variables’ discriminant validity. Specifically, we ran CFA to see whether all items loaded significantly on their five a priori constructs (Islamic-based identity threat, authenticity at work, accepting external influence, turnover intentions, and job satisfaction). We used fit indices to assess the goodness of fit for the five measurements. The CFA results showed that all factor loadings were acceptable (i.e., $> .40$) and significant ($p < .001$) for all items. Moreover, the model fit was good (Hu & Bentler, 1999): $\chi^2 = 570.67$, $df = 356$, CFI = .92, TLI = .91, RMSEA = .06, SRMR = .06.

Next, we conducted chi-square difference tests to compare our five-factor model to two alternative nested models. First, we assessed the hypothesized model with a four-factor model in which the items from the mediator, authenticity at work, were combined with the moderator, accepting external influence. Compared to our hypothesized model, the alternative four-factor model showed a worse fit for the data: $\Delta\chi^2 = 332.71$, $\Delta df = 11$, $p < .01$, CFI = .80, TLI = .78, RMSEA = .09, SRMR = .09. We then addressed the possibility of common method variance (CMV) by comparing our hypothesized model with a single-factor model in which all items were loaded onto a single latent factor. Compared to our hypothesized model, the single-factor model had a significantly worse fit to the data: $\Delta\chi^2 = 899.16$, $\Delta df = 10$, $p < .01$, CFI = .67, TLI = .64, RMSEA = .12, SRMR = .12. The results indicated that CMV did not appreciably bias the results.

Hypothesis testing

Missing data were handled using the FIML function in Mplus. We tested our first-stage moderated mediation model (Edwards & Lambert, 2007) in Mplus 8–4, using path analysis with bootstrapped estimates of 1000 samples and bias-corrected confidence intervals (Shrout & Bolger, 2002). To avoid multicollinearity issues, we mean-centered the mediating and moderating variables in all models. We included control variables in all analyses.

Islamic-based identity threat was negatively and significantly related to authenticity at work ($b = -.23$, $p < .01$, 95% CI: $[-.34, -.10]$), providing support for Hypothesis 1. Hypothesis 2 predicted that the negative relationship between Islamic-based identity threat and authenticity at work will be stronger when accepting external influence is higher rather than lower. To test this hypothesis, we estimated the indirect effect at high (+1 SD), moderate (mean), and low (−1 SD) levels of accepting external influence. As shown in Table 2, accepting external influence and Islamic-based identity threat interacted to predict authenticity at work ($b = -.11$, $p < .01$, 95% CI: $[-.18, -.03]$). Furthermore, we plotted the simple slopes of the relationship between perceived Islamic-based identity threat and authenticity at work at high (+1 SD), moderate (mean), and low (−1 SD) values of accepting external influence. As shown in Figure 2, the relationship between Islamic-based identity threat and authenticity at work was negative and significant when accepting external influence was high (simple slope = $-.37$, $t = -6.10$, $p < .001$), but nonsignificant when accepting external influence was low (simple slope = $-.08$, $t = -1.24$, $p = .22$).

Hypothesis 3a predicted that the relationship between Islamic-based identity threat and job satisfaction will be mediated via authenticity at work. The indirect effect of Islamic-based identity

Table 2. Path analytic tests of hypothesized and alternative models.

Path Estimated	Model 1 (Mediation)	Model 2 (Hypothesized First-Stage Moderated Mediation)	Model 3 (Second-Stage Moderated Mediation)	Model 4 (Full Effects Model)
Identity Threat → Turnover	.21*	.16	.14	.12
Identity Threat → Authenticity	-.23**	-.16**	-.23**	-.16**
Authenticity → Turnover	-.70**	-.63**	-.52**	-.54**
Indirect Effects	.16 ^b			
AEI → Authenticity		-.20**		-.20**
Identity Threat × AEI → Authenticity		-.11**		-.11**
Indirect Effects: Low AEI		.05		
Indirect Effects: Medium AEI		.14 ^a		
Indirect Effects: High AEI		.24 ^a		
AEI → Turnover			.19	.20
Authenticity × AEI → Turnover			-.21	-.28*
R ² Generalized	.48	.56	.48	.57
W ^b	25.50**	2.53	26.27**	—

Note: N = 177. Values represent unstandardized path estimates.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

^a95% confidence interval does not include zero.

^bIn computing the Q and W statistics, all models were compared with Model 4.

AEI = Accepting external influence.

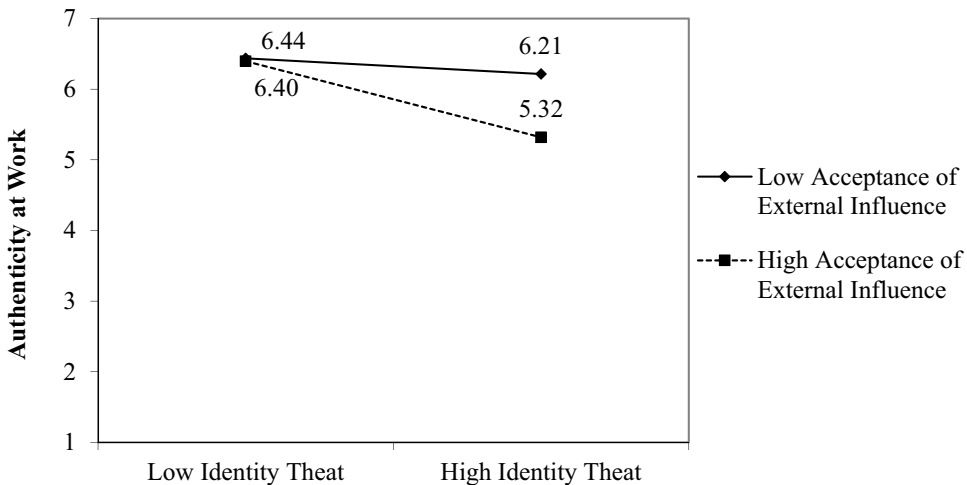


Figure 2. Interaction between Islamic-based identity threat and accepting external influence on authenticity at work.

threat on job satisfaction was significant (indirect effect = $-.15$, $p < .01$, 95% CI: $[-.27, -.05]$), providing support for Hypothesis 3a. Moreover, Hypothesis 3b was supported as well: The indirect effect of Islamic-based identity threat on turnover intentions was significant (indirect effect = $.16$, $p < .01$, 95% CI: $[.07, .29]$).

Additionally, we tested the conditional indirect effects of Islamic-based identity threat on turnover intentions through authenticity at work at different levels of accepting external influence. The findings showed that the indirect effect was significant at high levels (indirect effect = $.24$, 95% CI: $[.11, .38]$) and moderate levels (indirect effect = $.14$, 95% CI: $[.07, .25]$) of accepting external influence, but nonsignificant at low levels of accepting external influence (indirect effect = $.05$, 95% CI: $[-.03, .16]$).

Table 3. Path analytic tests of hypothesized and alternative models.

Path Estimated	Model 1 (Mediation)	Model 2 (Hypothesized First-Stage Moderated Mediation)	Model 3 (Second-Stage Moderated Mediation)	Model 4 (Full Effects Model)
Identity Threat → Job Satisfaction	-.24*	-.18*	-.26**	-.24**
Identity Threat → Authenticity	-.23**	-.24**	-.23**	-.16**
Authenticity → Job Satisfaction	.64**	.64**	.61**	.62**
Indirect Effects	-.15 ^a			
AEI → Authenticity		-.16*		-.20**
Identity Threat × AEI → Authenticity		-.13*		-.11**
Indirect Effects: Low AEI		-.05		
Indirect Effects: Medium AEI		-.13 ^a		
Indirect Effects: High AEI		-.22 ^a		
AEI → Job Satisfaction			.13	.12
Authenticity × AEI → Job Satisfaction			.14	.20
$R^2_{\text{Generalized}}$.50	.58	.51	.58
W^b	23.36**	.65	21.04**	—

Note: $N = 177$. Values represent unstandardized path estimates.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

^a95% confidence interval does not include zero.

^bIn computing the Q and W statistics, all models were compared with Model 4.

AEI = Accepting external influence.

Lastly, we tested the conditional indirect effects of Islamic-based identity threat on job satisfaction through authenticity at work at different levels of accepting external influence. The findings showed that the indirect effect was significant at high levels (indirect effect = $-.22$, 95% CI: $[-.39, -.09]$) and moderate levels (indirect effect = $-.13$, 95% CI: $[-.25, -.05]$) of accepting external influence, but nonsignificant at low levels of accepting external influence (indirect effect = $-.05$, 95% CI: $[-.16, .03]$).

To confirm that our hypothesized first-stage moderated mediation model explained more variance than the alternative models, we followed Edwards and Lambert's (2007) recommendation to compare our hypothesized first-stage moderated mediation with alternative nested models. Tables 2 and 3 demonstrate the path analytic tests of hypothesized and alternative models. First, we created a mediation model (Model 1) in which authenticity at work mediates the relationship between Islamic-based identity threat and the two outcomes: turnover intention and job satisfaction. In stage 2, we added accepting external influence as a first-stage moderator, as hypothesized in this study. Next, we created model 3, in which accepting external influence was added as a second-stage moderator. Finally, we created model 4, in which accepting external influence was added as a first and second-stage moderator.

We created generalized R^2 , Q , and W statistics (see Tepper et al., 2008) for Model 1 (mediation), Model 2 (hypothesized first-stage moderated mediation), Model 3 (second-stage moderated mediation), and Model 4 (dual-stage moderated mediation) for both outcome variables (turnover intentions and job satisfaction). We calculated Q and W statistics for Models 1, 2, and 3 while using Model 4 as the base model for comparison. Then, we compared the W statistics calculated for each model to the chi-square table using d degrees of freedom and $\alpha < .05$ to determine if the models were significantly different.

First, we conducted this analysis for turnover intentions. Model 4, in which moderation occurs at both stages ($R^2_{\text{Generalized}} = .57$), explained significantly more variance than either Model 1 ($R^2_{\text{Generalized}} = .48$, $W = 25.50$, $p < .01$) or Model 3 ($R^2_{\text{Generalized}} = .48$, $W = 26.27$, $p < .01$), but did not explain significantly more variance than Model 2, the hypothesized model ($R^2_{\text{Generalized}} = .56$, $W = 2.53$, $n.s.$). Next, we conducted the same analysis for job satisfaction. Model 4 ($R^2_{\text{Generalized}} = .58$) explained

significantly more variance than either Model 1 ($R^2_{\text{Generalized}} = .50$, $W = 23.36$, $p < .01$) or Model 3 ($R^2_{\text{Generalized}} = .51$, $W = 21.04$, $p < .01$), but did not explain significantly more variance than Model 2, the hypothesized model ($R^2_{\text{Generalized}} = .58$, $W = .65$, $n.s.$). Therefore, we conclude that the hypothesized first-stage moderation model is the best model for both outcome variables.

Discussion

Building upon identity and social identity theory,⁵ this study is one of the first to examine the effects of Islamic-based identity threat on women employees within an environment where religious observance is obligatory. At the same time, this study enhances our understanding of how Islamic-based identity threat relates to adverse workplace outcomes, including increased turnover intentions and decreased job satisfaction. Moreover, we investigated the moderating role of accepting external influence in regard to the effect of Islamic-based identity threat on authenticity at work. Our work contributes to the existing conversations by first considering “religion” as a component of “identity threat,” and then exploring the underlying mechanism through which perception of Islamic-based identity threat relates to adverse workplace outcomes (i.e., increased turnover intentions and decreased job satisfaction).

Theoretical implications

This study's results are consistent with prior research that suggests individuals protect their threatened identity by using a concealment strategy (Ellemers et al., 2002; Petriglieri, 2011). As in these earlier studies, we found that perceiving a threat to identity is related to increased intentions to leave the organization. This finding is consistent with previous studies suggesting that perceiving a lack of congruency between one's values and actions is followed by an expressed desire to leave the organization (Phillips et al., 2016). Moreover, while identity theory postulates that individuals' behavior is driven by the salience of their identity (Hogg et al., 1995), like Stryker (1968), we found that salient contextual demands of the workplace can change the way people act within the organization. For example, our study revealed that Iranian women hide their true non-religious identity when it is challenged by the organization, which hinders their cognitive functioning by creating dissonance (Kahn et al., 2017). Indeed, when employees appraise their non-religious identity as threatened in the organization, concealing their identity appears to be their best option. This finding provides empirical support for the earlier conceptualizations by Petriglieri (2011), who proposed concealment serves as a coping mechanism in response to perceived identity threat.

The results from our study indicate that when Iranian women experience Islamic-based identity, those high in accepting external influence are more likely to select the concealment option – that is, to display a less authentic self – compared to women who rate low on such acceptance. In other words, Iranian women who perceive their identity as challenged, harmed, or devalued by their organizations' religious context are less authentic if they inherently tend to accept external influence. Indeed, given organizations' obligatory religious rules, Iranian women with a threatened identity may well feel the need to put on a “religious mask.” Furthermore, the subjective nature of most organizational routines, such as performance appraisals and interviews, makes employees cautious given the importance of the employer's opinion of them (Meister et al., 2014).

Organizational implications

The global increase in international mobility has led to increased diversity in Western countries; As such, organizations need to adapt an understanding of social and cultural dynamics in Muslim countries (Razavi et al., 2023). Employees' heightened identity threat perceptions may lead to harmful outcomes – namely, increased turnover perceptions and decreased job satisfaction. A wide range of organizational research has emphasized how turnover intentions and reduced satisfaction are associated with deleterious individual and

organization performance levels (Bernerth & Aguinis, 2016). Given that over half of the variance in the job satisfaction and turnover intentions were explained by the predictors in our hypothesized model, we caution organizations about the costs associated with forcing compliance to Islamic-based rules and norms. The chances of employees' perceiving the existence of identity threat are higher in more conservative environments (Yagil & Medler-Liraz, 2012). Additionally, our study has important implications for women employees who have more tendency to accept external influence. While this study examined accepting external influence as a personality trait, it might be possible that organizational culture and expectations of adhering to Islamic practices could also induce a "state" of accepting external influence. Though Islamic restrictions are enforced mainly by the government in Iran, and there is little room for defiance regarding these limits in public sectors (Majbouri, 2016), managers can still mitigate some of the overly restrictive limitations associated with "proper Islamic behavior" by providing a freer environment where women may choose their attire style, for instance.

There are likely generational differences in employees' experiences of Islamic-based identity threat, given that Western culture more strongly influences younger generations of women in Iran and other Muslim-majority countries than women in the previous generations (Ghorbani & Tung, 2007). The growing number of these younger women means that more women are fighting against obligatory religious attire, especially the observation hijab, making employees' experiences of Islamic-based identity threat more prevalent. Most recently, the death of Mahsa Amini⁶ on 16 September 2022 has provoked revolutionary protests in Iran and the diaspora. These protests are prominently led by women chanting, "women, life, freedom." Protestors demand a regime change in Iran and rally for women's rights. Given that recent events have revolutionized the forty-three-year resistance movement against the theocracy's repression of Iranian women, future studies need to shed light on how experiences of Islamic-based identity threats have changed. Additionally, future researchers should study the differences between generations regarding their perceptions of Islamic-based identity threats. We predict that the perception of Islamic-based identity threat has grown substantially during the past few months, strengthening the implications of the proposed relationships in this study.

Limitations and future research

Due to the uniqueness Iranian women's experience in the workplace in terms of perceiving Islamic-based identity threat in an environment where both the government and the organization dictate Islamic norms, the results of this study might suffer from a cultural bias and therefore be more relevant to the Iranian workplaces. Moreover, the cross-sectional, self-report nature of this study represents a significant limitation. However, given the limits on freedom of expression in Iran, participant anonymity would be hard to assure with a repeated-measures design. This is a critical concern given the Iranian government's oversight/monitoring of telecommunications. The authors' snowball sampling method lessens the privacy concerns known to impact research in Middle Eastern countries (N. Cohen & Arieli, 2011). Moreover, this method was chosen in conjunction with use of the Telegram app to ensure participants' anonymity.

Despite the numerous benefits of authenticity in work, both employees and organizations can incur substantial costs if the authentic behavior contradicts the individual's true self or norms or rules (Kernis & Goldman, 2006). Future research can shed light on the costs, both financial and personal, of authentic displays in Muslim-majority organizations. Perceptions of identity threat in the workplace originate from disparities between employees' values and organizational values (Petriglieri, 2011). Future research should assess other factors that might create discrepancies between identity and workplace experiences, such as organization identification. Furthermore, future research should shed more light on the unique ways through which organizational procedures, norms and expectations ascribe and internalize, and enact one's identity at work (Creed et al., 2010).

Conclusion

The religious context of Iranian organizations requires women to work in environments that require specific Islamic behaviors, such as public praying and maintaining an Islamic appearance. Iranian women who work in organizations under imposed Islamic values that conflict with their values will have to hide their authentic, true selves, which will result in deleterious workplace outcomes. Specifically, the threat to their identity is likely to lead to decreased job satisfaction and increased intentions to leave the organization, as women seek employment in more tolerant organizations. Given the negative impacts of Islamic-based identity threats on women as discussed in this paper, organizations, and societies in general need to abolish such male-dominant barriers imposed on women in the name of Islam (Shariati, 1971).

Notes

1. The Global Gender Gap Index is used to illustrate the magnitude of gender-based inequality based on countries' status on economic, education, health and political criteria (World Economic Forum, 2020).
2. The ratio of the employed population (aged 15 years and older) to the total population at working age (15 years and older) (Statistical Center of Iran, 2018).
3. Number of employed women in Tehran, Iran, was estimated at five hundred thousand in 2018 (Kadivar, 2022).
4. Ethical approval for data collection was received from the Office of Research Compliance (14319).
5. The data described in this article are openly available in the Open Science Framework at <https://osf.io/gy3ns>.
6. A 22-year-old woman who was arrested by morale police for allegedly violating Iran's mandatory hijab law. She was beaten under custody and died three days after being arrested.

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Data availability statement

The data described in this article are openly available in the Open Science Framework at <https://osf.io/zwdnx/>.

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