Sport Contact as a Means to Reduce Islamophobia: FIFA World Cup 2022 Qatar

Umer Hussain, Texas A&M University
George Cunningham (Advisor), Texas A&M University

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Significance. Numerous scholars have argued that Islamophobia is prevalent in various social contexts in the West (Considine, 2017). Islamophobia is a type of racial prejudice against Muslims in Western countries (Considine, 2017). However, there remains a paucity of scholarship about strategies for reducing Islamophobia. Notably, there is a dearth of sport management scholarship about ways to reduce Islamophobia via sport interventions. Previously, Sport management scholars have recommended Allport’s (1954) contact hypothesis as a method to reduce sexual or racial prejudice (Cunningham & Melton, 2013).

Literature review. The central thesis of Allport’s (1954) contact hypothesis is that inter-group contact reduces prejudice. However, the key limitation of Allport’s (1954) contact hypothesis is that actual contact is difficult to arrange. Thereby, imagined contact is used by various scholars (Crisp & Turner, 2012). Schuhl et al. (2019) underscored that imagined contact effects are lasting, even after the minimal imagination. Nonetheless, there will be an actual intergroup interaction between Western soccer fans and Muslims during the FIFA 2022 world cup in Qatar, which might reduce Islamophobia. Hence, the imagined contact scenario can be used beforehand to understand how Islamophobia will be reduced in the FIFA 2022 world cup. We are testing the following hypothesis: Imagined sport-related contact between Western people and Muslims will reduce Islamophobia among Western individuals.

Purpose. This study aims to illustrate a relationship between sport-related imagined intergroup contact during the FIFA 2022 world cup and reduction in Islamophobia by grounding the study into Allport’s (1954) contact hypothesis.

Research Method. In this ongoing study, we are enrolling students of major US universities randomly in experimental (imagined sport contact) and control groups. Students will participate in the post-test experimental design (Campbell & Stanley, 1963). A questionnaire packet will be distributed among both the groups. The experimental group will be given 5 minutes to imagine the following situation: “Imagine that you go to Qatar for the FIFA soccer world cup match of your favorite team. Next to your seat, a Muslim man from Qatar will also be spectating the match sitting. After the match, you spend 30 minutes chatting with that Muslim man. During the conversation, you got to know some interesting and unexpected things about his religion.” In contrast, the control group will be asked to imagine watching a soccer match in the Qatar FIFA World Cup with his/her best friend. After the manipulation, participants will be asked to complete a post-experiment questionnaire. Lee et al. ’s (2009) 16-items scale will be used to measure Islamophobia. While Novotny and Polonsky’s (2011) 8-items scale will be adapted to measure knowledge about Islam. We will be using ANCOVA to measure the relationship between condition (experimental and control group-IV) and Islamophobia (DV) by controlling the variable of previous knowledge about Islam (covariate). The data will be analyzed in SPSS 27.00.

Contribution. This study will provide empirical support about how imagined contact in a sporting environment can reduce Islamophobia. Further, this study offers the Qatari government practical recommendations to use the FIFA 2022 world cup to reduce Islamophobia.