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Cultural distance through the lens of social closeness and individual experiences with diversity

Unveiling attitudes toward recent immigrants in Germany using a factorial survey experiment¹

Abstract: The influx of refugees to Germany, particularly from Syria and Ukraine, has significantly increased over the past decade due to wars and political tensions in the Middle East and Europe. These refugee groups vary not only in their demographic composition but also in their cultural similarity to Germany. Drawing on theoretical frameworks related to threat perception, social identity, and socialization, this paper explores the influence of cultural distance on the acceptance of immigrants in Germany. The study examines the interplay between cultural and social distance and investigates whether the impact of cultural distance differs based on individuals' socialization experiences.

Using data from a factorial survey experiment implemented in the 63rd wave of the German Internet Panel, we examine cultural distance in a multidimensional way. Our analyses confirm the significant role of cultural distance and highlight that its impact is more pronounced in interactions with lower social distance. Additionally, we find notable differences based on the dimension of cultural distance as well as between respondents depending on their educational level and between birth cohorts.

Keywords: attitudes, refugees, immigrants, factorial survey experiment, Germany

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Kulturelle Distanz im Spiegel sozialer Nähe und individueller Diversitätserfahrungen

Ein faktorielles Survey-Experiment zur Messung von Einstellungen gegenüber neu zugewanderten Personen in Deutschland

Zusammenfassung: Aufgrund von Kriegen und politischen Spannungen im Nahen Osten und Europa, hat Deutschland in den letzten Jahren einen starken Anstieg von Geflüchteten, insbesondere aus Syrien und der Ukraine erlebt. Diese Geflüchteten unterscheiden sich nicht nur in ihrer demografischen Zusammensetzung, sondern auch in ihrer kulturellen Ähnlichkeit zu Deutschland. Dieser Artikel untersucht den Einfluss kultureller Distanz auf die Akzeptanz von Immigranten in Deutschland und greift dabei auf theoretische Konzepte in Bezug auf Bedrohungswahrnehmung, soziale Identität und Sozialisation zurück. Die Studie untersucht das Zusammenspiel von kultureller und sozialer Distanz und untersucht, ob der Einfluss der kulturellen Distanz je nach den individuellen sozialen Erfahrungen der Personen variiert.

Unter Verwendung von Daten aus einem Faktoriellen Survey-Experiment, das in der 63. Welle des German Internet Panel durchgeführt wurde, untersuchen wir die kulturelle Distanz auf eine multidimensionale Weise. Unsere Analysen bestätigen die signifikante Rolle der kulturellen Distanz und heben einen stärkeren Einfluss der kulturellen Distanz in Interaktionen mit geringerer sozialer Distanz hervor. Darüber hinaus identifizieren wir deutliche Variationen basierend auf der Dimension der kulturellen Distanz sowie unter den Befragten, abhängig von ihrem Bildungsniveau und zwischen den Geburtskohorten.

Stichworte: Einstellungen, Geflüchtete, Migranten, Faktorielles Survey Experiment, Deutschland

1 Introduction

Wars and political tensions in the Middle East and Europe have tremendously increased the inflow of refugees to Germany during the past decade. In 2015–16, Germany has registered more than one million asylum applications from Syrians, Iraqis, and Afghans (BAMF 2017; Brücker et al. 2020), whereas more than one million Ukrainian refugees entered Germany within just a single year in 2022 following the Russian full-scale aggression in Ukraine (Brücker et al. 2023; UNHCR 2023). Both developments have not gone unnoticed by the German population, renewing the political discourse about attitudes toward newcomers and the ability of the German society to cope with the growing diversity (Czymara/Schmidt-Catran 2017; Dražanová/Geddes 2023; Gerhards et al. 2016). These developments have sparked a recent upswing in social science research in Germany and other European countries, revealing a growing trend of negative

attitudes among the majority population toward migration and immigrants, likely in response to the rising immigration levels (Czymara 2021; Czymara/Dochow 2018; Deiss-Helbig/Remer 2022; Hangartner et al. 2019; Sola 2018). Notably, a similar trend of declining immigrant acceptance was observed some twenty years earlier (Semyonov et al. 2006). While the majority's attitudes toward immigrants have become increasingly negative overall, previous research has also emphasized that the acceptance of immigrants depends on specific characteristics of the respective immigrant groups, such as their country of origin, religious denomination, or education (Bansak et al. 2016; Czymara/Schmidt-Catran 2016; De Coninck 2020; Fietkau/Hansen 2018).

Many of the above characteristics are part of the cultural baggage that newcomers bring with them, which in turn entails different levels of acceptance on the part of the host society. Research has indeed shown that immigrants' acceptance is considerably lower the larger their cultural distance to the receiving society (Czymara/Schmidt-Catran 2016; De Coninck 2020). A key explanation for this empirical regularity is rooted in the concept of perceived threat, in which immigrants are perceived to pose a threat to the values and identity of the receiving society (Ceobanu/Escandell 2010; Stephan/Stephan 2018). Such threat tends to be perceived as more pronounced the larger the perceived cultural distance between the host society and immigrants depending on the latter's country of origin or religious denomination. With regard to the origin of immigrants, research on European host societies has found that immigrants from European countries are more accepted than those from non-European countries (Czymara/Schmidt-Catran 2016; De Coninck 2020; Ford/Mellon 2020). With regard to religious denomination, a lower acceptance of Muslim immigrants is reported (Bansak et al. 2016; Czymara/Schmidt-Catran 2016).

The perception of immigrants by the majority population further depends on the social context in which the majority and minorities interact. The closeness of social interactions or the intimacy of relationships between social groups is referred to as social distance (Bogardus 1925). Previous research has shown that individuals' attitudes toward immigrants who marry into their family are more negative than toward immigrants who are their neighbors or friends (Gregurović/Mrakovčić 2022; Helbling 2014; Steinbach 2004). Furthermore, studies have shown that individuals are more willing to accept close relationships with immigrants from culturally closer countries. For example, Steinbach (2004) has reported the acceptance of immigrants from Italy or Greece as family members to be twice as high as that of immigrants from Turkey or African countries. Similarly, Gregurović and Mrakovčić (2022) have found immigrants' origin and religion to be much more important for their acceptance as marriage partners than for their acceptance as neighbors.

Furthermore, previous research has shown that the attitudes of the host society population toward immigrants are heterogeneous, depending on different factors. For

example, several studies have shown that individuals with higher levels of education have more favorable attitudes toward immigration and immigrants (Gorodzeisky/Semyonov 2009; Hainmueller/Hiscox 2007; Pettigrew et al. 2007; Semyonov et al. 2006). Moreover, previous research has found differences in attitudes by age, with younger individuals being more positive toward immigrants than older individuals, albeit most of this research is not able to disentangle age and cohort effects (Beller 2023; Gorodzeisky/Semyonov 2009; Quillian 1995). In Germany, there are also remarkable regional differences, with several studies showing that the attitudes toward immigrants are more negative in East than in West Germany (Boehnke et al. 1998; Gerhards et al. 2016; Wagner et al. 2003). However, whether these patterns are also shaped by the cultural distance of immigrants is less clear.

Against this background, this study's contribution is threefold. First, building on the assumption that cultural and social distance are contingent on one another, we assume that the role of cultural distance—defined in a multidimensional way—in shaping the majority's attitudes toward newcomers becomes more important as the interaction between the majority and immigrants becomes closer.

Second, we argue that the cultural distance between newcomers and members of the host society has a greater impact on their attitudes toward newcomers for some members of the majority population than for others. We propose that the cultural distance to the newcomers is more important for the attitudes of Germans who have been socialized with less experience of cultural diversity.

Our third contribution is a comparative focus on the two most recent refugee groups, i.e., those from Syria and Ukraine, which differ in several characteristics that are pivotal to this study, above all the groups' cultural similarity to the majority native German population. Culturally, Ukraine is much closer to other European societies, including Germany, in terms of religion, gender equality, and economic development than Syria.

In the following section, we first present the theoretical framework and provide a summary of existing research on the role of cultural and social distance in shaping attitudes toward newcomers. We then synthesize these theoretical perspectives to address the joint role of cultural and social distance in this process. Following this, we address variations in attitudes based on different characteristics of members of the receiving society, as established in the existing literature. Building on the theoretical arguments, we formulate testable hypotheses, which are examined using data from a factorial survey experiment (FSE) conducted in the German Internet Panel. This panel comprises a representative sample of the German population and was collected in January 2023. The study's results are then summarized, followed by a conclusion that discusses the findings and the study's contribution to the existing body of research.

2 Theoretical framework and hypotheses

Attitudes toward immigrants among members of the receiving society are addressed in a number of sociopsychological (e.g., the intergroup threat theory (Stephan/Stephan 2018)) and sociological (e.g., group threat theory (Blumer 1958)) theories, with perceived threat and competition crystallizing as key explanations for the studied phenomenon (Callens/Meuleman 2024; Esses 2021). These theories generally assume that the majority perceives immigrants as a threat in various domains, including economic and cultural life, the demographic situation, and safety and security (Esses 2021). Economic and cultural threat explanations are thereby most frequently discussed and juxtaposed in pertinent sociological studies (Callens/Meuleman 2024).

Economic threat involves that the societal and economic standing of the majority group is perceived to be challenged. According to realistic group conflict theory, this threat is rooted in perceived competition over scarce resources (Blalock 1967; Bobo 1999; Quillian 1995; Scheepers 2002; Semyonov et al. 2006). The notion of economic threat is particularly powerful in explaining the economic challenges that newcomers might pose to vulnerable segments of the host country population, such as the low-skilled or unemployed (Callens/Meuleman 2024; Esses 2021). However, a more general pattern seems to be that anti-immigrant sentiments are primarily driven by the perception that immigrants constitute a cultural threat (Bansak et al. 2016; Hainmueller/Hopkins 2015; Sides/Citrin 2007). Central to the notion of cultural threat is the proposition that individuals within the host society perceive the arrival of immigrants as an assault on their collective identity, cultural heritage, national symbols, and core values due to the arrival of immigrants, attributed to disparities in the values and lifestyles of these incoming individuals (Czymara/Schmidt-Catran 2016). This perceived threat might refer not only to being exposed to different values, but also to a fear of losing one's own way of life or the national identity (Blumer 1958; Ceobanu/Escandell 2010).

In this context, it is important to note that the more culturally distant an immigrant group is from the receiving society, i.e., the more immigrants' identities, traditions, and values diverge from those of the receiving society, the larger is the perceived potential threat, which is posed by that immigrant group (Czymara/Schmidt-Catran 2016; Kinder/Sears 1981). This idea is also in line with social identity theory (Tajfel 1981; Tajfel/Turner 2008), which addresses the perception of the ingroup and outgroup based on identity-building factors, such as religion, ethnicity, or cultural values in general. The categorization into groups perpetuates group boundaries via ingroup favoritism, with individuals showing more positive attitudes toward members of the ingroup than toward those of the outgroup. Immigrants represent an outgroup, which is why members of the receiving society form negative attitudes toward them in order to maintain their ingroup identity (Ceobanu/Escandell 2010).

Beyond the theories of intergroup threat and social identity, social psychology has introduced another approach, which suggests that interaction and contact with members of the outgroup reduce prejudice toward the members of the respective outgroup. The lower level of prejudice, in turn, increases the acceptance of and positive attitudes toward the members of the outgroup. The contact hypothesis, as introduced by Allport (1954), suggest that native individuals within a society who engage in contact with immigrants, particularly those who sustain regular interactions, are likely to have less negative attitudes toward them than native individuals who experience spatial segregation from immigrants. Essential to this hypothesis is the assertion that positive interactions are crucial to fostering favorable attitudes toward immigrants (Allport 1954; Pettigrew 1998). Empirical studies have further indicated that the efficacy of intergroup contact in shaping positive attitudes is enhanced when characterized by greater intensity, manifesting in personal and emotional closeness and increased temporal investment in shared activities (Davies et al. 2011). We extend this idea to argue that consistent exposure to immigrants and cultural diversity, in a broader sense, constitutes a significant component of an individual's socialization. Native-born individuals who grow up amidst ethnic and cultural outgroups that are part of their daily experience—such as attending school alongside immigrant children or residing in neighborhoods where many immigrants live—undergo a process of socialization that fosters a perspective in which immigrants are perceived as integral members of the society. In contrast, native-born individuals who have experienced socialization with only limited presence of immigrants may have more negative attitudes toward them.

2.1 The role of cultural distance

In accordance with the theoretical perspective assuming that immigrants pose a potential threat to the culture, values, and ways of life of the receiving society, the extent of the perceived threat depends on the divergence of the immigrants' culture from, and consequently its incompatibility with, the culture of the receiving society—often referred to as their cultural distance. If immigrants' cultural values diverge more strongly from those of the receiving society, it not only makes it more difficult for those immigrants to integrate into the host society (Dustmann/Preston 2007) but also increases the perceived threat to the receiving society's values (Czymara/Schmidt-Catran 2016). On the other hand, if the immigrant group is very similar to the receiving society in terms of culture, values, and ethnicity, it might not even be viewed as an outgroup and might therefore not be perceived as a potential threat to the society's cultural homogeneity (Dustmann/Preston 2007).

Such cultural differences may be due to the immigrants' origin or religious denomination. In the case of Germany, which is historically influenced by Christianity but increasingly secularized today (Pollack/Pickel 2007), this would make non-European or non-Western as well as non-Christian immigrants more culturally distant. Especially Muslim immigrants might be viewed as culturally less compatible with

the Christian-socialized majority (Helbling 2010). Both religious denomination and the country of origin are connected to ethnic differences: For Germany, the geographically closer European countries are also closer in terms of ethnicity and religion than most non-European countries. In other words, immigrants from other European countries such as France are more likely to be similar to the German society in terms of religion and ethnicity than immigrants from Syria. Furthermore, immigrants from culturally more distant countries of origin might have a different skin color, have a different physiognomy, and wear different religious symbols, making them more recognizable as members of the outgroup from the perspective of the receiving society (Aalberg et al. 2012; Fietkau/Hansen 2018). Hence, more negative attitudes toward culturally more distant immigrants might partly be a result of their recognizability as members of an outgroup. Beyond making them recognizable as outgroup members, a different appearance of immigrants and visible ethnic cues might trigger stereotypes and prejudice, which in itself leads to lower acceptance of those immigrants (Dustmann/Preston 2007; Hainmueller/Hopkins 2015). Accordingly, we expect that

H1: The acceptance of immigrants with higher cultural distance is lower than of immigrants with lower cultural distance.

In particular, we expect attitudes toward immigrants among the native German majority to be more negative when the immigrants come from more culturally distant (non-European) countries of origin and when the immigrants belong to a non-Christian, especially Muslim, religion. Furthermore, given Germany's increasing secularization, we expect natives' attitudes toward immigrants to be more negative when the immigrants are more religious.

2.2 The interplay between cultural and social distance

Irrespective of the cultural similarity of immigrants to the majority population, the nature of the interaction with immigrants might be crucial to the evaluation of these immigrants. Based on Bogardus' (1925) social distance scale, this study assesses the different forms of contact that members of the receiving society are willing to have with immigrants. We investigate whether the attitudes of members of the majority population toward immigrants who move into their neighborhood differ from those toward immigrants who marry into their family. The interaction with a person who marries into the family is usually much closer than any possible interaction with a neighbor. Therefore, for members of the host society accepting an immigrant as a member of their own family through marriage would mean accepting a much lower social distance than in the case of having an immigrant as a neighbor. Marriage represents a long-term and highly intimate relationship. Accepting an out-group member into such a close bond challenges social boundaries and incurs higher costs than other types of relationships, partly due to more enduring consequences arising from a marital partnership (Alba/Golden 1986; Kogan et al.

2021). From a theoretical standpoint, the lower the social distance in interactions with an immigrant, the greater the expected pressure in terms of cultural fit. This means that the risk of having to concede or change one's own values increases as the social distance to an immigrant decreases.

We propose that cultural and social distance do not operate independently of each other. Given our expectation that less socially distant interactions between members of the receiving society and immigrants pose a higher symbolic threat and challenge social identity categorizations, we anticipate that the role of immigrants' cultural distance becomes more important the lower the social distance to the immigrants becomes. In other words, we assume that a larger cultural distance is less likely to challenge a person's established value set when the social interactions with immigrants are not as close. This implies that particularly when an immigrant marries into one's family, the cultural closeness of the immigrant becomes crucial. Our theoretical argument echoes the findings of previous research on intermarriage, which demonstrates high levels of rejection of intermarriage with immigrants of other ethnic origins (Huijnk et al. 2013) and immigrants from majority-Muslim countries (Huijnk et al. 2013) or those who identify as Muslims (Carol 2013), particularly by members of the native majority of the receiving society (Carol 2013; Huijnk et al. 2010). In line with this, we expect that

H2: Immigrants' cultural distance matters more in the formation of attitudes in situations with lower social distance to immigrants.

In particular, immigrants' country of origin, religious denomination, and religiosity should play a greater role in individuals' acceptance of immigrants who marry into their family than in their acceptance of immigrants who move into their neighborhood.

2.3 Heterogeneity in the role of cultural distance

Attitudes toward minorities depend not only on the characteristics of these minorities but also on the individual-level characteristics of those who express the attitudes. Following the assumptions of the theories of social identity and threat perception, previous research has argued that individual attributes mitigating feelings of threat correlate with more favorable attitudes toward immigrants. In addition, in accordance with the contact hypothesis, individual characteristics linked to increased exposure and interactions with immigrants should also contribute to more positive sentiments toward immigrants. In the following, we discuss how the level of education, the birth cohort, and the place of residence can mitigate the impact of cultural distance in the formation of attitudes toward immigrants.

The role of education

Previous studies have found individuals with higher levels of education to have more favorable attitudes toward immigration, immigrants, and ethnic outgroups

(Coenders/Scheepers 2003; Gorodzeisky/Semyonov 2009; Hainmueller/Hiscox 2007; Pettigrew et al. 2007; Semyonov et al. 2006). These studies argue that this tendency is due to a link between higher education and elevated levels of openness and tolerance toward diverse social groups (Ceobanu/Escandell 2010; Hainmueller/Hiscox 2007). This link operates through the following mechanisms: First, education increases individuals' ability to engage with and indulge views and values that diverge from their own, without them threatening their own values. Second, education leads to more exposure to knowledge about different cultures or ethnic groups and to more culturally diverse social networks (Chandler/Tsai 2001), hence increasing tolerance among the more highly educated (Sidanius et al. 1996). Third, positive attitudes toward other cultural groups and tolerance in general may become integral components of the identity of highly educated individuals (Betts 1988). This can be attributed to the higher value placed on diversity within higher education institutions. In sum, by exposing individuals to knowledge and diverse groups and by promoting a more tolerant identity, higher education systems will socialize individuals in a manner that they express more positive attitudes towards immigrants. This entails that cultural distance should have less influence on the acceptance of immigrants among highly educated individuals.

Cohort differences

Furthermore, greater exposure to immigrants in everyday situations should increase the knowledge about and promote tolerance toward them irrespective of the individuals' level of education. In consequence, being socialized in a more diverse society, with more members of different cultural and ethnic groups, should increase the likelihood of forming positive attitudes toward these groups. The ethnic and cultural diversity in Germany has increased in the second half of the 20th century, starting with the guest worker migration from Southern Europe (Italy, Greece, Spain, Portugal) and Turkey in the 1950s and 60s (Ellermann 2015; Olczyk et al. 2016; Woellert et al. 2009). Since then, the German society has experienced further diversification given the rising proportion of immigrants and their offspring in the population (BAMF 2020; Sprengholz et al. 2021; Woellert et al. 2009). For instance, during the 1950s, the percentage of foreigners in Germany stood at approximately 1%, a figure that has since increased to a range of 8 to 9% in the early 2000s (Woellert et al. 2009) and to over 12% in 2018 (BAMF 2020). Moreover, the percentage of individuals with a migration background—defined as those born in Germany to immigrant parents—witnessed substantial growth over time (Merger 2012; Woellert et al. 2009).

Furthermore, the diversification of the German population manifests itself in the growing number of distinct origin countries of both immigrants and their descendants. In Germany, the percentage of individuals with a migration background from countries that represent less than 2% of the overall migrant population was 26.6% in 2010 (Merger 2012). By 2018, this percentage increased to 44.1%

(BAMF 2020), which means that in 2018 there were more different origin countries of small immigrant groups than in 2012. This suggests that the multitude of different origin countries within the migrant population in Germany has notably increased in less than ten years.

Considering the increasing cultural diversity in Germany over time, the younger cohorts are socialized in a context in which Germany is perceived as an immigration country characterized by considerable ethnic and cultural diversity. They are more likely than older cohorts to be brought up in ethnically diverse neighborhoods or to attend schools alongside peers with immigrant parents or who have immigrated themselves (Woellert et al 2019). This not only makes younger cohorts more used to cultural and ethnic diversity already in their formative years, but also increases the probability of (positive) interactions with immigrants or individuals with a migration background. Therefore, we expect that cultural distance has a lower influence on the acceptance of immigrants among younger cohorts than among older cohorts. This expectation arises from the younger cohorts' socialization in an environment in which interactions with immigrants in their daily lives are more common.

East–West differences

Moreover, the exposure to immigrants differs by the place of residence, given a strong variation in the proportion of immigrants living in West and East Germany during the last decades. As reported by the Federal Statistical Office, the percentage of the population without German citizenship was significantly higher in West Germany (16%) than in East Germany (7%) in 2022, a difference that has persisted already since the 1990s, when the proportion of foreigners was approximately 8% in West Germany and 1% in East Germany (Destatis 2024). This variation can primarily be attributed to historical differences between the two regions before the German Reunification. Specifically, there was a more pronounced guest worker migration to the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) than to the former German Democratic Republic (GDR) before the reunification (Destatis 2024). In addition, the origin countries of the guest workers differed between the two regions. While the FRG experienced a large influx of guest workers mainly from Southern Europe and Turkey (Ellermann 2015; Olczyk et al. 2016; Woellert et al. 2009), in the GDR, migrants from more “socialism-friendly” countries such as Northern Vietnam, Mozambique, Angola, Cuba, North Korea, and China constituted a comparable scheme, albeit on a smaller scale (Bade/Oltmer 2007). As a result, the population in today's East German federal states has been residing in a community that displays less cultural and ethnic diversity than the population in today's West German federal states. Consequently, individuals living in East Germany have been socialized with less contact to immigrants and an overall lower cultural diversity than individuals living in West Germany.

In summary, we assume immigrants' cultural distance to be less important for individuals who have experienced a more positive socialization toward immigrants and have been exposed to a more diverse immigrant population. Accordingly, we expect that

H3: Immigrants' cultural distance matters less in the formation of attitudes among groups that are socialized in contexts with more positive attitudes toward foreigners.

In particular, we expect immigrants' country of origin, religious denomination, and religiosity to be less important to individuals with higher levels of education (vs. lower levels of education), to younger (vs. older) cohorts, and to individuals living in West Germany (vs. East Germany).

3 Data and Methods

To test the impact of cultural distance on the acceptance of immigrants, we use data from a factorial survey experiment implemented in the 63rd wave of the German Internet Panel (GIP) (<https://doi.org/10.4232/1.14367>), which was carried out in January 2023. The GIP is an online panel survey of attitudes and preferences, which is conducted in several waves per year with around 4,000 respondents (Blom et al. 2015).

In the factorial survey experiment, the respondents received six different vignettes containing a description of a hypothetical immigrant and were asked to rate how they would react in three different situations and interactions with the described immigrant on an 11-point scale from very negative to very positive. Overall, the vignettes differed in seven dimensions, with two to three levels each (see figure 1 for an example vignette). For the factorial survey experiment, we selected 120 vignettes out of the total of 432 possible combinations and divided them among 20 experimental groups, with six different vignettes each. For this, we used a D-efficient design, which accounts for all two-way interactions between the dimensions. Respondents were randomly assigned to these experimental groups, and the vignettes were presented to them in randomized order.

Figure 1: Example of a vignette (English translation)

Ms. S. immigrated to Germany from Syria. She is highly qualified and speaks good German. Ms. S. is Muslim, and religion plays an important role in her life.

How would you react if Mrs. S. married into your family?

Note: Dimensions are underlined. See figure A1 for the German wording. *Source:* Own depiction.

Our analyses are based on a subsample of the vignettes. To analyze the social distance, we selected the vignettes describing the scenario in which the immigrant

marries into the family of the respondent and those describing the scenario in which the immigrant moves into the immediate neighborhood of the respondent. We dropped the vignettes describing the scenario in which the immigrant receives German citizenship after a few years, as it did not adequately capture the aspect of social interactions.

To analyze the impact of cultural distance, we used information on the country of origin, the religious denomination, and the religiosity of the immigrant. The country of origin was varied by describing the person as immigrated from France, Syria, or Ukraine. Regarding religious denomination, the person was described as Christian, Muslim, or Jewish. With regard to the level of religiosity, the immigrant was described as a person for whom religion does not play a big role in life or as a person for whom religion plays an important role in life. Additionally, the described immigrants varied in their gender, level of qualification, and language skills (see table 1 for an overview of all vignette dimensions and levels).

Table 1: Vignette dimensions and levels

Dimensions	Level
Scenario	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Married into your family 2. Moved into your immediate neighborhood 3. Received German citizenship after a few years
<i>Characteristics of immigrant</i>	
Gender	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Male 2. Female
Origin	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Syria 2. Ukraine 3. France
Denomination	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Christian 2. Muslim 3. Jewish
Religiosity	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Religion does not play a big role in life 2. Religion does play an important role in life
Qualification	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Low qualification 2. High qualification
Language skills	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Speaks German well 2. Hardly speaks German

Note: See table A1 for the German wording. *Source:* Own depiction.

To test our hypotheses about the impact of respondents' socialization on their attitudes, we used additional information on the respondents. First, we used information about their highest educational level and distinguished between respondents who had finished secondary education with an entry exam for tertiary education (*Abitur* or *Fachhochschulreife*) and those with a lower educational degree. Second, we used information on respondents' year of birth, distinguishing between those who were born before 1985 and those born 1985 and later. In the sensitivity analyses, we additionally tested whether our results hold for a more fine-grained differentiation of birth cohorts. Third, we differentiated between respondents who lived in East Germany and respondents who lived in West Germany at the time of the interview.

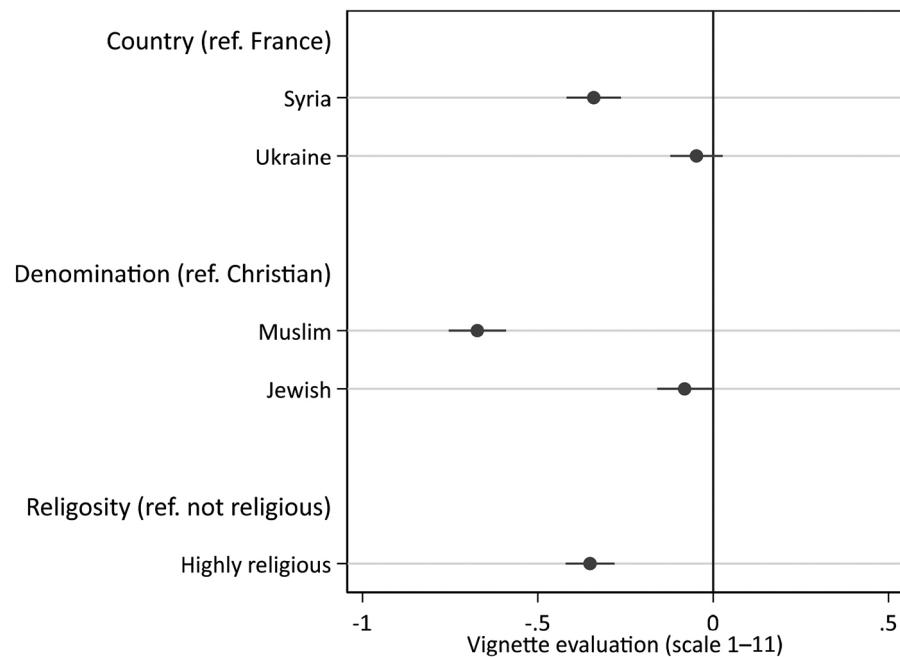
For our analytical sample, we restricted the full sample of 3,804 respondents who took part in wave 63 of the GIP as follows: We excluded respondents who did not have a German citizenship (n=196) and those with missing values on educational level, year of birth, or place of residence (n=98). After excluding respondents who had not answered one of the vignettes of interest (n=8), our analytical sample consisted of 13,954 vignette evaluations by 3,502 respondents. Table A2 shows the composition of the analytical sample along with the respondent characteristics used in our analyses. To test our hypotheses, we employed linear regression models with clustered standard errors on the individual level and controlled for the position of the vignette.

4 Results

Figure 2 illustrates respondents' attitudes toward immigrants depending on their cultural distance. These—and all following results—are based on models in which all vignette dimensions are included (see table A3 model 1 for the corresponding regression table). According to hypothesis 1, respondents should be less accepting of immigrants with a higher cultural distance than of those with a lower cultural distance. We tested this hypothesis using three different measurements of cultural distance: the country of origin, religious denomination, and the level of religiosity. Regarding the country of origin, we observe a statistically significant lower acceptance of immigrants from Syria moving into the neighborhood or marrying a family member than of immigrants from France, with a difference of 0.34 scale points. In contrast, the acceptance of immigrants from Ukraine does not differ from that of immigrants from France. For religious denomination, we find a statistically significant lower acceptance of Muslim immigrants than of Christian immigrants of 0.67 scale points. The acceptance of Jewish compared to Christian immigrants is also lower, but this effect is very small (0.08 scale points) and statistically significant only at the 5 percent level. In terms of religiosity, we observe a statistically significant lower acceptance of immigrants for whom religion plays an important role in life than of immigrants for whom religion does not play a big role in life of 0.35

scale points. Overall, these findings are in line with our theoretical expectations. We find a lower acceptance of non-European, Muslim, and highly religious immigrants.

Figure 2: The effect of cultural distance on the acceptance of immigrants



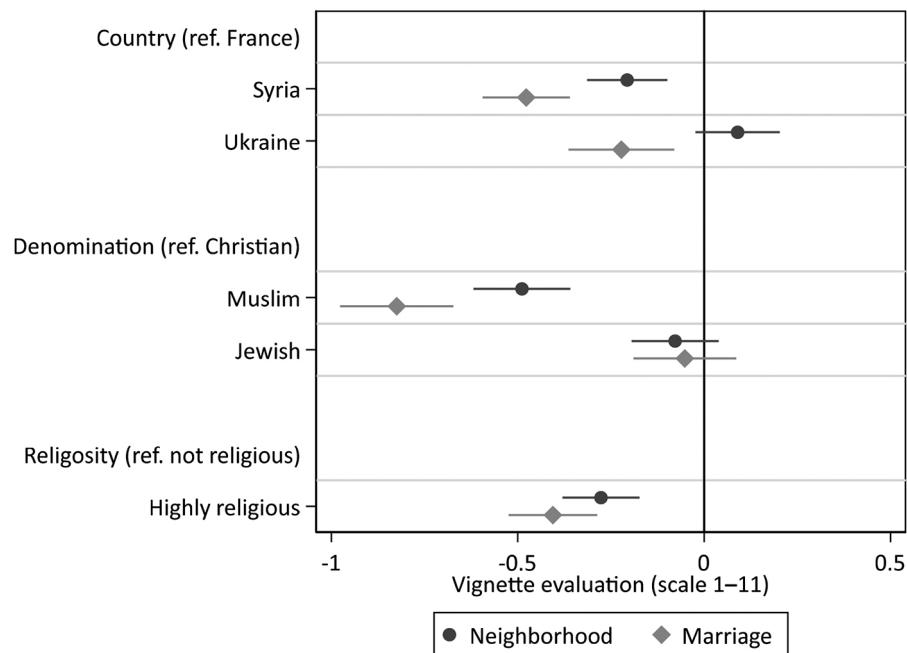
Notes: N = 13,954 vignette evaluations by 3,502 respondents; conditional effect plots with 95 percent confidence intervals. The estimates are reported in table A3 model 1. *Source:* GIP wave 63.

The interplay between cultural and social distance

In the next step, we tested whether the impact of cultural distance depends on the described social distance to the immigrant. For this purpose, we included several interaction terms between our measurement of cultural distance (country of origin, religious denomination, and religiosity) and the level of interaction with the immigrant (moving into the neighborhood and marrying into the family) into our model. Our basic model aligns with previous findings, indicating a generally lower acceptance of immigrants marrying into the family than of immigrants moving into the neighborhood by 0.64 scale points (see table A3 model 1), while figure 3 displays the results of the interaction between cultural and social distance.

Overall, our results partially confirm hypothesis 2, indicating that the way cultural distance is captured—whether through immigrants' origin, religious denomination, or religiosity—plays a significant role. In line with our expectations, we find a

Figure 3: The effect of cultural distance on the acceptance of immigrants by level of social distance



Notes: N = 13,954 vignette evaluations by 3,502 respondents; conditional effect plots with 95 percent confidence intervals. The estimates are reported in table A4. Source: GIP wave 63.

lower acceptance of Syrian than of French immigrants for both described situations, but the effect is stronger for those marrying a family member than for those moving into the neighborhood. Similarly, social distance matters for the acceptance of Ukrainian refugees. While the acceptance of Ukrainian immigrants marrying into the family is lower than that of French immigrants marrying into the family, the acceptance of Ukrainian immigrants moving into the neighborhood is slightly higher than that of French immigrants moving into the neighborhood, albeit it is not statistically significant. Comparing the effects for immigrants from Syria and Ukraine, we find that the acceptance of Ukrainian refugees is higher for both described situations, albeit the difference for marrying into the family is not statistically significant. When comparing the acceptance of Muslim to that of Christian immigrants, we find a statistically significant lower acceptance of Muslim immigrants marrying into the family than of those moving into the neighborhood, which is in line with our expectation. When comparing the acceptance of Jewish to that of Christian immigrants, we do not find any significant differences for both described situations. Contrary to our expectations, the acceptance of highly

religious and non-religious immigrants does not differ according to the level of social distance.

Heterogeneity in the role of cultural distance

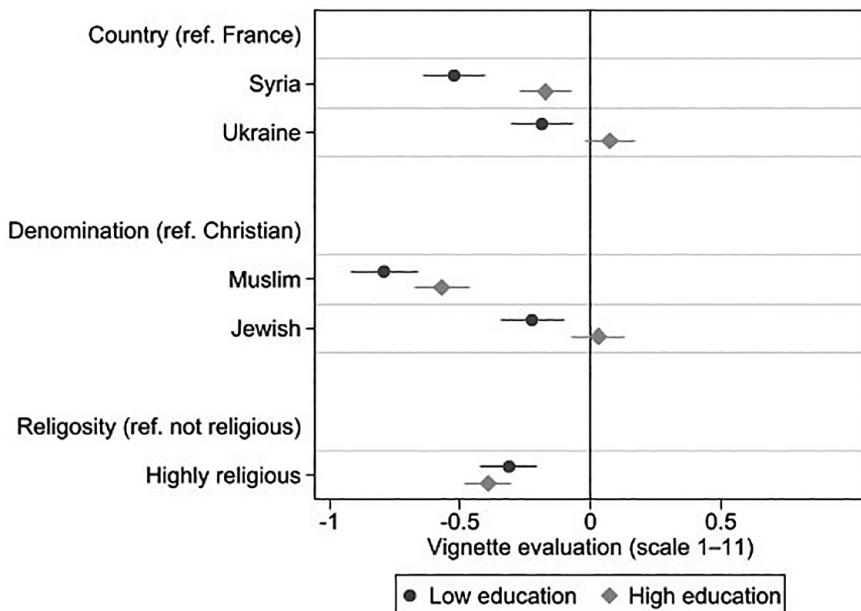
Finally, we tested whether the impact of cultural distance differs between groups that have been socialized differently regarding their attitudes toward foreigners. For this purpose, we estimated several models with interaction terms between our measurement of cultural distance and respondents' characteristics. Figure 4 shows the differences in the effect of cultural distance on the acceptance of immigrants depending on the educational level of the respondents. While, on average, respondents with a high level of education exhibit a higher acceptance of immigrants than respondents with a low level of education by 0.35 scale points (see table A3 model 2), we observe variations in this difference across some of our measurements of cultural distance. Regarding the immigrants' country of origin, we find that both respondents with a low and respondents with a high level of education show a lower acceptance of immigrants from Syria than of immigrants from France. This effect, however, is stronger for respondents with a low level of education by 0.36 scale points and statistically significant. Compared to immigrants from France, immigrants from Ukraine are less accepted by respondents with a low level of education, but not by respondents with a high level of education. The difference in the gap between both groups amounts to 0.27 scale points and is statistically significant at the 1 percent level.

Regarding the religious denomination of immigrants, we observe a lower acceptance of Muslim immigrants than of Christian immigrants (the benchmark) among both highly and low-educated respondents. This effect is somewhat stronger for low-educated than for highly educated respondents. Furthermore, respondents with a low level of education demonstrate a lower acceptance of Jewish immigrants than of Christian immigrants, while the acceptance of these two groups does not differ among highly educated respondents. We find a statistically significant difference between highly and low-educated respondents, with a 0.27 scale points higher acceptance of Jewish immigrants among the former.

For religiosity, we do not find differences in the acceptance of immigrants between respondents with a high level of education and those with a low level of education. Both express a lower acceptance of highly religious than of non-religious immigrants.

Next, we tested whether the impact of cultural distance differs by birth cohort. For this purpose, we estimated a model including interaction terms between the younger and the older birth cohort and our measurements of cultural distance. While on average we do not find statistically significant differences in the acceptance of immigrants in our factorial survey experiment between the younger and the older birth cohort (see table A3 model 2), we indeed find differences between

Figure 4: The effect of cultural distance on the acceptance of immigrants by level of education

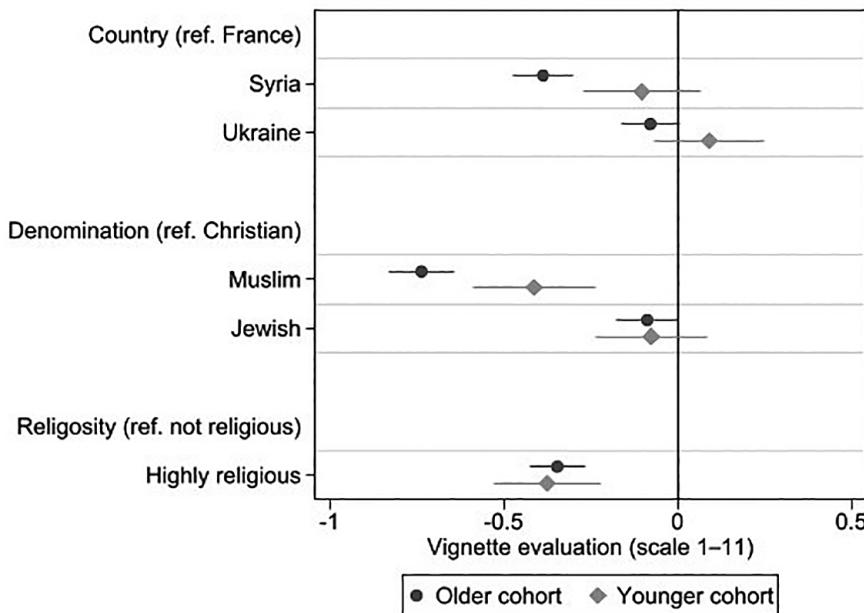


Notes: N = 13,954 vignette evaluations by 3,502 respondents, conditional effect plots with 95 percent confidence intervals. The estimates are reported in table A5 model 1. *Source:* GIP wave 63.

the two groups based on the cultural distance of immigrants. Figure 5 illustrates that respondents born before 1985 exhibit a lower acceptance of immigrants from Syria than of those from France. In contrast, this effect is much smaller and statistically not significant for respondents born 1985 or later. The older birth cohort also shows a slightly lower acceptance of immigrants from Ukraine than of immigrants from France, but this effect is small (0.08 scale points) and not statistically significant. Similarly, the differences in the acceptance of Ukrainian immigrants compared to French immigrants between the two cohorts are not statistically significant. In both the younger and the older birth cohort, we observe a lower acceptance of Muslim immigrants than of Christian immigrants. However, this effect is stronger by 0.33 scale points among the older than among the younger birth cohort. No differences are found between these two groups in the acceptance of Jewish immigrants compared to Christian immigrants. Similarly, there is no difference in the impact of religiosity, as both the younger and the older birth

cohort exhibits a similarly lower acceptance of highly religious than of non-religious immigrants.

Figure 5: The effect of cultural distance on the acceptance of immigrants by birth cohort

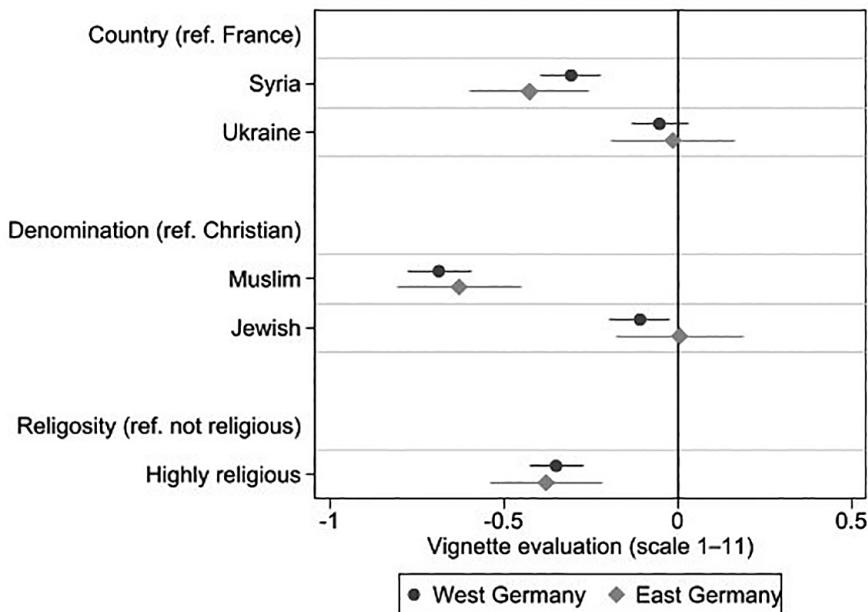


Notes: N = 13,954 vignette evaluations by 3,502 respondents; conditional effect plots with 95 percent confidence intervals. The estimates are reported in table A6 model 1. *Source:* GIP wave 63.

Finally, we tested whether cultural distance has a stronger impact on the acceptance of immigrants among respondents living in East Germany or among respondents living in West Germany. Consistent with previous studies, we observe a generally lower acceptance of immigrants by 0.38 scale points among respondents in East Germany than among those in West Germany in our factorial survey experiment (see table A3, model 2). However, this general pattern remains more or less the same regardless of immigrants' cultural distance. Figure 6 shows the results of a model including interaction terms between the measurements of cultural distance and respondents' region of residence. Overall, we do not find differences in the acceptance of immigrants from Ukraine compared to immigrants from France, of Muslim or Jewish compared to Christian immigrants, or of highly religious compared to non-religious immigrants between respondents from West Germany and those from East Germany. The acceptance of immigrants from Syria compared

to immigrants from France is slightly more negative among respondents in East Germany than among respondents from West Germany, but this difference is not statistically significant.

Figure 6: The effect of cultural distance on the acceptance of immigrants by place of residence



Notes: N = 13,954 vignette evaluations by 3,502 respondents; conditional effect plots with 95 percent confidence intervals. The estimates are reported in table A7 model 1. Source: GIP wave 63.

5 Sensitivity analyses

Previous studies have argued that the rejection of Muslim immigrants is primarily due to the perception of Muslims as more religious than members of other denominations and to the rejection of fundamentalist forms of Islam (e.g., Helbling/Traunmüller 2020). To test this assumption, we estimated the impact of cultural distance on the acceptance of immigrants in an additional model including an interaction term between denomination and religiosity of the described immigrant. Table A8 shows that this interaction is statistically significant for Muslim immigrants. We find that the acceptance of a Muslim immigrant who is described as highly religious is 0.64 scale points lower than that of a Muslim immigrant who is described as non-religious. However, we find the acceptance of non-religious Muslim immigrants to be 0.34 scale points lower than the acceptance of Christian immigrants. This contradicts the argument that the rejection of Muslims stems primarily from their

higher religiosity, albeit the acceptance of highly religious Muslim immigrants is remarkably low. The model also shows that religiosity only has a small influence on the acceptance of Jewish immigrants, with statistical significance only at the 5 percent level, and that religiosity has no effect on the acceptance of Christian immigrants.

To rule out that our finding of a stronger rejection of culturally distant immigrants among low-educated respondents is because the latter perceive the former as a stronger economic threat, we estimated a model including additional interaction terms. First, we interacted the educational level of the respondents and the qualification level of the described immigrants. Second, we interacted the respondents' educational level and the language skills of the described immigrant (see model 3 in table A5). The results demonstrate that all respondents prefer high- over low-skilled immigrants, but this effect tends to be stronger among highly than among low-educated respondents, and the difference is statistically significant. We did not find such a difference regarding language skills. However, these sensitivity analyses do not alter our main conclusions that the differences between highly and low-educated respondents in their assessment of immigrants vary according to their cultural distance to them.

Furthermore, we tested whether our finding of effect heterogeneity among respondents depends on our model specification. Given that the level of education, the birth cohort, and the place of residence are correlated, we estimated additional models in which we also controlled for these characteristics (see model 2 in table A5, A6 and A7). This specification did not change any of our results.

Finally, we tested whether our finding of differences by birth cohort depends on our dichotomized measurement of older and younger birth cohorts by using a more fine-grained differentiation of birth cohorts. Table A9 confirms our findings that cultural distance has a lower impact among younger birth cohorts and is most pronounced among those born between 1985 and 1994 regarding the acceptance of immigrants from Syria and Ukraine as well as Muslim immigrants.

6 Conclusion

In the context of the last two large waves of refugee immigration to Germany from Syria and Ukraine, this study uses data from a factorial survey experiment implemented in the 63rd wave of the German Internet Panel to examine the complex role of cultural distance in shaping the acceptance of immigrants.

Drawing on theoretical frameworks related to threat perception, social identity, and the relevance of socialization, we tested the impact of cultural distance, defined by the country of origin, the religious denomination and the level of religiosity of immigrants. Overall, our results align with prior studies and highlight the important role of cultural distance in shaping the acceptance of immigrants. In line

with our expectations, we observed that immigrants from Syria are less accepted than those from France or Ukraine, Muslim immigrants are less accepted than Christian or Jewish immigrants, and highly religious immigrants are less accepted than non-religious immigrants.

We added to previous research by accounting for the interplay between cultural and social distance and by considering whether the impact of cultural distance varies between individuals with different socialization experiences in terms of cultural and ethnic diversity. We expected that the impact of cultural distance would be more pronounced in situations with less social distance than in situations with high social distance and for individuals who were socialized in environments that are less positive toward foreigners. In general, our analyses confirmed many of our expectations, yet also revealed noteworthy differences depending on the dimension of cultural distance and the characteristics of the respondents.

In line with our expectations, we observed a higher acceptance of Syrian immigrants moving into the neighborhood than of those marrying into the family. However, in both cases, the acceptance of Syrian immigrants was lower than that of our reference group (immigrants from France). Furthermore, we found that the acceptance of Syrian immigrants was higher among respondents with a high level of education and among younger birth cohorts. Similarly, the acceptance of Ukrainian immigrants moving into the neighborhood was higher than that of Ukrainian immigrants marrying into the family. Respondents with a higher level of education were more accepting of Ukrainians than respondents with a lower level of education, whereas differences between birth cohorts were less pronounced.

Our finding that the acceptance of Ukrainian immigrants is consistently higher than the acceptance of Syrian immigrants across all described situations and among all respondents suggests that respondents perceive immigrants from Ukraine as culturally closer than immigrants from Syria. However, the lower acceptance of Ukrainian than of French immigrants in situations with lower social distance (marriage compared to neighborhood) and among respondents with a low level of education and older birth cohorts indicates that there are differences in the perception of the cultural distance of immigrants from Ukraine compared to immigrants from France.

A limitation of our findings is that we did not include information on the reason for migration in our vignettes. Consequently, we cannot rule out that the different motives for migration, such as economic migration mostly among immigrants from France or humanitarian protection largely among immigrants from Ukraine, are salient among the respondents evaluating vignettes describing immigrants from different countries of origin. Previous research has shown that the acceptance of immigrants depends on the reason for migration, with generally higher acceptance of refugees than of economic migrants (Czymara/Schmidt-Catran 2017). Since the outbreak of war in Ukraine and the subsequent refugee influx to Germany has been

quite recent and, therefore, salient to the respondents when answering the questionnaire, it is possible that they connected the recent events more strongly with immigration for Ukrainians than Syrian or French immigrants. Further research is needed to test whether the acceptance of Ukrainian immigrants remains higher than that of non-European immigrants in the long run.

In our study, we could not definitively exclude other potential explanations for a stronger rejection of Syrian, Muslim, and more religious immigrants, particularly those related to the economic, demographic, or security threat potentially posed by immigrants. The economic threat explanation, indicated by a pattern of more negative assessments from low-educated respondents than from highly educated ones, could not fully be dismissed. However, even if immigrants are perceived as more threatening to the economically vulnerable respondents, the economic threat explanation does not supersede the cultural threat explanation. Both respondents with a low and those with a high level of education were more likely to reject immigrants who were perceived as culturally more distant. Deliberate testing of response patterns by other dimensions of economic vulnerability could further illuminate the validity of the cultural versus economic threat explanations—a task that goes beyond the objectives of this study. Differentiating between cultural and security threat explanations remains challenging. Immigrants may give rise to concerns about terrorist threats or crime alongside concerns regarding threats to the shared beliefs, values, and cultural identity of the host country's resident population (Ceobanu 2011; Esses 2021; Landmann et al. 2019).

Regarding religious denomination, our study revealed that Muslim immigrants marrying into the family are less accepted than those moving into the neighborhood. Respondents with a higher level of education and those belonging to the younger cohort are less likely to reject Muslim immigrants than their counterparts. The latter effect may, in part, be driven by a higher share of respondents in the younger cohorts who either have a migration background or identify with Islam. Unfortunately, the German Internet Panel only provides information on respondents' citizenship, so we cannot quantify the significance of this explanation. Furthermore, given the cross-sectional nature of our study, disentangling cohort from age effects remains a challenge.

In general, we observed either no differences or only small variation in the acceptance of Jewish compared to Christian immigrants. This suggests that the German population perceives the Jewish religion as a part of the Judea-Christian tradition in Germany, alongside Christianity. However, it is crucial to note that these findings should not be interpreted as counterevidence to other—particularly most recent—studies that have identified instances of antisemitism within the German population (e.g., Zick et al. 2023). Our factorial survey experiment was not specifically designed to measure antisemitic attitudes, and we cannot rule out

the possibility that our results regarding the acceptance of Jewish immigrants may be influenced by social desirability.

Contrary to our expectations, no differences were found in the acceptance of immigrants with different levels of religiosity depending on the social distance or respondents' individual characteristics. These findings indicate that the German population is less open toward highly religious immigrants, independently of the social distance to these immigrants or the individual socialization. This underscores that a more secular identity is prevalent in the German population. However, additional analyses showed that religiosity matters primarily for the acceptance of Muslim immigrants. Exploring whether this effect is due to highly religious Muslims being perceived as a symbolic threat to Western values in general or due to stereotypical beliefs about highly religious Muslims is an important avenue for future research.

Finally, we did not identify any differences in the influence of cultural distance on the acceptance of immigrants based on respondents' place of socialization within Germany. In line with prior research, we observed a generally lower acceptance of immigrants among respondents living in East Germany than among those living in West Germany. However, there were no variations in this acceptance based on the cultural distance to the immigrants. Respondents from East Germany expressed less favorable attitudes toward Syrian and Muslim immigrants and toward more religious immigrants, much alike respondents from West Germany.

Overall, our study shows the importance of cultural distance for the formation of attitudes toward immigrants in Western societies. With respect to the last two waves of refugee immigration to Germany, our findings indicate that Ukrainian immigrants are more accepted than Syrian immigrants. Further research must explore whether this greater acceptance also leads to better social integration in the long term—not least because the two groups also differ in terms of other characteristics that are relevant for social integration.

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