


ORIGINAL ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

Islamophobia in Everyday Racial Encounters in Barcelona: The Emotional Impact on Maghrebi Communities in Spain

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Received: 31 January 2025 | **Revised:** 30 June 2025 | **Accepted:** 17 July 2025

Funding: This Study was supported by Spanish Government.

Keywords: emotions | everyday racism | Islamophobia | mixedness | racial encounters | Spain

ABSTRACT

This article explores Islamophobia in everyday racial encounters in Barcelona and its emotional impact on Maghrebi communities in Spain. The rejection of Maghrebi individuals—primarily from Morocco—remains a persistent form of racism and anti-Muslim sentiment in the Spanish context. This racialization process relies on visible and stereotypical markers that reproduce colonial and essentialist representations of the “Moor.” Drawing on 26 in-depth interviews with racialized youth (both Muslim and non-Muslim), the study analyses how daily experiences of Islamophobia in public and shared urban spaces shape emotional responses. These range from discomfort and fear to resilience, agency, and resistance. The findings highlight how intersecting systems of power—race, gender, and religion—structure emotional experiences and access to public space in Barcelona. Ultimately, this research underscores the importance of lived experience in exposing and challenging structural Islamophobia and racism in Spain, contributing to broader debates on racialization, urban exclusion, and the emotional dimensions of everyday discrimination.

1 | Introduction

Hostility and discrimination against Muslim communities in Europe have grown significantly, particularly since the 9/11 attacks. In the aftermath of these events, right-wing political groups have made anti-Muslim rhetoric a central element of their messaging. This rhetoric combines long-standing biases against Islam with nativist animosity towards Arab and Muslim immigrants, amplifying contemporary fears about the identity, status, and even the survival of the traditional nation-state (Kallis 2019). Berntzen (2019) also emphasizes the link between the rise in political violence and anti-Muslim attitudes and the growth of right-wing populist parties and anti-Islamic movements. As a result, right-wing parties like France's National Rally, the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP),

Fidesz in Hungary, and Austria's Freedom Party have integrated anti-Muslim rhetoric into their political agendas, pushing narratives of invasion and the erosion of Western values. Muslims are racialized in these narratives as outsiders to Western civilisation, traditionally viewed as adversaries and invaders.

In Spain, Islamophobia is also one of the most significant examples of racialization, deeply ingrained in the country's historical and colonial background. One of the primary groups affected by Islamophobia in Spain is the Maghrebi population, particularly Moroccans, who are derogatorily referred to as “Moors” (Moros) (Martín Corrales 2002). The concept of the *Moro* goes beyond just religion; this racialization is mainly associated with physical characteristics, accents, and names/surnames (Mijares et al. 2021). *Morofobia* in Spain represents

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the racial aspect of Islamophobia when it targets the Maghrebi population. This term, which will be explored further in this study, encapsulates the Spanish collective imagination's representation of a colonial figure shaped by stereotypes tied to visible ethnic, racial, and religious markers.

Islamophobia is deeply embedded in society to the point where its daily presence is undeniable. It goes beyond overt and visible incidents, entering the realm of what is often referred to as “everyday racism” (Essed 1991). In her study, Philomena Essed highlights the more subtle and hidden forms of racism that occur in daily life, offering a deeper understanding of contemporary racial dynamics. Essed (1991) argues that while minorities often face recurring racist behaviors in daily life, majority groups tend to normalize these actions and fail to recognize them as racist. This everyday racism is embedded in social practices and sustained by power structures that both reflect and reinforce systemic inequality.

Sue et al. (2007) explain that everyday racism appears across various settings—from workplaces to media—often through stereotypes and unconscious biases. Though frequently dismissed as harmless, these interactions have serious effects, draining emotional energy, hindering performance, and reinforcing social inequalities (Sue et al. 2007). Thus, the emotional impact of everyday racism on individuals' lives is an area that warrants deeper investigation. It is essential because the concept of everyday racism is difficult to define, even for those who experience it, as they may sometimes question whether they are genuinely being subjected to it. Studies such as those by Crocker and Major (1989) and Sue (2004) on racial biases in North American society highlight the detrimental effects of ambiguity and the psychological and physical harm caused by constant challenges to one's racial identity. Simultaneously, it is crucial to consider public spaces as the backdrop for these interactions. Public spaces are often seen as places where social networks and relationships are formed and shaped. For example, Goffman's (1963) foundational work emphasized the significance of brief, casual encounters in these spaces.

Therefore, considering the bond between everyday racism and social encounters, this paper aims to explore, through 26 in-depth interviews with racialized youth¹ (whether Muslims or not) living in Barcelona, the impacts of everyday racism on their daily emotions. Everyday cohabited and non-intimate spaces, defined as “zones of encounters” (Wood and Charles 2008), will be used as a context for narrative since most of these daily interactions occur in such spaces.

This paper contributes to the literature on everyday racism by exploring a specific dimension: the role of discomfort as an emotional response. Discomfort can be understood as a visible manifestation of racialized power hierarchies that organize and regulate access to, enjoyment of, and appropriation of public spaces. Not only is discomfort an effect of social inequalities, but it also produces inequalities, as it restricts individuals' ability to participate in public life freely (Rodó-Zárate 2023). The paper further examines how emotions arising from racial encounters often serve as catalysts for reactions, influencing individuals' agency and decision-making in coping with racism.

2 | The Nexus of Race and Religion: Advancing Insights Into Islamophobia

Given the general Europe's color-blind approach to race, this analysis draws on Critical Race Theory to examine the intersection of race and religion in the context (Topolski 2018) emphasizing that racialization is a social process with tangible consequences (Dixon and Parker 2023). Building on this foundation, Islamophobia is conceptualized as discrimination including racial and religious dimensions, with attention to its racial construction in Spain. However, as Hancock (2007) warns, these dynamics should not be understood as an “oppression Olympics,” where different forms of discrimination compete against one another. Instead, an intersectional framework that examines the interplay between race and religion is crucial for a comprehensive understanding.

Campos (2012) defines racialization as the social process through which racial characteristics are assigned to individuals or groups based on perceived physical, cultural, linguistic, or other differences. This process involves the creation of racial categories that are not naturally occurring but are socially constructed. For example, Muslims are a diverse group with different practices, cultures, and ethnic backgrounds. A Sunni Muslim from Egypt, a Shia Muslim from Iran, and a secular-identifying person of Pakistani heritage in the UK may all be racialized as ‘Muslim’ in similar ways, despite their vastly different religious beliefs, cultural practices, and levels of observance. However, according to Campos' definition, racialization occurs when they are considered as a homogeneous category. Meer (2013) further highlights that religion is not only marginalized but also essentialised and racialized, becoming a central axis of discrimination. This perspective aligns with the definition of Islamophobia provided by Farah and Khan (2017), who describe it as anti-Muslim racism. They emphasize that Islamophobia cannot exist without racism and, consequently, without racialization.

Modood (2005) elaborates on this idea by arguing that the racialization of Muslims subjects their cultural characteristics to a process of “othering,” which leads to marginalization. Similarly, Grosfoguel and Mielants (2006) identify anti-Muslim prejudice as a specific form of racism targeting Muslims, demonstrating how anti-Muslim sentiment and racism are intertwined in shaping Islamophobia. To racialize Islam is to attribute socially constructed stereotypes to Muslim individuals, placing them within subordinated social categories. This process operates by essentialising a single category: religion.

Understanding the racialized dimension of Islamophobia necessitates a contextual analysis. Garner and Selod (2015) stress the importance of addressing localized forms of Islamophobia to grasp its manifestations fully. In Spain, Islamophobia is interwoven with a specific historical narrative of “historical otherness,” rooted in the country's past interactions with Islam and the legacy of Al-Andalus. This narrative continues to influence collective perceptions of Muslim identity.

Gil-Benumea (2023) and Rodríguez-Reche and Cerchiaro (2023) underscore how Islamophobia in Spain is deeply entangled with

processes of racialization. As discussed in subsequent sections, individuals from the Maghreb are often homogenised and assigned inherent traits such as violence or danger. These racialized attributes serve to justify discriminatory practices, as noted by Douhaibi and Salma Amazian (2019). While such racial construction can occur independently of religion—targeting individuals regardless of their faith—it also incorporates a religious dimension due to the strong association in Spain between Muslim identity and the historical concept of the “Moor” (Gil-Benumea 2023). This intersectionality demonstrates how cultural, ethnic, and religious markers are essentialised and weaponized to sustain systems of exclusion.

In conclusion, the study of Islamophobia requires an integrative approach that acknowledges its racial and religious dimensions. By recognizing the intersection of these forms of oppression, we can better understand the mechanisms through which Islamophobia operates, particularly in contexts where race, religion, and culture are deeply intertwined.

2.1 | Exploring *Morofobia*: The Racialized Dimension of Islamophobia Toward Maghrebi Communities in Spain

Racialization creates group identities that operate according to the unique postcolonial contexts across Europe (Fanon 1952, 1956, 1961). This is where the interplay of historical, social, and political factors becomes crucial in shaping racial categories and, by extension, the racial aspects of Islamophobia. In Spain, a racial identity subordinated within the broader societal hierarchy has been ascribed to the Maghrebi population, particularly those from Morocco. Over time, the concept of the “Moor” has been depicted through enduring stereotypes, which have been deeply ingrained and explored within Spanish cultural, artistic and literary traditions.

From the eighth century to the Christian Reconquista of the Iberian Peninsula, and continuing into the modern era, a negative portrayal of Arabs, Muslims, and specifically Moroccans has been perpetuated. The term “Moor” in the Spanish collective imagination broadly encompasses elements of Islam, Andalusian heritage, Arab identity, and North African origins, often tainted by Orientalist ideas (Gil-Benumea 2018).

During Spain's colonial era, the image of the Moroccan people was frequently framed through notions of barbarism, exoticism, and violence (Mateo Dieste 2018). However, during the Francoist period, the narrative surrounding Moroccans shifted to strategic allies, reflecting a complex historical and outstanding specific relationship between Spain and the Arab world (Martín Corrales 2004). Scholars such as Martín Corrales (2002) and Gil-Benumea (2018) have examined how these contrasting views—both admiration and disdain—coexisted, particularly during the colonial era. Thus, “maurofobia” (fear or hatred of Moors) and “maurofilia” (affection for Moors) have alternated depending on political and historical convenience (Martín Corrales 2002; Mateo Dieste 2018; Gil-Benumea 2018).

This racialization of the “Moor” figure plays a pivotal role in the formation of Islamophobia in Spain. The image of the “Moor” in

Spanish society transcends religion, as it racialises individuals based on perceived origins (Rosón 2012). The term has come to symbolize a racialized identity, tightly bound to views of Islam, cultural divergence, and ethnic otherness. This racialization forms the foundation of *morofobia*, which continues to be a key component of Islamophobia in Spain. It reflects broader exclusionary patterns and discrimination against Maghrebi communities, particularly Moroccans. As previously noted, the intersection of race and religion shows how cultural and religious markers are used to reinforce marginalization in Spanish society. Consequently, *morofobia* is not a separate or opposing phenomenon to Islamophobia; instead, it is a racial dimension of Islamophobia, acquiring its specific meaning when considered within the context of Spain and the particular population it targets.

2.2 | Emotional Dynamics and Racialized Experiences: Understanding How Daily Encounters With Islamophobia Feel

Racism constitutes a social system organized around practices, mechanisms, and behaviors that perpetuate racial domination. These practices are deeply embedded in processes of racialization, shaping emotional subjectivities that align with one's position within racial hierarchies. Bonilla-Silva (2019) emphasizes that race is not only a social construct but also an embodied and emotional experience, asserting that races are “felt” even before they are fully understood. This experiential dimension of racism resonates with Ahmed's (2004) theorization of affects as relational dynamics intrinsic to racialization, highlighting the centrality of emotions in understanding how racism operates.

Research on the emotions associated with everyday racism has documented a range of responses, including fear, anger, grief, sadness, resignation, and shame (Kim 2016; Nowicka and Wojnicka 2023). For example, Kim's (2016) study of Korean immigrants in the United States reveals how the interplay of microaggressions and structural exclusions fosters chronic feelings of alienation and vulnerability. Similarly, Nowicka and Wojnicka (2023), through interviews with Black and Eastern European migrants in Poland, demonstrate how participants frequently experience anxiety and grief when navigating predominantly white public spaces. In this line, and as it will be exemplified in the analysis, Ayata et al. (2019) and Hope et al. (2022) highlight how anticipatory stress shapes emotional responses to race-related threats in daily interactions. These studies illustrate how racialized emotions are not solely individual reactions but are shaped by interpersonal encounters and broader systemic forces.

Racialized emotions' relational and spatial dimensions are particularly evident in public spaces, where interactions often generate feelings of exclusion and discomfort. Ahmed's (2007) work on comfort and discomfort offers a critical lens for understanding how these emotions are spatialised. Drawing on phenomenological approaches, Ahmed argues that comfort emerges when bodies align seamlessly with the spaces they inhabit, creating a sense of belonging. Conversely, discomfort arises when bodies are perceived as alien or out of place,

disrupting the normative order of those spaces. This framework has been applied in studies such as Piwoni's (2024) analysis of public transit experiences among racialized groups in Germany, which reveals how subtle interactions—such as being avoided or ignored—can create an “emotional mismatch” that limits one's ability to inhabit these spaces freely.

Rodó-Zárate's (2017) concept of geometries of power further elucidates how intersecting axes of oppression shape emotions like discomfort. Based on participatory mapping and interviews with LGBTQ+ individuals in Barcelona, her work demonstrates how power relations configure everyday life's emotional landscapes, producing feelings of inclusion or exclusion depending on one's positionality. This approach is particularly relevant to understanding how racialized emotions emerge in spaces marked by structural inequalities. Ahmed's (2007) observations on the racialized dynamics of space also align with this contribution, particularly her argument that colonialism has historically shaped public spaces to accommodate certain bodies while rendering others out of place. She notes that whiteness operates as an invisible norm, aligning with the contours of spaces and making them comfortable for white bodies while marginalizing racialized ones.

This relational understanding of emotions highlights how discomfort is not merely a passive response to exclusion but an active process that reflects and reproduces social hierarchies. Bondi et al.'s (2005) ethnographic research on gendered spaces in the United Kingdom illustrates how discomfort functions as both a symptom and mechanism of exclusion, forcing marginalized individuals to negotiate their presence constantly. Similarly, the emotional impact of everyday racism, as documented by Piwoni (2024) and Nowicka and Wojnicka (2023), underscores how discomfort shapes racialized individuals' ability to navigate public spaces. The chronic nature of these experiences points to the role of emotions as both products and producers of inequality, restricting racialized people's access to full spatial citizenship.

The literature on racialized emotions has made significant strides in uncovering the affective dimensions of racism, but gaps remain. While much of the existing research focuses on negative emotions, there is a need to examine the broader spectrum of affects and their relationship to positionality and agency capacity within racial hierarchies. By situating emotions within the context of structural inequalities, this analysis contributes to a deeper understanding of racism as an embodied, spatialised, and emotional experience.

2.3 | Research Methods and Participants

This article is grounded in an empirical study conducted during two distinct stages. The initial phase, spanning 2017 to September 2020, involved conducting 19 in-depth interviews with women who were either daughters of mixed couples (one member from North Africa² and the other a Spanish native) or were offspring of couples where both members were North Africans. These interviews took place in Barcelona (north of Spain) and Granada (south), focussing on experiences of everyday racism and their

impact on identity formation related to mixed heritage, religion, gender, and racialization. The age range of the interviews was 18–30, chosen based on Spanish government administrative criteria, classifying individuals aged 18 to 30 as young adults.

The interviews were conducted through a biographical script format with open-ended questions, with nine in Granada and 10 in Barcelona. Catalonia (specifically Barcelona) and Andalusia (particularly Granada and Almeria) are highlighted as Spanish regions with a substantial concentration of Muslim residents, according to a report by the Union of Islamic Communities of Spain (UCIDE³ 2022). Out of the 19 interviews conducted in the initial stage, this contribution focuses on the 10 interviews conducted in Barcelona.

The subsequent phase of empirical research spans from January 2023 to July 2023. Over these months, 16 interviews were carried out in Barcelona, employing a biographical format that evolved from the one used in the initial stage of empirical research. The questions also centered on experiences with racism interactions in daily encounters, encompassing religion and racialization.

Unlike the first phase, the participants included both women and men on this occasion. Specifically, 11 women and five men were interviewed, giving 26 interviews for this contribution—21 with women and 5 with men. It is crucial to emphasize that the aim here is not statistical representativeness but rather a comprehensive depth of analysis.

Among the 26 participants, comprising individuals interviewed in Barcelona during both research phases, eight were native-born in Spain to parents of Moroccan origin, 15 were Spanish-born children of mixed couples (one member being North African and the other Spanish), and 3 were Moroccan-origin students residing in Barcelona for university postgraduate studies and/or work. Of the 21 women interviewed, 18 identified as practising Muslims, with 10 wearing hijab. The interviews were conducted in Spanish, the usual language for most participants. However, some interviews were also in Catalan with those born in Barcelona. Given the specific socio-political and historical dynamics of Catalonia—marked by strong regional identity, migration flows, and distinct racialising discourses—Barcelona offers a particularly rich context for examining how racialization unfolds within Spain's broader territorial diversity.

The predominance of mixed-heritage participants—especially in the first phase—has a methodological justification. Mixed individuals often occupy liminal positions that challenge rigid ethno-racial and religious boundaries, making them especially relevant for exploring how racialization operates in Spain. Rather than escaping racialization, many experienced it in shifting and context-dependent ways. Some had Spanish surnames or lighter features, which led to moments of misrecognition or conditional inclusion (Rodríguez-Reche 2025). Others were racialized, particularly when religious cues like hijab or Arabic names were present. These dynamics reflect how racialization is not based solely on phenotype, but on intersecting markers interpreted through local logics of belonging (Jenkins 1997; Rodríguez-García 2015, 2022; Song 2017). Including these voices highlights the complexity of

mixedness as both a site of ambiguity and a lens into broader racialising processes.

While gender is not the central focus of this analysis, the fact that most interviewees are women necessitates considering gender as an additional axis of discrimination alongside racial and religious factors. An intersectional perspective was essential for interpreting these narratives, as it emphasizes that identities do not simply add layers of oppression but rather interact in ways that create qualitatively distinct experiences (Symington 2004). This approach reveals dimensions of discrimination that might remain unnoticed if these categories were examined separately. Consequently, in this study, intersectionality sheds light on the unique experiences of being women and Muslim, and often visibly so.

Accessing and establishing rapport with participants proved complex due to the sensitive nature of the issues discussed. In a prior research project (Rodríguez-Reche and Rodríguez-García 2020) I interviewed women from similar mixed parental origins, initially approaching them to connect with the remaining participants in their social network. Additionally, I engaged in open activities organized by the Barcelona Religious Affairs Office and a Muslim Students Association in Barcelona, fostering more fluid access to research participants through university connections and the possibility of conducting observation.

2.4 | Positionality and Limitations of the Research

My position as a researcher had a significant impact on this study. Participants saw me as a young, white, Western, non-Muslim woman in a privileged role investigating the 'other'. This perception can affect how participants feel about sharing their experiences, influencing their openness and honesty during the interviews. In general, researcher's positionality prompted critical reflection on ethical responsibilities, including the implications of privilege and the return of research findings. The manuscript also notes a constraint: the interviews included more women than men, potentially reflecting a bias in expressing racism, as Muslim women wearing the hijab experience different stereotypes than Muslim men (see Rodríguez-Reche and Rodríguez-García 2020; Rodríguez-Reche and Cerchiaro 2023; Gashi and Essanhaji 2023). Additionally, most participants had university or postgraduate education and medium to high economic status, introducing a potential social class bias. Participation was voluntary, with the research objectives shared with members of the Muslim Students Association.

Regarding "visibility" (Jenkins 1997), although only 10 women wore hijabs, all participants exhibited socially constructed markers of their ethnic, cultural, or religious background, such as names, accents, or physical features. This "Muslimness," whether genuine or socially assigned (Rodríguez-García and Rodríguez-García 2022; Rodríguez-Reche and Cerchiaro 2023), was a crucial identifier in reported racist interactions. Interviews were fully transcribed and encrypted using Atlas.Ti software for coding and analysis. All participants signed informed consent forms, which ensured anonymity, and pseudonyms⁴ were used in this study.

3 | Findings

This research explores how Islamophobia, as described in this study, manifests and reproduces in the daily emotions of those individuals racialized as "moors". Narratives of individuals describing daily encounters with racism have been analyzed. These encounters occur in shared and public spaces but never in intimate settings or with friends or relatives. Within their narratives, these young individuals frequently articulate the emotions elicited by their interactions with others, reconstructing the racist events and expressing what they meant to them. The analytical framework, in addition to drawing on intersectional theory (Crenshaw 1991; Yuval-Davis 2011), where the role of context and specific social and historical configurations are central, is also inspired by the contributions of Rodó-Zárate (2017), (2021), who links emotions to experiences of inequality not necessarily tied to racialization but also to gender, social class, sexual orientation, and so on, as experienced in public spaces. Her work leads this contribution to consider what happens when emotions are connected to racist interactions that occur within spaces. Here, the result of this connection will be exposed, first analyzing how these discomfort experiences are interpreted and described and second exploring the participants' management of these emotions, sometimes resulting in agency capacity.

3.1 | From Resignation to Pain. Discomfort Emotion in Different Scales

It is crucial to note that uncomfortable emotions prevailed among the participants during these daily described encounters. Out of the 26 participants interviewed, 24 explicitly expressed negative emotions such as insecurity, tension, anxiety, prevention, shame, anger and sadness. Interestingly, in all these instances, participants articulate their feelings using the precise names of the emotions (e.g. sadness, shame, anger...). The narratives reveal that these emotions are not only experienced during the racist interaction itself but can also go unrecognized initially, only to be identified and labeled later. This highlights the everyday nature of such experiences, such as tension, anxiety, and so-called prevention emotions (related to anxiety and hypervigilance). This is the case of Farima, a 20-year-old woman from Barcelona, the daughter of a Moroccan couple, and a Muslim woman who wears a hijab.

It is true that, generally, we (referring to the Muslim population) already know which restaurants we can visit or not. Once, I went to eat with some classmates. I usually order something vegan because it saves me from bad experiences, but that day, I asked the waiter if the meat was *halal*. You know, in Barcelona it is possible sometimes. He asked me in an ironic tone if I would make him ask the cook about the meat. He answered me so badly that I was tense throughout the whole meal. It even took away my hunger. So, I already know, for example, that I will not return there. That is why I always try to avoid this; I know where I can go and where I cannot.

(Farima, 20 years old, is a woman born in Spain to Moroccan parents)

The tension, clearly acknowledged by Farima, has dissuaded her from visiting this restaurant or similar establishments to avoid experiencing this emotion. This case vividly exemplifies the geometries of power (Rodó-Zárate 2017), which explain how power relations shape spaces and people's emotions based on their positions within social structures. In this sense, discomfort can be understood as visible manifestations of racialized power hierarchies that organize and regulate access to, enjoyment of, and appropriation of public and shared spaces.

When I get on the train, I am already thinking about what can happen or what I will find. There is much tension. Nothing serious has ever happened to me, luckily. However, I have noticed the looks. For example, my university is in Terrassa (close to Barcelona), right? Well, I have to take the train and go through San Cugat. Once, I sat next to a lady, and she changed seats. I cannot avoid taking the train, but in Barcelona, for example, I do not take the metro if I can walk. That is what I am avoiding.

(Shilah, 19 years old, is a woman born in Spain to Moroccan parents)

Shilah's account provides experiences similar to those described by Lorde in her childhood during a trip by bus (1984). As Ayata et al. (2019) assert, affects, described as "relational dynamics unfolding in interaction," are experienced through the context of the situation, manifesting in bodily reactions, gazes, and facial expressions. This anticipatory stress can be reflected toward anticipatory responses to racist experiences, a process whereby individuals become more aware and responsive to stress from race-related threats and exhibit heightened anticipatory stress responses to future exposures (Hope et al. 2022). In conjunction with tension, fear is another emotion explicitly mentioned by certain participants in their narratives. Let us look more specifically;

I will tell you about a striking episode. Once I got off the subway, some guys were handing out political pamphlets, and I said, "No, thank you," because I did not want the pamphlet. They answered, "What is wrong? Can't you understand it if it is not in your language, *mora de mierda*?" I turned to look at them, but then I hurried away because I was afraid. I wish I could tell you that I answered them, but the truth is that I did not. I was afraid. Every time I go out or enter the subway, I remember this episode, honestly.

(Zahara, 23 years old, is a woman born in Spain to a Saharai father and a Spanish mother)

Zahara's case can indeed be classified as everyday racism, as it appears to be a racist insult that many racialized individuals in Spain receive, regardless of their origin. Meeting specific criteria of physical appearance automatically labels the racialized person as "Moro". As Mateo Dieste (2018) asserts, generalization is integral to every stereotype. Due to these interactions, Farima, Shilah, and Zahara have experienced negative emotions, which have impacted their daily lives in one way or another. Daily

encounters with Islamophobia can also generate feelings of resignation and sadness; 22 of the 26 interviewed mentioned these emotions in their stories.

Last Friday, I was on the bus to the university and had my folder in my hand. There was a couple, and the boy, the man, kept looking at me. [Were they young or old?] They were adults, not very old, but adults. Then he could not stop looking at me, and suddenly he turned around and said something to his partner, and they both started looking at me. I see that the man is looking at the folder. What do I know? Maybe he wanted to know what university I was studying at, but it seemed exaggerated that he was looking at me for the fifteen minutes of the journey. It is uncomfortable. There are things you say, but it is not that it happened to me just one day. It is that it happens to me every day. What am I going to do? Well, put up with it, but it frustrates me.

(Amman, 19 years old, is a woman born in Spain to Moroccan parents)

Domination is structured differently across various contexts, meaning that intersectionality takes on distinct meanings depending on specific social conditions (Collins and Bilge 2016). In this analysis, her experiences of (dis)comfort highlight localized social processes and power relations, such as the gendered and racialized dynamics that shape these spaces.

Thus, the interplay between emotions, spaces, and interactions, alongside the intersecting power dynamics, becomes evident through her everyday life experiences. In addition to sadness, the narratives reveal shame and humiliation. Participants shared their recognition of these emotions after the interactions concluded, and these emotions remain dormant until individuals identify and label them. Such recognition often happens retrospectively, particularly in cases of racist interactions, especially those experienced during childhood.

I have a memory that I will never forget. My mother fell, we were going to catch the bus, and my mother fell in the street... apart from the fact that no one came to help her, a boy asked his mother if my mother was a nun because she was wearing a hijab. I will not forget that. I, for example, did not want her to accompany me to school, so I decided to wait for her further away. We have talked about it with my siblings. I think we all felt shame; we all felt anger. Moreover, of course, in the end, we all feel guilty for not having said anything at that moment.

(Mana, 28 years old, is a woman born in Spain to a Spanish father and Moroccan mother)

This account illustrates how intersecting power dynamics—such as racialization, religion, and gender—manifest in public spaces, generating what Rodó-Zárate (2017) calls "systemic discomforts." The shared feelings of shame, anger, and guilt that

Mana and her siblings experienced further emphasize how these emotions are relational and deeply tied to the lived consequences of intersecting power hierarchies.

This contribution encounters emotions linked to amazement, surprise, perplexity, and resignation. While these emotions contribute to discomfort, they are less expressive than emotions like fear, sadness or shame. Moreover, simultaneously, they become this uncertainty with which racialized people have to deal with. Of the 26 individuals involved in this study, 18 conveyed their experience of this emotion. The findings underscore that when individuals grapple with perplexity or surprise, the racist encounter is often so ambiguous that even individuals involved find it challenging to identify. Manifestations of everyday racism usually involve differentiated treatment rather than overt hostility, even creating a tense ambiguity in the racialized individual when discerning whether the interaction was discriminatory or not (Crocker and Major 1989). This is particularly crucial because defining everyday racism can be challenging, even for racialized individuals who sometimes grapple with this uncertainty.

Of course. I did not see this before, but I am becoming more aware now. For example, when I go to the bakery, I try not to let my accent be too noticeable. I speak as neutrally as possible. This has an explanation. One day in class, already at university, I am not talking about high school or primary school. I am talking about university. I asked a professor a question in class, and he asked, where are you from? He identified me just by my accent. I do not know... It is okay that they ask me where I am from, but it is strange if he does not do it with any other student. I did not understand it then, and I was surprised.

(Amin, 27 years old, Moroccan man living in Barcelona)

Amin, a Moroccan student who studied Hispanic Philology in his country, came to Barcelona for his master's degree. Having resided in Barcelona for 4 years at the time of the interview, Amin is proficient in Spanish, having spoken it even before arriving in the city. However, due to his accent, he encounters subtle instances of racism in his daily interactions. Initially, he found identifying this type of interaction challenging, leading to emotions characterized more by surprise or perplexity. As he elaborates in his narrative, Amin has become more attuned to recognizing and reacting to these subtle forms of racism. Amin's experience highlights how racialized men—particularly those marked by accents or phenotypic difference—are also subject to microaggressions and social surveillance, albeit in distinct ways from women.

3.2 | Emotions as a Tool for Responses and Agency Capacity

Within the group of 26, 17 individuals expressed in their accounts that, despite facing discomfort emotions regularly, racist incidents served as catalysts for the agency. They detailed undergoing responsive emotions that empowered them to react and assert themselves. This does not mean that these participants

were free from unsettling emotions affecting their daily lives; rather, it indicates that these emotions simultaneously evolved into a potential for acting.

We were in a supermarket, and I was behind my mother, and the man who commented did not know that I was her daughter...shocked, not knowing how to react. However, there, I became a "warrior". I messed up. I told the man a lot of bad things. This did not cause any trauma to me, you know? I felt very proud of that because I put the man in his place in a very polite way. I feel pleased to have reacted like this.

(Yinna, 26 years old, is a woman born in Spain to a Spanish father and a Moroccan mother)

Despite experiencing those negative emotions, these reactions distance Yinna from negative emotions, making her feel empowered in her decisions. This "talking back" involves outspoken and active verbal acts of resistance toward those who express hostility and actively counter criticisms of Islam or Muslims (Ellefsen and Sandberg 2022). Talking back goes beyond simply using one's voice; it involves making oneself heard in a manner that challenges the politics of domination (Hooks 1989).

I sometimes laugh at the situation. They are repeated so much that sometimes they become anecdotal. Once, the first time I did the internship, I was in a social health centre, and the nurse asked me, "Do they let you do the internship with that (referring to the hijab) on your head"? This was the first time I had seen this person or worked with him. I told him, "Well, look, I do not know, but if they told me something, I would not take it off either." Sometimes, you have to stand up and respond. No matter how bad the comment makes you feel, you cannot always keep quiet. Before, I always hung my head with shame, as if I had to ask forgiveness. Not now.

(Naisma, 20 years old, is a woman born in Spain to a Moroccan father and a Portuguese/Spanish mother)

On this occasion, Naisma's response is illuminated by her narrative, revealing a recurring sequence of everyday racist encounters. Despite evoking negative emotions, these interactions have concurrently shaped her ability to act and respond. The cultural symbols initially utilized to marginalize these individuals are subsequently reinterpreted as symbols of self-autonomy and self-assertion. This prompts a consideration of how stigma may be transformed into a symbolic emblem, in line with Goffman's (1963) and Sayad's (1999) perspectives. It is crucial to recognize that one phenomenon stems from the other, keeping the persistence of stigmatization in view.

The case of Nuria, a Barcelona native with a Spanish father and a Moroccan mother, also exemplifies the impact of negative emotions in forming agency. Nuria skateboards and plays basketball daily in public squares and parks throughout the city. She recounts the following:

I often break stereotypes by going out with my skateboard and to the skatepark because I see people's faces and know they are amazed or even bothered. It angers them when they see you riding a skateboard, supposedly liberated, having a good time. Countless times, the typical grumpy man or the old lady passing through the square has said things to me, and only to me, you know? It is very contradictory. It does not make sense. They want you to be free but in the way they want, so that is it. I do not care. I will continue doing it because it is my freedom, and I have as much right as anyone else to use it.

(Nuria, 22 years old, is a woman born in Spain to a Spanish father and a Moroccan mother)

As Fleming et al. (2012) point out, unlike passive and inexpressive emotional reactions, individuals who experience racism also actively oppose, confront, and resist these encounters. Therefore, people who experience racial discrimination “position themselves” in confrontations in ways that shape them as subjects rather than merely as subjugated, which also involves opportunities for agency and autonomy (Ohnmacht and Yıldız 2021). Another highly elucidating instance is the situation of Yahya, a young Moroccan man residing in Barcelona for the past 5 years. Like Amin, he arrived in the city to pursue a master's degree at the university. While he holds Spanish citizenship, he asserts that his accent “betrays” him:

I think the same thing happens to all of us. We become humiliated as if we are inferior. At the beginning of everything on the subway, I did not even sigh. I did not talk on the phone or anything... I did not want it to be obvious where I was from because, although I speak Spanish, my accent gave me away. I notice that people look at me. They have never said anything to me, but that is noticeable. It is perceived. Even if it is very hidden, people who suffer from racism notice it. Now, I do not care; if I have to talk to someone on the phone, I do it, and if I go with a friend and speak Arabic, then whatever.

(Yahya is a 26-year-old Moroccan man living in Barcelona)

This interview excerpt highlights the experience of subtle racial discrimination and its psychological impact on Yahya. Initially, his response to racism is self-censorship and fear of visibility, indicating feelings of shame, insecurity, and vulnerability. The awareness of being watched and the concern that his accent might “give him away” suggest social anxiety and a sense of exclusion. However, over time, Yahya seems to have developed resistance and empowerment, shifting from avoiding speaking in public to openly challenging these prejudices.

The emotions that may emerge from this racist experience include humiliation, anxiety, sadness, and frustration, but also, over time, possible resilience and pride in his identity.

4 | Conclusions

This study has provided an in-depth examination of the emotional impact of daily experiences of racism faced by individuals racialized as “Moors” in Spain, highlighting how Islamophobia not only shapes their everyday interactions and emotions but also influences their relationship with public spaces and their sense of belonging in society. Through the analysis of 26 in-depth interviews, it has been demonstrated that the emotions arising from these racist encounters—ranging from discomfort and anxiety to frustration and resignation—serve as an indicator of the racialized and gendered power hierarchies that structure public life.

One of the key findings of this research is that emotions are not merely passive responses to everyday racism but are part of a relational dynamic that both reproduces and challenges structures of domination. The discomfort experienced in shared spaces is not only a symptom of exclusion but also a mechanism through which structural inequalities are reinforced, limiting the access of certain racialized bodies to full participation in social life. In this sense, the results confirm Ahmed's (2007) propositions on how the racialization of public spaces generates a sense of alienation and bodily misalignment, affecting the ability of racialized individuals to inhabit these spaces without experiencing tension or fear.

Furthermore, the analysis has highlighted the gender dimension of everyday racism, emphasizing how Muslim women, particularly those who wear the hijab, face distinct forms of discrimination that combine religion, race and gender. While experiences of racism may provoke avoidance and self-censorship responses in some cases, in others, they become catalysts for resistance, leading individuals to assert their presence in public spaces and actively challenge exclusionary norms. This finding adds a new dimension to the literature on everyday racism by demonstrating that racialized emotions reveal vulnerability, empowerment strategies and re-significant of identity (Bonilla-Silva 2019; Rodó-Zárate 2017).

While this study has revealed key aspects of the relationship between racism, emotions, and public space, future research could further explore how these experiences vary according to social class and educational level, factors that have not been deeply analyzed in this contribution; lastly, it would be of great interest to analyze the collective strategies of resistance and mutual support developed by racialized communities in response to everyday racism. In the context of the increasing normalization of Islamophobic discourses in Europe, understanding how affected individuals articulate both individual and collective responses could provide key insights for designing more effective public policies and social intervention strategies to combat discrimination.

In conclusion, this research not only highlights the persistence of everyday racism in the lives of racialized youth living in Barcelona but also demonstrates that the emotions generated by these experiences are not mere effects of racism but analytical tools that allow us to make visible, understand, and challenge racial hierarchies in our society.

Acknowledgements

This research was conducted within the framework of the project MIXED_YOUTH (CSO2015-63962-R), Sociability and Identity Processes of the Children of Mixed Unions: Mixedness Between Inclusion and Social Constraint, funded by the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness. I would also like to acknowledge the support received through the Margarita Salas Postdoctoral Fellowship funded by the Spanish Ministry of Universities and the European Union—Next Generation EU Recovery Plan. Finally, I wish to express my sincere gratitude to all the participants who generously shared their time and experiences, without whom this research would not have been possible.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Endnotes

- ¹ It is important to highlight at this point that a significant number of participants are descendants of mixed unions, with one parent from North Africa and socialized in Islam. This sample characteristic reflects Rodríguez-Reche involvement in the following research project (2016–2021); “Sociability and Identity Processes of the Children of Mixed Unions: Mixedness Between Inclusion and Social Constraint—MIXED_YOUTH (CSO2015-63962-R).
- ² During the first phase of the fieldwork, interviews were conducted with sons and daughters of mixed couples in which one of the members was from North Africa, not necessarily Maghrebi.
- ³ Available at: <https://ucide.org/islam/observatorio/informes/>. It was accessed in July 2023.
- ⁴ The names used are pseudonyms that mimic real names. If a pseudonym is a Spanish name, as in the case of Ainara, it is because the participant had a Spanish name. If the participant had an Arabic or Muslim name, an effort was made to respect the equivalent of their pseudonym.
- ⁵ It has been decided not to translate this expression into English and to maintain the literalness of the insult. ‘Mora de mierda’ is a highly recurrent racist expression in Spain. For more information about ‘Morofobia’ (Martín Corrales 2002; Olmos Alcaraz 2007).

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