To Brexit or Not to Brexit:

The Roles of Islamophobia, Conspiracist Beliefs, and Integrated Threat in Voting Intentions for the United Kingdom European Union Membership Referendum

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Abstract

We used an identities approach to examine voting intentions in the June 2016 United Kingdom (UK) referendum on membership of the European Union (EU). In April 2016, 303 British adults (58.7% women, age M = 34.73) indicated their voting intentions for the referendum and completed measures of identification with the national in-group, perceived threat from Muslim immigrants, belief in Islamophobic conspiracy narratives, Islamophobia, general conspiracist beliefs, ambiguity tolerance, and belief in a clash of civilisations. Path and mediation analyses indicated that greater belief in Islamophobic conspiracy theories mediated the link between Islamophobia and intention to vote to leave. Islamophobia and Islamophobic conspiracist beliefs also mediated the effects of perceived threat from Muslims on voting intentions. Other variables acted as antecedents of perceived threat or Islamophobic conspiracy narratives. These findings highlight the role that identity-based cognitions may have played in shaping voting intentions for the UK EU referendum.

Keywords: Referendum; Brexit; Integrated threat; Islamophobia; Conspiracy theories

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Writing shortly after the first United Kingdom (UK) referendum on membership of the then-European Community, held on the 5th of June 1975, Butler and Kitzinger (1976) warned against interpreting the vote to remain as an outburst of widespread public support for the broader European project. Support for membership "did not run deep", they wrote, and it did not "result in a girding of the loins for a great new European adventure" (Butler & Kitzinger, 1976, pp. 279-280). The lack of British public enthusiasm for European integration would remain an important feature of the UK's membership of the European Union (Baker & Schnapper, 2015; Gifford, 2014), culminating forty-one years later when, on the 23rd of June 2016, the British electorate voted by 51.9% to 48.1% to leave the EU. This invites the question of what drove the country to vote for "Brexit" (a portmonteau of Britain and exit) and more broadly what motivates Euroscepticism in the UK.

Academic research of Eurosceptic attitudes across Europe has broadly identified three core explanations, each identifying a set of (non-mutually exclusive concerns) as being the primary motive (see de Vreese & Boomgaarden, 2005; Gabel, 1998; Lubbers, 2008). First, the political approach suggests that, given the low level of information about and knowledge of the integration process, voters resort to proxies when formulating their views about integration. These proxies tend to be strongly influenced by domestic politics, particularly government approval and support for incumbent political parties (Anderson, 1998; Franklin, Marsh, & Wlezien, 1994; Franklin, van der Eijk, & Marsh, 1995; Marsh, 1998; van der Eijk & Franklin, 1996). Preliminary analysis of the Brexit vote suggests that some voters may have used the UK EU referendum as an opportunity to voice their discontent with the

incumbent party of government and politicians of the main political parties in general (Goodwin & Heath, 2016; Jessop, 2017).

On the other hand, a utilitarian approach suggests that voters will be influenced by a calculation of economics costs and benefits of EU membership. These studies explain support for European integration primarily in terms of income, education, and occupational skills, and suggest that support for integration will be lower in social groups who are (or feel) more exposed to competition as a result of the single market and free movement of labour (e.g., Anderson, 1998; Anderson & Reichert, 1996; Gable & Palmer, 1995; Hakhverdian, van Elsas, van der Brug, & Kuhn, 2013; Ritzen, Wehner, & Zimmerman, 2016; van Klingeren, Boomgaaden, & de Vreese, 2013). Much of the early analysis and commentary of the Brexit vote has utilised this utilitarian perspective, suggesting that Brexit voters were more likely to be those "left behind" (Goodwin & Heath, 2016; Halikiopoulou & Vlandas, 2017; Los, McCann, Springford, Thissen, 2017; see also Menon & Salter, 2016) – the financially insecure, who have few or no educational qualifications and little social mobility.

Finally, the identity approach suggests that attitudes toward European integration will be driven by feelings of national attachment and perceptions of threat to the nation-state and national integrity (Kritzinger, 2003). Although this literature has focused on perceived threats to national interests (e.g., Christin & Treschel, 2002), some scholars have suggested that Euroscepticism is more strongly driven by perceived cultural threat (McLaren, 2002, 2006). In this view, the notion of European integration and the enlargement of the EU, which implies the integration of different peoples and cultures, poses a threat to in-group cultural values (Ford & Goodwin, 2014; Lubbers & Jaspers, 2010; van Klingeren et al., 2013). Threats may come from any non-national change in society (e.g., globalisation; Farrell & Newman, 2017), but much of the literature on European integration has focused on the threat

posed by immigration (e.g., de Vreese & Boomgaarden, 2005; Werts, Scheepers, & Lubbers, 2013).

This focus on immigration is not misplaced: social integration theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) proposes that individuals tend to achieve positive social identity through social comparisons between one's in-group and relevant out-groups. If the comparison results in a negative evaluation of the in-group, individuals may seek to re-establish positive social identity through derogatory views of the out-group, particularly if the out-group is perceived as a threat (Corenblum & Stephan, 2001; Riek, Mania, & Gaertner, 2006; Stephan et al., 2002). Studies of European integration consistently show that, when immigrants are perceived as an out-group and a threat to in-group cultural values, respondents are more likely to reject further European integration and provide greater electoral support for Eurosceptic political parties (e.g., Curtice, 2016; de Vreese & Boomgaarden, 2005; Ford & Goodwin, 2014; Lubbers & Jaspers, 2010). Moreover, anti-immigrant and anti-multiculturalist sentiments have been widely implicated in the Brexit vote (Goodwin & Heath, 2016; Hobolt, 2016).

One particular feature of anti-immigrant sentiment in Europe concerns the perceived threat posed by Muslims and Islam to Western cultural values (e.g., Azrout, van Spanje, & de Vreese, 2013; Schiffer & Wagner, 2011; Strabac & Listhaug, 2008). Although such sentiments are partly driven by external events such as terrorist attacks and the refugee crisis, scholars have also highlighted the impact of Islamophobic conspiracist narratives *vis-à-vis* European integration (Fekete, 2011; Ünal, 2016). These narratives draw on older forms of racism and Islamophobia, but also incorporate concepts derived from the notion of a clash of civilisations (i.e., that there is an inter-civilisational conflict caused and maintained by cultural differences) to suggest that there is an ongoing attempt to Islamise Europe (Fekete, 2011). The discursive framework of this conspiracist narrative seems to be based on the

claims that Europe is being Islamised, either directly via intentional asymmetrical population growth or mass migration, or indirectly via naïve attempts to encourage multi-culturalism.

To date, very little research has examined antecedents of this conspiracist narrative and, more importantly, its impact on attitudes toward European integration. In a study with German respondents (N = 355), Ünal (2016) reported that perceived out-group threat was positively associated with stronger belief in the Islamophobic conspiracy theory. In addition, out-group threat also fully mediated the relationships between in-group identification, stronger belief in the clash of civilisations hypothesis, and ambiguity tolerance on the one hand, and belief in the Islamophobic conspiracy theory on the other. In Ünal's (2016) view, the Islamophobic conspiracy theory may typify a minority conspiracy theory (i.e., where a minority group is considered a collective conspirator that threatens the majority group; Campion-Vincent, 2005; Moscovici, 1987) driven by perceived threat and related antecedents.

The Present Study

Here, we sought to extend the work of Ünal (2016) to examine the extent to which perceived out-group threat and belief in Islamophobic conspiracist narratives influenced voting intentions in the UK EU membership referendum that took place in June 2016. This focus is not misplaced given that polling data in the run-up to the referendum indicated that attitudes toward immigration was a decisive factor in voting intentions and that immigration was the factor most focused on by those seeking Brexit (e.g., Nardelli, 2016). More specifically, advocates for Brexit focused on the inability of the UK political system to stem the flow of immigrants from other EU countries, with an attendant and not unrelated focus on the supremacy of EU laws over British laws (for a review and analysis, see Arnorsson & Zoega, 2016). In contrast, those favouring remaining in the EU generally focused on

uncertainty about future trading agreements, which would have knock-on effects on investment, employment, and trade.

In the present work, we draw on the identity approach to European integration, which suggests that intention to vote for Brexit vote can, in part at least, be explained as a function of perceptions of threat posed by immigration and EU freedom of movement (Alfano, Dustmann, & Frattini, 2016; Hobolt, 2016). Preliminary evidence suggests that discourse of immigration in the UK in the run-up to the UK EU referendum was largely one of uncertainty, anxiety, and xenophobia, emerging from othering distinctions (i.e., drawing marked distinctions between the self and immigrants); this was true of political discourse (e.g., speeches by politicians), as well as public discourse as reflected in newspaper editorials and commentaries (Cap, 2017). Thus, we expected that that greater perceptions of out-group threat would be associated with greater intention to vote to leave the EU. Furthermore, like Ünal (2016), we believed that perceptions of threat would be associated antecedenally with a number of individual difference variables on the one hand and that its relationship with voting intentions would be mediated by belief in conspiracy theories. Below, we briefly introduce the variables included in our analyses and our hypotheses.

Integrated threat. According to the intergroup threat theory (Stephan, Ybarra, & Rios Morrison, 2015), individuals will be more likely to exhibit prejudice toward social out-groups to the extent that those out-groups are perceived as realistic and symbolic threats. The former refers to threats to a group's political or economic power, resources, and general well-being, whereas symbolic threats refer to threats to a group's values, belief systems, morality, philosophy of life, or identity (Stephan & Renfro, 2002; Stephan & Stephan, 2000). Studies have consistently shown that intergroup threat plays an important role in negative perceptions and interactions between a host country's majority group and immigrants (for a review, see Riek et al., 2006). In the context of the UK EU referendum, we expected that greater

perceived symbolic and realistic threats from Muslim immigrants would be associated with greater intention to vote to leave the EU.

Conspiracist ideation. In addition to the associations between perceived threat and voting intention, we also examined the extent to which belief in the Islamophobic conspiracy theory mediated these relationships. Insofar as this conspiracist narrative represents a means of demonising the minority out-group (i.e., Muslim immigrants; Ünal, 2016), we expected that stronger belief in the conspiracy theory would be associated with greater intention to vote to leave the EU. In broad outline, previous work supports this reasoning: for example, one study found that belief in Jewish conspiracy theories was associated with anti-Semitic behavioural intentions and actual behaviour (operationalised in terms of monetary donations) in Polish respondents (Bilewicz, Winieski, Kofta, & Wójcik, 2013; see also Swami, 2012).

In the present study, we also expected that belief in the Islamophobic conspiracy theory would mediate the relationship between perceived threat and voting intention. That is, given the perceived threat negatively impacts perceptions of immigrants (Riek et al., 2006), we hypothesised that individuals who perceive greater threat would be more likely to endorse conspiracist beliefs that demonise out-groups (i.e., Muslim immigrants), which in turn would impact on voting intentions. Finally, in addition to examining belief in the Islamophobic conspiracy theory, we included a measure of generic conspiracist beliefs. This was based on the consistent finding from the psychological literature that belief in conspiracy theories are monological (e.g., Goertzel, 1994; Swami, Chamorro-Premuzic, & Furnham, 2010; Swami et al., 2011; Wood, Douglas, & Sutton, 2012); that is, individuals who are more prone to believe in conspiracist narratives were expected to more strongly endorse the Islamophobic conspiracy theory.

Antecedents of threat. According to Stephan et al. (2009), perceptions of intergroup threat arise within particular social contexts, but also vary in relation to individual difference

variables (see also Bakker & de Vreese, 2016; Nielsen, 2016). One such variable, derived from social identity theory, is the extent to which individuals identify with their in-group. The more that individuals identify with their in-group, the more they are likely to be concerned with its interests and react negatively to perceived threats from out-groups (Riek et al., 2006). That is, a sense of collective identity and identification with an in-group is more likely to emerge when individuals believe that self-categorisation at the group level is a meaningful way of understanding social phenomena (Haslam, 2001). Critical here is the degree of comparative "fit", or extent to which differences between members of the in-group are seen as small compared to the differences between that category and other categories in a social context (Tajfel, 1978; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). Thus, previous studies with respondents from multiple European countries have reported that greater identification with the in-group is associated with greater perceived threat from Muslim immigrants (e.g., Gonzáles, Verkuyten, Weesie, & Poppe, 2008; Ünal, 2016). Based on this work, we included identification with the national in-group as an exogenous variable in our analyses, but also expected that it would directly predict intention to vote to leave the EU.

Given the focus on the Islamophobic conspiracist narrative, we also included a measure of Islamophobia. Whereas the conspiracist narrative is more specifically focused on claims about the Islamisation of Europe, Islamophobia more broadly can be viewed as a neologism for racist attitudes and beliefs, prejudice, and discrimination aimed at Muslims (Lee, Gibbons, Thompson, & Timani, 2009). At the same time, some scholars have suggested that the target of Islamophobia is not religious faith but rather a people (Halliday, 1999); indeed, Salaita (2006) suggests that Islamophobia is synonymous with anti-Arab racism. In this view, Islamophobia can be considered to be a conceptually different construct to Islamophobic conspiracist beliefs; although the two are likely to be correlated, they may also have independent effects *vis-à-vis* attitudes toward European integration.

Likewise, we also included a measure of belief in the clash of civilisations narratives. This variable has been previously found to be associated with intergroup bias (e.g., Sidanius, Kteily, Levin, Pratto, & Obaidi, 2016), as well as the Islamophobic conspiracist narrative (Ünal, 2016). Following Ünal (2016), we also included a measure ambiguity tolerance, which refers to a tendency to view ambiguous situations (i.e., those that are complex, ambivalent, or new) as sources of threat (Budner, 1962; Furnham & Marks, 2013). Ünal (2016) hypothesised, and found support for, the idea that greater integration of Muslims in Europe would be perceived as ambiguous, as it challenged traditional in-group narratives about the nation-state, which in turn would be associated with greater perceived threat.

Finally, we also included a measure of political knowledge about the EU. Although this aspect was more exploratory, it is grounded in the notion that greater political knowledge and awareness of the functions and processes of the EU would require a degree of critical thinking. Although it is possible that such a thinking style would promote a more rationale appraisal of (the low level of) realistic and symbolic threats, it seems more likely that it would have an independent and direct effect on voting intentions. Previous work provides some preliminary support for this perspective, finding for example that greater education is predictive of greater support for European integration (Gabel, 1998). On the other hand, de Vrees and Baumgaarden (2006) found that greater political sophistication, which includes a measure of political knowledge of the EU, was associated with lower support for EU integration in Denmark.

Summary. Our dependent variable in the present work was voting intention in the UK EU membership referendum, with our data collection taking place before the actual referendum in June 2016. While we acknowledge that voting intentions may not necessarily translate into actual voting behaviour, we emphasise that we are focusing on underlying explanations of attitudes toward the EU referendum. Moreover, voting intention is widely-

used as a dependent measure in the referendum literature (e.g., de Vrees & Baumgaarden, 2006). In summary, we predicted that belief in Islamophobic conspiracy theories would mediate the relationship between perceived threat and an intention to leave the EU. We further expected that generic conspiracist ideation would be positively associated with belief in the Islamophobic conspriacy narrative and that identification with the national in-group, belief in a clash-of-civilisations narrative, ambiguity tolerance, Islamophobia, and political knowledge of the EU would be significantly associated with perceived threat. A hypothesised model of these relationships is presented in Figure 1.

Method

Participants and Procedure

The study was approved by the relevant departmental ethics committee (application number: VRE1516-1352). All data were collected via the Prolific Academic website, a crowdsourcing Internet marketplace that allows individuals to complete academic surveys for monetary compensation. A brief description of the study, including estimated duration and compensation, was posted on the website on April 14-15, 2016. Because of our research aims and the country-specificity of questionnaire items, participation was limited to respondents from the UK. After providing informed consent, participants were directed to the measures described below, which were presented in an anonymous form and in random order via the randomisation function with Qualtrics, which hosted the survey. In exchange for completing the survey, participants were paid £1.00. All participants received debriefing information at the end of the survey.

The initial participant pool consisted of 321 respondents. However, because of the very small number of participants who indicated that they did not intend to vote in the EU membership referendum (n = 18), we elected to omit data from these participants. The final sample, therefore, consisted of 303 respondents who indicated that they intended to vote in

the EU membership referendum (58.7% women, 40.6% men, 0.7% other). Participants ranged in age from 18 to 74 years (M = 34.73, SD = 12.60) and the majority were of British White descent (92.4%). In terms of educational qualifications, 23.8% had completed minimum secondary schooling, 47.2% had an undergraduate degree, 17.8% had a postgraduate degree, 7.3% were still in full-time education, and 4.0% had some other qualification. Finally, the majority of the sample self-reported as being atheists or of no religious affiliation (52.5%), 34.3% as Christians, 7.6% as agnostics, and the remainder as of some other religious background.

Measures

Referendum voting intentions. Participants were informed that the EU membership referendum was scheduled to take place in the UK and Gibraltar on June 23, 2016. They were then asked to indicate whether they intended to vote in the referendum (1 = *Yes*, 2 = *Have not decided/Not sure*, 3 = *No*). All participants were also asked the question that appeared on ballot papers ("Should the United Kingdom remain a member of the European Union or leave the European Union?"), but we modified the response format to include an uncertain option (1 = *Remain a member of the European Union*, 2 = *Have not decided/Not sure*, 3 = *Leave the European Union*).

Islamophobic conspiracist beliefs. Because Ünal (2016) did not fully report on the design and factorial validity of his measure of Islamophobic conspiracist beliefs, we elected to design a novel scale based on best-practice recommendations (Spector, 1992). Specifically, the first author initially defined and refined the construct of interest through a careful reading of the available academic and non-academic literature. The first author then developed an initial item pool, which was then refined through discussion with all other authors. The final item pool consisted of 13 items (see Table 1), which participants were asked to rate for agreement on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly agree*). The

factorial validity and internal consistency of this measure is evaluated in the Results section below.

Clash-of-civilisations intergroup conflict. We included the Clash-of-Civilisations Attributions Scale (Sidanius, Henry, Pratto, & Levin, 2004; adaptation: Ünal, 2016) to measure the essentialist belief that there is an ongoing clash of civilisations between the West and the Islamic world. This is a 4-item scale that captures endorsement of the existence of such a clash of civilisations (sample item: "We are currently facing a 'clash of civilisations'"), with items rated on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*Strong disagree*, 5 = *Strongly agree*). An overall score was computed as the mean of all 4 items, with higher scores reflecting greater endorsement of the belief in a clash of civilisations. Ünal (2016) reported that scores on the adaptation of this scale had good validity estimates and adequate internal consistency. In the present study, Cronbach's α for this scale was .87.

Identification with national in-group. Participants' identification with a British in-group was measured using 3 items from the Collective Self-Esteem Scale (Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992), a method that has been used previously (Ünal, 2016; Verkuyten, 2005). The items measure participants' beliefs about the extent to which their identity is shaped by, and their pride in, being British (sample item: "I am proud to be British"). All items were rated on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly agree*) and an overall score was computed as the mean of all 3 items, such that higher scores reflect greater identification with the British in-group. Previous studies have reported that scores on this measure have good validity and reliability estimates (e.g., Ünal, 2016; Verkuyten, 2005). Here, Cronbach's α for this measure was .92.

Political knowledge. To assess political knowledge of the EU, we adapted an earlier measure used by de Vreese and Boomgaarden (2005) in a survey on European integration in Dutch and Danish adult populations. In its original formulation, this measure included 5

open-ended questions about the number of Commissioners in the EU Commission, the name of the current President of European Commission, the name of the Danish/Dutch Commissioner, the country that currently holds the Presidency of the EU, and the number of countries currently seeking membership of the EU. We modified the third of these items so as to ask participants the name of the only UK Commissioner in the EU Commission. We used the same scoring method as de Vreese and Boomgaarden (2005); that is, each item was coded as 1 for correct answers (respectively, correct at the time of participant recruitment: 28; Jean-Claude Juncker; Jonathan Hill; Netherlands; 5) and 0 for missing or incorrect answers. For responses that required text, we were liberal in our scoring and allowed for spelling errors (e.g., "Yuncker" instead of "Juncker") and alternate forms (e.g., "Lord Hill" instead of "Jonathan Hill"). A total score was computed as the sum of responses to all 5 items (scores could range from 0 to 5), with higher scores reflecting greater political knowledge of the EU. Cronbach's α for this scale was .72.

Ambiguity intolerance. To measure intolerance of ambiguity, we used the Tolerance for Ambiguity Scale (TAS), an adaptation (Herman, Stevens, Bird, Mendenhall, Oddou, 2010) of an earlier and widely-used scale designed by Budner (1962). Because the original measure suffers from poor reliability (e.g., Furnham, 1994), Herman et al. (2010) omitted items with low item-total correlations and added several new items. The adapted measure consists of 12 items that tap a preference for valuing diverse others, coping with change, dealing with unfamiliar situations, and managing conflicting perspectives (sample item: "The sooner we all acquire similar values and ideals the better"). All items were rated on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly agree*), and an overall score was computed as the mean of all items. Herman et al. (2010) reported that overall scores on the TAS had adequate factorial validity and internal consistency. In the present study, Cronbach's α for the TAS was .71.

General conspiracist beliefs. To measure individual differences in generic conspiracist ideation, participants were asked to complete the Generic Conspiracist Beliefs Scale (GCBS; Brotherton, French, & Pickering, 2013). This is a 15-item scale that measures belief in five types of conspiracy theories, namely government malfeasance, extraterrestrial cover-up, malevolent global conspiracies, personal well-being conspiracies, and control of information conspiracies. All items were rated on a 5-point scale, ranging from 1 (*Definitely not true*) to 5 (*Definitely true*). Although the GCBS nominally consists of 5 factors, Brotherton et al. (2013) reported that the subscales are highly inter-correlated and suggested that total scores, which had adequate factorial fit, is more suitable in practical terms. Recently, however, Swami et al. (2017) reported that both the five-factor and one-factor model of GCBS scores had poor factorial fit and recommended that scholars using this scale should re-examine its factor structure prior to use. In the present dataset, the one-factor model with all items had poor fit, $\chi^2_{M}(90) = 811.109$, $\chi^2_{normed} = 9.012$, CFI = .772, RMSEA = .163 (low = .153, high = .173), SRMR = .081, as did the five-factor model, $\chi^2_{M}(80) = 728.624$, $\chi^2_{normed} = 9.108$, CFI = .795, RMSEA = .164 (low = .153, high = .175), SRMR = .080. Swami et al. (2017) also proposed two-factor model, consisting of General Conspiracist Beliefs (6 items) and Extraterrestrial Conspiracist Beliefs (4 items). In the present dataset, this model also had poor fit, $\chi^2_{M}(34) = 196.957$, $\chi^2_{normed} = 5.793$, CFI = .909, RMSEA = .126 (low = .109, high = .143), SRMR = .068. After consultation of modification indices, the metrics for the two-factor model had acceptable fit, $\chi^2_{M}(31) = 96.453$, $\chi^2_{normed} = 3.111$, CFI = .964, RMSEA = .084 (low = .065, high = .103), SRMR = .081. This led to the following covariances: items 13 and 14, items 13 and 15, and items 14 and 15. We, therefore, used the 6-item General Conspiracist Beliefs factor (sample item: "New and advanced technology which would harm current industry is being suppressed"), which had adequate internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .87$), in our analyses.

Islamophobia. To measure Islamophobia, we used the 8-item Cognitive subscale of the Islamophobia Scale (Lee et al., 2009). This subscale measures the belief that Islam is a harmful religion (sample item: "Islam is an evil religion"). We adapted items on the subscale to refer to the UK, rather than to the United States. All items were rated on a 5-point scale, ranging from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly agree*). A subscale score was computed as the mean of items, so that higher scores reflect greater cognitive Islamophobia. Lee et al. (2009) reported that scores on the Islamophobia Scale yielded acceptable psychometric properties of reliability and validity. In the present study, Cronbach's α was .97 for the subscale.

Perceived symbolic and realistic threats. To measure perceived symbolic (i.e., to the values, norms, moral, and identities of the in-group) and realistic threat (i.e., to the political and economic power of the in-group), we used items that were first developed by Stephan, Ybarra, and Bachman (1999) in their study of attitudes toward Asian migrants. We adapted the items so that they referred to Muslim immigrants and threats to the UK. The symbolic threat measure consisted of 7 items (sample item: "Muslims wants to take over the world") and the realistic threat measure consisted of 8 items (sample item: "I would become incredibly uncomfortable speaking to a Muslim"), all of which were rated on a 10-point scale ranging from 1 (*Strong disagree*) to 10 (*Strongly agree*). Subscale scores were computed as the mean of items associated with each factor, so that higher scores reflect greater perceived threat from Muslim immigration to the UK. Previous studies have reported that these subscales have adequate psychometric properties in diverse samples (e.g., Stephan et al., 1999). In the present study, Cronbach's α was .88 for symbolic threat and .87 for realistic threat.

Demographics. Participants were asked to provide their demographic details, consisting of sex, age, highest educational qualifications, ethnicity, and religious affiliation.

Results

Factor Analysis of the Islamophobic Conspiracy Measure

To examine the factor structure of our novel measure of Islamophobic conspiracist beliefs, we used principal-axis EFA. This method allowed us to test for the best-fitting model for our dataset without *a priori* limitations in terms of modelling. Our sample size met conservative participant-to-item requirements for EFA (Nunnally, 1978). Items were submitted to EFA based on item distribution (standardized kurtosis values > 10.0 suggest a problem), average correlation with the other items (items with $r < .40$ should be dropped), and item-total correlation (items should be dropped with corrected-item total correlations are < .30), as recommended by Clark and Watson (1995). A quartimax rotation was used, as we expected a single, orthogonal factor (Pedhazur & Schmelkin, 1990). The number of factors to be extracted was determined by factor eigenvalues (λ) above 1.0 (the EGV1 criterion) and examination of the scree plot. Factor loadings were interpreted were interpreted using Tabachnik and Fidell's (2007) recommendations (i.e., > .71 = excellent, > .63 = very good, > .55 = good, > .45 = fair, and > .32 = poor). As a measure of internal consistency, we computed Cronbach's α, with values of .70 and greater considered acceptable (Kline, 1999).

Examination of the 13 items submitted items for skewness, kurtosis, average correlations with other items, and item-total correlations suggested no underlying problems and that all items could be submitted to EFA. Bartlett's test of sphericity, $\chi^2(78) = 5252.01$, $p < .001$, and the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy, KMO = .96, showed that the 13 items had adequate common variance for factor analysis. The results of the EFA revealed a single factor with $\lambda > 1.0$ (i.e., $\lambda = 10.29$) and the scree plot suggested a primary factor with a steep cut-off to the second factor. Based on these findings, we elected to retain a single factor, which explained 79.1% of the common variance. Factor loadings are reported in Table 1 and, as can be seen, all items had excellent loadings. Finally, we

computed an overall Islamophobic conspiracist belief score by computing the mean of all 13 items. This total score had very good internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .97$).

Sex Differences and Inter-Scale Correlations

Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics (*M* and *SD*) for all variables included in the present study. We first examined whether there were sex differences on any of our variables using a series of independent-samples *t*-tests. Because of the large number of comparisons (*k*), a Bonferroni adjustment was applied to reduce the chance of Type I error, such that $p = (1 - \alpha)^k \approx 1 - k\alpha = \alpha/k = .005$ (Bland & Altman, 1995). As can be seen in Table 2, none of the comparisons reached significance and all effect sizes were negligible-to-small. In terms of voting intentions, our data suggested that 55.1% intended to vote to remain part of the EU, 22.8% had not decided or were unsure about their voting intentions, and 22.1% intended to vote to leave the EU. A chi-squared test indicated no significant distribution pattern in voting direction in the EU membership referendum as a function of participant sex, $\chi^2(4) = 7.53$, $p = .110$. For these reasons, we pooled all data across participant sex for all subsequent analyses. Table 2 also reports on bivariate correlations between all variables included in the present study. As can be seen there were significant correlations between most variables in the expected directions, with the exception of political knowledge of the EU[1]. Most significant correlations were moderate-to-strong in strength. Because high inter-correlations can be indicative of multicollinearity, we examined variance inflation factors (VIFs). All VIFs were ≤ 3.93, suggesting that multicollinearity was not a limiting issue in this dataset (Hair, Anderson, Tatham, & Black, 1995).

Path Analysis

Path analysis using Analysis of Moments Structure v.23 with maximum likelihood estimation using the covariance matrix (Arbuckle, 2014) was used to develop a conceptual integration of the predictors of intention to vote to leave the EU in the membership

referendum. Standard goodness-of-fit indices were selected *a priori* to assess the measurement models (Hu & Bentler, 1999). The normed model chi-square (χ^2_{normed}) is reported with lower values of the overall model χ^2 indicating goodness-of-fit. A χ^2_{normed} value of < 3.00 indicates good fit (Hu & Bentler, 1999). The Steiger-Lind root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) and its 90% confidence interval provide a correction for model complexity (Hu & Bentler, 1999). RMSEA values close to .06 indicate a good fit, with values ranging to .10 representing a mediocre fit (MacCallum, Browne, & Sugawara, 1996). The standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) assesses the mean absolute correlation residual and is a badness-of-fit index: the smaller the SRMR, the better the model fit (Hu & Bentler, 1999). A cut-off value for SRMR is recommended to be close to or < .09. The comparative fit index (CFI) measures the proportionate improvement in fit by comparing a target model with a more restricted, nested baseline model (Hu & Bentler, 1999). The CFI reflects a goodness-of-fit index and is recommended to close to or > .95 for adequate fit.

Our initial model was based on the hypothesised model developed by Ünal (2016), such that clash-of-civilisations attributions, identification with the national in-group, and ambiguity tolerance were included as exogenous variables; symbolic and realistic threats were included as mediators, and; Islamophobic conspiracist beliefs was included as an endogenous variable. However, we modified this model to include our additional variables: Islamophobia was entered as a less distal mediator, and Islamophobic conspiracist beliefs became a less distal mediator. General conspiracist beliefs was included as a less distal mediator. Because of the lack of significantly correlations between political knowledge and all other included variables, the former was included as a standalone predictor of the intention to vote to leave the EU (see Figure 1 for the hypothesised model). Voting intention was included as the endogenous variable. Because our primary research question was focused on intention to vote to leave the EU, we coded this item for analyses so that 1 = *Remain/Have*

not decided/Not sure and 2 = *Leave the EU* (i.e., this method distinguishes between intending to vote for Brexit and all other voting options). However, we also checked that our final model was robust by examining model fit when participants who were undecided or unsure about their voting intentions (n = 69) were excluded from the analyses (i.e., voting intentions were coded so that 1 = *Remain* and 2 = *Leave the EU*); these results are report in Footnote 2.

The hypothesised model had acceptable fit with the exception of RMSEA values: $\chi^2(19) = 78.782$, $p < .001$; $\chi^2_{normed} = 4.146$; CFI = .965; SRMR = .100; RMSEA = .102 with 90% *CI* = .079-.126. Inspection of maximum likelihood scalar estimates indicated that there were several non-significant paths, which we deleted from the hypothesised model. These included pathways leading to intention to leave: symbolic threat (estimate = -0.005, *SE* = .017, CR = -0.283, p = .777), identification with national group (estimate = 0.006, *SE* = .021, CR = 0.295, p = .768), political knowledge (estimate = 0.019, *SE* = .018, CR = 1.102, p = .270), and general conspiracist beliefs (estimate = 0.024, *SE* = .020, CR = 1.216, p = .224). In addition, there was also a non-significant pathway between realistic threat and belief in Islamophobic conspiracist theories (estimate = -0.087, *SE* = .061, CR = -1.419, p = .156). The final model is depicted in Figure 2 and had acceptable fit, $\chi^2(14) = 50.059$, $p < .001$; χ^2_{normed} = 3.576; CFI = .979; SRMR = .049; RMSEA = .092 with 90% *CI* = .066-.121.[2]

Bootstrapping procedures were used to obtain the direct and indirect effects within the fitted model for two-variable pathways to intention to vote leave, drawing on 5,000 bootstrap samples from the dataset (see Table 3). Our results showed that there were significant direct and indirect effects from all two pathways within our fitted model. As there were direct pathways and from Islamophobia to intention to vote leave, and also via Islamophobic conspiracist beliefs, it was possible to test for Islamophobic conspiracist beliefs as a mediator in this pathway (see Figure 3). There was a significant indirect effect from this pathway, and considering the non-significant direct pathway from Islamophobia (cognitive) to intention to

vote leave, Islamophobic conspiracist beliefs was considered to fully mediate this model. Further, it was also possible to investigate realistic threat to intention to vote leave, via Islamophobia. However, there was no direct effect from via Islamophobia (cognitive) to intention to vote leave, and no indirect effect via Islamophobia (cognitive), therefore, there was no mediation within the pathway (see Figure 4).

Discussion

Our aim in the present study was to explore reasons for the Brexit voting intentions based on identities approach toward Euroscepticism, which broadly suggests that attitudes toward European integration is – in part at least – driven by feelings of national attachment and perceived threat to the nation-state (Kritzinger, 2003). In broad outline, our findings are consistent with this identities perspective, suggesting that the intention to vote to leave in the UK EU referendum in our sample of respondents was influenced by perceptions of symbolic (i.e., to the value, norms, morals, and identities of the in-group) and realistic threat (i.e., to the political and economic power of the in-group). However, our results also suggest some nuance in this perspective, with belief in Islamophobic conspiracy theories and Islamophobia both playing mediatory roles. In addition, various antecedenal factors contributed to perceptions of threat. Below, we elaborate on these findings.

Building on the notion that Euroscepticism is driven by perceived threat to in-group cultural values (McLaren, 2002, 2006; Riek et al., 2006), a number of commentators have highlighted the impact that attitudes *vis-à-vis* immigration may have had on the Brexit vote (Alfano et al., 2016; Hobolt, 2016). Our results are consistent with these suggestions: most importantly perhaps, we found that perceptions of threat to political and economic power posed by Muslim immigrants was directly associated with the intention to vote to leave the EU. However, contrary to our hypotheses, we found that perceived symbolic threat was not

directly associated with intention to vote to leave; rather, symbolic threat was indirectly associated with the intention to vote to leave via Islamophobic conspiracist beliefs.

In broad outline, these findings are consistent with research conducted in other EU nations, which suggests that, when immigrants are perceived as an out-group and a threat to the in-group, respondents are more likely to reject European integration (Curtice, 2016; de Vreese & Boomgaarden, 2005; Ford & Goodwin, 2014; Lubbers & Jaspers, 2010); however, our results extend previous work by suggesting that perceived threats realitistic posed by Muslim immigrants specifically may have shaped the intention to vote to leave the EU. This may hint at the conclusion drawn from a utilitarian perspective, namely that the Brexit vote was motivated by social and economic insecurity (Goodwin & Heath, 2016; Halikiopoulou & Vlandas, 2017; Los et al., 2017). On the other hand, it seems that symbolic threat exerted an effect on voting intentions indirectly via Islamophobic conspiracist beliefs, which is consistent with the view that symbolic threat is more strongly associated with prejudice than political intolerance (see Skitka et al., 2013).

In addition, our results also showed that perceptions of both realistic and symbolic threat were indirectly associated with voting intentions via Islamophobic attitudes. Interestingly, in our path model, Islamophobia was negatively associated with intention to vote leave; however, further inspection of this association suggested that the direct path was not significant once the mediatory effects of Islamophobic conspiracist narratives had been taken into account. In other words, those who scored more highly in terms of racist attitudes toward Muslims were more likely to adopt conspiracist cognitions about Islam and Europe, and it was this pathway that was associated with intention to vote to leave the EU. One way of viewing this finding is to first acknowledge that racism directed at Muslims is longstanding in nations where European Muslims live, with Muslims constructed as a clear out-group engendering responses of general concern, anxiety, and fear (Yilmaz, 2016). Of

course, such patterns of racism may have been exacerbated in the context of the Brexit vote by violent extremism in the name of Islam and increased fear about future acts of terrorism on European soil, but what is noteworthy is that racist discourse and attitudes appear to be associated with greater conspiracist beliefs about Islam in Europe. In turn, some individuals may have been more likely to vote to leave the EU for fear that Europe is being Islamised. Influenced by a racist binary that casts Muslims as a distinct out-group that threats the existential, material, and physical safety of the in-group (Messina, 2016) was associated with false beliefs that Europe is being Islamised; voting to the EU may have been seen as a means of protecting the legitimacy of the in-groups privileged position.

In addition to the influence of Islamophobia, our results also suggested that the link between symbolic (but not realistic) threat and the intention to vote to leave the EU was mediated by belief in the Islamophobic conspiracy narrative. This aspect of our findings corroborates previous work with German respondents (Ünal, 2016), where it was reported that perceived symbolic (but not realistic) threat was associated with greater belief in Islamophobic conspiracist beliefs. Our work extends previous research by suggesting that such conspiracist narratives may have influenced the decision to vote to leave the EU in our participants. An additionally important finding in our study was that belief in the Islamophobic conspiracist narrative was associated with generic conspiracist beliefs; that is, a tendency to think in conspiracist terms appears to have been positively associated with belief is a specific, Islamophobic conspiracist narrative. This finding is consistent with the extant literature suggesting that belief in conspiracy theories are monological (e.g., Goertzel, 1994; Swami et al., 2010, 2011; Wood et al., 2012). One further aspect of our findings *vis-à-vis* conspiracist beliefs is important: we found that intolerance of ambiguity was associated with generic conspiracist beliefs. This is noteworthy because at least one previous study has reported that tolerance of ambiguity is not significantly associated with endorsement of

conspiracy theories (Moulding et al., 2016). A number of possibilities may explain this discrepancy, including differences in the manner that both tolerance of ambiguity and conspiracist ideation were measured across studies, as well as sampling variations. Future work may wish to further investigate this association to ascertain its reliability, although it should also be pointed out that the association in the present study, though significant, was relatively weak.

In our study, we also found that identification with the national in-group (in this case, the extent to which participants' identities were shaped by being British) was positively associated with greater perceived symbolic and realistic threat. This is consistent with previous work in European nations suggesting that greater identification with the national in-group is associated with greater perceived threat from Muslim immigrants (e.g., González et al., 2008; Ünal, 2016). In contrast to our hypotheses, however, we found that the direct link between identification with the in-group and intention to vote to leave the EU was not significant. It seems likely, therefore, that the effects of in-group identification on voting intentions were mediated by other factors, primarily perceived threat. In addition, and consistent with previous work (e.g., Sidanius et al., 2016; Ünal, 2016), we also found that belief in the clash of civilisation narrative – that is, belief that there is an ongoing clash of civilisations between the Western and Islamic worlds – was positively associated with greater perceived symbolic and realistic threat. Taken together, these findings suggest that there were a number of antecedenal, individual difference factors that shaped perceptions of threat in our sample.

One final point about our findings is worth highlighting: in our study, political knowledge of the EU was not significantly associated with any other included variable. Including political knowledge as a direct predictor of voting intentions also returned a null effect. This is surprising given that one previous study found that greater political

sophistication – which included a measure of political knowledge of the EU – was associated with lower support for EU integration (de Vrees and Baumgaarden, 2006). Of course, it is possible that it is the broader construct of political sophistication, rather than political knowledge specifically, that is associated with attitudes toward EU integration. Another possibility is that the lack of a significant association in the present study was an artefact of ceiling effects in our measure of political knowledge (see Footnote 1). It is possible that a different measure of political knowledge may have resulted in very different findings.

The main strength of the present study was our ability to examine attitudes toward EU integration via a specific, sample-relevant outcome, namely voting intentions during the UK EU referendum. However, this might also be viewed as a limitation of the present work: in the absence of post-voting follow-up data, it is difficult to ascertain to what extent voting intention translated into actual voting behaviour in our sample. One concern is that, while our data provided a snapshot of voting intentions at a particular point in time (i.e., in mid-April 2016), events that occurred in the intervening period before the actual vote may have affected voting intentions in ways that are difficult to determine. Our use of an online recruitment method also means that we cannot be certain about the generalisability of our findings to the wider British population. Indeed, our finding that 55.1% of participants intended to vote to remain, whereas only 22.1% intended to vote to leave the EU, points to a discrepancy with the final referendum result, which suggests that either some participants changed their minds post-study, that our sample is not generalisable, or both.

Other limitations of the present study include our focus on an identities approach to the exclusion of other factors that may have influenced voting intentions, including factors derived from a political approach (e.g., attitudes toward incumbent political parties) and a utilitarian approach (e.g., financial or job security). This is important because our work cannot speak to other issues that may have influence voting intentions in our sample; that is,

we cannot draw any conclusions about other, unmeasured motivations of voting intentions (e.g., that citizens used the referendum to reject politics as they know it; Koch, 2017). Even from the point-of-view of an identities approach, there may have been other neglected variables that further mediated or even suppressed our effects. Swami and Furnham (2014) have highlighted a range of potentially relevant factors, including personality traits, and extreme paranoia and suspiciousness. Finally, it is important to highlight that our data are cross-sectional and, while we have interpreted our findings in line with contemporary theorising (de Vreese & Boomgaarden, 2005; Gabel, 1998; Lubbers, 2008), some caution should be exercised when interpreting causational effects.

Despite these limitations, our findings provide a valuable snapshot of voting intentions for the UK EU referendum and suggest that the intention to vote to the leave the EU may have been partly motivated by Islamophobic conspiracist beliefs and Islamophobia, which were in turn shaped perceived threats and a wider set of antecedenal factors. Of course, this is not to suggest that identities broadly-defined were the "real cause" of voting intentions *vis-à-vis* the UK EU referendum; rather, it seems likely that there were multiple, heterogeneous "causes" that together shaped voting intentions in complex ways (Clarke & Newman, 2017). Nevertheless, what is clear from the present findings is that, in our sample at least, voting intentions may have been driven by feelings of national attachment and perceptions of threat to the nation-state and national integrity from Muslim immigrants. If nothing else, our findings provide some much-needed context to commentaries about Brexit and emphasise the role of individual cognitions on attitudes toward EU integration.

Footnotes

[1] It is possible that the null relationships with political knowledge was a function of ceiling effects. Mean scores on this measure were very low (see Table 2) and the majority of participants (59.1%) failed to answer any of the five questions correctly.

[2] When participants who were undecided or unsure about their voting intentions (n = 69) were excluded from the analyses, the final model still had acceptable fit, $\chi^2(14) = 40.537$, $p < .001$; $\chi^2_{normed} = 2.896$; CFI = .982; SRMR = .049; RMSEA = .090 with 90% *CI* = .059-.123. However, inspection of maximum likelihood scalar estimates indicated that there was one non-significant path from intolerance of ambiguity to general conspiracist beliefs (estimate = 0.161, *SE* = .131, CR = 1.232, p = .218). The model without this path had acceptable fit, $\chi^2(15) = 42.054$, $p < .001$; $\chi^2_{normed} = 2.804$; CFI = .981; SRMR = .061; RMSEA = .088 with 90% *CI* = .057-.120.

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Table 1. *Factor Loadings for the Islamophobic Conspiracist Belief Scale*

Item	Factor loading
1. There is an ongoing attempt to Islamise and Arabise Europe, thereby weakening Europe's existing culture and values.	.94
2. Europe is on the brink of racial and cultural extinction in the face of a coordinated campaign of domination by Muslims to transform Europe into an Islamic colony.	.93
3. Immigration is being used by Muslims as a means of Islamising Europe.	.93
4. The Islamisation of Europe is being supported by liberal politicians, but concealed from the public through deliberate media disinformation.	.91
5. Muslims are intent on Islamising Europe through the introduction of Sharia law.	.91
6. Islam is a totalitarian ideology, rather than religion, that is intent on destroying European culture and identity.	.90
7. Liberal elites in Europe, through their weakness and misguided liberalism, aid Islamisation.	.90
8. The high birth-rate of Muslims in Europe is an intentional attempt to Islamise Europe.	.90
9. The government of this country is enthusiastically co-operating with the Islamisation of Europe.	.90
10. Europe's Christian identity and values are being threatened by the Islamisation of its population.	.90
11. The European White community are the true victims of racism from Muslims.	.86

12. Muslims who do not signal their Muslimness (e.g., by wearing religious clothing) are in fact in camouflage (changing their appearance to blend in) and this makes them more dangerous.	.80
13. A secret project exists between European politicians and the Arab world for the Islamisation of Europe.	.77

Table 2. *Descriptive Statistics, Sex Differences, and Bivariate Correlations between All Variables Included in the Present Study*

		(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)
(1) Islamophobic conspiracist beliefs			.45**	.79**	.45**	.86**	.78**	.75**	.43**	.06	.55**
(2) General conspiracist beliefs				.32**	.13*	.42**	.33**	.33**	.13*	.03	.28**
(3) Clash-of-civilisations attributions					.38**	.76**	.77**	.60**	.26*	.07	.46**
(4) Identification with national in-group						.36**	.48**	.45**	.38**	.10	.30**
(5) Islamophobia							.75**	.66**	.34**	.03	.45**
(6) Realistic threat appraisal								.74**	.66**	.07	.52**
(7) Symbolic threat appraisal									.44**	.01	.44**
(8) Intolerance of ambiguity										.02	.15*
(9) Political knowledge of the EU											.10
(10) EU membership referendum vote[a]											
Women[b]	*M*	2.50	2.27	2.89	3.61	1.96	5.43	4.33	4.40	0.64	-
	SD	1.59	0.81	1.06	1.08	1.19	1.97	1.88	0.54	1.05	-
Men[b]	*M*	2.84	2.35	3.05	3.66	2.31	5.79	4.67	4.40	0.89	-
	SD	1.67	0.95	1.10	1.05	1.20	1.87	1.95	0.52	1.18	-

	t	1.80	0.74	1.20	0.46	2.50	1.58	1.52	0.02	1.96	-
	p	.073	.459	.230	.647	.013	.115	.130	.984	.051	-
	d	0.21	0.09	0.14	0.05	0.29	0.18	0.18	<0.01	0.23	-

Note. [a]Dummy coded so that 1 = *Remain/Have not decided/not sure* and 2 = *Leave the EU*; [b]Sex-comparisons were Bonferroni-corrected so that $p = .005$. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .001$. $N = 303$.

Table 3. *Decomposition of unstandardised and standardised direct and indirect effects on intention to vote leave, with bootstrap standard errors in parentheses*

Pathway	Direct Effect		Indirect Effect	
	Unstandardised	Standardised	Unstandardised	Standardised
General conspiracy beliefs → Islamophobic conspiracist belief	.772 (.094)	.469 (.048)	.071 (.019)	.182 (.047)
Intolerance of ambiguity → Islamophobic conspiracist belief	.685 (.157)	.235 (.057)	.096 (.024)	.124 (.031)
Symbolic threat → Islamophobic conspiracist belief	.637 (.027)	.751 (.027)	.089 (.009)	.412 (.040)
Symbolic threat → Islamophobia	.073 (.038)	.125 (.069)	.011 (.006)	.053 (.029)
Clash of civilisations → Islamophobia	.629 (.118)	.642 (.099)	.098 (.022)	.260 (.058)
Identification with national in-group → Realistic threat	.886* (.091)	.484* (.043)	.099 (.014)	.253 (.033)
Intolerance of ambiguity → Realistic threat	1.438 (.182)	.391* (.051)	.160 (.053)	.205 (.031)
Clash of civilisations → Realistic threat	1.088 (.091)	.678 (.047)	.121 (.016)	.326 (.041)

$p < .001$ unless denoted, *$p = .001$

Figure 1. *The hypothesised model of intention to vote leave*

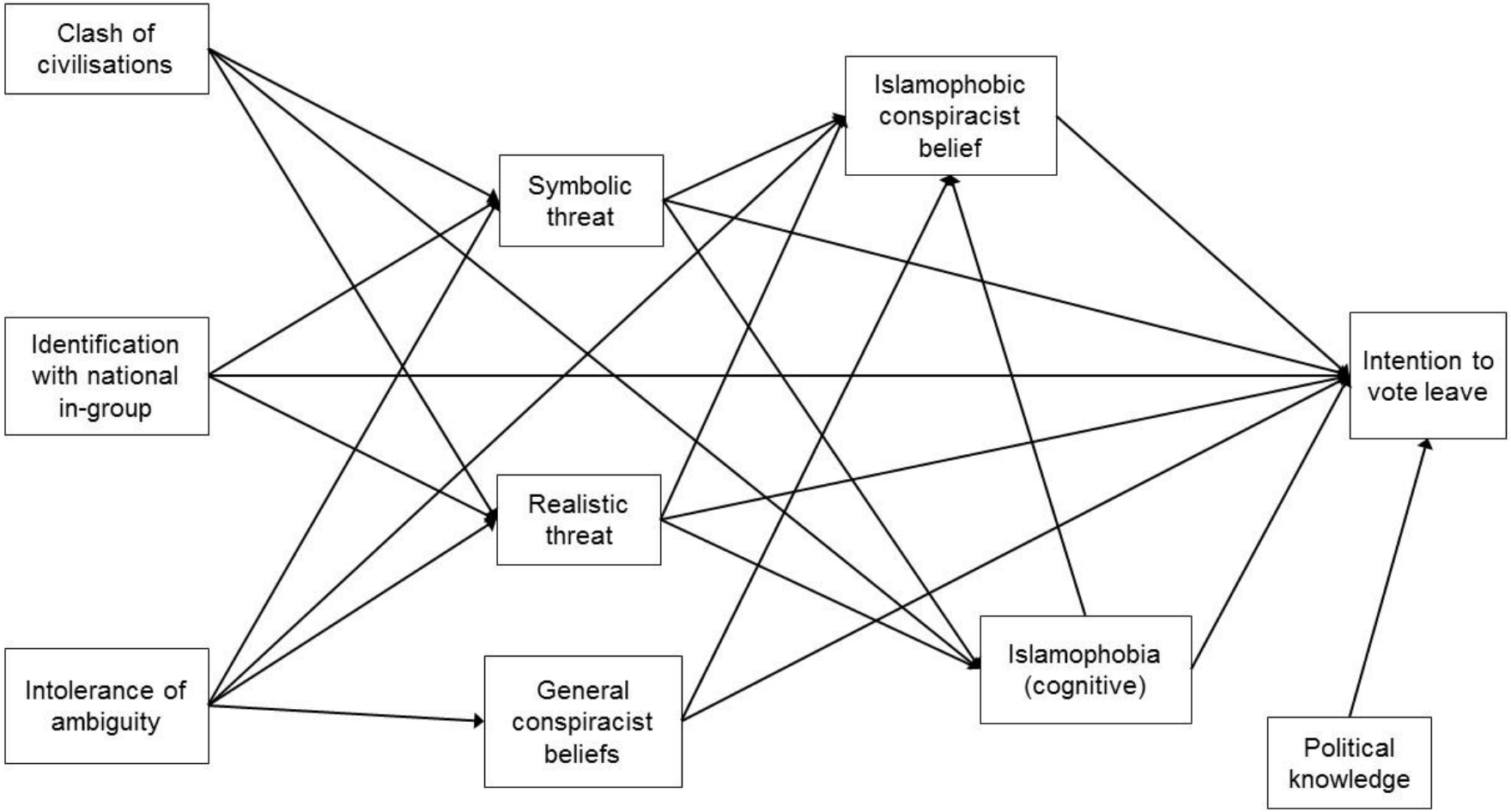

Figure 2. *Path diagram model with estimated standardised coefficients*

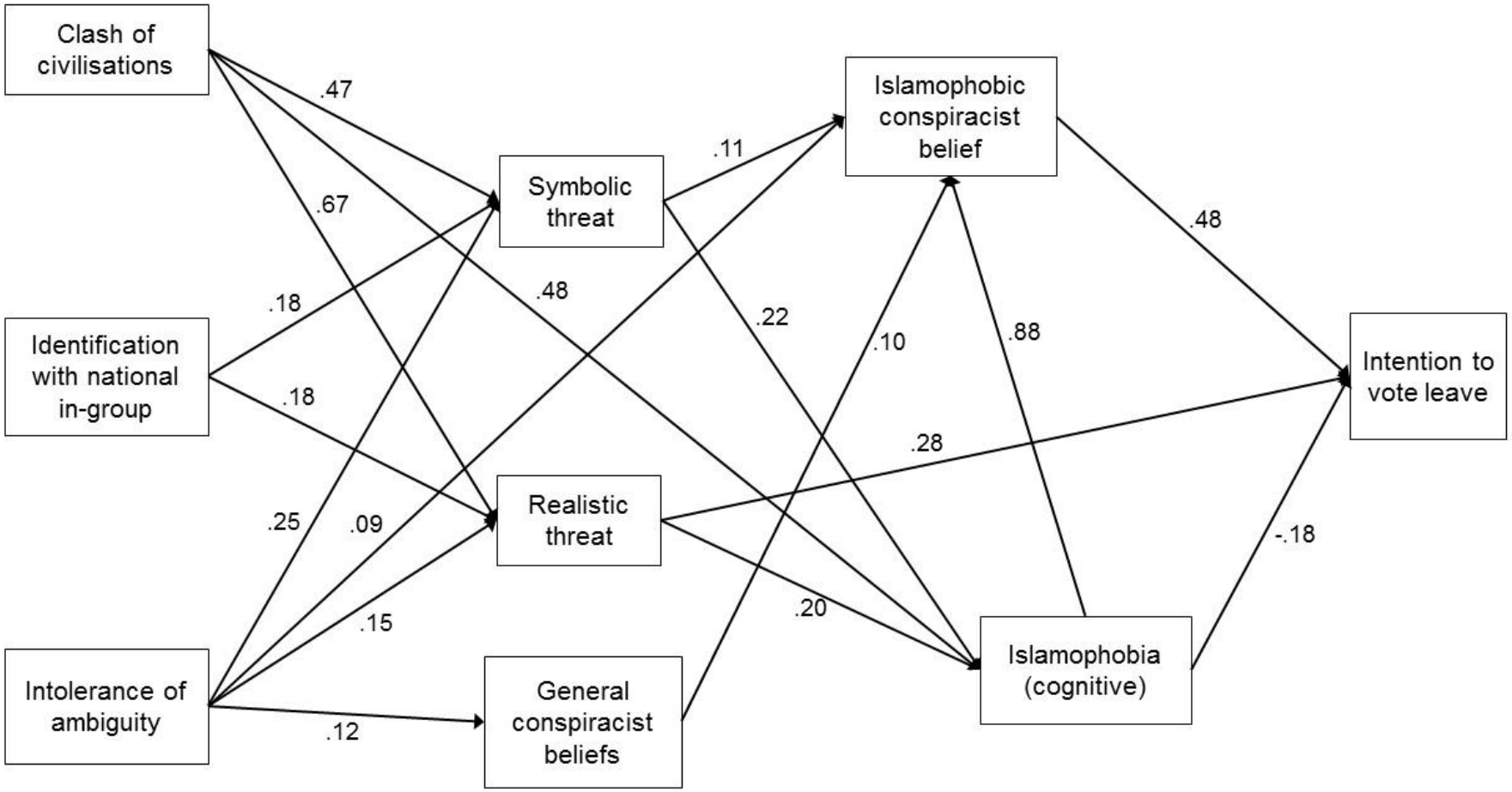

Figure 3. *Mediation model of Islamophobia, Islamophobic conspiracist beliefs, and intention to vote leave. The path coefficients are included for the unstandardised direct effect, with the standardised direct effect inside the parenthesis. The unstandardised indirect effect is in italics, with the standardised indirect in parenthesis. $p \leq .001$ unless denoted, *p = ns*

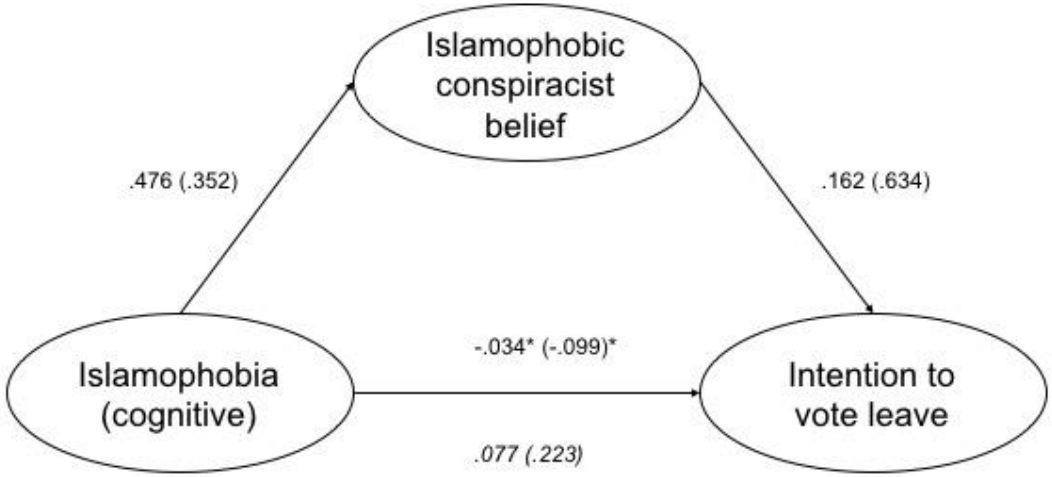

Figure 4. *Mediation model of realistic threat, Islamophobia (cognitive), and intention to vote leave. The path coefficients are included for the unstandardised direct effect, with the standardised direct effect inside the parenthesis. The unstandardised indirect effect is in italics, with the standardised indirect in parenthesis. p ≤ .001 unless denoted, *p = ns*