

## **Effects of Priming on Muslims' Behaviors: An Empirical Study**

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### **Abstract**

*Studies on the effects of priming religious people are not a new phenomenon for Christians and Jews. However, it appears there is no such study on the effects of priming on Muslims. As such, this research is an empirical study that tests and shows the reactions of the Muslim respondents to priming. Data was collected and regression analysis was, used to arrive at the results. The results show that immediately the respondents were primed with a certain sect's or a creed they try to demonstrate specific characteristics according to the sect's ideology. This appears in both actions and ideology during responds to the questionnaire.*

**Keywords:** Sects, Priming, Muslims, Behaviour

### **Introduction**

Priming can be defined as changes in the way individuals evaluate situations or circumstances which directly or indirectly impact their actions or conclusions (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987). Recently, the effects or consequence of priming on human behaviour has attracted the attention of psychologists, sociologist, religious scholars, and policy makers to name a few. The findings from these studies confirm the existence and positive influence of priming on human behaviour. According to McQuail, (2005) approaches like priming rejuvenate when issues or a particular subject has been a focus of discussion or reference where the attendee subjected or benchmarked the current discussion to a previously set standard. In other words, a new issue triggered an old standard or benchmark. Intensity plays a vital role in priming; however, these effects also depended heavily on predispositions, schema, and other characteristics of the audience that influenced how they processed messages (Scheufele & Tewksbury 2007).

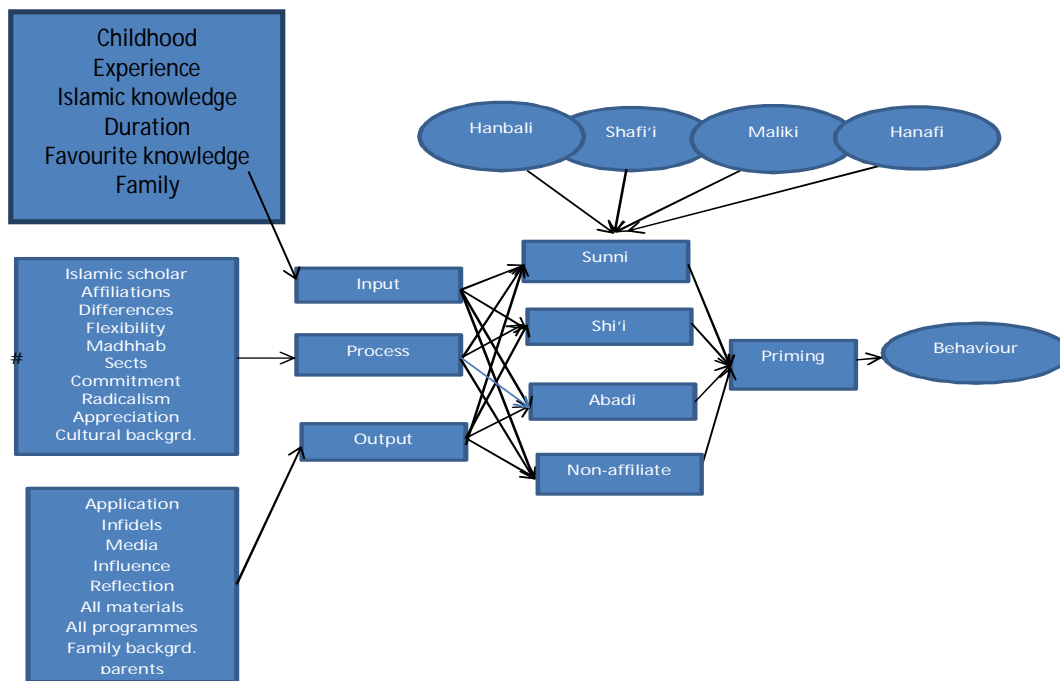
Priming's effect is said to be one of the memory-based models of information processing. This model assumed people form attitudes based on the considerations that are most salient when they make decisions (Hastie & Park, 1986; Price and Tewksbury 1997; Tversky & Kahneman, 1973). In addition, Iyengar & Kinder, (1987) in their study on media effects on political issues, stated and argued that priming is a temporal extension of agenda setting. Thus, by making an issue prominent in people's mind (agenda setting), mass media can also shape the considerations that people take into account when making judgments about political candidates or issues (priming) (Scheufele & Tewksbury 2007; Price & Tewksbury 1997).

Medical researchers such as Roediger & McDermott (1993) have established the two types of priming activation as perceptual and conceptual priming. Conceptual priming was, found to be more effective on human beings as it facilitates the ways they process information such as given meaning to words and the classification of a situation as favourable or unfavourable. Previous studies also affirmed the unintentional trigger of primes by that current situation can reflect on one's own behaviour (Dijksterhuis et al., 1998) or in communal judgment of others (Higgins, Rholes, & Jones, 1977). In Bargh's (1997) view, the behavioural and perceptual systems are not out of work and thus behavioural effects can deviate from judgmental effects. Furthermore, behavioural effects may be less controllable than judgmental effects because the direction of influence may be more difficult to pinpoint. Despite the great work on priming from the western perspective on social and Judeo-Christian religious issues, researchers such as Strack et al. (1993) and Wegener & Petty (1997) requested further study to explore whether awareness of a priming influence leads to contrast effects following mind-set primes as it does with construct primes.

However, to the best knowledge of the researchers there is no published study on priming from an Islamic perspective. Regardless of the source or origin of this field of study, it is vital for Islamic psychology in order to establish how deep sectarian ideologies are rooted in Islam as well to understand its impact and the ways of handling its negativity among individuals or congregations. Thus, this study is set to investigate whether awareness of being primed leads to contrast the effects following mind-set primes of Muslims which reflects in their behaviours from all sects i.e. religious affiliations. As such, the research is arranged as follows: the following section discusses the conceptual model, followed by the methodology followed by material, participants, results and analysis, and finally the conclusion.

**The conceptual model**

To achieve the objective of this research an Islamic conceptual model was established the various methods inculcations and as well as its influences on the Muslims’ behaviours across sectarian groups which is identified in framework (Figure 1). In general, the relationships between Muslim behaviour considered across sects and priming were sketched. In addition, taking into consideration the factors that trigger the prime among the sects as well as its effects, it was divided into input, process and output. The analysis of variance was performed to facilitate a sound conclusion through Friedman’s Chi-Square ( $\chi^2$ ).



**Figure 1: The Effects of Priming on Muslim Behaviour**

**Methodology**

**Material**

This study strives to measure the effects of priming on Muslims through a questionnaire developed specifically for this purpose. The questionnaire used a likert’s scale between 1 “strongly agree” to 4 “strongly disagree”. Given the nature of the study, participants were not given a neutral option. The researchers assumed that the current state of affairs of Islam excludes no one from belonging to a specific group or sect. We hypothesised that priming does not exist in the activities and religious actions of Muslims across sects and has no effect on their behaviour. The questionnaire containing 8 demographic questions and 25 items designed to measure various correlations among variables and the effects of priming on Muslims. The questionnaire items were modelled according to the studied current state of affairs among the sampled Muslims individually or collectively such as the recent and on-going sectarian-cum-political wars in the Middle East for example.

**Participants**

Muslim students from across the world were, recruited from both the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) and University Malaya (UM) to participate in a study of the effects of priming on the Muslim behaviour.

A simple random sample method was, adopted in the selection of the participants. Upon meeting the participants, their consent for participation was, requested upon which some participants sought further clarification on the meaning of priming and its relevance to Islamic ideology. Our ultimate goal was for participants to willingly, provide the relevant information. Participants were, assured that they had the right to withdraw at any time and their identity would remain secured. Upon their consent, participants were, given the questionnaire. It asked them to provide demographic information such as their gender, age, education, and educational location. Out of 200 questionnaires printed and distributed, 158 were, received excluding those, which were incomplete leaving 158 for analysis. 64% of participants identified themselves as male and 36% as female. The average age was 24. They varied greatly in educational background between Masters, PhD and being professionals. Racially, 37% identified themselves as Asian, 27% Africans, 33% Arabs, and 2% Europeans. Almost all the participants were affiliated to one sect where 69% reported being Sunni with 11%, 22 %, 36, 0.6% being affiliated to the four prominent schools namely the Hanafites, Malikites, Shafi'ites, and Hanbalites, respectively. Others reported themselves as Abadites and Shi'ites with 5% and 22% respectively while 4% were non-affiliated.

In regards to the source of their Islamic knowledge, 6% of Hanafites attained Islamic knowledge from Arabs, 4% Asians, and 0.6% Africans. 7% of Malikites sought Islamic knowledge from Arabs, and 15% from Africans. 13% of the Shafi'tes sought knowledge from Arabs, 17% from Asians, and 6% from Africans. 0.6% of the Hanbalites sought Islamic knowledge from Arabs. 4% of the Abadites obtained Islamic knowledge from Arabs, and 0.6% from Africans. 3% of the Shi'ites received their Islamic knowledge from Arabs, 18% from Asians, and 0.6% from European. Approximately 0.6% of the non-affiliated sought Islamic knowledge from Arabs and Africans respectively, while 2% obtained Islamic knowledge from Asian Islamic scholars.

On the question of the location of the institutions from which they received their Islamic knowledge, 0.6% of Hanafites institutions were located in the Middle-East and 9% in Asia. Of the Malikites 1% studied in the Middles East, 9% in Asia, and 12% in Africa. 3% of the Shafi'tes studied in the Middle East, 29% in Asia, 2.53% in Africa, and 0.6% in Europe. 0.6% of the Hanbalites studied in the Middle East. 4% of the Abadites studied in the Middle East, and 0.6% studied in Asia. 3% of the Shi'ites studied in the Middle East, 17% in Asia, and 0.6% in Europe. The non-affiliated studied in the Middle East, Asia, and Africa with 0.6%, 3%, and 0.6% respectively.

## ***Results and Discussions***

### **Descriptive Statistics**

The descriptive statistics adopted in this study were percentage, means and standard deviations of the respondents. Each question of any item was given four response options in the questionnaire which were agree, strongly agree, disagree, strongly disagree on the scale of 1-4 respectively similar to the likert scale. In this analysis we decided to maintain the scale as it is.

**Table 1: Priming of Muslims' behaviors Descriptive Statistic**

Variables	Agree (%)	Strongly Agree (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly Disagree (%)	Mean	SD
I spent much of my childhood away from my family.	10.8	10.8	18.4	59.5	3.25	1.06
My childhood experiences have influenced my thinking and behavior.	36.1	47.5	10.8	5.1	1.84	.82
I acquired some degree of Islamic knowledge from an Islamic scholar outside my family.	22.8	48.1	14.6	11.4	2.08	.97
I spent five years or more acquiring Islamic knowledge	39.2	22.2	16.5	17.7	2.04	1.20
I read and listen only to scholars of my own denomination	9.5	30.4	32.3	24.7	2.66	1.05
My family taught me to hold on strongly to our understanding and practice of Islamic principles.	45.6	35.4	15.8	2.5	1.74	.82
The Islamic scholar I follow challenges anyone who holds views different from his own.	8.2	34.2	38.0	17.1	2.59	.95
It is true that there are major differences between my current Islamic affiliation and other denominations based on fundamental principles.	7.6	43.0	36.1	10.1	2.42	.89
These major differences distinguish me from others.	5.7	38.0	36.7	15.2	2.53	.97
The Islamic scholar I follow is open to other scholars' views even if different from his fundamental views about Islam.	19.6	52.5	17.1	5.7	1.99	.90
The idea of schools of Islamic jurisprudence is acceptable in Islam.	29.7	44.3	13.3	3.8	1.73	.93
I believe my denomination's interpretation of fundamental principles is the best.	18.4	44.9	24.7	7.6	2.13	.95
I strongly believe that my school of Islamic jurisprudence is the best.	20.3	34.8	29.7	10.1	2.20	1.04
I learned how to challenge people whose views are different from mine from one or two of these websites.	5.1	29.7	44.3	18.4	2.73	.89
It is possible for me to appreciate the ideology of other sects.	24.1	55.1	13.9	5.7	1.99	.81
The culture of my country/region has impact on my thinking and behavior.	20.9	57.0	16.5	5.1	2.04	.78
I always apply all that I have learned through these media in all matters I come across.	6.3	41.8	35.4	13.3	2.49	.92
Perceiving other sects as infidels is acceptable in the Islamic denomination that I am affiliated with.	5.1	20.9	38.6	29.1	2.79	1.11
I believe some of these media are radical in presentation of Islamic ideology	19.6	52.5	19.6	4.4	2.01	.85
Praying on a school of jurisprudence other than my own is acceptable.	21.5	51.3	15.8	5.7	1.94	.91
I refer back to my acquired knowledge whenever I face new issues.	25.3	58.2	7.6	3.2	1.77	.80
I admire reading Islamic books, listening to cassettes, watching TV, etc. regardless of the author's background.	24.7	44.9	20.3	8.2	2.08	.92
I read all types of books, listen to all kinds of cassettes, and watch all kinds of TV programmes that I come across.	17.7	41.1	26.6	12.0	2.28	.98
In practice, my family background is more influential than my acquired Islamic knowledge.	9.5	34.8	43.7	9.5	2.48	.89
My parents oppose and challenge anyone who has views different from my family's practice.	3.8	18.4	49.4	25.9	2.92	.91

Table 1 above shows total percentage agree, strongly agree, disagree and strongly disagree and means and standard deviation of responses to the items which measured the impact of priming on Muslim behaviour.

Half of the respondents strongly disagreed and approximately 19% disagreed that they spent their childhood away from their family. The results show that the mean is 3.25 (SD= 1.06.) which is considered moderate. Participants further responded to the question of the influence of past experiences on their conclusions with 36.1% agreeing and 47.5 strongly agreeing to it with the mean is 1.84 (SD= .82). The results indicate that on average respondents refer to prior experiences when faced with new issues. Participants further testify that they acquired Islamic knowledge from scholars outside their family during their younger years with 22.8% agreeing and 48.1% strongly agreeing resulting in a mean of 2.08 (SD.= .97). The results show that on average Muslim scholars' impact on their thought. When asked about the number of years they spent acquiring knowledge during youth, the response shows that 39.2% agreed and 22.2% strongly agreed that they spent at least 5 years with Muslim scholars leading to a mean of 2.04 (SD= 1.20). The results demonstrate that on average respondents spent at least five years acquiring Islamic knowledge. When asked about listening to scholars, 32.3% of respondents disagreed and 24.7% strongly disagreed with the idea of focusing on sectarian knowledge leading to a mean of 2.66 (SD.= 1.05). The results show that the respondents do not value Islamic knowledge based on sectarian philosophy. When asked regarding their family religious conservatism, almost three-quarters of respondents agreed and strongly agreed that their family forced them to hold to the family model of understanding Islam. The mean score is 1.74 (SD = .82) which means on average the respondents family's ideology impacts on their behaviour.

When asked about the approach of Muslim scholars to dialogue, 8.2% of respondents agreed and 34.2% strongly agreed that their scholars challenge opposition. However, 38% disagreed and 17.1% strongly disagreed to this resulting in a mean score of 2.59 (SD. = .95). The results attested that on average there were no such confrontations from the majority of scholars. Nevertheless, it may be, understood that there are scholars who confront anyone with opposing ideas. Regarding the major differences among Islamic sects, the results show that half of the respondent agreed to and half disagreed leading to a mean of 2.42 (SD= .89). This means that the differences were not obvious and might not be on fundamental issues. The majority of respondents agreed and strongly agreed that the schools of Islamic jurisprudence are acceptable in Islam with a mean score of 1.73 (SD = .93). When asked whether they learn the skills of challenging people from online websites, more than half of the respondents disagreed and strongly disagreed with 44.3% and 18.4% respectively that they possess skills of challenging their opponents resulting in a mean score of 2.73 (SD. =.89). The results show that a substantial number of respondents possessed imminent skills of challenging people. Participants however commonly appreciate one another regardless of sect or school of thought.

Moreover, when asked on the frequent application of their knowledge from online and media sources, half agreed that they apply their stored memories when new issues arise. Likewise half disagreed to have referred back to stored memories with a mean of 2.49 (SD = .92). This is an indication that a number of respondents were influenced by online websites. One of the major issues raised in this research is to what extent can Muslims accept one another, the respondent scores show that 38.6% disagreed and 29.1% strongly disagreed that they would call other sects infidels with a mean of 2.79 (SD= 1.11). The result shows that on average the respondents agreed that Islam does not tolerate labelling other Muslims as infidels. For the sake of brevity, the results explicitly show that the majority of responses contradict reality where labelling serves as weapon between the Sunni and Shi'a sects. This might signify the activation of prime, as the participants were aware of the intention of the study. A series of regression analyses were, conducted to determine the significant value of the data in justification of our  $H_0$  (null hypothesis) that priming does not exist among Islamic sects and to determine the variance among the variables tested.

**Table 2: ANOVA with Friedman's Test**

	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	Friedman's Chi-Square	Sig
Between People	534.412	156	3.426	642.108	.000
Between Items	597.869 <sup>a</sup>	24	24.911		
Within People	2910.531	3744	.777		
Residual	3508.400	3768	.931		
Total	4042.812	3924	1.030		

Grand Mean = 2.2696

a. Kendall's coefficient of concordance  $W = .148$ .

The analysis of variance (ANOVA) results show that our  $\alpha = .05$  and the p-value = .000. According to the rule of thumb we reject the null hypothesis when p-value  $\leq \alpha$ . Thus, in our result p-value = .000  $\leq .05$  we reject our null hypothesis that priming does not exist among Islamic sects and we accept the  $H_1$  (alternative hypothesis) that priming does exist among Islamic sects and it impacts on Muslims behaviour. The descriptive statistics show that priming activation is obvious from the participants' responses. To ascertain which of the variables accounted for the significance, we conducted one-Sample Test to determine the t-value of each variable of the data set.

**Table 3: One-Sample Test**

Variables	Test Value = 0					
	T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
Childhood	38.417	157	.000	3.25316	3.0859	3.4204
Experience	28.115	157	.000	1.83544	1.7065	1.9644
Islamic knowledge	26.784	157	.000	2.08228	1.9287	2.2358
Duration	21.268	157	.000	2.03797	1.8487	2.2272
favorite knowledge	31.781	157	.000	2.65823	2.4930	2.8234
Family	26.581	157	.000	1.74051	1.6112	1.8698
Islamic scholar	34.183	157	.000	2.58861	2.4390	2.7382
Affiliation	34.204	157	.000	2.42405	2.2841	2.5640
Differences	32.760	157	.000	2.52532	2.3731	2.6776
Flexibility	27.887	157	.000	1.98734	1.8466	2.1281
Madhhab	23.349	157	.000	1.73418	1.5875	1.8809
Sect	28.160	157	.000	2.12658	1.9774	2.2757
Commitment	26.614	157	.000	2.19620	2.0332	2.3592
Radicalism	38.434	156	.000	2.72611	2.5860	2.8662
Appreciation	30.696	157	.000	1.98734	1.8595	2.1152
Culture	33.088	157	.000	2.04430	1.9223	2.1663
Application	34.250	157	.000	2.49367	2.3499	2.6375
sect as infidel	31.553	157	.000	2.79114	2.6164	2.9659
Media	29.692	157	.000	2.01266	1.8788	2.1465
Influence	26.790	157	.000	1.94304	1.7998	2.0863
Reflection	27.940	157	.000	1.77215	1.6469	1.8974
all materials	28.339	157	.000	2.08228	1.9371	2.2274
all programs	29.325	157	.000	2.27848	2.1250	2.4319
family background	35.170	157	.000	2.48101	2.3417	2.6203
Parents	40.534	157	.000	2.92405	2.7816	3.0665

As evident in the above table the  $t \geq t_{\alpha/2}$  or significant value i.e. p-value = .000  $\leq \alpha = .05$  for every variable. The rule of thumb is to reject the  $H_0$  (null hypothesis). Therefore, the t Test results further affirm the rejection that there is no effect of priming on Muslim behaviour indicating that the impact of priming on Muslim behaviour is obvious. Furthermore, the results are in line with the previous study of Scheufele & Tewksbury (2007) where activation of prime depends on variables such as predisposition and schema. Observation of the participants' responses revealed that the majority of the respondents were, taught from childhood by their parents or Muslim scholar and in some cases by both parents and Muslim scholars. The significance of proselytization could be felt throughout the input, process and output stages. It is important to note the effects of priming in the Sunni sect where the four schools of thought have a number of different responses to the questionnaire. However, respondents showed constant exposure to Islamic knowledge through scholars and Islamic materials either online or physical such as books and other sources. This could be in line with fulfilling their obligatory responsibility that frequent remembrance is the fundamental function of a Muslim as stressed and emphasized by education institutions in the Muslim world. Through persisted memory, priming is, intentionally or unintentionally activated.

## Reliability Analysis

The reliability test of the surveyed items was, carried out through Cronbach's Alpha, which led to the retention of all 25 items used during the pilot test. The Cronbach's Alpha measured .77 in the group of items measuring the impact of priming on Muslim behaviour. This indicates average accuracy of the data set and average reliable conclusion. This result is inconsistent with previous research on accuracy of data where Cronbach's Alpha was required to be at least .70 for validity of data set in nonparametric research.

## Conclusion

This present study has unfolded the present effects of priming among Muslim sectarian groups. The results of this study further established that sectarian influence might be among the forces of unrest throughout Muslim nations. If at least postgraduate students could demonstrate the existence of priming amongst their pairs, it suffices that at the governmental level as well as religious matters would be involved. Therefore, there is a need for the eradication or at least minimization of prime influences in the social and religious setting among Muslims individually or congregationally. The existence of primes could justify the presence of dishonesty, distrust and other vices. The results immediately showed respondents were aware that results reflect some sort of reservation portraying their sect as the best.

The results of this study unveil one major area where further research is needed: The participants' responses to the attitudes of their Muslim scholars towards dialogue and behaviour or their relationship with those of opposing views was that half agreed and half disagreed. This requires further investigation to determine the accuracy of this result whereby samples will be drawn from Muslim scholars as respondents.

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