

# Markers Of Difference: The Impact Of Visible Foreign Characteristics On Prejudice In The Icelandic Labor Market

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## Abstract

*Research on immigration has emphasized the importance of an individual's physical differences from the host population as a common precursor to discrimination. The purpose of this research is to examine and measure the experiences of individuals of foreign origin regarding prejudice in the Icelandic labor market. Using a quantitative study, we explore how individuals perceive prejudice based on their visible foreign<sup>1</sup> characteristics in a relatively homogenous labor market. Our results indicate that individuals of foreign origin encounter prejudice in proportion to their "foreign" physical characteristics, such as hair, eyes, or facial shape. We conclude by emphasizing the need for more research on how otherness in physical characteristics induces prejudice.*

**Keywords:** *Immigrants; prejudice; appearance; visible characteristics*

## Introduction

In an increasingly globalized world, the movement of people across borders has become a defining feature of the 21st century. Immigration contributes to the cultural and economic dynamism of nations but also presents challenges in the integration of individuals into new social and economic contexts (Ritzer, 2015; Castles, et al., 2014). This is especially true for homogenous labor markets where the labor force has similar visible characteristics.

The phenomenon of discrimination based on visible differences—such as skin color, physical features, and even names—is not new, yet it remains a persistently troubling aspect of many societies (Johnson, et al., 2013). Previous research has extensively documented the various forms of discrimination that immigrants face, highlighting how such biases can significantly affect their social and economic opportunities (Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2004; Oreopoulos, 2011). This study arises from the recognition of a critical gap in the understanding of how visible foreign characteristics specifically contribute to the prejudice experiences of immigrants (Quillian, 2006; Pager & Shepherd, 2008). By focusing on the Icelandic labor market, the research aims to shed light on the nuanced ways in which visible markers of 'otherness' can influence an individual's employment journey in a relatively

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homogenous labor market. Using a quantitative approach, the study measures and examines the perceptions and experiences of individuals of foreign origin, offering empirical insights into the prejudice they face. The methodology employed involves a comprehensive survey designed to capture a wide array of experiences among immigrants in Iceland. By asking participants about their experiences with prejudice in the workplace and correlating these experiences with their visible foreign characteristics, the study seeks to understand the depth and breadth of discrimination.

The findings of this study reveals the significant impact of visible foreign characteristics on the experiences of prejudice. The study demonstrates that individuals of foreign origin are indeed more likely to encounter prejudice in the Icelandic labor market, with the level of prejudice closely linked to the degree of their visible foreignness. This correlation between foreign characteristics and prejudice highlights a critical barrier to integration and equality in the workplace, suggesting that deeper societal and structural changes are necessary to combat these biases.

In conclusion, the paper emphasizes the need for further research in this area. Understanding the specific impacts of visible foreign characteristics on labor market experiences is crucial for developing effective policies and interventions aimed at fostering a more inclusive society. As Iceland continues to navigate its evolving demographic landscape, the insights from this study offer valuable insights for policymakers, employers, and society at large in promoting diversity and combating discrimination.

### **Immigrants in Iceland and their appearance**

Discrimination in the labor market is a pervasive issue globally, often affecting individuals based on various characteristics such as race, ethnicity, and physical appearance. Immigration research highlights that physical differences from the host population frequently serve as a precursor to discrimination.

Research indicates that discrimination based on physical appearance can significantly impact an individual's employment opportunities, career progression, and overall economic well-being. For example, Bertrand and Mullainathan (2004) conducted a field experiment in the United States, demonstrating that job applicants with African-American-sounding names received fewer callbacks for interviews compared to those with White-sounding names, despite having identical resumes. This study highlights how physical and perceived racial differences can lead to unequal treatment in the labor market.

In the United Kingdom, a study by Wood et al. (2009) found similar patterns of discrimination against individuals with foreign-sounding names. Their findings suggest that visible ethnic markers, such as names and physical appearance, can trigger prejudicial treatment by employers. These studies underscore the significant role that physical characteristics play in shaping labor market outcomes for individuals from diverse backgrounds. It is important however to note that when it comes to hiring, employers often have limited time to find a new employee. They frequently take shortcuts by excluding applicants with foreign names (Banerjee, 2009) or foreign education because they assume that they do not have sufficient language skills (Oreopoulos, 2011).

Physical characteristics such as skin color, hair texture, facial features, and body shape can serve as markers of foreignness and lead to discrimination. In their study on the impact of skin color on earnings in the United States, Hersch (2006) found that lighter-skinned immigrants earned significantly more than their darker-skinned counterparts, even after controlling for education, language skills, and other factors. This suggests that physical

appearance alone can influence economic opportunities and outcomes.

Similarly, in Europe, studies have shown that immigrants with visibly different physical characteristics often face higher levels of discrimination. A study by Carlsson and Rooth (2007) in Sweden found that job applicants with Middle Eastern-sounding names and presumably different physical appearances received fewer interview invitations than those with Swedish-sounding names. This pattern was consistent across various industries, indicating widespread discrimination based on physical characteristics.

The concept of intersectionality, introduced by Crenshaw (2013), is crucial in understanding how multiple social identities intersect to create unique experiences of discrimination. Individuals with foreign physical characteristics may face compounded discrimination when these characteristics intersect with other marginalized identities such as gender, religion, or socioeconomic status. For instance, female immigrants with visibly different physical characteristics may encounter both gender and racial discrimination, leading to more significant barriers in the labor market.

A study by Banerjee et al. (2018) in Canada highlights this intersectionality. They found that racialized women faced higher levels of unemployment and underemployment compared to both racialized men and non-racialized individuals. This suggests that the intersection of physical characteristics with other identity markers can exacerbate the experience of discrimination.

Prejudice and discrimination in the labor market can manifest through various mechanisms. One such mechanism is statistical discrimination, where employers use physical characteristics as proxies for unobservable traits such as productivity or reliability. Phelps (1972) proposed that in the absence of complete information about a job applicant, employers may rely on stereotypes associated with certain physical characteristics to make hiring decisions. This can lead to systematic biases against individuals with foreign physical characteristics.

Implicit bias is another mechanism through which discrimination occurs. Greenwald and Banaji (1995) introduced the concept of implicit biases, which are unconscious attitudes or stereotypes that influence behavior and decision-making. These biases can lead to discriminatory practices even among employers who consciously endorse egalitarian values. Studies using the Implicit Association Test (IAT) have shown that individuals often harbor implicit biases against people with different physical appearances, which can affect hiring and promotion decisions in the labor market.

In addition, research shows that these prejudices also manifest in the labor market, where individuals with darker skin tones receive more negative responses than those with lighter skin tones, resulting in more unemployment (Ritter & Taylor, 2011). It is clear that employers prefer candidates with lighter skin tones, even if both applicants have the same education and experience (McConahay, 1983). This bias is more prevalent than expected, and it can also be seen when an employee is hired based on characteristics unrelated to the job. Such bias depends on how prejudiced managers and HR professionals are. Those with more prejudices rely on stereotypes and filter out applications based on these images. Those with fewer prejudices are less likely to rely on stereotypes. Therefore, the level of prejudice among managers determines the extent of discrimination in the recruitment process (Kawakami, et al., 1998).

While much of the research on labor market discrimination has focused on multicultural

societies, studies in more homogeneous countries like Iceland also reveal significant findings. Iceland, with its relatively homogenous population, provides a unique context to examine how visible foreign characteristics influence labor market experiences. Furthermore, studying this issue in Iceland is important because the Icelandic labor market has undergone significant changes in recent years, particularly with the increasing presence of foreign workers.

In recent decades, foreign workers in the Icelandic labor market and foreigners in general have increased significantly. As of January 2024, there were 74,654 immigrants in Iceland, constituting 18.71% of the population, a significant increase from 8.0% in 2012 (OECD, 2024). Many seek employment in the tourism industry, where foreign workers make up about 32% of the workforce, with a significant majority working in hotels, accounting for 75% (Magnússon, 2019). Such jobs are often considered low-paying, with no requirement for specific qualifications, and the wages are usually at a minimum (Lacher & Oh, 2011; Magnússon, 2019).

Foreigners in Iceland face discrimination in various ways. In most cases, immigrants end up in low-paying jobs, with women often working in the service sector and men in construction, (Butler, et al., 2023; Black et al., 2006; Sin, et al., 2022) but there is a risk that the notion of low-paying jobs is solely intended for foreigners who carry a certain stigma (Loftsdóttir, et al., 2016). Society holds the belief that certain jobs, such as cleaning, are best suited for immigrants and people of foreign origin. Thus, these prejudices are based on the stereotype that it is natural for people of foreign origin to work in low-paying jobs with little respect within society (Zock, 2005; Guðjónsdóttir & Loftsdóttir, 2009).

These individuals experience discrimination, lack of respect, and prejudice in their daily lives, as other individuals within society show them distrust, approach them in English, or even ignore them (Christiansen & Kristjánssdóttir, 2016). In the Icelandic labor market, thousands of employees of foreign origin experience violations in the form of wage theft, breaches of labor protection regulations, and undefined fees each year (Þorkeldsdóttir, 2018). It is also evident that Icelandic-speaking workers are more likely to receive higher wages for the same jobs, housing benefits, and other perks or support. About 60% of all cases brought to Efling's attention in 2017 were violations against foreign workers (Erlendsdóttir, 2018), and more often than not, society chooses to turn a blind eye to such misconduct (Þorkeldsdóttir, 2018).

Research shows that foreign workers struggle to find employment in specialized positions despite their education and experience (Skaptadóttir & Loftsdóttir, 2019). Similarly, the experience gained by immigrants abroad is not recognized by employers who are unfamiliar with their work methods and the projects they were involved in during their foreign employment (Oreopoulos, 2011). Therefore, employers consider experience in the Icelandic labor market to be more valuable and significant than experience acquired abroad (Loftsdóttir, et al., 2016).

Immigrants from Eastern Europe to Iceland have often been defined as threats (Loftsdóttir et al., 2016), incompatible, and not sufficiently European (Buchowski, 2006). Even today, immigrants from Eastern Europe still encounter these same prejudices, with men often portrayed as violent and dangerous, while women are often categorized as prostitutes (Loftsdóttir et al., 2016). This is based on negative stereotypes that emphasize organized crime and is primarily associated with individuals from Poland, Lithuania, and other Eastern European countries. However, it is interesting to note that not all nationalities

within Eastern Europe face the same level of prejudice. It appears that Poles and Lithuanians experience the most prejudice, while other groups experience it to a lesser extent. Therefore, there is a certain hierarchy of prejudice and negative attitudes towards people from Eastern Europe (Loftsdóttir, 2015). Research shows that the general public in Iceland is concerned about prejudices against immigrants from Eastern Europe, but it seems that prejudices based on skin color are not a concern (Loftsdóttir et al., 2016).

However, individuals of African descent who have darker skin tones claim to experience racial prejudices in Icelandic society. They have heard derogatory terms such as "negro" and "nigger" in ordinary conversations and even as jokes (Loftsdóttir, 2015). Many do not understand that stereotypes are perpetuated through jokes, leading to a certain misunderstanding of what racism is in Icelandic society (Gunnarsson, 2020).

Given this context, it is essential to explore whether such prejudices extend to the labor market, particularly in a relatively homogeneous society like Iceland. This study aims to examine whether foreign individuals, especially those with visible foreign characteristics, perceive and experience prejudice in the Icelandic labor market. By understanding these perceptions, we can gain insights into the broader issue of discrimination and its impact on employment opportunities for immigrants. We therefore ask: Do people with foreign physical characteristics encounter prejudice in the Icelandic labor market?

## **Material and Methods**

### **Participants and Study Design**

The researchers started by contacting the National Registry of Iceland to obtain a sample of individuals born in Iceland but are also registered with at least one foreign parent. Following that list the researchers contacted all individuals and sent them a questionnaire. Additionally, the questionnaire was posted on social media groups for foreigners in Iceland. These groups include Serbians in Iceland, Croats in Iceland, and Bosnians in Iceland. It should be noted that one of the researchers has connections to former Yugoslavia and thus has access to these groups.

A total of 182 individuals participated in the questionnaire. Of these, 124 valid responses were used for analysis. The age of the participants was fairly evenly distributed, although most were between 18 and 31 years old. More women participated than men, and most of the participants were residing in the capital area. The educational background of the participants was varied, although an equal number had completed high school, undergraduate degree and held a master's degree from the University.

After closing the questionnaire, the data was downloaded and analyzed using the statistical software Jamovi.

### **Measures**

In this study, participants were required to have at least one foreign parent. Therefore, the first question was "Do you have foreign parents?" Participants who answered "No" were directed to a thank-you page to complete the survey.

In this study, the Perceived Discrimination Scale was used, which is a measurement tool developed by Williams, et al., 1997. This scale examines how often and to what extent individuals experience discrimination. It refers to instances where others treat them unfairly

and/or dishonestly based on their origin, age, ethnicity, gender, religion, race, appearance, and other factors. This scale measures the perception of discrimination and prejudice across school, work, and home environments. It has been used in research to measure prejudice regarding age, ethnicity, and gender together. It has also been used to examine differences in environments where multiple ethnicities converge. This scale consists of 20 questions divided into two parts. Eleven questions focus on the experience of lifetime discrimination, assessing how often respondents have encountered specific types of discrimination. The remaining nine questions address discrimination in everyday life and the experiences of respondents in their daily lives. These questionnaires are often used together, but each can be used independently without affecting reliability (Williams, et al., 1997). Participants were also asked about their visible characteristics, such as eyes, hair and skin tone.

## **Results**

The results of the study show that many of the participants experience prejudice in the job market, with about 34% of respondents indicating so. Not many have encountered prejudice in job interviews, around 20%. However, nearly 34% believe that their applications are placed at the bottom of the pile in the application process. Interestingly, 61% of respondents believe that performance at work reduces prejudice towards them, and the same can be said for education, as 53% of respondents believe that higher education reduces prejudice towards them. Of the respondents, 48% believe they need to work harder for the same rewards compared to others who are not of foreign origin. Additionally, 39% of respondents do not consider themselves to have equal opportunities in the job market compared to others who are not of foreign origin. The results show that a significant majority experience prejudice towards people of foreign origin in society, with a whopping 71% of respondents.

When it comes to skin color, the independent samples t-test shows a significant difference between individuals with skin color suggesting foreign origin ( $M = 19.8$ ,  $SD = 7.97$ ) and those who do not ( $M = 15.7$ ,  $SD = 5.93$ ;  $t(122) = 3.14$ ,  $p = .002$ , two-tailed). The effect size is moderate ( $d = 0.618$ ), indicating a 66.9% likelihood that an individual from the group with foreign skin color will experience more prejudice compared to an individual from the group without foreign skin color, if randomly selected from each group. See Figure 1 below.

According to the independent samples t-test, a significant difference can be observed between individuals with hair that suggests foreign origin ( $M = 20.3$ ,  $SD = 7.38$ ) and those who do not have such hair ( $M = 15.5$ ,  $SD = 6.10$ ;  $t(122) = 3.71$ ,  $p = .001$ , two-tailed). The effect size is large ( $d = 0.727$ ), indicating a 69.5% likelihood that an individual from the group with foreign looking hair will experience more prejudice compared to an individual from the group without foreign looking hair, if randomly selected from each group.

The independent samples t-test also reveals a significant difference between individuals with facial features suggesting foreign origin ( $M = 19.4$ ,  $SD = 7.43$ ) and those who do not have such features ( $M = 16.0$ ,  $SD = 6.36$ ;  $t(122) = 2.57$ ,  $p = .011$ , two-tailed). According to Cohen's  $d$ , the effect size is moderate ( $d = 0.508$ ), indicating a 63.8% likelihood that an individual from the group with foreign facial features will experience more prejudice compared to an individual from the group without foreign facial features, if randomly selected from each group.

However, the independent samples t-test did not show a significant difference between individuals with eye shape suggesting foreign origin ( $M = 18.5$ ,  $SD = 6.41$ ) and those who

do not have such shape ( $M = 16.5$ ,  $SD = 6.95$ ;  $t(121) = 1.40$ ,  $p = .165$ ), although it is present in the sample.

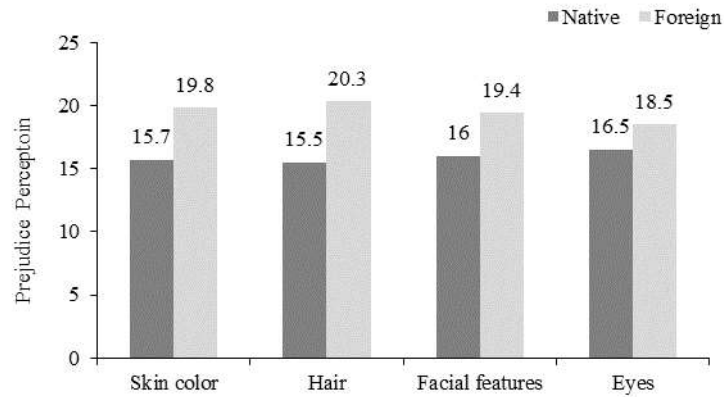


Figure 1. Visible foreign characteristics and prejudice

### Conclusion and discussion

According to the results, a significant majority of participants experience prejudice in Icelandic society, with a high percentage of 71%. Additionally, many people feel disturbed when others label them as foreigners, this is in line with foreign studies (Banerjee et al., 2009; Black et al., 2006; Sin et al., 2022). It is noteworthy that most participants fall within the age range of 18-31 years, accounting for approximately 57.3%, which can be a cause for concern. As mentioned by Baert et al., (2017) early discrimination in the employment process can create a vicious cycle where individuals are given fewer opportunities and thus do not gain experience. The results also indicate that participants perceive that higher education and greater competence reduce prejudice towards them. This raises the question of whether these individuals face more pressure and a constant need to prove themselves. These reflections mirror Tulshyan's article from 2020, which questions the opportunities available to individuals of foreign origin to reach positions of leadership. Similarly, in the results, a significant 39% of participants believe they do not have equal opportunities in the job market due to their origin. It would be interesting to delve deeper and examine the nature of these unequal opportunities and how they manifest. This could help identify the barriers faced by individuals of foreign origin and hinder equal opportunities in the Icelandic job market. It would also be interesting to explore whether individuals of foreign origin generally have higher education and/or demonstrate greater competence in their work compared to those who are not of foreign descent, for example Mexican immigrants to USA have been found to be negatively selected, i.e., those living in Mexico with less education are the ones that immigrate to the USA (Moraga, 2011).

The results indicate that individuals who have physical characteristics different from the majority and hint at a foreign origin, experience more prejudice. These findings are not surprising, as racism is a deeply rooted concept present in Icelandic society. In many cases, it is underlying and concealed, meaning that prejudices are greater than perceived. Certain appearance traits were examined, and it can be observed that most of them are statistically

significant, which is interesting. Particularly intriguing is the finding that individuals with facial features indicating foreign characteristics experience more prejudice. These features may include beards, dark complexion, strong eyebrows, larger nose, etc. These are all characteristics that provide clues about one's origin, and individuals with Eastern European ancestry likely fall into this group. They are individuals who face significant prejudice in Icelandic society. The same can be observed with hair, as individuals with hair that deviates from the majority experience more prejudice. This is not surprising, but it is nonetheless interesting to see that individuals with hair of foreign origin face more prejudice than individuals with different skin tones. Racism in Icelandic society is evident, and most Icelanders are aware of it. Using derogatory language, whether in jest or seriously, reinforces stereotypes about foreigners and individuals of specific origins. Furthermore, it is not enough to remain passive without consequences when such messages are conveyed, as it implies that such behavior is acceptable, and bystanders should tolerate it.

One of the limitations of this research is the small number of participants, it would strengthen the results to have more participants and include as many individuals as possible from all groups. The limitations are not only the potential small size of the sample, but also the accessibility to individuals. A study like this requires individuals with specific characteristics and therefore cannot include just anyone. It would be easier to contact associations, groups, and communities where individuals of foreign origin gather, but such communities are scarce in Iceland. It can be speculated whether individuals of foreign origin avoid such gatherings due to prejudice; they may consciously or unconsciously try to escape the foreigner label that holds them back. Similarly, not everyone is willing to participate in such research. Individuals who have assimilated or disconnected from their heritage may not see themselves as individuals of foreign origin and may not want to participate. Others who have become isolated from society and have not adapted may also not be part of the group that can participate in this research, as it requires a good command of the Icelandic language, and those who are isolated from society often do not speak the Icelandic language. Therefore, only a specific group of individuals who have embraced integration can participate in this study, individuals who have adapted to Icelandic society while still holding onto their cultural values and language of origin.

In conclusion, the results of this study reveal a significant presence of prejudice in Icelandic society, particularly towards individuals of foreign origin. These findings are not surprising, given the deeply ingrained racism that exists. Certain physical characteristics and appearance traits associated with foreign origin are statistically significant in experiencing higher levels of prejudice. Racism in Icelandic society is evident, and it is important to address and challenge these biases. It is crucial to move beyond passive acceptance and promote inclusivity, equal opportunities, and cultural understanding. Further research with a larger and more diverse sample would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the experiences of individuals of foreign origin in Icelandic society and shed light on the barriers they face in achieving equal opportunities in the job market.

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