

Araştırma Makalesi / Research Article

Xenophobia and Intercultural Communication: Turkish Students in the Erasmus Program*

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Abstract

This study investigates the prevalence of xenophobia among Erasmus students and examines its relationship with their experiences and cultural integration. While the Erasmus program has effectively promoted intercultural communication, awareness, and a sense of European identity, insufficient attention has been given to the xenophobia experienced by students within the program. This mixed-method study addresses this gap by surveying 237 Turkish Erasmus students, revealing that despite their high levels of satisfaction with the program, xenophobia remains a significant issue, particularly for Turkish participants. The findings highlight the need for a stronger emphasis on social inclusion, equity, tolerance, and mutual understanding within the Erasmus framework. The study concludes that although the Erasmus program has significant potential to facilitate cultural integration, additional efforts are required to address and mitigate, if not eliminate, xenophobia and racism effectively.

Keywords

Xenophobia, Racism, Turkish Erasmus students, European identity, intercultural communication, tolerance.

* Date of Arrival: 11 September 2024 – Date of Acceptance: 07 March 2025

Citation: Kayaoğlu, Mustafa Naci. "Xenophobia and Intercultural Communication: Turkish Students in the Erasmus Program." *bilig*, no. 115, 2025, pp. 29-55, <https://doi.org/10.12995/bilig.8351>.

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Yabancı Düşmanlığı ve Kültürlerarası İletişim: Erasmus Programındaki Türk Öğrenciler*

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Öz

Bu çalışma, Türk Erasmus öğrenci deneyimi ve yabancı düşmanlığının yaygınlığını ve bunun kültürel entegrasyon üzerindeki ilişkisini araştırmaktadır. Erasmus programı, kültürlerarası iletişimi, farkındalığı ve Avrupa kimliğini etkili bir şekilde teşvik ederken, öğrencilerin yaşadığı yabancı düşmanlığının program kapsamında yeterince incelenmediği görülmektedir. Bu karma yöntemli çalışma, 237 Türk Erasmus öğrencisini anket yoluyla inceleyerek bu eksikliği ele almakta ve programdan duyulan yüksek memnuniyete rağmen, özellikle Türk öğrenciler için yabancı düşmanlığının önemli bir sorun olarak kaldığını ortaya koymaktadır. Bulgular, Erasmus çerçevesinde sosyal katılım, eşitlik, hoşgörü ve karşılıklı anlayışın teşvik edilmesine yönelik daha fazla odaklanma gerekliliğini vurgulamaktadır. Çalışma, Erasmus programının kültürel entegrasyonu kolaylaştırma konusunda önemli bir potansiyele sahip olduğunu göstermektedir. Ancak bu çalışma aynı zamanda yabancı düşmanlığını ve ırkçılığı ele almak, hafifletmek, hatta mümkünse ortadan kaldırmak için ek çabalara ihtiyaç duyulduğunu ortaya koymaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler

Yabancı düşmanlığı, ırkçılık, Türk Erasmus öğrencileri, Avrupa kimliği, kültürlerarası iletişim, hoşgörü.

* Geliş Tarihi: 11 Eylül 2024 – Kabul Tarihi: 07 Mart 2025

Atıf: Kayaoğlu, Mustafa Naci. "Xenophobia and Intercultural Communication: Turkish Students in the Erasmus Program." *bilig*, no. 115, 2025, ss. 29-55, <https://doi.org/10.12995/bilig.8351>.

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Introduction

Established in 1987 as a student mobility project and now known as Erasmus+, the program aims to promote European identity, mutual understanding among cultures and students, and the incorporation of the EU's educational policy into national education systems. It provides cross-border cooperation and mobility in various educational fields, including higher education, vocational education and training, school education, adult education, youth, and sports, for not only students but also teachers, staff, and administrators. The program's priorities include promoting social inclusion, equity, active citizenship, non-discrimination in education, and the professional development of educators, youth workers, and learners from disadvantaged backgrounds. The Erasmus program has received significant interest in academia regarding internationalization, intercultural awareness, and communication skills, with students participating in the program to study for a few months to a year at a European university.

The Erasmus experience has been positively evaluated from academic, social, educational, cultural, and linguistic perspectives. Existing studies tend to emphasize career advancement, academic and personal development, and the acquisition of “soft skills” (Mutlu 88; Genç İlter 182; Kayaoğlu 317; Malet Calvo 2144). Significant scholarly interest has been shown in Erasmus+, particularly in the context of education diplomacy, internationalization, and intercultural communication skills. Studies highlight how the program facilitates not only academic exchange but also broader goals of fostering education diplomacy and cross-cultural engagement. A systematic review examines the intersection between diplomacy and education (Khan et al. 1–9). Another study explores the evolving global landscape of education diplomacy (McGill Peterson 2–3). Additionally, research evaluates the role of international student centers in higher education institutions as think tanks for fostering such diplomacy (Şehitoğlu et al.). This body of literature underscores the strategic and cultural significance of Erasmus+, beyond its immediate academic benefits. Nevertheless, there has been a lack of investigation into the prevalence of xenophobia experienced by Erasmus students, especially given the global rise of xenophobia in Europe. Consequently, this follow-up study aims to explore the existence

of xenophobia, with a specific focus on the experiences of Turkish Erasmus students during their time in Europe.

The term xenophobia is composed of two Greek words: *xenos*, meaning stranger or foreigner, and *phobos*, meaning fear. According to various dictionaries, including Merriam-Webster and the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, xenophobia is defined as an extreme dislike or fear of foreigners, their customs, and their religions (Hornby 1642). While early scholars conceptualized xenophobia as a complex socio-psychological phenomenon extending beyond mere fear to include hostility, exclusionary attitudes, and discriminatory behavior toward out-groups (Allport 29; Blumer 3), more recent studies continue to explore its evolving manifestations in contemporary contexts. It is often linked to social identity theory, which explains how individuals categorize others into in-groups and out-groups, reinforcing social hierarchies and exclusionary practices (Tajfel and Turner 40). Xenophobia is not merely an irrational fear but a manifestation of structural and systemic biases that shape public discourse, policies, and social interactions (Bonilla-Silva 2). Scholars argue that it results from a combination of historical, economic, and cultural factors, influencing both individual attitudes and institutional practices (Glick Schiller et al. 613). These negative perceptions of foreigners can lead to discrimination, segregation, and even violence, impacting both marginalized communities and societal cohesion.

The escalation of xenophobic attitudes throughout Europe, particularly in response to the refugee and immigrant crisis, cannot rationally be attributed to those who have fled their countries for safety, to escape conflict, or for economic reasons. Notably, the contemporary manifestation of xenophobia is often rooted in a lack of real-life encounters with foreigners. Xenophobia has deep roots in human history, with ancient Romans and Greeks perceiving outsiders as barbarians and threats to their societies. Efforts to combat xenophobia and racism have a long history, with organizations like the United Nations (UN) and United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) leading the charge (UNESCO).

While xenophobia has traditionally been associated with white attitudes toward African Americans, it has now become a pervasive issue affecting diverse groups. Importantly, xenophobia has significantly influenced

historical events and political discourse, which continue to shape present-day society (Essed 85–120). It is paradoxical that the digital age has fostered a world of unprecedented virtual connectivity while simultaneously allowing for the rise of far-right political movements that spread hateful rhetoric and advocate for violent attacks against those perceived as outsiders. Individuals exposed to xenophobia are often marginalized and labeled as outsiders by society, resulting in discrimination and hate crimes against certain groups of people. This is particularly evident in the rise of right-wing political movements throughout Europe, which contradicts the widely held notion of Europeans as open-minded and welcoming.

Xenophobia and racism are related but distinct concepts. Racism extends beyond fear of the ‘other’; it refers to the belief that certain races are inherently superior or inferior to others, often manifesting as a form of oppression. In contrast, xenophobia involves a fear or dislike of people from other countries or cultures, often based on the belief that foreigners pose a threat to one’s own culture or way of life. While both forms of discrimination may overlap, in some ways, racism is typically based on physical characteristics such as skin color, hair type, or facial features, whereas xenophobia targets individuals perceived as foreign within a particular community.

Despite their differences, both xenophobia and racism share a common foundation in fear of the ‘other,’ discrimination, and hostile attitudes toward people perceived as different. This distinction often becomes irrelevant because the emotional, psychological, and social effects on victims are nearly identical, making the technical distinctions secondary to the harm caused. While neither form of discrimination is acceptable, it is worth noting that xenophobia is more likely to be directed at individuals perceived as foreigners, while racism may target people based on their physical characteristics or cultural backgrounds. However, it is important to recognize that both forms of discrimination have negative effects on individuals and society as a whole.

However, racism in the European context manifests through interconnected forms—institutional, cultural, and structural—which are widely documented across various fields. These biases are often covert, embedded in the everyday operations of legal, educational, sports, business, bureaucratic, healthcare, and criminal justice systems. Unlike overt, personal prejudice, this type of racism operates subtly within the routine

practices of these institutions (Mbembe 27; Alexander 4–21). In discussions of institutional racism, criminal justice systems are frequently highlighted as systematically disadvantaging certain groups (Goldberg, *Racial* 104–135). In France, institutional racism is especially evident in immigration and housing policies, which have historically marginalized North African and sub-Saharan communities. Didier Fassin critiques these structural inequalities, arguing that such policies contribute to a form of symbolic violence by racializing certain populations as “others” and systematically positioning them as outsiders (Fassin 5; 112–130). In Germany, discussions of institutional racism often center on the experiences of Turkish and Middle Eastern communities, particularly within education and the labor market. Philomena Essed’s concept of *everyday racism* provides insight into how routine interactions within institutions reinforce systemic inequalities, showing how subtle biases in education and employment sustain institutional racism, particularly in multicultural European contexts (Essed 3; 45–70). In *Racism Without Racists*, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva argues that institutions often present themselves as neutral but continue to perpetuate racial hierarchies. He concludes that institutional racism operates covertly within policies that appear racially impartial, providing a critical framework for understanding the subtle mechanisms of racial inequality in modern societies (Bonilla-Silva 2–25). As evidence of structural racism, Goldberg examines how state mechanisms enforce racial hierarchies and perpetuate systemic inequalities through legal and political frameworks (Goldberg, *The Threat* 120).

One significant form of racism that has emerged in contemporary societies is cultural racism. Hall examines how stereotypes and cultural representations of ‘the Other’ function as tools for cultural racism, particularly in media and political rhetoric, reinforcing the idea that certain cultural traits are incompatible with mainstream society (Hall 225–279). Similarly, Taguieff discusses how modern forms of racism rely on ‘differentialism,’ where cultural differences are portrayed as natural and unchangeable (Taguieff 110–138). Modood explores how Western societies have developed a subtle defense mechanism to justify covert racism, often framing it as a defense of national identity or social cohesion. Specifically, he examines how cultural racism manifests in multicultural societies, with particular emphasis on the racialization of Muslims. He argues that cultural racism is frequently justified as a defense of national values, with cultural symbols, such as religious

attire, framed as threats to social cohesion (Modood 50–75). Scholars have extensively examined how media and political rhetoric often devalue cultural differences. One study emphasizes the construction of cultural identities and the role of power in defining what constitutes ‘normative’ values (Hall 15), while another highlights how certain cultural practices are framed as incompatible with ‘European values’ and, consequently, as socially threatening (Essed 15). All forms of racism and xenophobia lead to social exclusion and limited access to resources, reinforcing cycles of marginalization. Collectively, these manifestations of racism contribute to a broader system of exclusion and inequality that continues to affect various groups in Europe. Indeed, it is evident that xenophobia and racism in Europe exhibit cyclical tendencies, coinciding with broader regional and global developments in international relations, which are inherently dynamic. The period of Erasmus mobility of the students who participated in the survey is of particular significance in this context, as outlined above.

Method

This study employed a survey approach to examine the experiences of Erasmus students, with a particular focus on negative incidents that may have contributed to xenophobic attitudes. A mixed-methods design was adopted to ensure comprehensive data collection, combining standardized quantitative measures with in-depth qualitative insights. A structured questionnaire comprising 25 items was distributed to a sample of 237 Erasmus students following a pilot study. Among the participants, 79% (n = 187) were undergraduate students, 17% (n = 40) were Master’s Degree students, and 4% (n = 10) were doctoral students. In terms of gender, 58.6% (n = 139) of the participants identified as female, while 41.4% (n = 98) identified as male. The Erasmus students who participated in the study were enrolled in the program for either one term (4–5 months) or two terms (8–9 months). Turkish Erasmus students were pursuing majors in a diverse range of academic fields, including but not limited to architecture, educational sciences, advertising, English literature, finance, computer engineering, and public administration. To protect the confidentiality of the host universities, their identities were not disclosed. Data collection took place between 2021 and 2023. Due to practical considerations, such as access to participants through established Erasmus offices, the sample

consisted exclusively of students from seven state universities participating in the Erasmus program as displayed in Table 1 below.

Table 1
List of Erasmus Visited Countries (A), and Home Universities in Türkiye (B)

A	B
Austria	Adnan Menderes University
Czech Republic	Artvin Çoruh University
Germany	Çanakkale Onsekiz Mart University
Greece	Karadeniz Technical University
French	Mehmet Akif Ersoy University
Hungary	Trabzon University
Italy	Yıldız Teknik University
Lithuania	Mustafa Kemal University
Poland	
Portugal	
Romania	
Spain	

This could be considered a limitation, as foundation universities could not be included, not as a matter of choice but due to logistical constraints. The quantitative component of the survey included closed-ended questions designed to generate standardized data, enabling statistical analysis of trends and correlations. The qualitative component consisted of an open-ended question aimed at eliciting detailed personal accounts of unpleasant situations or events participants may have experienced while at their host institutions. These open-ended responses provided richer, detailed insights that could not be captured through closed-ended questions alone. To ensure broad and representative participation, the online questionnaire was created using Google Forms and distributed through the Erasmus offices of seven universities. Google Forms was selected for its user-friendly interface, cost-efficiency, and ability to include a variety of question types, including open-ended ones. A key advantage of this tool was its ability to preserve participant anonymity, which encouraged candid responses. This anonymity

proved particularly valuable in eliciting reports of sensitive experiences, such as xenophobic behavior. In addition to the survey, qualitative data were further enriched through unstructured self-report interviews conducted via email exchanges. This method was particularly effective for gathering in-depth, detailed information, as it provided participants with a comfortable and non-hierarchical platform to share their experiences. The researcher facilitated these exchanges, focusing on ensuring participant comfort and minimizing psychological barriers. Follow-up feedback from participants indicated that email exchanges fostered a sense of relaxation and openness, enabling them to express their opinions more freely than might have been possible in a face-to-face interview setting. Given the research objectives and the specificity of the target population, purposive sampling was employed. Throughout the study, participants demonstrated a high level of cooperation, which contributed to the depth and richness of the qualitative data. The mixed-methods design allowed the study to combine the strengths of quantitative precision with the depth of qualitative exploration. Quantitative findings provided a broad overview of patterns and trends, while qualitative data offered context and deeper understanding of participants' lived experiences. This integration ensured that the research objectives were addressed comprehensively, capturing both measurable impacts and subjective perspectives.

In order to enroll participants for this research, we reached out to ten universities chosen at random and provided them with information about the study. The Erasmus offices of these universities were then requested to share the questionnaire link, which was hosted on Google Forms, with their students enrolled in Erasmus programs in Europe.

Findings

The following section presents the main findings of the study, highlighting both the positive and negative aspects of the Erasmus program as experienced by the participants. The data was analyzed using descriptive statistics based on the frequency of responses from Erasmus students to the questionnaire statements.

Table 2
Reasons for Students’ Erasmus Choice

	Strongly agree		Agree		No idea		Disagree		Strongly disagree	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
1.Visiting different countries	198	83.5	36	15.2			2	.8		
2.Developing career opportunities	127	53.6	81	34.2	23	9.7	3	1.3		
3.Contributing to my personal development	209	88.2	27	11.4	1	.4				
4.Having experience abroad	210	88.6	23	9.7	3	1.3			1	.4
5.Developing my foreign language skills	203	85.7	28	11.8	2	.8	1	.4		
6.Introducing Turkish culture	81	34.2	84	35.4	45	19	12	5.1	10	4.2

Ttable 2 illustrates Erasmus students’ perceptions regarding the benefits of the program. The results suggest that the majority of students view the program as an opportunity to travel and experience different cultures, improve their career prospects and personal growth, and enhance their foreign language skills. The reasons for Erasmus students’ willingness to step out of their “comfort zones” cannot be solely attributed to the desire to be abroad, as nearly 90% of the students expressed a keen interest in developing their career prospects and achieving personal growth through the program. It is noteworthy that a significant proportion of students (69.6%) regarded this mobility initiative not only as a means to gain intercultural experience but also as a way to showcase their Turkish heritage to others.

Table 3

Participant Perceptions on the Benefits of Erasmus Program

	Strongly agree		Agree		No idea		Disagree		Strongly disagree	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
7.My foreign language skills have improved	142	59.9	72	30.4	14	5.9	7	3.0	2	.8
8.I gained academic experience	87	36.7	86	36.3	46	19.4	12	5.1	5	2.1
9.My self-confidence increased	177	74.7	51	21.5	6	2.5	1	.4	2	.8
10.My view of the world has changed	179	75.5	47	19.8	6	19.8	3	1.3	2	.8
11.I learned different cultures	177	74.7	56	23.6	1	.4	1	.4	1	.4
12.I understood the value of our own culture more	75	31.6	76	32.1	47	19.8	23	9.7	10	4.2
13.I had cultural difficulties	225	94.9	33	13.9	38	16.0	75	31.5	44	18.6

Looking at the responses presented in Table 3, the majority of students agreed that their foreign language skills and self-confidence improved and that their view of the world changed due to the Erasmus program. Regarding academic experience, most students held positive views. A vast majority agreed that they learned about different cultures, and more than half reported that they understood the value of their own culture more and experienced cultural difficulties. Overall, the responses in the table suggest that the majority of Erasmus students who participated in the study had a positive experience during their mobility program in many respects.

Table 4
Attitudes and Experiences Related to Social Relations and Identity

	Strongly agree		Agree		No idea		Disagree		Strongly disagree	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
14.I believe skin color has a great influence on social relations.	17	7.2	43	18.1	49	20.7	59	24.9	60	25.3
15.I think national identity is important in social relations.	35	14.8	74	31.2	26	11.0	40	16.9	50	21.1
16.I can easily show my religious-national identity in the Erasmus program	89	37.6	97	40.9	34	14.3	8	3.4	6	2.5
17.I witnessed ill-treatment and hate speech in different environments.	12	5.1	40	16.9	8	3.4	63	26.6	94	39.7
18.I can feel the xenophobia	17	7.2	50	21.1	25	10.5	56	23.6	69	29.1
19.We are always treated with respect	81	34.2	96	40.5	36	15.2	15	6.3	5	2.1

Table 4 provides valuable insights into the responses of Erasmus students to questions pertaining to xenophobic incidents that occurred at their respective host universities. It is important to note that the study’s objective is not merely to compare and tabulate the responses but to identify instances of xenophobia or racism that Erasmus students may have encountered while studying at European universities. The data indicates that the majority of students reported being treated with respect. However, it is noteworthy that 28.3 percent reported experiencing xenophobia. Just as a drop of ink can stain a whole glass of water, the report reveals that 22 percent of the students witnessed hate speech or ill-treatment during their participation in the program. Although this proportion may not be statistically significant,

it is significant in highlighting the severity of the issue. Similarly, in terms of national identity's role in social relations, 46 percent of the students considered it to be a determining factor.

Table 5 below focuses on the attitudes and knowledge of fellow Erasmus students and individuals who interact with Turkish students regarding Islam and Turkish identity. It is worth noting that these students spend a significant amount of time socializing within the academic community, which can shape their opinions. One of the most significant findings is that the majority of Turkish Erasmus students (72%) reported a considerable lack of knowledge about Islam, the world's second-largest religion.

Table 5
Perceptions of Integration and Discrimination Among Turkish Students in Europe

	Strongly agree		Agree		No idea		Disagree		Strongly disagree	
	n	%	n	%	n	n	%	n	%	n
20.I have witnessed discourses such as “Turks will not be integrated into Europe”.	11	4.6	28	11.8	31	13.1	72	30.4	82	34.6
21.With their attitude, they reveal that we do not belong to Europe.	18	7.6	41	17.3	51	21.5	77	32.5	42	17.7
22.Most of them don't know much about Islam	83	35.0	88	37.1	37	15.6	17	7.2	9	3.8
23.People tend to look down on Turkish students	6	2.5	51	21.5	59	24.9	70	29.5	43	18.1
24.Some avoid contacting me because of my Turkish identity	13	5.5	40	16.9	25	10.5	64	27.0	84	35.4
25.The lecturers at my host (Erasmus) university are interested in our culture.	63	26.6	99	41.8	38	16.0	22	9.3	8	3.4

The survey also indicates that stereotyped attitudes toward Turkish identity are present, with 24% of respondents perceiving prejudice against it. Additionally, 22.4% feel that they are avoided due to their Turkish identity. Furthermore, a similar proportion of participants believe that Turks are not considered part of Europe.

In conclusion, the findings of this study suggest that Erasmus students face various challenges related to their national identity and religion during their mobility programs. The results indicate that many Turkish students perceive a lack of knowledge about Islam and stereotyped attitudes toward Turkish identity among their fellow students and others they interact with in academic settings. Additionally, a significant number of participants reported experiencing avoidance due to their Turkish identity. These findings highlight the importance of promoting intercultural understanding and respect in academic environments and creating safe spaces for students to share their diverse perspectives and experiences. Overall, this study sheds light on the complex dynamics of identity and intercultural relations in the context of the Erasmus program.

To summarize the overall quantitative data, Turkish students express high levels of satisfaction with the program. They perceive it as enabling them to develop their foreign language skills, increase their self-confidence, and expand their intercultural awareness. The students also appreciate the academic experience that the program provides and enjoy being part of an international and intercultural academic environment. The conclusion is that the Erasmus mobility program represents a valuable opportunity for Turkish students who lack genuine international experience and has contributed to the goal of internationalizing higher education to some extent. However, despite these positive findings, the quantitative data also reveal that some students have encountered xenophobic and racist attitudes while participating in the program. This is an alarming trend that warrants further attention and action to ensure the program remains inclusive and respectful of all participants.

Qualitative Data Analysis

This section presents findings obtained from an open-ended question in the Google Form to gather detailed responses from Erasmus students about their

experiences with xenophobic incidents, if any. To ensure participants' privacy and comfort, they were given the option to answer the question voluntarily. It is important to note that the purpose of this study was not to track the frequency of xenophobic incidents occurring on or off campus. While some self-reports suggest that incidents took place in campus or educational settings, our main objective was to develop a thorough understanding of individuals' lived experiences contributing to this phenomenon.

The qualitative data focused on understanding the subjective experiences and meanings that Turkish Erasmus students assign to their realities, highlighting the diversity and complexity of their perspectives. Recognizing the significance of individual experiences and perspectives in shaping broader social and cultural phenomena is essential. Content analysis was used to systematically identify patterns, recurring themes, and meanings in the data to draw inferences and conclusions about the phenomenon under study. The study allowed the data to speak for itself by avoiding quantification, ensuring transparency, and minimizing researcher bias. To ensure reliability, two researchers independently reviewed the analysis, achieving 85% inter-coder reliability. Reflective journaling and peer debriefing were used to minimize bias. Through careful examination, four main themes related to xenophobic incidents were identified, with selected quotes provided to illustrate the findings.

Xenophobic/ Racists Remarks and Attacks

Our findings demonstrate that Erasmus students acknowledge the existence of xenophobia in Europe through their experiential learning, which complements the numerous benefits offered by the Erasmus program. Despite the recording of hundreds of thousands of xenophobic incidents in Europe annually, the personal experience of witnessing such hostility was an unexpected event for Participant S1. Before embarking on the exchange program, the participant may have felt a sense of privilege associated with their status as an Erasmus student. However, the duration of the exchange program led to an increasingly acute awareness of the growing frequency of xenophobic incidents in Europe.

During my master's degree program in [X country], I have, unfortunately, observed a rise in xenophobic incidents, which has been quite distressing. As a student who arrived in a European country for the first time via the Erasmus program, this development has come as a surprise to me. I am actively seeking to understand the root causes of this xenophobic behavior. (S15)

Suddenly, an unknown individual approached me and, using foul language, told me to leave the country and go back home without any apparent reason. I hadn't done or said anything, and at first, I didn't even realize he was coming toward me. Initially, I assumed he was referring to someone else. It became apparent that the sole basis for this demand was my appearance. (S21)

I was exposed to racist remarks and witnessed discrimination. (S61)

At orientation week, a drunkard student threw an alcohol bottle at us without any reason. (S27)

The participant also noted that manifestations of xenophobia or racism appear to affect various ethnic and racial groups. Targeted populations may differ between countries, resulting in varying forms of discrimination. For instance, while discrimination against Black people is common in the United States, Turks are often the target of prejudice in Germany, and Algerians are commonly discriminated against in France. Erasmus students have corroborated the prevalence of discrimination against a diverse range of groups, as evidenced by the following account:

I have to admit, there were xenophobic behaviors directed toward me, Black people, as well as other certain groups of people. (S16)

The racism committed by some individuals is not only specific to Turks but also affects certain nations. (S55)

My dormitory mate is from Algeria, and he has also expressed experiencing xenophobic comments directed toward him. (S93)

Upon returning from the school library around 10 p.m., one of my friends had her headscarf pulled by someone. (S17)

The attitude of the university dormitory staff was unpleasant at all. The xenophobic attitude was evident in their behavior. (S56)

I was physically assaulted because of my being a fan of a Turkish national football team. (S57)

I found myself in a situation where I had to defend myself against one of my lecturers' remarks about a political issue in my country. Despite being a typically kind and sociable person, as the debate heated up, I sensed a hidden xenophobic attitude surfacing within him. (S62)

While there have been xenophobic incidents reported by Turkish Erasmus students, it would be inaccurate to generalize and assume that these incidents are representative of the entire continent. On the contrary, it is also clear from the quantitative and qualitative data that most Turkish Erasmus students have not experienced these incidents to a great extent, as indicated below:

During my Erasmus study in Europe, I encountered numerous individuals who displayed kindness and expressed strong opposition to xenophobia. A case in point is that all of my lecturers were exceptionally friendly and supportive toward me, and I did not experience any form of discrimination. (S63)

However, as a whole, the students' self-reports emphasize the importance of acknowledging and addressing any xenophobic incidents that do occur. A small, seemingly insignificant action or event can have a significant impact and quickly spread to affect a much larger area or group. In the context of social issues such as discrimination or prejudice, a single instance of xenophobia can spread and negatively impact an entire community. This is because such attitudes can be contagious, influencing the beliefs and behaviors of others. It cautions against ignoring such incidents, even if they are infrequent, as they still have the potential to cause harm and perpetuate discriminatory attitudes.

Religious Background

Another area where xenophobic attitudes were felt was related to Turkish Erasmus students' backgrounds. The self-reports provided by the students

suggest that Erasmus students experienced discrimination and prejudice due to their religious beliefs, practices, and identity, illustrating how cultural racism operates within academic and social environments. Such discrimination often targets perceived cultural incompatibilities, positioning certain cultural or religious expressions as threats to social cohesion and reinforcing exclusionary attitudes (Essed 1991; Modood 2007). Some students reported being stigmatized and stereotyped as terrorists and immigrants, resulting in negative comments and attitudes toward them. Additionally, they faced religious intolerance and discrimination, being ridiculed for their beliefs and excluded from mainstream society. Finally, these students reported facing marginalization due to their religious identity, being labeled as outsiders and not fully accepted in the societies they were living in. These points were reflected in their self-reports as follows:

My friend and I were on a European tour, and we had to catch an early train the next morning. So, we decided to spend the night at the station. As we walked toward the seating area, I noticed people staring at me. I knew immediately what the reason was—my headscarf. The glances were disturbing and made me feel like an outsider. I tried my best to ignore them, but their stares only intensified. I felt like I was being targeted and singled out. The discomfort I felt that night stayed with me throughout the trip. As an Erasmus student, I had hoped for a more accepting and welcoming environment. (S75)

Many students found my refusal to eat pork because of my religious beliefs odd. (S82)

While I was wearing a headscarf, a man realized I was a Muslim and called after me, shouting, “This is the land of Christians.” In my experience, women who cover their heads are not widely tolerated. (S17)

In a bar in the city, when the locals asked where I was from, I said Türkiye. They then asked if I was a Muslim, and when I said yes, they made statements like, “Where is your gun?”. (S89)

A student approached me and inquired whether I was familiar with any terrorist organizations. However, as our conversation

progressed, it became clear that the student held the belief that all Muslims were terrorists, which was reflected in some of his statements. (S120)

I observed people mocking Islam. (S127)

I ended up in a disagreement regarding my religion. (S130)

We encountered reactions due to my friend's veil and our Islamic faith. Everywhere I went, people stared at me intrusively because of my hijab, and I was frequently asked why I chose to wear it. (S44)

I was shocked to hear that the foreign relations officer of the university made a blanket statement that all Muslims from Türkiye are associated with terrorism. (S49)

Overall, the self-reports, though isolated instances, shared by Erasmus students highlight the prevalence of Islamophobia, discrimination, and bias faced due to their religious beliefs and identity in certain parts of Europe. These examples illustrate how cultural racism reinforces marginalization by framing distinct cultural identities as incompatible with dominant societal values. Some students may not be familiar with their peers' religious beliefs and the dietary restrictions that accompany them. As a result, they might find it odd or confusing that someone does not eat pork. Unfortunately, some students may hold negative stereotypes or prejudices about people from different religious or cultural backgrounds, and the student's (S82) refusal to eat pork might be viewed as confirmation of those stereotypes. The man's remark, "This is the land of Christians," suggests that he believed the Muslim person did not belong in that particular place or country. This incident highlights the issue of religious intolerance and discrimination faced by Erasmus students based on their religious beliefs. Discrimination based on religion can manifest in many forms, such as verbal abuse, exclusion, and physical violence. Islamophobia is the fear or hatred of Islam or Muslims. It is a form of racism and discrimination that targets people based on their perceived religious identity (Allen 190–191). In Europe, there has been a rise in Islamophobic attitudes and incidents in recent years, particularly directed toward Muslim immigrants and their descendants. This has led to the development of anti-Muslim sentiment and discriminatory policies, as well as instances of hate speech and violence toward Muslim communities.

There are also political parties and movements that have been built on an anti-Islamic agenda. Similarly, it appears that students are being targeted and singled out because of their religious beliefs, with many facing hostility, prejudice, and intolerance. It is important to acknowledge and address such discrimination and work toward creating a more inclusive and welcoming environment for individuals from diverse backgrounds. It is only through empathy, education, and open dialogue that we can overcome these prejudices and build a society that is truly accepting and respectful of all individuals, regardless of their religion or cultural background.

National Identity

Interestingly, the national background of Turkish Erasmus students was observed as another area where xenophobic attitudes were expressed. While the term “Turkphobia” is not commonly acknowledged in academic circles, it appears to represent a phenomenon involving a fear or distrust of Türkiye as a nation, potentially rooted in political or historical factors. Several Turkish Erasmus students reported facing discrimination, racism, and negative stereotypes during their study abroad, as indicated in the following quotations:

I never expected to be attacked for wearing a Turkish football jersey, but unfortunately, it happened to me last week. (S141)

It was hurtful to see that some of our classmate’s distance themselves from us after we mentioned that we are of Turkish descent. It was hard to concentrate in class when I felt unwelcome due to the cold reactions I received from my fellow students. (S123)

The security guards at the airport scrutinized our Turkish passports more closely than those of other passengers, who were allowed to pass without any hassle. This made us feel like we were being singled out. (S164)

While waiting at a bus stop, an individual initially greeted us but later directed derogatory language towards Turks. The incident made us realize how easily people can switch from being friendly to being hateful based on our Turkish identity. (S172)

During my Erasmus study, I encountered people who whispered, shouted, and made derogatory comments towards me because of my Turkish identity. (S179)

I felt like the Erasmus coordinator at my school was unapproachable and unsympathetic towards me because of my Turkish identity. (S192)

Overall, the self-reports indicate that some Erasmus students faced discrimination and institutional racism during their stay in Europe due to their Turkish identity. ‘Turkophobia’ similarly refers to the irrational fear or hatred of Türkiye, Turkish people, or Turkish culture” (Barın Akman 23–24). In recent years, several cases of Turkophobia have emerged in Europe, particularly targeting individuals perceived to be of Turkish origin. This hostility has resulted in discriminatory behavior, negative stereotypes, and even violent acts against Turkish individuals and communities. Often, this discrimination is linked to political tensions between Türkiye and certain European nations (Erboğa and Yiğit 290–292). For instance, during the 2021–2023 period, tensions arose over Türkiye’s opposition to Sweden and Finland’s NATO membership, citing their alleged support for groups Türkiye considers terrorist organizations. Additionally, disputes over migration policies intensified, as Türkiye played a key role in managing refugee flows to Europe, leading to disagreements over the implementation of the EU-Türkiye migration deal. Türkiye’s increasing influence in the Middle East and Africa, particularly in defense and trade partnerships, also caused friction with some European nations, who viewed these developments as a challenge to their strategic interests. The racism and xenophobia directed at Turkish individuals manifested in various forms, including physical assault, verbal abuse, discrimination at universities, increased security checks, and the reinforcement of negative stereotypes. It is particularly prevalent in countries that have had historical conflicts with Türkiye, where some extremist political groups actively promote anti-Turkish sentiments.

Prejudice and Ignorance

Another source of xenophobia appears to stem from cultural ignorance or a lack of understanding about other cultures. It remains unclear whether this lack of awareness results from limited exposure to other cultures, a lack

of motivation to learn about them, or outright cultural racism. Regardless of the cause, such ignorance can lead to misunderstandings, perpetuate stereotypes, and foster discriminatory attitudes and behaviors. Cultural ignorance can manifest in various ways, such as assuming that one's own cultural values and practices are the only valid ones, making negative generalizations about other cultures, and failing to recognize the unique experiences and perspectives of people from different cultural backgrounds.

A number of people have asked me how many girlfriends I currently have or how many women I would like to marry. (S193)

I was once asked why the girls wore black clothing that only revealed their eyes. In their view, camels are used to transport goods in our country. (S197)

Some of my friends thought we were an Arab country. They asked, 'You have to cover your head too, don't you? Don't you use the Arabic alphabet?'. (S201)

A few of our teachers were surprised to see us wearing skirts and t-shirts and, interestingly, asked, 'Can you dress like that in your home country?'. (S209)

I believe that the media abroad portrays us negatively. Due to the prevalence of strict immigration propaganda, some people incorrectly label us as immigrants, even though we are students. (S223)

The self-reports indicate that some people held stereotypes and prejudices about Turkish culture and people. The questions about the number of girlfriends and wives that a person has, as well as the assumption that camels are used to transport goods in Türkiye, demonstrate a lack of understanding of the diversity within Turkish culture and the complexity of its social norms. The comments and questions regarding the participant's clothing, along with the assumption that Turkish women only wear black clothing, reflect a narrow view of Turkish fashion and culture. It is important to note that discrimination and stigmatization are often fueled by misinformation and bias in the media. According to Erasmus students, the media in Europe have reported false news about Türkiye, and as a result, some people may have been influenced by negative and biased media coverage.

Prejudice refers to preconceived opinions or attitudes toward a particular group of people, formed without reason or experience. It can lead to the perception of the group as inferior or threatening, which, in turn, can give rise to xenophobia. Various factors contribute to xenophobia, including stereotypes, misinformation, disinformation, lack of knowledge, and bias. Disinformation, the deliberate spread of false or misleading information, plays a significant role in reinforcing negative perceptions. Western narratives have often portrayed Turkey and Turkish people through distorted stereotypes, fueling xenophobia. Depictions of Turks as violent or barbaric have perpetuated misconceptions and fears about Turkish culture. Such literary representations illustrate how disinformation shapes xenophobic attitudes” (Ayдын 24–56). These factors collectively create an atmosphere of fear and distrust toward groups perceived as different or unfamiliar, ultimately fueling xenophobia.

Conclusion

The study presents both qualitative and quantitative analyses of Turkish students’ experiences in the Erasmus mobility program. The findings reveal that the majority of students perceive the program as an opportunity to explore foreign countries and immerse themselves in a multicultural environment. Additionally, most students view the program as a chance to travel, experience different cultures, enhance their career opportunities, foster personal growth, and improve their foreign language skills. Despite the high levels of satisfaction among Turkish students with the program, the study also uncovered instances of xenophobia and various forms of racism, including institutional, cultural, and structural racism, during their study abroad experience.

While it may be argued that such incidents occur everywhere in the world and are isolated occurrences, it is crucial to note that xenophobic incidents are becoming increasingly common in Europe. It is clear from the findings that xenophobic incidents were reported by a relatively small number of Turkish Erasmus students, indicating a high level of satisfaction among Turkish Erasmus students with the program as a whole. However, these incidents should not be dismissed as insignificant. In fact, individual cases can often leave a more profound impact on society than even the most compelling statistical data.

When isolated xenophobic incidents occur, they can create fear, anxiety, and mistrust among affected individuals and their community. These negative emotions can spread and impact the community's social cohesion and trust, ultimately causing divisions and a breakdown of relationships. Moreover, if such incidents are not addressed or condemned, they can be perceived as a tacit approval of intolerance and bigotry, further emboldening the perpetrators and creating an environment where discrimination and prejudice can thrive. Therefore, it is crucial to address and condemn isolated xenophobic incidents promptly and effectively to prevent their negative impacts from spreading and potentially causing harm to the wider community. This can include promoting tolerance, education, and diversity, as well as enforcing laws that protect individuals from discrimination and prejudice.

The study highlights the importance of fostering cultural sensitivity and inclusivity within university environments to ensure that all students feel welcome and valued. It emphasizes the persistent presence of xenophobia and discrimination in society, which requires ongoing attention and action. To address these issues, universities must actively work to create an environment where all students, regardless of background, feel accepted and appreciated. This can be achieved by offering intercultural training and facilitating opportunities for dialogue between students from diverse cultures. Universities should also establish clear policies and procedures to address instances of xenophobia, institutional racism, and discrimination, and to offer support to students who experience such incidents. Additionally, universities should strive to provide platforms where students can share their cultural heritage, promoting mutual understanding and fostering appreciation among peers.

To promote cultural sensitivity and inclusivity, universities and organizations running the Erasmus program can organize workshops, seminars, and training sessions to educate students on the importance of cultural sensitivity and inclusivity, and to raise awareness about the different cultures and backgrounds of the participating students. In addition, initiatives should aim to encourage dialogue and provide opportunities for students to engage in meaningful conversations with people from diverse cultural backgrounds, in order to break down stereotypes and foster mutual understanding and

respect. With its Islamic heritage and position as one of the few Erasmus countries in the region, Turkish universities have the potential to act as a catalyst for these efforts.

Furthermore, universities should strengthen their anti-discrimination policies and ensure their effective implementation. This can include providing support and resources for students who experience discrimination and taking disciplinary actions against those who engage in discriminatory behavior. Students should be encouraged to report any incidents of discrimination or xenophobia they encounter or witness during their participation in the Erasmus program. This will help raise awareness of the issue and allow universities and organizations to take appropriate action.

As an educational diplomacy activity, Erasmus student mobility fosters cooperation between universities and states. Decision-makers should enhance students' diplomatic awareness by integrating pre-departure training on cultural adaptability, communication, and countering disinformation. Erasmus students, as 'citizen diplomats,' should actively engage with local communities, represent their culture positively, and participate in intercultural dialogue. Embedding this within educational diplomacy strengthens academic exchange, international cooperation, and mutual understanding. Universities can support this through orientation sessions and networking events. Additionally, cross-cultural education should be introduced early and integrated into Western curricula, textbooks, and public awareness campaigns to combat xenophobia rooted in institutional and cultural biases.

Finally, universities and organizations can collaborate with local communities to promote intercultural understanding and address issues of discrimination and xenophobia. This could involve organizing cultural events and activities that bring together local and Erasmus students, as well as engaging in community outreach to raise awareness of the program and its benefits. Creating a welcoming and inclusive environment is essential to ensure all students feel valued and respected while participating in the Erasmus program. Cross-cultural education should be introduced early and integrated into western curricula, textbooks, and public awareness campaigns to help combat xenophobic incidents rooted in institutional, cultural, and structural racism.

Conflict of Interest Statement

There is no conflict of interest with any institution or person within the scope of this study.

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