The Influence of Media Portrayals of Immigration and Refugees on Consumer Attitudes

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Abstract

This study examined media portrayals of immigrants and refugees and consumer attitudes regarding immigrants, immigration policy, and Islamophobia. Participants included 284 male and female college students who were primed with negative, positive, or no media portrayals of immigrants and refugees prior to answering questions related to their views regarding immigrants, immigration policy, and Islamophobia. Significant differences were found based on experimental condition for viewing immigration as an economic, physical, social cohesion, and modernity threat as well as physical benefits of immigration, intolerant attitudes toward immigrants, and affective-behavioral and cognitive Islamophobia. Factors related to participant susceptibility to media portrayals were examined and included biological sex, race, social class, and political and religious affiliation.

Background Literature

The media consistently stereotype immigrants and refugees, often linking them to threat and crime (de Zuniga et al., 2012). Such representations were amplified during the 2016 U.S. presidential election campaign, which also brought attention to fake news, where politicians or entertainment news media described factual stories that did not align with their personal views incorrectly or presented stories that were fabricated and embellished (Douglas, 2018).

Fake news has the intent of validating and encouraging discriminatory and racist opinions toward minority groups, particularly immigrants and refugees (Cerase & Santoro, 2018). Negative portrayals of immigrants and refugees in media can influence viewer attitudes in a negative manner (Saleem et al., 2017). Exposure to fake news with negative images corresponds to biased opinions and stereotypical views regarding minority groups (Schemer, 2012).

Assuming that media priming may explain the relationship between the way media present, or frame, information and the opinions and attitudes of consumers (Estrada et al., 2016), this study examined the portrayals of immigrants and refugees in media and viewer's attitudes regarding immigrants, immigration policy, and Islamophobia using an experimental design. Ramasubramanian (2007) proposed that media portrayals and reproduction of stereotypes leads to biased schemas among consumers regarding stereotyped groups, which can then be primed unconsciously by future media exposure that then influence attitudes and behaviors regarding stereotyped groups (Higgins & Eitam, 2014). We wanted to determine if exposure to negative portrayals of immigrants and refugees was associated with negative attitudes regarding immigrants and immigration policy, as well as increased levels of Islamophobia among consumers.

Because negative and intolerant attitudes regarding immigrants and refugees have been associated with social class (Gattino & Taraglia, 2015), political and religious ideology (Ostfeld, 2017), as well as race, age, and biological sex (Knoll et al., 2014), we also wanted to determine if there were specific sociodemographic characteristics of consumers that increased their susceptibility to negative media portrayals of immigrants and refugees.

Method

Participants & Procedure

Participants included 284 college students (64.47% female, 59.2% White, *M* age 19.84 years) from a large southeastern public research university who were recruited through their undergraduate psychology courses and received class credit for completing the 75-min online questionnaire.

Participants were assigned to three experimental conditions where they were primed with either video clips containing negative portrayals, positive portrayals, or no video clips of immigrants and refugees. Inter-rater reliability of the videos was assessed using intra class reliability and was high (0.94).

Measures

Immigration Threats and Benefits Inventory. This 40-item questionnaire assesses views regarding economic, physical, social cohesion, and modernity threats as well as economic, physical, cultural diversity, and humanitarian benefits associated with immigration and immigrants and refugees (Tartakovsky & Walsh, 2016).

Immigration Policy Questionnaire. This 19-item questionnaire assesses views of immigration policy as defending the state and defending asylum seekers' rights (Tartakovsky & Walsh, 2016).

Intolerant Attitudes toward Immigrants and Foreigners. Participants answered six items related to intolerant attitudes toward immigrants and foreigners (Gniewosz & Noack, 2015).

Islamophobia Scale. This 16-item questionnaire examines affective-behavioral attitudes and cognitive attitudes toward Muslims (Lee et al., 2009).

All items in the above questionnaires were scored on a 5-point Likert scale (1 being *strongly disagree;* 5 being *strongly agree*). Alpha reliability for all scales were .70 or higher. Items for each category were averaged to obtain total scores that were used in analyses.

Sociodemographics. Participants answered items related to their age, race, biological sex, political party affiliation, religious affiliation, and social class.
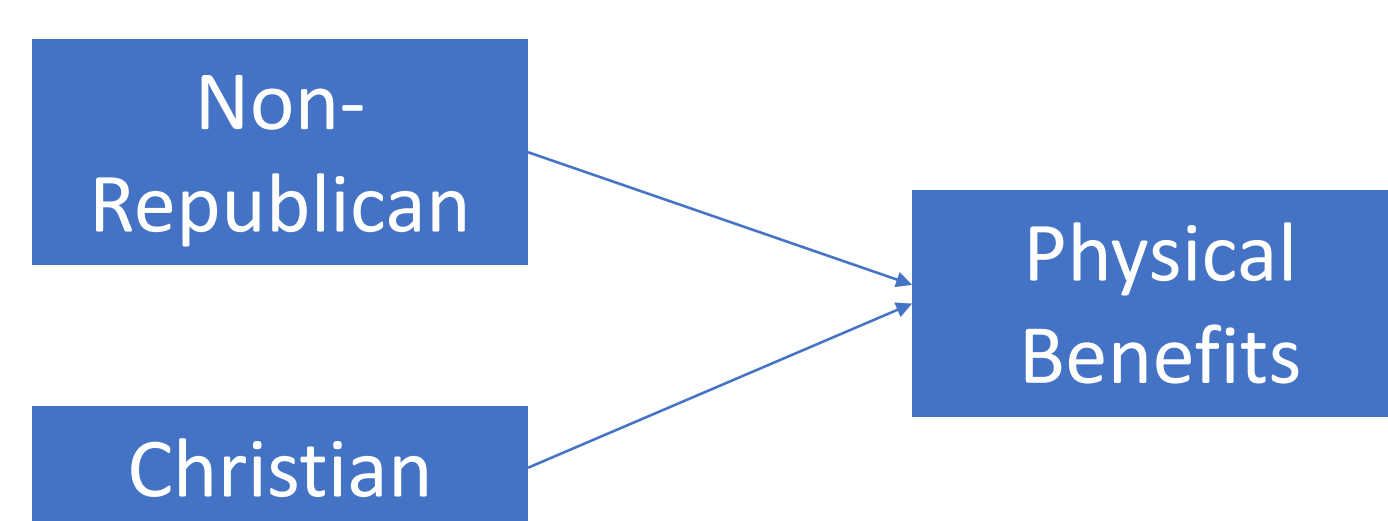
Figure 2. *Positive Media Portrayals*

Results

Generally, participants reported low levels of cognitive and affective-behavioral Islamophobia, viewing immigration policies as defending the state and viewing immigration as a social cohesion, economic, physical, and modernity threat. Participants reported higher levels of viewing immigration as having economic, physical, cultural diversity, and humanitarian benefits, and immigration policy as defending the rights of asylum seekers. Additionally, all outcome variables were significantly correlated with each other.

Experimental Conditions

A MANCOVA was conducted to determine if there was a significant difference in participants' views and attitudes based on experimental condition while controlling for age, race, biological sex, social class, and political and religious affiliation.

Significant differences were found for economic threats, F (2, 199) = 4.44, p = .01, $\eta2$ = .04, physical threats, F (2, 199) = 5.65, p = .004, $\eta2$ = .05, social cohesion threats, F (2, 199) = 3.05, p = .05, $\eta2$ = .03, modernity threats, F (2, 199) = 5.79, p = .004, $\eta2$ = .06, physical benefits, F (2, 199) = 3.42, p = .04, $\eta2$ = .03, intolerant attitudes toward immigrants, F (2, 199) = 3.21, p = .04, $\eta2$ = .03, affective and behavioral Islamophobia, F (2, 199) = 3.38, p = .04, $\eta2$ = .03, and cognitive Islamophobia, F (2, 199) = 4.02, p = .02, $\eta2$ = .04. Significant differences were not found for the other outcome variables. Descriptive can be found in Table 1.

Factors Related to Participants Immigration Attitudes and Islamophobia

Hierarchical multiple- regression analyses were conducted to examine factors that could result in participants being more susceptible to positive and/or negative media influences. These included age, race (coded as 1 = white and 0 = non-white), biological sex, social class, and political (coded as 1 = Republican and 0 = not Republican) and religious affiliation (coded as 1 = Christian and 0 = non-Christian). Analyses were only performed for significant outcomes for the experimental groups that were exposed to negative and positive media portrayals of immigrants and refugees and were performed for each experimental condition separately.

Demographic variables of participant age, biological sex, and race were entered first, followed by social class, and then political and religious affiliation. Results are depicted in Figures 1 and 2.

Table 1. *Descriptive Statistics Based on Experimental Condition*

		M	SD
Economic Benefits	Negative Portrayals	3.48	.95
	Positive Portrayals	3.82	.93
	No videos	3.52	1.00
Economic Threats	Negative Portrayals	2.66	.98
	Positive Portrayals	2.14	.88
	No videos	2.54	.93
Physical Threats	Negative Portrayals	2.58	.91
	Positive Portrayals	1.98	.73
	No videos	2.25	.84
Social Cohesion Threats	Negative Portrayals	1.98	.94
	Positive Portrayals	1.56	.67
	No videos	1.86	.90
Modernity Threats	Negative Portrayals	2.61	.94
	Positive Portrayals	2.06	.78
	No videos	2.42	.79
Physical Benefits	Negative Portrayals	2.82	.79
	Positive Portrayals	3.20	.64
	No videos	2.98	.72
Cultural Diversity Benefits	Negative Portrayals	3.79	.90
	Positive Portrayals	4.13	.73
	No videos	3.85	1.01
Humanitarian Benefits	Negative Portrayals	3.52	1.05
	Positive Portrayals	3.88	.95
	No videos	3.65	.92
Immigration as Defending the State	Negative Portrayals	2.64	.89
	Positive Portrayals	2.24	.86
	No videos	2.42	.85
Immigration as Defending Asylum Seekers' Rights	Negative Portrayals	3.02	1.02
	Positive Portrayals	3.38	1.02
	No videos	3.21	.97
Intolerant Attitudes toward Immigrants	Negative Portrayals	2.62	.81
	Positive Portrayals	2.23	.71
	No videos	2.43	.73
Islamophobia Affective-Behavioral	Negative Portrayals	1.97	.90
	Positive Portrayals	1.62	.79
	No videos	1.55	.74
Islamophobia – Cognitive	Negative Portrayals	2.34	1.02
	Positive Portrayals	1.78	.99
	No videos	1.83	.99

Discussion

Media Portrayals of Immigrants and Refugees

The hypothesis that there would be differences in participants' attitudes based on experimental condition, with those exposed to negative portrayals of immigrants and refugees reporting more negative attitudes compared to those in other experimental conditions, was supported. It can theoretically be determined that viewing specific types of media portrayals caused participants attitudes. This supports previous research with similar findings (e.g., Saleem et al., 2017). Even so, participants were exposed to video clips they may not regularly view, creating an artificial exposure that may not reflect their life experiences.

Additionally, three things should be noted regarding the results. First, those who were not exposed to any media portrayals reported similar attitudes as those in other experimental conditions. This may indicate that participants in our control group held similar views regarding immigrants and refugees but did not have those attitudes brought to consciousness because they were not primed in the study (see Ramasubramanian, 2007). Second, the effect of media portrayals was significant but rather small, ranging from .03 to .06, which is common in experimental designs (Field, 2009). However, even small effects can have important real-world implications (McCartney & Rosenthal, 2000). Third, the priming effect may have yielded a short-term (i.e., the duration of the study) rather than a long-term effect on participant attitudes (Wentura & Rothermund, 2014). Even so, our findings support those of previous studies (e.g., Atwell et al., 2016; Saleem et al., 2017) and highlight the importance of further research examining the dosage effect of media priming (Arendt, 2015).

Susceptibility to Media Portrayals

The hypothesis that susceptibility to media portrayals of immigrants and refugees would be related to age, race, biological sex, social class, and political and religious affiliation was also supported. As in previous research, being male (e.g., Knoll et al., 2014), White (e.g., Watson & Riffe, 2013), Christian (e.g., Ostfeld, 2017), and Republican (e.g., de Zuniga et al., 2012) was associated with reporting more negative attitudes after being primed with negative media portrayals compared to other participants.

In regard to social class, our findings vary in comparison to previous research. We found a positive relationship between social class and negative attitudes, where previous research has found the opposite relationship (e.g., Gattino & Taraglia, 2015). This may be related to the fact that we focused on social class, where the majority of previous research has focused on indicators of SES (Timberlake & Williams, 2012). We also used a college sample. College is less accessible to those from lower-class families and more accessible to students from middle- and upper-class families (Williams, 2016).

Limitations and Implications for Future Research

This study was administered online, which may have interfered with how participants responded to questions. Future research should include a social desirability item to assess the honesty of participants. Additionally, it is possible that viewers select programming that reflects their personal interests and experiences. Furthermore, media portrayals were chosen from both mainstream and nonmainstream news sources in order to expose participants to both negative and positive portrayals found in media. However, it is possible that the interpretations of certain media portrayals may have occurred in the opposite direction than what was intended. The video clips may also have been interpreted critically before the questionnaire was answered, which may negate the effects. Additionally, future research should examine more thoroughly the differences and similarities between mainstream and nonmainstream news sources on consumer attitudes and behaviors.
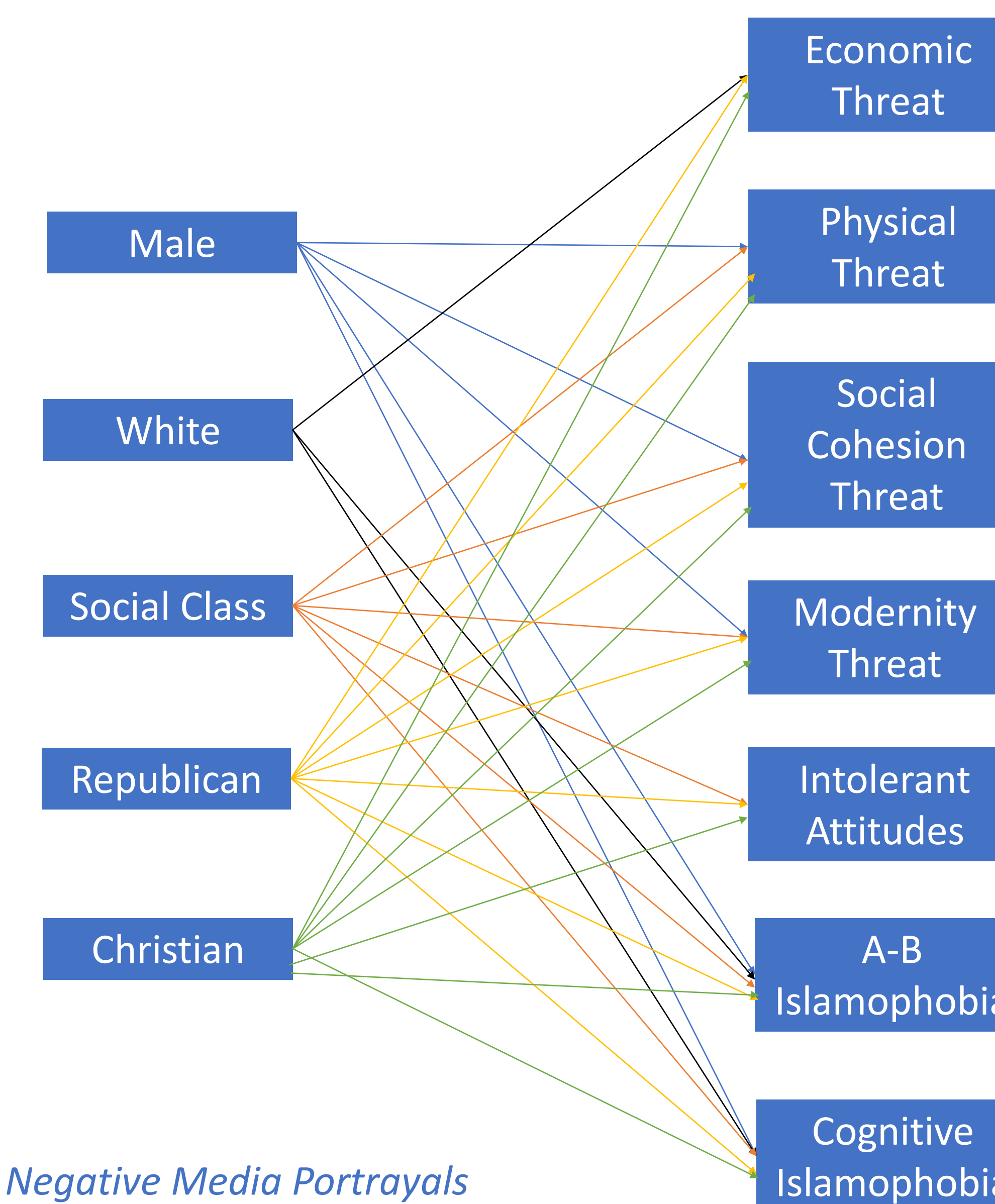
Figure 1. *Negative Media Portrayals*