

## **(Un)Veiling Our Biases: Activating Religious, Emotional, and Contextual Cues in News Media Representations of Syrian Refugees**

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This experiment tests visual and textual cue effects on U.S. participants' reactions to news media representations of Syrian refugees desiring resettlement in the United States during the 2016 presidential election cycle. Undergraduates from a large Midwestern university participated in this online experiment in April 2016. We analyzed participants' extant biases and stereotypes toward Syrian refugee and Muslim communities and measured their emotional responses, feelings of threat, and attitudinal feedback. Our research shows that participants were less emotionally and attitudinally sympathetic and felt higher levels of threat toward Syrian refugees when receiving the visual manipulation with hijab. Additionally, our findings show that participants' religious identification significantly influences responses to Syrian refugees and that visual representations of Syrian refugees with intensified facial emotions, such as despair and sadness, amplified participants' varying feelings of perceived threat.

*Keywords: Syrian refugees, religion, media effects, ethnic stereotypes, priming*

It is important that as a world superpower we take care of those who have been put through this awful event, but it is also important to keep our homeland safe from radical Islamic terrorists. Should we let Syrian refugees into America? Yes. Should we do absolutely everything we can to prevent ISIS from attacking our homeland? Absolutely. That is a fine line I hope our politicians handle. (Participant X)

Leading up to the 2016 U.S. presidential election cycle and his subsequent election to the presidency, Donald Trump instigated concerns over what—or who—Syrian refugees positioned for resettlement would bring into U.S. borders. Trump spoke to Americans' anxieties over the perceived unknowability of the Syrian refugee, relying on metaphors alleging that Syrian refugees would act as a Trojan horse for ISIS and comparing these displaced people to a venomous snake killing its rescuer. Such anxieties reflect a long-standing Orientalist apprehension over the unknowability of the veiled "other," the

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potential Middle Eastern (ME)/Southwest Asian and North African (SWANA) and Muslim threat. A common iteration of these anxieties, representations over the literal veiling of Muslim women in news, and media discourse contribute to fears of SWANA and Muslim dissimulation. For example, when U.S. Representative Ilhan Omar advocated for the allowance of religious head coverings in congressional buildings in 2018, she was met with pushback from those who feared the presence of a Muslim woman in a high-ranking U.S. political position.

A 2013 Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) study in California revealed that for students ages 11–18, 20% of girls and young women who wore hijab were bullied for their headscarves that year and nearly 50% of Muslim American students experienced biased-based bullying in school (CAIR California, 2013). Other reports indicate that school officials and teachers also maltreat Muslim students (CAIR California, 2017). Such issues of discrimination are repeated and reinforced on a judicial level both locally—such as the 10% of Muslims who claimed they were singled out by law enforcement in 2016—and nationally—such as the 20% who claimed to be targeted by airport officials in 2016 (Pew Research Center: Religion & Public Life, 2017). These are unsurprising results in light of U.S. discriminatory policies—such as putting Muslim-sounding names on no-fly lists—that perpetuate stereotypes of Muslims as violent, aggressive, and irrational (Brown, Ali, Stone, & Jewell, 2017; Calfano, Djupe, Cox, & Jones, 2016; Nomani, 2010).

In the present study, we examined how journalistic reporting could influence Americans' attitudes toward Syrian refugees by testing the effects of three framing decisions: the use of optical symbols of religious cues such as the hijab in these stories, the presence of visual emotional cues, and the use of contextual elements related to violence in the war in Syria. Our findings show that visual and textual cues, particularly the hijab, are salient factors contributing to designating Syrian refugees as an outgroup, which in turn reduces participant emotional and attitudinal support for Syrian refugees and increases perceived levels of threat.

## **Literature Review**

### ***Minority Media Effects***

Media effects literature concerning racial and ethnic media representations illustrates that the preponderance of negative representations of marginalized figures are produced using preexisting framing techniques that often demonize racial and ethnic minorities (ex. Fayyaz & Shirazi, 2013; Riley, 2009). For U.S. communities that predominantly experience minority groups through their media consumption rather than through interpersonal interaction, negative news media representations may prompt deleterious attitudes and emotions toward the target community (Brown, Ali, Stone, & Jewell, 2017; Fujioka, 1999). For example, stereotypes create institutional as well as localized roadblocks for minority communities seeking equal access to national resources and equal treatment under the law (Strabac, Aalberg, Jenssen, & Valetna, 2016). Moreover, these stereotypes work to prime institutional ingroups and contribute to everyday mistreatment and biases (Todd, 1998; Windle, 2004).

Scholarship has pointed to long-standing Orientalist stereotypes about the Muslim and SWANA other that persist in U.S. news and entertainment media, including the wealthy sheikh, hypersexualized Arab men and women, meek Arab women and aggressive Arab men, the SWANA terrorist, and SWANA people as backward barbarians (e.g., Alsultany, 2012; Fayyaz & Shirazi, 2013; Riley, 2009; Said, 1978). In the situation of Syrian refugees, Muslims, and SWANA people more broadly, news representations often associate the communities with institutional and personal violence (Brown et al., 2017; Calfano et al., 2016; Domke, McCoy, & Torres, 1999; Hoewe, Bowe, & Makhadmeh, 2014). Despite the general consensus that these stereotypes exist and that they have material and ideological consequences, this article seeks to bring nuance to what constitutes a negative representation—specifically relating to religion, emotion, and violence—and to when these stereotypes are activated and influenced by media depictions.

Past research has shown that symbolic identities matter, particularly in the way in which religious belonging is materially represented on the body (Brown et al., 2017; Smith & Zárate, 2015; Stolle, Harell, Soroka, & Behnke, 2016; Todd, 1998; Windle, 2004). The importance of this material representation, however, fluctuates dependent on its situational context (e.g., Strabac et al., 2016). In the case of Syrian refugees, debates over religious belonging—Christian, Yazidi, Muslim—were invoked to establish a legitimate hierarchy of victimhood, with Syrian refugees both rhetorically tied to the Islamic State and Sunni Muslims positioned as less deserving of resettlement opportunities.

### ***Theorizing Ingroup and Outgroup Interactions***

The representation of SWANA communities as “other” has implications beyond the explicit stereotypes described above. There are a number of theories that help explain negative attribution of qualities toward an outgroup, as well as how this formation of stereotypes contributes to material and ideological consequences. Since the Gulf War and the terrorist attacks on 9/11, Muslims have been targeted as both different from mainstream U.S. citizens and possessing identities that are antithetical to ideological constructs that determine the “nature” of a U.S. citizen. U.S. news and media representations of Muslims typically conflate Muslim, SWANA, and Brown communities in general, establishing a wide base of consistently related categories used to prime audiences to access negative attributes.

Priming, or activating one node of a larger web of related concepts and ideas, has been shown to have short-term media effects (Jo & Berkowitz, 1994) but, when salient and/or repetitive, can result in longer-term cognitive mapping (Fujioka, 1999). When a set of ideas, events, people, or traditions is consistently connected in news and entertainment media, the connectivity becomes inherent (Hoewe et al., 2014). The mention of one point in this web prompts audiences to contextualize the situation automatically, and quickly, within their already established understanding of the topic. In the context of Islam specifically, news media pair the concept of Sharia with conflict, terrorism, and the Taliban, among other negatively valenced topics (Hoewe et al., 2014). These concepts are marked as belonging to an outgroup, which invokes other similarly negative connotations in consumers’ minds.

The religious, emotional, and contextual cues in our experiment could delineate ingroup and outgroup categories between Americans and Syrian refugees, particularly those refugees pictured with hijabs. Social identity theory (SIT) illuminates the mechanisms by which participants may react negatively

toward an outgroup even when there may be no deleterious effects on participants' own well-being (Tajfel, 1978). SIT rests on three general assumptions: Individuals desire to have a positive self-concept and manage or improve their self-esteem accordingly, there are negative or positive attributes associated with varying social group categories and these associations are relevant to one's own self-concept, and social groups are not inherently positive or negative but accrue these evaluations based on comparisons with other social groups (Tajfel & Turner, 2004). These assumptions are supported by research that shows that comparisons are derived through competition, either social or instrumental, and that while instrumental competition often benefits the individual, social competition instead values successes that further differentiate among social groups (Tajfel & Turner, 2004). According to such findings, the very awareness of difference among groups is enough for prompting negative reactions to outgroups regardless of whether an outcome would benefit the individual member of the ingroup.

Outgroup stereotypes contribute to perceptions of threat, which can safeguard a community's physical, emotional, and ideological well-being while facilitating interpersonal and institutional harm toward the outgroup. For example, research has found that Europeans, Canadians, and Americans hold prejudicial attitudes toward Muslims and perceive them as ideological (e.g., unassimilable) and physical threats (e.g., terrorists; Nassar, 2020; Velasco González, Verkuyten, Weesie, & Poppe, 2008). These perceptions promote, or exacerbate, deleterious state policies toward Muslim immigrants and citizens and demonstrate how media representations contribute to ideological insularity. Intergroup threat theory (ITT; Stephan, Ybarra, & Rios, 2016) provides important insight into how and when certain groups are perceived as threatening. ITT's authors have revised their theory to posit that there are four categories of threat split between individual/ingroup and symbolic/realistic threats (Stephan et al., 2016). Realistic group threats are threats to a group's resources and systems of power, and realistic individual threats pose physical and economic harm to a person. Symbolic group threats instead challenge a group's ideology, worldviews, and belief systems, and symbolic individual threats may denigrate an individual's self-esteem or honor.

Representations of Syrian refugees as untrustworthy, risky, and dishonest (Bowe, et al., 2013; Douai, Bastug, & Akca, 2021) also may lead to perceptions of Syrians as threatening according to the moral primacy model (MPM; Brambilla, Sacchi, Rusconi, & Goodwin, 2021). Brambilla et al.'s (2021) model revises the stereotype content model (SCM; Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002)—which claimed that personal impressions depended on perceptions of warmth and competence—to instead demonstrate that (1) warmth should be subdivided into sociability and morality and that (2) morality is more important than either competence or sociability in shaping interpersonal and intergroup perceptions. The sociopolitical construction of Syrian refugees—and ontologically related communities such as Muslims or other Arabs—as holding morals antithetical to U.S. values marks Syrian refugees as a particularly threatening outgroup to U.S. physical and ideological unity.

Visual representations also have powerful effects on perceptions of ingroups and outgroups, especially when the outgroup is a marginal group with little exposure outside of the media (e.g., Stolle et al., 2016). Research suggests that the hijab can influence attitudes and behaviors, but the effect varies depending on context (Brown et al., 2017). Concern over religious head coverings and Muslim identities filters through other societal structures concerning education, regulation of public space, and freedom of movement (Strabac et al., 2016; Todd, 1998; Windle, 2004). Global media scrutinization over variants of

Muslim corporeal coverings, in particular, have intensified over similar issues of perceived threats to national security (Grillo, 2014; Nomani, 2010; Windle, 2004).

Often using the hijab as a signifier of religious extremism, political extremism, and limited freedom over bodily autonomy, news media could prime audiences to make connections between head coverings and these ideologies regardless of the hijab's variant sociopolitical and religious history (e.g., Behiery, 2013). Although laws and norms about the adoption of various coverings for Muslim women (hijab, jilbab, niqab, chador, among others) vary, many Muslim women wear hijab as a sign of their submission to God, a reminder of their faith, a gesture of humility over adornment, and to control who has access to their personhood. Despite these variations in meaning, laws such as Executive Order 13769—colloquially known as the “Muslim ban”—have mobilized fears of the unknowability often associated with the hijab, including associations with negative emotional reactions and violence, to prevent Syrian refugees and other Muslim migrants from entering U.S. borders (Partain, 2019). Based on the above, we hypothesize that the marker of an additional outgroup categorization, specifically the hijab as denotes Muslim, will invoke participants' self-concept and provoke negative reactions that will strengthen ingroup status (Atwell Seate & Mastro, 2017; Spears Brown, Ali, Stone, & Jewell, 2017).

*H1a: The presence of a hijab will prompt participants to be less emotionally sympathetic toward Syrian refugees.*

*H1b: The presence of hijab will result in participants feeling higher levels of threat in reaction to Syrian refugees.*

*H1c: The presence of hijab will lead participants to feel lessened attitudes of care toward Syrian refugees.*

Extant media effects and marginalized communities scholarship frequently focus on race and ethnicity but neglect thorough examination of those identities' intersections with religious belonging and practice (Rana, 2007; Windle, 2004). Research shows that religious belonging constitutes a powerful ingroup with the potential to prompt boundaries between one's community and the other (e.g., Smith & Zárate, 2015; Stolle et al., 2016; Todd, 1998; Windle, 2004). These studies, however, often neglect the influence of participants' own religions. Moreover, few experimental studies have worked on disparities in participants' reactions toward groups rhetorically connected to a religious group but separated by outward symbols of religious belonging, e.g., Syrian refugees with and without hijab (e.g., Brown et al., 2017; Strabac et al., 2016). Given the role that identification with a religion can play in delineating ingroups and outgroups, we hypothesize the following statements concerning participants' religious identities:

*H2a: Participants with non-Muslim religious identities will have stronger emotional responses to Syrian refugees than nonreligious participants.*

*H2b: Participants with non-Muslim religious identities will feel greater levels of threat toward Syrian refugees than nonreligious participants.*

*H2c: Participants with non-Muslim religious identities will have lessened responses of care toward Syrian refugees than nonreligious participants.*

Because Muslim religious identity is often connected to violent rhetoric and discussions on terrorism, we hypothesize that contextual manipulations of violence will have a significant impact on audience responses to Syrian refugees. Studies that examine media rhetoric about refugees illustrate that these representations consistently employ frameworks of threat and citizenship concerns when discussing those fleeing violence in Syria (e.g., Dimitrova, Ozdora-Aksak, & Connolly-Ahern, 2018). Textual rhetorical devices used to describe immigrants, refugees, and SWANA groups have been shown to influence stereotypes (Calfano et al., 2016). Media representations of Muslim and SWANA communities as physical and ideological threats precipitated audience views that Muslims, and Muslim men in particular, are more threatening and aggressive (Brown et al., 2017; Domke et al., 1999). Accordingly, our experiment assesses participant reactions to varying contextual elements of violence. In all situations, we designate internally displaced Syrians and Syrian refugees as the victims of violence rather than its perpetrators or perpetrators. Nonetheless, priming violence in association with Syrian refugees could activate that framework of threat. Our hypotheses about contextual cues are:

*H3a: The intensification of contextual violence will lead participants to feel heightened emotional reactions toward Syrian refugees.*

*H3b: The intensification of contextual violence will result in participants feeling increased levels of threat in response to Syrian refugees.*

*H3c: The intensification of contextual violence will prompt participants to have attitudes of decreased care toward Syrian refugees.*

In addition to descriptive violence, emotional cues may provide points of affective context for participants in our study. Existing research on the topic has examined audience competency in interpreting facial expressions and the extent to which forced participant mimicry affects trust of, or attitudinal responses to, the subject in the experimental condition (Ask, 2018; Rymarczyk, Zurawski, Jankowiak-Siuda, & Szatkowska, 2016). Examinations of facial expressions also provide reason for us to believe that facial expressions interact with the background context of the visual condition as well as the level of cognitive load that the background facilitates for the participant (Ahmed, 2018; Brambilla, Biella, & Freeman, 2018; Van den Stock, Vandenbulcke, Sinke, Goebel, & de Gelder, 2014). For example, Kret and Fischer (2018) found that participants more accurately recognized facial cues when the subject wore a non-Islamic, compared with an Islamic, head and face covering. It is less clear as to whether variations in facial expressions contribute to an affective and attitudinal participant response to the broader subject under examination, in our case Syrian refugees (Jung Kim & Niederdeppe, 2014). Along those lines, we examined the potential for empathy between the audience and the subject in the visual representation condition in our study by activating emotional states via apparent facial cues. Functioning as another aspect of context, these emotional connections may facilitate feelings of threat or empathy based on ingroup and outgroup relationships (Finke, Larra, Merz, & Schächinger, 2017). Thus, our hypotheses are as follows:

*H4a: The intensification of visual emotional cues will lead participants to feel heightened emotional reactions toward Syrian refugees.*

*H4b: The intensification of visual emotional cues will result in participants feeling reduced levels of threat in response to Syrian refugees.*

*H4c: The intensification of visual emotional cues will prompt participants to have increased attitudes of care toward Syrian refugees.*

### **Method**

#### ***Participants***

We conducted this study with 219 undergraduate college students at a large Midwestern university between April 16, 2016, and April 29, 2016. Because of our incorporation of religious identification within our model, we filtered out from our data set those participants who did not identify their religious belonging ( $n = 16$ ) as well as the five Buddhists, one Sikh, one Daoist, one Taoist, and three Scientologists whose low numbers were statistically problematic for this study.

These students were part of a single survey media course and participated in this experiment for extra credit in the class. They were presented with alternative opportunities for extra credit. After we applied the religious filter, students who took part in this study ranged from 19 to 29 years of age and were split by gender identity to 65 men, 119 women, and 1 gender-fluid individual. The religious makeup of the group is characterized by disproportionately high levels of Jewish ( $n = 40$ ) and nonreligious faith participants ( $n = 46$ ) according to the national average as well as an expected high number of Christian participants ( $n = 99$ ; Pew Research Center: Religion & Public Life, 2015). The students' political identities were split accordingly: 81 Democrats, 55 Republicans, 4 Libertarians, and 42 participants who stated that they did not support any political parties.

#### ***Procedure***

The study was conducted online. Each student read a set of four paragraphs describing accompanying images, with the text and images drawn from news articles representing the Syrian refugee crisis. The participants filled out demographic information and personality surveys before the manipulations portion of the study and then filled out a set of questionnaires following the completion of the manipulations.

#### ***Stimulus Material***

Each participant received a set of four images with corresponding textual descriptions of life for Syrian refugees at different refugee locations: in Syria, in refugee camps, on the refugee trail, and on refugee water crossings. These images and descriptions were manipulated to create the experimental conditions.

### *Religious Image*

Participants received a set of images that either included the presence of the hijab or did not include the hijab or any other religious designation.

- Those in the religious image condition had at least one individual in all four of the images who was wearing a hijab.
- Participants in the nonreligious image condition had no religious symbols present in any of the photographs.

### *Written Descriptions*

Participants read either low content, medium content, or high content textual descriptions:

- In the low content conditions, the participants received a single paragraph of text with an overarching description of the conflict in Syria and its resulting refugee crisis. The text did not go into details about the different sites of refugee displacement shown in the images.
- In the medium content condition, participants received four separate paragraphs of text that matched each of the four sites of violent refugee displacement. These textual elements were short in length, were explanatory, and were not graphic, but did provide specific context to the scenario represented in the visual image.
- In the high content condition, participants also received four separate paragraphs that matched each of the four sites of violent refugee displacement. In contrast with the medium content conditions, however, the high content conditions were longer. They included descriptions of refugee experiences that had additional information as well as graphic descriptions of violence.

### *Emotion Level*

Participants received images that were designated as either high level of emotion or low level of emotion.

- Low-emotion images took place in the same categories as those in the high-emotion images—refugee trails, water crossings, refugee camps in Syria—but the subjects' faces within the images remained neutral.
- High-emotion images showed the subjects in these photographs portraying visible discomfort: screaming, crying, distraught.



## **Measures**

### *Demographics*

Before viewing the stimuli, the participants were asked a set of demographic questions, including their religious identification. They had a choice of 27 religious identifications but self-selected into 14 different categories. These religious identifications coalesced into nonreligious (21.5%), Jewish (19.2%), Christian (47%), and other (5.1%) religious identities. We filtered out the "other" category for the statistical analyses.

### *Emotional Reaction*

Following the reception of the stimuli, the participants then filled out several questionnaires. The first questionnaire measured discrete levels of emotion to identify levels of participant emotional empathy with the Syrian refugees in the story. We asked the participants, "After participating in this study, do you feel," and then had participants fill out a 7-point Likert scale (strongly agree to strongly disagree) for fear and sadness, among other emotions.

### *Threat*

We measured three different subcategories of threat: intercommunal, international, and interfaith threat. Across all three categories, we used a 7-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree" to measure participant responses. Three questions were used to assess intercommunal threat ( $\alpha = .66$ ): "Do you think Syrian refugees could become terrorists?" "Do you think refugees are dangerous?" and "Do you think the United States helping Syrian refugees takes away assistance from other disadvantaged communities?" International threat was assessed with the question, "Do you think the Middle East is inherently violent?" Interfaith threat was measured with two items ( $\alpha = .85$ ): "Do you think Muslims are violent?" and "Do you think Islam is a violent religion?" Although all three threat variables are consistent with ITT's revised symbolic and realistic threats hypothesis (threats to power, threats to economy, threats to physical well-being, threats to ideology), they are polysemous. Participants may have perceived the description of "violent" to mean that, for example, Islam is an ideological threat to U.S. White Christian hegemony or a physical threat to corporeal safety. We are not measuring participants' feelings of threat as rational, perceived, symbolic, or realistic. Rather, with these variables, we assess the origin of feelings of group threat to better understand the efficacy of stereotypes that contribute to the ITT paradigm.

### *Attitudes of Care*

We assessed attitudes showing care toward the situation with Syrian refugees using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." Three questions were used ( $\alpha = .73$ ): "Should the United States be providing resources to countries in Europe that are supporting Syrian refugees?" "Do you care about Syrian refugees?" and "Should Syrian refugees be able to come to the United States?" We also assessed behavioral intent to care for refugees with the question, "Does this survey cause you to want to take action?"

## Results

To assess the effect that religious symbolism, emotional cues, and contextual violence cues have on reactions to Syrian refugees in the news, we performed a 3 (participant religion: nonreligious, Christian, Jewish)  $\times$  2 (religious symbol: nonreligious image, religious image)  $\times$  2 (emotion level: low emotion, high emotion)  $\times$  3 (content level: low content, medium content, high content) analysis of variance (ANOVA) for each of the dependent variables. When significant main effects were found for factors with more than two groups, Scheffe post hoc tests were run to examine mean differences. The following section contains a summary of the results that we found.

H1a analyzing the impact of hijab on participant emotional reaction was partially supported. We found a significant difference in levels of sadness between religious image groups ( $F(1, 144) = 4.143, p = .04$ ) with the presence of hijab ( $M = 5.43, SE = 0.17$ ) leading to lessened feelings of sadness than the condition without a hijab ( $M = 6.01, SE = 0.18$ ), but we failed to find any significant difference in levels of fear between religious image groups ( $F(1,142) = 0.01, p = .93$ ).

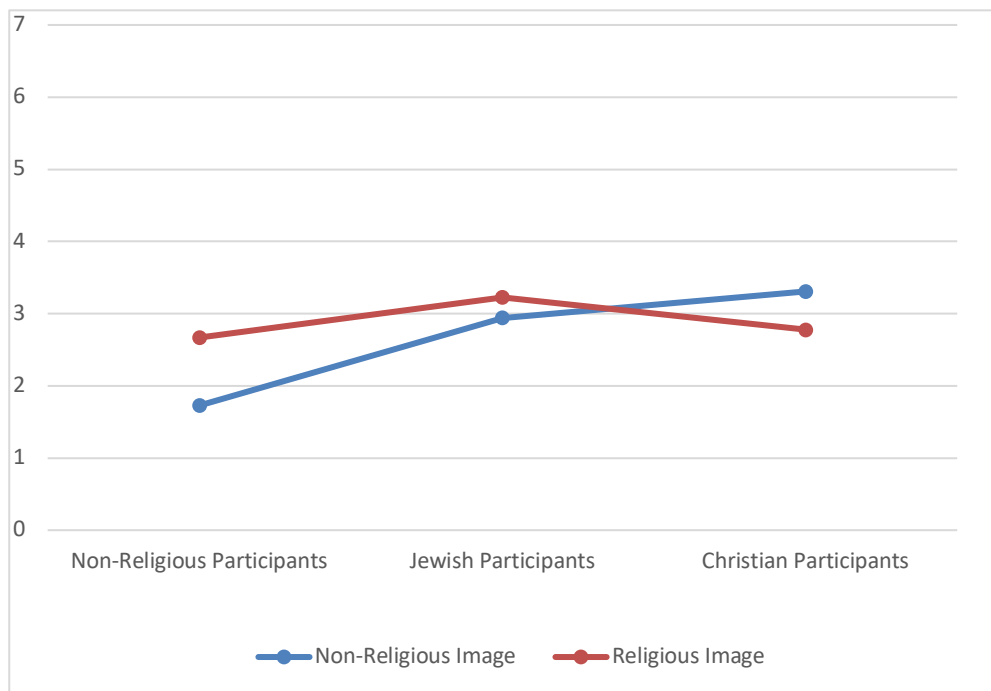
Our H1b also was supported. There was a significant difference between religious image groups for international threat ( $F(1, 143) = 7.34, p = .01$ ) with the presence of a hijab eliciting higher feelings of threat ( $M = 4.28, SE = 0.21$ ) than the condition without the hijab ( $M = 3.55, SE = 0.21$ ). There was also a significant interaction between the religious image and the emotion-level manipulations for the international threat measurement ( $F(1,143) = 4.00, p = .05$ ), with the lowest threat felt in the low-emotion, nonhijab condition ( $M = 2.79, SE = 0.38$ ), relative to the nonhijab high emotion ( $M = 4.42, SE = 0.27$ ), hijab high-emotion ( $M = 4.42, SE = 0.32$ ), and hijab low-emotion ( $M = 4.13, SE = 0.25$ ) conditions. We also found a significant difference between religious image conditions for the measure of intercommunal threat ( $F(1, 143) = 8.00, p = .01$ ) with the presence of a hijab prompting increased feelings of threat ( $M = 3.09, SE = 0.12$ ) than the condition without the hijab ( $M = 2.66, SE = 0.12$ ). There was no significant difference between religious image conditions in participant reaction to the measure of religious ideology threat, ( $F(1,144) = 0.37, p = .54$ ).

Last, H1c was partially supported because there was a significant difference between religious image conditions for participants' desire to take action ( $F(1, 144) = 4.27, p = .04$ ), with the presence of a hijab decreasing this desire ( $M = 4.43, SE = 0.18$ ) relative to the absence of a hijab ( $M = 5.02, SE = 0.20$ ), but there was no significant effect on the measure of care ( $F(1,143) = 1.00, p = .32$ ).

Now, turning toward the impact of participant religion in our study, religious identification did not affect the discrete emotion of sadness in H2a ( $F(2,144) = 1.15, p = .32$ ), but there was a significant difference in levels of fear according to participant religious identity ( $F(2, 142) = 3.80, p = .03$ ). Specifically, Jewish participants felt higher levels of fear ( $M = 5.13, SE = 0.27$ ) compared with their nonreligious ( $M = 4.01, SE = 0.29$ ) and Christian counterparts ( $M = 4.53, SE = 0.24$ ).

In our analyses of threat for H2b, there was a significant difference between participants' religious groups for religious international threat ( $F(2, 143) = 3.19, p = .04$ ). Nonreligious groups felt significantly lower levels of threat ( $M = 3.30, SE = 0.29$ ) than the Jewish groups ( $M = 4.43, SE = 0.27$ ) and the Christian

groups ( $M = 4.18$ ,  $SE = 0.23$ ). There was a significant interaction between the IVs of participant religion and the religious image for religious ideological threat ( $F(2, 143) = 6.51$ ,  $p = .01$ ; see Figure 1). We found a significant main effect for participants' religious groups on the measure of religious ideological threat ( $F(2, 144) = 3.49$ ,  $p = .03$ ), which illustrates that nonreligious participants felt less threatened toward Islam and Muslims ( $M = 2.198$ ,  $SE = 0.257$ ) than both the Jewish participants ( $M = 3.100$ ,  $SE = 0.235$ ) and the Christian participants ( $M = 3.042$ ,  $SE = 0.209$ ). We found a significant level of difference between participants' religious groups for the measure of intercommunal threat ( $F(2, 143) = 7.53$ ,  $p = .00$ ). Nonreligious groups felt significantly less threatened in this situation ( $M = 2.44$ ,  $SE = 0.16$ ) than their Christian counterparts ( $M = 3.23$ ,  $SE = 0.13$ ) but not their Jewish counterparts ( $M = 2.88$ ,  $SE = 0.15$ ).



**Figure 1. Estimated marginal means of religious ideology threat.**

In terms of levels of care toward Syrian refugees, H2c was partially supported. We failed to find a level of significant difference between participants' religious groups when asking if they desired to take action ( $F(2, 144) = 0.93$ ,  $p = .40$ ). There was, however, a significant main effect of participants' religious groups on the measure of care ( $F(2, 143) = 5.12$ ,  $p = .01$ ). Nonreligious groups ( $M = 4.05$ ,  $SE = 0.16$ ) held significantly higher levels of care and positive attitudes toward Syrian refugees than the Jewish groups ( $M = 3.45$ ,  $SE = 0.15$ ) and the Christian groups ( $M = 3.40$ ,  $SE = 0.13$ ).

About the results for the visual emotional cues manipulation, H3a was not supported as it pertains to the measures of discreet emotions of fear ( $F(1, 142) = 0.17$ ,  $p = .68$ ) and sadness ( $F(1, 144) = 0.27$ ,  $p = .61$ ). About H3b, however, we found significant differences for all relevant dependent variables (DVs). For H3b, there was a significant difference between emotional cue conditions for international threat ( $F(1, 143)$

= 6.51,  $p < .00$ ) with the heightened emotions cues prompting higher feelings of threat ( $M = 4.28$ ,  $SE = 0.21$ ) than the low-emotion condition ( $M = 3.50$ ,  $SE = 0.22$ ). We also found a significant difference between emotional cue conditions for the measure of religious ideology threat ( $F(1, 144) = 5.51$ ,  $p = .02$ ), with the high-emotion condition resulting in participants feeling higher levels of threat ( $M = 3.04$ ,  $SE = 0.19$ ) than the low level of emotion condition ( $M = 2.41$ ,  $SE = 0.20$ ), and also for the measure of intercommunal threat ( $F(1, 143) = 5.03$ ,  $p = .03$ ), which led to participants feeling increased threat with the heightened emotional cue ( $M = 3.00$ ,  $SE = 0.12$ ) and reduced feelings of threat with the low-emotional cue ( $M = 2.66$ ,  $SE = 0.12$ ). For H3c, there were no emotional cue effects with the DVs of care ( $F(1,143) = 1.48$ ,  $p = .23$ ) and desire to take action ( $F(1,144) = 1.85$ ,  $p = .18$ ) for Syrian refugees.

Last, in H4a, H4b, and H4c, we considered how the context manipulation might impact our DVs. Our H4a was the only aspect of this set of hypotheses that was partially satisfied as there was a near significant difference in levels of fear between levels of context ( $F(2, 142) = 3.02$ ,  $p = .05$ ), with the lowest context leading to participants feeling less fearful ( $M = 4.20$ ,  $SE = 0.39$ ) than the medium level of context condition ( $M = 4.36$ ,  $SE = 0.21$ ) or the high level of context condition ( $M = 4.94$ ,  $SE = 0.19$ ). But we failed to find significant difference in levels of sadness between levels of context for H4a ( $F(2,144) = 0.45$ ,  $p = .64$ ). There were no significant results for H4b considering context's impact on levels of threat, including international ( $F(2,143) = 0.03$ ,  $p = .98$ ), intercommunal ( $F(2,143) = 0.08$ ,  $p = .93$ ), and religious ideologies ( $F(2,144) = 1.13$ ,  $p = .33$ ), nor were there any significant results for H4c when measuring participants' care ( $F(2,143) = 0.03$ ,  $p = .97$ ) and desire to take action ( $F(2, 144) = 0.23$ ,  $p = .80$ ) for Syrian refugees.

### Discussion

Our results show that both the religious image manipulation and the participants' religion had significant effects across the affective and attitudinal spectrum. For the measures of sadness, take action, international threat, and intercommunal threat, participants were less receptive to Syrian refugees when they received the manipulation including the hijab. Results were similar for all interactions involving the religious image manipulation. Participants' religion had a main effect on the measures of fear, international threat, religious ideological threat, communal threat, and care. In each of these situations, nonreligious groups had generally more positive responses to Syrian refugees. Contextual elements relating to violence and attribution of blame in regard to violence had little to no effect on audiences' responses to Syrian refugee stories.

The emotional cue manipulation also had an impact, although not in the way we expected. We anticipated that participants would mimic the subjects' feelings of sadness and despair and exhibit more empathy toward the victims. Instead, the emotional displays by the victims seemed to set them apart. Participants felt higher levels of threat when they received the manipulation with the heightened emotional cue portraying Syrian victims with intensified feelings of sadness and despair.

One explanation for our results, which showed relatively high levels of sadness for Syrian refugees across the participant pool but decreasing levels of support when asked about feelings of intercommunal threat, taking action, and care, is that participants feel generalized sympathy toward the construct of the refugee but that the sympathy doesn't necessarily translate into positive attitudes toward

Syrian refugees. Participants were fairly liberal with their feelings of sympathy for Syrian refugees, going so far as to hold moderate attitudes of willingness to support Syrian refugees with provisions and resettlement options. But, even when attitudes toward Syrian refugees are more receptive, U.S. respondents find those without association to the hijab to be more palatable. In contrast, Syrian refugee association with the hijab renders them as an outgroup—more unpredictable, and thus more dangerous and less desirable for resettlement. Under these circumstances, the mere visual presence of the hijab paints the Syrian refugees as *that much more* devoted to Islam, and thus less assimilable, than those not pictured with, or alongside, the hijab. Additionally, rather than contextual elements explaining violence and apparent emotion increasing sympathy between the participants and Syrian refugees, our results indicate that these particular manipulations intensified preexisting outgroup stereotypes of aggression and threat, traits that U.S. media connect to Islam.

Another explanation for our results, and one not mutually exclusive to the first explanation, derives from the participants' responses as to why they do or do not support resettlement of Syrian refugees: Syrian refugees are often rhetorically connected to the radical terrorist group ISIS (the Islamic State, Da'esh, ISIL) and other forms of terrorism. There was renewed apprehension over ISIS and other fundamentalist terrorist groups during the 2016 U.S. presidential election cycle, during which ISIS was gaining control over Syrian land, forcibly recruiting Syrians into their army, and committing local and global terrorist attacks. As a result, verbalized connections between Syrian refugees and ISIS were mediated widely. These connections trivialized the experiences of forcibly displaced Syrians and disqualified their access to identities of victimhood. Donald Trump, for example, voiced concern that Syrian refugees would be able to hide terrorists in their resettlement groups.

This experiment purposefully left out any mention of the group ISIS so as to not rhetorically prime participants into the connection between ISIS and Syrian refugees. That the participants made this connection anyway speaks to extant sociopolitical rhetorical structures in the United States. We posit that the implications of this rhetoric may explain the variances in all three manipulations such that apparent religious symbolism, explicit explanations of violence, and heightened emotional cues all resulted in significantly worse responses to Syrian refugees. Media connection of the hijab, aggression, and violence to fundamentalist ideologies may have primed audiences to believe that hijab-wearing communities, highly emotional Syrian refugees, and Syrian refugees tied to extreme violence are more likely to be connected to ISIS and aggressive behavior such as terrorism. Additionally, the hijab's connotations position Syrian refugees in the hijab condition as more of an other than the condition without hijab. For the participants in our study, U.S. citizens, predominantly White, and nonreligious, Jewish, and Christian, the hijab is a distancing mechanism from Syrian refugees, distinguishing them as an outgroup and signaling an unrecognizability that could be at once frightening and threatening.

Not only does the corporeal presence of the hijab render its wearer to some extent hidden—i.e., concealing a “person of threat”—but it also symbolizes what is in many ways an unknowable other to U.S. citizens who primarily come into contact with Muslims through media representations. Ilhan Omar, for example, symbolized illegibility to U.S. citizens by both embodying a hijab-wearing Muslim woman and also a successful, intelligent, progressive woman who chooses to wear the hijab. Her multifaceted identity signals that refugees such as Omar increasingly shirk notions of assimilability to instead shape their own multitudes

of identities. This ideology signals a shift in U.S. refugee and immigration social norms and poses a threat to privilege and power in the eyes of some U.S. citizens. It is both the literal veiling—concealing corporeal aspects of the Muslim woman, thus reducing a power of *knowing* that some deem necessary for understanding—as well as an ideological concealment of one's belief system that the hijab has come to stand for, that render the hijab as emotionally, affectively, and attitudinally disruptive.

Given that our explanation for these differences is contextualized within current sociopolitical and religious U.S. events, it is necessary to address the differences among participants' religious groups because of their important role in our model. We found that for all dependent variables, nonreligious groups responded more positively to Syrian refugees. Whereas Jewish faith groups held more negative emotional reactions and feelings of threat toward Syrian refugees, Christian communities were the least likely to support actions of care toward Syrian refugees. Presumably, religious identity further distances the ingroup from the outgroup in these cases. That is not to say, however, that nonreligious groups do not hold biases; in the ANOVA where religious group belonging moderated perceptions of SWANA as inherently violent, nonreligious groups had the largest disparity in variance based on the presence or absence of the hijab. Future research should further explore whether these differences in participant reactions were because of their belief systems or the sociopolitical histories of these three religious communities.

### **Conclusion and Implications**

Media effects research has concentrated on how representations of Brown, SWANA, or Muslim identities result in institutional and personal setbacks for these communities (e.g., Grillo, 2014; Stolle et al., 2016; Strabac et al., 2016). There is substantial research showing that news media representations of marginalized communities such as Muslims and other racial or ethnic minorities are disproportionately negative and uphold stereotypes about these groups (Brown et al., 2017; Calfano et al., 2016). According to a 2017 Pew Research Center: Religion & Public Life poll, roughly half of Muslim-Americans state that they had experienced an instance of religious discrimination in the last year and 6% of Muslims say they had been physically threatened or attacked (CAIR California, 2013, 2017; U.S. Muslims Concerned, 2017). FBI reports on hate crimes against Muslims, notoriously low because of unreported attacks and the inability to properly categorize Islamophobic or anti-Arab and anti-SWANA attacks, showed that in 2017, the 127 anti-Muslim assaults outpaced even the 93 assaults resulting from increased anti-Muslim racism following the 9/11 terrorist attacks (Kishi, 2017).

Given the generalized data that connect representations of Islam and Muslim identity to instances of harassment, bullying, and institutional violence, news media have a crucial role in contributing to discourse surrounding religious identities. Extant priming research has shown that stereotypic verbal cues in news media impact public support for national and geopolitical policies about Muslims, specifically when the topic of terrorism is raised (Saleem, Prot, Anderson, & Lemieux, 2015). Additionally, media effects research has illustrated the ways in which visual cues, in these cases limited to racial representation of Black and White males, influence audience judgments about criminal activities (Dixon & Azocar, 2007; Mastro, Lapinski, Kopacz, & Behm-Morawitz, 2009). This scholarship relies on negative priming attributes—terrorism, criminality—to assess participant support for retribution—military action in Muslim countries, prison time. Alternatively, our research focused on priming audiences with sympathetic textual and visual

representations of victimhood and its effects on audience attitudes toward refugees and their resettlement. Our results contribute to the priming literature by demonstrating that in instances where U.S. participants are primed with two separate identity categories—victims and Syrians/Muslims/Arabs—participants' cognitive map that rhetorically connects instantiations of violence (the Syrian war, ISIS) to Islam and the SWANA region is the primary activation point. Moreover, whereas existing research shows that audiences misread emotional facial cues more often when the target is wearing a Muslim face covering versus a non-Muslim face covering, our research demonstrates that audiences altogether misread, or alternatively interpret, representations of anguish and sadness as threatening more often when the target image merely *includes* a hijab, even when the face is fully visible and the target is visually victimized (Ahmed, 2018; Brambilla et al., 2018; Kret & Fischer, 2018).

In contribution to social identity literature, our hijab findings show how perceptions of threat toward an outgroup can override affective emotional responses and intensify the background modulation of facial cue perception (Van den Stock et al., 2014). Last, we contribute to recent findings on the role of U.S. Christian nationalism in political ideology when we show that U.S. Christians hold more negative attitudes toward Syrian refugees than their nonreligious and Jewish counterparts, regardless of political affiliation, and we demonstrate the saliency of religious beliefs in shaping intergroup affiliations (Whitehead, Perry, & Baker, 2018; Windle, 2004).

Our research offers an examination of the way in which material religious symbolism, participants' religious belonging, emotional cues, and textual cues of violence factor into ingroup and outgroup memberships in news media representations of Syrian refugees. Such communal divisions find particular relevance when the community under question occupies a precarious liminal position with far-reaching political ramifications, as is the case for Syrian refugees desiring resettlement in the United States and for Syrian refugees more broadly. Experimental analysis such as ours is important for several reasons: negative media representations both produce harmful living conditions for Muslim and associated communities, such as SWANA groups and refugees, and public support for Syrian refugee resettlement and positive views of these communities impact U.S. global policy. Moreover, public attitudes have the potential to influence interpersonal and institutional treatment of Syrian refugees and affiliated groups already residing in the United States. Without proper analysis of how and when these negative stereotypes occur, there are missed opportunities for countermeasures that could systemically improve treatment for these groups.

### ***Future Research and Limitations***

There are a few limitations worth noting with the above research. This research considered the symbolic representation of Islam on the body of women and not men because of the identifiable Muslim symbol of the hijab. Yet, as evidenced both by political representations of Syrian refugees as well as U.S. military policy in the SWANA region, men are considered more threatening and less likely to be victims than women. About this study's methodology, another possible limitation to our research project is our use of university students as the sample. Several issues arise from using this particular group as the sample in a study, including the limitations in age range, access to higher education, as well as the disproportionate religious identities of this sample as compared with the U.S. population—particularly as pertains to Jewish and nonreligious communities. There was enough variance in this population, however, that we did see

effects related to the experimental manipulations. This is notable given that the college sample is likely more tolerant of refugees than the general population. Still, future research should explore these effects in a more diverse sample.

The goal of this research is to better understand the complex web of cognitive associations among immigrants, refugees, and more specific identities such as Syrian refugees or groups associated with the hijab and their emotional and/or violent contextualization. We chose to mobilize imagery of Syrian refugees using the presence or absence of a hijab rather than including other religious symbols for those Syrians who identify as Christian. This research's scope also neglected to include other communities that have mandatory dress requirements, such as Orthodox Jews, Sikhs, or certain Christian denominations. Thus, additional studies may provide important theoretical differentiations between biases based on religious difference or biases targeting Brown and/or Muslim communities. Moreover, to date, media research has privileged the views of White Christian-centric communities about their views toward Muslims. Our research points to the variances among ethnic and religious communities, such as Christians, Jews, and nonreligious groups; further analyses that explore the effects of such disparities in attitude and behavior would contribute to extant literature on the topic.

One takeaway from this experiment could be that journalists and media producers should avoid using imagery that includes the hijab when trying to portray Syrian refugees in a sympathetic light. This takeaway, however, at the same time reinforces dominant ideologies that demonize Muslim communities while rewarding those who endorse the unveiling of Muslim women as a form of assimilation. Instead, we encourage future research to explore the ways in which media representations can at once seek to dismantle biases toward Syrian refugees and those wearing hijabs while also representing these communities according to their own modes of self-representation. Additionally, our findings suggest that heightened emotional facial expressions and contextual graphic violence exacerbate the "othering" of Syrian refugee communities. Given these findings, we urge both further exploration of the topic in connection to SIT as well as a reconsideration of news media use of these forms of graphic violence that at times have encouraged audiences' voyeuristic gazes. Further inquiries pertaining to contextual elements and visual cues that prompt positive emotional connectivity to the subject are advised to combat attitudes detrimental to marginalized communities such as Syrian refugees. Because of ongoing state violence in Syria since 2016 amid global environmental and pandemic crises, we encourage continual reassessment of the present findings as well as further inquiries that center other displaced people, such as those fleeing Afghanistan following the cessation of the U.S. occupation and reinstatement of the Taliban government in summer 2021.

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