Drifting Further Apart? How Exposure to Media Portrayals of Muslims Affects Attitude Polarization

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Political discourses about Muslim immigration in the media and on social networking sites (SNSs) are highly contentious and have the potential to further polarize societal segments, which may ultimately harm democratic processes. Especially on SNSs, politicians and citizens can circumvent journalistic filters often resulting in blatant and emotionally charged content. Using a two-wave panel design (N = 559), we investigated how positive and negative portrayals of Muslims in traditional media outlets and on SNSs influence anti-Muslim immigration attitudes among people who either agree or disagree with the encountered information. Our findings indicate that exposure to negative portrayals further reinforces anti-Muslim immigration attitudes among those who agree with the encountered information. In contrast, for those who disagree with the negative information, a backfire effect emerges, showing that anti-Muslim attitudes even decrease. This effect occurs for both SNSs and traditional media. Positive information about Muslims did not result in attitude polarization.

KEY WORDS: attitude polarization, news, social networking sites, Muslims, panel survey

Muslim immigration to Western societies is a highly contentious topic. Political events such as Donald Trump's immigration ban for Muslims, Islamist terrorist attacks in Western countries as well as the European refugee crisis have contributed to a polarized public opinion climate in many Western countries (Dunwoody & McFarland, 2018; Heath & Richards, 2016; Strabac & Listhaug, 2008). The prevalence of hostility toward Muslims in many Western societies is also visible in the rising number of hate crimes and assaults against Muslims offline and online (e.g., Pew Research Center, 2017; Williams & Burnap, 2016). In this context, the question arises to what degree discourses about Muslim immigration in the media and social networking sites (SNSs) contribute to polarized public opinions about Muslims.

Findings from previous studies suggest that portrayals of Muslims are overwhelmingly negative in the mainstream media (Ahmed & Matthes, 2016; Bowe, Fahmy, & Wanta, 2013; Dixon & Williams, 2015; Powell, 2011) and on SNSs (Farkas, Schou, & Neumayer, 2017; Kaakinen, Oksanen,

& Räsänen, 2018; Williams & Burnap, 2016). As the non-Muslim majority in Western societies has little direct contact with the Muslim minority (Jung, 2012), such emotionally charged and threatening content in the media may crucially contribute to a polarized opinion climate (Farkas et al., 2017; Hameleers & Schmuck, 2017).

Despite the negative ramifications these messages may have, important gaps in understandings of attitude polarization in response to negative portrayals in the mainstream media and SNSs remain. First, existing research has largely neglected the influence of attitude congruence. The exacerbating effect of news portrayals of Muslims on anti-Muslim attitudes found in previous research (Saleem, Prot, Anderson, & Lemieux, 2017; Saleem, Yang, & Ramasubramanian, 2016) may not be uniform for all news consumers, but they depend on the congruence between the information and news consumers' preexisting attitudes toward this issue (Binder, Dalrymple, Brossard, & Scheufele, 2009; Jamieson & Cappella, 2008; Kim, 2015; Wojcieszak, 2010, 2011).

Second, although news coverage about Muslims is dominated by negative information (Ahmed & Matthes, 2016; Bowe et al., 2013; Dixon & Williams, 2015; Powell, 2011), journalists often deliberately portray particular positive examples of minority members (Ramasubramanian, 2011, 2015). In fact, content analyses on news coverage in general show that in many countries, positive topics such as successful postarrival integration or rights for immigrants are almost as prevalent as negative topics centering around border control or crime (Brosius, van Elsas, & de Vreese, 2019; De Cock et al., 2018). Yet, existing research reveals conflicting results regarding the effects of positive media portrayals of minority members suggesting that they may either attenuate (Bodenhausen, Schwarz, Bless, & Wänke, 1995; Ramasubramanian, 2011, 2015; Schemer, 2012) or backfire and aggravate existing attitude polarization (e.g., Bail et al., 2018; Wojcieszak, 2010, 2011; Wojcieszak & Price, 2010). Therefore, a more thorough investigation of the message's valence is warranted.

Third, none of the studies to date have attempted to systematically compare people's exposure to congruent and incongruent opinions about Muslims in traditional media and on SNSs. On SNSs, hostile portrayals and hateful speech have been found to be highly prevalent, especially in the aftermath of terrorist attacks (Kaakinen et al., 2018; Williams & Burnap, 2016). Additionally, due to the possible circumvention of journalistic filters (Engesser, Ernst, Esser, & Büchel, 2017), Facebook posts and Tweets are often marked by fiery anti-Muslim rhetoric from conservative commentators and politicians, including the U.S. president Donald Trump. Thus, the polarizing potential of exposure to political messages might even be higher for SNSs compared to traditional news.

This study aims to fill these important gaps in the literature by examining the relationship between exposure to negative and positive information about Muslims in traditional media and SNSs and issue-based attitude polarization. In doing so, we take into account the congruence of the information with individuals' preexisting issue-specific attitudes as an important moderator of those effects. As such patterns are difficult to discern in cross-sectional survey or lab experimental designs, we employed a two-wave panel design in the context of a political election campaign. A political campaign provides a fruitful context to investigate the influence of information encountered in the media or on SNSs on issue-specific attitude polarization, as media attention is increased in such periods and latent issue positions are heightened (Song & Boomgaarden, 2017).

We conducted the study in Austria, where Muslims form a fast-growing minority group and currently constitute approximately 8% of the Austrian population with most Muslim immigrants originating from Turkey, Bosnia, and Syria (Goujon, Jurasszovich, & Potančoková, 2017). At the same time, perceived threats from Muslim immigrants are comparably high in Austria as evidenced by the European Social Survey (Marfouk, 2019). Similar to other European countries in Europe, the issue of immigration and the related topics of asylum seekers and Islam religion became an important issue in Austrian politics during the European refugee crisis in summer 2015 and remained salient ever since (Bodlos & Plescia, 2018). For these reasons, Austria represents an important context to examine if and how media portrayals of Muslims contribute to anti-Muslim immigration attitudes.

Exposure to Attitude-Congruent Portrayals of Muslims

News media may play a powerful role in contributing to more extreme—that is, more polarized attitudes. The phenomenon of attitude polarization, which can be described as the strengthening of one's original attitude or opinion, has received much scholarly attention (Stroud, 2008). The existing literature on political attitude polarization differentiates between partisan polarization, which is characterized by a reinforcement of existing partisan ideology (Feldman, 2011; Iyengar & Westwood, 2015), and issue-specific attitude polarization, which refers to an increase in the extremity of issue positions in the public. Thus, people move from moderate attitudes toward a certain issue to more extreme and committed positions (Mason, 2013). It is important to distinguish issue-specific polarization from partisan polarization, because an increase in the strength of partisan ideology (e.g., identify as Republican) does not necessarily entail an equivalent increase in the extremity of a political issue position (e.g., oppose Muslim immigration, Mason, 2015).

Especially if individuals predominantly select attitude-consistent messages—that is, engage in selective exposure—news media exposure may contribute to attitude polarization (Stroud, 2008). The underlying mechanism for the effects of exposure to homogenous media messages on attitude polarization is seen in the exposure to persuasive arguments, which are in favor of one's own opinion. Exposure to attitude-congruent information increases the accessibility of like-minded thoughts, which reduces uncertainty and strengthens the impression of attitude correctness (Gaffney, Rast, Hackett, & Hogg, 2014). Researchers have repeatedly shown a link between attitude-congruent media consumption and attitude polarization (Binder et al., 2009; Kim, 2015; Slater, 2007; Song & Boomgaarden, 2017; Stroud, 2007, 2008, 2010; Taber & Lodge, 2006). In a seminal investigation of individuals' media use including a variety of different news media types, Stroud (2008) found that exposure to political content that is consistent with one's ideology contributes to partisan polarization (see also Garrett et al., 2014). In a subsequent cross-lagged analysis, Stroud (2010) could demonstrate that the media causally influence partisan polarization, which was supported in follow-up studies (e.g., Kim, 2015).

Attitude polarization has further received notable research attention in the context of SNSs. Due to filter algorithms on SNSs, many scholars have pointed to the risks of so-called filter bubbles or echo chambers, that is, the phenomenon that citizens tend to expose themselves primarily to like-minded views (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Jamieson & Cappella, 2008), while others challenge that view (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2017; Weeks, Ksiazek, & Holbert, 2016). Overall, however, there is evidence suggesting that the homogeneity of one's network (e.g., Lee, Kwak, & Campbell, 2015) and discussions with like-minded others (e.g., Huckfeldt, Mendez, & Osborn, 2004) are directly linked to the robustness of attitudes. With regard to issue-specific polarization, findings from existing research support the idea that discussions with like-minded others in an online context strengthen existing attitudes and therefore lead to attitude polarization (Bail et al., 2018). Being embedded in a like-minded social network has been found to lead to more pronounced attitudes in different attitude domains such as Neo-Nazi extremism (Wojcieszak, 2010), sexual minority rights (Wojcieszak, 2011; Wojcieszak & Price, 2010), or attitudes toward immigrants among immigration opponents (Wojcieszak & Garrett, 2018). Yet, while the contribution of attitude-congruent exposure to attitude polarization has received wide support, there is debate as to whether or not attitude-incongruent exposure fosters attitude polarization.

Attitude-Incongruent Exposure to Portrayals of Muslims

Although there is growing evidence that media users are frequently exposed to attitude-incongruent opinions both online and offline, the literature remains inconclusive about the polarizing influence of exposure to messages that conflict with individuals' attitudes. Some researchers find

that exposure to dissimilar views may encourage people to take those opposing views into account in reconsidering their biases and may ultimately attenuate citizens' extreme and polarized attitudes (e.g., Gutmann & Thompson, 1996; Kim, 2015; Price, Cappella, & Nir, 2002). Others have demonstrated that when exposed to dissimilar views, people may be motivated to uphold their beliefs and even get more extreme in their attitudes suggesting that disagreement even leads to more polarized attitudes (Meffert, Joiner, Garst, Waks, & Chung, 2006; Wojcieszak, 2010, 2011). This tendency is called the "backfire effect" and describes the phenomenon that individuals who are exposed to disagreement counterargue to offset attitude-threatening information (Wood & Porter, 2019). These counterarguments accentuate individuals' commitment to preexisting beliefs and therefore aggravate polarization (Bail et al., 2018).

While studies have revealed inconclusive results with regard to a backfire effect in general partisan polarization (e.g., Bail et al., 2018), studies investigating issue-specific polarization point toward more consistent results. More specifically, perceived incongruence with a message has been found to contribute to the strengthening of one's existing attitude toward this issue—that is, issue-specific attitude polarization. Such a backfire effect is especially likely in the context of controversial topics (Kim, 2015). For instance, studies find evidence for attitude polarization in response to attitude-incongruent information in the context of issues such as affirmative action and gun control (Taber & Lodge, 2006), stem-cell research (Binder et al., 2009), neo-Nazi extremism (Wojcieszak, 2010), climate change (Hart & Nisbet, 2012), racial attitudes (Jamieson & Cappella, 2008), energy politics (Kim, 2015), and sexual minority rights (Wojcieszak & Price, 2010).

This backfire effect has often been explained with the biased processing model (Kunda, 1990), which postulates that existing attitudes bias information perception and evaluation. That is, people who are committed to their attitude tend to rationalize the opinions already formed by readily accepting consonant information and critique attitude-discrepant perspectives rather than trying to understand the opposite side. Such motivated reasoning can strengthen people's initial convictions leading to widening attitudinal gaps in society (Taber & Lodge, 2006).

It has been argued that the degree to which individuals engage in biased processing depends on the affective response (Lodge & Taber, 2000, 2005). "Hot" topics are more likely to lead to directionally motivated reasoning (see also Feldman, 2011). Based on this logic, biased processing should be particularly likely in response to political information about Muslims, as this topic is often associated with emotionally charged attributes such as perceived threats, fear of terror, or radicalism.

Hypotheses

Taken together, the theoretical arguments and empirical evidence outlined above suggest that exposure to portrayals of Muslims in traditional media and SNSs might contribute to issue-specific attitude polarization. On the one hand, exposure to attitude-congruent information about Muslims may influence individuals' attitudes toward Muslims in line with the messages' content (Stroud, 2008, 2010). On the other hand, when individuals are confronted with disagreement on a contentious issue, attitude-incongruent information can lead to a backfire effect—that is, individuals change their attitudes in the opposite direction of the presented information (Taber & Lodge, 2006; Wojcieszak, 2010; Wojcieszak & Price, 2010). Thus, in line with the biased-processing model (Kunda, 1990), individuals actively defend their existing views when those views are challenged by attitude-incongruent information.

Extrapolated to the context of anti-Muslim attitudes, it follows that negative information should increase anti-Muslim immigration attitudes among individuals who agree with the encountered information. Conversely, individuals who are exposed to negative information about Muslims and disagree with that information are likely to become more positive in their attitudes toward Muslim immigration (i.e., backfire effect). Thus, we hypothesized:

H1a: Exposure to negative information about Muslims *increases* negative attitudes toward Muslim immigration when the information is predominantly *attitude congruent*.

H1b: Exposure to negative information about Muslims *decreases* negative attitudes toward Muslim immigration when the information is predominantly *attitude incongruent*.

Although research explicitly focusing on positive information about minority members is scarce, findings from studies investigating issue-specific polarization (Bail et al., 2018; Kim, 2015; Wojcieszak, 2010; Wojcieszak & Garrett, 2018; Wojcieszak & Price, 2010) can also be transferred to positive portrayals of Muslims. More specifically, if one is exposed to predominantly positive information and this information is predominantly congruent with one's attitudes, negative attitudes toward Muslim immigration should be decreased. Conversely, if individuals are exposed to positive information about Muslims and disagree with that information, their attitudes toward Muslim immigration are likely to become even more negative.

H2a: Exposure to positive information about Muslims *decreases* negative attitudes toward Muslim immigration when the information is predominantly *attitude congruent*.

H2b: Exposure to positive information about Muslims *increases* negative attitudes toward Muslim immigration when the information is predominantly *attitude incongruent*.

Scholars have made a strong case for considering both traditional media environments as well as more interpersonal environments such as SNSs, since focusing solely on one or the other can yield incomplete results (Song & Boomgaarden, 2017; Wojcieszak, 2010). There are several reasons to assume that SNS exposure leads to stronger effects than traditional media exposure. First, high-choice environments such as SNSs increase the probability of selective exposure patterns—that is exposure to attitude-congruent content (Bakshy, Messing, & Adamic, 2015), which makes attitude polarization more likely (Stroud, 2010). Second, SNSs users can spread their messages in unfiltered and often uncivil ways without needing to observe norms of political correctness, while mainstream media face pressure to uphold professional norms and values (Engesser et al., 2017). As such, SNSs provide a platform that make extremist and radical ideas as well as online hate messages accessible to a large audience (Bliuc, Faulkner, Jakubowicz, & McGarty, 2018; Keipi, Näsi, Oksanen, & Räsänen, 2017). Muslims have been found to be particularly likely to become a target of online hate attacks, especially in time periods of perceived threat or uncertainty, for instance, in the aftermath of a terrorist attack (Kaakinen et al., 2018; Williams & Burnap, 2016). Therefore, messages on SNSs might be more extreme than those encountered in traditional media and have a stronger polarizing effect.

In contrast, mass media coverage has a wider reach than messages on SNSs and may be ascribed more source credibility, which may lead to stronger perceived biases such as hostile media perceptions for traditional media outlets. The hostile media effect describes the phenomenon that news coverage in traditional media is perceived as biased against one's own opinion even if the news reports are actually neutral (Vallone, Ross, & Lepper, 1985). In other words, if individuals consider the mainstream media biased against their opinions, perceived attitude-message incongruence is higher, which may result in stronger polarization effects. However, because existing research has not yet systematically compared the effect of exposure to negative and positive attitude-congruent and attitude-incongruent information in traditional media and SNSs, we posed a research question: How do the effects described above differ for traditional media and SNSs?

Method

We used data from a two-wave panel survey conducted by a large private survey company in the context of the Austrian national parliamentary election 2017 (N_{w2} = 559). The first wave was

conducted between August 29 and September 2, 2017. The second wave was implemented one week before the actual election, i.e., between October 5 and October 12. Hence, participants were exposed to one month of intensive election campaign in the period between the two waves. We defined quotas based on the distribution of age, gender, and education in Austria. Because the questionnaire was mainly concerned with SNS use, we sampled people from 16 to 65 ($M = 44.49$, $SD = 12.61$) who reported to use either Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, or Instagram. We did not sample individuals above the age of 65 because the penetration rate of SNS use in this age group is still very low. Nevertheless, the mean age is representative for Austria (42.8 years in 2019).

Sample

We collected data from 764 individuals in the first wave, and some 73% responded in the second wave. Our sample is composed of 50.27% female. Some 19% had college degrees, 27% had degrees from college-bound high schools, and 48% apprenticeship or vocational schools. The remaining participants hold degrees from compulsory schools. Although the attrition rate was 27%, our sample is still fairly representative for the Austrian population. The original quotas (based on national population survey) were 18% college-bound high schools, 13% college degrees, 44% apprenticeship/vocational school, and 25% compulsory school only. In total, 18.25% indicated that they or their parents were born abroad.

Participants in the two waves did not differ with regard to their exposure to proattitudinal, $F(1,763) = 1.603$, $p = .206$, $\eta^2 = .00$, counterattitudinal, $F(1,763) = 0.613$, $p = .434$, $\eta^2 = .00$, positive, $F(1,763) = 0.252$, $p = .616$, $\eta^2 = .00$, or negative, $F(1,763) = 2.449$, $p = .118$, $\eta^2 = .00$, portrayals of Muslims on SNSs at Time 1. Likewise, there were no significant differences between participants in the two waves with regard to their exposure to proattitudinal, $F(1,763) = 1.437$, $p = .231$, $\eta^2 = .00$, counterattitudinal, $F(1,763) = 0.271$, $p = .603$, $\eta^2 = .00$, positive, $F(1,763) = 0.161$, $p = .688$, $\eta^2 = .00$, or negative, $F(1,763) = 0.081$, $p = .776$, $\eta^2 = .00$, portrayals of Muslims in traditional media in wave 1. However, participants who dropped out at Time 2 indicated significantly lower anti-Muslim attitudes in wave 1, $F(1,763) = 14.995$, $p < .001$, compared to those who participated in both waves. Yet, the effect size reveals a very small effect ($\eta^2 = .02$).

Measures

All items were measured on a 7-point Likert-type scale and are displayed in Appendix S2 in the online supporting information. We assessed attitudes toward Muslim immigration ($\alpha_{(w1)} = 0.93$, $M_{(w1)} = 4.49$, $SD_{(w1)} = 2.08$; $\alpha_{(w2)} = 0.94$, $M_{(w2)} = 4.50$, $SD_{(w2)} = 2.10$) with three standard items based on Matthes and Schmuck (2017).

In order to measure relative congruence, we first constructed congruence and incongruence exposure scales (two items each) following Wojcieszak and Price (2010). We assessed congruent ($\rho = 0.89$, $M = 3.96$, $SD = 1.72$) and incongruent ($\rho = 0.86$, $M = 3.48$, $SD = 1.60$) opinion exposure on SNSs, with two items each asking how often people in participants' network on SNSs (Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, or Instagram) express the same/different opinion like their opinion on issues related to Muslims and Islam. We calculated the Spearman-Brown coefficient to assess the internal consistency of the items. To measure congruent ($\rho = 0.87$, $M = 3.60$, $SD = 1.42$) and incongruent ($\rho = 0.87$, $M = 4.08$, $SD = 1.52$) opinion exposure on traditional media, we asked participants how often they are confronted with news media articles and reports (newspapers, TV, radio) that express the same/different opinion like their opinion on issues related to Muslims and Islam.

We also tested the four-factors distinction along congruence and media type. We found support for the four-factors solution using *parallel analysis* and *principal axis factoring* with oblimin rotation

(see Worthington & Whittaker, 2006). All factor loadings were above 0.8, and the eigenvalues for the four factors were 1.59 (congruent, SNSs), 1.53 (incongruent, SNSs), 1.53 (congruent, traditional media), and 1.52 (incongruent, traditional media).

Based on these scales, we constructed two *relative congruence indices*, one for SNSs and one for traditional media. The relative score was calculated by: congruence score / (congruence score + incongruence score). For a similar approach, see Prior (2005). The *SNSs relative congruence* index reaches from 0.125 to 0.875 ($M = 0.53$, $SD = 0.13$). The *traditional media relative congruence* index reaches from 0.125 to 0.800 ($M = 0.47$, $SD = 0.11$).

Furthermore, we measured how frequently they are exposed to negative information about Muslims and Islam on SNSs ($\rho = 0.94$, $M = 3.87$, $SD = 1.89$) and in traditional media ($\rho = 0.92$, $M = 4.20$, $SD = 1.70$) based on Saleem and colleagues (2017). In order to measure exposure to negative information, we used the same introductory questions for SNSs and traditional media as above. Participants then reported how often they encounter (1) information about criminal activities (e.g., rape, sexual assault) and (2) information about extremism and radicalization of Muslims in Austria. We then measured how frequently individuals are exposed to positive information about Muslims and Islam on SNSs ($\rho = 0.91$, $M = 2.92$, $SD = 1.49$) and in traditional media ($\rho = 0.92$, $M = 3.21$, $SD = 1.47$). Based on existing content analyses (e.g., De Cock et al., 2018), we asked how often participants encounter information about (1) positive achievements and (2) the successful integration of Muslims in Austria.

Again, we ran parallel analysis and principal axis factoring (oblimin rotation) with all items and found support for the proposed four-factor solution. All factor loadings were above 0.9, and the eigenvalues were 1.771 (positive, SNSs), 1.716 (negative, SNSs), 1.715 (positive, traditional media), and 1.665 (negative, traditional media).

Data Analysis

To test our hypotheses, we ran four regression models predicting anti-Muslim immigration attitudes in wave 2. In each of the models, we control for the autoregressive effect of anti-Muslim immigration attitudes (i.e., the wave 1 score). Thus, these models explain changes in anti-Muslim immigration attitudes from wave 1 to wave 2 which are not explained by individuals' wave 1 anti-Muslim immigration attitudes scores. This panel design reduces problems related to omitted variables, selection bias, and reverse causation, because we only compare individuals with the same anti-Muslim attitudes score at wave 1, and changes in anti-Muslim attitudes from wave 1 to wave 2 cannot affect wave 1 characteristics (Prior, 2005). We used the *jtools* package in R (see Long, 2018) to plot and probe the moderation effects.

As control variables (see measures in Appendix S2 in the online supporting information), we included gender, age, education, and migration background, which have been found to influence anti-Muslim immigration attitudes in previous research (Dunwoody & McFarland, 2018; Strabac & Listhaug, 2008). We computed two dummy variables for education with high education representing college degree and medium education representing college-bound high school degree, and all others as a reference category. Furthermore, to rule out that our findings are influenced by individuals' frequency of general news use, we assessed the frequency of news use via different channels. As much of the content on SNSs origins from traditional media, we also controlled for respondents' use of SNSs for news. Additionally, we controlled for political interest as a standard control variable in political communication research and prior experiences with Muslims, since intergroup contact crucially influences prejudice toward minority groups (e.g., Voci & Hewstone, 2003). Note that we also ran models which included the general use of different social media platforms as control variables (i.e., the frequency of using Twitter and other SNS channels). However, these variables did not affect the results and did not contribute explanatory power, so we proceeded with the parsimonious models.

Additionally, our results also remained stable when we ran the analyses with political ideology (left-wing vs. right-wing orientation) as covariate.

Results

Before testing our hypotheses, we look at the mean values of our key independent variables across SNSs and traditional media. Figure 1 shows the sample mean values with 95% confidence intervals. The values indicate that the mean value for congruent exposure is higher for SNSs compared to traditional media. Furthermore, exposure to incongruent opinions are considerably smaller for SNSs compared to traditional media, but both exposure to positive and negative portrayals of Muslims is more intense in traditional media compared to SNSs. These differences between SNSs and traditional media are all significant, since there is no overlap between the confidence intervals of each individual exposure type across the two media types.

Table 1 shows the regression results. Model 1 and model 3 show the main effects of valence and relative congruence, indicating that positive exposure reduced anti-Muslim immigration attitudes in the SNS context ($b = -.08$, $SE = .05$, $p = .024$) and higher levels of relative congruence increased anti-Muslim immigration attitudes in the traditional media environment ($b = .88$, $SE = .44$, $p = .044$). More importantly, models 2 and 4 show the results with regard to our hypotheses. Our first hypothesis assumed that exposure to negative portrayals of Muslims would increase anti-Muslim immigration attitudes when exposure is predominantly congruent (H1a), but it would decrease anti-Muslim immigration attitudes when exposure is predominantly incongruent (H1b). We find support for this assumption as indicated by the significant interaction effect between negative exposure and relative congruence both in the SNS context ($b = .50$, $SE = .19$, $p = .009$) and in the traditional media context ($b = .82$, $SE = .25$, $p < .001$). Figures 2 and 3 visually depict these interactions. Panel A in the figures plots the simple slopes based on Table 1, keeping covariates at mean values. Panel B plots the Johnson-Neyman significance intervals, indicating the slope size of negative exposure and its significance intervals across all observed levels of the moderator (i.e., relative congruence). The figures indicate that among individuals who primarily encounter attitude-congruent information about Muslims, exposure to negative information increases anti-Muslim immigration attitudes.
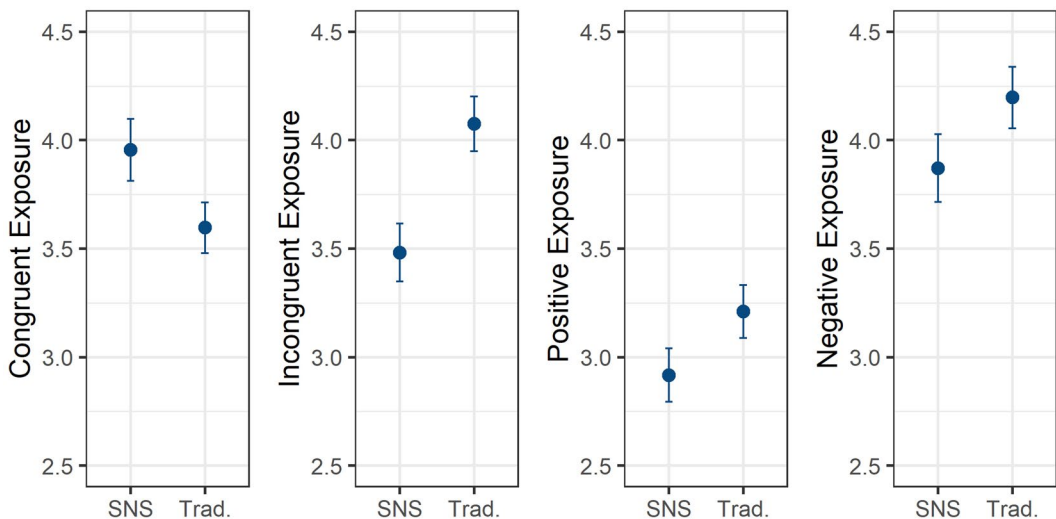

Figure 1. Sample mean values with 95% confidence for congruent, incongruent, positive, and negative exposure to information about Muslims and Islam across SNSs and traditional media (Trad.). [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

Table 1. OLS Regressions with Autoregressive Effects Predicting Anti-Muslim Immigration Attitudes

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
	b (SE)	*b (SE)*	*b (SE)*	*b (SE)*
Controls				
Anti-Muslim Attitudes (w1)	.82*** (.03)	.80*** (.03)	.84*** (.02)	.81*** (.03)
Age	.003 (.004)	.002 (.004)	.004 (.004)	.004 (.004)
Female	−.12 (.10)	−.12 (.10)	−.15 (.10)	−.14 (.10)
Med. Education (vs. Low)	−.29* (.12)	−.30** (.12)	−.27* (.12)	−.29* (.12)
High Education (vs. Low)	−.23+ (.13)	−.21 (.13)	−.22 (.14)	−.26+ (.13)
Immigrant (vs. no Immigrant)	.03 (.12)	.04 (.12)	.03 (.12)	.10 (.12)
Political Interest	.02 (.04)	.01 (.04)	.03 (.04)	.03 (.04)
News Use (general)	−.02 (.04)	−.02 (.04)	−.03 (.04)	−.03 (.04)
Newspaper Use for News	.01 (.03)	.01 (.03)	.02 (.03)	.02 (.03)
SNS Use for News	.02 (.03)	.02 (.03)	.02 (.03)	.02 (.03)
TV Use for News	.03 (.03)	.03 (.03)	.01 (.03)	.01 (.03)
Contact with Muslims	−.06* (.03)	−.06* (.03)	−.05+ (.03)	−.05+ (.03)
SNS				
Relative Congruence (RC)	.62 (.39)	−.81 (1.09)		
Positive Exposure (PE)	−.08* (.04)	.08 (.14)		
Negative Exposure (NE)	.03 (.03)	−.25* (.11)		
RC*PE		−.27 (.26)		
RC*NE		.50** (.19)		
Traditional Media				
Relative Congruence (RC)			.88* (.43)	−1.39 (1.57)
Positive Exposure (PE)			−.01 (.03)	.18 (.12)
Negative Exposure (NE)			−.02 (.03)	−.39** (.12)
RC*PE				−.45+ (.26)
RC*NE				.82*** (.25)
Constant	.73* (.32)	1.54* (.64)	.50 (.36)	1.68* (.82)
Observations	559	559	559	559
Adjusted R^2	0.72	0.73	0.72	0.73

+$p < .1$; *$p < .05$; **$p < .01$; ***$p < .001$.

Among individuals who encounter predominately attitude-incongruent information about Muslims, by contrast, negative exposure decreases their anti-Muslim immigration attitudes.

Figure 2 (panel B) indicates that the slope of negative exposure on SNSs is significantly negative at SNSs relative congruence levels below 0.24 (i.e., below 2.24 *SD* from mean) and significantly positive at levels above 0.63 (0.77 *SD* above mean). Figure 3 (panel B) indicates that the slope of negative exposure in traditional media is significantly negative at relative congruence (media) levels below 0.39 (or 0.70 *SD* below mean) and significantly positive at levels above 0.57 (or 0.89 *SD* above mean).

Hypotheses 2a and H2b suggested that similar effects could be expected for exposure to positive information about Muslims. More precisely, exposure to positive information in a predominately congruent environment would decrease anti-Muslim immigration attitudes (H2a), whereas exposure to positive information in a predominately incongruent context would increase anti-Muslim immigration attitudes (H2b). We only found weak support for this notion in model 4, where we find a marginally significant interaction effect of positive information and relative congruence in the traditional media environment (*b* = −.45, *SE* = .26, *p* = .085), but not in the SNS context (*b* = −.27, *SE* = .26, *p* = .288). Thus, although the effects point in the expected direction, we reject Hypotheses 2a and 2b. Thus, overall, the findings do not differ for SNSs and traditional media, although the effects were slightly more pronounced for traditional media, which answers our research question.
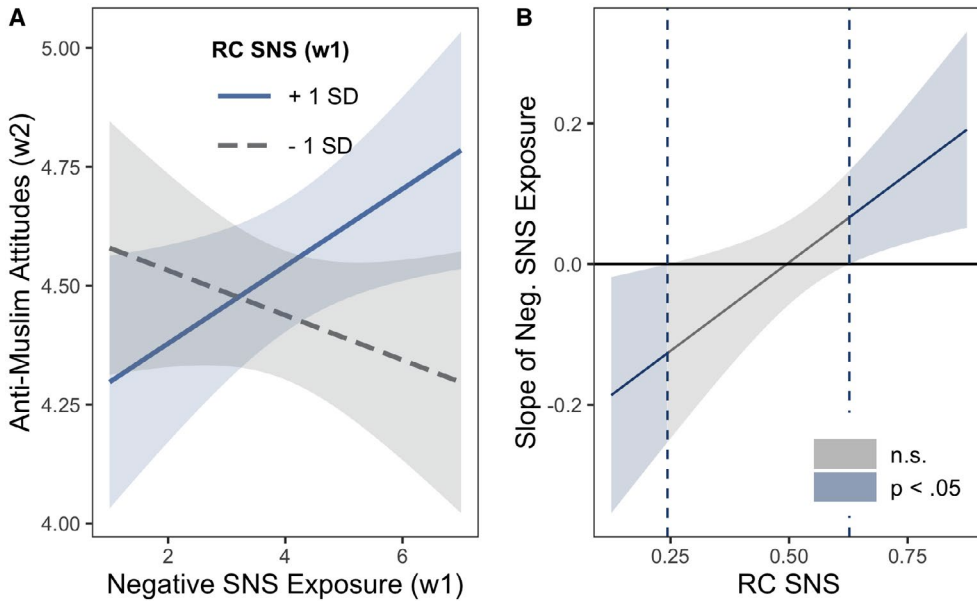
Figure 2. Effect of negative SNS exposure on anti-Muslim immigration attitudes for relative congruence (RC) scores 1 *SD* below and above the mean (Panel A). Panel B indicates the Johnson-Neyman intervals of significance. Shaded regions indicate 95% confidence intervals. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

Additional Analysis

We also ran an additional analysis in which we controlled for relative congruence, positive and negative exposure in traditional media in model 2, and a model in which we controlled for these exposure variables in the SNS context in model 4. Substantial changes in the effect sizes were negligible, and all hypothesized interaction effects remained statistically significant. However, when we included all four interaction effects together in a full model, the interaction effect of negative exposure times relative congruence on SNSs only yielded a marginal level of significance ($p < .10$), while the interaction effect of negative exposure times relative congruence on traditional media remained statistically significant ($p < .05$). This may indicate that the interactions across SNSs and traditional media may explain similar parts of the variance in anti-Muslim immigration attitude changes, but the interaction effects in the traditional media context may be slightly more robust than those in the SNS context.

Finally, previous research suggests that small effects of news media portrayals on attitude polarization can be expected (Schemer, 2012). A post hoc power analysis ($\alpha = .05$, $f^2 = .02$) revealed that we were highly likely to detect a small effect with our sample size ($1 - \beta = .92$).

Discussion

We set out to investigate the influence of exposure to information about Muslims in traditional media and SNSs on attitudes toward Muslim immigration. In doing so, we also took on the challenge of specifying the role of congruence when being exposed to positive and negative information about Muslims. Our findings revealed that congruent exposure was higher and incongruent exposure lower on SNSs compared to traditional media, which could be due to algorithmic filter bubbles on SNSs
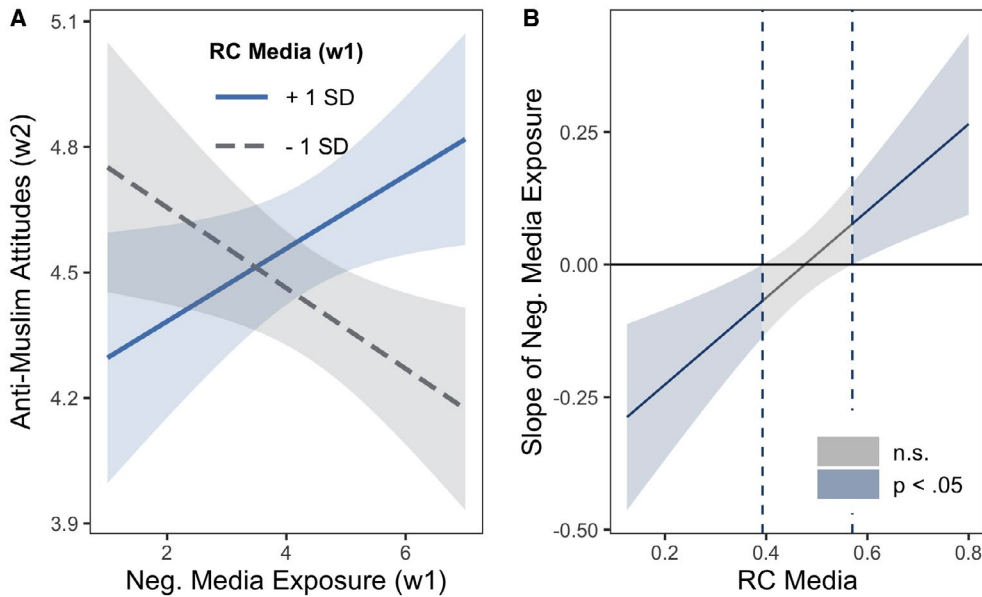
Figure 3. Effect of negative media exposure on anti-Muslim immigration attitudes for relative congruence (RC) scores 1 *SD* below and above the mean (panel A). Panel B indicates the Johnson-Neyman intervals of significance. Shaded regions indicate 95% confidence intervals. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

(Thorson & Wells, 2015) or due to more diverse opportunities to self-select news content in a high-choice environment such as SNSs (Bakshy et al., 2015). At the same time, mean values of exposure to positive and negative valence of Muslim portrayals were higher in traditional media. A potential explanation for this difference is the heightened media attention for contentious political topics such as immigration in election contexts in general (Song & Boomgaarden, 2017) and in Austria specifically, as the topic of (Muslim) immigration was highly salient during the 2017 elections (Bodlos & Plescia, 2018). It is also noteworthy that individuals indicated more frequent exposure to negative than positive information about Muslims in both traditional media and SNSs, which is in line with existing studies showing that Muslims and Islam are predominantly portrayed in a negative way in traditional media (Ahmed & Matthes, 2016; Bowe et al., 2013; Dixon & Williams, 2015; Powell, 2011) as well as in SNSs (Farkas et al., 2017).

Furthermore, we argued that the combination of the topic's valence and attitude congruence would drive attitude polarization, which was confirmed for negative but not positive information about Muslims. More specifically, in line with previous studies on issue-specific attitude polarization (Bail et al., 2018; Kim, 2015; Wojcieszak, 2010; Wojcieszak & Garrett, 2018; Wojcieszak & Price, 2010), negative information on SNSs led to reinforced negative attitudes toward Muslim immigration among individuals who predominantly encounter attitude-congruent negative information about Muslims. Equally noteworthy and consistent with expectations, we found that participants who perceived disagreement with the negative information about Muslims reported more positive attitudes toward Muslim immigration (see also Meffert et al., 2006; Wojcieszak, 2010). Negative messages may have motivated participants for whom that information was attitude inconsistent to defend their views precisely on the topic on which their views were challenged, that is, Muslim immigration. Ultimately, this process of counterarguing may have led to more polarized attitudes toward that issue (Meffert et al., 2006). In line with that argument, Garrett and colleagues (2014) claim that exposure

to dissimilar views are likely to result in attitude polarization if people "only listen to the argument made by their counterparts with an eye toward rejecting them" (p. 324).

Extrapolated to the context of selective exposure (e.g., Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Stroud, 2008) and echo chambers (e.g., Jamieson & Cappella, 2008), our findings suggest that being entrenched in a homogeneous network or following a selective news diet can be harmful for democratic processes, when people are exposed to negative information in these environments. This is due to a reinforcement effect, which leads to more extreme negative attitudes among Muslim immigration opponents and more extreme positive attitudes among proponents, because exposure to dissimilar viewpoints backfires (Jamieson & Cappella, 2008; see also Wojcieszak, 2010). Therefore, our study contradicts existing findings suggesting a direct persuasion effect irrespective of one's political ideology (e.g., Feldman, 2011).

Although we found evidence for issue-specific polarization processes among individuals who encounter predominantly congruent or predominantly incongruent negative information about Muslims both in traditional media and SNSs, the effects were slightly more pronounced for traditional media. Thus, although selective exposure patterns may be stronger in high-choice SNS environments (Bakshy, et al., 2015), exposure to information about Muslim immigration in traditional media seems to lead to stronger attitude polarization. One potential reason for this finding could be that individuals indicated they were more frequently exposed to negative portrayals of Muslims in traditional media than on SNSs. Another potential explanation could be derived from hostile media perceptions, which have been found to be stronger when the reach of a medium is higher (Gunther & Schmitt, 2004). In SNSs, by contrast, information is often shared by close personal ties who may have a comparably strong persuasive influence (see Diehl, Weeks, & Gil de Zuniga, 2016). Therefore, disagreement with opinions on Muslim immigration encountered in distant traditional media outlets may have a more robust effect on attitude polarization compared to information encountered on SNSs.

Finally, we went beyond existing studies, which investigated the association between negative news media coverage about Muslims and anti-Muslim attitudes (Saleem et al., 2016, 2017), by also taking exposure to positive information about Muslims into account. However, we did not find a significant polarizing effect for anti-Muslim attitudes in response to positive information about Muslims. Previous research suggests that effects of positive news media portrayals on attitude polarization are small (e.g., Schemer, 2012). Given our sample size, we were highly likely to observe a significant small effect. Hence, we can conclude that most probably there is no effect of positive media portrayals of Muslims on attitude polarization on the topic of Muslim immigration during the short time period of an election campaign. However, since the effects of positive portrayals in traditional media pointed toward a polarizing effect of anti-Muslim immigration attitudes, future studies should investigate whether effects of positive encounters become visible during longer time intervals.

That said, our findings are in line with Jamieson and Cappella's (2008) findings showing a polarizing effect for negative but not positive information about minority members. Negativity bias—that is, the phenomenon of negative information exerting a stronger influence on judgment and information processing compared to similar positive information—may explain the stronger effect for negative compared to positive information (Meffert et al., 2006; Pratto & John, 1991). An alternative explanation is the lower potential to induce affective responses of positive compared to negative information about Muslims. Scholars have argued that biased processing is more likely for high affect-laden information (Feldman, 2011; Lodge & Taber, 2000). Information about Muslims including topics such as terror, conflict, or extremism is probably more likely to induce affect than information about positive achievement and successful integration of Muslims. Lastly, it is also conceivable that other positive topics or more specific issues in the context of Muslim immigration may

exert stronger effects than the rather general topics we used here (e.g., successful integration, positive achievements). For instance, Schemer (2012) found that news articles, which specifically appealed to universalistic principles (e.g., norms of fairness) and warned against anti-immigrant discrimination, attenuated anti-immigration attitudes over time.

It is also noteworthy that we found a direct persuasion effect of positive information on SNSs. Thus, being primarily exposed to positive information about Muslims on SNSs can lower anti-Muslim attitudes overall. However, no equal effect could be noted for traditional media, which may be explained by the source of information on the one hand. On SNSs, media users might receive positive information about Muslims from their close ties, including personal experiences from these ties. By contrast, positive portrayals in the mass media might be more strongly perceived as an explicit persuasion appeal and thus trigger more reactance or counterarguing (Moyer-Gusé, Jain, & Chung, 2012). Furthermore, we also found a main effect of relative congruence on anti-Muslim attitudes in traditional media. One reason for this finding could be that specifically conservative or right-wing media users exhibit greater preference and react more strongly to congruent information in the media (Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003). However, these potential mechanisms are merely speculations and need to be further investigated in future research.

Limitations

Our study posed some notable limitations. First, following Tsfati (2016), we used self-report measures for both perceived exposure to positive or negative messages and perceived exposure to like-minded or cross-cutting opinions. Although the use of self-report measures might not be as accurate as behavioral tracking measures (Scharkow, 2019), it can be assumed that media users are willing and able to report about the extent to which they expose themselves to sources that are congruent or incongruent with their views. According to self-perception theory (Bem, 1972), individuals are capable of deducing their attitudes and tendencies from observing their own behavior (for a discussion, see Tsfati, 2016). Although experimental designs may be superior in terms of internal validity, they are limited to exposing participants to one or two specific messages, which might not be representative for their usual media diet.

Additionally, zero-order correlations (see Appendix S1 in the online supporting information) suggest that some perceptions of content may be related to individuals' existing attitudes toward Muslims. However, since we controlled for individuals' prior attitudes toward Muslims in all analyses, the effects of perceived exposure to Muslim portrayals found here are statistically independent of individuals' prior anti-Muslim attitudes. Nevertheless, future studies should employ behavioral data or systematically link content analyses and survey data to further bolster our findings.

Second, future research should take potential moderating factors such as different media channels (e.g., Stroud, 2008), tie strength (e.g., Lee et al., 2015), prior issue knowledge (Schemer, 2012), or attitude strength (Lodge & Taber, 2005) into account and also assess the dynamics of those effects as a function of frequency of exposure using more than two measurement points (Slater, 2007; Song & Boomgaarden, 2017).

Third, we chose the topics of crime and extremism to assess negative media portrayals and the topics of successful integration and achievement to measure positive media portrayals of Muslims. Content analyses investigating news coverage of immigration in general suggest that these topics are about equally prevalent in Austrian news coverage about migration (Greussing & Boomgaarden, 2017). However, as the degree of language abstraction may crucially decrease the persuasiveness of a message (e.g., Aerts, Smits, & Verlegh, 2017), it is possible that references to crime and radicalization were perceived as more specific and thus more persuasive than references to successful

integration or positive achievements of Muslims. Future research should therefore take a wider array of different topics into account.

Lastly, due to panel attrition, participants in the final sample were slightly higher educated than the Austrian population in general. As lower-educated individuals have been found to be more susceptible to anti-Muslim messages (Matthes & Schmuck, 2017), the effects found here may be even more pronounced among lower-educated segments of the population. However, since the deviation of the original quotas was rather small, we are confident that our findings are nevertheless fairly representative for the Austrian population.

Implications

Taken together, our findings indicate a more complex relationship between negative media portrayals of Muslims and anti-Muslim immigration attitudes than previously assumed. Instead of leading to a direct persuasion effect among all respondents, proponents and opponents of Muslim immigration seem to be further drifting apart when being exposed to negative but not to positive information about Muslims.

For political campaigns directed against immigrants or minority members (Schmuck, Matthes, & Paul, 2017; Schmuck & Tribastone, 2020), our findings suggest that the average negative right-wing populist campaign may not work as intended—that is, worsen perceptions of immigrant or minority members among all voters (see also Meffert et al., 2006). Instead, our findings suggest that especially the negative information may foster the development of extreme "us" versus "them" camps in society.

Furthermore, our findings also contribute to the discussion of how the media should report about Muslims (e.g., Matthes, Schmuck, & von Sikorski, 2019; von Sikorski, Matthes, & Schmuck, 2018; von Sikorski, Schmuck, Matthes, & Binder, 2017). Journalists should be aware of what exactly causes attitude polarization over an issue (van Klingeren, Boomgaarden, & de Vreese, 2017). Based on our findings, positive news portrayals of successful integration or achievements of Muslims may not cause the public to polarize, whereas information about crime and terrorism does. Hence, it is critical that journalists try to reduce the overrepresentation of Muslims in the context of terrorism and crime, which has been demonstrated in previous studies (Dixon & Williams, 2015).

Last, on a positive note, scholars have argued that issue-specific polarization can more easily be attenuated than partisan or ideological polarization, because unlike partisan polarization it can be resolved by reasoned debate or better education on issue content (Mason, 2013). Thus, information campaigns and knowledge transfer via the media (see e.g., Scharrer & Ramasubramanian, 2015) about other cultures and religions may be a fruitful approach to avoid societal segments to further drifting apart on the issue of Muslim immigration.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information may be found in the online version of this article at the publisher's web site:

Supplementary Material

Appendix S1. Correlations
Table S1. Zero-Order Correlations Wave 1
Table S2. Zero-Order Correlations Wave 2
Appendix S2. Measures