Tearing Us Apart? Muslims' Attitudes Toward the Majority Population in Response to Differentiated Versus Undifferentiated News About Terror

DESIRÉE SCHMUCK
KU Leuven, Belgium

JÖRG MATTHES
University of Vienna, Austria

CHRISTIAN VON SIKORSKI
University of Koblenz-Landau (at Landau), Germany

MONA RAHMANIAN
University of Vienna, Austria

BERIL BULAT
University of California, Davis, USA

The intensive news coverage about terrorist attacks committed by the so-called Islamic State (IS) has raised concerns about unwanted effects on intergroup relations between Muslims and non-Muslims in Western societies. News coverage, which makes an explicit distinction between Muslims and IS terrorists (i.e., differentiated news), may reduce negative media perceptions, perceived discrimination, and hostile intergroup attitudes among Muslims. Within two experimental studies, we explored Muslim news consumers' responses to terror news coverage depending on news differentiation and the terrorist attack's proximity. Results indicated that Muslims evaluated the perceived news quality of differentiated compared with undifferentiated news reports higher irrespective of the terrorist attack's proximity, which was negatively related to perceived discrimination and negative attitudes toward the non-Muslim majority population. These findings suggest that news differentiation can contribute to improved intergroup relations between Muslim minority members and the non-Muslim majority population in Western societies.

Keywords: Terrorism news, differentiation, proximity, discrimination, Muslims, Islam

Desirée Schmuck: desiree.schmuck@kuleuven.be
Jörg Matthes: joerg.matthes@univie.ac.at
Christian von Sikorski: vonsikorski@uni-landau.de
Mona Rahmanian: rahmanian.mo@gmail.com
Beril Bulat: bbulat@ucdavis.edu
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The rise of the Islamic State (IS) and its terrorist activities in Western societies have been dominating the media landscape worldwide in the years since the (self-)proclamation of the IS on June 29, 2014. In several empirical studies, researchers have highlighted that news coverage about Muslims is overall negative, frequently linking Muslims with violence, terrorism, and aggression (Alsultany, 2012; Dixon & Williams, 2015; el-Nawawy & Elmasry, 2017; Nacos, 2016; Powell, 2011). Biases in news reporting may have tremendous effects on the social cohabitation of different groups in society (von Sikorski, Matthes, & Schmuck, 2021). As the news media are one of the most important sources for many news consumers to learn about minority groups, their role in perpetuating stereotypes and prejudices is indisputable. In fact, empirical research has repeatedly demonstrated that exposure to news reports that links terrorism to Islam may promote negative attitudes toward Muslims (Nellis & Savage, 2012; Saleem, Prot, Anderson, & Lemieux, 2017; von Sikorski, Schmuck, Matthes, & Binder, 2017).

Against that background, public and scientific discussions arose about how the media should report about terrorist attacks committed in the name of Islam (as claimed by the perpetrators). Additionally, researchers have repeatedly stressed the need for proactive approaches to change mainstream news media coverage of Muslims and Islam (e.g., Ewart, Cherney, & Murphy, 2017). Extant research suggests that the degree of differentiation in news reports (i.e., explicitly distinguishing between IS terrorists and Muslims in general) mitigates the formation of Islamophobic attitudes in response to terrorism news among non-Muslims: Undifferentiated news, which explicitly state a connection between Islam and terrorism, has been found to create more fear of terror (von Sikorski et al., 2017) and hostility toward Muslims (von Sikorski, Matthes, et al., 2021) as opposed to news articles, which make an explicit distinction between Muslims and IS terrorists. As such, differentiated news cannot just be understood as the opposite of undifferentiated news (i.e., the absence of an explicit link between Muslims and terrorism). Instead, news differentiation refers to a journalistic technique that is characterized by an active and explicit distinction between characteristics and activities of specific individuals and more general and open-ended population segments (Teo, 2000). For example, differentiated articles may contain statements like: Muslims must not come under general suspicion; Muslims are not terrorists. Although the application of this journalistic technique has been found to result in lower fear of terror and subsequent hostility toward Muslims, news differentiation is rarely applied and differentiated news are less common than undifferentiated news or news not containing differentiated or undifferentiated statements (von Sikorski, Schmuck, et al., 2021).

Although those studies have provided important insights, the perspective of Muslims themselves has been largely neglected thus far. Yet, investigating the factors that improve Muslims' evaluations of terrorism news coverage is crucial, as it can help minimizing negative consequences of news coverage that can potentially exacerbate Muslims' discrimination and societal withdrawal (Ewart et al., 2017). Our study aims to fill that crucial research gap and seeks to contribute to the existing research in several ways.

For one, unlike previous work, we focus on the minority members' perspective, which contributes to a more complex understanding of the role of media in intergroup relations (Saleem & Ramasubramanian, 2019). Moreover, we examine the effects of news differentiation in terrorism news on Muslims' perceived news quality and related perceptions of discrimination and attitudes toward non-Muslim majority members. That contribution is crucial against the background of research suggesting that perceived low journalistic standards may exacerbate perceived discrimination and hostility toward the non-Muslim majority population

among Muslim news audiences (Ahmad, 2006; Ewart & Rane, 2013). Last, we explore how proximity as a universal news value and a key construct in terrorism research affects those processes. To that aim, we conducted two experimental studies that investigate, for the first time, how Muslim news consumers evaluate the news quality of undifferentiated and differentiated news articles that report about a local compared with a distant terrorist attack.

News Differentiation

Although literature lacks a uniform definition of terrorism, terrorist attacks may be defined by a few key criteria such as the use of violence, the intention to generate fear, and the aim to influence citizens' political beliefs (Moghaddam & Marsella, 2004; see also Nacos, 2016). Members of the Islamic State claim to commit terrorist attacks in the name of Islam, which has stimulated controversial public discussions about the connection of Islam to terrorism in the past. In this context, the news media play a powerful role in shaping discussions about terrorism, Islam, and Islamism. Islamism can be understood as a set of ideologies that guide an individual's life (Berman, 2003) and describes "a whole constellation of political movements and actors world-wide, only a tiny highly radical subset of which engage in acts of violence" (Piazza, 2009, p. 64). These "militant Islamists" who turn to violence (Bokhari & Senzai, 2013, p. 25) can be clearly distinguished from the general Muslim population (Eikmeier, 2007; Piazza 2009). Journalists report about terrorist attacks committed by members of the IS who self-identify as Muslims in different ways. Some journalists may comment on a possible connection between terrorism and Islam or even play on fears of "Islamic terrorism," the "clash of civilizations," or "the enemy within" (Ahmad, 2006, p. 963). Others may choose to educate against irrational prejudices and stereotypes by actively stressing the difference between IS terrorists and the general Muslim population. This phenomenon has been labeled "news differentiation" and can be described as the explicit distinction between Islamist terrorism or terrorist acts committed by terrorists who self-identify as Muslims on the one hand and the general Muslim population at large on the other hand (von Sikorski et al., 2017; von Sikorski, Matthes, et al., 2021). News differentiation is not either present or absent but can be understood as a multidimensional construct. Theoretically, news can (a) contain both undifferentiated and differentiated coverage, (b) differentiated but no undifferentiated coverage, (c) undifferentiated but no differentiated coverage, and neither differentiated nor undifferentiated coverage. Existing research suggests that 44% of news articles reporting about Muslims and terrorism contain at least one undifferentiated statement, while only 26% contained at least one differentiated statement (von Sikorski, Schmuck, et al., 2021). News differentiation may be exercised in different ways, for example, by stressing the cultural and political diversity of Muslims, emphasizing that most Muslims do not agree with the Islamist ideology by providing space for members of the Muslim community to condemn the terrorist attacks, or by directly mentioning that terrorism or radicalization are not an inherent Islam-related phenomenon (Ahmad, 2006).

In contrast, undifferentiated reporting, also called generalization, "refers to the extension of the characteristics or activities of a specific and specifiable group of people to a much more general and open-ended set" (Teo, 2000, p. 16). Undifferentiated news reporting underlines an explicit connection of terrorist attacks and Islam religion or Muslims in general, for example by using terms like "Islamic terrorism" that actively make a connection between Islam and terrorism, discussing the role of Islam religion in jihad and

terrorism, showing the scene of a terrorist attack, and cutting to Muslims praying in mosques, or by demanding that Muslims need to "apologize" for the attacks (Ahmad, 2006, p. 978).

When reporting about an attack committed by a perpetrator who self-identifies as Muslim, as it is the case for IS members, both versions of news reporting mention the concepts of "Muslims" and "terror." However, undifferentiated news reporting explicitly underlines a connection between those concepts, while differentiated news reporting explicitly denies it. Recent findings reveal that differentiation may mitigate negative effects of IS terrorism news coverage on news consumers' fear of terror, negative stereotypes, and negative attitudes toward Muslims (von Sikorski et al., 2017; von Sikorski, Matthes, et al., 2021). However, the crucial question of how Muslims themselves respond to news differentiation in the context of IS terrorism remains virtually unexplored.

The Effects of News Differentiation on Muslims' Perceived Journalistic Quality

Minority audiences have been found to be particularly critical of news coverage of their own group (Beaudoin & Thorson, 2005), which can be explained by the theoretical approach of distinctiveness. Distinctiveness theory postulates that people find their own traits in news coverage more salient than traits that are more prevalent (McGuire, 1984). In line with this assumption, numerous researchers have indicated that Muslims in Western countries are frustrated and dissatisfied with political and media-based rhetoric surrounding their religious in-group (Ahmad, 2006). In the context of terrorism news about 9/11, Ahmad (2006) found that Muslims' evaluations of the news coverage were largely negative. They perceived the media to promote anti-Arab and anti-Muslim stereotypes and to rely on sensationalist reporting, rumors, and speculation. Many felt that the news media lacked in-depth analysis and did little to inform and educate viewers. Ahmad (2006) also found that British Muslims appreciated language sensitivities—for instance, that news outlets avoided terms such as "Islamic terrorist." They also found that not enough of a distinction was made between "those who kill innocent people in the name of Islam, and the millions of peaceful citizens of the world" (Ahmad, 2006, p. 972). Similarly, Ewart and colleagues' (2017) focus groups suggested that Muslims blamed the media for wanting them to show that Islam is a source of terrorism. Overall, these perceptions reflect the core of undifferentiated news reporting, which lies in the conflation of Islam or Muslims with terrorism (von Sikorski et al., 2017).

These undifferentiated news reporting practices may crucially influence news consumers' evaluations of a news article's quality. Perceived news quality can be understood as an "integral part of the overall evaluation of content" that consists of distinct aspects of news story perception such as credibility aspects, which may be defined "as a global evaluation of the objectivity of a given story" as well as quality aspects, which "means the degree or level of overall excellence of a news story" (Sundar, 1999, p. 381). The existing literature has brought forward many facets of news media quality, which makes the concept hard to grasp and elusive. Therefore, Bachmann, Eisenegger, and Ingenhoff (2021) aimed to define news media quality in its most general sense by describing it as journalistic content of a media entity that contributes to a better society in a superior or inferior way in comparison with news of a similar kind of media entity, which can be measured on normative criteria such as diversity or professionalism. As such, news differentiation can be expected to crucially influence perceived news credibility because it applies a

careful distinction between the activities and characteristics of certain individuals and population groups (Teo, 2000).

Previous research investigating aspects of perceived news quality has revealed that negative news portrayals stimulate less anger among Muslims when the news is perceived as accurate rather than biased (Saleem, Hawkins, Wojcieszak, & Roden, 2021). Distinctiveness theory provides an explanation for news perceptions of one's own group: Muslims are expected to pay special attention to portrayals of their own religious group in news coverage of terrorist attacks, making special note of possible flaws in covering Islam and Muslims. This will inform their judgements of the coverage's quality and credibility, which constitutes perceived news quality in the present study. More specifically, Muslims will compare the depiction of their own ingroup in the media with their own experiences within the ingroup. Based on research on ingroup heterogeneity, Muslims may perceive their own in-group as heterogeneous (Rothgerber, 1997). Since undifferentiated coverage, by contrast, depicts Muslims as homogeneous, ingroup experiences will most likely diverge from group depictions in the media leading to a decrease in perceived news quality. Thus, if the media provide Muslims with undifferentiated portrayals of their own religious group, which conflate Islam with terrorism, it is conceivable that Muslim news consumers evaluate the quality of those news articles negatively. In contrast, it can be expected that Muslim news consumers appreciate differentiated news coverage, which not only avoids the conflation of Muslim and Islam with terrorism, but explicitly stresses the difference between Muslims and Islamist terrorists (see also Beaudoin & Thorson, 2005). Hence, our first hypothesis is as follows:

H1:   *Differentiated news coverage increases perceived news quality among Muslim news consumers compared with undifferentiated news coverage.*

Muslims' Perceived Discrimination and Attitudes Toward the Majority Population

Previously, researchers have shown that negative, stereotypical portrayals of one's own group represent threats to the self-concept of racial, ethnic, or religious minority audiences (e.g., Saleem & Ramasubramanian, 2019; Schmuck, Matthes, & Paul, 2017). According to the *Social Identity Theory* (SIT; Tajfel & Turner, 1986), individuals are motivated to achieve or maintain a positive social identity. Situational cues such as negative media portrayals of one's in-group may be perceived as a threat to one's social identity (Major & O'Brien, 2005). Specifically, journalistic representations of Muslims and Islam, which are perceived as inaccurate, sensational, or undifferentiated, may represent identity threats among Muslims in Western societies and result in experiences of discrimination. Ahmad's (2006) findings underline that assumption showing that, in the aftermath of 9/11, Muslims believed that the sharp increase in the numbers of attacks against visible Muslims resulted directly from biased reporting in Western media. Overall, Muslims perceive that journalism practices have negative consequences in their lives, fueling stereotypes, hostility, and feelings of resentment from non-Muslims (Heeren & Zick, 2014). Those negative consequences are particularly attributed to the media's failure to avoid offensive terminology, ignorance, and the perpetuation of misconceptions of Islam (Ahmad, 2006). Additionally, previous findings show that Muslims feel discriminated by sensationalized, uncritical, or derogatory reporting about Islam and Muslims (Ahmad, 2006; Heeren & Zick, 2014). Thus, we assumed that journalism practices, which are perceived low in quality

by Muslim news consumers, would increase perceived discrimination. Put differently, we expected that perceived discrimination decreases with higher levels of perceived news quality. Thus, we hypothesized:

H2:   Perceived news quality decreases perceived discrimination among Muslim news consumers.

Perceived discrimination may subsequently have crucial consequences for minority group members' attitudes toward the majority population. According to SIT, the experience of prejudice against one's ingroup encourages individuals to maximize the distinctness of their own group and the out-group. One way to achieve this distinctness is derogating the out-group (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). To alleviate the threat of discrimination, one derogates the out-group who is perceived as posing the threat (Martinez & Ramasubramanian, 2015). When perceiving discrimination, individuals have been found to react with more hostility not only toward those who exclude but also toward the entire out-group (Schaafsma & Williams, 2012). In support of that theoretical assumption, the findings of several empirical studies suggest that discrimination is often a significant source of identity threat that motivates minorities to avoid or derogate majority members (Jasinskaja-Lahti, Mähönen, & Liebkind, 2011; Saleem & Ramasubramanian, 2019). Minority members who report discrimination are more likely to display negative attitudes toward majority members (Jasinskaja-Lahti et al., 2011). As terror news reports make the religious minority group of Muslims salient, which is contrasted with the out-group of the non-Muslim majority population, it is conceivable that perceived discrimination in response to such news reports results in less positive attitudes toward non-Muslim majority members (Saleem & Ramasubramanian, 2019). Thus, we hypothesized:

H3:   Perceived discrimination decreases positive attitudes toward non-Muslim majority members among Muslim news consumers.

**The Moderating Role of Proximity of a Terrorist Attack**

Since the proclamation of the IS, terrorist attacks have occurred in many Western countries such as the United States, Great Britain, France, Germany, and Spain. Yet, according to the Global Terrorism Index (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2017), most terrorist attacks take place in countries such as Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria, which may appear rather distant to citizens of Western countries—both culturally and geographically. Accordingly, attempted or executed IS terrorist attacks taking place rather far away (e.g., in Middle Eastern countries) or close by (e.g., in the city or country news consumers live in) may differentially influence responses to terrorism news. That so-called proximity of a terrorist attack refers to "the geographic distance between an event and a media organization's newsroom and/or its audiences" (Shoemaker, Lee, Han, & Cohen, 2007, p. 231). Researchers studying proximity of a terrorist attack as an important influence variable for individuals' reactions to terrorist attacks (e.g., Fischhoff, Gonzalez, Small, & Lerner, 2003; von Sikorski, Matthes, et al., 2021) have arrived to contradicting results. On the one hand, Fischhoff and colleagues (2003) found that perceived closeness to a terrorist attack increased risk perceptions. On the other, von Sikorski, Matthes, and colleagues (2021) did not detect changes in fear of terror depending on the terrorist attacks' proximity, which they attributed to an omnipresent global terrorism threat.

Overall, the effects of a terrorist attack's proximity on news consumers' perceived news quality have largely been neglected. Proximity is an important news value, which makes an event more meaningful for a country and its audiences (Shoemaker et al., 2007). Therefore, it can be assumed that proximity influences Muslim news consumers' sensitivity to biases in journalistic reporting, which impacts the evaluation of the news quality. The influence of proximity on news quality evaluations can be explained by individuals' higher involvement, which is a critical determinant of news bias perceptions (e.g., Choi, Yang, & Chang, 2009). More specifically, if the news media report about a terrorist attack in their country of residence, Muslims are more strongly involved and pay higher attention than when the attack occurs abroad, which increases the influence of news differentiation on news quality perceptions. Therefore, we expected proximity to moderate the effects of news differentiation on perceived news quality. We do not hypothesize the main effect of proximity on perceived news quality, as we assumed no general differences about the news quality of portrayed local compared with distant events irrespective of news differentiation. More formally, we proposed that:

H4:   Proximity of a terrorist attack increases the effect of news differentiation on Muslim news consumers' perceived news quality.

General Method

We conducted two experiments. In Study 1, we tested the assumption that news differentiation influences perceived discrimination via perceived news quality (H1–H2). In Study 2, we aimed to replicate the findings of Study 1 as well as to extend the design by measuring Muslims' attitudes toward the majority population as a crucial consequence of perceived discrimination as dependent variable (H3). Additionally, we investigated the moderating role of proximity of a terrorist attack on Muslim news consumers' perceived news quality (H4). Figure 1 presents the hypothesized model.
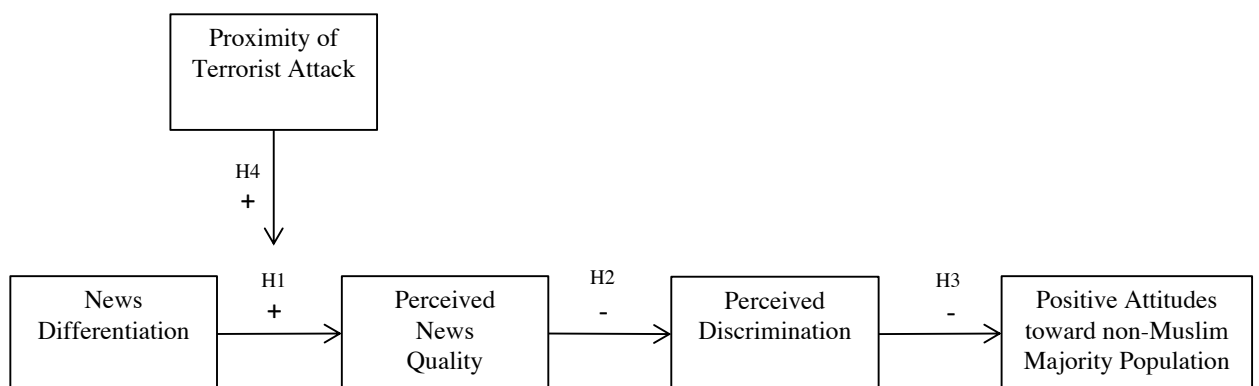
Figure 1. Conceptual theoretical model.

Experiment 1

Participants, Design, and Procedure

We conducted an online survey-embedded experiment in Austria in 2017 using a nonstudent Muslim convenience sample. Participants were recruited online, via personal networks, and in public spaces. Participants were 86 Muslims (76 % female) aged 16 to 39 (M = 23.94, SD = 4.67), from diverse educational backgrounds (24.4 % no high school degree). Only participants who self-identified as Muslim and were Austrian residents were allowed to participate in the study. In total, 75.6 % were national citizens of Austria. All participants had been living in Austria longer than one year and were fluent in German. As an incentive, 10 vouchers worth €20 were raffled among participants. We employed a randomized between-subjects design with three experimental groups: undifferentiated news articles about terrorism (n = 34), otherwise identical differentiated news articles about terrorism (n = 24), and nonterrorism news articles (control group, n = 28). We used the control group as a baseline measure for perceived news quality. In total, participants read two newspaper articles. Participants were exposed to each news article for a minimum of 25 seconds before taking part in a computer-administered survey. All participants gave their informed consent and received a thorough debriefing.

Randomization Check

Randomization was successful for age F(2, 82) = 0.72, p = .491), gender χ^2(2, N = 86) = 0.54, p = .765, education level χ^2(4, N = 86) = 3.38, p = .497, immigration background χ^2(2, N = 86) = 0.76, p = .683, political orientation F(2, 83) = 2.56, p = .083), and religiosity F(2, 83) = 2.42, p = .100).

Stimulus Material

Participants in the treatment group were exposed to two news articles by established news outlets in Austria. We used articles from the public broadcaster's and the national news agency's website. We designed the articles elaborately in terms of layout to make them look like authentic news articles of the news outlets' Web portals. We exposed participants in the control group to two nonterrorism news articles that dealt with unrelated topics, and participants in the treatment groups to two articles dealing with attempted terrorist attacks or other activities by the IS (see Appendix B on OSF: https://osf.io/m8fcb/). The first news article dealt with the infiltration of IS foreign fighters to Austria. In addition to the hard facts, the article contained an expert statement. In the undifferentiated version, the expert stressed that IS members have their roots in Muslim communities and radicalize themselves through the Internet—that is, the expert makes an active connection between Islam religion and terrorism. In the differentiated version, the expert clearly differentiates between Islam and terrorism by emphasizing that Muslim community members condemn those terrorist activities and are supportive in the police's activities against terrorism. The second article was about an attempted IS terrorist attack on a prominent shopping street in Vienna, Austria. The first paragraph was identical in both versions of the article. In the undifferentiated version, the second paragraph mentioned that the police closely monitor Muslim organizations and mosques, who do not cooperate with the police to identify terrorist suspects. In the differentiated version, the second paragraph mentioned that the Islamic community in Austria condemns the attempted terrorist attack. Additionally, the

article made an explicit distinction between the mainstream Muslim population in Austria and IS terrorists who self-identify as Muslims.

Measures and Data Analysis

We measured all items on a seven-point Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree; see Appendix A). We gauged perceived news quality using two items for each news article based on Sundar (1999; mean index for the evaluations of both news articles, Cronbach's = .75). We assessed perceived discrimination with five items following Jasinskaja-Lahti, Liebkind, and Solheim (2009; Cronbach's = .81). We conducted a path analysis using the PROCESS macro in SPSS (Model 4, Hayes, 2013; undifferentiated news condition as reference group, perceived news quality as mediator). We used 95% bias-corrected bootstrap confidence intervals based on 10,000 bootstrap samples. As the effects of political predisposition and religiosity are close to significant in the randomization check, we also conducted the path analysis with political predisposition and religiosity as covariates in the model (not shown here). All effects remain stable when these variables are controlled.

Manipulation Check

We asked participants about the news articles' content in a questionnaire block after the dependent variables. We employed one item with three response options. Participants in the differentiated group indicated more frequently that the news articles explicitly stressed the difference between the mainstream Muslim population and IS terrorists, $\chi^2(2, N = 86) = 65.16$, $p < .001$ compared with the other groups. Similarly, participants in the undifferentiated group perceived more frequently that the news articles equated terrorism with Islam religion, $\chi^2(2, N = 86) = 62.67$, $p < .001$ compared with other groups. Last, participants in the control group indicated more frequently that the news articles did not deal with terrorism but with unrelated topics such as renovations and coffee consumption, $\chi^2(2, N = 86) = 81.52$, $p < .001$ compared with the other groups. Altogether, those results indicate a successful experimental manipulation.

Results

Table 1 presents all results. We found that differentiated news articles significantly enhanced perceived news quality compared with the undifferentiated news articles ($b = 0.99$, $SE = 0.34$, $p = .005$), which confirmed H1. When the control group was used as reference group, exposure to differentiated news articles also exerted a significant positive effect on perceived news quality compared with the control group ($b = 0.80$, $SE = 0.36$, $p = .028$). Undifferentiated news articles did not differ from the control group in terms of perceived news quality ($b = 0.19$, $SE = 0.33$, $p = .557$).

In line with our second hypothesis (H2), we further found that perceived news quality was significantly negatively related with perceived discrimination ($b = -0.27$, $SE = 0.13$, $p = .038$). Additionally, results revealed a significant indirect negative effect of differentiated news coverage on perceived discrimination via perceived news quality ($b = -0.27$, $SE = 0.18$; [95% CIs] = [−.74, −.02]). We found no direct effect of differentiated news coverage on perceived discrimination ($b = -0.13$, $SE = 0.42$, $p = .752$).

Table 1. Study 1, OLS Path Analysis, Unstandardized Coefficients, N = 86.

	Perceived News Quality		Perceived Discrimination	
Variables	b	SE	b	SE
Differentiated News[1]	0.99**	0.34	−0.13	0.42
Control Group[1]	0.19	0.33	−0.10	0.39
Perceived News Quality			−0.27*	0.13
Differentiated News via Perceived News Quality[2]			−0.27*	0.18
Adj. R^2	.09		.06	

Note. *** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$; [1]Undifferentiated News is the reference category; [2]Indirect Effect of Differentiated News Article on Perceived Discrimination via Perceived News Quality.

Discussion

The results of Study 1 revealed that differentiated news reporting about IS terrorism (compared with undifferentiated news reporting) decreased Muslims' perceived discrimination in response to terrorism news. Our results further showed that the underlying mechanism of that effect was the overall level of perceived news quality. Hence, news articles that made an explicit distinction between Islamist terrorists and Muslims in general were rated higher in news quality among Muslim news consumers, which decreased their feelings of discrimination in general. Overall, our results extend findings of previous research (e.g., Ahmad, 2006; Ewart et al., 2017) by showing, for the first time, that news differentiation is a highly useful remedy to decrease perceived discrimination among Muslim minority members in the context of terrorism news reporting and may therefore also potentially mitigate hostility toward the non-Muslim out-group among Muslims. To investigate this relationship between perceived discrimination and out-group hostility and to test our remaining hypotheses, we conducted a second experiment.

Experiment 2

Study 2 was conducted to replicate the findings of Study 1 and extended the experimental design of Study 1 by an additional experimental factor: proximity. Like Study 1, Study 2 was an online survey-embedded experiment in Austria conducted in 2017.

Participants, Design, and Procedure

We employed a nonstudent convenience sample of 126 Muslim residents in Austria (55.7 % female), aged 17 to 45 (*M* = 26.61, *SD* = 5.19), from diverse educational backgrounds (17.5 % no high school degree). Participants were recruited online, via personal networks, and in public spaces. The same selection criteria as in Study 1 were applied. In total, 56.3% were national citizens of Austria. As an incentive, 10 gift vouchers worth €10 were raffled among participants who completed the survey.

We employed a 2 (news differentiation: differentiated vs. undifferentiated) x 2 (proximity: close vs. distant) between-subjects design with a control group. We assigned participants randomly to the five experimental conditions: undifferentiated news coverage about close terrorism (*n* = 27), differentiated news

coverage about close terrorism (n = 23), undifferentiated news coverage about distant terrorism (n = 31), differentiated news coverage about distant terrorism (n = 25), and a control group (n = 20). As in Study 1, each participant was exposed to two newspaper articles. Participants were exposed to each news article for a minimum of 30 seconds (news articles were slightly longer compared with Study 1). After stimulus exposure, participants responded to a computer-administered survey before they received a debriefing.

Stimulus Materials

As in Study 1, we created two different news articles about attempted terrorist attacks or other activities by the IS (see Appendix B on OSF: https://osf.io/m8fcb/). We designed the news articles as online news articles of the Web portal of the largest Austrian quality newspaper and a large mass-market newspaper. The stories' hard facts were identical in all conditions. The articles in the close conditions reported about events in Austria, while those in the distant conditions focused on events in India. We chose India as a suitable country for the distant news articles for two reasons: First, India is both locally and culturally distant to Austria. Second, Muslims are also a religious minority in India rather than the religious majority group. The first news article dealt with an Interpol warning about the increased probability of terrorist attacks. In the undifferentiated version, the head of Interpol stressed that young Muslims radicalize themselves in mosques and Muslim organizations. He also emphasized that there is a clear connection between Islam, radicalization, and terrorism. In the differentiated version, the Interpol head stressed that the general Muslim population needs to be differentiated from IS terrorists. Additionally, he mentioned that the Muslim community assists the police with fighting against terror and preventing terrorist attacks.

Measures and Data Analysis

Measures were analogous to Study 1. Additionally, we measured attitudes toward the non-Muslim majority population with four items on a semantic differential similar to Schaafsma and Williams (2012; Cronbach's α = .82).[1] Appendix A shows all items.

We used the same data analytic procedure as in Study 1. We created two dummy variables, one for proximity (distant is the reference category) and one for differentiation (undifferentiated news is the reference category). We entered the interaction term between news differentiation and proximity to test for the moderating effect of proximity. We mean-centered all variables. The control group was not included in the analysis, as it only served as a baseline measure for news quality. We modeled perceived news quality as a mediator of the experimental conditions' effects on perceived discrimination. Additionally, we modeled perceived discrimination as a mediator of the effect of perceived news quality on attitudes toward the non-Muslim majority population. We used 95% bias-corrected bootstrap confidence intervals.

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[1] In Austria, more than 80% of the population are Christians. Hence, perceptions of Austrians and perceptions of Christians may overlap for Muslim minority members. However, we also measured attitudes toward Christian Austrians with the same four items. All results remain stable when substituting attitudes toward non-Muslim Austrians by attitudes toward Christian Austrians.

Manipulation Check

We measured perceived news differentiation (one 7-point Likert scale item, "The news articles clearly emphasized that one needs to distinguish between Muslims and terrorists"). Participants in the differentiated conditions were more likely to favor that item compared with the undifferentiated conditions, $F(1/102) = 85.98$, $p = .003$, $\eta^2 = .46$. Likewise, those participants in the undifferentiated conditions were more likely to indicate that the news articles did not explicitly differentiate between Muslims and terrorists (one 7-point Likert scale item, "The news articles clearly stressed that there was a general danger of radicalization among Muslims"), $F(1/102) = 45.87$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .31$. Additionally, those participants assigned to the close conditions were more likely to indicate that the news articles described (attempted) terrorist attacks in Austria (one 7-point Likert scale item), $F(1/102) = 183.80$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .35$. Likewise, those participants assigned to the distant conditions indicated to a higher degree that the news articles described (attempted) terrorist attacks in India (one 7-point Likert scale item), $F(1/102) = 145.80$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .59$. Last, we tested whether perceived news quality of the treatment conditions differed from those of the control group. That was not the case.

Results

All findings are shown in Table 2 and visualized in Figure 2. As in Study 1, H1 was supported. We found a positive effect of differentiated as compared with undifferentiated news articles on perceived news quality ($b = 0.93$, $SE = 0.27$, $p < .001$). Furthermore, we tested whether perceived news quality enhanced perceived discrimination. Also replicating the findings of Study 1, news quality and perceived discrimination were significantly related ($b = -0.21$, $SE = 0.09$, $p = .017$), which supports H2. Furthermore, H3 postulated that perceived discrimination would negatively affect positive attitudes toward the non-Muslim majority population. We found a significant negative effect of perceived discrimination on positive attitudes toward the non-Muslim majority population ($b = -0.40$, $SE = 0.10$, $p < .001$). Thus, H3 was supported.

Results also revealed a significant indirect effect of perceived news quality on positive attitudes toward the non-Muslim majority population via perceived discrimination ($b = 0.09$, $SE = 0.04$, 95% CIs [.02, .19]). No direct effect of perceived news quality on positive attitudes toward non-Muslim majority members remains when perceived discrimination is modeled as a mediator, which points to a full mediation. Furthermore, our results showed a significant indirect positive effect of differentiated news coverage on attitudes toward the non-Muslim majority population via perceived news quality and perceived discrimination ($b = 0.08$, $SE = 0.05$, 95% CIs [.02, .21]).

Table 2. Study 2, OLS Path Analysis, Unstandardized Coefficients, N = 106
(Without Control Group).

Variables	Perceived News Quality		Perceived Discrimination		Positive Attitudes Toward Majority Population	
	b	SE	b	SE	b	SE
Differentiated News[1]	0.93***	0.27	−0.21	0.25	−0.07	0.26
Proximity[2]	−0.19	0.27	−0.25	0.06	0.06	0.25
Differentiated News[1] x Proximity[2]	0.88	0.54	−0.64	0.48	0.44	0.50
Perceived News Quality			−0.21*	0.09	0.11	0.09
Perceived Discrimination					−0.40***	0.10
Perceived News Quality via Perceived Discrimination[3]					0.09*	0.04
Differentiated News via Perceived News Quality via Perceived Discrimination[4]					0.08*	0.05
Adj. R^2	.10		.09		.18	

Note. *** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$; [1]Undifferentiated News is the reference category, [2]Distant Terrorist Attack is the reference category, [3]Indirect Effect of Perceived Journalistic Quality via Perceived Discrimination, [4]Indirect Effect of Differentiated News on Positive Attitudes Toward Majority Population via Perceived Journalistic Quality and Perceived Discrimination.

Last, we investigated whether proximity increased the effects of news differentiation on Muslim news consumers' perceived news quality (H4). In contrast to that assumption, there was no significant interaction effect between proximity and news differentiation on perceived news quality ($b = 0.88$, $SE = 0.54$, $p = .104$). Thus, our fourth hypothesis was not supported. We also found no significant main effect of proximity on perceived news quality (not hypothesized, $b = −0.19$, $SE = 0.27$, $p = .483$).
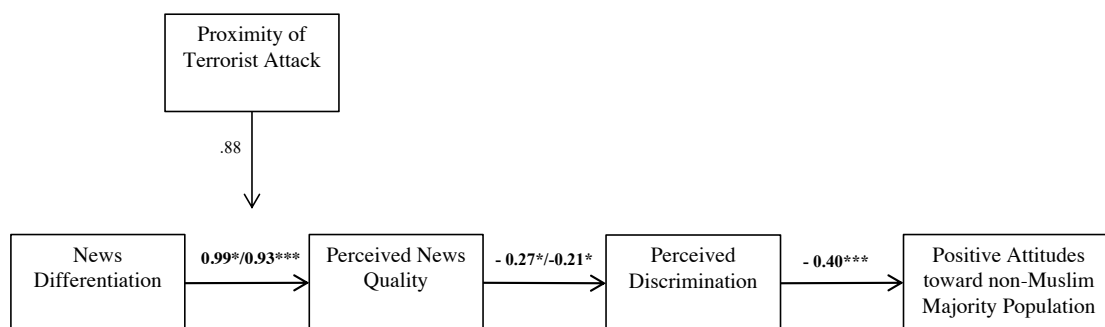
Total Indirect Effect Study 2: $b = .08$, $SE = .05$, 95% CIs [.02, .21]

Figure 2. Hypothesized unstandardized path coefficients Study 1/Study 2.

Discussion

Results of Study 2 showed that perceived news quality was higher for differentiated compared with undifferentiated news articles, which was subsequently negatively related to perceived discrimination. Thus, once again our findings confirmed that news differentiation has the potential to mitigate perceived discrimination among Muslim news consumers in response to terrorism news coverage. Extending the design of Study 1, we additionally investigated how proximity of a terrorist attack influenced perceived news quality. Our findings showed that, although the manipulation check indicated that the manipulation worked as intended, Muslim news consumers did not evaluate the news quality of differentiated compared with undifferentiated news reports about distant terrorist attacks differently than those about domestic terrorist attacks. In other words, proximity did not moderate the effects of news differentiation. Possible reasons for that null finding will be discussed below. Last, Study 2 took a closer look at the consequences of perceived discrimination in response to terrorism news coverage for attitudes toward the non-Muslim majority population. In line with the assumptions of *SIT*, the findings indicated that perceived discrimination in response to terrorism news coverage led to increased feelings of hostility toward majority members among Muslim news consumers, which may be explained for the need to restore a positive self-concept in response to perceived discrimination (Wills, 1981).

General Discussion

Across two experimental studies, we set out to test the effects of journalistic news differentiation in IS terrorism news on Muslim news consumers' perceived news quality, perceived discrimination, and attitudes toward the non-Muslim majority population. Additionally, we investigated the moderating role of the terrorist attack's proximity. In doing so, we built on previous findings demonstrating that news differentiation may prevent the perpetuation of negative stereotypes and Islamophobia among non-Muslim news audiences (von Sikorski et al., 2017; von Sikorski, Matthes, et al., 2021). To complement those findings, we examined for the first time how news differentiation affects attitudes of those portrayed in such news reports: Muslim minority members.

Overall, our findings demonstrated that journalistic differentiation plays an essential role in preventing feelings of discrimination and hostility toward the non-Muslim majority population among Muslim news consumers irrespective of where the terrorist activities occur. We found across both studies that Muslim news consumers appreciated differentiation in news about IS terrorism, which was mirrored in their news quality ratings. Those positive perceptions of journalistic quality were subsequently negatively related with feelings of discrimination. Additionally, our second study showed that perceived discrimination predicted higher hostility toward out-group members. That effect may be explained by the need for self-enhancement in response to undifferentiated news coverage that conflates Muslims with terrorists and therefore represents a threat to the self-concept of Muslims (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Hence, our findings underscore *SIT*'s assumption that individuals derogate out-group members in response to threats to their self-concept to maintain a positive social identity. Evaluating others negatively and reacting with hostility may serve this very purpose (Wills, 1981).

In that light, our research responds to the repeated calls of scholars for proactive changes in mainstream news media coverage of Muslims and Islam in the context of terrorism news coverage (e.g., Ewart et al., 2017). Our research is the first to show that news differentiation is a highly useful remedy to prevent hostile attitudes toward non-Muslims among Muslim news consumers by reducing perceived journalistic biases and discrimination. The finding that perceived discrimination entirely explained the effects of perceived news quality on attitudes toward majority members (full mediation) strongly indicates that lowering feelings of discrimination among Muslims by carefully distinguishing between IS terrorists and Muslims in general is a key to improve minority attitudes toward majority members (see Jasinskaja-Lahti et al., 2009).

Unexpectedly, our findings did not show any effects related to proximity. The described relationships between news differentiation and perceived news quality occurred irrespective of whether the terrorist activities took place in the news consumers' country of residence, Austria, or a culturally and geographically distant country, India. In that sense, our findings corroborate previous studies investigating the effects of terrorism news coverage on non-Muslim news consumers, which could not detect any influence of proximity either (von Sikorski, Matthes, et al., 2021). Several explanations for that null finding seem plausible. First, as already described, distinctiveness theory postulates that minority members tend to be particularly sensitive to aspects of news coverage, which mention their own religious group irrespective of whether the news describe a national or international event. Second, in today's news media environment, citizens are informed of global issues and receive the same information around the world irrespective of their location. Thus, the possibility to follow the events in other countries in real time may increase perceived proximity among news consumers (Ahva & Pantti, 2014; Ruigrok & van Atteveldt, 2016). Third, the frequent occurrence of IS terrorist attacks may create a global threat of terrorism, which renders the actual location of a terrorist attack as less important, as news consumers may expect that their own country of residence may be affected eventually. Last, exposure to threatening terrorism news may lead to a biased perception of proximity, as affective signals of threat have been found to increase perceived proximity, which leads to the perception that threatening objects or events are closer than they are in reality (Cole, Balcetis, & Dunning, 2013).

Overall, we believe that our findings are highly relevant in the context of terrorism news coverage. Our results corroborate previous qualitative research suggesting that Muslims perceive biases and low journalistic standards in the reporting of terrorist attacks (Ahmad, 2006; Ewart et al., 2017) and that such biases have the potential to create social division in Western societies. Across two experimental studies, our findings complement existing research on perceived news bias and discrimination (Ewart et al., 2017; Saleem et al., 2017; Saleem & Ramasubramanian, 2019) by showing that undifferentiated news reporting can have important ramifications for intergroup relations between Muslims and non-Muslims, as they enhance discrimination and hostility toward the majority population among Muslim news consumers. Yet, our study goes beyond this well-established finding: As a completely novel result, we show that employing news differentiation—that is, explicitly distinguishing between Islamist terrorists and Muslims in general, may prevent those negative effects. As such, our study takes a solution-oriented approach directed at the investigation of a potential remedy to prevent these negative outcomes that have repeatedly been shown in previous literature. Previous studies show that news differentiation has the potential to prevent the development and reinforcement of negative intergroup relations between

Muslim minority members and non-Muslim majority members (von Sikorski et al., 2017). Against this background, our findings suggest that news differentiation can serve as a powerful tool to reduce negative stereotypes among non-Muslims on the one hand, and to prevent hostility toward non-Muslim majority members among Muslims on the other.

Limitations and Future Research

This research has some notable limitations. First, the experiments are based on small samples, and lower-educated Muslims were underrepresented. However, Muslim minority members in Austria, who only constitute around 8% of the population, are extremely hard to reach. Thus far, research on Muslim minority members' responses to terrorism coverage or stereotypical news coverage is extremely limited, and many existing experimental studies are either based on student samples (e.g., Saleem & Ramasubramanian, 2019) or convenience samples (Neumann, Arendt, & Baugut, 2018). Therefore, this study represents one of the first studies in this research field that gives attention to the impact of news reporting on those who are being targeted directly in that news coverage—that is, Muslim minority members. Nevertheless, we highly encourage future research to try to extend this research to an even more diverse sample of Muslim minority members. In particular, education might influence Muslims' perceptions of perceived news quality in response to news differentiation, as well-educated individuals may feel a stronger responsibility toward their group (Krueger & Malečková, 2003). Moreover, as undifferentiated news may be marked by linguistic biases (Gorham, 2006), higher educated individuals might be more likely to detect linguistic nuances in journalistic reporting than lower educated ones. Therefore, future research should investigate whether susceptibility to news differentiation increases with higher education.

Second, our design allows only correlational evidence for the mediators and dependent variables, which underlines the need for multiwave panel designs in future research. A third limitation concerns the low amount of explained variance for some of the mediators (e.g., perceived discrimination). The level of perceived discrimination may be influenced by many other factors besides news articles. Therefore, it is comprehensible that exposure to two news articles may explain only a relatively small amount of the variance. Explained variance may increase with the frequency of exposure in a real-life setting.

Implications and Conclusion

Overall, our research suggests that the impact of news reporting on those who feel directly targeted should not be underestimated. By avoiding a conflation of Islamist terrorism and Muslims in general, journalists may actively contribute to better intergroup relations between Muslim minority members and non-Muslim majority members in Western societies (Ramasubramanian, 2007). Examples for careful news reporting may be the use of sensitive language that refrains from making an active connection between Islam and terrorism. Additionally, representatives of Muslim organizations may help improve news coverage of Islam and Muslims by actively reaching out to the mainstream media and drawing their attention to flaws in journalistic reporting. Finally, against the background of many Western countries dealing with the successful integration of Muslim immigrants, our findings suggest that differentiation in terms of using sensitive language, carefully choosing spokespeople as well as displaying

the cultural and political diversity of Islam should be given top priority in public discussions, informational campaigns as well as media literacy programs.

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Appendix A

Perceived News Quality: The credibility of the news article is low—high; The quality of the news article is low—high (Study 1: M = 3.98, SD = 1.33, Cronbach's α = .75; Study 2: M = 4.05, SD = 1.41, Cronbach's α = .88).

Perceived Discrimination: Whether I am Muslim or not, is not important in Austria (R); I often have disadvantages in Austria because of my religion; I feel that I am discriminated in daily life in Austria because of my religion; I feel a sense of belonging in Austria (R); Many Austrians have prejudices against Muslims (Study 1: M = 4.15, SD = 1.53, Cronbach's α = .81; Study 2: M = 4.33, SD = 1.29, Cronbach's α = .73).

Positive attitudes toward non-Muslim majority members: In my view, non-Muslim Austrians are reserved—open, intolerant—tolerant, unfriendly—friendly, dishonest—honest. (Study 2: M = 4.17, SD = 1.30, Cronbach's α = .82).

Political orientation: In politics, people sometimes talk of "left" and "right." Where would you place yourself on this scale, where 0 means "left" and 10 means "right?" (Study 1: M = 3.19, SD = 1.43; Study 2: M = 2.97, SD = 1.27)

Religiosity: How religious would you consider yourself overall: 1 = Not religious at all and 7 = very religious? (Study 1: M = 5.12, SD = 1.49; Study 2: M = 4.29, SD = 1.82)