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# Silent Sympathy: News Attention, Subtle Support for Far-Right Extremism, and Negative Attitudes Toward Muslims

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**ABSTRACT**

Right-wing terrorist (RWT) incidents targeting Muslims have become more frequent and news reporting about these incidents can trigger a variety of cognitions and behaviors in audiences. While some studies report more tolerance and openness in response to RWT, hate crimes against minorities can increase in their aftermath. To date, we know little about the associations between following news reporting about RWT and attitudes toward Muslims as one of the main target groups of modern RWT. Using a young, quota-based German sample (aged 16–25, $N = 865$), we build on Terror Management and Social Identity Theory to shed light on the relationships between attention to RWT in the media, threat attributed to RWT, and negative attitudes toward Muslims. Additionally, a measure of subtle support for far-right extremist stances (SSE) was included, accounting for moderation effects. Results suggested that attention to RWT was positively related to perceived threat. This association was weaker in individuals with higher levels of SSE. Attributing more threat was associated with less negative attitudes toward Muslims, independent of SSE. Media attention only had a (positive) association with negative attitudes in individuals with moderate to high levels of SSE. Implications and limitations are discussed.

In March 2019, a far-right terrorist entered the Al Noor Mosque in Christchurch, New Zealand, during Friday Prayer and opened fire on the defenseless Muslim prayers. He continued to make his way to Linwood Islamic Center, killing a total of fifty-one and leaving countless injured and traumatized, before the police were able to arrest him. In the days following the attacks, a monitoring group, Tell MAMA, reported a stark increase in anti-Muslim hate crimes in Great Britain, apparently triggered by the attacks that happened nearly 12,000 miles away.[1] In light of similar —but often anecdotal—reports and stories that point to growing hostility toward Muslims in response to right-wing terrorism (RWT) and violence, and given that the media are at the forefront of informing the public about such terrorist events, this study investigates how individuals' media attention to far-right extremism and terrorism relates to threat appraisal and ultimately to negative attitudes toward Muslims. We focus on negative attitudes toward Muslims because such cognitions may contribute to intergroup frictions in Western societies, threatening societal cohesion.

Although the term *terrorism* is contested, it is often used to describe acts that seek to achieve political change by use of violence and generation of fear.[2] *Far-right terrorists* aim at reshaping society in accordance to a right-wing extremist model built on (ingroup) supremacism.[3] Therefore, investigating RWT calls for a Social Identity Theory perspective (SIT).[4] According to SIT, individuals identify with certain social groups (ingroup) and disassociate from other groups (outgroup), depending on contextual cues, generally striving for a positive self- and group-image.[5] Research on far-right

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extremism and violence has prominently focused on the authoritarian personality[6] and predictors and effects of right-wing authoritarianism,[7] but rarely specifically on mediated terrorism. Instead, jihadist terrorism has shaped public perceptions of terrorism since 9/11, has occupied the larger part of terrorism researchers, and has often looked into individuals' authoritarian responses to terror.[8] For instance, Sullivan and Hutchings showed that participants' levels of right-wing authoritarianism increased in response to the November 2015 Paris attacks compared to the levels prior to the terror acts.[9] Thus, jihadist terror threat may increase authoritarian attitudes specifically right after attacks.[10]

This bias in research foci is problematic because RWT incidents have risen dramatically and inherently possess different group dynamics.[11] Proposing the ideal of a former "biologically," nowadays "culturally" homogeneous society, RWT devalues and often targets minorities.[12] Although the results of prior studies are not conclusive, RWT incidents seem to increase levels of tolerance and openness in the general population.[13] Additionally, respondents seem to diffuse responsibility attributed to shared group membership with the perpetrator,[14] and tend to categorize group-ambiguous terrorist offenders as outgroup members.[15] In recent years, Muslims emerged as a one of the main target groups of modern RWT, as for instance in Christchurch 2019 or Québec 2017.[16] This tendency is also visible in anti-Islamic far-right conspiracy narratives, that were prominently featured in "manifestos" of RWT perpetrators (e.g., Oslo and Utøya, Norway, or Halle, Germany).[17] Yet, the question how the public follows news content related to RWT and the association with negative attitudes toward Muslims remains under-investigated.

We want to address this research gap by investigating how attention to RWT in the media relates to threat attributed to RWT, and, in turn, how attributed threat is associated with negative attitudes. Importantly, ideological stances, such as personal justification of far-right extremism, may interact with these relationships. Assessing socially undesirable attitudes such as support of far-right extremism is difficult. Prior research has employed scales that measure covert prejudice, for instance modern racism.[18] Building on these endeavors and Social Dominance Theory, we use a measure of subtle support of far-right extremism (SSE), i.e., justification of these acts, as a moderator.[19]

Taken together, this study provides answers to four highly relevant but so far overlooked aspects of the problematic terrorism-media dynamic. First, given the increasing threat of RWT to Western societies,[20] and the public and scholarly bias toward jihadist terrorism,[21] unfolding RWT-related media attention characteristics is vital. Second, past research has failed to address how young individuals beyond highly-educated student samples are interacting with RWT in the media. Even though young individuals tend to report less prejudice against minorities,[22] RWT (attempted) offender data suggests that adolescents and young adults are the largest age group recruited by the extreme right.[23] As such, gaining insights into young individuals' attention to RWT in the media, perceived RWT-attributed threat, and possible associations with negative attitudes toward Muslims, depending on individual SSE, is called for. Third, investigating negative attitudes toward Muslims as a highly-stigmatized minority in Western societies as well as a target group of far-right threat narratives and RWT is necessary to advance possible ways to mending intergroup frictions. Fourth, blatant support for far-right extremist stances may be particularly prone to social desirability bias and of little practical use to assess sympathy toward far-right terrorists and extremists. We try to circumvent this issue by building on related research on covert, subtle prejudice, and implementing a measure of subtle sympathy.[24] We address these research gaps in a large survey amongst sixteen- to twenty-five-year-olds in Germany.

## Attention to RWT in the media and threat perceptions

The far right is heterogeneous and structured around the features authoritarianism and nativism.[25] Based on meta-analytical evidence, research has identified a relationship between right-wing ideological attitudes (including authoritarianism) and aggressive tendencies, such as attitudes toward violence, and specifically intergroup hostility and aggression.[26] More precisely, the role of aggression directed against outgroups has been integrated to the theorizing and measurements of the right-wing

authoritarianism concept.[27] Specifically, far-right terrorists aim to achieve societal and political change by building on supremacism or the thought that one group that shares common attributes (e.g., nation, race) is superior to others.[28] The frequency and intensity of far-right terrorism has increased in Western countries.[29] From 2014 to 2019, incidents of RWT have increased by 250 percent and the death toll has risen by 709 percent.[30] As RWT can be considered one of the most prominent terrorism threats,[31] scholars have called for studies focusing on RWT.[32]

To gain more power for political change, terrorists commonly rely on mass mediated publicity.[33] The media cover terrorism extensively and frame terrorist attacks in their aftermath.[34] Terror attacks are uncommon but sudden and can be identified as attention-grabbing events that draw public awareness (i.e., a focusing event).[35] News about terrorism often include elements that emphasize threat.[36] Thus, the media coverage makes the topic salient and may induce threat perceptions in individuals.[37] Moreover, the media report about terrorist attacks differently, based on factors such as perpetrator or victim characteristics.[38] For example, attacks committed by Muslim perpetrators receive more media coverage compared to perpetrators without Muslim religious affiliation.[39] Nevertheless, RWT attacks are also covered in the media, as the media serve its watchdog functions and inform the public.[40]

Research has repeatedly shown that exposure to terrorism in the media can lead to higher levels of fear of terrorism.[41] Similarly, more general research on crime suggests a relationship between consumption of crime news and fear of crime.[42] Research has further revealed that individuals with a high interest in violent crime news are more fearful of street violence and are more likely to perceive terrorism as a threat compared to individuals with low interest, pointing out to the importance of cognitive involvement.[43] Higher knowledge of terrorism gathered through media heightens the levels of fear of terrorism.[44] Furthermore, reliance on mass media makes it more likely that (out)group-related threat perceptions (i.e., symbolic threat posed by Muslims) contribute to negative attitudes toward minorities.[45] Although most research in this context has focused on general terrorism threat, jihadist terrorism, or crime, we expect similar patterns to apply to RWT. Translated to the purpose of the present study, it can be assumed that news consumers that pay close attention to reporting about RWT, that is, show topical involvement in the issue, also perceive the threat posed by RWT as higher. Due to the cross-sectional nature of the present study, it is important to keep in mind that although this is a directional hypothesis, it is formally not possible to account for directionality, i.e., causality.

**H1**: Attention to RWT in the media is associated with higher levels of threat attributed to far-right terrorism.

### Attention to RWT in the media and SSE shape threat perceptions

On paper, that is, in legal terms, minorities and specific societal subgroups have achieved equality in many regards, driven by and driving social norms and attitudes surrounding them. Yet, this does not imply that lived equality is achieved. Instead, the tone and terrain of the debate has shifted. Past research has established how to assess (negative) outgroup attitudes in focusing either on their overt or covert forms, as for instance McConahay's covert Modern Racism Scale.[46] In related terms, Pearson et al.[47] describe "aversive racism" as "a form of prejudice characterizing the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of the majority of well-intentioned and ostensibly non-prejudiced White Americans."[48] In aversive racism, the attribution of racist intent is avoided by adhering to indirect, subtle forms of racism that do not stand in direct contrast with perceived social norms, such as basic human rights and equality. The reasoning behind these scales is that overtly prejudiced statements are unacceptable to most and prejudiced arguments are embedded in more covert or subtle forms. Hence, it is of little informational value to ask members of the general public for blatantly norm-violating attitudes, such as far-right extremist ideologies. Analogue to above-described outgroup devaluations, only few people would report extremist attitudes deliberately even if they held them.

Although we generally suspect a positive association between attention to RWT in the media with threat attributed to RWT, the level of attributed threat likely depends on the interaction of broader

attitudes toward far-right extremism and attention. Put differently, outcomes of attention to RWT in the media may vary depending on the SSE individuals express—for instance, to what length they go to justify the reasoning behind violent acts of far-rightists. Far-right extremism may take on different forms but is, in its core, characterized by authoritarianism, nativism, as well as the will to change the system from the outside, if necessary, with violent means.[49] Justifying suggests sympathizing with the implicit argumentation, whereby the underlying far-right extremist argument is perceived as legitimate.[50] The basic idea of SSE can be based on Social Dominance Theory, which explains group-based social hierarchies in societies, in which one social group based on, e.g., religion holds disproportionate political power and at least one another group holds relatively little power.[51] According to Social Dominance Theory, inequalities among groups are present through the usage of such disproportionate power against subordinate groups.[52] In particular, discrimination and the use of power are made acceptable by hierarchy legitimizing myths that are based on beliefs and attitudes suggesting that subordinate group members are inferior and deserve their status.[53] Accordingly, hierarchy-enhancing legitimizing myths add to group-based inequalities.[54] Notably, intergroup violence and terror may be seen as a tool to maintain societal intergroup hierarchies.[55] Practical examples for SSE are that "ultimately, far-right extremists and terrorists only want what is best for Germany," or that one "can very well understand the fears of far-right extremists of a foreign infiltration of Germany." In order to sympathize with far-right extremist and terrorist stances, their potentially violent means do not have to be supported and may even be criticized—the underlying ideological assumptions, however, are regarded as just.

Attention to RWT in the media in itself does not include an evaluation of RWT, but rather translates to cognitive involvement with the broader topic. Assuming, however, that some people show higher levels of SSE than others, and generally perceive far-right extremist stances as *legitimate*, it is likely that their motivation to pay attention to RWT does not translate as strongly to threat attributed to RWT as in people with lower levels of subtle support. The hostile media effect suggests that, based on media reports contradicting one's own opinions or values, media outlets are evaluated as non-credible and even hostile.[56] A precondition for the hostile media effect is *involvement*. Prior research found a positive influence of immigration-specific media attention[57] as well as personal topic involvement with illegal immigration on hostile media perceptions.[58] This could also foster impressions of a concrete media bias in RWT, in which the threat stemming from RWT is perceived as exaggerated. Given that subtle supporters evaluate far-right extremists and terrorists overall as legitimate, we assume that they will neglect the factual danger that RWT poses. Thus, we hypothesize:

**H2**: The positive association of attention to RWT in the media with threat ascribed to RWT described in **H1** depends on the level of subtle support for far-right extremism, individuals express. The association is stronger in individuals with lower levels of subtle support and weaker in individuals with higher levels of subtle support.

### *Associations between RWT threat perceptions and attitudes toward Muslims*

Terrorist attacks are disruptive events that can have long-lasting effects on news consumers and public discourses. For instance, after the 2011 Norway attacks, a shift in the media discourse about immigration became apparent.[59] On the one hand, Norwegian media covered the topic of immigration less and silenced voices generally opposing immigration to a larger extent. On the other hand, media discourse triggered by the attacks partly opened the floor of mainstream media to previously ignored anti-Islamic online actors and their deviant positions.[60] Looking at the effects of terrorism and terrorism news, past research has prominently referred to Terror Management Theory (TMT).[61] According to TMT, humans share a defiance of death and suppress the awareness of their own mortality by adhering to culture and traditions. If mortality is salient, i.e., is a direct reminder of others' or one's own mortality, individuals draw back to cultural constructs that offer stability. For instance, worldview or social group categorizations.[62] According to SIT, an important share of self is derived from identifying with social groups, as well as

distinguishing one's ingroup from other social groups.[63] As individuals strive to uphold a positive self- and group-image, they tend to evaluate members of their ingroup more favorably than members of the outgroup (see for instance Levy & Rozmann).[64] SIT is especially relevant for this branch of research because it allows to explain a number of intergroup phenomena, including outgroup degradation in the face of mortality salience.

As summarized by Jost et al., a number of studies have established the link between death anxiety and conservative stances as motivated social cognition.[65] Yet, the effect of attention to information rich in mortality salience is most likely tied to perceptions of threat. Past studies have linked exposure to terror news and more negative attitudes toward outgroups.[66] This tendency was not only found for outgroups that were associated with the perpetrators of the specific terror attack, but also for outgroups that cannot be readily associated with the perpetrators.[67] Notably, a study by Álvarez-Benjumea and Winter suggests an increase in hatred toward the perpetrators' social group, in their case refugees, solely if personal antiracist norms were eroded.[68] Only few studies report no significant effects on intergroup attitudes.[69] All in all, these studies suggest that increased threat attributed to terrorism predicts less favorable evaluations of outgroups, manifesting for instance in negative attitudes toward these groups. However, most research conducted in this area focuses on jihadist terrorism in Western countries, where the perpetrator's generalized social group is a minority, i.e., an outgroup. Effects of RWT attacks could differ drastically from jihadist attacks and may not fall into the line predicted by TMT, because in RWT, the perpetrators are mostly categorized as members of the majority society.

While some far-right extremists and terrorists target "foreigners" as a broad category, Muslims as a specifically vulnerable target group emerged in recent years.[70] Although Muslims are the largest religious minority in Germany, constituting over six percent of the total population, they are often met with prejudice.[71] Especially since 9/11, Muslims have been regarded and framed as an alien threat.[72] Adding to this, Hafez attests that Islamophobia constitutes the common ground that ties pan-European right-wing actors together.[73] Over the last decades, Muslims are increasingly targeted by hate-crimes, especially following jihadist terrorist attacks.[74] Although not all far-right perpetrators target Muslims, anti-Muslim sentiments are a prominent cornerstone of RWT. In the Norway attacks, for instance, the perpetrator published a "manifesto" with a collective action framing that "most noticeably overlaps with that of the larger anti-Islamic movement," albeit advocating violent means.[75] Anti-Islamic conspiracy theories, such as Eurabia or the "Great Replacement" are heavily perpetuated by far-right actors,[76][77] staging Muslims at the center of a threat-scenario to take over Europe. Although far-right violence and RWT are highly prevalent, little is known about their effects on members of the general population.

Past studies have established that group-ambiguous individuals are more readily categorized as outgroup members, when they violated norms by committing violent acts.[78] Piazza found that support for extraordinary detention practices in the case of ingroup perpetrators, who committed acts of RWT, is lower than in the case of Muslim perpetrators.[79] Further, Doosje et al. found that ingroup perpetrators of terrorist attacks tend to be judged as individuals, whereas the responsibility in outgroup perpetrators is transferred to the whole social group.[80] This effect is thought to be a function of upholding self- and group-image by distancing oneself from the devious individual and is in line with the assumptions of SIT. In related terms, Solheim describes the effect of dissociating from the far-right perpetrator of the 2011 Norway attacks with cognitive dissonance.[81] As conceptualized in the Black Sheep Effect, unambiguously norm violating behavior of ingroup perpetrators is condemned and punished more vigorously, to uphold an overall positive group-image.[82] As such, the perpetrator can be regarded as a "black sheep," an isolated exception, while the group- and self-image stays intact. Put simply, individuals want to distance themselves from an ingroup perpetrator to reduce adverse psychological effects attributed to the shared group-membership.

In line with this reasoning, evidence from the 2011 Norway attacks suggests an increase in democratic values of trust, tolerance, and openness following the attacks.[83] Pointing to a similar

direction, attitudes toward immigrants were more positive after the 2011 Norway attacks.[84] In contrast to the Norway attacks, which targeted children and adolescents attending the Workers' Youth League summer camp, the far-right perpetrator in the 2019 Christchurch attacks targeted Muslims. Shanaah et al. report an increase in warmth toward Muslims in the direct aftermath of the attack.[85] It is likely that the underlying driver of these effects is the heightened threat potential attributed to RWT. As such, we hypothesize that attitudes toward Muslims, as the most salient minority in Germany, are less negative, when the levels of threat attributed to RWT are higher compared to lower:

**H3**: Threat attributed to far-right terrorism is negatively associated with negative attitudes toward Muslims. That means that individuals who perceive RWT as rather threatening express fewer negative attitudes toward Muslims, while individuals who perceive RWT as less threatening report more negative attitudes toward Muslims.

### Attention to RWT in the media and SSE shape attitudes toward Muslims

However, preexisting ideological stances may moderate the relationship hypothesized in **H3.** Reporting an increase in outgroup trust following the attacks, Solheim states that this increase varies as a function of positive attitudes toward immigration held prior to the attack.[86] As such, individuals who were more supportive of immigration experienced a greater increase in outgroup trust than individuals who were skeptical about immigration. Experimentally investigating the morality judgments of political violence and the effect of participants' ideological alignment with the causes, Norman reported that conservatives found violent actions aligning with conservative perspectives as more justifiable while liberals rated violent actions adhering to their ideological alignment as more justifiable.[87] Other scholars have used political ideology as a moderator of outgroup warmth.[88] Yet, far-right extremism per definition operates outside of democratic societal systems and therefore cannot be equated with self-positioning on the (democratic) political spectrum.[89]

As conceptualized, individuals who express higher levels of SSE justify the actions of far-right extremists and terrorists. While they may not agree with the violent means, they see a just reason for far-right extremism and terrorism. This might affect their perceptions of victims of RWT and attitudes toward these victimized groups. Research on victim blaming in the face of hate crimes suggests that participants who held Islamophobic attitudes drew back to victim blaming when the victim of a harassment was a South Asian Muslim compared to a White victim.[90] Victim blaming can be regarded as a justification strategy, in which the perpetrator is (partly) absolved from guilt and a share of responsibility is burdened on the victim. "Blaming the victim" has been identified as one element of the broader denial of racism.[91] As such, it seems particularly relevant to the justification practices expressed in SSE.

While we assume a negative association between threat attributed to RWT and negative attitudes toward Muslims, we suspect that this relationship is stronger in individuals with low levels of SSE and weaker in individuals with higher levels of SSE. That is, for those who sympathize with far-right extremist stances, the hypothesized association may be weaker than for individuals with lower levels of SSE. If individuals express high levels of SSE, i.e., sympathize with far-right extremist ideology and justify these actions, they will rather attribute blame and negative affect to one of the main target groups of RWT—Muslims. Taken together, we hypothesize that for those with low levels of SSE, RWT-attributed threat will be associated with less negative attitudes toward Muslims more strongly, whereas this negative relationship will weaken with rising levels of SSE:

**H4**: The negative association described in **H3** depends on the level of subtle support for RWT, individuals express. The relationship is stronger for individuals with lower levels of subtle support compared to individuals with higher levels of subtle support.

### Attention to RWT in the media, subtle support, and attitudes toward Muslims

Only little empirical work investigates the possible effects that cognitive involvement with RWT, i.e., attention to RWT in the media, could have on intergroup attitudes. It is, however, well established that the way in which the media frame Muslims and Islam as well as jihadist terrorism may not only affect emotional and attitudinal outcomes but also inspire hateful actions. This is evident in the increasing number of hate crimes following non-right-wing attacks.[92] Since the line between hate-crime and RWT is thin and often times blurry,[93] jihadist and far-right incidents and ideologies may contribute to a spiral of violence, or "cumulative extremism."[94] Looking at RWT, one might assume that individual media attention to RWT would automatically increase empathy for the victims, who are to a large extent minorities. But experimental evidence speaks against this. In Austria, news readers reported less compassion for Muslim victims of RWT attacks than for Christian victims, most likely because they felt less similar to them.[95] On another note, the Christchurch attacks worsened the situation for Muslims in the U.K. drastically by inspiring anti-Muslim hate crimes and accelerating Islamophobia.[96] As it is media coverage that informs citizens about RWT incidents, outcomes related to attention to RWT in the media may also be prone to ideological distortions.

Far-right beliefs are often accompanied by deteriorated trust in societal institutions like established media outlets.[97] This distrust and dismissal can be highly emotional, and most notably characterized by feelings of anger due to perceived lack of objectivity.[98] Involvement seems to be particularly predictive of the hostile media effect.[99] According to this effect, highly involved individuals may perceive media reporting as biased when the reporting contests their own views.[100] It is likely that individuals with higher levels of SSE would pay close attention to news reports about RWT, despite potential distrust. Still, what they see and experience when reviewing these media reports may be embedded in their ideological belief system—given that they sympathize with the perpetrators' assumptions, it is likely that they contest the credibility of the news reports and simultaneously reinforce their worldview, manifesting in stronger negative attitudes toward Muslims. Albeit plausible, existing research is not sufficient to hypothesize. Thus, we explore this dynamic with a research question:

**RQ1**: How is attention to RWT in the media related to negative attitudes toward Muslims and shaped as a function of subtle support expressed for far-right extremism and terrorism?

All hypothesized relationships are depicted in Figure 1. Please note that directionality of the hypotheses is derived from the literature and cannot be tested.

### Method

We conducted an online survey among adolescents and young adults (sixteen- to twenty-five-year-olds) in Germany.[101] Subjects' informed consent was obtained before participation. The participants were recruited by two professional polling companies.[102] The sample approximately met the quotas of gender (53.9 percent female, 0.7 percent diverse) and age ($M = 21.14$, $SD = 2.73$) of the target population. We also implemented a soft quota for education level (36.50 percent no degree, elementary or secondary school; 50.20 percent high school degree; 13.30 percent university degree). The survey was administered between July 15 and August 17, 2021. No jihadist or RWT incidents happened in Germany during that time. Before the data collection, the Institutional Review Board of the Department of Communication at the University of Vienna approved the study (ID: 20210531_037). With an aim to ensure the data quality, we excluded speeders[103] and participants who failed responding to three attention-check items correctly (e.g., "My birthday is on February 30").[104] The final sample included $N = 865$ adolescents and young adults. This study was embedded in a larger data collection. Before answering questions on the variables presented in this paper, participants filled out a survey on green influencers[105] and answered questions about media use about jihadist terrorism.[106] Data relating to the present analyses are available at OSF (https://osf.io/jxf24/?view_only=6d79343723a544ea9041a9663d4dd116).
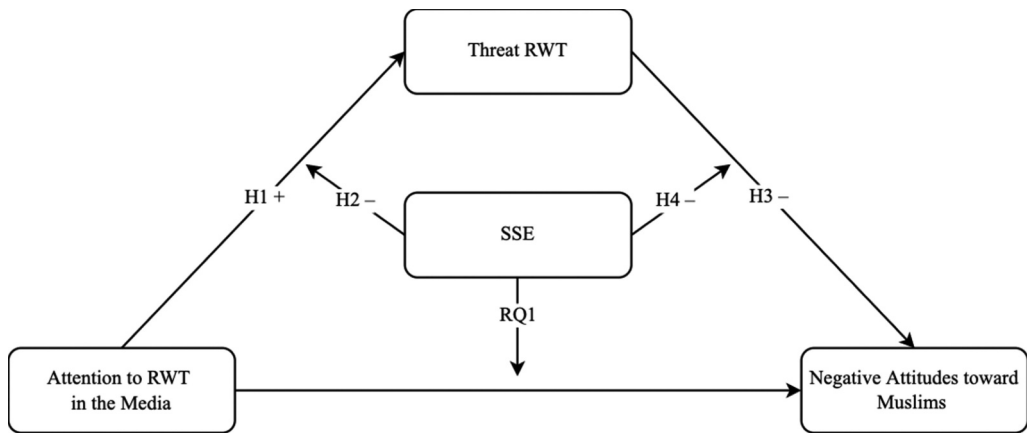
**Figure 1.** Hypothesized model. Only hypothesized paths are depicted. Control variables are omitted for clarity reasons. SSE = Subtle support for far-right extremism; RWT = Right-wing terrorism.

## Measures

A full item list is provided in the online Appendix on OSF: https://osf.io/jxf24.

### Attention to RWT in the media

We used two items to measure attention to RWT in the media (1—*never*, 7—*all the time*; e.g., "I follow news coverage about right-wing extremist terrorism closely"). After ensuring sufficient correlation between the items, they were combined to a mean-based index (Spearman-Brown coefficient ($\rho$) = .86, $M$ = 3.47, $SD$ = 1.70).

### Threat attributed to RWT

Threat ascribed to RWT was measured with six items covering aspects of threat to self, others, and Germany adapted from Huddy et al.[107] and Goodwin et al.[108] (1—*strongly disagree*, 7—*strongly agree*; e.g., "I feel personally threatened by right-wing extremists or terrorists"). After principal component analysis suggested one-dimensionality, the items were compiled to a mean-based index (Cronbach's $\alpha$ = .90, $M$ = 4.09, $SD$ = 1.51).

### Negative attitudes toward Muslims

A measure with five items based on Lee et al.[109] and Park et al.[110] was used to gauge negative attitudes toward Muslims (1—*strongly disagree*, 7—*strongly agree*; e.g., "If it was possible, I would avoid places where there are many Muslims"). After establishing one-dimensionality with principal component analysis, the items were collapsed (Cronbach's $\alpha$ = .94, $M$ = 3.01, $SD$ = 1.72).

### Subtle support for far-right extremism

SSE was measured with four self-developed items (1—*strongly disagree*, 7—*strongly agree*; e.g., "I condemn right-wing extremists and terrorists but I think that they ultimately only want what is best for Germany"), adapting scales for modern racism[111] and aversive racism[112] to the objectives of this study. Principal component analysis revealed one dimension and the items were mean-indexed (Cronbach's $\alpha$ = .88, $M$ = 3.08, $SD$ = 1.54).

### Control variables

As control variables, we included age, low education (dummy-coded), high education (dummy-coded), female gender (dummy-coded), diverse gender (dummy-coded), political ideology (1—*left*, 10—*right*),

negative attitudes toward religion (partly based on Wang et al.),[113] and perceived everyday discrimination.[114] As ninety-seven participants indicated Muslim religious affiliation (11.20 percent of the sample), we controlled for self-identification as a Muslim (dummy-coded). Additionally, we controlled for sample provider.[115]

### Statistical analysis

The data was analyzed using SPSS® Version 27.[116] We analyzed the conceptualized moderated mediation model with PROCESS macro based on 5,000 bootstrap samples (model 59).[117] Continuous measurement scales were mean centered.

### Results

Confirming **H1,** we found that attention to RWT in the media was positively associated with levels of threat attributed to RWT ($b = 0.43$, $SE = 0.03$, $p < .001$). As hypothesized in **H2**, this association was negatively moderated by SSE ($b = −0.03$, $SE = 0.02$, $p = .044$). As such, the positive association of attention to RWT in the media with threat attributed to RWT was stronger in individuals with lower levels of SSE and weaker in individuals with higher levels of SSE. With growing levels of SSE, the positive relationship remains significant but gets weaker. The moderation is plotted in Figure 2.

Further, we found that overall threat attributed to RWT was negatively associated with negative attitudes toward Muslims ($b = −0.13$, $SE = 0.03$, $p < .001$). This means that individuals who perceive RWT as more threatening expressed fewer negative attitudes toward Muslims, while individuals who perceive RWT as less threatening reported more negative attitudes toward Muslims. Therefore, **H3** was confirmed. Contrasting **H4,** the negative association was not moderated by SSE ($b = −0.01$, $SE = 0.02$, $p = .531$).

RQ1 explored the relationships between media attention to RWT, SSE, and negative attitudes toward Muslims. The data suggested no direct relationship between attention to RWT in the media and negative attitudes toward Muslims ($b = 0.04$, $SE = 0.03$, $p = .182$). But the interaction effect of attention to RWT in the media and SSE on negative attitudes toward Muslims was positive and significant ($b = 0.04$, $SE = 0.02$, $p = .042$). Looking closer into the conditional effect, the association between media attention and negative attitudes was only significant when levels of SSE were high. When levels of SSE were low to moderate, there was no association of attention with negative attitudes. The interaction is plotted in Figure 3.

The conditional indirect association was significant for all levels of subtle support, as indicated by the bootstrapped confidence intervals presented in Table 1. This means that attention to RWT in the media was negatively related to negative attitudes toward Muslims via threat appraisal in all levels of SSE.

Looking at the direct relationships of SSE with threat and with attitudes, we found that SSE was negatively related to threat attributed to RWT ($b = −0.10$, $SE = 0.04$, $p = .008$) and positively related to negative attitudes toward Muslims ($b = 0.41$, $SE = 0.03$, $p < .001$). The following controls related to threat attributed to RWT significantly: The association with discrimination ($b = 0.12$, $SE = 0.04$, $p = .004$), negative attitudes toward religion ($b = 0.08$, $SE = 0.03$, $p = .007$), female gender ($b = 0.34$, $SE = 0.09$, $p < .001$), and diverse gender ($b = 1.12$, $SE = 0.53$, $p = .036$) was positive. The association with political ideology was negative ($b = −0.05$, $SE = 0.02$, $p = .037$), indicating that right-wingers attributed less threat to RWT. Relating to negative attitudes toward Muslims, we found positive predictions of age ($b = 0.05$, $SE = 0.02$, $p = .006$), discrimination ($b = 0.28$, $SE = 0.04$, $p < .001$), negative attitudes toward religion ($b = 0.21$, $SE = 0.03$, $p < .001$), and political ideology ($b = 0.09$, $SE = 0.02$, $p < .001$). Negative attitudes toward Muslims were negatively predicted by identifying as Muslim ($b = −0.33$, $SE = 0.14$, $p = .016$) and diverse gender ($b = −1.29$, $SE = 0.51$, $p = .012$). All regression coefficients are displayed in Table 2.
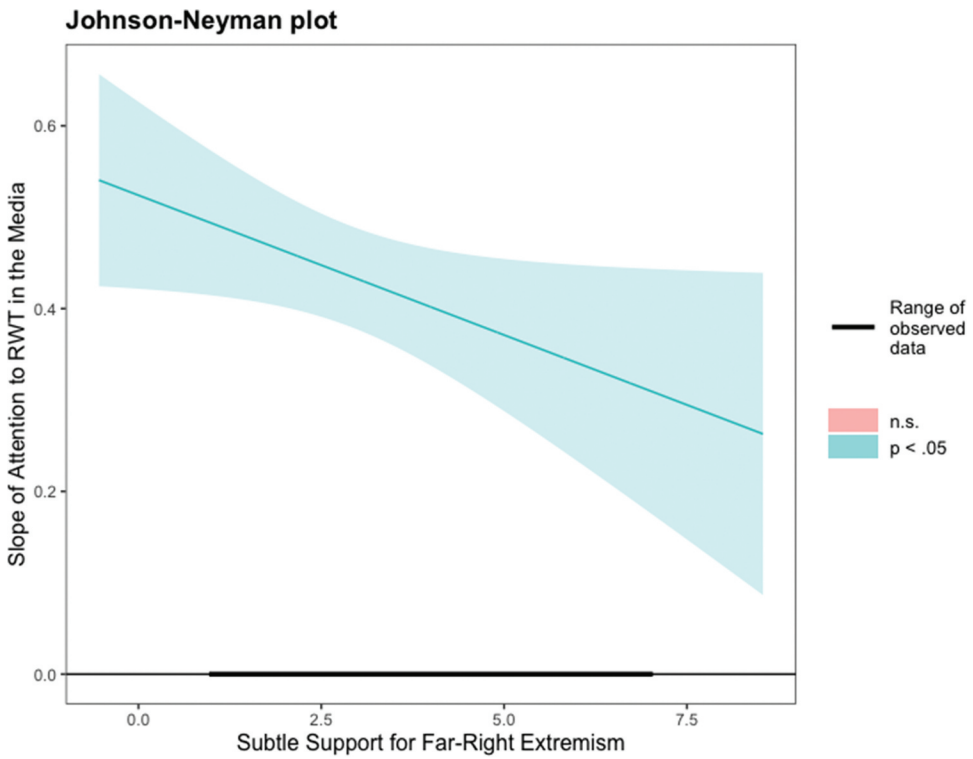
**Figure 2.** Johnson-Neyman plot for interaction of attention to RWT in the media and subtle support for far-right extremism on threat attributed to RWT. RWT = right-wing terrorism.
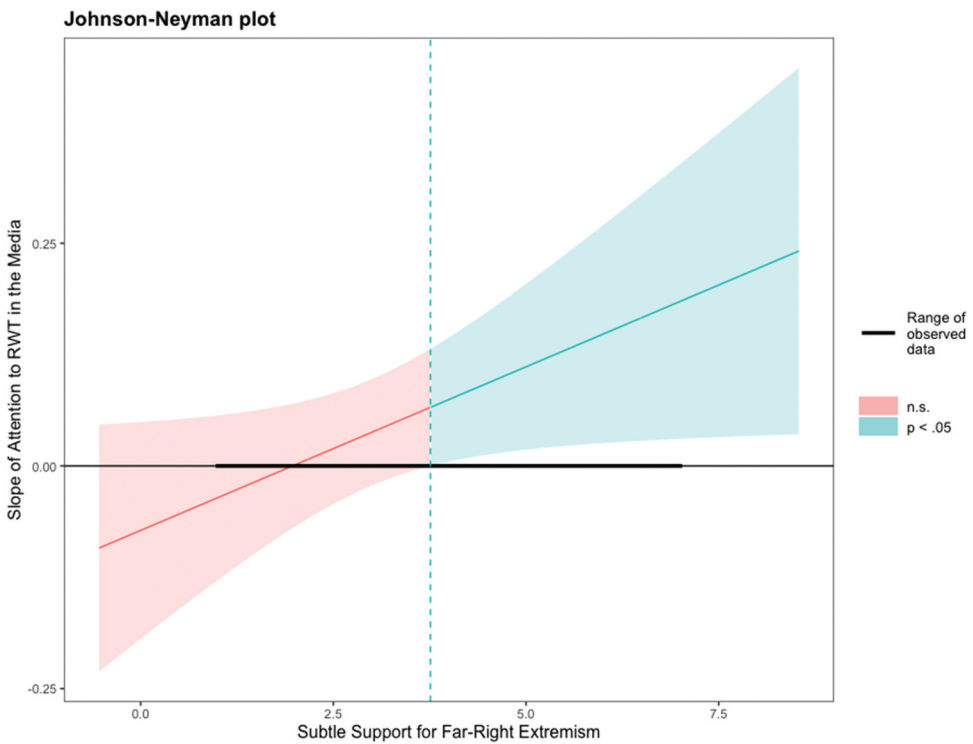


**Figure 3.** Johnson-Neyman plot for interaction of attention to RWT in the media and subtle support for far-right extremism on negative attitudes toward Muslims. RWT = right-wing terrorism.

Table 1. Indirect conditional effect of attention to RWT in the media on negative attitudes toward Muslims

| SSE | b | BootSE | BootLLCI | BootULCI |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| −1.54 | -0.055 | .021 | −0.097 | −0.012 |
| 0 | −0.058 | .018 | −.094 | −0.020 |
| 1.54 | −0.059 | .026 | −.110 | −0.007 |

RWT = right-wing terrorism, SSE = subtle support for far-right extremism. $N = 865$.

Table 2. Regression coefficients

| | Threat Attributed to RWT | Negative Attitudes toward Muslims |
|---|---|---|
| Attention to RWT in the media | 0.43*** (0.03) | 0.04 (0.03) |
| Subtle Support of Far-Right Extremism | −0.10** (0.04) | 0.41*** (0.03) |
| Attention X Subtle Support | −0.03* (0.02) | 0.04* (0.02) |
| Threat Attributed to RWT | | −0.13*** (0.03) |
| Threat Attributed to RWT X Subtle Support | | −0.01 (0.02) |
| Age | −0.003 (0.02) | 0.05** (0.02) |
| Muslim | −0.03 (0.14) | −0.33* (0.14) |
| Perceived Everyday Discrimination | 0.12** (0.04) | 0.28*** (0.04) |
| Woman | 0.34*** (0.09) | −0.13 (0.09) |
| Diverse | 1.12* (0.53) | −1.29* (0.51) |
| Low Education | −0.13 (0.10) | 0.10 (0.09) |
| High Education | −0.05 (0.14) | −0.10 (0.13) |
| Attitude toward Religion | 0.08** (0.03) | 0.21*** (0.03) |
| Political Orientation | −0.05* (0.02) | 0.09*** (0.02) |
| Data Source | 0.02 (0.09) | 0.15 (0.09) |
| $R^2$ | 0.30 | 0.50 |

Standard errors in parentheses. $N = 865$. Continuous variables were mean-centered prior to analysis. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

## Discussion

This study builds on TMT,[118] SIT,[119] and related theories, and contributes to the understanding of correlations between attention to RWT in the media, threat attributed to RWT, and negative attitudes toward Muslims. As such, it addresses a research gap related to RWT and potential associations with intergroup attitudes.[120] Implementing prior research on covert prejudice[121] and Social Dominance Theory,[122] a measure of SSE was included. Surveying a young German sample, and controlling for a number of covariates, we found support for most of our hypotheses.

As expected from prior research on media effects of jihadist terrorism reporting, we found that media attention to RWT was associated with higher levels of threat attributed to RWT.[123] That is, young individuals who pay attention to RWT in the media, i.e., show high levels of cognitive involvement, tend to attribute more threat to RWT. This positive association was moderated by SSE. The higher the levels of subtle support, the weaker was the positive association between attention and attributed threat. This is not surprising, given that individuals who express more SSE are justifying the motives of far-right extremists and terrorists and may evaluate media reports on RWT differently. Although not explicitly measured in this study, one possible explanation for this interaction may lie in the hostile media effect.[124] Given that high levels of SSE and cognitive involvement to the matter might give rise to feelings of media bias, resulting from the hostile media effect, the media's portrayal of RWT may be evaluated as exaggerated regarding the danger of RWT.[125] Notably, although the association was weaker in individuals with higher levels of subtle support, it was still positive and significant.

Another hypothesis was based on studies implementing TMT[126] and SIT[127] as a theoretical framework. These studies were mostly conducted in the context of jihadist terrorism and found that terror, likely by increasing mortality salience, derogated attitudes toward outgroups.[128] A precondition of this effect may be that the terrorist acts are perceived as threatening, thus activating mortality salience, and contribute to negative outgroup attitudes as a cognitive defense mechanism. Since the underpinnings of RWT are

different—it is majority/ingroup perpetrators who commit the acts—we hypothesized that higher levels of threat attributed to RWT would result in less negative attitudes toward Muslims. Although Muslims are generally depicted negatively and often framed in connection to terrorism and violence, many RWT attacks are directed at Muslims.[129] As such, reducing negative attitudes toward Muslims could be a means of distancing oneself from the ingroup perpetrators and the far-right ideology associated with them. Our data supported this hypothesis, finding that threat attributed to far-right terrorism is negatively associated with negative attitudes toward Muslims. That means that individuals who perceive RWT as a greater threat also express fewer negative attitudes toward Muslims, while individuals who perceive RWT as less threatening report more negative attitudes toward Muslims. Investigating the moderating role of preexisting ideology, i.e., SSE, did, however, not yield significant results. Thus, independent of SSE, individuals who attributed more threat to RWT expressed fewer negative attitudes toward Muslims.

Finally, we addressed a possible interaction effect of attention to RWT in the media and SSE on negative attitudes toward Muslims with a research question. The results suggested no direct relationship between attention to RWT in the media and negative attitudes. Including the moderator SSE, however, offered valuable insights. Attention to RWT in the media predicted negative attitudes toward Muslims depending on the level of SSE that individuals express. In individuals who report higher levels of SSE, the relationship between attention to RWT in the media and negative attitudes toward Muslims was positive and significant. In contrast, in individuals who reported lower levels of SSE, the association of attention to RWT in the media with negative attitudes toward Muslims was negative and, most importantly, not significant. Again, the positive interaction effect of attention to RWT in the media and SSE on negative attitudes toward Muslims may be explained by the hostile media effect.[130][131] In-depth interviews with far-right commenters on social media show that they often experience strong feelings of anger at traditional news outlets.[132] One could argue that subtle supporters are cognitively and affectively involved in the topic of RWT. As such, it is likely that they will pay close attention to RWT in the media. But, instead of countering the information with more positive attitudes toward Muslims, they might feel that their worldview is justified and report less favorable attitudes toward Muslims. This tendency gives rise to concern. While we did not include items about possible copy-cat inspiration through media attention to RWT and SSE, prior studies on media reporting about far-right incidents in Germany suggest that media reporting may, under specific conditions, inspire copycats and insinuate more far-right violence.[133]

## *Limitations*

Naturally, this study comes with some notable limitations. Most importantly, while the results of this study are insightful, the reported relationships are merely correlational and do not allow to draw causal conclusions. We hypothesized the directionality of the statistical effects relying on previous studies that employed various designs, among them longitudinal designs and experiments. Although numerous studies highlight the impact that news stimuli about terrorism can have on attitudes toward outgroups,[134] particularly toward Muslims,[135] or on threat appraisals, anxiety, and fear,[136] our independent variable here was not media exposure but media attention—it is likely that media attention to RWT and threat appraisal of RWT indeed reinforce each other. Our data is not suitable for disentangling cause and effect, nor for speaking to the preconditions of media attention. To the best of our knowledge of the existing literature on media exposure as well as the hostile media effect, in the case of media attention and attitudes toward Muslims, a full reverse causality without reciprocal relations is less convincing than our hypothesized direction. For instance, a panel study investigating support for Mexican immigration indicated that even when individuals' partisanship and ideology was statistically controlled for, watching FOX news was significantly related to negative attitudes toward Mexican immigration.[137] Further panel data suggests that exposure to negative content about Muslims in traditional media over time is significantly related to increased anti-Muslim immigration attitudes if the encountered information is attitude congruent.[138] Notably, this relationship was independent of individuals' preexisting attitudes toward Muslims. While there may be reciprocal relationships that we cannot rule out with our survey-

approach, the available evidence speaks in favor of the hypothesized relation and the significant (partial) role that media play in shaping attitudes toward outgroups. Adding to this, social contacts are often homogeneous—for instance, religion has been found to impact friendship choices and networks among youth in German schools, who prefer to befriend peers with a similar religious background.[139] Thus, many non-Muslims rely on media reporting to form or adopt attitudes toward Muslims. Meta-analytical evidence speaks to the effectiveness of mediated contact to impact levels of prejudice.[140] Although direct outgroup contact shapes outgroup attitudes, scholars argue that because of the stability of direct contact over time, mediated outgroup contact can be considered a driving factor of outgroup attitudes, reducing social distance and threat perceptions over time.[141] Still, future research should strive to implement longitudinal surveys to monitor the relationship between media attention to RWT and negative attitudes toward Muslims over time, particularly because the literature here generally focuses on media use or media exposure and not media attention.

Another limitation lies in the nature of far-right terrorism and extremism, that does not limit its use of violence to Muslim targets. Even though Muslims or symbols of Islam have been directly attacked, it is over-simplifying to say that individuals were targeted *because* they are Muslim—they are targeted because they belong to an often non-tangible otherness that may manifest in a non-Christian religious affiliation, physical characteristics, not "traditionally German" names etc., but is not restricted to it. Consequently, future studies should strive to include other intergroup related measures to do the interconnectedness of social identities justice. Further limitations relate to the use of self-reported data. Self-reports may be particularly prone to bias, either related to memory or related to social desirability. Given our measure of SSE, however, we believe to have limited social desirability, compared to overt measures. Additionally, we did not ask for specific media use characteristics but instead for attention to RWT in the media—as such bias related to memory is unlikely. As we controlled for a number of potential confounders, for instance political ideology, education, and general attitudes toward religion, we believe that what we measured here was not general cosmopolitanism but specifically related to cognitions about RWT on the one hand and attitudes toward Muslims on the other. Adding to this, previous studies established that stereotypes and negative attitudes toward Muslims are present among diverse parts of the German society, including the liberal middle class and individuals that generally report religious tolerance.[142]

Lastly, this study offers insights into a sample from Germany. Comparative research is needed to know more about the generalizability of our findings. Still, it is important to acknowledge the significance of negative attitudes toward Muslims as potential common ground for far-right radical and extremist discourses and as a potential breeding ground for Islamophobia and social conflict.[143] For instance, a social network analysis suggests a high transnational connectedness of Western European far-right discourses in online environments (Twitter) when the topic is related to anti-immigration and nativism.[144] The authors further describe that such tweets are largely driven by Islamophobic content.

## Conclusion

Despite the limitations of this study, it offers a novel and unique outlook on a timely issue. This is partly due to the young and relatively diverse sample. By focusing on young individuals, we addressed a research gap related to extremism and media attention correlates in a specific subgroup of the German population. On the one hand, young adults (aged twenty-six to thirty-five) have been found to hold more positive attitudes toward immigrants and refugees compared to older individuals.[145] On the other hand, according to the latest Terrorism Situation and Trend Report, individuals arrested for planning far-right terrorist or extremist attacks are young and often radicalized online.[146] At the time of arrest, many of them were minors.[147]

Past studies have specifically shed light on youths' exposure to and engagement with online hate,[148] exposure to extremist content on social media in connection to self-reported political violence,[149] and young men's violent extremist intentions.[150] While the goal of this study is not to explain radicalization processes, it does provide a small piece adding to the larger puzzle

surrounding the youths' attention to (mainstream) media reports about RWT, potential justification of the far-right motivation behind RWT attacks, and attitudes toward Muslims as Germany's largest religious minority. Given that these young people constitute the next generation of voters and policy makers, as well as the vital role that functioning intergroup relations play for this area of research deserves more attention. It is important to develop frameworks to understand RWT and the media's role in shaping responses to RWT to ensure ethical reporting and foster intergroup relations. This is particularly relevant because the threat of RWT is imminent. Exploring how SSE relates to other intergroup and media variables is imperative to overcome and ultimately prevent negative outcomes on an individual and societal level, especially considering the role of young people in far-right extremism.

## Disclosure statement

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