Media depictions, Fear and Anti-Muslim Prejudice

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ABSTRACT. *Anti-Muslim prejudice becomes increasingly prevalent since 911 Incident. Medias play an important role in the spread and formation of anti-Muslim prejudice. We examines the effect of media depictions on the prejudice formation process. Particularly, our research is conducted in China, a country has more than 10 million Muslims. The result shows that reports about terrorist attacks will arise individuals' prejudice towards Muslim significantly. Specifically, fear is a mediating variable in the process that is mentioned above. However, the role of religious groups that are mentioned in the reports cannot be told clearly.*

KEYWORDS: *Anti-Muslim prejudice; Islamophobia; media; terrorism; fear; religious; Muslims*

1. Introduction

In recent years, the fear, hatred and prejudice towards Muslims, which also been called Islamophobia has sharply increased [1]. The Friedrich Ebert Foundation in Germany announced that between 27% and 61% of people in European countries hold that Muslims are too many in their countries (2014). Additionally, the poll conducted by Sverige Television shows that 61% of the residents oppose Muslims to pray in public(2018).

To be more specific, it was since 911, a notorious terrorist attack, made such climate begin to rapidly increase, that the number of reports related to terrorist attacks has risen significantly and terrorist attacks has gained more attention from the publics [2]. Searching for key words on CNN: terrorists, Muslims, Islamic terrorist, Muslim terrorist, Muslim attack, there are 10513, 5181, 2017, 1870 and 2673 results shown up respectively. Comparing to the number of word "presidents", which is 5713 totally (2019.8) , as well as considering that religious background is seldom mentioned in reports, it can be told that "terrorists" is a hot topic and Muslim terrorists' issues take up a large proportion of the topic. With such news being able to be viewed every day, naturally, people will relate Muslims to terrorism and thereby increase the fear and prejudice towards this group.

The anti-Muslim prejudice brings seriously harm to Muslims. Incidents that involved anti-Muslims prejudice are numerous and durable in both online and offline situations. Victims of these incidents suffer from serious depression, emotional stress, anxiety and fear. What is worse, even normal life of many Muslims has been disordered due to the serious prejudice [3]. However, these pains are still tend to be ignored by out-group members [4].

In fact, Muslims are not as dangerous as people expected. First and foremost, Islam was separated into to Sunni and Shias. Between these two parts, there were fierce history conflicts which was impossible to suspend. Conflicts can be carried on by both wars and online arguments [5]. Thus, Muslims seldom act like a whole to achieve a goal and thereby the threat of Muslims is reduced significantly. Second, a large number of Muslims are secularized. Only 28 percent of American Muslims follow a traditional reading as prescribed by one of the classical legal schools [6]. Muslims, the victims of these issues, with the number of 16 hundred million, generally take up 23% in the world population, which means it is important to conduct research helping reduce Islamophobia. Specifically, the constitution of Muslims includes a large amount of Asians and Europeans [7]. Previous studies are mainly focus on Islamophobia in European countries and America. However, based on the data we mentioned, studies in Asia context are also required.

Abundant theories are came up to explain the increasing prejudice, such as the "suitable enemy theory" which purposed by Spruyt and Elchardus in 2012 [8]. Also, Allport tried to solve it by defining prejudice as an inevitable result in the categorization processes [9]. Educational levels, political points, religious belief, religious practice etc. are also factors being taken into concerns [10].

Particularly, the fear people have after reading terrorist attacks' news may be an important factor contribute to the formation of prejudice. The role of fear is supported by at least three theories. To begin with, studies based on TMT(terror management theory) found that when people feel fear, the increase of death-related thought and the change of self-esteem will affect people's prejudice toward outgroups [11]. In the second place, according to the evolutionary theory, perceived vulnerability of physical injuries result prejudice[12]. Rather, when medias are spreading news about terrorists' attack, it is prevalent to involve the number of death and injured as well as the pictures that describing the panic, helpless of the crowds, which is, undoubtedly, matched with "perceive vulnerability of physical injuries" that is mentioned in the paper. Furthermore, other researches in terms of the evolutionary theory also indicate that many prejudices result from adaptations designed to manage fitness-relevant threats [13]. Last but not least, integrated threat theory purposed that it will be more likely to generate prejudice towards a minority group when people perceive threats [14]. One study reveals that there is a positive correlation between realistic threats, symbolic threats, and stereotypes toward American Muslims, which greatly help us understand the generating of anti-Muslim prejudice [15].

Current study

Our research wants to explore the impact of medias in prejudice formation

process more specifically by controlling the content of media(whether the content is about a negative issue such as terrorist attack) as well as the religious groups which are depicted in the reports. In addition, we also relate the two important factors in the prejudice formation process——media depictions and fear. Accordingly, two hypothesizes come up. H1: Media depictions affects peoples' prejudice toward Muslim. H2: Fear is a mediating variable of the relationship in H1. We test these hypothesizes from three different levels: Nice Muslims, Muslim terrorists and Buddhist terrorists by distributing three groups of questionnaires to three groups of people.

2. Methods and materials

2.1. Participants

We asked a total of 97 Chinese participants to do the questionnaires in 2019. The participants are equally divided into three groups. The age of the participants ranged from 12 to 49 and the mean age of the three groups of participants are 19.03, 19.81 and 18.96 respectively. Men made up 27.27%, 31.25% and 53.13% accordingly.

2.2. Procedure

Each participants was randomly assigned into a group. Each group received a different questionnaire. The participants were told to do a memory test in the cover story and did not know the existence of other groups. As questionnaires contain some misleading information, a debriefing would be provided at the end.

2.3. Materials

Each questionnaire is mainly made up by four parts: cover story, one scenario, 15 statements and a debriefing. All of the statements are required to be rated with a 10-point (1 to 10) scale indicating their level of agreement.

We have three different questionnaires for three groups of people. The only difference between them is the scenario. Two independent variables——the content of the reports and the religious groups that are concerned by medias were tested by three scenarios (nice Muslim, Muslim terrorist and Buddhist terrorist). "Nice Muslims" describes two good things done by Muslims. "Muslim terrorists" is about two terrorist attacks done by Muslims. "Buddhist terrorists" is about two terrorist attacks done by Buddhists.

Two dependent variables were tested, fear and anti-Muslim prejudice. We measured fear by 6 items (see supplementary material) according to the fear of crime scale [16], such as " I worry about the safety of myself". Additionally, we measured people's attitude towards Muslims by using 6 items based on anti-Muslims Scale

[17], such as "Muslims are potential cancer in this country". The questionnaires are in Chinese. Thus, after we translated the questions from papers in English, we asked an objective coder to translate the Chinese back into English. The two English versions are similar. Therefore, the questionnaires are valid on testing fear and anti-Muslim prejudice.

In order to disguise our real purpose, we used several distractors. Three items are included to help the questionnaire acts like a real memory test.

3. Results

The research is to test whether the media depictions poses relationship with people's anti-Muslim prejudice (H1) and whether fear is a mediating variable of the relationship in H1 (H2). In order to test these hypothesizes, a One Way ANOVA, with media content (nice Muslim, Muslim terrorist, and Buddhist terrorist) as the between-subjects factors, was conducted on participants' levels of agreement.

3.1 Anti-Muslim Prejudice

According to the anti-Muslims scale, as expected, media content significantly affected prejudice toward Muslims, $F(2,96)=2.27$, $p<.05$. Depictions of Muslim terrorist yielded more bias to Muslims (M=3.97 , SD=2.44) than depictions of nice Muslims (M=2.87, SD=1.56), $p<.05$. However, there was only a marginally significant difference between the effect of Muslim terrorist and Buddhist terrorist (M=3.20, SD=2.31), $p<.1$. (see Figure 1).

3.2 Fear

Based on the fear of crime scale, as expected, media content affected people's fear significantly, $F(2, 96)=2.92$, $p<.05$. Depictions of Muslim terrorist made people feel more fear (M=5.60, SD=1.96) than Nice Muslims depictions (M=4.51, SD=2.05), reveals that media content significantly affected people's fear towards Muslims, $F(2, 96)=2.92$, $p<.05$. On the contrary, the religious groups which are mentioned in the reports had no influence on people's fear towards Muslims. (See Figure 2).

3.3 Mediation Analysis

Furthermore, we tested the mediation pathway of fear by using Preacher and Hayes' (2008) PROCESS method with 10,000 bootstrapped samples and 95% confidence interval. the unstandardized effect of fear is significant (B = .486, SE = .113, p = .00). The direct effect of manipulations (Nice Muslims and Muslim terrorist) on attitude is significant (p=.03). However, the indirect effect, which means that fear does not involve in the process, is insignificant (p=.20). Additionally,

confidence interval (.04, 1.13) does not include zero. All these above can clearly tell that fear significantly mediates the relationship between media content and anti-Muslims prejudice (see Figure 3).

In a nutshell, both Figure 1 and 2 can be found a significant difference between the effect of nice Muslims and Muslims terrorist, which are items that are used to test the impact of medias' content. Nonetheless, in both graphs, there are no clear difference between the effect of Muslim terrorist and Buddhist terrorist, which are items being used to test the influence of religious groups that are concerned in the reports. Despite the unclear effects of religious group, both H1 and H2 can be supported by empirical evidence in the research.
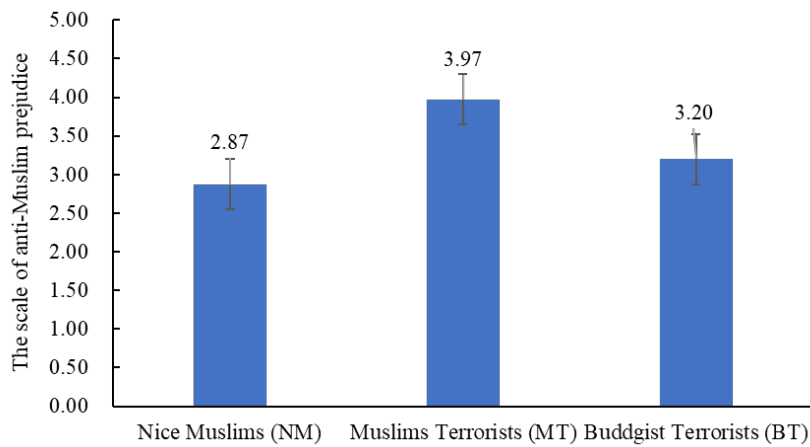

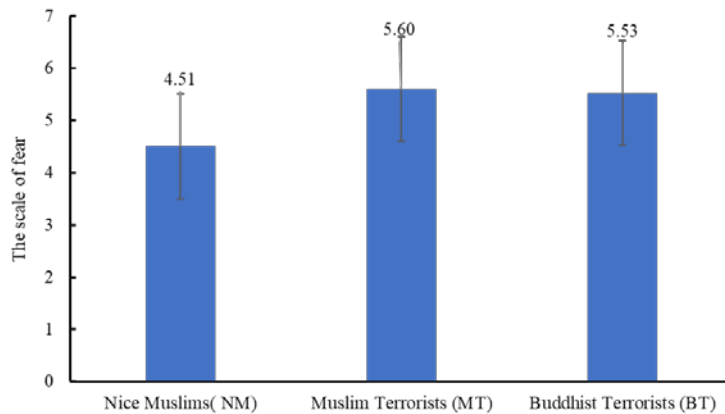*Figure 1 the questionnaire result about Anti-Muslim prejudice*

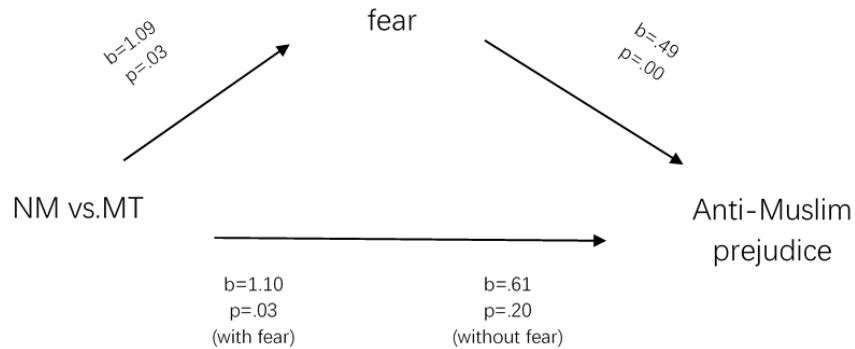*Figure 2 the questionnaire result about Fear*

Figure 3 Fear as mediating variable

4. Discussions

The result conforms that media depictions, especially about terrorists significantly lead the increase of people's anti-Muslim prejudice (H1). Additionally, the data also support that fear is a mediating variable in this relationship (H2).

Though relative researches are lack, such studies on how media depictions affect people's prejudice are important. To begin with, the reports about terrorism done by Western countries' medias are based on bias due to the geographical barrier and long history of intervention [18]. For instance, the Orientalist view which Western medias now take is accepted as a fact in the Middle East [19]. "Orientalism is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between 'the Orient' and most of the time 'the Occident" [20]. In addition, this bias still keeps continuing and is not likely to be terminated in a short period. One of the most distinctive characteristics of medias is searching for shock and sensational news [21]. As Terrorism is defined as "the act is committed in order to create a fearful state of mind in an audience different from the victims", which fits the requirements of medias, it is no wonder that terrorists attacks are reported frequently and massively[22]. In current study, we acknowledged that the negative content, typically about terrorist attacks will rise people's fear and prejudice. However, we failed to figure out the content specifically. In other word, the future study should find out which word or what kind of information leads the change of individual's emotion more accurately. Thus, by positioning such information more detailed, it will be more likely for the medias to reduce their bias as well as for the publics to be more objective.

In our research, the effect of religious groups that are concerned by medias is not clear. Here we work out several reasons to explain our result and some improvements: when people feel fear, their prejudice will increase towards every outgroup members. In order to prove our inference, another question to test people's

prejudice towards Buddhist is required to be added in the future study. Secondly, the unclear result can be attributed to unproper culture context. Comparing to European countries and America, the frequency of terrorists attacks in China is relatively low. Therefore, Chinese are not sensitive to such reports and their negative mood towards such issues is not strong, which limits our research to tell a difference.

Still, the prejudice towards Muslims might be different in different age groups. Rather, we did not separate teenagers from middle-aged people as well as the elders. Therefore, similar studies conducted in different age groups can also help our conclusion be more valid.

5. Conclusion

In current research, we explore that due to the biased media depiction, individuals hold prejudice and fear towards Muslims popularly. We selected three stories to our survey, which are Muslim terrorists, Buddhist terrorists and kind Muslims. The result of these three stories are varied from each other. In the first place, it can be told that the news released cannot be completely impartial and objective, as even though the content is relatively real, determining what to press is biased. In addition, the points held by the audience are not objective and firm as they believed. Instead, a short paragraph is enough to shape their attitude and lead their fear as well as prejudice towards a group.

The media has great impact on public perception, including prejudice, which is harmful to the social stability and can cause the loss of wealth and talents. Thus, journalists should not only consider the credibility and the value of one piece of information, but also should view their press as a whole to check whether it uncovers the negative news overmuch, since negative contact produces more impact than the positive one.

Acknowledgement

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Supplementary materials

Statements in questionnaires

1) You remember when does the attack happen very well.

2) You remember where does the attack happen very well.

3) You remember the terrorists' last name very well.

4) I worry about the safety of myself a lot

5) I worry about the safety of people I love a lot

6) I worry about the safety of my property a lot

7) I worry about the safety of my property a lot when i was not home

8) I believe my neighborhood is the very safe

9) I am reasonable to be scared for being the victim of crime in my neighborhood.

10) In this country, Muslim is the potential cancer

11) Muslim are seeking for the opportunity of attacking Chinese. They would take action once they find one

12) A large portion of Muslim are secretly for ISIS

13) The terrorist attack in Xinjiang indicate that Muslim is one threat of citizens

14) People who are for the Muslim is pushing all people into danger

15) People who are for the Muslim is betraying their Chinese companion