

## **Mediatized Realities of Migrants in a Comparative Perspective: Media Use, Deservingness, and Threat Perceptions in the United States and Western Europe**

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Whereas European countries received more than a million refugees in 2015 alone, the United States admitted just over a half million that year and only 25,782 in 2019, following limits placed by the Trump administration. The rhetoric surrounding the alleged dangers migrants pose pushed the issue to the front of the political agenda in Europe and the United States, resulting in significant shifts in public opinion. Based on five similar surveys conducted in four European countries ( $N = 6,000$ ) and in the United States ( $N = 1,031$ ), this study focuses on how perceptions of migrant deservingness might be affected by television news exposure and perceived threat. The findings indicate that in Europe, exposure to public news is associated with lower threat perceptions and greater deservingness, whereas exposure to commercial news is associated with higher threat perceptions and lower deservingness. In the United States, exposure to CNN is associated with lower threat perceptions and greater deservingness, but exposure to Fox News is associated with greater threat perceptions and lower deservingness. The study also found

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Date submitted: 2020-09-06

<sup>1</sup> This research was supported by funding from the Belgian Science Policy Office as part of the framework program BRAIN-be, Contract BR/165/A4/IM2MEDIATE, and the KU Leuven Research Council within the C2-research project FRIENDS, Project 3H170314. Supplemental materials (Tables A1–A5) can be retrieved from <http://dx.doi.org/10.17632/3h2scr3nh2.1>.

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that realistic threat plays a greater role than symbolic threat in lowering public perceptions of deservingness in the United States, whereas the reverse is true in Europe.

*Keywords: immigrants, refugees, Europe, United States, intergroup threat theory, media use, deservingness*

Anti-immigrant attitudes resulting in immigration restrictions are not new to the United States, dating back to 1882 when the government identified a category of “inadmissible aliens” who would not be considered for entry. Over the years, the United States has vacillated between more permissive and more restrictive policies regarding the numbers, characteristics (skills, language, etc.), and national origins of deserving immigrant populations (Jones-Correa, Marrow, Okamoto, & Tropp, 2018). Although the 1952 Immigration and Naturalization Act governs current U.S. immigration policies, several executive orders restricting the entry of immigrants were issued by President Donald Trump (Shear & Jordan, 2021). Trump’s infamous “Muslim ban,” issued in January 2017, barred foreign nationals from seven (later expanded to 13) predominantly Muslim countries from visiting the country for 90 days and suspended entry of all Syrian refugees indefinitely.

Europe introduced restrictions on immigration after the foreign-born civilian workforce more than doubled between 1960 and 1973 (Hall, 2000). Since then, asylum seekers have constituted the largest group of immigrants to Europe, especially during the recent “migrant crisis” when more than a million refugees entered the continent. During this time, spurred by political actors who questioned migrants’ legitimacy and need for help (Crawley & Skleparis, 2018), the public increasingly considered them undeserving of settlement (Diez, 2019).

To evaluate the potential effects of policy changes on public perceptions of immigrants in the United States and Europe, this study examines public perceptions of deservingness toward migrants in four Western European countries—Belgium, The Netherlands, France, and Sweden—and compares them with those in the United States through surveys conducted in all five countries.<sup>2</sup> This comparison is unique because the four European countries and the United States have very different migration origins. In Europe, refugees have been arriving mostly from the Middle East and North Africa, whereas migration flows to the United States mainly originate in Latin America (Mexico and El Salvador) and Asia (China, India, and the Philippines; Budiman, 2020).

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<sup>2</sup> Under the law, refugees, migrants, and asylum seekers are defined differently, but we do not make a distinction between them in this study, following Dempster and Hargrave (2017) and van Oorschot (2005). Although migrants choose to resettle in a new country, and refugees and asylum seekers are forced to make a move because of armed conflict or persecution, the public often does not perceive them differently once they have arrived. The confusion over terminology is exacerbated by the many different types of migrants referenced in the literature (Douglas, Cetron, & Spiegel, 2019), hence our decision to include anyone settling in a country other than where he/she was born to be within the scope of this study.

Media sources for news about migration events are also different. Consumption of news from commercial television is the norm in the United States, whereas Europeans more often consume news from public television channels (Matsa, 2018). In the four European countries included in this study, several similarities justify their consideration as a group. In Hallin and Mancini's (2004) conceptual framework for comparing media systems covering media-politics relations in 18 Western countries, France follows the Mediterranean/polarized pluralist model; Belgium, The Netherlands, and Sweden fall within the so-called North/Central democratic corporatist model. All four nations represent welfare states with significant levels of state intervention, regulation of the media, and strong public service media. It therefore makes sense to contrast the four European welfare states with consensus governments with the United States, which adheres to the North Atlantic liberal model and is characterized by a weaker welfare state and a majoritarian government model.

Because most people in the five countries under study lack direct contact with immigrants, television news media constitute important information sources that likely shape perceptions of immigrants (Bleich, Bloemraad, & de Graauw, 2015; Jacobs, Hooghe, & de Vroome, 2017; Joyce & Harwood, 2014). Mediated representations of migration, and specifically those on television, frequently portray immigrants as threats to a country's economy or culture, as victims of their dire situation, or as disproportionately associated with crime (Chiricos, Padgett, & Gertz, 2000; De Poli, Jakobsson, & Schüller, 2017; Meltzer et al., 2017). In Europe, public broadcasters have used more positive frames to portray this group than commercial broadcasters, often focusing on humanitarian issues and presenting migrants' own voices (Figenschou & Thorbjørnsrud, 2015; Jacobs, Meeusen, & d'Haenens, 2016). In the United States, on the other hand, commercial media coverage of migrants varies by political orientation, with large cleavages between specific TV networks (Bartlett, 2015; Gil de Zúñiga, Correa, & Valenzuela, 2012).

To our knowledge, no study to date has compared the factors determining perceptions of migrants in the United States and Europe. This study focuses on possible differences in how the European public media and the ideologically more diverse commercial media system in the United States might affect perceptions of immigrants. Specifically, we examine whether the representational preferences in these two media systems are reflected in how perceptions of migrants (e.g., threat, deservingness) are shaped in Europe and the United States. The study's main goal is to explore whether the differences in media exposure and citizens' concerns about possible threats posed by migrants might affect public perceptions of migrants differently in Europe and the United States.

### **The Role of Threat in the Perception of Migrants**

Stephan and Stephan's (2000) integrated threat theory identifies four types of threats and fears (realistic and symbolic threat, intergroup anxiety, and negative stereotypes) that serve as antecedents for prejudice that arise when individuals believe that those in an out-group (such as immigrants) can harm them.

This study focuses on realistic and symbolic group threats as the important factors shaping perceptions of immigrants (Stephan, Ybarra, & Morrison, 2009). Realistic threat consists of two components: perceived threats to the in-group's economic or material interests and perceived threats to the in-group's psychical well-being (Ata, Bastian, & Lusher, 2009; Stephan et al., 2009). As groups compete for economic

resources or fear becoming the victim of intergroup violence, they view the out-group as a competitor for scarce resources (such as jobs) or perpetrators of criminal acts (Lancee & Pardos-Prado, 2013). Symbolic threat refers to the fear that newcomers challenge the in-group's religion, values, belief systems, ideology, or worldview (Stephan et al., 2009), which, in turn, can lead to intergroup prejudice (Ata et al., 2009).

Evidence for the integrated threat theory has been found both in Europe and the United States. For example, studies related to out-group perceptions in The Netherlands found that when citizens perceive threats from migrants, they are most concerned about symbolic threats, such as loss of cultural values and traditions (Wirtz, van der Pligt, & Doosje, 2016). During the migration crisis in 2015–2016, most immigrants entered Europe from predominantly Muslim countries such as Syria, Afghanistan, and Iran. They differed from native Europeans in their value orientations and religious affiliation, which likely drove the observed perceptions of symbolic threat. We therefore would expect that Europeans opposing the entry of migrants will perceive religious and other cultural differences as important factors in their attitudes toward migrants.

Most Europeans, particularly those from nations with higher per capita income, should be less focused on realistic threats related to fears about economic competition or intergroup violence. For example, van der Linden and Jacobs (2017) show that North African immigrants are not associated with economic threat frames in European media coverage, but the cultural or symbolic frames are much more present. More important, experimental evidence indicates that exposure to safety and cultural frames in news content increases perceptions of safety and cultural threat accordingly, but exposure to economic issues reveals no effect for economic threat (van der Linden & Jacobs, 2017).

A longitudinal study in Spain from 1996 to 2007 found a positive relationship between negative news coverage on immigrants and perceived threats toward immigrants (Schlueter & Davidov, 2013). Based on voter panel data collected in 11 European countries alongside a media content analysis, Burscher, van Spanje, and de Vreese (2015) found a relationship between exposure to news about crime and immigration and membership in anti-immigration parties. Attitudes toward immigrants served as an intervening variable in that study, lending support to a connection between threat and immigration attitudes in Europe. Other European research supports a specific relationship between symbolic threat and negative attitudes toward Muslim immigrants (Gonzalez, Verkuyten, Weesie, & Poppe, 2008; Wirtz et al., 2016).

In the United States, recent migrant flows have prompted new discussions about preferred and nonpreferred immigrants, akin to the debate on (un)deserving migrants in Europe (Hainmueller & Hopkins, 2015; Kruger, Mulder, & Korenic, 2004). U.S. immigration policies have restored the "discriminatory practice of dividing immigrants into preferred and nonpreferred groups based on country of origin" (Kruger et al., 2004, p. 86). In the past, the policy was meant to select immigrants who were best able to integrate; recently, its purpose is to protect citizens from immigrants suspected as security threats (Kruger et al., 2004), a key element in the development of realistic threat perceptions.

Studies conducted in the United States on integrated threat theory indicate that Americans are likely to be more concerned about perceived realistic than symbolic threats associated with migrants. Ferwerda, Flynn, and Horiuchi (2017), for example, found that American citizens are more concerned with realistic threats from refugees when media frames emphasized their potential security threats (e.g.,

terrorism or crime). An experimental study conducted by Stephan, Diaz-Loving, and Duran (2000) found that realistic rather than symbolic threat predicts hostile attitudes toward Mexicans. The authors argue that economic treaties between the United States and Mexico increase the salience of economic threat and that Americans are not likely to believe that their cultural foundation can be fundamentally altered by immigrants.

Post-9/11 studies have examined the threat posed by Muslims in the United States several years after the attacks on the country. Several U.S. studies found that Muslims are mostly viewed as a realistic threat and that fears of terrorism associated with them predict support for anti-Muslim policies (Grillo, 2014; Haner, Sloan, Cullen, Kulig, & Lero Jonson, 2019). In addition, strongly held Christian beliefs among many Americans also sustain negative attitudes toward Muslims over time. For example, Al-Kire, Pasek, Tsang, Leman, and Rowatt (2021) found that stronger identification with Christian nationalism is related to negative stereotypes and policy attitudes toward Muslim refugees and immigrants.

### **The Role of Deservingness in Migration Research**

The concept of deservingness arises from theories of justice. Lerner (1975) states in his just-world hypothesis that people need to believe they live in a world where people get what they deserve. This belief is important to maintain the idea that individuals can live their own lives without anything unjust or undeserving happening to them. Thus, to avoid conflicts between standards set for deservingness in one's own life, a person should "care strongly about seeing justice preserved for others" (Lerner, Miller, & Holmes, 1976, p. 137).

Given the critical role this belief system plays in the function of modern society, people are troubled when encountering evidence that suggests the world is not just (Appelbaum, 2002; Furnham, 2003). Lerner (1975) points to the phenomenon of victim-blaming, in which the cause of an unjust situation is attributed to the individual rather than to the context. Consequently, Lerner and colleagues (1976) argue that "an individual's concern for personal deservingness restrains or diverts him from responding to the needs of others" (p. 147), especially when he believes his personal deserving is threatened.

A specific application of the just-world hypothesis can be found in the welfare deservingness framework (van Oorschot, 2000, 2005), focusing on the public's support for welfare provisions that distinguish between the deserving and nondeserving. Van Oorschot (2005) developed five deservingness criteria: control, attitude, reciprocity, identity, and need. Control predicts that those in control of (or responsible for) their situation will be considered less deserving. According to the attitude criterion, individuals who are thankful for the support they receive will be perceived as more deserving. The reciprocity criterion states that deservingness depends on the extent to which the support has been earned, for example, by contributing to a country's welfare through labor market participation (De Coninck & Matthijs, 2020). The identity condition implies that deservingness increases when the cultural distance between those in need and the native population decreases. Finally, need postulates that those with higher needs are considered more deserving.

Although initially applied to attitudes toward welfare allocation, this framework has been adapted to measure the degree of migrants' deservingness of settlement in another country. De Coninck and Matthijs (2020) found that perceptions of deservingness vary between European countries and that perceived cultural or symbolic threats of migrants are associated with decreased deservingness in terms of identity, reciprocity,

and attitude. Comparative research between The Netherlands and the United States has illustrated that similar framing of deservingness is applied to children and youth immigrants to mobilize support for their permanent residency in both countries despite different cultural contexts (Nicholls, Maussen, & de Mesquita, 2016).

Relevant to this study, Hopmann, Skovsgaard, and Elmelund-Præstekær (2017) argue that news reporting of needy individuals may alter public opinion about their deservingness. They tested this position in Danish survey experiments in which exposure to cases with differing descriptions resulted in public opinion aligning with the cases' position. In the United States, an analysis of newspaper coverage of DREAMers (alien minors who came to the United States with their parents) and unaccompanied youth arriving from Central America revealed that contradictory narratives portrayed both groups as deserving of opportunity in the United States, while simultaneously describing them as an economic burden and as threats (Huber, 2015). A framing analysis of the Affordable Care Act in *The New York Times* revealed both compassionate and cost-control frames that described the benefits of providing health care to undocumented immigrants (Viladrich, 2019), and concluded that these frames contributed to public support for extending health care to immigrants based on deservingness.

### **Media Representation of Immigrants**

Given the lack of frequent personal contact with immigrants in most societies, the media shoulder a great responsibility for accurately representing this group in their news coverage (Ogan, Pennington, Venger, & Metz, 2018). However, Jacobs and associates (2016) found that the European news media differ in their representational preferences: Frames used in public media more likely emphasize the positive consequences of migration, whereas commercial media use more sensational elements referring to negative emotions and conflict. In Europe, quality newspapers also often adopt more left-leaning, liberal viewpoints toward migration, and tabloids or popular newspapers apply more sensationalized frames.

During the years of the European refugee crisis, Greussing and Boomgaarden (2017) found that the media's narratives predominantly focused on security threats and economization, and victimization frames were less frequent. Stereotyped descriptions of refugees were found in both tabloid and quality newspapers. Similarly, a comprehensive review of 78 studies of European media discourse on immigration found that migrants were most often framed unfavorably as economic, cultural, or criminal threats (Eberl et al., 2018).

In the United States, several recent studies analyzing media coverage of migration and refugees confirm that crime-related frames are used to portray immigrants and refugees negatively (Callanan, 2012; Qadri, 2020). Ogan and colleagues' (2018) analysis of 12 news sources across the United States found that stories featuring former President Trump as the main actor framed immigrants as a threat and described the need to build physical barriers at the Mexican border. The main policy frames emphasized the security and safety of the American people, crime and justice, and cultural identity, all of which are related to discussions of immigration threats.

Other studies that compared U.S. media coverage of migrants across different news outlets found that CNN, similar to European broadcasters, often adopts left-leaning frames that describe events from the standpoint of immigrants in vulnerable positions (Qadri, 2020). In contrast, Fox News tends to portray stories

from the viewpoint of the U.S. government and public entities in charge of immigrant policies, often depicting migrants as threats to the country's security. Similarly, Haynes, Merolla, and Ramakrishnan's (2016) news-framing analysis of immigrants between 2007 and 2014 found that 64% of Fox News stories referred to "illegal" immigrants, whereas only 42% of the stories on CNN did so. Over time, Fox's references to "illegal" immigrants increased to 94% by 2013, and CNN's references to "illegal" immigrants increased to 54%. The content analysis also showed that Fox's coverage of the legalization of immigrants was mostly negative, but that of CNN was more neutral. In framing economic dimensions of legalization, Fox was more likely to use economic frames than was CNN.

Most studies examining how media coverage of immigrants affects public attitudes have been conducted in Europe. In their literature review of media effects on attitudes toward migration in the European Union, Meltzer and colleagues (2017) concluded that media coverage is "essential" in the judgment formation of EU citizens regarding mobility and migration (p. 14). In Europe, where public media were found to be more positive in their coverage of immigrants than commercial media, public news consumers tend to hold more positive views of immigrants than those who prefer news on commercial television (Jacobs et al., 2017). In contrast, Theorin and Strömbäck (2020) found that consumption of alternative right-wing media in Sweden reinforced negative attitudes toward migrants who come from great distances, but was related to more positive attitudes toward immigrants from nearby regions. Overall, most studies conducted in Europe show that audiences with frequent exposure to media relying on negative framing of migrants hold negative attitudes toward migration and have stereotypical views of migrant groups (Eberl et al., 2018).

Research that analyzed connections between television news exposure and public attitudes toward immigrants in the United States found fairly consistent associations between exposure to partisan news and attitudes toward immigrants (Facchini, Mayda, & Puglisi, 2017; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012; Hoewe, Peacock, Kim, & Barnidge, 2020). Gil de Zúñiga and associates (2012), for example, found that Americans with more exposure to Fox News were more likely to have negative perceptions of Mexican immigrants and more support for restrictive immigration policies than those exposed to CNN. Similarly, Hoewe and associates (2020) found that Fox News consumers preferred stricter immigration policies, whereas those who preferred MSNBC or CNN did not. The authors argue that these effects were based on Fox News' emphasizing authority and subversion in their stories while deemphasizing the state's (health) care of migrants. Finally, Nassar (2020) found that regular consumers of Fox News exhibited decreased support for resettling Syrian refugees in the United States, but no such relationship was found for those who watched CNN or MSNBC more frequently.

Overall, it seems clear that the potential effects of news exposure on perceptions of immigrants should significantly differ in Europe and the United States. Based on the literature on deservingness, symbolic and realistic threats, and media effects on perceptions of immigrants in Europe and the United States, we proposed the following six hypotheses:

*H1: In Europe, exposure to public television news will be associated more strongly with perceived deservingness of migrants than exposure to commercial television news.*

- H2: In Europe, exposure to public television news will be associated with fewer perceived symbolic and realistic threats of migrants, whereas exposure to commercial television news will be associated with more perceived symbolic and realistic threats.*
- H3: In Europe, perceived symbolic threats from migrants will correlate more negatively with perceived deservingness than perceived realistic threats.*
- H4: In the United States, exposure to CNN, MSNBC, and PBS will be associated with fewer perceived symbolic and realistic threats, whereas exposure to Fox News will be associated with more perceived symbolic and realistic threats.*
- H5: In the United States, exposure to CNN, MSNBC, and PBS will be associated more strongly with perceived deservingness than exposure to Fox News.*
- H6: In the United States, perceived realistic threats from migrants will correlate more negatively with perceived deservingness than perceived symbolic threats.*

### **Study 1: Europe**

In Study 1, we examined how exposure to television news in four European countries is associated with perceived realistic and symbolic threat and with perceptions of deservingness. The data were collected with online surveys in Belgium, Sweden, France, and The Netherlands in September and October 2017. In total, the data set consisted of 6,000 respondents (1,500 per country). The response rate was about 35% in all four surveys, and responses were weighted by gender and age to ensure that the data were representative of these characteristics within each country.<sup>3</sup> The four surveys were conducted in the official language of the country or region (either Dutch, French, or Swedish) where respondents resided. Translations of the surveys were carried out by professional translators, ensuring that the questions' terminology reflected respondents' everyday language.

### **Measures**

#### *Deservingness*

To measure perceptions of deservingness, we used items from a rotating module of the European Social Survey (2014). Respondents were asked to indicate how important they thought six items were when "deciding whether someone born, brought up, and living outside of [country] should be able to come and live here": (1) to have good educational qualifications, (2) to be able to speak the country's official language(s), (3) to come from a Christian background, (4) to have work skills that the country needs, (5) to be committed to the way of life of the country, and (6) to be White. The last item was omitted to improve comparability with the second study conducted in the United States, in which a question regarding the "importance of being White" might trigger negative responses from respondents. Answer categories for each

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<sup>3</sup> For more information on the European data set, see De Coninck, d'Haenens, and Joris (2019).



item ranged from 1 (*not important at all*) to 5 (*very important*). The items were reverse coded and combined so that a high score indicated high deservingness ( $M = 2.56$ ,  $SD = 0.82$ ,  $\alpha = .79$ ).

#### *Realistic and Symbolic Threat*

Realistic threat was measured by asking respondents whether they would say "that refugees who come to live here generally take jobs away from workers in [country], or generally help to create new jobs" and whether their country's "crime problems increased or decreased by refugees coming to live here from other countries." Responses were provided on an 11-point scale, with the high end indicating high realistic threat perceptions. The two measures were combined and used in the subsequent analyses ( $M = 6.90$ ,  $SD = 2.11$ ,  $\alpha = .84$ ). Symbolic threat was measured by asking respondents whether they would say that their country's "cultural life is generally undermined or enriched by refugees coming to live here from other countries." This item was also answered on an 11-point scale, with the high end indicating high symbolic threat perceptions ( $M = 6.37$ ,  $SD = 2.84$ ).

#### *Media Exposure*

Exposure to news about migrants was measured by asking respondents to report how often they came across news on refugees in the past year, with answer categories ranging from 1 (*never*) to 6 (*very often*). As for general television news consumption, we differentiated this measure by looking at the consumption of public broadcasting and commercial broadcasting separately. Respondents were asked to indicate how often they consumed news on each broadcaster in the past month, with answer options from 1 (*never*) to 8 (*every day*).

#### *Control Variables*

Respondents were asked about their age, gender (female = 1), migration background (1 = respondent or at least one parent was born outside the country of residence), place of residence (1 = city), educational attainment (6 = university education), employment (1 = full- or part-time employment), and the importance of religion in their lives (7 = attend every day; see Table 1). We also included country-fixed effects, with Belgium as the reference category.

**Table 1. Descriptive Overview of the European Samples by Country (N = 6,000).**

Variable	Belgium		France		The Netherlands		Sweden	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Age (years)	42.94	12.54	43.55	13.06	45.59	13.88	41.40	13.20
Female	1.50	0.50	1.51	0.50	1.51	0.50	1.50	0.50
Education	2.49	0.58	2.41	0.55	2.34	0.56	2.30	0.61
Migration background	0.09	0.28	0.17	0.38	0.11	0.31	0.25	0.43
Employment	0.63	0.48	0.67	0.47	0.62	0.48	0.70	0.46
Importance of religion	1.56	0.88	1.84	1.16	1.82	1.34	1.94	1.18
Deservingness	2.48	0.76	2.59	0.91	2.45	0.66	2.72	0.94
Perceived threat								
Realistic threat	7.13	1.98	7.14	2.08	6.67	1.99	6.65	2.38
Symbolic threat	6.54	2.68	7.00	2.93	6.22	2.63	5.70	3.11
Media exposure								
Refugee news	3.73	0.99	3.81	0.99	3.29	0.94	3.37	0.97
Public TV news	4.28	2.69	2.90	2.46	4.94	2.69	4.27	2.60
Commercial TV news	3.78	2.76	3.64	2.72	4.42	2.64	4.17	2.49

### Results

To test our hypotheses, we estimated a structural equation model using PROC CALIS in SAS Version 9.4. Goodness of fit indices showed a good model fit (root mean square error of approximation = .06, standardized root mean residual = .02, goodness of fit index = .99, comparative fit index = .98).<sup>4</sup> The results of the direct effects displayed in Figure 1 indicate that exposure to commercial ( $b = -.07, p < .001$ ) and public news ( $b = -.06, p < .001$ ) was associated with lower levels of deservingness. Thus, Hypothesis 1, which stated that exposure to public television news would be associated more strongly with perceived deservingness of migrants than commercial television news, was not supported.

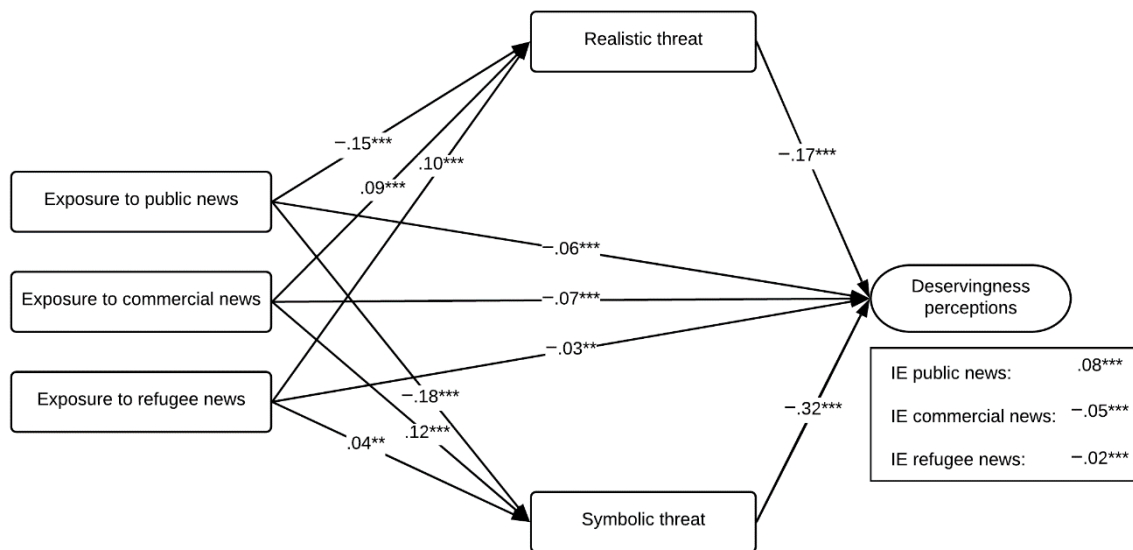
As expected, exposure to commercial and public news was associated with threat perceptions in different ways. Exposure to public news was associated with lower realistic ( $b = -.15, p < .001$ ) and symbolic threat ( $b = -.18, p < .001$ ). At the same time, exposure to commercial news was associated with higher realistic ( $b = .09, p < .001$ ) and symbolic threat ( $b = .12, p < .001$ ). Similarly, exposure to news about refugees in general was associated with higher levels of realistic ( $b = .10, p < .001$ ) and symbolic threat ( $b = .04, p < .001$ ). Thus, Hypothesis 2, which stated that exposure to public television news would be associated with less perceived symbolic and realistic threats of migrants, whereas exposure to commercial television news would be associated with more perceived symbolic and realistic threats, was supported.

As predicted in Hypothesis 3, we also found that perceived symbolic threats from migrants in Europe correlated more negatively ( $b = -.32, p < .001$ ) with perceived deservingness than perceived

<sup>4</sup> Coefficients of the measurement model for the latent constructs of realistic threat and deservingness can be found in the supplemental materials (see Table A1).

realistic threats ( $b = -.17, p < .001$ ). Exposure to news about refugees in general also was associated with lower deservingness ( $b = -.03, p < .01$ ), further supporting the negative impact of news exposure on perceived deservingness.

It is important to note a discrepancy in indirect effects of exposure to public and commercial media on deservingness. The indirect effect of exposure to public media (via perceived threat) resulted in a positive association with deservingness ( $b = .08, p < .001$ ), whereas the indirect effect of exposure to commercial media was negative ( $b = -.05, p < .001$ ).



**Figure 1. Path model for media exposure on threat and deservingness perceptions in Europe. Direct standardized effects are presented. Values presented under deservingness perceptions indicate standardized indirect effects (IE). Sociodemographic indicators were included, but not presented (see Tables A2 and A3). \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .**

### Study 2: The United States

Similar to Study 1, Study 2 examined how exposure to television news in the United States is associated with perceived realistic and symbolic threat and with perceptions of deservingness. Respondents were recruited by a professional survey company providing access to representative online panels. The cooperation rate was 80%. Although the sample compared favorably to 2010 U.S. Census data, the final set of respondents was slightly older, more educated, and racially less diverse than the overall U.S. population. However, a comparison with a national telephone poll conducted by the Pew Research Center (2018) revealed only small differences in the two samples' basic demographic characteristics. We were therefore confident that the sample was representative of the overall U.S. population.

## **Measures**

### *Deservingness*

The same six items were used to measure deservingness perceptions as in Study 1, with answer categories from 1 (*very important*) to 5 (*not at all important*). These items (to have good educational qualifications, to be able to speak the country's official language(s), to come from a Christian background, to have work skills that the country needs, to be committed to the way of life of the country) were combined in an index and used in the subsequent analyses ( $M = 2.44$ ,  $SD = 0.88$ ,  $\alpha = .79$ ).

### *Realistic and Symbolic Threat*

Realistic threat was measured with two items similar to those used in Study 1. Respondents were asked how much they agreed (1 = *strongly agree*, 5 = *strongly disagree*) with the statements that "refugees who come to live here take jobs away from workers in the United States," and that "refugees have contributed to a rise in crime rates across the United States." The two items were combined in a scale with reversed coding so that the high end of the scale indicated high realistic threat perceptions ( $M = 2.83$ ,  $SD = 1.18$ ,  $\alpha = .88$ ). Symbolic threat was measured by asking respondents how much they agreed (1 = *strongly agree*, 5 = *strongly disagree*) with the statement that "refugees undermine the cultural life in the United States." The coding of this item also was reversed so that the high end of the scale indicated high symbolic threat perceptions ( $M = 2.86$ ,  $SD = 1.24$ ).

### *Media Exposure*

Exposure to news on immigrants was measured by asking respondents how often they came "across news on immigrants during the past year," with answer categories ranging from 1 (*very often*) to 4 (*never*). The coding for this variable was reversed so that a high score corresponded to increased exposure to immigrant-related news. Exposure to news on U.S. television networks was measured by asking respondents how many days they watched MSNBC, Fox News, CNN, and PBS during the past week (coded 0 to 7).

### *Control Variables*

Respondents were asked about their age, gender (female = 1), migration background (1 = respondent or at least one parent was born outside the United States), political orientation (1 = Republican), place of residence (1 = city), educational attainment (7 = postgraduate training), income, employment (1 = full- or part-time employment), and the importance of religion in their lives (4 = *very important*; see Table 2).

**Table 2. Descriptive Overview of the U.S. Sample (N = 1,031).**

Variable	Mean	SD
Age (years)	42.45	15.26
Female	0.52	0.50
Education	4.99	1.47
Income	10.48	7.99
Republican	0.28	0.45
Migration background	0.18	0.38
Employment	0.45	0.50
Importance of religion	2.71	1.18
Deservingness	2.44	0.88
Perceived threat		
Realistic threat	2.83	1.18
Symbolic threat	2.86	1.24
Media exposure		
Immigrant news	3.77	1.17
CNN	2.04	2.45
Fox News	2.27	2.60
MSNBC	1.77	2.37
PBS	1.71	2.26

### Results

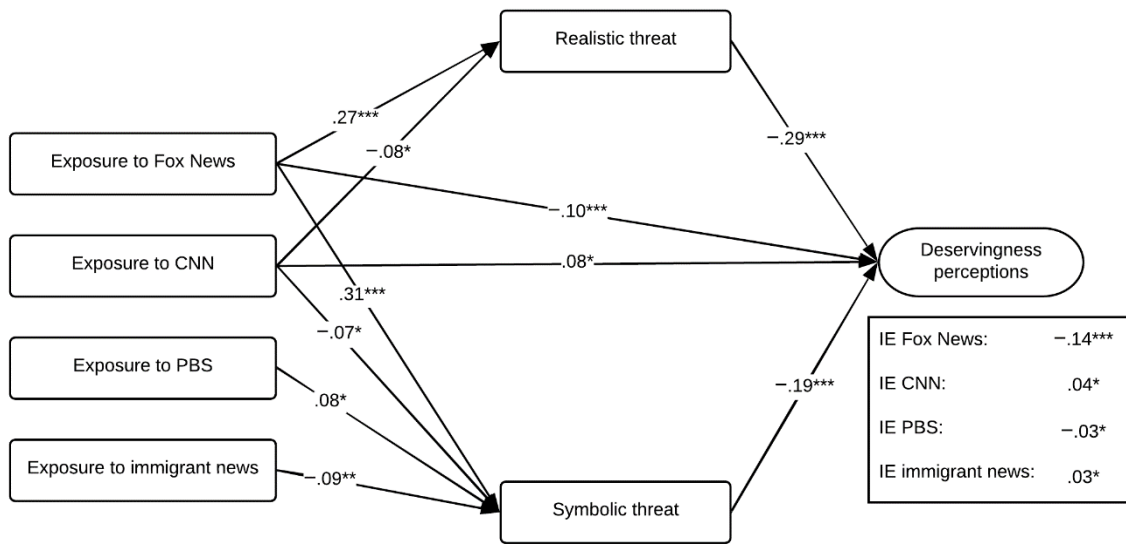
As in Study 1, we estimated a structural equation model using PROC CALIS. Goodness of fit indices showed a good model fit (root mean square error of approximation = .08, standardized root mean residual = .03, goodness of fit index = .98, comparative fit index = .97).<sup>5</sup> The results of the direct effects displayed in Figure 2 show that more exposure to Fox News ( $b = -.10, p < .001$ ) was associated with lower deservingness, whereas more exposure to CNN ( $b = .08, p < .05$ ) was associated with higher deservingness perceptions. Exposure to MSNBC and PBS did not show any significant associations with deservingness. Thus, Hypothesis 4, which stated that exposure to CNN, MSNBC, and PBS would be associated more strongly with perceived deservingness than Fox News, was partially supported.

Figure 2 also shows that more exposure to Fox News correlated with higher levels of perceived realistic ( $b = .27, p < .001$ ) and symbolic threat ( $b = .31, p < .001$ ). In contrast, more exposure to CNN correlated with lower levels of perceived realistic ( $b = -.08, p < .05$ ) and symbolic threat ( $b = -.07, p < .05$ ). The indirect media effects presented were mostly in line with the direct effects: There were negative indirect associations of exposure to Fox News ( $b = -.14, p < .001$ ) and PBS ( $b = -.03, p < .05$ ) with deservingness, whereas exposure to CNN ( $b = .04, p < .05$ ) was positively associated with deservingness.

<sup>5</sup> Coefficients of the measurement model for the latent constructs of realistic threat and deservingness can be found in the supplemental materials (see Table A1).

Thus, with the exception of exposure to PBS, which correlated positively with perceived symbolic threat, Hypothesis 5 was mostly supported. Exposure to Fox News boosted perceptions of symbolic and realistic threats, but exposure to CNN had the opposite effect. It is interesting that we also found that more exposure to news about immigrants in general was associated with lower symbolic threat ( $b = -.09, p < .05$ ).

Finally, higher levels of perceived realistic ( $b = -.29, p < .001$ ) and symbolic threat ( $b = -.19, p < .001$ ) were associated with lower deservingness. Following earlier studies that emphasized the greater role of realistic rather than symbolic threat in the development of prejudice in the United States, we found that the association of realistic threat with lower deservingness was greater than the association of symbolic threat with lower deservingness, mirroring the findings in Study 1 in Europe. Thus, Hypothesis 6 was supported.



**Figure 2. Path model for media exposure on threat and deservingness perceptions in the United States. Direct standardized effects are presented. Values presented under deservingness perceptions indicate standardized indirect effects (IE). Sociodemographic indicators were included, but not presented (see Tables A4 and A5). \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .**

### Discussion

The countries in our study are diverse in several ways, but they all have one thing in common: They have received many immigrants and refugees in the years prior to data collection. The four European countries have had to cope with unusually large numbers of migrants tapping their resources and forcing discussions and policy changes to accommodate the new residents. Before Donald Trump’s election, the Obama administration faced pressure to admit many children showing up at the border with Mexico while simultaneously managing requests to admit more people made homeless by the civil war in Syria. Each country’s residents have their own set of attitudes regarding these newcomers. In this study, which is one of the first to systematically compare Europe and the United States in this regard, we examined multiple factors that might have had an impact on these attitudes: the amount and type of media use

among citizens in each country, the degree of perceived realistic and symbolic threat, and related perceptions of migrant deservingness.

The results show that media effects differ between Europe and the United States. Public news media generally portray immigrants and refugees more positively than commercial news networks (Jacobs et al., 2017). Nevertheless, we found that watching public broadcasting news in the United States was associated with greater perceptions of threat and lower deservingness, whereas watching public news in Europe was associated with lower threat perceptions and—somewhat surprisingly—lower deservingness (when we considered direct effects). We found that exposure to public news was associated with higher deservingness when we looked at the indirect effects. This may confirm earlier findings that public broadcasters in the United States and Europe portray newcomers differently, as indicated by Merolla and colleagues (2013) and Figenschou and Thorbjørnsrud (2015), who noted that European media are more positive in their representational preferences toward newcomers. The finding that public and commercial news consumption was associated with lower deservingness may point to a convergence of frames regarding migration during this time on both types of broadcasters. Such a trend supports Greussing and Boomgaarden's (2017) study, which showed that the media's narratives generally focused on security threats and economization, whereas victimization frames were less frequent. Moreover, the European study was conducted in 2017, directly following (or arguably during) the migration crisis, and it is possible that the European public's perceived deservingness was at an all-time low given the negative news coverage of asylum seekers and refugees at that time. Follow-up studies using content analyses could investigate the specific narratives and representations of migrants on these different networks.

The direct and indirect effects indicated that watching Fox News was associated with greater threat and lower deservingness perceptions. In contrast, these same effects showed that watching CNN was associated with lower threat perceptions and greater deservingness. Although these are both commercial networks, the literature shows that they use different frames to portray newcomers, with conservative frames by Fox News and more liberal frames by CNN (Bartlett, 2015; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012). For media scholars, this means that reflecting on media effects in the United States and Europe requires different frames of reference. Whereas several European studies have compared the effects of public and commercial media on attitudes (De Coninck, Matthijs, Debrael, De Cock, & d'Haenens, 2019; Jacobs et al., 2017), this relationship is far more complicated in the United States because of PBS's relatively small audience (Schaal, 2019) and commercial television's fragmented landscape.

Our findings also indicate that perceptions of symbolic threat are more important for stimulating deservingness perceptions in Europe, whereas perceptions of realistic threat are more relevant in the United States. This may be related to the different media frames used in these regions: Frames emphasizing crime and economic concerns related to migrants are more present or sensationalized in commercial media (Jacobs et al., 2017). This might explain why realistic threat—representing economic and crime concerns—is more important in the United States, where the impact of public broadcasting is limited. The emphasis on symbolic threat in Europe might be related to extensive discussions of identity, integration, and religion in the European news media, which focus on the negative media portrayal of Muslims and Islam as a threat to Western civilizations. Moreover, measures to restrict the arrival of migrants in the wake of the 2015

immigrant crisis have called into question elements of national identity, European culture, and value orientations in European societies (Diez, 2019).

One of the difficulties in assessing the effects of immigration news exposure is based on the definition of "news." For example, cable news broadcasters in the United States air programs of both news and opinion. The evening hours are mainly dedicated to opinion-based programs, where more ideologically based content is included, whereas the daytime shows feature more news programs. Viewers may not be distinguishing between news and opinion programs, and we did not specify which hours of the day or which programs respondents watched in our surveys. Ideally, content analyses of the specific news programs viewed in all countries would have allowed us to conclude more accurately the relationships between consumption of news content and perceived threats and attitudes about the deservingness of immigrants.

A further limitation of our study's findings derives from using nonrepresentative online samples. In addition, no income data or information regarding political party affiliation were collected in the European surveys. We also used a single-item measure for symbolic threat. There is some debate about using single-item measures in survey research as some authors argue that these are generally unreliable. In contrast, others argue that short scales do reach acceptable levels of reliability if "they assess homogeneous, theoretically deduced, and clearly defined concepts" (Postmes, Alexander Haslam, & Jans, 2012, p. 598). Some recent studies have used single-item threat measures, with findings indicating that single-item measures yield similar results to multiple-item measures (for a recent example, see Callens & Meuleman, 2017). Future studies should address these limitations, but the current study does advance our knowledge about attitudes toward immigrants comparatively, which has not often been undertaken.

Our work illustrates that many countries oppose the influx of migrants, but for different reasons. Such opposition can lead to locking in attitudes based on whether people deserve to be admitted to their countries. We hope that our finding that media exposure is associated with people's attitudes toward immigrants will lead to the provision of media-based information that will help citizens make better-informed judgments about admitting migrants to their countries, especially as climate change threatens to uproot people from their homes around the world.

In conclusion, it appears that perceptions of deservingness (i.e., whether or not migrants deserve to settle in the host country) are strongly associated with greater perceptions of realistic and symbolic threat and news media consumption in Europe and the United States. Our results show that although exposure to commercial news in Europe and Fox News in the United States is related to greater perceptions of threat and lower deservingness, exposure to public news in Europe and CNN in the United States is related to lower perceived threat and greater deservingness (in the United States only). This comparison of media effects points to the different ways in which we must understand media systems. Whereas media systems in Europe are often categorized in a public/commercial typology, the United States has a far more fragmented commercial media system. Apparently, the effects of exposure to immigration news on CNN align more with the effects associated with European public broadcasters, whereas the effects of exposure to immigration news on Fox News correspond more with those of commercial broadcasters in Europe. Our hope is that



journalists working in news media organizations will carefully consider the impact that their approach to the topic of immigration in the United States and Europe has on viewers' attitudes.

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