

The Negative and Positive Influences of Threat and Nonthreat Media Messages About Immigrants

CHANJUNG KIM

JAKE HARWOOD

JUN XIANG

University of Arizona, USA

We examined (a) the effect of threat messages (media messages suggesting that an outgroup is threatening to an ingroup) versus nonthreat messages (messages refuting the outgroup's threat) on intergroup bias, (b) the mechanisms underlying that effect, and (c) whether nonthreat messages would result in smaller effects of negative stereotypes on intergroup bias, compared with threat messages. We found that exposure to a threat message about immigrants (compared with a nonthreat message) resulted in more support for punitive immigration policies. This occurred via two sequential mediators: feelings of anger and contempt toward the outgroup, and outgroup derogation. The effect of negative stereotypes on intergroup bias was smaller in the nonthreat message condition than the threat message condition. We discuss implications for the effects of minority news portrayals.

Keywords: threat message, stereotypes, intergroup bias, immigration policy

"Whatever is sensed as a threat is hated" (Allport, 1954, p. 413). In his seminal work, Allport warned about the importance of threat in intergroup relations. Allport's insight is still valid. Research has consistently documented that threat is a critical factor exacerbating negative intergroup relations (Kinder & Sears, 1981; Stephan & Stephan, 1996). In the intergroup context, threat exists when "one group's actions, beliefs, or characteristics challenge the goal attainment or well-being of another group" (Riek, Mania, & Gaertner, 2006, p. 336).

The U.S. media often frame minority groups as a threat to the majority (Devin & Baker, 1991; Domke, 2001; Mastro & Behm-Morawitz, 2005), by describing minorities as a burden on the national economy and as violators of traditional American values (Borjas, 1999; Dunaway, Branton, & Abrajano, 2010; Kim, Carvalho, Davis, & Mullins, 2011). Given that the mass media are an important source for socialization about intergroup relations (Oliver, Ramasubramanian, & Kim, 2007), it is unsurprising that

Chanjung Kim: chanjungkim@email.arizona.edu

Jake Harwood: jharwood@u.arizona.edu

Jun Xiang: junxiang2009@gmail.com

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media threat messages have inspired vast scholarly interest. Nonetheless, little attention has been paid to the mechanism by which threat messages affect intergroup bias.

Recently, several studies focused on the role of emotions and found that the effect of threat message on intergroup bias is mediated by intergroup emotions (e.g., Seate & Mastro, 2015a, 2015b). Our study is also interested in the underlying mechanism of threat message. However, we add a motivational variable as an important mediator of the effect of threat message. Scholars have differentiated two motivations for intergroup biases: motivation to seek relative gain for the ingroup over others versus motivation to devalue or harm the other as an end in itself (Brewer, 1999). The former motivation is generally called ingroup favoritism; the latter is referred to as outgroup derogation. Unlike ingroup favoritism, which relates to elevation of the ingroup, outgroup derogation means to devalue, dislike, or harm the outgroup (Struch & Schwarz, 1989).

In the current work, we examine threat message effects in the context of media messages about minority group immigration to the United States. We experimentally manipulate exposure to a threat (versus nonthreat) message concerning Hispanic immigration, and measure majority group's policy attitudes as an outcome indicative of intergroup bias. Based on integrated emotion theory, we hypothesize that a threat message elicits negative emotions, which exert a negative influence on intergroup bias via outgroup derogation. Therefore, we test a sequential mediation model: from threat message, to negative emotion, to outgroup derogation to negative outgroup attitude.

Further, we explore the hypothesis that a media message stating that the outgroup is not a threat could neutralize the hostile effects of negative stereotypes. Specifically, we examine a message explicitly refuting (or contesting, Rowling, Sheets, & Jones, 2013) the idea that immigration is a threat. Our study contributes to enlarging understanding of the effects of minority ethnic group media portrayals in general, and specifically of their impact on the majority group's attitudes about immigration issues in the United States. Via our two overlapping goals, we aim to explore further both the negative effects of threat messages and the beneficial effects of nonthreat messages.

Literature Review

Threat and Intergroup Bias

Threat is an antecedent of intergroup bias (Kinder & Sears, 1981; LeVine & Campbell, 1972; Stephan & Stephan, 1996). It elicits negative emotion (Seate & Mastro, 2015a, 2015b), exacerbates negative attitudes toward outgroups (Stephan, Renfro, Esses, Stephan, & Martin, 2005), and influences opinion about outgroup-related policy (Gilmore, Meeks, & Domke, 2013). There are two main types of threat: realistic and symbolic (Riek et al., 2006). Realistic group conflict theory, an early theory of threat, hypothesizes that threat originates in a conflict of interest between groups (Sherif, 1958). When groups are in zero-sum competition for scarce resources, outgroup success threatens the well-being of the ingroup, which leads to intergroup bias. In a seminal experiment, Sherif (1958) divided children in a summer camp into two groups and had them engage in competitive activities and found increasing hostility between the two groups. However, when the zero-sum competition was removed by presenting

groups with a superordinate goal that could not be achieved without cooperation, hostility between the groups decreased. Recent research replicates these results in social contexts, such as affirmative action and immigration. For example, messages stressing economic successes of immigrants led to stronger anti-immigration attitudes than did general immigration messages (Esses, Dovidio, Jackson, & Armstrong, 2001).

Intergroup differences in values and beliefs (symbolic threats) can also be threatening (Kinder & Sears, 1981). In the case of a mayoral election, Kinder and Sears (1981) analyzed why people voted against a Black candidate and found that symbolic threat was a stronger predictor than realistic threat of voting behavior: Whites voted against the Black candidate to remove a possible threat from (perceived) Black values (e.g., agreeing that Blacks should not "push themselves where they are not wanted"). Symbolic threat theory has been principally applied in the domain of racial issues, but it can also be applied to domains such as sexuality (Wyman & Snyder, 1997) and immigrant–host relations (McLaren, 2003).

Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 1986) expands our understanding of intergroup threat by explaining how social comparison with an outgroup increases intergroup tension. According to the theory, (a) individuals strive to maintain positive social identity, (b) positive social identity is obtained from favorable comparison with a relevant outgroup, and (c) when social identity is unsatisfactory, individuals leave their existing group or engage in action to make their group more positively distinct. The pressure to positively evaluate one's own group relative to an outgroup can lead individuals to engage in intergroup bias (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 1986). When the actions of an outgroup have the potential to decrease positive social comparison (i.e., when the outgroup threatens the ingroup, including the ingroup's positive social identity), that elicits intergroup bias to defend the ingroup identity. Threat can occur on any dimension that groups regard as relevant to self-esteem, including attributes (e.g., intelligence) or resources (e.g., social benefits; Turner, 1978). Hence, both realistic and symbolic threats can challenge social identity, particularly when groups are in competition (Branscombe, Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 1999). In an experiment, Gilmore, Meeks, and Domke (2013) found that Americans who are exposed to a message assigning responsibility for anti-American sentiment to both Americans and foreigners exhibited a strong relationship between national identification and support for harsh foreign policy. The authors explain that because of attributing responsibility to Americans for such sentiment, participants support harsh policy toward foreign outgroups to restore their own positive group identity.

One prominent way in which people are exposed to threat messages is via the media. Mass media frequently associate minority groups with economic and cultural threats (e.g., Chavez, 2008; Dunaway et al., 2010), and those messages influence people's attitudes. Using survey data, for instance, Fujioka (2011) found that audience members' perceptions of realistic threat (e.g., taking jobs) from media portrayals of Hispanic immigrants were negatively associated with attitudes toward those immigrants. In an experimental study, Seate and Mastro (2015a) found that participants exposed to a threatening news story about immigration exhibited more anxiety toward immigration than those exposed to a nonthreatening story.

Immigration legislation is among the more contentious issues covered in U.S. news media, with the threat of immigrants to natives a common theme of such coverage (Kim et al., 2011). Immigration policy proposals range from the punitive (e.g., imprison, deport, marginalize) to the progressive (e.g., provide a path to citizenship, integrate, legalize). Drawing on the theories above, and viewing punitive immigration policy as an expression of intergroup bias (negative attitude toward immigration; Ommundsen & Larsen, 1997), we expect that if people encounter a message describing threatening consequences of Hispanic immigration to U.S. society, they are more likely to support punitive immigration policy: The punitive policy will guard against the threat, and hence improve positive ingroup social identity.

H1: Participants exposed to a media threat message will show more support for punitive immigration policy than participants exposed to a nonthreat message.

Threat, Emotions, and Outgroup Derogation

Outgroup threat is an antecedent of negative outgroup emotion (Mackie, Silver, & Smith, 2004). The centrality of emotions to intergroup relations is described in intergroup emotion theory (IET; Mackie, Devos, & Smith, 2000; Smith, 1993). This theory suggests that people often define themselves as group members and experience emotional responses at the group level (Smith, 1993). The theory posits prejudice as a social emotion experienced in intergroup relations and discriminatory behaviors as group-level emotional action tendencies (Smith, 1993). Prejudice against outgroups is therefore determined based on the ingroup's emotional appraisal and reactions to the outgroup (Mackie et al., 2004).

Specific emotions are determined by appraisal of ingroup status and outgroup threat toward the ingroup's status (Mackie et al., 2000). According to IET, if an outgroup is assessed as threatening the ingroup, and ingroup members perceive their own group as high status compared with the outgroup (i.e., seen as being able to overcome the threat), then anger or contempt (we call these "harm emotions") are elicited (Smith, 1993). In contrast, members of low-status groups feel fear or disgust (we call these "avoidance emotions") in response to threat from high-status outgroups, given the potential for high-status outgroups to harm them. Emotions mediate the relation between threat and intergroup bias. For instance, Seate and Mastro (2015a) found that exposure to threatening immigration news coverage indirectly influences outgroup behaviors through contempt. In another study, the feeling of intergroup anxiety mediates the effect of threatening news on immigration attitude (Seate & Mastro, 2015b).

The predominant psychological process of intergroup bias is ingroup favoritism rather than outgroup derogation (Brewer, 1999; Hewstone, Rubin, & Willis, 2002). For instance, intergroup bias is more common when the outcomes to be distributed are positive but less common when people are distributing negative stimuli (punishments) (the "positive-negative asymmetry" Mummendey et al., 1992; Otten, Mummendey, & Blanz, 1996). One key question underlying this literature is under what conditions ingroup favoritism becomes outgroup derogation. Threat is one cause of this transformation (Brewer, 2001; Mummendey & Otten, 2001). In positive-negative asymmetry experiments, Otten et al. (1996) found that participants in a threat condition (i.e., participants' positive distinctiveness was under threat) distributed negative outcomes (e.g., punishments) to the outgroup member more often than did

participants in a nonthreat condition. Similarly, Gilmore and Rowling (2017) found that people who were exposed to messages that challenged American exceptionalism (i.e., self-esteem threat) were more likely to degrade other countries than were people in a control condition. Moreover, the tendency to degrade other countries was stronger when the challenge came from competitor countries compared with noncompetitor countries. Gilmore and Rowling explained that the people in the threat condition tended to engage in favorable comparisons in an effort to restore the supremacy of the U.S.

How are intergroup emotions and outgroup derogation related each other? Analyzing national survey data, Kinder and Kam (2009) showed that threat from the outgroup increases outgroup derogation across various political contexts. In their analysis, for instance, when the U.S. was threatened by enemies (e.g., during 9/11), outgroup derogation among Americans was a stronger predictor of public opinion on related policies (e.g., the "War on Terror") than when threat was absent. These results indicate that both emotions and outgroup derogation independently mediate the effect of threat on attitudes toward the outgroup. However, we posit that emotion bridges threat messages and outgroup derogation, a notion supported by IET. One of important features of intergroup emotion theory is that it relates specific emotions with subsequent judgments (Mackie, Smith, & Ray, 2008): Emotions trigger motivations that enable the group members to deal with an encountered problem or opportunity (Smith, 1993). For instance, anger is associated with the motivation to change and remove the problematic situation, whereas fear is related to an avoidance motivation (Frijda, Kuipers, & ter Schure, 1989). With these assumptions, the theory relates specific emotions with action tendencies (Smith, 1993). Research shows that anger and contempt toward outgroup members are linked to motivation to harm and act against the outgroup members, whereas fear and disgust are related to the tendency to avoid action (Frijda et al., 1989; Smith, 1993). Motivation to harm and act against the outgroup represents the core of outgroup derogation—wanting to hurt the outgroup.

Building on IET and previous findings, we expect the effects of threat messages in the media on policy attitudes to go through sequential mediators of harm emotions and outgroup derogation, in order. Threat messages elicit harm emotions rather than avoid emotions (a) because the outgroup is framed as acting against the ingroup's interest, and (b) because (in our context) Hispanic immigrants have lower status than the dominant U.S. population. Harm emotions elicit outgroup derogation for reasons outlined above—outgroup derogation represents the action tendency of "removing the problem" more than ingroup favoritism. Finally, outgroup derogation leads to support for punitive immigration policies; such policies reflect the desire to maintain ingroup status by acting against the outgroup.

H2: The effect of threat message on punitive immigration policy attitudes will be mediated by the sequential mediators of harm emotions and outgroup derogation rather than mediators such as avoid emotions or ingroup favoritism.

Stereotypes and Threat Messages

Stereotypes refer to "beliefs about the characteristics, attributes, and behaviors of members of certain groups" (Hilton & von Hippel, 1996, p. 240). Stereotypes also include information about social roles and specific qualities that group members share (Dovidio, Hewstone, Glick, & Esses, 2010). Those

beliefs come from peers, family, school, and direct contact with group members but also from stereotyped media portrayals. Compared with Whites, media describe minority racial groups with negative stereotyped traits (Dixon & Linz, 2000; Mastro & Greenberg, 2000). In the U.S. mass media, Blacks are associated with criminal behaviors (Dixon & Linz, 2000), are shown in low-status positions, and are portrayed as lazy, untrustworthy, and unintelligent (Mastro & Greenberg, 2000).

The same is true of Hispanics. Media describe Hispanics with negative attributes such as poor, uneducated, and criminal (Dixon & Linz, 2000; Mastro & Greenberg, 2000). Mastro and Behm-Morawitz (2005) found that Hispanic characters in prime time are portrayed as inarticulate, unintelligent, hot-tempered, and verbally aggressive, compared with Whites. Dixon (2015) analyzed local television news and found that Hispanics are depicted as crime perpetrators more frequently than Whites and are underrepresented as victims compared with Whites and real crime reports. Tukachinsky, Mastro, and Yarchi (2015) analyzed U.S. television shows over a 20 years span and found that Hispanics are severely underrepresented (Hispanic make up only 2.1% of characters), and many of characters are negatively stereotyped (24.1% are hypersexualized, and 23.9% have low professional status).

Media effects research shows that exposure to negative portrayals of racial groups in the media contributes to the forming of negative stereotypes of those groups (e.g., Mastro, Behm-Morawitz, & Ortiz, 2007). The cognitive accessibility model explains this by suggesting that frequent media exposure increases the accessibility of related construct in memory, thus forming individuals' stereotypes (Shrum, 2007). Thus, for example, if people frequently encounter messages associating the two constructs Hispanic and crime, negative stereotype of Hispanics as criminal would be formed by increasing the joint accessibility of those two constructs.

Research consistently shows a strong association between negative stereotypes and prejudice or discrimination (e.g., Dixon & Azocar, 2007). Stereotypes are used as cognitive shortcuts to make judgments about policy, for instance (Mastro & Tukachinsky, 2011). Policies that favor minority groups (e.g., affirmative action) could be denied without deliberation because of the negative stereotypes toward that group (Oliver et al., 2007). Esses, Medianu, and Lawson (2013) found that participants incidentally exposed to an editorial cartoon that associated immigrants with disease were more likely to have perceptions of immigrants as sources of disease, which results in less favorable attitudes toward immigration.

Negative emotions are also associated with negative stereotypes (Dijker, Koomen, van den Heuvel, & Frijda, 1996; Esses, Haddock, & Zanna, 1993). For instance, Dijker et al. (1996) found that Dutch people with negative stereotypes of immigrant workers were more likely to express negative emotions toward those groups. Also, participants exposed to a newspaper article in which Hispanic immigrants were described as poor and unskilled were more likely to exhibit anxiety about immigration than participants exposed to a nonnegatively stereotyped article (Brader, Valentino, & Suhay, 2008). Thus, we suggest the following:

H3: Preexisting negative stereotypes will be positively associated with feeling harm emotions toward immigrants.

If negative stereotypes influence harm emotions, then it is important to understand how to reduce the effect of stereotypes. We suggest that the effects of negative stereotypes could be reduced by exposing people to media messages that explicitly state that the outgroup is not a threat (i.e., nonthreat message). The relations between stereotypes and threat have been detailed in the integrated threat model—a model supported by data (Aberson & Gaffney, 2008; Riek et al., 2006). The model says that negative stereotypes are an antecedent of symbolic and realistic threat perceptions, and that such perceptions mediate the effect of stereotypes on prejudice (Stephan & Stephan, 1996; Stephan, Ybarra, & Bachman, 1999).

Drawing on the integrated threat model, we suggest that the effect of negative stereotypes on prejudice could be reduced by exposing people to nonthreat messages. Our approach follows the “manipulation-of-mediator experimental design” idea. This idea came from the critique of the causal step approach to mediation in which causal inferences about the mediator to dependent variable link are not warranted (e.g., Jacoby & Sassenberg, 2011). To overcome this problem, some scholars have suggested manipulating (rather than measuring) the mediator (see Pirlott & MacKinnon, 2016, for a detailed explanation). In manipulation-of-mediator designs, the mediation effect can be demonstrated by a moderation test. If a variable mediates the relation between an independent and dependent variable, the effect of the independent variable on the dependent variable should be reduced under conditions where the mediator is manipulated so as to eliminate (or reduce) systematic variance between the independent and mediator variable (this is called a blockage manipulation). Alternatively, if the mediator is manipulated to maintain or boost the systematic independent-mediator variable connection, the effect of the independent variable on the dependent variable would remain or be strengthened (an enhancement manipulation; Bullock, Green, & Ha, 2010).

In our case, according to the integrated threat model, we expect systematic variance between negative stereotypes and harm emotions. However, a nonthreat message that explicitly refutes the threat from immigration should operate as a blockage manipulation between stereotypes and harm emotions—we predict the nonthreat message will suppress scores on the hypothesized mediator of the effect (perceived threat) and thus reduce the stereotype-harm connection by reducing the effect of stereotyping on perceived threat. Contrarily, we predict that an enhancement manipulation (a message that accentuates the threat from immigration) will strengthen the effect of negative stereotypes on harm emotions by exacerbating the stereotype-threat association. Those already inclined toward harm emotions (those with negative stereotypes) will receive additional support for their position and shift toward higher perceived outgroup threat, and hence higher harm perceptions.

H4: The effect of negative stereotypes on harm emotions will differ by the presence of threat: There will be a stronger relation between negative stereotypes and harm emotions under the threat condition than under the nonthreat condition.

Method

Participants

A total of 434 students at a large Southwestern U.S. university were recruited by offering extra credit in introductory communication classes. Given our goal of understanding how threats from a minority group affect majority group members' attitudes, 171 minority ethnicity participants were excluded (Black: 24, Hispanic: 90, Asian: 34, Other race: 23 cases). Thus, the final sample consisted of 263 non-Hispanic White students. The sample was 28.1% male (71.9% female). The proportion of gender was almost identical across conditions (threat condition: female 73.5%; nonthreat condition: female 70.1%).

Procedure and Materials

In an online experiment, participants first answered demographic questions and rated their attitudes and stereotypes concerning various racial groups. Then, they were randomly assigned to either a threat or nonthreat condition. In the threat condition, participants read a short fictional newspaper article in which the threat of increased Hispanic immigration to U.S. society was accentuated. The article described competition between Hispanics and Whites surrounding jobs (i.e., realistic threat) and a detrimental cultural influence of Hispanics (i.e., symbolic threat). In the nonthreat condition, the article described the increase in immigration in a nonthreatening way. Specifically, an expert in the article was quoted as saying that increased Hispanic immigrants would not negatively affect U.S. economy and culture.

To mask the artificial nature of the experiment, we designed a fictional newspaper masthead and provided instructions saying that the story was recently published by a newspaper; these factors were intended to make participants perceive the stimuli as a real news story. Other aspects of the story were controlled: news title, word count (195 vs. 201 words), topic, and sources quoted were equivalent across versions. After reading the article, participants were asked to answer questions measuring variables of interest (see below). Participants were debriefed after completing all these processes, including being told that the news articles were not real.

Measurement

Negative Stereotypes of Hispanics

Stereotypes were measured before being exposed to the manipulation on commonly held stereotypical attributes of racial and ethnic minorities (and particularly Hispanic immigrants; Mastro & Tukachinsky, 2011). Six items (violent, lazy, uneducated, unintelligent, likely to commit a crime, sexually provocative) were measured using 7-point Likert scales, from 0 (*not at all*) to 6 (*very much*), and the scores were averaged ($\alpha = .81$, $M = 2.66$, $SD = 1.06$). Higher scores indicate more negative stereotypes of Hispanic immigrants.

Outgroup Derogation

Given that outgroup derogation implies dislike for the outgroup, and hence keeping a distance from them, researchers have used these concepts to measure it (e.g., Branscombe & Wann, 1994; Struch & Schwartz, 1989). We used Branscombe and Wann's (1994) approach to capture outgroup derogation: A social distance measure was combined with a measure of outgroup attitude. Four items measured social distance (e.g., How willing are you to have a Hispanic immigrant as a neighbor? How willing are you to date a Hispanic immigrant?) (Struch & Schwartz, 1989). Each item was measured on a 7-point Likert scale, from 0 (*not at all*) to 6 (*very much*), and the scores from all items were averaged ($\alpha = .91$, $M = 3.60$, $SD = 1.64$). Outgroup attitude was measured using a feeling thermometer scale on which participants provided a number between 0° and 100° that best represented their overall attitude toward Hispanic immigrants (0° = *extremely cold*; 50° = *neither cold nor warm*; 100° = *extremely warm*) ($M = 56.05$, $SD = 24.68$). Because the two measurements used different scales, we transformed them into z scores and averaged them ($\alpha = .90$). Finally, the measure was reversed by multiplying by -1 ; higher scores indicate a greater desire to maintain a distance from and dislike of Hispanic immigrants (i.e., higher level of outgroup derogation).

Ingroup Favoritism

To assess ingroup favoritism, we had participants rate ingroups and outgroups on a series of semantic differential items. If participants rate the ingroup (White Americans) more favorably than the outgroup (Hispanic immigrants) on positively valued adjective dimensions, then it suggests ingroup favoritism (Aberson, Healy, & Romero, 2000). On a 7-point bipolar scale (from 1 to 7), respondents rated the degree to which five traits characterize the ingroup and outgroup (e.g., 1 = *untrustworthy* to 7 = *trustworthy*; 1 = *stingy* to 7 = *generous*). We subtracted outgroup scores from ingroup scores for each trait and averaged those difference scores ($\alpha = .75$, $M = .25$, $SD = 1.27$). Higher scores indicate that ingroup members are perceived to have more positive traits than outgroup members. The measures of outgroup derogation and ingroup favoritism were significantly correlated (see Table 1 for all correlations) but are clearly not empirically isomorphic. This is consistent with the literature discussed in the introduction, which demonstrates that these two concepts are distinct.

Emotions

Harm emotions were measured by combining ratings of anger and contempt (Hewstone et al., 2002; Smith, 1993). Respondents rated how much they feel anger and contempt when they think of Hispanic immigrants on 7-point scales, from 0 (*not at all*) to 6 (*very much*). The scores were averaged ($\alpha = .65$, $M = 1.44$, $SD = 1.29$). Avoidance emotions were measured in the same way, using fear and disgust evaluations ($\alpha = .64$, $M = 1.32$, $SD = 1.25$). The correlation showed that two emotions are nonorthogonal but distinct concepts (see Table 1).

Table 1. Correlations Among Variables.

	Negative stereotype	Harm emotions	Avoidance emotions	Ingroup favoritism	Outgroup derogation	Policy attitude
Negative stereotype		.40**	.40**	.30**	.32**	.25**
Harm emotions	252		.66**	.37**	.49**	.40**
Avoidance emotions	255	254		.44**	.59**	.37**
Ingroup favoritism	258	251	254		.49**	.29**
Outgroup derogation	260	253	256	259		.48**
Policy attitude	261	254	257	260	262	

Note. Numbers in the upper diagonal are Pearson's correlation coefficient (r). Numbers in the lower diagonal are sample sizes. ** $p < .01$.

Attitude Toward Punitive Immigration Policy

Participants' policy position was assessed by asking their agreement with four statements (The U.S. government should provide more border patrol enforcement to strengthen border security; The U.S. government should enhance punishment for illegal entry and reentry; Immigration rates should be increased from the current levels; The U.S. government should toughen enforcement on employers hiring undocumented workers), scored on the same 0–6 Likert scale. The third item was reverse coded, and all scores were averaged ($\alpha = .73$, $M = 4.54$, $SD = 1.25$); higher scores indicate more support for punitive immigration policy. Table 1 shows that this variable is significantly related to outgroup derogation but that the two concepts are distinct from each other ($r = .48$).

Results

Manipulation Check

Three manipulation check questions asked participants how much they feel a threat from Hispanic immigration to the U.S. economy, culture, and society, using 7-point Likert scale, from 0 (*not at all*) to 6 (*very much*); scores on the three items were averaged ($\alpha = .89$). Participants in the threat condition ($M = 2.86$, $SD = 1.39$) felt more threat than those in the nonthreat condition ($M = 2.43$, $SD = 1.40$), independent $t(261) = -2.51$, $p < .05$, $d = .15$.

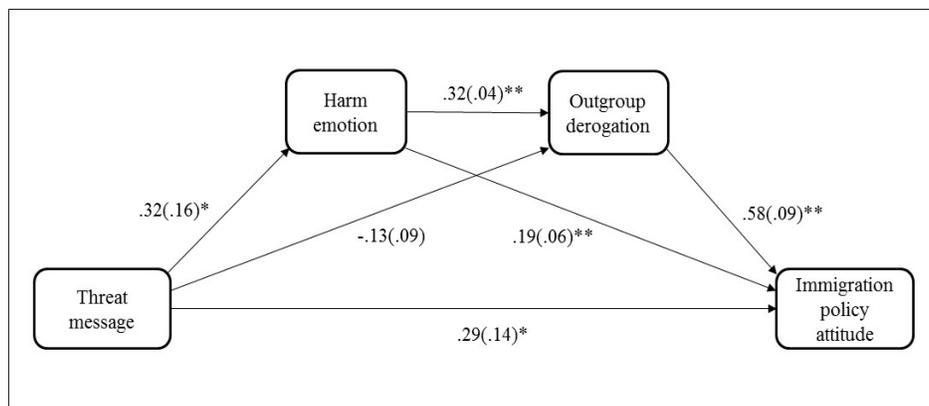
Hypothesis 1

To test the hypothesis that a threat message, compared with a nonthreat message, would lead to more support for punitive immigration policy for Hispanic immigrants, we compared the mean immigration policy attitude scores between the two conditions. The hypothesis was supported. An independent-samples *t* test showed that participants who were exposed to the threat message ($M = 4.71$, $SD = 1.27$) supported punitive immigration policy significantly more than participants who read the nonthreat message ($M = 4.37$, $SD = 1.20$), $t(261) = -2.25$, $p < .05$, $d = .14$.

Hypothesis 2

The second hypothesis predicted a mediated pathway from threat message, through harm emotions and outgroup derogation, to policy attitude. To test the hypothesis, we ran Hayes' (2013) PROCESS macro (Model 6), which computes regression coefficients for all indirect and direct effects. Using bootstrapping procedures, the macro estimates 95% confidence intervals for indirect and direct effects. If the confidence interval for an effect does not include zero, then the effect is statistically significant.

As can be seen in Figure 1, participants exposed to the threat message are more likely to express harm emotions ($b = .32$, $SE = .16$, $p < .05$) than are participants exposed to the nonthreat message. Also, the more participants have harm emotions, the more they show outgroup derogation ($b = .32$, $SE = .04$, $p < .01$). Finally, outgroup derogation leads to supporting punitive immigration policy ($b = .58$, $SE = .09$, $p < .01$). Bootstrapping procedures showed that the sequential indirect effect through both mediators was statistically significant (95% CI for mediation [.006, .136]; see Table 2). A simple indirect model from threat message to immigration policy attitude via harm emotions was also statistically significant while controlling for outgroup derogation (95% CI for mediation [.007, .162]). There was no significant difference between the size of these two indirect effects (95% CI for comparison of effects [-.075, .067]).



Numbers in parentheses are standard errors.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Figure 1. Unstandardized regression coefficient of sequential mediation.

To further evaluate our model, we compared it against some alternatives. It is possible that a threat message could elicit avoidance emotions as well as harm emotions. Also, it is possible that support for punitive immigration policy derives from ingroup favoritism, rather than outgroup derogation. Table 2 shows results from tests of alternative models based on these possibilities. None of alternative models statistically mediated the effect of threat message on punitive immigration policy attitude.

Table 2. Bootstrap Estimates of 95% Confidence Intervals for the Indirect Effects.

Indirect effects	Point estimates	SE	CI (lower)	CI (upper)
Proposed model and submodels				
TM → HE → OD → PA	.060	.032	.006	.136
TM → HE → PA	.059	.040	.007	.162
TM → OD → PA	-.072	.060	-.211	.019
Alternative Model 1 and submodels				
TM → HE → IF → PA	.017	.013	-.000	.051
TM → HE → PA	.089	.057	-.005	.220
TM → IF → PA	-.014	.030	-.076	.029
Alternative Model 2 and submodels				
TM → AE → OD → PA	.033	.036	-.036	.110
TM → AE → PA	.029	.033	-.027	.108
TM → OD → PA	-.035	.047	-.139	.049
Alternative Model 3 and submodels				
TM → AE → IF → PA	.008	.011	-.007	.037
TM → AE → PA	.046	.057	-.064	.159
TM → IF → PA	-.002	.020	-.047	.035

Note. TM = threat message; HE = harm emotions; OD = outgroup derogation; PA = punitive immigration policy attitude AE = avoid emotions; IF = ingroup favoritism.

In all models with only one mediator, the mediator not included in the mediated pathway remains in the model as a control variable. This explains why some identical-looking single-mediator models have different coefficients.

Although we hypothesized a sequential mediation model, harm emotions and outgroup derogation might simultaneously predict prejudice. Also, the order of mediators could be reversed: from outgroup derogation to harm emotions. To test these possibilities, we ran Hayes' PROCESS macro Model 6, reversing the order of the two mediators, and we also ran Model 4, treating the two mediators as parallel. Neither alternative model yielded significant effects (see Table 3). Only an indirect model from threat message to policy attitude via harm emotions was significant, which is the same effect already observed in our originally hypothesized model (compare the fourth line of results in Table 3 with the second line of results in Table 2).

Table 3. Bootstrap Estimates for the Alternative Indirect Effects.

Indirect effects	Point estimates	SE	CI (lower)	CI (upper)
Sequential mediation model				
TM → OD → HE → PA	-.003	.016	-.039	.028
Simultaneous mediation model				
Total	.047	.088	-.120	.220
Harm emotions	.060	.041	.004	.167
Outgroup derogation	-.012	.062	-.141	.103

Note. TM = threat message; OD = outgroup derogation; HE = harm emotions; PA = punitive immigration policy attitude.

Hypotheses 3 and 4

The third hypothesis predicted an association between negative stereotypes and harm emotions. This was tested by multiple regression. As shown in Model 1 in Table 4, negative stereotypes had a statistically significant effect on harm emotions toward Hispanic immigrants after controlling for possible confounding variables such as gender, political ideology, and preexisting attitude toward Hispanic immigrants.

Table 4. Multiple Regression Models for Effect of Negative Stereotype on Harm Emotions.

	Model 1	Model 2
Gender	-.09	-.09
Political ideology	-.19**	-.20**
Attitude toward Hispanic immigrants (pretest)	-.17**	-.18**
Negative stereotypes	.29**	.17*

Threat message		-.22
Negative Stereotype × Threat Message		.33*
Adjusted R^2	.23**	.24**
R^2 change		.01*

Note. Numbers in the table are standardized coefficients (β).

$N = 252$.

* $p \leq .05$. ** $p < .01$

To test Hypothesis 4, the interaction between negative stereotypes and the threat message (coded 0 = *nonthreat*, 1 = *threat*) was added to the model (see Table 4, Model 2). The interaction term was statistically significant. The regression coefficient of the interaction term showed that the effect of stereotypes on harm emotions is stronger under threat (vs. nonthreat) conditions. The effect is more specifically decomposed into simple slopes in Figure 1. The simple slopes revealed that in the nonthreat message condition, the effect of negative stereotypes on harm emotions was weaker (unstandardized $b = .21$, $t = 2.08$, $p < .05$) than the effect in the threat message condition ($b = .48$, $t = 4.76$, $p < .01$), which supports Hypothesis 4's prediction that compared with a threat message, a nonthreat message can reduce the effect of negative stereotypes on harm emotions.

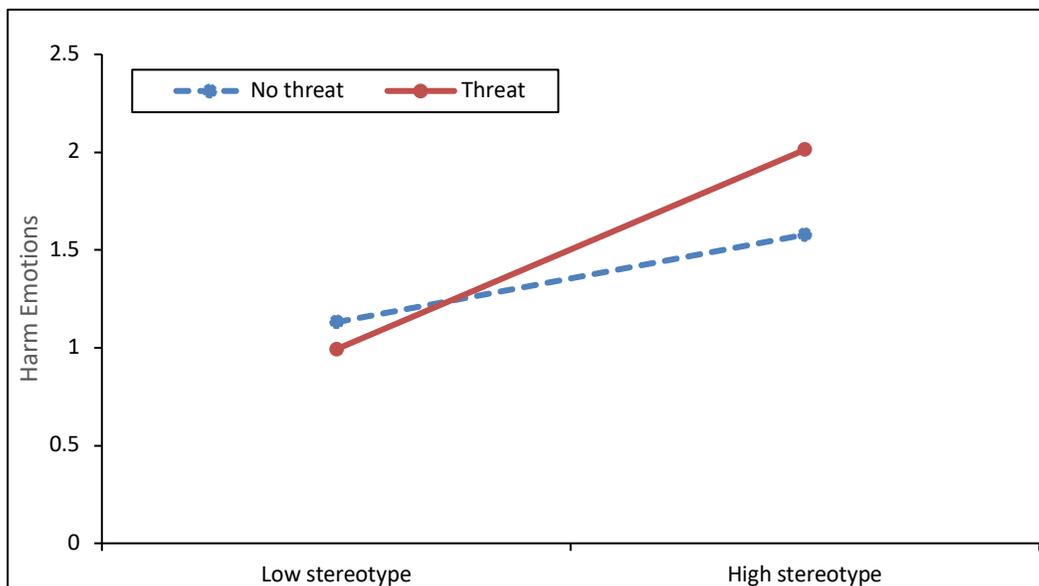


Figure 2. Simple slopes representing the moderating effect of threat message on the association between negative stereotype and harm emotions toward Hispanic immigrants.

Discussion

We showed that exposure to a threat message about an outgroup can elicit more support for hostile group-targeted policy than exposure to a nonthreat message. Although a general effect of threat on intergroup bias has been previously demonstrated, our study is notable because we obtained these effects from only a single exposure to a short news article. We showed that the effect of threat (vs. nonthreat) messages on policy attitudes occurs via sequential mediators: The threat message, compared with nonthreat message elicits more harm emotions, which in turn predicts outgroup derogation, which ultimately predicts the policy attitudes. This provides a novel test of the process by which threat leads to policy attitudes, and our data, although not definitive because of the limitations outlined below, are nonetheless quite supportive of the process. Finally, we found that an explicitly nonthreatening message contributes to reducing the effect of negative stereotypes on intergroup bias, compared with a threatening message. These findings have important implications for understanding intergroup cognitive processes and practical implications for messaging about groups.

Typically, bias manifests as ingroup favoritism, but on occasion outgroup derogation emerges. Outgroup derogation is a particularly damaging form of intergroup bias in that it results in destructive consequences such as hatred and violence—consequences that do not follow from ingroup favoritism (Mummendey & Otten, 2001). Our work shows that threat messages encourage outgroup derogation and that the effects of threat manifest through harm-related emotions (anger, contempt). As we seek to understand situations of intergroup conflict and to reduce such conflict, understanding the processes by which messages translate into a direct desire to harm the outgroup is essential. Our research suggests that emotional processes, and particularly harm emotions, need to be central to such discussions. In our analysis, harm emotions impair intergroup relations not only indirectly via outgroup derogation but also in a direct manner (see the second row of coefficients in Table 2). This result revalidates intergroup emotion theory's basic prediction that intergroup emotions directly link outgroup threats with prejudice and discrimination (e.g., Smith, 1993). Therefore, examining further how to reduce the prevalence of such emotional responses is an important task for future research. We suspect (although data would be required to support this suspicion) that the path from threat to harm emotions might be reduced by mindful consideration of the message and awareness of emotional responses. In some cases, a presented threat might be reevaluated as nonthreatening (e.g., a values-based threat to a value that is not personally important), or an emotional response might be muted by being aware (e.g., "Why am I getting angry about this?"). Maintaining resistance to such messages might be a valuable skill, and one that competing messages could encourage (a la inoculation theory, Compton, 2013). Messages claiming economic threat, for instance, can be countered by knowledge of economic contributions made by particular groups.

Second, the study has implications for the nature of messaging about groups in society, and the importance of maintaining journalistic balance (e.g., in selecting sources for quotes in such articles). Where there are competing perspectives on whether a group really constitutes a threat (whether symbolic or real), news coverage must provide voices on both sides of that concern. Our work shows that a message explicitly suggesting a lack of threat from the outgroup reduces the likelihood of outgroup stereotypes leading to outgroup derogation (at least as compared with a threat message), and hence we

show the importance of having nonthreatening messages about immigration present in the media landscape to compete with more prevalent threatening depictions of immigrants.

Our findings do show that negative stereotypes still influence harm emotions in the nonthreat condition (albeit less so than the threat condition), and indeed the moderating effect of our messages was relatively small. Other mediator variables undoubtedly also contribute to this effect: The integrated threat model suggests intergroup anxiety as one possibility (Stephan & Stephan, 1996). In addition, of course, our single message was competing with a news environment in which messages about immigrant threats are widespread and largely negative (Federation of Americans for Immigration Reform, 2016).

One limitation of our study is that we used only non-Hispanic White respondents, which limits the generalizability of the findings to minority–minority intergroup relations. Relations between minority groups show different dynamics from intergroup relations between a majority and a minority group (e.g., White, Schmitt & Langer, 2006), and hence it will be important in the future to examine how members of one minority group react to threats from another minority group. Also, we measured group stereotypes in our pretest, which could hurt the external validity of experiment. The premeasurement might have primed stereotypes for our participants when they encountered the stimulus and subsequent questions (a testing–stimulus interaction; Campbell & Stanley, 1963). Similarly, our results should be considered in our specific regional context (the U.S. Southwest close to the Mexican border). Immigration is a more salient and important issue in this region than in other parts of the U.S. (Branton & Dunaway, 2009), which might have influenced participants' reactions to our stimuli.

Our research is also limited by only using a single message (Jackson & Jacobs, 1983). Although we controlled for potentially confounding factors in preparing our stimuli, a single message makes it impossible to generalize to other similar messages. Multiple message designs are rare in communication research, and we were careful to use a message that is typical of news framing about immigration. (e.g., Seate & Mastro, 2015a). Also, when writing the experimental stimuli, we included both realistic and symbolic threats. Given previous findings (e.g., Kim et al., 2011) that media in the U.S. frequently address those two threats, we believe addressing two threats at the same time could increase external validity by reflecting reality more precisely. However, we cannot ascertain which threat brings about attitudinal change. Similarly, we do not have a control group (i.e., a group that is not exposed to any stimulus), which prevents comparison with a baseline. Therefore, our findings should be interpreted only in a relative sense. Without the baseline, we cannot say whether the threat message truly increased intergroup bias (or the nonthreat decreased it), or whether the nonthreat message decreased the effect of negative stereotypes on intergroup bias (vs. the threat message increasing it).

Despite the limitations, our study supplies two novel findings concerning the effects of threatening media messages about outgroups, and does so in a context currently high on the U.S. political and social agenda—Hispanic immigration. We show the specific cognitive mechanisms through which a media message suggesting threat from an outgroup translates into punitive policy attitudes. We also demonstrate that the link between negative stereotyping and intergroup bias is smaller under the nonthreatening than the threatening message condition.

Illegal immigration to the U.S. is a perennial political issue (Dunaway et al., 2010; Miller & Nevins, 2017). It is important to know how non-Hispanic White Americans process outgroup threatening messages about this topic. Our finding suggests that they understand threatening messages in a very negative way, which might severely damage relations between the host population and immigrants, thus reducing the potential for a harmonious country. In an environment where media frequently use threat framing, therefore, future research should continue to explore how to disrupt the psychological processes leading to outgroup derogation and support for outgroup-harming policy.

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