

Media Use and Attitudes Toward Immigrants and Refugees in Western Europe and the United States

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Abstract: While European countries received over a million refugees in 2015 alone, the United States admitted only 33,000 in 2017, following the Trump administration ban on migrants from specific countries. The rhetoric surrounding the dangers refugees pose to the United States has pushed the issue to the front of the political agenda, resulting in shifts in public opinion. Based on online surveys conducted in Belgium, France, the Netherlands, Sweden, and the United States (N = 7,031), this study focuses on how attitudes toward migrants and refugees might be affected by (a) media use, (b) perceived realistic and symbolic threat, and (c) contact with migrants and refugees. The results indicate that realistic and symbolic threat are influenced by news media consumption in Europe and the United States. Attitudes toward immigrants and refugees are positively affected by public network consumption, but commercial network consumption negatively affects them (in Europe). In the United States, Fox News and CNN consumption have differential relations to attitudes. Realistic threat is strongly related to attitudes in the United States, while symbolic threat relates more strongly in Europe. Finally, direct and indirect intergroup contact stimulates positive intergroup attitudes in Europe and the United States.

Keywords: Europe, immigrants, refugees, the United States, threat, intergroup contact, media use, framing

Introduction

Anti-immigrant attitudes resulting in immigration restrictions are not new to the United States. Almost 100 years ago, when Calvin Coolidge was about to become vice president of the United States, he wrote that: “Biological laws tell us that certain divergent people will not mix or blend. The dead weight of alien accretion stifles national progress.” Coolidge’s views, supported by many other prominent scholars and public figures at the time, led to a 1924 law severely restricting immigration through a quota system based on race and ethnicity. This Immigration Act, which kept many Europeans from entering the United States, was not overturned for 40 years (Okrent, 2019).

At about that time, European nationalist politics contributed to the collapse of empires and the formation of new states (Kaya, 2002). But there was no anti-immigrant history similar to that of the United States until the middle of the 20th century because the continent was experiencing a long period of emigration, with most nations not especially concerned about who might enter. That perspective changed when economic migrants doubled the foreign workforce across Europe between 1960 and 1973 from 3 to 6% (Hall, 2000). The need for foreign workers ended with the 1973 oil crisis. Since that time, asylum seekers have constituted the largest group of immigrants to Europe, and governments across the continent have sought to limit entry to those who are genuine asylum seekers and not economic migrants. Culminating in the migrant crisis of 2015, when more than one million refugees entered Europe, European attitudes toward immigrants changed from a multiculturalist view to a perspective that favored severe limits on economic migrants. Diez (2019) argues that this shift in European attitudes represents an identity issue: “At the root of multiculturalism’s rejection is a historic shift. Ever since the attack on the World Trade Center in New York in September 2001, the worldwide conflicts formerly confined to the edges of the old empires have spread into the nations of the West itself. Once-distant conflicts have come

to the heart of Europe; and culture and, most of all, religion have become the battlefields on which fights about identity take place” (Diez, 2019, para. 32).

This study examines the current state of attitudes toward refugees and immigrants 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. We examine multiple factors that might have an impact on those attitudes—the amount and type of media use among citizens in each country, the amount of intergroup contact between refugees and citizens, the perceived realistic and symbolic threats posed by immigrants, and the perceived differences between citizens and refugees in socioeconomic status.

Because most people in the five countries under study lack direct contact with immigrants or refugees, media constitute important sources through which information about these subgroups is accumulated (Bleich, Bloemraad, & de Graauw, 2015; Jacobs, Hooghe, & de Vroome, 2017; Joyce & Harwood, 2014). These mediated messages contribute to the development of individual attitudes toward immigrants and refugees (Jacobs et al., 2017). Problematic in this regard is that the media rarely provide objective representations of reality, but often use particular frames. The process of framing defines the way an issue is represented, identifies causes, makes moral judgments, and shapes proposed solutions; in short, it is far from neutral (O’Neill, Williams, Kurz, Wiersma, & Boykoff, 2015). Migration is a particularly contentious topic, and scholars have found that not all media represent minority groups the same way.

In Europe, public broadcasters are found to portray this group more positively than commercial broadcasters (Jacobs, Meeusen, & d’Haenens, 2016). In the United States, the Public Broadcasting Service is trusted by all but the most “consistently conservative” (Mitchell, Gottfried, Kiley, & Matsa, 2014). However, the audience for the PBS Newshour, a nightly news program,

has held nearly steady at just over one million regular viewers over the past three years (Pew Research Center, 2019), while several commercial channels, including the Fox News cable channel, greatly exceed that number for specific news programs in primetime (Schaal, 2019). Because of the difficulty in determining the degree of bias in any news source, researchers turn to examining the relationship between the consumption of particular news sources and specific attitudes. In one such study, negative attitudes toward illegal immigration indicate that those who watch Fox News are 9% more likely to hold negative attitudes than those who watch CBS News, while those watching PBS news are more likely to favor legalization of such migrants (Facchini, Mayda, & Puglisi, 2017). Most U.S. media are commercial, but with large cleavages between specific networks in their representation of minority groups (e.g., Fox News vs. CNN) (Bartlett, 2015).

The Role of Threat in the Perception of Immigrants and Refugees

Following the integrated threat theory, people experience threat when an outgroup can harm them. Two types of threat are currently distinguished: realistic (which could be economic or crime-related) and symbolic (which could be cultural or religious) threat (Stephan, Ybarra, & Morrison, 2009). Negative stereotypes, first understood as a separate threat, are now believed to be a subset of both types, where characteristics of the outgroup might have a negative (realistic or symbolic) effect on the ingroup. Both realistic and symbolic threats can take place at group and individual levels (Stephan et al., 2009).

Stephan et al. (2009) also note that threats can be real or perceived. Whether groups have actual contact with one another or not, the threat can have real consequences for all those involved. Realistic group threats relate to the competition for power, resources and general welfare (Stephan et al., 2009). As groups compete for these resources, they view the outgroup as a competitor, which

stimulates negative prejudice. This prejudice is more pronounced among individuals in more precarious socio-economic positions, such as people with fewer skills or less education (Fetzer, 2012; Lancee & Pardos-Prado, 2013). Symbolic threat refers to the fear that newcomers will challenge the in-group's religion, values, belief systems, ideology or worldview (Stephan et al., 2009). This threat is seen as real or perceived harm by immigrants or refugees with differing values, norms, and beliefs, and is a major source of prejudice (Ata, Bastian, & Lusher, 2009; Riek, Mania, & Gaertner, 2006; Schlueter & Wagner, 2008).

Testing this theory as it relates to immigration attitudes and policy options using survey methodology has been common (Hercowitz-Amir & Rajjman, 2019; Keleş, Yıldırım, Kurtoğlu, & Sunata, 2016; Murray & Marx, 2013; Schweitzer, Perkoulidis, Krome, Ludlow, & Ryan, 2005). However, some scholars have refined their surveys to provide more nuance to their studies. Von Hermanni and Neumann (2019) adopted a factorial survey approach that allowed the researchers to determine whether respondents discriminate between characteristics of refugees in determining whether their asylum applications were justified. The authors found that partisanship, local immigrant context, and perceptions of both economic and cultural threat were all factors in determining attitudes toward immigration/refugee policies.

In studying Canadian attitudes toward policies governing refugees and immigrants, Gravelle (2017) combined national survey data with local demographic information to address the question of what drives Canadians to have open or restrictionist attitudes toward refugees and immigrants. Gravelle found that Conservative Party supporters and those living in areas where few migrants reside, in addition to those who have a high perception of economic and cultural threat, support the most restrictive policies on immigrants and refugees. On the other hand, respondents

living in areas with high concentrations of migrants are much less likely to favor restrictive policies, mediated by perceptions of realistic and symbolic threat.

Another study used conjoint analysis varying nine attributes of hypothetical immigrants, to make explicit comparisons between preferred characteristics in newcomers (Hainmueller & Hopkins, 2015). Both sociotropic and norms-based explanations were important outcomes. Similar results for Democrats and Republicans in the study revealed a preference for well-educated, highly skilled immigrants who spoke English and had not made prior illegal trips to the United States. The authors found no difference between attitudes of respondents with high school diplomas and university degrees, or between those who support immigration and others who oppose it. However, the study only addressed which types of immigrants rather than how many immigrants should be admitted or the nature of the policies that should guide their admittance. The authors argue that “to the extent that opposition to immigrants is rooted in sociotropic perceptions about their likely contributions, that suggests very different immigration and settlement policies than does an opposition rooted in prejudice against specific countries” (p. 546).

Effects of Intergroup Contact

According to the contact hypothesis, intergroup contact reduces prejudice between members of traditionally opposed ethnic groups (Allport, 1954; Ata et al., 2009; Barlow et al., 2012). This theoretical framework has been widely used to demonstrate that positive contact reduces intergroup anxiety and, as such, decreases prejudice toward outgroup members (Techakesari et al., 2015). Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) conducted a meta-analysis of more than 500 studies and concluded that intergroup contact typically reduces prejudice between different groups. We therefore expect to find a similar pattern in which more direct contact with immigrants will be

associated with reduced feelings of realistic and symbolic threat coming from immigrants/refugees – and, as a consequence, more positive overall feelings toward immigrants/refugees.

As it applies to immigrants or refugees, several recent studies reveal differing results depending on the situation and the characteristics of newcomers. Swedish research that tested the contact hypothesis found that when the proportion of foreign-born increased in the population, attitudes toward refugees became more positive (Velásquez, 2016). The author notes, however, that higher levels of unemployment correlate with less tolerant attitudes toward refugees. A study among undergraduate students in the United States found differences in attitudes toward unauthorized immigrants versus those who were living legally within the country. Their attitudes toward unauthorized individuals were more prejudicial and reflected greater perceived realistic threats and greater intergroup anxiety (Murray & Marx, 2012). Still another study examined the attitudes toward immigrants in the United States and Germany based on the respondents' political views (Homola & Tavits, 2018). For those who held more left-oriented political positions, the authors found that positive contact with immigrants decreased the amount of perceived immigration threat. But for the voters on the right, contact with immigrants either had no effect on their attitudes or slightly increased their immigration threat perceptions. The authors argued that the differing attitudes were based on partisan motivated reasoning, with pre-existing attitudes driving the direction and magnitude of changes in perceived threat from immigrants.

It also appears that when large numbers of refugees arrive in a short period of time, their presence may have a negative effect on the local population. In Greece, Hangartner, Dinas, Marbach, Matakos, and Xefteris (2018) found that on islands receiving more refugees, Greek respondents were “more likely to oppose hosting additional asylum seekers and to support the ban from school for asylum seekers' children and less likely to donate to UNHCR and to sign a petition

that lobbies the government to provide better housing for refugees” (p. 444). They also concluded that the refugee crisis, as experienced by natives on the islands, had a long-term effect on the hostility expressed by the local population.

Interestingly, the “natural experiment” in the Greek islanders’ attitudes toward refugees did not meet the usual requirements for the contact hypothesis—e.g., the refugees did not stay very long before being transported off the island, and the local population did not ordinarily have much opportunity for sustained interaction with any particular refugees. Yet, the lives of the islanders were disrupted by the presence of the group and their experiences negatively impacted their policy preferences for the conditions under which they would be open to accepting future immigrants.

Media Representation of Newcomers

The public learns about events related to migration and related policies primarily from the media. And, depending on the representation of refugees or immigrants in the media, audiences draw on the media to form attitudes and opinions about these groups (Bleich, Bloemraad, & de Graauw, 2015; Jacobs, Hooghe, & de Vroome, 2017; Joyce & Harwood, 2014).

During the 2016 U.S. presidential election campaign, the press covered the immigration issue extensively. In their study of 12 news sources across the United States, Ogan, Pennington, Venger, and Metz (2018) found a total of 551 news and opinion stories on the immigration topic published between the start of the Republican National Convention and Election Day, of which 143 featured Donald Trump as the main actor. Stories that featured Trump as the main actor framed immigrants as a threat to the country and described the need to build walls or other barriers. The main policy frames found in the study included emphases on security and safety of the American people, crime and justice, and cultural identity, all of which could be invoked in discussions of immigration threats.

During the year of the “refugee crisis” in Europe, Greussing and Boomgaarden (2017) studied the frames used for refugees in six quality and tabloid media. Like the U.S. study, most frames focused on security threats and economization, while humanitarian frames related to victimization were less frequent. Overall, the authors found a predominant focus on stereotyped descriptions of refugees in both tabloid and quality media. The authors concluded that “while they support the general finding in the international literature that victim and threat frames are relevant in the media coverage of immigration issues, and mostly follow larger European trends in the coverage of the crisis of 2015, our comparative design also reveals certain Scandinavian peculiarities vis-à-vis other European countries, which merits further investigation and suggests the continuing importance of cultural, political, and media systems in shaping immigration discourse in the mass media.” (p. 346). For example, a 2018 study found that newspapers in Sweden, Norway and Denmark wrote less often about negative outcomes resulting from the arrival of refugees in their countries than news outlets in other Northern European countries (Gripsrud, Hovden, & Mjelde, 2017). This finding is consistent with the degree of openness to refugees in Scandinavian countries, especially in Sweden.

A comprehensive literature review of 78 studies of media discourse related to immigration in European countries by Eberl et al. (2018) concurs with the studies cited above. Migrants were most often framed unfavorably as economic, cultural or criminal threats. The authors found that only 20 studies focus on more than one country, only nine examine more than two countries, and most analyses are merely descriptive and do not provide an explanation for differences between countries. While studies conducted in Western European countries dominate the field, none of them included the United States for comparisons. Additionally, almost all studies focus on coverage and potential effects of mainstream media. Discourse in the studies was often negative

and conflict-based, while exposure to these messages leads to negative attitudes toward immigrants or stereotypic assessments of migrants by media consumers. Given these insights, we expect that more exposure to news about immigrants/refugees will be associated with more feelings of realistic and symbolic threat coming from immigrants/refugees – and, as a consequence, more negative overall feelings toward immigrants/refugees.

Effects of Media Coverage on Intergroup Attitudes

Most studies that have examined potential effects of media coverage of refugees and immigrants on public attitudes have been conducted in Europe. Boomgaarden and Vliegenthart (2009), for example, examined the relationship between news content and attitudes toward immigrants between 1993 and 2005. They showed that both the frequency and tone of the news stories influenced the dynamics in anti-immigrant attitudes, but that the strength of the relationship was dependent on the contextual variation in the immigration levels and the number of asylum seekers.

In their literature review of media effects on attitudes toward migration in the European Union, Meltzer et al. (2017) conclude that media coverage is “essential in the judgment formation of EU citizens” regarding EU mobility and migration (p. 14). Particularly when the media present threatening views of immigrants (both symbolically and realistically), that coverage can have a significant impact on media users. A recent experiment that examined the effect of media coverage of refugees who drowned in the Mediterranean Sea found that when the refugees were portrayed as victims rather than threats, the respondents were much less likely to display xenophobic attitudes toward them (De Poli, Jakobsson, & Schüller, 2017).

Crime-related frames are often used to portray immigrants and refugees negatively (Callanan, 2012). In the United States, Chiricos, Padgett, & Gertz (2000) found that local and national news consumption significantly impact viewers’ fear of crime, and that the effect of local

news is stronger than that of national news. This latter finding is explained by the resonance hypothesis, which states that local news is considered more important because it resonates more directly with the viewers' personal conditions of existence. Jacobs et al. (2017) found that television consumption is positively related to fear of crime in Flanders, Belgium, which is in turn associated with anti-immigrant sentiment. However, a preference for public television decreases anti-immigrant sentiments.

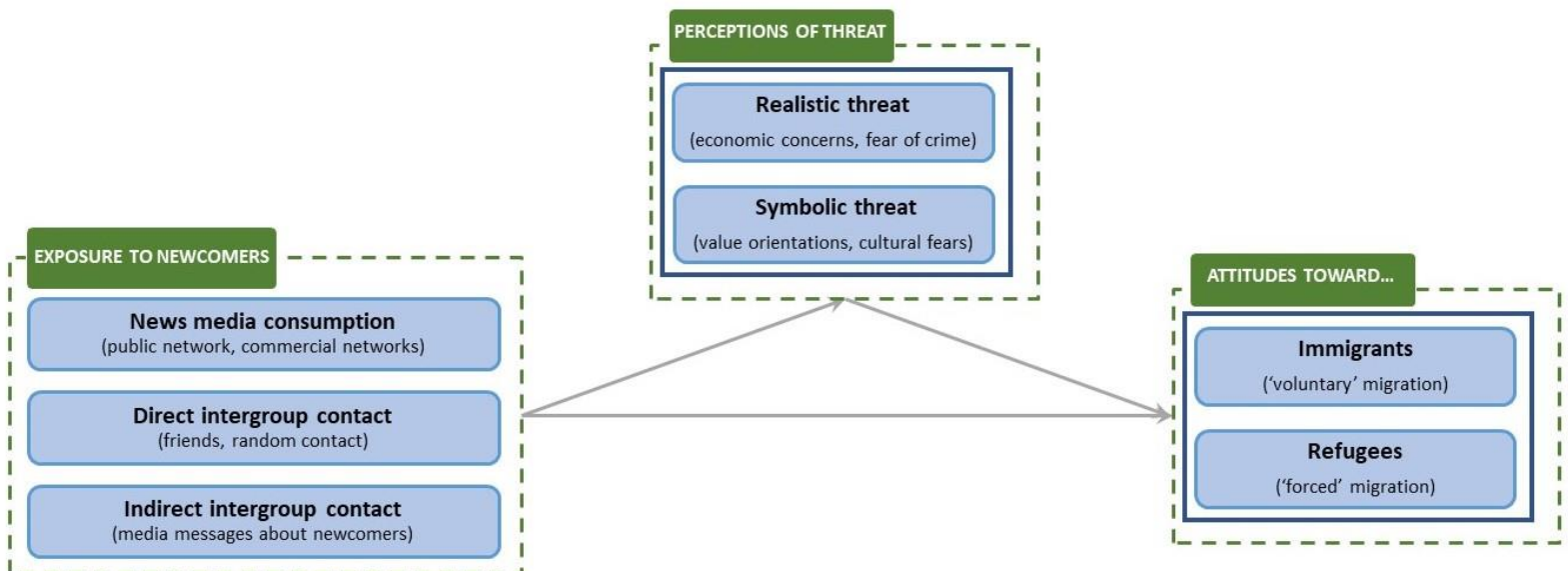
With this point, we touch upon a final but very important piece of the puzzle: media effects are also dependent on which type of media is consumed. Jacobs et al. (2016) found that news media differ in their representational preferences: frames used by public broadcasters are more positive than those used by commercial broadcasters. Subsequent studies in several European countries found that these representational differences are reflected in the attitudes of viewers, as commercial media consumption negatively relates to attitudes toward newcomers, while public broadcasting consumption positively relates to them (De Coninck, Matthijs, Debrael, De Cock, & d'Haenens, 2019). We therefore expect that compared with exposure to public broadcasting news, exposure to commercial news will be associated with more feelings of realistic and symbolic threat coming from immigrants/refugees – and, as a consequence, more negative overall feelings toward immigrants/refugees.

The present study adds to the literature by examining how media exposure and direct and indirect contact with immigrants might be associated with perceptions of realistic and symbolic threat, which, in turn, should be associated with public attitudes toward immigrants and refugees. Based on the literature, we developed several hypotheses which are briefly summarized below:

1. More exposure to news about immigrants/refugees will be associated with greater feelings of realistic and symbolic threat coming from immigrants/refugees – and, as a consequence, greater negative overall feelings toward immigrants/refugees.
2. Compared with exposure to public broadcasting news, exposure to commercial news will be associated with greater feelings of realistic and symbolic threat coming from immigrants/refugees – and, as a consequence, greater negative overall feelings toward immigrants/refugees.
3. More direct contact with immigrants will be associated with less feelings of realistic and symbolic threat coming from immigrants/refugees – and, as a consequence, greater positive overall feelings toward immigrants/refugees.

Figure 1

Theoretical model



We argue that differences between European and U.S. respondents should be minimal due to the general applicability of group threat and contact theory. The main differences between the U.S. and Europe are expected to be found in the media effects, due to the highly negative coverage of immigrants by Fox News, while CNN immigration coverage seems to be more in line with the commercial broadcasters in Europe.

Data and Methodology

The dataset is a combination of data from two online surveys: one distributed among adults in Belgium, Sweden, France, and the Netherlands in September and October of 2017, and another among adults in the United States in October of 2018. In total, our dataset consists of 7,031 respondents: 6,000 from Europe (1,500 per country), and 1,031 from the United States. The U.S. survey was a deliberate replication of the European one, with some slight differences arising here and there for practical/theoretical reasons. The choice was made to carry out online questionnaires because of their (cost) efficiency.

In Europe, country selection was based on convenience: the survey agency we selected has a strong presence in the four European countries under study, which meant we could limit the cost of the study and still receive a large, high-quality dataset. The survey agency drew a nonrandom heterogeneous purposive sample out of its available panels, with heterogeneity in terms of age and gender. The response rate was about 35% and responses were weighted by gender and age to ensure that the data is representative for these characteristics within each country.¹ The survey itself was distributed via the polling agency's own survey tool, and in the official language of the country or region (either Dutch, French, or Swedish) where respondents resided. Translations of

¹ For more information on the European dataset, see De Coninck, d'Haenens, and Joris (2019).

the survey were carried out by professional translators, ensuring that the terminology used in the questions is considered ‘everyday language’ by the respondents.

In the U.S., respondents were recruited by a professional survey organization providing access to representative online panels. The response rate was 80%. While the sample compares 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 Pew in 2018 reveals only small differences in the basic demographic characteristics of the two samples. We are therefore confident that the sample is representative of the overall U.S. population.

Measures

Attitudes Toward Immigrants and Refugees

To measure public opinion on immigrants and refugees in Western Europe, we adapted a scale previously used in rotating modules of the European Social Survey. The original scale consists of six items asking which groups of immigrants should be allowed to come and live in the country (1 = allow none, 4 = allow many): ‘Immigrants of the same race or ethnicity as most of [country’s] population’; ‘Immigrants of a different race or ethnicity as most of [country’s] population’; ‘Immigrants of the richer countries in Europe’; ‘Immigrants of the poorer countries in Europe’; ‘Immigrants of the richer countries outside Europe’; and ‘Immigrants of the poorer countries outside Europe’ (European Social Survey, 2014). We presented the scale in its original form and added an extra item concerning immigrants from Muslim countries, since most newcomers entering Europe during the ‘refugee crisis’ originate from predominantly Muslim countries such as Syria, Iraq, or Afghanistan (Pew Research Center, 2017). To measure attitudes toward refugees,

we presented the same scale but replaced the word ‘immigrant’ with ‘refugee’. To investigate whether there are underlying concepts in these blocks of items, principal components analyses were carried out which revealed that all items loaded on the same concept for both immigrant and refugee attitudes (see Appendix A). In the U.S. survey, feeling thermometers are used: sliders ranging from 0 to 100 on which respondents must indicate how ‘warm’ or ‘cold’ they feel toward immigrants and refugees, respectively. In both surveys, we presented respondents with definitions of immigrants and refugees to ensure that everyone had a uniform understanding of each group when completing the survey. The items on attitudes toward immigrants and refugees were not on successive pages: several questions were inserted between them in order to avoid straight-lining² or speeding. To combine these measures, we first calculated the mean score of the items in the European survey, and then classified the mean European scores and the thermometer scores from the U.S. survey into five categories (1 = highly negative, 5 = highly positive).

Realistic and Symbolic Threat

Realistic threat was measured via the following four items: 1) ‘Would you say that refugees who come to live here generally take jobs away from workers in [country], or generally help to create new jobs?’ (Europe), ‘Refugees who come to live here take jobs away from workers in the U.S.’ (U.S.); 2) ‘Would you say it is generally bad or good for [country]’s economy that refugees from other countries come to live here?’ (Europe), ‘Immigrants are a burden on our economy because

² Straight-lining describes the tendency of respondents to select the same answer option for a set of items, usually in blocks of items, independent of the content of the item. The appellation ‘straight-lining’ originates from the appearance of this answering behavior: a straight line as the viewer reads down a set of items (Cole, McCormick, & Gonyea 2012).

they take our jobs and social benefits' (U.S.) 3) 'Crime in [country] increased due to immigrants' (Europe), 'Immigrants in our country are more to blame for crime than other groups' (U.S.) and 4) 'Refugees have contributed to a rise in crime rates across [country]' (Europe and U.S.). European items were answered on an 11-point scale, and the U.S. items on a five-point scale, with the high end of the scale indicating high threat perception in both surveys. The European items were recoded to correspond to the 5-point scale used in the United States. The mean of these items was calculated to obtain a single indicator. To measure symbolic threat, we used the following item in Europe and the United States: 'Would you say that [country]'s cultural life is generally undermined or enriched by refugees coming to live here from other countries?' Again, answer options for this item ranged from 0 to 10 in the European survey, which was recoded to the 0 (low threat perception) to 5 (high threat perception) scale from the United States.

Intergroup Contact

In the European survey, direct intergroup contact was measured by asking whether respondents have any interethnic friendships (1 = no, 2 = some, 3 = many), and how often they have interethnic random contact in public (six items, ranging from 1 = never to 6 = every day). In the U.S., interethnic friendships were measured by asking which percentage of the respondents' friends are immigrants, while random contact was measured the same way as in Europe. The indicator on interethnic friendships was recoded into a dummy variable [1 = respondent has some or many friends with a migration background (Europe) or 1% or more of their friends are immigrants (U.S.)]. In both surveys, mass mediated (or indirect) intergroup contact was measured through the following question: 'How often did you come across news on refugees in the past year?', with answer categories ranging from 1 = never to 6 = very often.

News Media Consumption

News media consumption was measured by asking about the number of days in the past week that respondents consumed a certain type of television news, either on public or on commercial broadcasters. Answer options range from 0 = never to 7 = every day. While European countries usually only have a limited number of commercial channels that offer news coverage, the U.S. context is different. There are several commercial networks, many of whom have their own news coverage. Because of the different frames on migration that some of these networks use (Bartlett, 2015; Ogan et al. 2018; Pew Research Center, 2019), the measure of commercial news consumption in the United States is split into three categories: 1) network television news (ABC, CBS, NBC), Fox News, and CNN.

Demographics

Respondents were asked to indicate gender (1 = male, 2 = female), birth year, and educational attainment (1 = no or primary education/grade 1-8, 2 = secondary education/high school, 3 = tertiary education/college or university). A descriptive overview of the samples can be found in Table 1. F-scores indicate statistically significant differences between countries as determined by one-way ANOVA for all indicators, except for gender.

Table 1

Socio-demographic overview of sample by country

	Belgium	France	Netherlands	Sweden	U.S.
Age (F = 47.23***)	42.94 (12.54)	43.55 (13.06)	45.59 (13.88)	41.40 (13.20)	41.45 (15.26)
Gender (F = 1.49)	1.50 (0.50)	1.51 (0.50)	1.51 (0.50)	1.50 (0.50)	1.52 (0.50)
Educational attainment (F = 82.27***)	2.49 (0.58)	2.41 (0.55)	2.34 (0.56)	2.30 (0.61)	2.69 (0.47)
Attitudes toward...					

Immigrants (F = 123.18***)	2.85 (1.01)	2.59 (1.07)	2.75 (0.91)	3.12 (1.09)	3.43 (1.28)
Refugees (F = 72.86***)	2.84 (1.12)	2.62 (1.15)	2.78 (1.04)	3.11 (1.18)	3.29 (1.32)
Threat					
Realistic threat (F = 120.61***)	3.46 (0.81)	3.50 (0.84)	3.30 (0.77)	3.36 (0.97)	2.76 (1.19)
Symbolic threat (F = 53.22***)	3.19 (1.13)	3.41 (1.22)	3.11 (1.09)	2.91 (1.27)	2.85 (1.28)
Intergroup contact					
Migrant friends (F = 23.32***)	0.63 (0.48)	0.72 (0.45)	0.62 (0.49)	0.76 (0.43)	0.68 (0.47)
Random interethnic contact (F = 56.92***)	4.97 (1.92)	5.36 (1.87)	4.47 (1.95)	4.42 (2.14)	5.05 (2.00)
Refugee news frequency (F = 105.51***)	3.73 (0.99)	3.81 (0.99)	3.29 (0.94)	3.37 (0.97)	3.88 (1.06)
News media consumption					
Public network (F = 212.09***)	4.28 (2.69)	2.90 (2.46)	4.94 (2.69)	4.27 (2.60)	2.71 (2.26)
Commercial network (F = 22.71***) ^a	3.78 (2.76)	3.64 (2.72)	4.42 (2.64)	4.17 (2.49)	-
ABC, CBS, NBC	-	-	-	-	4.27 (2.59)
Fox	-	-	-	-	3.27 (2.60)
CNN	-	-	-	-	3.04 (2.45)

Note: Mean scores, standard deviation between brackets. *: $p < 0.05$; **: $p < 0.01$; ***: $p < 0.001$.

^a F-score for commercial network consumption cannot be calculated for all countries because this measure is different in the U.S. The presented F-score applies to the European countries.

Analytic Strategy

We test the hypotheses by running stepwise linear regressions. In a first step, we examine how intergroup contact and news media consumption relate to realistic and symbolic threat in Europe and the United States. To investigate, we will run a three-step linear regression for Europe and the United States separately. Splitting the data by these two regions (Europe and the U.S.) also allows us to include the detailed composition of commercial media in the United States, which would be impossible if all countries were combined. In the analysis of the European countries, we control

for country fixed effects. Following this, we move on to the analysis of general feelings or attitudes toward immigrants and refugees. Here, we perform two stepwise linear regressions: one with attitudes toward immigrants as the outcome variable, and another with attitudes toward refugees as the outcome. Again, these analyses are split between Europe and the U.S., and country fixed effects are controlled for in the European analysis. Although multiple countries in one dataset invites multilevel modeling, intra-class correlation coefficients (see Appendix B) indicate that there is insufficient variance at the country level to warrant this procedure (Hox, Moerbeek, & van de Schoot, 2017).

Results

The results in Table 2 indicate that news media consumption plays a large role in the development of threat in Europe and the United States. In Europe, watching public television news decreases feelings of realistic and symbolic threat, while watching news on commercial broadcasters increases them. In the United States, public television consumption is only marginally related to threat perceptions—but the association found is positive. This is somewhat surprising, as the literature indicates that public broadcasters use more positive frames when discussing immigration, although this is mostly based on content analyses in Europe. As for commercial news consumption in the United States, the differential framing on these networks as indicated by Bartlett (2015) is reflected in people’s threat perceptions: while watching Fox News correlates with greater perceptions of both realistic and symbolic threat, watching CNN is associated with fewer such perceptions. These associations persist even after controlling for socio-demographics and intergroup contact in the United States.

Having immigrant friends decreases perceived realistic and symbolic threat in Europe, and realistic threat in the United States. Random intergroup contact seems to be the more influential of

the contact types, as it negatively relates to both threat types in Europe and the United States, which is in line with the contact hypothesis (Allport, 1954). Indirect contact with immigrants and refugees via news is positively related to perceptions of threat in Europe, which is in line with Jacobs et al. (2017) who found that television consumption increases feelings of anti-immigrant sentiment. This latter finding provides mixed evidence for the contact hypothesis. Direct intergroup contact is influential on both sides of the Atlantic, but mass-mediated contact is only relevant in Europe. This implies that the negative framing of media messages about newcomers leaves a stronger impression on Europeans' threat perceptions than the indirect 'contact' they are having with refugees, which is expected to decrease threat.

A final note is on the role of the socio-demographics. We find that age and educational attainment are related to threat in Europe, with younger and more educated people experiencing less realistic and symbolic threat than older and less educated people, in line with the literature (De Coninck et al., 2019). In the United States, gender is more relevant, while educational attainment negatively affects symbolic threat only.

Table 2

Hierarchical linear regressions with realistic threat and symbolic threat as outcome variables and standardized beta's of predictors

	Europe						United States					
	Realistic threat			Symbolic threat			Realistic threat			Symbolic threat		
	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3
Age	.10***	.11***	.09***	.03*	.06***	.03*	ns	ns	ns	ns	ns	ns
Female	ns	ns	ns	-.05***	-.06***	-.06***	-.10**	-.06 ⁺	-.05 ⁺	-.16***	-.11***	-.11**
Moderately educated	-.10**	-.08**	-.08*	-.10**	-.08**	-.07*	ns	ns	ns	-.49 ⁺	-.41 ⁺	-.40 ⁺
Highly educated	-.24***	-.21***	-.19***	-.25***	-.21***	-.18***	ns	ns	ns	-.63*	-.53*	-.48*
France	ns	ns	ns	.07***	.04***	.05**	-	-	-	-	-	-
Netherlands	-.10***	-.10***	-.08***	-.06***	-.05**	-.04**	-	-	-	-	-	-
Sweden	-.07***	-.07**	-.05**	-.15***	-.15***	-.13***	-	-	-	-	-	-
Public broadcaster		-.12***	-.13***		-.14***	-.14***		.07 ⁺	.07 ⁺		.10*	.10*
Commercial broadcaster		.12***	.11***		.13***	.11***		-	-		-	-
ABC, CBS, NBC		-	-		-	-		ns	ns		ns	ns
Fox News		-	-		-	-		.37***	.36***		.36***	.35***
CNN		-	-		-	-		-.12**	-.15***		-.09*	-.10*
Direct contact - friends			-.16***			-.15***			-.07*			ns
Direct contact - random			-.05***			-.09***			-.18***			-.17***
Indirect contact - news			.13***			.10***			ns			ns
Adjusted R ²	.05	.07	.11	.06	.08	.12	.03	.16	.19	.05	.17	.20

Note. Reference categories are male, lowly educated, and Belgium (the latter for the analyses of European data only).

ns: not significant; +: $p < 0.10$; *: $p < 0.05$; **: $p < 0.01$; ***: $p < 0.001$.

The results in Table 3 and Table 4 indicate that attitudes toward immigrants and refugees are significantly associated with different types of news media consumption. Watching public television, for example, is associated with more positive feelings toward immigrants in Europe and the United States. In Europe, watching commercial news is associated with more negative feelings toward immigrants and refugees. Again, media effects related to watching commercial network news in the United States are mixed: exposure to Fox News correlates with more negative feelings toward immigrants and refugees in step 2, and this significant effect disappears after controlling for perceptions of threat. Watching CNN, on the other hand, is associated with more positive feelings toward immigrants and refugees, even after controlling for threat perceptions. This indicates that watching CNN affects attitudes in more ways than via threat. These results are in line with previous literature concerning differential media effects on attitudes toward immigrants, as Jacobs et al. (2016) found that the differential migration framing by public and commercial television is reflected in differences in attitudes in Flanders, Belgium, while Bartlett (2015) showed that CNN and Fox News frame migration very differently from one another.

Perceptions of threat are strong predictors of negative attitudes toward immigrants and especially refugees, in line with group threat theory which suggests that these feelings, whether they are ‘realistic’ or ‘symbolic’, stimulate negative prejudice toward newcomers (Stephan et al., 2009). Realistic threat is found to carry more weight in the United States than in Europe, while symbolic threat is more important in predicting negative attitudes of Europeans. In the literature we mostly find evidence of the large role of symbolic threat, but most of these studies were carried out in Europe (Ata et al., 2009; Riek et al., 2006; Schlueter & Wagner, 2008).

Direct intergroup contact is associated with more positive attitudes, especially in Europe – generally confirming our hypothesis. Although random intergroup contact seems somewhat more

influential than having interethnic friends, both are associated with more positive attitudes toward immigrants and refugees. In the United States, the picture is somewhat different. Random intergroup contact is associated more strongly with positive attitudes toward immigrants than refugees – perhaps because U.S. respondents have limited direct contact with refugees, while contact with immigrants is more common. Mass-mediated or indirect intergroup contact is associated with more positive attitudes, contrary to what we hypothesized, but providing further support for Allport’s contact hypothesis.

Table 3

Stepwise linear regressions with attitudes toward immigrants as outcome variable and standardized beta's of predictors

	Europe				United States			
	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 4	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 4
Age	-.07***	-.09***	-.05***	-.05***	-.15***	-.12***	-.11***	-.13***
Female	ns	.03*	ns	ns	ns	ns	-.05 ⁺	-.05 ⁺
Moderately educated	.15***	.13***	.09**	.06*	ns	ns	ns	ns
Highly educated	.30***	.27***	.15***	.11***	ns	ns	ns	ns
France	-.09***	-.07***	-.06***	-.05**	-	-	-	-
Netherlands	ns	ns	-.05***	-.03*	-	-	-	-
Sweden	.14***	.14***	.08***	.06***	-	-	-	-
Public network		.12***	.05***	.04**		.08 ⁺	.12**	.11**
Commercial network		-.10***	-.04**	-.04***		-	-	-
ABC, CBS, NBC		-	-	-		.07 ⁺	.07 ⁺	ns
Fox		-	-	-		-.14***	ns	ns
CNN		-	-	-		.17***	.11**	.10**
Realistic threat			-.22***	-.22***			-.44***	-.44***
Symbolic threat			-.32***	-.30***			-.09 ⁺	ns
Direct contact - friends				.04***				.05 ⁺
Direct contact - random				.09***				.08**
Indirect contact - news				.07***				.12***
Adjusted R ²	.08	.09	.31	.33	.04	.09	.31	.33

Note. Reference categories are male, lowly educated, and Belgium (the latter for the analyses on European data only).

ns: not significant; +: $p < 0.10$; *: $p < 0.05$; **: $p < 0.01$; ***: $p < 0.001$.

Table 4

Stepwise linear regressions with attitudes toward refugees as outcome variable and standardized beta's of predictors

	Europe				United States			
	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 4	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 4
Age	-.07***	-.09***	-.05***	-.05***	-.15***	-.10**	-.09**	-.10**
Female	.03*	.04**	ns	.02*	ns	ns	ns	ns
Moderately educated	.14***	.13***	.08**	.05 ⁺	ns	ns	ns	ns
Highly educated	.30***	.27***	.15***	.10***	ns	ns	ns	ns
France	-.07***	-.04**	-.03*	ns	-	-	-	-
Netherlands	ns	ns	-.04**	ns	-	-	-	-
Sweden	.13***	.13***	.07***	.05***	-	-	-	-
Public network		.13***	.06***	.04**		.16***	.20***	.19***
Commercial network		-.12***	-.05***	-.06***		-	-	-
ABC, CBS, NBC		-	-	-		ns	ns	ns
Fox		-	-	-		-.15***	ns	ns
CNN		-	-	-		.18***	.12**	.11**
Realistic threat			-.22***	-.23***			-.40***	-.41***
Symbolic threat			-.35***	-.33***			-.15**	-.13**
Direct contact - friends				.03**				.06 ⁺
Direct contact - random				.09***				ns
Indirect contact - news				.09***				.09**
Adjusted R ²	.07	.09	.34	.36	.02	.09	.32	.33

Note. Reference categories are male, lowly educated, and Belgium (the latter for the analyses on European data only).

ns: not significant; +: $p < 0.10$; *: $p < 0.05$; **: $p < 0.01$; ***: $p < 0.001$.

Discussion

The countries in our study are diverse in several ways, but they all have one thing in common: they have received many refugees; in Europe mainly from Syria and other countries of the Middle East, and in the United States primarily from Latin America. Each of the countries under study (Belgium, France, Netherlands, Sweden, and the United States) has had to cope with a relatively large number of refugees tapping their resources and forcing discussions and policy changes to accommodate the groups of people that do not speak their language and do not share many of their cultural practices. Each country's residents have their own set of attitudes regarding the newcomers. In our study, which is the first to systematically compare Europe and the United States in this regard, we examine multiple factors that might have an impact on those attitudes—the amount and type of media use among citizens in each country, the amount of intergroup contact between refugees and citizens, the perceived realistic and symbolic threats posed by immigrants, and the perceived differences between citizens and refugees in socioeconomic status.

The results show that media effects differ between Europe and the United States. Public networks generally frame immigrants and refugees more positively than commercial networks, but we find that watching PBS is associated with greater perceptions of threat, while watching the European public networks is associated with lower threat perceptions. Does this mean that United States and European public networks frame newcomers differently? Follow-up studies using content analyses could investigate the specific framing on these different public networks. Furthermore, watching Fox News and/or CNN – two commercial networks – is associated with threat: watching Fox News is associated with greater perceptions of threat, while watching CNN is associated with lower threat perceptions. 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). The same distinction is found in the analysis of general attitudes toward immigrants and refugees, although the negative impact of Fox News on intergroup attitudes is likely moderated by the presence of threat in the model. For media scholars, this means that reflecting on media effects in the United States or Europe requires different frames of reference. While there are several European studies who effectively compare the effects of public and commercial media on attitudes (De Coninck et al., 2019; Jacobs et al., 2016), this picture is far more complicated in the United States due to the limited audience of PBS (Schaal, 2019).

When we reflect on the role of threat on attitude formation, we find that symbolic threat is more important in Europe, and realistic threat is more important 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 newcomers are more present or sensationalized in commercial media (Jacobs et al. 2016). This might explain why realistic threat—which consists of economic and crime concerns—is more important in the United States, where the impact of PBS is rather limited due to its limited audience (Pew Research Center, 2019). The emphasis on symbolic threat in Europe may be related to discussions on identity, integration, and religion, notably the media portrayal of Muslims and Islam in a negative light and as a threat to Western civilizations, which are currently dominating the political debate and are feeding the populist narrative. This mostly began following the attacks on the World Trade Center in September 2001 but exacerbated in the wake of the 2015 refugee crisis, during and after which several countries had/are having intense debates on how to deal with the settlement and integration of these newcomers in Europe. Measures to restrict the arrival of or to deport newcomers have called into question elements of national identity, European culture, and value orientations in European societies (Diez, 2019). This

may explain why symbolic threat—which consists of concerns related to the different value orientations of newcomers (Ata et al, 2009)—is more important in Europe than in the United States.

Random intergroup contact is associated with more positive intergroup attitudes and is also associated with lower perceptions of threat, and it also appears to outweigh the importance of having immigrant friends. Indirect intergroup contact—watching news about refugees—also stimulates positive attitudes. This is in line with the contact hypothesis but is somewhat contrary to our hypothesis as previous literature also illustrated that watching television news, especially on commercial networks, increases feelings of threat (Jacobs et al., 2017). With this study, we contribute to the European and American literature on media effects, threat, and intergroup contact. Comparisons between the United States and Europe are rare, mostly due to data limitations or measurement issues, but with our study we contribute to a deeper theoretical and empirical understanding of intergroup relations, the effect of media on these relations, and what obstacles and are associated with comparing Europe and the United States in this regard (e.g., the media context).

In conclusion, we expected respondents who are more exposed to news about immigrants and refugees to have greater perceptions of realistic and symbolic threat, and therefore more negative overall feelings toward immigrants and refugees. Our results show that news exposure is related to greater perceptions of threat, but on the other hand, it is also positively associated with attitudes toward newcomers. This may point to a strong indirect effect of news exposure, while simultaneously also showing that indirect intergroup contact can be framed within the contact hypothesis. Furthermore, we found that commercial news exposure is associated with greater perceptions of threat and with overall more negative feelings toward immigrants and refugees. In

the United States, the picture is more complicated due to the large commercial network presence and increased differentiation by political orientation and patterns of media use, particularly since the 2016 presidential elections. Here, Fox News consumption is associated with greater threat perceptions and more negative attitudes toward immigrants and refugees, while exposure to CNN is correlated with less threat perceptions and more positive attitudes. Finally, the contact hypothesis is relevant in this study as well, as intergroup contact—particularly random intergroup contact—is associated with less threat perceptions, and more positive overall feelings toward immigrants and refugees.

Disclosure of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Items measuring attitudes toward immigrants/refugees

To what extent do you think immigrants/refugees mentioned below should be allowed to come and live here?

1. Immigrants/Refugees of the same race or ethnicity as most of [country]'s population.
2. Immigrants/Refugees of a different race or ethnicity than most of [country]'s population.
3. Immigrants/Refugees of the richer countries in Europe.
4. Immigrants/Refugees of the poorer countries in Europe.
5. Immigrants/Refugees of the richer countries outside Europe.
6. Immigrants/Refugees of the poorer countries outside Europe.
7. Immigrants/Refugees coming from Muslim countries who wish to work in [country].

Table A1. Internal consistency and standardized factor loadings of items on attitudes toward immigrants/refugees

Items	Immigrants ($\alpha = .94$)	Refugees ($\alpha = .96$)
1.	.79	.84
2.	.90	.92
3.	.81	.87
4.	.89	.93
5.	.87	.90
6.	.89	.92
7.	.85	.88

Note. Answer options range from 0 = allow none to 4 = allow many.

Appendix B

Table A2. Intra-class correlation coefficient (ICC) for the dependent variables

Items	ICC
Realistic threat	.09
Symbolic threat	.05
Attitudes toward immigrants	.10
Attitudes toward refugees	.04

Appendix C

Table A3

Correlations for Western European countries

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.
1. Attitude on immigrants	1								
2. Attitude on refugees	.79**	1							
3. Contact (friends)	.19**	.19**	1						
4. Contact (random)	.22**	.23**	.31**	1					
5. Indirect contact (news)	.09**	.10**	.09**	.25**	1				
6. Realistic threat	-.46**	-.49**	-.17**	-.10**	.11**	1			
7. Symbolic threat	-.51**	-.54**	-.18**	-.17**	.03*	.70**	1		
8. Public network	.09**	.09**	Ns	.05**	.18**	-.07**	-.11**	1	
9. Commercial network	-.10**	-.11**	ns	-.04**	.13**	.12**	.11**	.26**	1

Note. *: $p < 0.05$; **: $p < 0.01$; ***: $p < 0.001$.

Table A4

Correlations for the United States

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.
1. Attitude on immigrants	1										
2. Attitude on refugees	.71**	1									
3. Contact (friends)	.16**	.15**	1								
4. Contact (random)	.17**	.10**	.08*	1							
5. Indirect contact (news)	.17**	.14**	.14**	.14**	1						
6. Realistic threat	-.45**	-.45**	Ns	-.24**	Ns	1					
7. Symbolic threat	-.36**	.37**	Ns	-.23**	Ns	.79**	1				
8. Public network	.16**	.21**	.21**	-.11**	.16**	.16**	.19**	1			
9. ABC/NBC/CBS	.14**	.13**	.12**	Ns	.24**	.12**	.10**	.44**	1		
10. Fox	Ns	Ns	.15**	-.10**	.22**	.36**	.37**	.42**	.38**	1	
11. CNN	.21**	.23**	.15**	-.13**	.23**	.08*	.11**	.57**	.51**	.43**	1

Note. *: $p < 0.05$; **: $p < 0.01$; ***: $p < 0.001$.