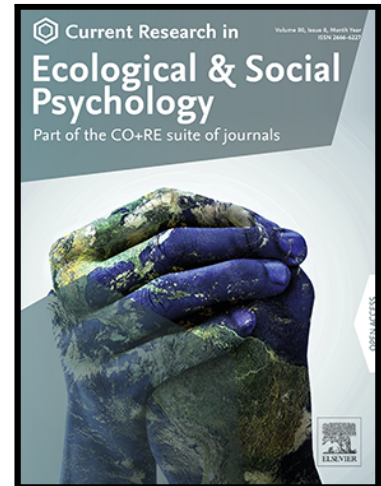


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#WeDontWantRefugees: Mass-mediated contact, dehumanization, and support for Afghan refugee rights in Turkey

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Highlights:

- We tested mass-mediated contact in the context of Afghan refugees in Turkey.
- In Study 1 positive and negative mass-mediated contact predicted attitudes and support.
- In experimental Study 2 positive mass-mediated contact improved positive attitudes.
- In Study 2 negative mass-mediated contact improved attitudes and support indirectly.
- These associations were mediated by outgroup dehumanization.

**#WeDontWantRefugees: Mass-mediated contact, dehumanization, and support for
Afghan refugee rights in Turkey**

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Abstract

In two studies, we investigated how positive and negative mass-mediated contact shape attitudes towards refugees and support for their rights through dehumanization. Study 1 (correlational, $N = 193$, community sample) demonstrated both positive and negative mass-mediated contact to predict attitudes towards Afghan refugees, as well as support for their rights, through lower and higher levels of dehumanization, respectively. Study 2

(experimental, $N = 214$, student sample) showed that positive mass-mediated contact directly improved attitudes towards refugees, whereas negative (but not positive) mass-mediated contact increased the dehumanization (*less human* view) of refugees, which was in turn related to reduced support for their rights. Findings highlight the critical role of mass-mediated contact in the formation of pro-refugee attitudes in an increasingly hostile migration context.

Keywords: Mass-mediated contact; contact valence; dehumanization; support for rights; refugees.

#WeDontWantRefugees: Mass-mediated contact, dehumanization, and support for Afghan refugee rights in Turkey

1. Introduction

Despite significant growth in egalitarian values and tolerant attitudes towards minority group members in recent years, refugees still constitute one of the most marginalized groups in society, suffering from pervasive discrimination (e.g., Cheung et al., 2022). The so-called *refugee crisis* in various parts of the world is eventually accompanied by increased contempt, distrust, and perceptions of threat among host society members who strive to protect their privileges against the increasing number of newcomers (e.g., Esses et al., 2017; Esses et al., 2021). Hostile discourses towards refugees have become much more prevalent universally, and are even more visible in countries such as Turkey where the influx of refugees has rapidly amplified anti-refugee sentiments and defensive reactions (Aktas et al., 2021; Bagci, Verkuyten et al., 2022; De Coninck, Ogan et al., 2021).

While the growth of mass-mediated contact creates opportunities for native-refugee interactions to take place in various societal settings such as schools and neighbourhoods (e.g., Wagner et al., 2006), in practical terms such encounters that cross group boundaries may not easily transform into meaningful intergroup experiences due to various psychological barriers (e.g., Kotzur & Wagner, 2021; Paolini et al., 2021). Hence, indirect types of contact such as interactions that occur through mass media (mass-mediated contact, but see also parasocial contact, e.g., Schiappa et al., 2005) may partly shape attitudes towards refugees, with whom high quality direct contact may not be feasible (e.g., Igi et al., 2019; Joyce & Harwood, 2014). However, like other forms of contact, mass-mediated contact can also stimulate hostile attitudes and behaviors towards refugees who are often portrayed in negative ways in various communication channels (e.g., Igartua et al., 2014; Visintin et al., 2017). In such contexts, mass media may become an important agent of

dehumanization (e.g., Esses et al., 2013; Jelínková, 2019), a process whereby outgroup members are deprived of uniquely human traits and emotions and are perceived to be less human than ingroup members (see Kteily & Landry, 2022 for a review).

Through two studies (one correlational and one experimental), we aimed to delineate how both positive and negative mass-mediated contact with Afghan refugees in Turkey would over and beyond direct contact effects. Despite increasing attention to the role of mass-mediated contact on attitudes towards refugees worldwide, existing research has been primarily correlational (e.g., Graf & Sczesny, 2019; Visintin et al., 2016), focused on the amount of mass-mediated contact with no valence considerations (e.g., De Coninck, Rodríguez-de-Dios et al., 2021), and has rarely tested the role of dehumanization in this relationship (e.g., Esses et al., 2013). Moreover, how mass-mediated contact with refugees shapes the perception of natives has been studied primarily in Western contexts (e.g., Pagotto & Voci, 2013; Visintin et al., 2016), limiting the evidence regarding the potential generalizability of existing findings. We aimed to fill these gaps in the literature by using both correlational and experimental methods to reveal the unique effects of positive and negative mass-mediated contact in the understanding of increasing hostility towards Afghan refugees in Turkey.

1.1. Mass-mediated contact

Over the last decades, intergroup relations research has consistently shown contact to be one of the most effective tools to reduce prejudice in a variety of intergroup contexts (e.g., Dovidio et al., 2003; Lemmer & Wagner, 2015; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006), primarily through increased empathy and decreased intergroup anxiety (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008). Hence, a great deal of research has shown direct intergroup contact to effectively improve attitudes and behaviors towards refugees in various cultural settings (e.g., De Coninck, Rodríguez-de-Dios

et al., 2021; Graf & Sczesny, 2019; Kotzur et al., 2019; Lutterbach & Beelmann, 2020; Meleady & Forder, 2019).

Recent research avenues in the intergroup contact field have further suggested that contact may also improve intergroup relationships even when it does not involve direct, face to face interactions (e.g., Brown & Paterson, 2016; Dovidio et al., 2011). An increased volume of research conducted within the last two decades has shown that indirect contact can function not only as a replacement of direct contact, but as a unique tool that directly influences attitudes towards outgroups (White et al., 2021). Among indirect contact strategies, mass-mediated contact which is an indirect interaction with an outgroup member through newspapers, TV news, and social media is suggested to be particularly relevant for shaping attitudes with refugees, given that media consumption is often a primary mechanism of interaction and impression formation about this outgroup (e.g., Abrams et al., 2018). While mass-mediated contact (like other indirect forms of contact) has been suggested to exert a greater impact on attitudes when direct contact is absent (e.g., Shim et al., 2012), other studies have indicated such contact to have unique effects beyond direct experiences (e.g., Abrams et al., 2018; De Coninck, Rodríguez-de-Dios et al., 2021; Wojcieszak & Azrout, 2016).

Contemporary literature also acknowledges now the role of negative contact experiences in addition to positive ones (e.g., Paolini et al., 2010). Research considering the differential effects of positive and negative mass-mediated contact on attitudes revealed mixed findings (e.g., Schemer, 2012; Visintin et al., 2017). While positive or negative mass-mediated contact can be more predictive of attitudes across different intergroup contexts (Pagotto & Voci, 2013; Rupar & Graf, 2019; Rupar et al., 2022), a recent meta-analysis concluded both forms of contact to produce opposite, but equally strong effects on attitudes (Banas et al., 2020).

While scarce research is devoted to understanding the associations between mass-mediated contact and support for outgroup rights, existing evidence suggests that contact through media may also shape attitudes towards immigration policies (e.g., Esses et al., 2013). For example, mediated contact with Black characters on television was found to be associated with a more favourable perception of Black people, as well as increased support for racialized social issues (Stamps & Sahlman, 2021). On the other hand, negative portrayal of immigrants on media is likely to trigger tendencies to support anti-immigrant actions (Saleem et al., 2017). Overall, these findings suggest that both positive and negative mass-mediated contact are likely to shape not only attitudes towards refugees, but also the extent to which refugee rights are supported.

1.2. The mediating role of dehumanization

Despite growing interest in mass-mediated contact, only few social psychological processes have been investigated as explanatory mechanisms. Park (2012), for example, indicated that mediated contact shapes perceptions of the outgroup, since the audience would identify with the outgroup member and thereby show greater outgroup empathy. Further research has shown typical contact mediators such as trust, empathy, and anxiety to explain mass-mediated contact effects (Pagotto & Voci, 2013; Visintin et al., 2017). Critically, consistent research in the media literature has also indicated that refugees and immigrants are likely to be portrayed as delinquents or criminals in many societies and they are depicted as posing important cultural, economic and security threats to the host nation (see Eberl et al., 2018 for a recent review; Parker, 2015; Müller, 2018; Wahlström et al., 2021), which may in turn provoke dehumanizing beliefs about the outgroup (e.g., Louis et al., 2013). In fact, depictions of refugees in mass media might bolster their dehumanization through representing this group as a critical source of threat (De Coninck, Rodríguez-de-Dios et al., 2021; Esses et

al., 2013), and using consistently a f g j wo c p k l p i ' r p i w e i g ' * N c | q x k . " 4 2 4 3 = U y g w g t " (" Y k m . " 2009).

Following this line of research, we focused on dehumanization - the denial of full humanness to others ó as an explanatory variable between mass-mediated contact and refugee attitudes and support. Based on previous research that has shown both direct and indirect forms of contact to relate to outgroup dehumanization (Bruneau et al., 2021; Capozza et al., 2014; Prati & Loughnan, 2018; Stathi et al., 2017), as well as studies suggesting mass media to function as one of the primary tools to stimulate the dehumanization of particular groups in society such as refugees (e.g., Esses et al., 2013), we argued that both positive and negative forms of mass-mediated contact would be linked to the extent at which refugees are seen as more or less human.

Dehumanization, in turn, explains hostile behaviors towards various groups, especially vulnerable ones such as refugees, through negative emotions such as contempt and anger (e.g., Esses et al., 2013; Utych, 2018). Dehumanization of refugees and the associated threat perceptions may l w u h { ' f q o k p c p v i t q w u o ' y k m p i p g u u ' v q ' r t q g e v ' j g k ' q y p ' r t k k r g i g u ' * G u u g u ' g v ' al., 2013; Esses et al., 2021), supporting the process of moral disengagement in society (Motal, 2015). More specifically, dehumanization has been found to relate to support for deportation and forced internal displacement, as well as rejection of refugees or immigrants (e.g., Esses et al., 2021; Haslam, 2006; Haslam & Stratemeyer, 2016). Therefore, we expected that positive and negative mass-mediated contact would be linked to attitudes and support for refugee rights through decreased and increased dehumanization of refugees, respectively.

1.3. The Afghan refugee context

Turkey has witnessed a significant influx of Syrian refugees (over three and a half million, UNHCR, 2022) within the last decade, which was followed by a second wave of Afghan refugees after 2018 (Karakaya & Karakaya, 2021). While initial responses to

immigration were characterized by humanitarian concerns, with increasing numbers of refugees and heightened perceptions of threat, the welcoming climate has become more hostile over time (e.g., Bagci, Baysu et al., 2022; Bagci, Verkuyten et al., 2022). A recent study comparing attitudes towards refugees in Europe and Turkey, for example, indicated that negative socio-economic conditions as well as the higher number of refugees accepted in the country were related to more negative attitudes towards refugees among Europeans (De Coninck, Ogan et al., 2021).

Hostile attitudes towards refugees in Turkey are also represented in various mass media tools (Ünal, 2014). For example, the content analysis of news articles published in Turkey revealed that refugees, in general, are commonly situated at the center of societal issues such as increased economic problems and conflicts, and are depicted with exclusionary and separationist attitudes (Ünal, 2014). Yet, this literature has primarily centered on the general perception of refugees (e.g., Verkuyten, 2018), with much less empirical research devoted to understanding attitudes particularly towards Afghan refugees.

China's recent wave of refugees from Afghanistan particularly after 2018 (Ministry of Migration, 2021). Whereas the number of Afghan refugees is smaller compared to the number of Syrian refugees, the arrival of Afghans corresponds to a period when Turkish society was already facing a wave of Syrian refugees (e.g., Eroler & Ünal, 2021). Moreover, unlike the majority of Syrians, Afghans do not have a long history in Turkey. Syrian refugees, Afghan refugees are often evaluated even more negatively by Turkish citizens (Bagci & Saglam, 2022). Recent research has indicated specifically Afghans to

equipped with a questionnaire that was designed to measure attitudes towards refugees and support for their rights, by testing dehumanization as a mediator in a correlational (Study 1) and an experimental (Study 2) study. We aimed to contribute to the existing literature by a) investigating the role of both positive and negative mass-mediated contact, b) testing dehumanization as a critical mediator, c) using experimental procedures to draw causal assumptions between the variables (Study 2), d) controlling for both positive and negative direct contact to explore the unique effects of mass-mediated contact, and e) focusing on a less-investigated sociocultural context, Turkey, that has experienced a recent, considerable influx of refugees.

Karakaya, 2021) and being consistently represented in the mass media. This suggests the urgent need to investigate how mass-mediated contact may shape the perception of refugees in this increasingly hostile context.

1.4. The current study

In summary, the current studies explored the role of positive and negative mass-mediated contact on attitudes towards refugees and support for their rights, by testing dehumanization as a mediator in a correlational (Study 1) and an experimental (Study 2) study. We aimed to contribute to the existing literature by a) investigating the role of both positive and negative mass-mediated contact, b) testing dehumanization as a critical mediator, c) using experimental procedures to draw causal assumptions between the variables (Study 2), d) controlling for both positive and negative direct contact to explore the unique effects of mass-mediated contact, and e) focusing on a less-investigated sociocultural context, Turkey, that has experienced a recent, considerable influx of refugees.

Based on previous research, we hypothesized that positive mass-mediated contact would be associated with more positive attitudes and greater support for refugee rights, whereas negative mass-mediated contact would be associated with more negative attitudes and lower support. Moreover, we expected dehumanization to function as a critical explanatory mechanism on these relationships. We also hypothesized mass-mediated contact to have unique effects on the dependent variables after controlling for both positive and negative direct contact.

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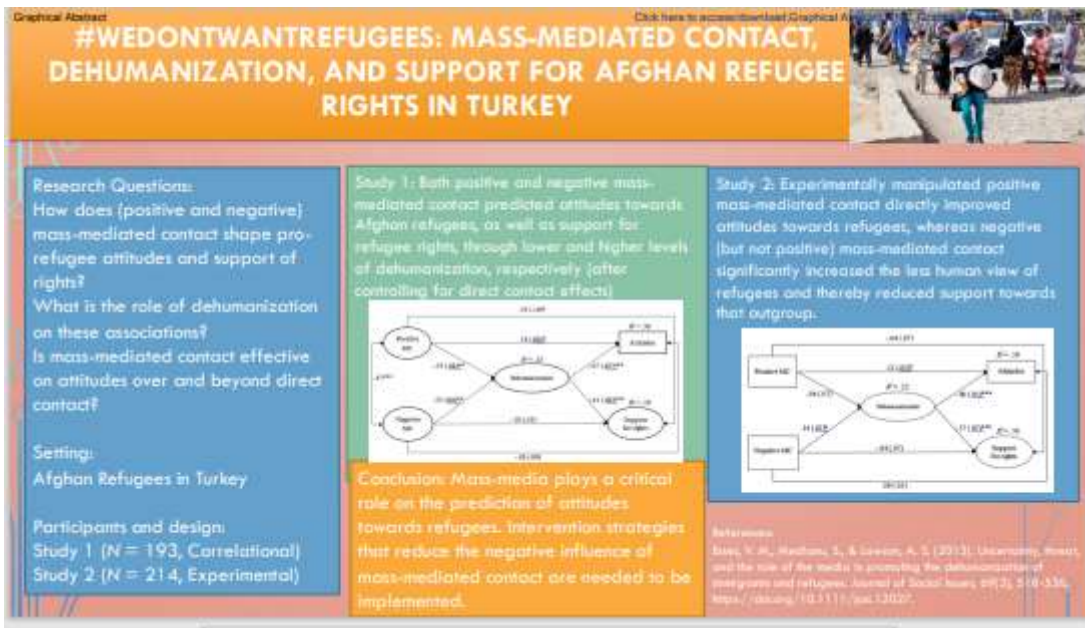
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Ethical statement: Gj kvcn'cr r tqxcnlhqt'vj ku'uwf { 'y cu'i tcpvgf 'htqo 'vj g'htuv'cwj qt'au' affiliated university (Ethical statement no: FASS-2022-23)



Declaration of interests

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

The authors declare the following financial interests/personal relationships which may be considered as potential competing interests: