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Effects of Economic and Symbolic Threat Appeals in Right-Wing Populist Advertising on Anti-Immigrant Attitudes: The Impact of Textual and Visual Appeals

DESIRÉE SCHMUCK and JÖRG MATTHES

Right-wing populist parties portray immigrants as economic or symbolic threats in their political advertisements by constructing a moral divide between the “good” ordinary people and “bad” immigrants. Yet, it remains unclear how these different threat appeals contribute to the formation of anti-immigrant attitudes among citizens and what role visual elements play in producing these effects. A survey-experiment with a quota sample of 471 participants reveals that, overall, symbolic threat appeals exert stronger effects on anti-immigrant attitudes than economic ones. When presented via text alone, only symbolic—not economic—threat appeals increased anti-immigrant attitudes via the activation of heuristic processing such as the reliance on negative stereotypes or feelings of anxiety, in particular among lower-educated citizens. When visuals were present, both types of threat appeals enhanced anti-immigrant attitudes among citizens across all education levels based on heuristic processing. Additionally, high image-text congruency induced cognitive argument approval resulting in higher anti-immigrant attitudes.

Keywords economic threat, political advertising, right-wing populism, symbolic threat

Across Europe, right-wing populist (RWP) parties are on the rise. In particular, the high numbers of refugees fleeing to Europe in 2015 have fueled the surge in support for RWP parties. In this context, many citizens in the host countries feel anxious and threatened by immigrants. RWP parties appeal to these public fears by calling for more border controls and a stricter regulation of immigration (Lucassen & Lubbers, 2012; Schemer, 2012; Sheets, Bos, & Boomgaarden, 2016). To advertise their stance on anti-immigration policies, RWP politicians frequently employ extremely negative slogans and images in their political campaigns that stigmatize immigrants or minority groups, such as “Love of Homeland Instead of Moroccan Thieves” (Austrian Freedom Party) or “Maria Instead of Sharia” (Swiss People’s Party). In addition, these slogans are often accompanied by fear-evoking visual images, such as minarets piercing the national flag (Swiss People’s Party) or large groups of refugees crossing a country’s border (UK Independence Party).

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These textual and visual threat appeals reflect the core of populism, which can be seen in the moral and causal divide between the “ordinary people” as “good” in-group and horizontally or vertically defined others as “evil” out-groups representing a threat to and a burden on society (e.g., Jaggers & Walgrave, 2007; Mudde, 2004). In particular, visual images lend themselves well to construct an antagonistic view of the mainstream population and immigrants by allowing populist politicians to portray immigrants and minorities in a stereotypical and negatively emotionalizing way that would not be acceptable when expressed with text only (Grabe & Bucy, 2009).

RWP parties’ campaigns usually use these textual and visual appeals to cue two basic types of perceived threats from immigrants, which have been found to crucially influence anti-immigrant attitudes: economic and symbolic threats (e.g., Lucassen & Lubbers, 2012; Schneider, 2008; Sniderman & Hagendoorn, 2007). By means of political ads, RWP parties aim to trigger these perceived threats from immigrants in the electorate by employing either symbolic threat appeals that refer to threats to a social group’s system of meaning, such as their religious customs, values, and traditions, or economic threat appeals, which portray immigrants as competitors for jobs, housing, or social welfare benefits (Atwell Seate & Mastro, 2016; Schmuck & Matthes, 2015). First research evidence suggests that RWP threat appeals contribute to the formation of anti-immigrant attitudes (e.g., Matthes & Schmuck, 2015). However, research lacks a thorough investigation of whether or not symbolic and economic threat appeals exert different effects on anti-immigrant attitudes. Furthermore, the effects of visual images in the process of transmitting threats from immigrants and constructing a moral divide between the mainstream society and immigrants remain completely unexplored.

Our experimental design draws on these two important aspects of RWP advertising, by employing a 2 × 2 factorial design that varies the absence and presence of visual images in two different types of threat appeals in RWP ads: symbolic and economic threat appeals. This design allows a thorough investigation of the underlying mechanisms of the individual and combined effects of textual and visual threat appeals on anti-immigrant attitudes. In addition, we use a comprehensive online quota sample (N = 471) to take into account important individual-level variables that may influence populist communication effects such as formal education (Bos, van der Brug, & de Vreese, 2013).

Economic and Symbolic Threat Appeals in Right-wing Populist Advertising

Previous research has extensively studied the success of RWP parties on both the supply side of politicians (e.g., Jaggers & Walgrave, 2007; Pelinka, 2013) and the demand side of the electorate (e.g., Bos et al., 2013; Hameleers, Bos, & de Vreese, 2016; Mazzoleni, 2008; Sheets et al., 2016). However, scant attention has been paid to the means with which these parties promote their ideology to the electorate: political ads. Due to European regulations in political advertising on television, print and poster ads are still one of the most important advertising vehicles in Europe. In Austria, political parties spend the majority of their campaign budget on print ads in newspapers (Statista, 2016). Thus, political print ads may have considerable impact on individuals’ formation of anti-immigrant attitudes. One of the most important roles of political advertising is to inform the public about parties, candidates, and their political stances (Schmitt-Beck & Farrell, 2002). Emphasizing their opposition to immigration is a core element in political communication (Bos, van der Brug, & de Vreese, 2010) and advertising (Arendt, Marquart, & Matthes, 2015; Matthes & Schmuck, 2015) of the populist right. Although academic definitions vary, most scholars agree on two core elements of populism: a central reference to “the people” and a juxtaposition of the “ordinary people” against “dangerous others” (e.g., Mudde, 2004). According to Jaggers and Walgrave (2007), these
“dangerous others” can be defined vertically or horizontally. The vertical dimension emphasizes the distance and estrangement between the people and the elites. The horizontal dimension stresses the exclusion of specific population groups within the people. In right-wing populism, such “others” are ethnically, nationally, or religiously defined (Pelinka, 2013). Being a threat to society, these groups are scapegoated and have to be fiercely dealt with or simply removed from the territory of “the people” (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007).

An abundance of studies have demonstrated that the perception of immigrants as a threat may contribute to the formation of anti-immigrant attitudes (e.g., Lucassen & Lubbers, 2012; Schneider, 2008; Stephan, Ybarra, Martinez, Schwarzwald, & Tur-Kaspa, 1998). The derogation of an out-group that poses a threat to members of an in-group can be explained by social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978): As individuals are motivated to maintain a positive identity, they tend to negatively evaluate members of an out-group that pose a threat to one’s in-group. Political ads in RWP political campaigns may contribute to this process in two important ways: First, RWP ads make the “us”-versus-“them”-distinction of the “pure” national citizens as in-group and “dangerous” immigrants as out-group salient in individuals’ minds (Hameleers et al., 2016). Second, they may induce or reinforce perceived threats posed by immigrants among citizens, as RWP parties usually appeal to two basic types of perceived threats from immigrants in their political campaigns that have also been distinguished in extant literature (e.g., Lucassen & Lubbers, 2012; Schneider, 2008; Sniderman & Hagendoorn, 2007): economic and symbolic threats.

Economic threat appeals refer to threats to a group’s wealth and financial security. More precisely, immigrants are portrayed as a competition for jobs or as a burden to shared social systems, such as welfare. Theoretical approaches such as theory of realistic group conflict (LeVine, 1972) and relative deprivation theory (Crosby, 1976), which stresses the influence of group comparisons on dissatisfaction, yield the general prediction that perceived economic threat, whether real or imagined, encourages opposition to immigration. In their political campaigns, RWP parties use textual and visual elements to portray economic threats from immigration, such as higher costs for taxpayers, and increasing competition for housing and social security services, or in the workplace.

Symbolic threat appeals, in contrast, refer to threats to the established symbolic environment of a country’s majority population, which is expressed by shared cultural practices including religion, values, clothing habits, traditions, and language (Atwell Seate & Mastro, 2016). RWP parties conceive of Europe as nations with each having an ethnic and cultural homogeneity. Thus, in their political campaigns, populist politicians aim to imply “a vision of the world as it was’ in the rejection of immigration,” also referred to in literature as the populist “heartland” (Taggart, 2004, p. 274). Hence, they portray incoming immigrant groups with distinctive cultural practices (in Western European countries, typically Muslim immigrants) as a threat to a nation’s traditions and cultural heritage, namely its symbolic environment (Betz, 2013; Croucher, 2013). Consequently, textual and visual claims that express opposition to the construction of minarets, or to symbols of Islam religion (e.g., the Muslim headscarf) take a prominent place in RWP political campaign ads (Betz, 2013).

There is initial evidence that both threat appeals successfully contribute to the formation of individuals’ anti-immigrant attitudes among young voters (Schmuck & Matthes, 2015). Yet, the existing research lacks a thorough investigation of the effects of economic and symbolic threat appeals on anti-immigrant attitudes in the general public. Moreover, the underlying mechanisms that may explain how these threat appeals influence anti-immigrant attitudes remain unclear. The integrated threat theory (ITT; Stephan & Stephan, 2000) provides a possible theoretical framework for the explanation of the effects of economic and symbolic threat appeals on anti-immigrant attitudes by postulating four basic threats that may engender resentments toward immigrants: (a) realistic or economic threats, (b) symbolic
threats, (c) anxiety regarding interactions with out-group members (i.e., intergroup anxiety) and (d) negative stereotypes. As mass-mediated contact with immigrants likely embodies the threats described in ITT (Atwell Seate & Mastro, 2016), RWP ads may trigger the activation of these threats in the public. However, the specific underlying mechanisms of these effects in particular regarding the contribution of textual and visual elements in RWP ads remain unclear. The current study takes an approach to close this gap by connecting the ITT to the heuristic-systematic model of information processing (HSM; Chen & Chaiken, 1999).

The Role of Textual and Visual Threat Appeals in Right-wing Populist Advertising

In the field of political advertising, many print advertisements or posters combine words with images to disseminate a message effectively (Holtz-Bacha & Kaid, 2006). The use of text provides political candidates with the opportunity to communicate important factual information, while images convey nonverbal information (Dumitrescu, 2010). Due to their distinct qualities, textual and visual messages in political advertising may induce different forms of information processing. Dual-process models such as the HSM provide a theoretical explanation for differences in information processing, which can be applied to textual and visual appeals in political advertising. While systematic or argument-based processing refers to a relatively analytic and comprehensive treatment of judgment-relevant information responsive to the actual content of a message, heuristic processing demands less cognitive effort and describes the activation and application of judgmental rules, so-called heuristics.

From an ITT perspective, textual messages dealing with economic or symbolic threats from immigrants in RWP ads may strengthen citizens' beliefs that immigrants threaten a country’s economic situation or cultural capital (Atwell Seate & Mastro, 2016). These higher perceived threats may in turn guide individuals’ attitude formation. Based on the HSM, this process of attitude formation can be considered as argument-based processing, as it entails persuasion guided by the message’s actual content. More precisely, the presented arguments of the political ads guide the viewer's subsequent attitude formation (Chen & Chaiken, 1999).

In contrast, relying on intergroup anxiety and negative stereotypes in the process of attitude formation may be considered as heuristic processing. Previous literature postulates that forming a judgment toward a social group or person as a response to media content based on affect (Coleman & Banning, 2006) and stereotypes (Ottati, Terkildsen, & Hubbard, 1997) can be considered as heuristic processes. Intergroup anxiety reflects feelings of anxiety regarding real or anticipated intergroup interactions. According to the affect-as-information approach (Schwarz & Clore, 1988), individuals use their feelings as information when making a judgment when they are unable or unwilling to think about the issues being considered. The reliance on affect heuristics, particularly on intergroup anxiety, has been found to be an important underlying mechanism of mass-mediated intergroup threat and attitudes toward immigration (Atwell Seate & Mastro, 2016).

Similarly, negative stereotypes may serve as a heuristic. According to Bodenhausen and Wyer (1985), stereotypes can be viewed as judgmental heuristics that are sometimes used to simplify the cognitive tasks a social perceiver is confronted with. Regular exposure to RWP ads that emphasize positive stereotypes of the “good” in-group and the “bad” out-group may contribute to the development of stereotypical memory traces, which easily can be reactivated by subsequent exposure (e.g., Mendelberg, 2001; Valentino, Hutchings, & White, 2002). Thus, the mere exposure to RWP ads—without thoroughly processing the presented claims—is likely to activate negative stereotypes, which subsequently may serve as cognitive shortcuts for attitude formation (Arendt et al., 2015). Due to their distinct
characteristics, textual and visual elements in political advertising may encourage different routes of information processing (Rodriguez & Dimitrova, 2011).

**Text-Only Threat Appeals**

In their political campaigns, RWP parties use slogans and textual messages to express economic and symbolic threats from immigrants. These textual messages may persuade viewers by inducing cognitive approval of the presented arguments. In line with this reasoning, economic threat appeals should increase perceived economic threats from immigrants, such as higher taxes or less social security services due to immigration, after ad exposure, which in turn guide citizens’ attitude formation toward immigrants. Attitude formation in response to symbolic threat appeals, by contrast, should be guided by reasoning about threats to a society’s system of meaning, such as their culture, religion, and traditions, posed by immigrants (Lucassen & Lubbers, 2012). Hence, we hypothesize the following:

\[ H1: \text{ (a) Economic or (b) symbolic threat appeals in RWP ads induce (a) perceived economic threats or (b) perceived symbolic threats, which guides individuals’ formation of anti-immigrant attitudes.} \]

Yet, textual messages in political ads may not always persuade viewers based on cognitive approval of the presented arguments. As citizens usually only spend approximately 0.5 to 2.5 seconds viewing a print advertisement (Rosbergen, Pieters, & Wedel, 1997), they may not always engage in argument-based processing; instead it is highly likely that they rely on heuristics, which are easy to retrieve when processing the presented information (Kaid, Fernandes, & Painter, 2011). Previous research indicates that heuristic processing in response to political ads is particularly likely in low informational and motivational contexts (Matthes & Schmuck, 2015; Schemer, 2012) or in response to political ads using threatening images (Matthes & Schmuck, 2015). However, it remains unclear whether or not a mere text-only appeal without an accompanying image may also activate heuristic processes (i.e., reliance on intergroup anxiety and negative stereotypes). Hence, we formulate a research question (RQ):

\[ RQ1: \text{ Do economic or symbolic text-only threat appeals enhance intergroup anxiety and negative stereotypes?} \]

**Combined Text-Image Appeals**

The use of images and visual elements in addition to text messages to promote policy positions and candidate qualities in political campaigns has a long tradition (Grabe & Bucy, 2009). Visual elements in political advertising give a first impression of a politician’s policy stance and provide information about issue positions (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995), or evoke instant emotional response (Iyer, Webster, Hornsey, & Vanman, 2014). Yet, despite the powerful impact of visual elements, research lacks a systematic investigation of their effects in particular with regard to images of immigrants. Most studies investigating the effects of visuals in political ads have focused on candidate portraits and their effects on voters’ attitudinal outcomes (e.g., Holtz-Bacha & Kaid, 2006). However, not much is known about the persuasive effects of images of immigrants in political advertising. RWP parties all over Europe use negative images in political campaigns to visually portray immigrants as a dangerous out-group that poses a threat to
the host nation (e.g., large groups of women in burkas, black ravens stealing citizens’ money). Research on negative campaigning indicates that pairing negative messages with fear-evoking images is a fruitful approach to influence voters’ attitudes (Brader, 2005). However, research has mostly neglected to investigate the underlying mechanisms that explain the influence of negative imagery in political advertising on the electorate.

Drawing from the HSM, images in political advertising lend themselves particularly well to be processed heuristically as they require less cognitive load (Rodriguez & Dimitrova, 2011). Hence, when combined with textual appeals it may be assumed that textual elements lead to cognitive argument approval, while visual elements tend to be processed heuristically. Thus, for the textual elements of the combined ads, we assume for text-only appeals that the textual economic and symbolic threat appeals guide the viewer’s formation of anti-immigrant attitudes by evoking higher economic or symbolic threats:

**H2:** (a) Combined economic or (b) combined symbolic threat appeals in RWP ads induce (a) perceived economic threats or (b) perceived symbolic threats, which guides individuals’ formation of anti-immigrant attitudes.

However, the inclusion of visuals in addition to textual arguments allows populist politicians to portray immigrants and minorities in a stereotypical and negatively emotionalizing way that would not be acceptable when expressed with text only (Grabe & Bucy, 2009). Thus, it is conceivable that economic and symbolic threat appeals, which combine textual appeals with negative images of immigrants in political ads, will evoke negative emotions toward members of the portrayed out-group as a distinct process in addition to argument approval (Iyer et al., 2014). Previous research on negative campaigning has demonstrated that political ads appealing to emotions can cause crucial changes in political opinions (e.g., Brader, 2005; Marcus, Neuman, & MacKuen, 2000). Drawing from ITT, it is particularly fear of interpersonal contact with the negatively portrayed group that contributes to anti-immigrant attitudes (Atwell Seate & Mastro, 2016). As RWP ads often use images displaying immigrants’ different clothing or religious habits as well as portraying immigrants as poor or threatening, they may elicit feelings such as uneasiness or awkwardness regarding the interactions with these out-group members. These negative feelings may in turn serve as a heuristic for anti-immigrant attitude formation (Kühne, Schemer, Matthes, & Wirth, 2011). Accordingly, we pose the following hypothesis:

**H3:** Combined (a) economic or b) symbolic threat appeals induce intergroup anxiety, which results in higher anti-immigrant attitudes.

Furthermore, previous research indicates that negative images of minorities can activate negative stereotypes among viewers (e.g., Abraham & Appiah, 2006). Images serve as exemplars in mind, which provide context for the textual appeals. Due to its vividness, a stereotypical image of immigrants will reinforce associations between the concept of “immigrants” and negative stereotypes such as “criminal” or “aggressive” that people may already have in their minds (Arendt et al., 2015; Matthes & Schmuck, 2015). In addition, images lend themselves well to visually construct an in-group–out-group distinction without explicitly expressing it (e.g., by portraying immigrants in dark colors and the national in-group in bright colors). Exposure to these images in RWP advertising makes positive stereotypes of the self and negative stereotypes of the culprit other chronically accessible among receivers (e.g., Mendelberg, 2001; Valentino et al., 2002). These stereotypes, in turn, may serve as a heuristic for attitude formation toward
immigrants. Thus, we expect that combined economic and symbolic threat appeals activate or reinforce existing stereotypic traces in memory, which are consequently used as heuristic cues for the formation of anti-immigrant attitudes (Matthes & Schmuck, 2015; Mendelberg, 2001; Valentino et al., 2002).

**H4:** Combined (a) economic or (b) symbolic threat appeals induce negative stereotypes, which results in higher anti-immigrant attitudes.

Finally, in line with the literature on visual framing (e.g., Abraham & Appiah, 2006; Geise & Baden, 2015; Powell, Boomgaarden, De Swert, & de Vreese, 2015), it may be assumed that rather than merely encouraging a heuristic route of attitude formation, visuals may play a more meaningful role in interacting with the accompanying text, by making particular parts of the message more salient. According to Geise and Baden (2015), the state of inner arousal or alertness activated by images tends to increase the depth of mental and emotional processing and raises the accessibility and applicability of cognitive information processing. Thus, scholars postulate that learning and memory is improved when political messages are presented in both visual and verbal modalities compared to text-only messages, which is called the “amplifying effect” of images (Geise & Baden, 2015, p. 50). Powell and colleagues’ (2015) findings confirm this assumption by showing that the inclusion of an attention-grabbing image increased the salience of and the attention to the accompanying text. Yet, whether images may also interact with the accompanying text in RWP ads by drawing more attention to the textual appeal remains unexplored. Thus, we formulate a research question:

**RQ2:** Do images in combined text-image economic and symbolic threat appeals draw more attention to the accompanying text?

The full theoretical model is depicted in Figure 1.

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**Figure 1.** Model of hypothesized effects. *Note.* Control variables are omitted from the model for clarity reasons.
Method

We conducted an online survey-embedded experiment ($N = 471$). We employed a two (threat appeal: economic, symbolic) by two (layout: text-only appeal, combined appeal) factorial design with a control group. Participants were randomly assigned to five conditions: a text-only economic threat appeal ($N = 90$), a text-only symbolic threat appeal ($N = 81$), a combined economic threat appeal ($N = 111$), a combined symbolic threat appeal ($N = 95$), and a control group ($N = 94$). A randomization check for age, gender, education level, and immigration background was successful.

Participants

A total of 500 Austrian adults ages 16 to 68 were recruited via a data collection company. We excluded 29 participants for very low complete times (below five minutes; median time = 12.6 min) or for reporting that they were not attentive during the experiment. The final sample included $N = 471$ participants. We employed a quota sample based on the demographic characteristics of the general Austrian population for age ($M = 43$, $SD = 14$), gender (52.7% female), and level of education (14% compulsory school; 43.9% apprenticeship; 15.3% secondary vocational school; 14.9% high school degree; 11.9% academic degree). Two educational groups were created: individuals with high school and university degree were grouped as higher educated (26.8%) and individuals with vocational school degree, apprenticeship, and compulsory school were grouped as lower educated (73.2%).

Stimulus Material

Based on existing populist ads, four political print ads for the right-wing Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) were created. The text-based economic and symbolic conditions contained a real party slogan referring to immigrants as a symbolic (“Respect for our culture instead of false tolerance”) or economic (“Protection for our jobs instead of competition and loss of workplaces”) threat for Austria and a slightly modified text explaining why immigrants pose an economic or a symbolic threat for Austrian citizens (see Appendix). In the combined text-image conditions, the same text was combined with an image used in an original print ad by the FPÖ. The picture showed Muslim immigrants crossing the Austrian borders. European RWP parties (such as the Swiss People’s Party or the Flemish Vlaams Belang) have used similar political ads depicting Muslim immigrants in their campaigns (Betz, 2013). Moreover, Muslims from countries such as Turkey, Syria, and Afghanistan form an important immigrant group in Austria. The particular image was chosen for both conditions because it portrayed both symbolic threats to the Austrian culture (e.g., religion, headscarves) and economic threats to Austrian social services and the economy (e.g., poverty). Participants in the control group saw a commercial ad with no reference to the FPÖ or immigrants. Each ad was embedded into the layout of the Austrian newspaper Heute. Heute is a free newspaper and the second most-read daily paper in Austria (almost one million readers per day), which frequently publishes print ads by the FPÖ (Statista, 2016).

Pretest of Stimulus Material

A pretest among a student sample ($N = 75$, 66% female, $M_{age} = 25.28$, $SD = 6.80$) indicated that the economic ad communicated more economic threats ($M = 6.26$, $SD = 1.06$) from
immigrants than symbolic threats \((M = 2.54, SD = 1.67)\) \((F(1, 74) = 297.28, p < .001, \eta^2 = .80)\) (all items were measured on a 7-point scale). Respectively, the symbolic ad communicated higher symbolic threats \((M = 6.47, SD = 0.99)\) than economic threats \((M = 1.99, SD = 1.72)\) \((F(1, 74) = 393.38, p < .001, \eta^2 = .84)\). Furthermore, we asked participants to indicate whether the image used in the ad communicated symbolic threats like immigrants’ different culture, traditions, and values (e.g., “The image aims to convey different values and traditions of immigrants compared to most Austrians”) or economic threats like immigrants’ lower economic status (e.g., “The image aims to convey that immigrants are poorer than most Austrians”). No significant differences between economic \((M = 5.34, SD = 1.62)\) and symbolic \((M = 5.66, SD = 1.34)\) threats were found \((F(1, 74) = 2.69, p = .11, \eta^2 = .04)\), suggesting that the image almost equally conveyed symbolic and economic threats. Finally, participants rated the image as highly stereotypical \((M = 6.13, SD = 1.35)\).

**Procedure**

Participants were instructed to carefully evaluate the layout of a double page of the Austrian newspaper *Heute*. In total, the double page contained four shorter and three longer news articles, as well as two advertisements, of which one was manipulated for the present study. The embedded political ad was not explicitly mentioned. Participants were then randomized to one of the stimulus conditions, which were presented on a blank screen. They were forced to spend at least 30 seconds viewing the newspaper pages. After the stimulus presentation, participants were asked to rate the newspaper’s layout followed by the assessment of the dependent variables.

**Measures**

All items were measured on a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree). Four items assessed perceived economic threats. The scale was drawn and modified from Stephan and colleagues (1998) and Schneider (2008) (e.g., “Immigrants take away jobs from Austrian workers”; Cronbach’s \(\alpha = .90, M = 5.16, SD = 1.71\)). Perceived symbolic threats were measured with three items drawn from Stephan and colleagues (1998) (e.g., “Immigrants damage the Austrian culture”; Cronbach’s \(\alpha = .83, M = 5.04, SD = 1.65\)). To assess intergroup anxiety, participants indicated on four items how they would feel when interacting with immigrants (e.g., “awkward,” “threatened”; Cronbach’s \(\alpha = .88, M = 4.21, SD = 1.65;\) Stephan et al., 1998). Negative stereotypes were measured using three items based on Stephan and colleagues (1998) (e.g., “Immigrants are aggressive”; Cronbach’s \(\alpha = .87, M = 4.44, SD = 1.50\)). Negative attitudes toward immigration were assessed using three standard items (e.g., “Immigration to Austria should be restricted”; Cronbach’s \(\alpha = .88, M = 5.41, SD = 1.65\)).

**Data Analysis**

A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted with the software lavaan (R) using maximum likelihood estimation to test the structure of the assumed mediators perceived symbolic threats, perceived economic threats, intergroup anxiety, and negative stereotypes. A CFA with four latent factors revealed a good model fit \(\chi^2 (71) = 199.90, CFI = .97, TLI = .97, RMSEA = .06\) 90% CI [0.05, 0.07]). All factor loadings were above .65. The correlations between the factors were between .71 and .78. Hence, our model provided sufficient convergent and
discriminant validity (Kline, 2011). To additionally test for discriminant validity, we constrained the correlations between the four factors to 1.00, which resulted in a significant decline in model fit ($\Delta \chi^2 = 75.33, p < .001$). This indicates that although the factors were related, they correlated too weakly to be merged into a one-dimensional scale.

To test our hypotheses, we conducted an ordinary least squares path analysis using the PROCESS macro in SPSS. Experimental condition was dummy coded with the control group as reference group. Symbolic threats, economic threats, intergroup anxiety, and negative stereotypes were modeled as mediators of the political ads’ effects on anti-immigrant attitudes. Thus, we tested a simultaneous mediation by multiple variables, which allows us to determine to what extent a mediator transmits the effect of the independent variable on the dependent variable, conditional upon the presence of the other mediators in the model (see Preacher & Hayes, 2008). We used 95% bias-corrected bootstrap confidence intervals based on 10,000 bootstrap samples for statistical inference of indirect effects. Age, gender, education and FPÖ attitudes were controlled in all analyses. Figure 1 shows the full theoretical model.

Results

Text-Only Symbolic and Economic Appeals

All findings are shown in Table 1. First, we expected that text-only threat appeals would lead to a higher cognitive approval of the threat messages presented in the ad. Hence, H1(a) assumed that attitude formation in response to economic text-only appeals should be based on the perception of higher economic threats from immigrants. This was not the case. The economic text appeal did not significantly increase perceived economic threats ($b = -0.22, SE = 0.21, p = .301$). Similarly, we did not find that perceived symbolic threats guided individuals’ attitude formation in response to the symbolic text-only appeal ($b = 0.24, SE = 0.20, p = .232$) (H1[b]). Hence, H1 had to be rejected.

Furthermore, our first research question asked whether economic and symbolic text-only appeals induced heuristic processing, namely the reliance on intergroup anxiety or negative stereotypes, when forming anti-immigrant attitudes. We found a significant and positive effect of the symbolic text-only threat appeal on negative stereotypes ($b = 0.38, SE = 0.19, p = .048$). Using mediation analysis, we additionally found a significant indirect effect of the symbolic threat appeal on anti-immigrant attitudes via negative stereotypes ($b = 0.06, SE = 0.03; CI = [.01, .16]$), suggesting that exposure to the symbolic text-only appeal enhanced stereotypic beliefs about immigrants, which in turn resulted in higher anti-immigrant attitudes. We found no other significant effects of the text-only appeals on intergroup anxiety or negative stereotypes (see Table 1).

Combined Economic and Symbolic Appeals

In a next step, we investigated whether or not the combined appeals led to cognitive approval of the arguments presented in the political ads. H2(a) assumed that anti-immigrant attitude formation in response to a combined economic appeal would be based on higher perceived economic threats from immigrants. However, we found no support for this assumption in our data. The combined economic appeal did not increase perceived economic threats ($b = -0.02, SE = 0.20, p = .932$), which contradicts H2(a). Furthermore, H2(b) assumed that a combined symbolic threat appeal would enhance anti-immigrant
Table 1
Ordinary least squares path analysis, unstandardized coefficients (N = 442)

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<th>Negative Stereotypes</th>
<th>Anti-Immigrant Attitudes</th>
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<td>Economic Appeala</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>0.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Symbolic Appeala</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>0.24</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comb. Economic Appeala</td>
<td>–0.02</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>0.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comb. Symbolic Appeala</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>0.42*</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>0.43*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived Economic Threat</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>0.34***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived Symbolic Threat</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>0.25***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intergroup Anxiety</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>0.12***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative Stereotypes</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>0.16***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted $R^2$</td>
<td>.37</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>.41</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$F$ for Change in $R^2$</td>
<td>32.01***</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>38.04***</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>23.05***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Twenty-nine individuals were excluded due to missing data in the variable “Attitude toward the FPÖ.”

* The control group is the reference group.

*** $p < .001$. * $p < .05$. 

a
attitudes via the activation of higher perceived symbolic threats. Our findings confirmed this assumption. We found a positive and significant effect of the combined symbolic appeal on perceived symbolic threats ($b = 0.42, SE = 0.20, p = .036$). In addition, a formal test of the mediation effects revealed a significant indirect effect of the combined symbolic threat appeal on anti-immigrant attitudes via perceived symbolic threats ($b = 0.10, SE = 0.05; CI = [0.01, .24]$). Hence, perceived symbolic threats from immigrants guided the formation of anti-immigrant attitudes in response to a combined symbolic threat appeal, which lends support to H2(b). These findings also answer our second research question (RQ2): Unlike the symbolic text-only appeal, the combined symbolic appeal enhanced perceived symbolic threats, which suggests that the association of a text appeal with a visual image of immigrants increased the salience of the textual appeal and induced argument-based processing. However, this effect was only present for the combined symbolic appeal but not for the combined economic appeal, which might be due to the higher thematic congruence of the symbolic text appeal and the image.

Next, we tested whether the combined text-image appeals induced heuristic processing, namely the activation of intergroup anxiety and negative stereotypes. Contradicting H3(a), we found no significant effect of the combined economic appeal on intergroup anxiety ($b = 0.12, SE = 0.20, p = .548$). The combined symbolic appeal, by contrast, increased intergroup anxiety ($b = 0.43, SE = 0.21, p = .046$). A formal test of the mediation effects revealed that the combined symbolic threat appeal significantly enhanced anti-immigrant attitudes via intergroup anxiety ($b = 0.05, SE = 0.03; CI = [0.01, .14]$), which confirms H3(b). For negative stereotypes, we found a positive and significant effect of both the combined economic appeal ($b = 0.42, SE = 0.18, p = .020$) and the combined symbolic appeal ($b = 0.39, SE = 0.19, p = .038$). Mediation analysis confirmed significant indirect effects of the combined economic threat appeal ($b = 0.07, SE = 0.03; CI = [0.02, .15]$) and the combined symbolic threat appeal ($b = 0.06, SE = 0.04; CI = [0.01, .15]$) on anti-immigrant attitudes via the activation of negative stereotypes. Hence, the combined economic and symbolic appeals contributed to the formation of anti-immigrant attitudes via the activation of negative stereotypes, which supports H4(a) and H4(b) (see Figure 2).

Among the control variables, we observed significant positive effects of attitudes toward the FPÖ on all dependent variables (see Table 1). Education had a negative significant effect on perceived economic threats ($b = −0.40, SE = 0.15, p = .009$). Age had a positive and significant effect on anti-immigrant attitudes ($b = 0.01, SE = 0.00, p < .015$). Explained variance for anti-immigrant attitudes was very high (adj. $R^2 = .76$; see Table 1).

### Additional Analyses

As formal education has been found to be an important moderator of populist communication effects (Bos et al., 2013; Matthes & Schmuck, 2015; Schmuck & Matthes, 2015), we additionally tested the moderating influence of formal education on the effects just described. We computed moderated mediation models with the interaction terms between the threat appeals and formal education (see Hayes, 2015) (interaction terms of formal education and the remaining dummy conditions were controlled in all analyses; not shown in Table 1). We found significant interaction effects of the symbolic text appeal and formal education on intergroup anxiety ($b = −1.06, SE = 0.48, p = .028$) and a trend to a significant interaction effect on negative stereotypes ($b = −0.71, SE = 0.43, p = .096$), indicating that lower-educated individuals are more susceptible to the effects of ad exposure on intergroup anxiety and negative stereotypes. Analysis of moderated mediation
showed a significant interaction effect of formal education and the textual symbolic appeal on anti-immigrant attitudes, mediated by intergroup anxiety (Hayes’ [2015] index of moderated mediation $= -0.13$, $SE = .07$; CI $= [-.32, -.03]$) and negative stereotypes (index of moderated mediation $= -0.11$, $SE = .06$; CI $= [-.27, -.01]$). Thus, lower-educated individuals were more prone to the effects of the symbolic text appeal on intergroup anxiety and negative stereotypes. We found no other interaction effects of education with the text-only or combined text-image appeals.

**Discussion**

Across Europe, right-wing populist (RWP) parties are on the rise, which has encouraged extensive research concerned with the factors that may explain their success (e.g., Hameleers et al., 2016; Lucassen & Lubbers, 2012; Mazzoleni, 2008). In this experiment, we aimed to advance this knowledge, by investigating how the effects of RWP parties’ political ads contribute to the formation of anti-immigrant attitudes, which have been found to be a crucial predictor for RWP voting preference (e.g., Sheets et al., 2016). In their political campaigns, RWP parties use textual and visual threat appeals to portray immigrants as a “dangerous” out-group that poses a threat to the people (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Mudde, 2004). Drawing from the heuristic-systematic model (HSM) and the integrated threat theory (ITT), we sought to explain the underlying mechanisms of the effects of symbolic and economic threat appeals in RWP campaigns on the formation of anti-immigrant attitudes. In doing so, we explored for the first time the role of visual images in producing these effects. Overall, we found that symbolic threat appeals have a stronger effect on anti-immigrant attitudes than economic threat appeals. In their
political campaigns, RWP parties portray immigrants with different religious customs and traditions as a threat to the populist heartland, an ideal conception of the world as it was before the influx of high numbers of immigrants to Western societies (Taggart, 2004). In line with previous research (e.g., Lucassen & Lubbers, 2012; Schneider, 2008), our findings indicate that these threats to a social group’s shared system of meaning exert a stronger influence on anti-immigrant attitudes in European countries compared to perceived job competition or depletion of social services due to immigration. Thus, the study presented here is the first to demonstrate with a comprehensive quota sample that perceived symbolic threats from immigrants are more likely to be activated by RWP campaigns than economic threats.

Exploring the underlying mechanisms of these effects, we found that overall, heuristic processing, such as the reliance on stereotypical beliefs and negative emotions rather than cognitive argument approval of the ads’ actual threat messages, explained the formation of anti-immigrant attitudes in response to RWP ads. With the exception of the text-only economic threat appeal—which had no effect at all on anti-immigrant attitudes—all ads activated negative stereotypes and/or intergroup anxiety toward immigrants, resulting in higher anti-immigrant attitudes. However, in line with previous studies, we found that education had some influence on citizens’ susceptibility to the messages in RWP political communication (Bos et al., 2013; Matthes & Schmuck, 2015). We found that, in particular, lower-educated individuals perceived higher intergroup anxiety and negative stereotypes toward immigrants after the exposure to a text-based symbolic threat appeal. This finding is in line with the assumptions of the HSM, postulating that heuristic processing is particularly likely in low informational or motivational contexts (Chen & Chaiken, 1999). As lower-educated individuals may be less motivated to suppress negative emotional or cognitive evaluations of immigrants, they are more prone to rely on heuristic processes such as stereotyping and negative affect. An alternative explanation may be that lower-educated individuals are less informed about immigration issues and thus more likely to engage in heuristic processing in response to a textual appeal compared to higher-educated individuals. These findings corroborate with Matthes and Schmuck’s (2015) findings, indicating that lower-educated individuals are more inclined to experience intergroup anxiety and have more stereotypic beliefs in response to combined text-image symbolic threat appeals in RWP ads. However, the present study expands these findings by showing that a mere textual symbolic threat message is sufficient to induce heuristic processes such as stereotypical beliefs and anxiety among lower-educated individuals. In interpreting these findings, it is important to note that these effects did not depend on respondents’ underlying political predispositions.

We further investigated how an additional visual image presented in combination with the respective threat appeal influenced anti-immigrant attitudes. To our knowledge, this study is the first to investigate the role of visual images in RWP advertising. Our results show that the inclusion of an attention-grabbing image in RWP ads reinforces the effects of the mere textual appeals on anti-immigrant attitudes and extends them to a broader population. Both combined appeals, the economic and the symbolic appeal, induced stronger anti-immigrant attitudes among all participants when the very same claim was combined with a negative image of immigrants. This finding suggests that everyone is susceptible to negative images in RWP advertising to some degree, which underlines the power of negative images in shaping anti-immigrant attitudes (see also Abraham & Appiah, 2006).

However, we found some differences for the effects of the combined economic and symbolic threat appeal on anti-immigrant attitudes. When combined with a negative image
of immigrants, the economic threat appeal, which was not persuasive at all when viewed in isolation, influenced anti-immigrant attitudes via the activation of negative stereotypes. Yet, the combined economic appeal did not induce cognitive approval of the ad’s textual arguments. In case of the combined symbolic threat appeal, however, we found that exposure to the ad increased not only heuristic processing such as the activation of negative stereotypes and intergroup anxiety, but also led to higher cognitive approval of the arguments presented in the ad (i.e., higher perceived symbolic threats). This finding suggests that the vivid qualities of images enhance the salience and recall of a linked text whose structure in turn guided participants’ interpretation of the symbolic claim (Powell et al., 2015). However, no such effect was found for the economic appeal. This might be explained by a higher congruency of the symbolic message and the image of Muslim immigrants. Research on visual framing (e.g., Powell et al., 2015) suggests that media effects are increased when visual and verbal messages are highly congruent. Thus, although the image we used also pointed to economic threats by depicting poor immigrants, which may harm the country’s economy, the association of Muslim immigrants and cultural infiltration may have been more obvious for the respondents, which increased the effects of the transported message in the symbolic political ad (Powell et al., 2015). In sum, our findings suggest that images in RWP advertising do not only increase heuristic processing, but rather, additionally act together with textual appeals during processes of attitude formation on the premise that they are highly congruent.

Limitations and Future Research

That said, there are some notable limitations of this study. First, we investigated the effects of anti-immigrant populist ads of one specific party, the Austrian Freedom Party. Future research should extend this design and explore the effects of political campaigns of other European RWP parties. Related to this, we used slogans and images that were actually employed in campaigns by the Austrian Freedom Party to ensure high external validity of our results. Although the material used in the study was rather unknown, participants might have been familiar to some elements of the ads. Second, as the current study employed rather complex stimuli (a double newspaper page with several articles and ads), we used a forced-exposure procedure presenting participants for 30 seconds with the newspaper page. This procedure may have hindered selective exposure (see de Vreese & Neijens, 2016; Leiner, Scherr, & Bartsch, 2016). However, we exposed participants to the newspaper page without explicitly mentioning the embedded ad, which highly resembled an actual news reception situation. Hence, participants still had the possibility to avoid reading the embedded ad and expose themselves to other articles, which allowed some form of selective exposure (see Marquart, Matthes, & Rapp, 2016). Furthermore, our stimuli design is more externally valid as compared to exposure to full-screen print ads (e.g., Arendt et al., 2015). Third, we used a particular image in both conditions: the depiction of Muslim immigrants. We employed the same image in both conditions to ensure high internal validity, as different pictures may embody distinct levels of emotionality or negativity, which limits their comparability. However, the lower congruence between the economic textual appeal and the image compared to the symbolic appeal could have reduced the effects of the combined economic appeal. Hence, further research expanding this design by using different images is needed. Fourth, building upon ITT as our central theoretical framework, we only assessed the emotional response to RWP ads in terms of intergroup anxiety. Future research should take into account a broader range of emotions. Finally, we did not include an image-only threat appeal in our experimental
design. However, RWP ads always combine images with some sort of text—at least with an eye-catching slogan. Thus, we refrained from using an image-only appeal, as it does not reflect realistic political advertising practice.

**Implications**

Our findings provide important insights for political communication research by further developing our understanding of how political ads are processed and how textual and visual elements contribute to attitude formation. In doing so, our study underlines the crucial role of images in political campaigns and stresses the importance of devoting more attention to visual elements in political communication research. Furthermore, our study suggests that by morally dividing the people into a “good” in-group and a “bad”, “culprit” out-group, RWP campaigns may harm integration processes and a peaceful cohabitation of different ethnic and religious groups in Western societies. Future research should investigate how we can counteract these negative influences and prevent a stigmatization of immigrants through RWP campaigns. Finally, more public information on how RWP ads influence attitudes toward minority members and immigrants seems warranted. This is particularly crucial against the background of an increasing use of social media in political campaigns, in particular among populist politicians (Engesser, Ernst, Esser, & Büchel, 2016). In the non-mediated environment of social media that is widely under the radar of public regulations, the content of RWP campaigns is about to become even more emotionalized and stereotypical compared to traditional media outlets. Thus, more media literacy programs which inform citizens about the process of stereotyping through political ads are required.

**References**


Effects of Right-Wing Populist Ads


Appendix
Stimulus Materials for Experimental Conditions

Economic Text-only Condition

Combined Economic Condition

Symbolic Text-only Condition

Combined Symbolic Condition

Control Condition (Commercial Ad)