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Matthes, J.; Marquart, F.; Arendt, F.; Wonneberger, A.

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The Selective Avoidance of Threat Appeals in Right-Wing Populist Political Ads: An Implicit Cognition Approach Using Eye-Tracking Methodology

Jörg Matthes, Franziska Marquart, Florian Arendt, and Anke Wonneberger

1 Introduction

Right-wing populist parties increasingly use political poster advertisements depicting negative and threatening images of foreigners, especially framing Muslims as a threat to Western European countries and culture (e.g. Betz, 2013; Marquart, 2013). For instance, parties such as the SVP in Switzerland, the FPÖ in Austria, the Fremskrittspartiet in Norway, or the NPD in Germany apply political poster ads that openly attack minorities and immigrants. These poster ads often depict simple, strongly emotional content, such as praying or screaming Muslims, or women in Burkas. Such advertising images appeal to cultural or symbolic threats which lead to the feeling that the in-group's system of values is being undermined by an out-group (Matthes & Marquart, 2013; Schmuck & Matthes, 2014; Stephan et al., 1998). In fact, a wide body of research (e.g., McConhay & Hough, 1976; Sidanius, Devereux, & Pratto, 1992) suggests that symbolic threats can create negative attitudes toward immigrants and ethnic minorities.

Even though large amounts of money are invested in these political advertising campaigns and they may have important consequences for integration and religious freedom, hardly any research has been concerned with their effects so far. In addition to that, advertising research has mostly ignored the underlying perceptual processes that take place when citizens are exposed to such negative, threatening images. Given the fact that approximately 85 percent of the population are reached by political poster advertisements in European countries (Lessinger, Moke, & Holtz-Bacha, 2003), we need to better understand how threatening ads are perceived and processed by audience members.

This study attempts to fill this pressing research gap and extends previous research in two important ways. First, rather than looking at the effects of such ads, we explore the perceptual processes of selection and avoidance of political threat ads. More specifically, and relying on theorizing in social and cognitive psychology, we distinguish between implicit and explicit attitudes (Gawronski & Bodenhausen, 2006) in order to predict how viewers look at threatening ads. Explicit attitudes are those that people are consciously aware of, they are deliberative, and people can control them. Implicit attitudes, in contrast, are

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"automatic affective reactions resulting from the particular associations that are activated automatically when one encounters a relevant stimulus" (Gawronski & Bodenhausen, 2006, p. 693). Translated to the processing of threatening poster ads, we can theorize that implicit attitudes should predict the spontaneous allocation of attention in which people engage without much effort (Beattie & McGuire, 2012). In fact, political posters are often processed in passing (e.g., in public places) without people investing much cognitive energy. In situations such as these, implicit attitudes are especially strong predictors of human behavior (Gawronski & Bodenhausen, 2006). More specifically, psychological theorizing and some prior research (e.g., Beattie & McGuire, 2012) suggests that negative implicit attitudes toward an attitude object should lead to perceptual avoidance.

As the second innovation in research on right-wing populist political ads, we apply eye-tracking methodology in order to measure citizens' exposure to or avoidance of threatening ad images. Compared to self-reported recall or recognition measurements, this method's key advantage lies in the possibility for the researcher to unobtrusively track perceptual processes that recipients are not necessarily aware of. In fact, unconscious eye movements cannot be assessed with self-reports. In addition to that, eye-tracking allows us to measure perceptual processes in dynamic ways, which is to say that we are able to observe the processing of threatening ads in several phases of a reception process (i.e., initial versus overall attention allocation).

2 Implicit and Explicit Attitudes and Political Advertising Perception

There is a growing stream in consumer and advertising research that distinguishes explicit from implicit attitudes (e.g., Arendt, Marquart & Matthes, 2013; Dimofte, 2010). Explicit attitudes can be described as conscious, controlled, and intentional (Gawronski & Bodenhausen, 2006). The term "explicit" refers to the fact that this type of attitudes is based upon overtly expressed evaluations toward objects. In contrast, implicit attitudes are conceptualized as automatic affective reactions toward attitude objects and are the result of the activation of associations in the memory. This process of activation operates rather automatically (see Bargh, 1994), meaning that individuals are mostly unaware of it (i.e., lack introspective access to the process), that they have mostly no intention to start it (i.e., unintentional), that it is highly efficient (i.e., operating despite conditions of restricted cognitive resources), and mostly uncontrollable (i.e., cannot be altered or stopped). It comes as no surprise that research has revealed that implicit attitudes are related to our spontaneous evaluations of objects (Gawronski & Bodenhausen, 2006), impulsive forms of behavior (Strack & Deutsch, 2004), and can guide rather spontaneous attention allocation (Beattie & McGuire, 2012). The latter is of

primary importance for the present study: It is assumed that when a social stimulus is encountered in the (symbolic) environment (e.g., political ads), cues that activate one concept in memory (e.g., "foreigner") will also activate associated concepts (i.e., cognitive associations or affect, see Greenwald et al., 2002). Thus, when a social stimulus is associated with negative affect in memory, the mere (re)activation of the corresponding internal representation of this social stimulus will also elicit negative automatic affect when encountering this social stimulus in the (symbolic) environment.

To measure explicit attitudes, one can simply ask respondents to evaluate a stimulus (e.g., a brand, party, or social group). Implicit attitudes, in contrast, cannot be measured via introspection, but can be assessed by implicit attitude tests (e.g., the Implicit Association Test, Greenwald et al. 1998) or implicit choice tests, both of which limit the participant's opportunity to control her responses or behaviour.

The differentiation between implicit and explicit attitudes is beneficial for advertising research for several reasons. Research on implicit attitudes offers a theoretical model for understanding why people choose or buy brands without conscious control or deliberative reasons (e.g., Brunel et al., 2004). Implicit attitudes can even predict behaviours which are associated with a high level of deliberative thinking by common sense, such as voting (Glaser & Finn, 2013). Even more importantly, it has been demonstrated that implicit attitudes can explain approach or avoidance behaviour especially in low control and low cost situations with a limited amount of available resources, such as spontaneous product choices or spontaneous orienting reactions (Strack & Deutsch, 2004). However, when people engage in deliberative thinking, the effect of implicit attitudes on behaviour weakens (Strack & Deutsch, 2004).

When citizens are confronted with political poster ads in public situations, it is very unlikely that they invest much cognitive effort in looking at those ads. Since right-wing populist posters often depict negative, threatening images, implicit attitudes may predict whether and how people look at those ads. Based on implicit cognition theory (Strack & Deutsch, 2004), we can predict that positive implicit attitudes toward an attitude object increase approach behaviour. By contrast, negative implicit attitudes toward an attitude object should lead to avoidance behaviour. However, the predictive power of implicit attitudes is strongest when there is not much thinking or deliberation involved (Strack & Deutsch, 2004). When people are asked to look at an ad more attentively, in contrast, their implicit attitude (i.e., their automatic gut reaction) can be overridden by conscious thought.

Beattie and McGuire (2012) were the first to investigate the effects of implicit and explicit attitudes on approach and avoidance behaviour in the context of eye-movements. Their study on environmental images found that a

person's implicit attitude is a "psychologically significant measure since it seems to connect to the pattern of unconscious eye movements towards or away from images connected with environmental damage and climate change. The explicit measures, on the other hand, were not good predictors of attentional focus" (p. 336). Even more importantly, the effects of implicit attitudes on eye-movements were especially present in the first 200 milliseconds after encountering a new stimulus. Translated to threat appeals in political poster ads, we can theorize that negative implicit attitudes toward foreigners should lead to avoidance of threatening images of negatively depicted outgroups such as foreigners.

This effect, however, should be especially present for the first fixation, that is, at the beginning of stimulus reception. It is well known that a fixation signifies the processing of information, and the first fixation measures the immediate reaction not driven by conscious thought (Gidlöf, Wallin, Dewhurst, & Holmqvist, 2013). When people have more time to look at a political ad, the effects of implicit attitudes should decrease. The reason is that, as time goes by, people start to engage in more elaborated and reflective processing. In other words, when individuals are confronted with political poster ads, automatic gut reactions should guide eye-movements only in the beginning, when a spontaneous reaction takes place. This process is at the heart of implicit cognition because it is rather automatic, unconscious, and fast (Strack & Deutsch, 2004). After this initial period, subjects are more likely to engage in conscious and reflective processing. It follows that implicit attitudes should predict the automatic allocation of attention during the first fixation of a poster. Explicit attitudes, in contrast, should have no effect on this fast, spontaneous, and automatic process. After this first spontaneous period of attention allocation, implicit attitudes should decrease and explicit attitudes should therefore increase in their importance. The reason is that explicit attitudes are based on propositional reasoning that may correct or override spontaneous responses to stimuli (Gawronski & Bodenhausen 2006). This leads to two our basic hypotheses:

H1: Negative implicit attitudes should predict the perceptual avoidance of a negative stimulus in the first phase of reception (i.e., first fixation).
H2: Negative explicit attitudes should predict the perceptual avoidance of a negative stimulus after the first period of reception (i.e., overall fixation).

3 Method

To test our hypotheses, we conducted an experimental laboratory study combining survey data with eye-tracking measurement and the Implicit Association Test (IAT). A total of 63 students of an introductory lecture at a large Austrian university were recruited in exchange for extra course credit. Of

these participants, 18 had to be excluded from the analysis due to data lacking in one of the three individual parts of the study (i.e., no eye-movement data), resulting in 45 participants who ranged from 19 to 52 in age (M = 23.02, SD = 5.19; 30.4% male).

3.1 Procedure and Stimuli

Participants attended the study in individual sessions of 20 minutes each. In order to conceal the purpose of the investigation, the investigator told them that, due to time considerations, they were to participate in two independent studies. They first took the Implicit Association Test (Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwarz, 1998) and a short survey, after which they were asked to switch computers and take a seat in front of the eye-tracker. The investigator briefly explained the procedure and functioning of the eye-tracker, administered a calibration and then started displaying the stimuli. After the recording of eye movements, participants were debriefed and dismissed.

During the eye-tracking session, participants saw a total of 17 different poster ads (5 political posters of the right-wing populist Austrian Freedom Party, FPÖ, 6 posters of other political parties, and 7 commercial posters showing non-political, unrelated content) for 5 seconds each. The eye-tracking data were obtained with a stationary SMI iView X™ RED eye-tracker, and eye-positions were sampled at 120 Hz. The order of all posters presented was randomized, and a small fixation cross in between stimuli ensured that participants centered their glance after each poster. For the purpose of this study, we focus on reporting the findings of one political poster only. It showed the head of FPÖ party leader Heinz-Christian Strache in front of the Austrian national flag to the left, accompanied by three threatening photographs to the right (a group of furious men clenching fists and shouting; a large number of individuals bent forward and praying in a park; three veiled women in black burqas). In addition, a headline ("Our country for our children!"), three bullet points ("No Islamization of Austria; Deportation of criminal foreigners; Against over-foreignization") and the party's logo were depicted as well. The poster ad was designed for the purpose of this study, but bears resemblance to other political posters. The poster can be obtained by the authors upon request.

3.2 Measurement

The eye-tracker recorded participants' eye movements during stimuli presentation permanently. However, for reasons outlined above, we especially looked at the duration of individuals' first fixation on the three small threat images (i.e., the relevant area of interest). That is, the viewing time allocated to the area of the three threat photographs for the very first time before

participants' gaze moved away was recorded in milliseconds (M = 180.0, SD = 124.32; see Gidlöf et al., 2013). In addition, we also measured overall duration of all fixations on the threat area of interest.

Participants' implicit attitudes were measured by taking the Implicit Association Test (IAT; Greenwald, et al., 1998), in which individuals were asked to classify names as belonging either to the category "Austrian" or "Foreigner". In addition, they had to file attributes as belonging to either a "positive" or "negative" category, the underlying assumption being that categorization should be faster if the association between target (i.e. names) and attributes is more readily accessible in memory. In the analysis, a scoring algorithm was used, with higher values indicating a stronger negative automatic affective reaction toward foreigners (M = .548, SD = .375).

Individuals were asked for their explicit attitudes toward foreigners with two items (α = .63; 1 = very positive; 7 = very negative; M = 3.19, SD = .86). In addition to age and gender, several other controls were inserted into the model as well, including prior attitudes toward the FPÖ (1 = very positive; 7 = very negative; M = 6.22, SD = 1.04), respondents' country of origin (54% Austria), and frequency of contact to foreign citizens in their family, friends, neighborhood or at the university (4 items, α = .68; 1 = never; 7 = very often; M = 4.23, SD = 1.42).

4 Results

Results of a regression model explaining the duration of fixation is depicted in Table 1. As can be seen, the control variables do not explain the duration of looking at the threat appeal during the first fixation. In line with hypothesis 1, Table 1 reveals that implicit attitudes have a negative effect on the duration of the first fixation (b = -143.38, $p < .05$). That means, when subjects fixate those negative images for the first time after being presented the stimulus, people with negative implicit attitudes avoid the threat appeal. By contrast, the more positive the implicit attitudes toward foreigners are, the more likely subjects are to approach the threat images with their eye-movements. Also in line with implicit cognition theory, explicit attitudes have no effect on attention allocation during this first, spontaneous process. In total, 28% of the variance of the duration of the first fixation is explained by this model.

Also in line with what implicit cognition theory would suggest, implicit attitudes do not predict the duration of the fixation of the threat appeals for the whole period of five seconds. That is, as time goes by, implicit attitudes cannot explain approach and avoidance processes in eye-movements. Surprisingly, and in contrast to hypothesis 2, however, explicit attitudes could not predict the fixation time during the whole period of stimulus perception either (see Table 1). As an additional finding, Austrian students, as opposed to participants from

other countries, tend to took longer at the threat appeal during the whole five seconds (i.e. country of origin being a significant predictor for overall fixation duration, $b = -376.14$, $p < .05$)

Moreover, we also looked at the amount of time it took participants to first center their eye-movements on our relevant are of interest (i.e., the three threatening images). It could be argued that negative implicit attitudes toward a threatening stimulus do also increase the speed it takes for individuals to locate and attend to the threat on a political poster, that is, the threat manages to grab participants' initial attention. However, this additional analysis shows that neither implicit nor explicit attitudes significantly predict the speed of attention allocation (i.e., entry time, not shown in Table 1) to the threatening pictures.

Table 1: Fixation Duration of Negative Threat Appeals

Independent variables	*Fixation Duration (First Fixation, in ms)*		*Fixation Duration (Overall, in ms)*	
	b	(SD)	B	(SD)
Gender	16.07	38.63	-21.23	-.02
Age	.563	3.48	1.91	.02
Country of Origin	-25.346	37.20	-376.14*	163.33
Party Identification	19.729	19.23	8.01	84.41
Contact with Foreigners	-9.14	13.09	50.39	57.47
Explicit Attitude	15.37	22.92	-14.27	100.63
Implicit Attitude	-143.38*	53.19	-352.29	233.50
R^2	.28		.199	

Note: * p < .05

Finally, in an exploratory fashion, we also looked at the effects of implicit and explicit attitudes on the fixation of the other parts of the advertisement (i.e., the candidate and the arguments). Yet neither explicit nor implicit attitudes could explain the amount of attention that people devoted to the image of Heinz-Christian Strache or the three text arguments that were depicted. It follows that implicit attitudes can predict initial attention allocation for threatening images, but not for the other non-threatening parts of the advertisements.

Furthermore, another exploratory analysis looked at the consequences of perceptual avoidance during the first fixation (as a result of implicit attitudes). Surprisingly, we found that avoiding the threatening images has no consequences for the eye-movements regarding the remaining parts of the

advertisement. The duration of the first fixation is also unrelated to the duration of the first fixation of the Strache image as well the displayed text. This means that negative implicit attitudes make people to shy away from the whole ad content: They do not allocate their attention to other parts of the ad when they avoid the threatening images.

5 Discussion

This study is the first to demonstrate that implicit attitudes can guide the perception of threatening political advertisements. The key innovation is that we separated explicit thought-based attitudes from automatic gut reactions that guide our behaviour in spontaneous actions. Although the distinction between explicit and implicit attitudes is well established in consumer and advertising research, there are no studies investigating the consequences of implicit versus explicit attitudes in the context of political advertising. Moreover, rather than looking at the effects of political ads, we attempted to shed light on perceptual processes that have only gained little attention in political advertising research. Without studying the perception of ads, we cannot fully understand their effects on cognitions and attitudes.

We have investigated perceptual processes by applying eye-tracking methodology in order to answer the questions if and how people expose themselves to political threat ads. Such threat ads are increasingly used by right-wing populist parties throughout Europe. Explaining how people look at such ads is therefore of great practical and theoretical importance.

The findings of this study revealed that implicit but not explicit attitudes guide eye movements during the first fixation of the threat appeal. The first fixation is important because it is the first moment during the reception of the ad in which information is processed. One could argue that such a finding is not relevant in practical terms because there were no effects of implicit attitudes on overall fixation duration. However, we have to keep the nature of our design in mind. We exposed subjects to the ad for a total of five seconds. Five seconds of full attention is more than political posters are likely to get when shown in public places. Moreover, based on widespread advertising scepticism, most people try to avoid political poster ads and it is unlikely that they get full attention. In fact, political posters are usually processed in passing, and people rarely invest much cognitive energy when looking at them. In other words, we may look at political posters in the twinkling of an eye and, therefore, the processes that take place at the first fixation are of crucial importance. It was also interesting to learn that the avoidance of threat perception did not lead subjects to look at other parts of the ad, such as the slogan. One may conclude that an avoidance reaction based on implicit attitudes harms processing of the whole advertisment.

A number of limitations need to be noted. A total of N= 45 is small compared to experimental research but quite large in eye-tracking studies (Beattie & McGuire, 2012). However, the sample is problematic due to the lack of variance in education and age which are key variables in the context of right-wing populism (Matthes & Marquart, 2013; Schmuck & Matthes, 2014). At least, a number of important statistical controls that explain responses to political ads could be included. Also, given that our ad was created for the purpose of this study, generalization of our threat ad to other political ads needs to be tested in future research. Our ad was comprised of three main parts, the candidate, the threat images, and the campaign arguments. We cannot generalize our findings to other right-wing populist ads that do not employ threatening images.

These limitations notwithstanding, the study has some interesting practical implications. When right-wing populist parties use threat appeals in their campaigns, our findings seem to suggest that they may turn off especially those people they wish to reach with their ads: Those with negative gut feelings toward foreigners. Yet it is important to note that people with negative implicit attitudes toward foreigners are not necessarily those who openly support right-wing parties. Threat appeals in political ads may therefore discourage potential voters by preventing them from information processing during an important spontaneous initial phase of impression formation.

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