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No-go zone for Jews? Examining how news on anti-Semitic attacks increases victim blaming

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Abstract: Antisemitism is on the rise. Recently, discussions have considered so-called “no-go zones for Jews” (city areas Jews should avoid to reduce the likelihood of being attacked). In this context and drawing from attribution theory, we examined if news consumers perceive a Jewish hate crime victim as partly responsible for being attacked when news coverage explicitly emphasizes that the victim displayed religious symbols (kippah) in a certain inner-city location. We conducted a quota-based survey experiment (N = 392) in Germany (4 groups, between-subjects design) and randomly exposed participants to news coverage about an anti-Semitic attack. The article either emphasized that the Jewish victim displayed religious symbols (kippah) or not, and highlighted the specific location of the attack (Berlin synagogue vs. deprived inner-city district of Berlin). Moderated mediation analysis suggested that participants perceived the victim’s behavior to be more provocative when the news article highlighted that the victim displayed religious symbols and when the attack occurred in a deprived Berlin district. Yet, effects were only detected for individuals with low (vs. high) levels of education. Perceived provocativeness in turn increased victim blaming indicating that some individuals indirectly regarded the Jewish victim to be partly responsible for being attacked.

Keywords: Anti-Semitic attitudes, hate crime, perceived provocativeness, victim blaming

1 Introduction

Antisemitism is on the rise in Europe and in other countries around the world (Eddy, 2021; Kantor Center, 2021; see Frindte, Wettig, and Wammetsberger, 2005;

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Voigtländer and Voth, 2015). In Germany, antisemitism including anti-Semitic hate crimes are at a 20-year high (Röhling, 2021; Steinke, 2020). For instance, in 2018 a Jewish person wearing a kippah was attacked with a belt in Berlin (Noack and Beck, 2018). The incidence received international attention and triggered an intensive debate about anti-Semitic attitudes in Germany and so-called “no-go zones for Jews”; inner-city districts in which Jews are recommended not to identify as Jews (e. g., by wearing religious symbols) (Angelos, 2019). This debate over no-go zones started a discussion about the role of news media reporting and Jewish victims’ own responsibility for being attacked (Steinke, 2020).

That is, news coverage highlighting that a Jewish victim was wearing religious symbols in a certain city district may be perceived as provocative behavior by (some) news consumers and may increase the attribution of responsibility, a phenomenon known as victim blaming (Eigenberg and Garland, 2008; Grubb and Turner, 2012; von Sikorski and Saumer, 2021). Put differently, when news coverage emphasizes certain informational cues—e.g., Jewish victim wore religious symbols in an inner-city district—when reporting about attacks on Jewish citizens, victim blaming tendencies may become more likely; although, the attacker is (of course) solely responsible for his or her actions.

Previous research has examined the prevalence of antisemitism (e. g., Bergmann, 2008; Steinke, 2020) and predictors of anti-Semitic attitudes (e. g., Bilewicz, Winiewski, Kofta, and Wójcik, 2013; Cohen, Jussim, Harber, and Bhasin, 2009; Frindte et al., 2005; Voigtländer and Voth, 2015), such as a person’s individual level of formal education (Gibson and Duch, 1992; Mocan and Raschke, 2016; Zick, 2015), beliefs in conspiracy theories (Kofta, Soral, and Bilewicz, 2020), and authoritarianism and social dominance orientation (Frindte et al., 2005; also see Holz, 2010).

Also, it has been studied how media depictions affect victim blaming tendencies in news consumers (e. g., Gravelin, Biernat, and Bucher, 2019), for example, in regard to topics such as sexual harassment and rape (von Sikorski and Saumer, 2021). This research revealed that minor variations in portraying victims can increase victim blaming (Gravelin et al., 2019). To date, however, it remains unclear how news coverage about anti-Semitic attacks affects victim blaming and what role information regarding religious symbols and location of attack play in this context.

Journalists tend to report about crime when incidents can be deemed newsworthy. That is, a scuffle between two adults on a street is not *per se* newsworthy, but when it turns out that a person was attacked because he or she wore religious symbols (e. g., kippah), journalists (especially in Germany; see Steinke, 2020) tend to report about an incident (i. e., anti-Jewish hate crime) as they may rate it as unexpected (Boudana and Segev, 2017) and of “social significance” (Shoe-

maker and Cohen, 2005, p. 8; see Harcup and O'Neill, 2017) and thus newsworthy. However, looking for certain informational cues that increase the news value of an article may (at the same time) increase victim blaming tendencies in (some) news consumers.

Drawing from provocation narrative theory (Boudana and Segev, 2017) and attribution theory (Fiske and Taylor, 1991), the aim of the present research was twofold. First, based on a quota-based online experiment in Germany, we examined how media coverage about an anti-Jewish hate crime highlighting that a Jewish victim wore religious symbols (or not) and location of attack (deprived inner-city area vs in front of a synagogue) affects news consumers' perception of provocativeness and, in turn, victim blaming. Second, we analyzed if effects vary and are moderated by an individual's level of education (low/high).

2 Effects on perceived provocative behavior

The role of religious symbols in the public sphere is frequently debated and regularly triggers widespread discussion regarding religious freedom, but also in terms of (alleged) norm transgressions (Barnett, 2013). In modern western societies (like Germany) wearing religious symbols in public is not only allowed, but a fundamental right protected by law. Wearing an Islamic headscarf, a turban (i. e., Sikh faith), or kippah (Jewish faith) is one way to express freedom of religion. However, based on provocation narrative theory (Boudana and Segev, 2017) individuals may perceive certain informational cues like religious symbols as provocative.

According to the theory and first empirical evidence (Driessens, 2013), perceived provocativeness may increase when individuals perceive a behavior as unexpectedly violating norms. Based on this, we theorized that a victim's behavior may be perceived as an unexpected norm violation and thus as provocative by (some) news consumers, when news coverage emphasizes that a Jewish victim openly displayed religious symbols. That is, (some) news consumers may not interpret mediated information about a Jewish victim wearing religious symbols as an act of expressing freedom of religion but (falsely) as a behavior that is challenging and provocative to others (see Steinke, 2020). In line with this, we further theorized that effects on perceived provocativeness will be especially pronounced when news coverage highlights that a Jewish person displayed religious symbols in a deprived inner-city area, compared to wearing Jewish religious symbols in an area close to a synagogue, as the religious context (i. e., synagogue) may lower perceived provocativeness (see Boudana and Segev, 2017; Driessens, 2013), as we articulated in our hypotheses below (see Figure 1 for the full model).

H1: The behavior of a Jewish victim of a hate crime is perceived to be provocative to a greater degree, when news coverage highlights that the victim displayed religious symbols (i. e., kippah, Star of David) compared to no information on religious symbols.

H2: The behavior of a Jewish victim of a hate crime is perceived to be provocative to a greater degree, when news coverage highlights that the attack occurred in a deprived inner-city area compared to an attack that occurred outside of a synagogue.

H3: Provocative behavior is perceived to be highest, when news coverage highlights both that the victim displayed religious symbols and when the attack occurred in a deprived inner-city area.

3 Effects on victim blaming

Drawing from attribution theory as a general framework and Fiske and Taylor's (1991) more specific understanding of attribution theory, we further theorized that perceived provocativeness will positively predict victim blaming. Victim blaming refers to the tendency to (partially) blame victims of negative events for the resulting consequences (Eigenberg and Garland, 2008). The phenomenon has been intensely studied in psychology (e. g., Gravelin et al., 2019) and criminology research (e. g., Erentzen, Schuller, and Gardner, 2021). Furthermore, previous research revealed the importance of certain media portrayals in this context. For instance, the specific framing of news headlines affected news consumers' assessments of a rape case. Specifically, headlines that included so-called rape myths reduced male individuals' perceived guiltiness of a potential perpetrator (Franiuk, Seefelt, and Vandellos, 2008) and specific rape victim portrayals have been shown to increase victim blaming tendencies in news consumers (see Gravelin et al., 2019). That is, minor variations in portraying victims in the media like mentioning that a victim drank alcohol or information on a victim's appearance (e. g., victim was wearing a mini skirt, is physically attractive) can increase victim blaming tendencies (see Gravelin et al., 2019; von Sikorski and Saumer, 2021). Perceived provocativeness is a relevant predictor of victim blaming (van der Bruggen and Grubb, 2014) in contexts such as sexual harassment and rape. Such tendencies to victim blame can be explained by attribution theory (Fiske and Taylor, 1991; Heider, 1958). According to Heider (1958), attributions can be viewed on a continuum from *external attributions* (based on the situation) to *internal attributions* (based on a person's behavior). When individuals perceive higher (compared to lower) levels of victim provocativeness—due to news coverage emphasizing a victim wearing religious symbols or being in a certain location—internal attributions become more likely. Internal attributions

that assign the cause of a behavior to a victim's personal characteristics or motivations (compared to other situational outside forces; see Fiske and Taylor, 1991) make it more likely that individuals perceive the victim to be partly responsible for an attack. For instance, Lewis and Johnson (1989) showed that higher levels of perceived provocativeness resulted in increased levels of internal attributions toward a victim. Therefore, we predict:

H4: Perceived provocative behavior positively predicts victim blaming.

Furthermore, previous research suggests that conspiracy theory beliefs (e. g., Kofta et al., 2020), higher (vs. lower) levels authoritarianism and social dominance orientation (e. g., Frindte et al., 2005), and education (e. g., Carvacho et al., 2013; Gibson and Duch, 1992; Mocan and Raschke, 2016; Zick, 2015; among other variables, see also Holz, 2010) may positively affect anti-Semitic attitudes. In the present research, we focus on an individual's level of education, as the moderating role of (low vs high) education has not been systematically examined in media effects studies in this context. That is, certain group norms, for instance, basic values such as freedom of opinion and freedom of religion are more salient among highly educated individuals (Kołczyńska, 2020). Thus, when individuals are generally more open to basic values such as freedom of opinion and freedom of religion, they may generally perceive behaviors that relate to freedom of religion (i. e., publicly displaying religious symbols) as less provocative. Based on this reasoning, we expected that more highly-educated individuals show lower levels of perceived provocative behavior compared to more lowly-educated individuals. Thus, we expected dampened effects (H1-H3) for highly educated individuals, as articulated in H5:

H5: Highly educated individuals show lower levels of perceived provocative behavior of the Jewish victim compared to less educated individuals.

4 Method

Participants and procedure

We conducted an experiment using a quota-based sample in Germany collected by panel provider Respondi ($N = 392$, ages ranging from 18 to 69 years, $M_{age} = 45.4$ years, $SD = 15.72$; 50.5 % female; original sample: $N = 399$, 7 cases were dropped because of incomplete data). Participants were randomly assigned to one of four experimental groups (G) (between-subject design), G1: no symbols/synagogue ($n =$

102); G2: symbols/synagogue ($n = 95$); G3: no symbols/deprived area ($n = 103$); G4: symbols/deprived area ($n = 92$). News articles dealt with a physical attack (i. e., hate crime) on a Jewish person in Berlin and were based on authentic news reports about anti-Semitic attacks in Germany. The appearance and logo of the German news site *Der Spiegel* referred to the source of the articles. *Spiegel* is a quality news outlet and a German flagship medium with a large reach. All four articles were completely identical and only differed regarding experimental variations (i. e., religious symbols: yes/no; place of attack: deprived inner-city area/in front of a synagogue). Variations were highlighted both in the headline and in the text of the articles. Wearing of symbols was emphasized in such a way that the victim was either wearing Jewish religious symbols (i. e., kippah and Star of David necklace) or not. In addition, the location of the incident was varied so that the attack took place either in front of a Berlin synagogue, or in a deprived inner-city area of Berlin (Neukölln; see Angelos, 2019).

Measurement

Perceived provocative behavior was measured using three items (1 = disagree to 7 = agree; $\alpha = .89$, $M = 2.04$, $SD = 1.38$). Example item: “The victim provoked the behavior of the perpetrator”. Victim blaming was gauged based on Abrams, Viki, Masser, and Bohner (2003). The four items were combined into an index (1 = disagree to 7 = agree; $\alpha = .88$, $M = 2.23$, $SD = 1.42$; see online Appendix for all variables). The education variable was dichotomized to differentiate between a rather low ($n = 250$; i. e., no degree, compulsory school degree, secondary school degree) and rather high formal education level ($n = 142$, i. e., university entrance qualification). Manipulation checks regarding the variations showed a successful manipulation.

Research transparency statement

Data, materials, and the appendix are available at <https://osf.io/8qjez/>.

5 Results

To test the hypotheses, linear regression analysis using the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2018) for SPSS was conducted (the no religious symbols/in front of synagogue condition served as reference category in all conditions). All models included polit-

ical orientation, gender and preconception of Judaism and Jews as covariates (excluding covariates produced similar results). First, results did not support H1 and showed that the news article highlighting religious symbols (vs no symbols highlighted) had no effect on perceived provocative behavior ($b = 0.09$, $SE = 0.18$, $p = .627$). Second, highlighting that an attack happened in a deprived inner-city area with no religious symbols also did not affect perceived provocative behavior in participants ($b = 0.08$, $SE = 0.18$, $p = .663$, no support for H2). However, results supported H3 and showed a significant effect for the combination condition (i. e., combination of religious symbols/deprived inner-city area vs no symbols/synagogue). That is, participants perceived the victim's behavior to be significantly more provocative in the combination condition ($b = 0.42$, $SE = 0.18$, $p = .021$). In line with H4, provocative behavior positively and significantly predicted victim blaming ($b = 0.78$, $SE = 0.03$, $p < .001$). Next, results supported H5 showing a moderating effect for formal education. While individuals with *low* levels of education were affected ($b = 0.78$, $SE = 0.23$, $p = .001$) highly educated individuals were not ($b = -0.22$, $SE = 0.30$, $p = .470$). Finally, results supported the theorized moderated mediation model (Figure 1; Index of moderated mediation: $b = -0.77$, $Boot-SE = 0.29$, $BootCI [-1.36, -0.22]$) revealing that the combination condition affected provocative behavior and in turn increased victim blaming for individuals with lower levels of education ($ab = 0.60$, $Boot-SE = 0.20$, $BootCI [0.23, 1.00]$). There was no direct effect of the condition on victim blaming ($c' = -0.03$, $Boot-SE = 0.12$, $BootCI [-0.26, 0.20]$).

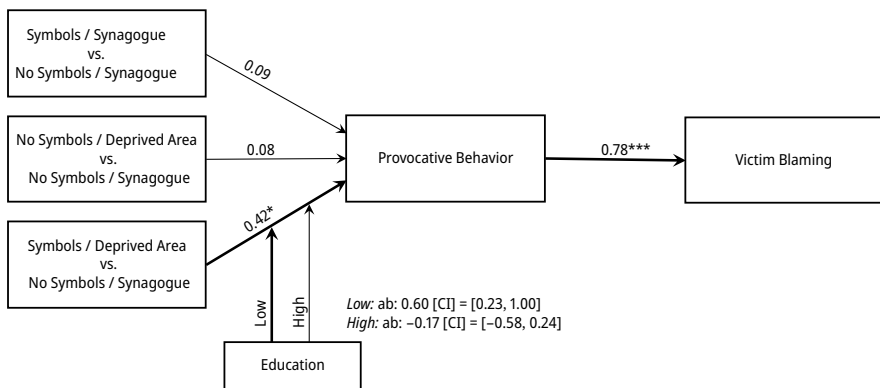


Figure 1: Moderated mediation model. Effects of condition, provocative behavior on victim blaming.

Note. Model showing unstandardized coefficients for effects of the three conditions (compared to the reference category) on perceived provocative behavior. Education only affected the combination condition (Symbols/Deprived Area). Bold lines indicate significant effects. Significances: * $p < .05$, *** $p < .001$.

Table 1: Linear regression models, N = 392.

Variables	Provocative Behavior (mediator)		Victim Blaming	
	M1.1	M1.2	M2.1	M2.2
Constant	1.89(0.14)***	2.60(0.43)***	0.56(0.10)***	1.69(0.29)***
noID_Syn/ID_Syn	0.07(0.20)	0.09(0.18)	−0.00(0.12)	−0.02(0.12)
noID_Syn/noID_DA	0.12(0.19)	0.08(0.18)	−0.01(0.12)	−0.05(0.11)
noID_Syn/ID_DA	0.42(0.20)*	0.42(0.18)*	−0.05(0.12)	−0.03(0.12)
Provocative Behavior			0.83(0.03)***	0.78(0.03)***
Political Orientation		0.15(0.06)**		0.02(0.04)
Gender		0.26(0.13)*		−0.18(0.08)
Preconception of Judaism and Jews		−0.33(0.05)***		−0.16(0.03)***
Adj. R ²	.013	.167***	.650***	.675***

Notes. noID_Syn = no symbols in front of synagogue; ID_Syn = symbols in front of synagogue; noID_DA = no symbols in deprived area; ID_DA = symbols in deprived area. Models M1.1 and M2.1 are calculated without control variables, M1.2 and M2.2 with control variables. Coefficients in the cells: *b* = unstandardized regression weights, *SE* = standard errors with significances, **p* < .05, ***p* < .01, ****p* < .001.

6 Discussion

It is a fundamental right for citizens in modern democratic societies to practice their religion, wear religious symbols, and move about all locations, cities, and regions. Yet victims of crimes are often blamed for attacks because they are perceived as provoking perpetrators. The current research highlights this tendency by suggesting that news consumers see victims as blame-worthy when news coverage emphasizes that they both wear religious symbols and go to certain areas (i. e., deprived inner-city regions). In these situations, victims are seen as more provocative, thus inciting greater victim blaming tendencies.

These findings support and extend previous findings on provocation narrative theory (Boudana and Segev, 2017) and research on victim blaming (Gravelin et al., 2019; van der Bruggen and Grubb, 2014). However, our findings also reveal that only the combination of religious symbols and location of attack (i. e., deprived inner-city area) indirectly increases victim blaming, while neither informational cue in isolation does. We posit that the combination of both religious symbols and location may have led participants to perceive the victim’s behavior as inappropriate; future research should further test this possibility. The current research also highlighted the importance of considering the role of news consumers’ education. Effects were only observed for those with lower (and not higher) levels of education, supporting

and extending findings of previous research (Gibson and Duch, 1992; Mocan and Raschke, 2016; Zick, 2015).

The present results have several important implications. First, they add to the growing corpus of literature on antisemitism and anti-Semitic attitudes (e. g., Baugut, 2021; Imhoff and Banse, 2009; Voigtländer and Voth, 2015) and improve our understanding of how news coverage about anti-Semitic hate crimes can affect victim blaming tendencies (see Erentzen et al., 2021). Second, the results show that news coverage may (inadvertently) contribute to forms of secondary victimization (Steinke, 2020) of hate crime victims. That is, a person is first victimized by being physically attacked and then media coverage (inadvertently) victimizes the person again, as news consumers use certain cues to attribute responsibility to the victim. In this context the question arises how the journalistic dilemma—certain news values (e. g., victim displayed religious symbols in a deprived inner-city district) increase the likelihood that journalists report about an incident in the first place (Harcup and O'Neill, 2017), highlighting respective cues (at the same time) indirectly increases victim blaming—can be resolved. Future research should test if alternative forms of reporting about anti-Semitic hate crimes (e. g., emphasizing freedom of religion and the natural right of citizens to publicly wear religious symbols in any location) may reduce victim blaming tendencies, especially in individuals with lower levels of formal education. Third, the present findings have important implications for journalists in the newsroom. Journalists should be sensitive and carefully scrutinize which informational cues they highlight when reporting about anti-Semitic hate crimes, as not doing so may inadvertently contribute to victim blaming tendencies in news consumers.

7 Limitations

The present research has some limitations. We employed a quota-based sample in Germany and believe our findings should generalize to other cultural contexts (e. g., other European countries). Yet, future research should examine this assumption also testing if the effects replicate for different types of attacks and victims (e. g., age, gender), and in rural areas. We used perceived provocativeness as our mediator variable. Future research should further examine perceived provocativeness and the role of perceived unexpectedness and perceived norm violations in regard to a victim's behavior in this context. Also, in the present study the perpetrator of the attack was unidentified (i. e., still under investigation). Future research should examine potential effects of different types of preparators (e. g., right-wing extremist, Islamic terrorist, etc.) on victim blaming tendencies. In the present study,

we focused on the moderating role of education. Future research should test other important variables in this context, for instance, the moderating role of beliefs in conspiracy theories (Kofta et al., 2020) and the impact of differing degrees of authoritarianism (Frindte et al., 2005).

8 Conclusion

The present study applies the victim blaming framework to anti-Semitic hate crimes. The results reveal that news coverage about a Jewish hate crime victim's behavior is perceived as more provocative and, in turn, increases victim blaming, when an article highlights that a victim displayed religious symbols in a deprived inner-city area. Yet, effects were only detectable in individuals with rather low levels of education (and not for individuals with high levels of education), suggesting that these individuals support the idea of so-called “no go areas for Jews” at least to a certain extent and when a Jewish citizen chooses to publicly display religious symbols.

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