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References to nationality in crime reporting: Effects on perceived news credibility and the moderating role of xenophobia

Nennung der Staatsangehörigkeit in der Kriminalitätsberichterstattung: Auswirkungen auf die wahrgenommene Glaubwürdigkeit von Nachrichten unter dem moderierenden Einfluss fremdenfeindlicher Einstellungen

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Abstract: In many Western countries, right-wing populists have accused mainstream media of disguising criminals' foreign origins for the sake of political correctness. To avert a loss in credibility among certain audience segments, an increasing number of news media have therefore made it their policy to always report the nationality of perpetrators. Yet, whether references to nationality or the absence thereof affect credibility perceptions among audiences has not been empirically established. A between-subjects experimental study (N = 261) was conducted in Germany to fill this gap. The findings show that the effect of references to nationality on credibility perceptions depends substantially on news consumers' pre-existing social attitudes. Among xenophobic participants, references to perpetrators as foreign citizens enhanced perceptions of media credibility; the opposite tended to be true for participants with low xenophobia. Practical implications for news practitioners and avenues for future research are discussed.

Keywords: Credibility, Experiment, News Media, Stereotype, Xenophobia

Zusammenfassung: Rechtspopulist*innen vieler westlicher Länder werfen den Mainstream-Medien vor, die ausländische Herkunft von Straftäter*innen aus Gründen der politischen Korrektheit zu verschleiern. Um einen Glaubwürdigkeitsverlust bei bestimmten Zuschauersegmenten zu vermeiden, entscheiden sich daher immer mehr Nachrichtenmedien dazu, stets die Staatsangehörigkeit der Täter*innen zu nennen. Ob die Nennung der Staatsangehörigkeit einen Einfluss auf die Glaubwürdigkeitswahrnehmung des Publikums hat, ist jedoch nicht empirisch belegt. Um diese Lücke zu schließen, wurde in Deutschland eine web-basierte experimentelle Studie (*N* = 261) durchgeführt. Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass der Effekt der Staatsangehörigkeitsnennung auf die wahrgenommene Glaubwürdigkeit von Nachrichten wesentlich von den bereits bestehenden sozialen Einstellungen der Nachrichtenkonsument*innen abhängt. So bewerteten Teilnehmer*innen mit fremdenfeindlichen Einstellungen Nachrichtenartikel, in denen die Täter*innen als ausländische Staatsbürger*innen beschrieben wurden, als besonders glaubwürdig; bei Teilnehmer*innen mit geringer Fremdenfeindlichkeit zeigte sich ein umgekehrter Effekt. Der Diskussionsteil der Studie widmet sich den praktischen Implikationen dieser Befunde sowie möglichen Aspekten zukünftiger Forschung.

Schlagwörter: Glaubwürdigkeit, Experiment, Nachrichten, Stereotype, Fremdenfeindlichkeit

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1. Introduction

In several European countries, such as Germany, Austria, or Sweden, the question of whether news media should inform the public about the nationality of criminals is controversial (Brown, 2016; Herczeg & Pöttker, 2018; Semenova, 2017). In this strongly polarized debate, one camp argues that a perpetrator's nationality is irrelevant information that only fosters the stigmatization of ethnic minorities. The other camp insists that news media should not withhold information but let audience members decide for themselves what information they consider essential. Right-wing populists in particular have sparked the debate by consistently accusing the news media of deliberately deceiving the public (Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019; Haller & Holt, 2019; Krämer, 2018). According to their narrative, the mainstream media censor information about the foreign backgrounds of criminals to prevent public sentiments that would disrupt the journalists' immigration-friendly agenda (Haller & Holt, 2019; Krämer, 2018).

Meanwhile, right-wing alternative media have made it their unique selling point to highlight whenever the nationality of a perpetrator is foreign (Holt, 2019). As a consequence, mainstream news media have felt pressured to offset the alternative media's competitive advantage among certain audience segments by referring to perpetrators' foreign nationalities as well (Holt, 2019; Krämer, 2018). Yet, the mainstream media's strategic approaches have been inconsistent. While some have chosen to name the perpetrator's nationality only when they consider it necessary for the audience to understand the incident, others have decided to always name it, regardless of whether the nationality is foreign or domestic. Others still inherently refuse to refer to perpetrators' nationalities out of ethical concerns. These concerns are not unfounded: Research has shown that crime-related news reporting that refers to perpetrators as ethnic minority members tends to increase the stigmatization and stereotyping of the respective ethnic minorities (e.g., Dixon, 2007, 2008; Domke, 2001).

However, as has been argued, omitting to name perpetrators' nationality to prevent racist sentiments within the public, may trigger unintended negative effects as well. If a growing number of audience members suspects mainstream media to censor information and fundamentally question their credibility, it paves the way for a more polarized, misinformed, and fragmented society (van Dalen, 2019). Essentially, mainstream news media depend on being perceived as credible information sources to fulfill their socially relevant mission of informing the public (Porlezza & Russ-Mohl, 2013; van Dalen, 2019). Consequently, it is not only worthwhile to investigate how references to perpetrators' nationalities may foster racist sentiments, but also whether the lack of such information may lower the perceived news credibility among certain audience segments.

Yet, hitherto, the effects on audiences' news credibility perceptions have not been investigated. The lack of scholarly attention can likely be explained by the fact that the debate has only gained momentum in recent years due to the rise of right-wing populism and increasing pressures on mainstream media from right-leaning users in the digital public sphere. The aim of this study is, therefore, to provide first empirical evidence by investigating how the presentation of perpetra-

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tors' nationalities affects audience members' credibility perceptions toward crime-related news. For this purpose, a web-based survey experiment with a single-factor (foreign nationality reference vs. domestic nationality reference vs. no nationality reference), between-subjects design (N = 261) was run. Essentially, the experiment tested whether effects would be moderated by individuals' pre-existing degree of xenophobia. It was expected that the stronger the individuals' xenophobic attitudes, the lower the perceived credibility of crime-related news items, which do not refer to the perpetrator as a foreign citizen, compared to news items, which do so. In what follows, this hypothesis will be derived from social-psychological theory.

2. Perceived news credibility and attitude congruency

Different terminologies, conceptualizations, and operationalizations have created a confusingly unsystematic research field around the concepts of credibility perceptions and media trust (Appelman & Sundar, 2016; Fisher, 2016; Strömbäck et al., 2020). Generally, the concepts tend to overlap, and the terminology is, in many cases, even applied in an interchangeable manner (Fletcher & Park, 2017; Kohring & Matthes, 2007; Strömbäck et al., 2020). Nevertheless, in a strict conceptual sense, media trust must be regarded as something that emerges from credibility perceptions (Strömbäck et al., 2020; van Dalen, 2019). In other words, if media messages and sources are perceived as credible time after time, individuals are likely to develop trust (van Dalen, 2019). As such, credibility is more narrowly defined as the judgment individuals make of news items on a case-by-case basis concerning, for instance, completeness, objectivity, and accuracy (Appelman & Sundar, 2016; Kohring & Matthes, 2007; Metzger et al., 2003).

In this light, journalists are cautioned to craft messages that will be perceived as credible, so that audience members will develop trust in the news source and return to it for information. As Appelman and Sundar (2016) argue, journalists "live in fear of losing their credibility and, by extension, their media audience" (p. 62). This fear has in recent decades been fostered by declining levels of media trust within entire populations or specific audience segments of Western countries (Hanitzsch et al., 2018). Thereby, media trust levels have in particular decreased among audience members with right-wing (populist) attitudes (Schulz et al., 2020; Strömbäck et al., 2020). While one reason for this trend may be general sentiments of anti-elitism (Schindler et al., 2018; Schulz et al., 2020; van Dalen, 2019), levels of media trust are also likely to have declined due to the individuals' case-by-base credibility assessments of media messages (also referred to as message credibility; Appelman & Sundar, 2016). Consequently, investigating the perceived credibility of news items based on messages that are either typical for mainstream media or alternative media is likely to provide insight into factors that may cause right-wing (populist) individuals to distrust mainstream media, call them "Lügenpresse" ("lying press") and prefer alternative media.

Yet, while journalists may generally aim to produce content that audiences perceive as credible, individuals' credibility assessments are not necessarily based on objective factors. Instead, a range of studies in the field of motivated reasoning

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and other research traditions, such as cognitive dissonance, selective exposure, and confirmation bias, have indicated that individuals tend to perceive attitude-incongruent information as less credible than attitude-congruent information (Fischer et al., 2005; Kuru et al., 2017; Metzger et al., 2010; Metzger et al., 2020; Nickerson, 1998; Oyedeji, 2010). According to the theories of motivated reasoning and confirmation bias, this effect can be explained by the human tendency to seek and interpret information in accordance with desired conclusions (Kunda, 1990; Nickerson, 1998). Information that does not correspond to pre-existing attitudes, thus, tends to be scrutinized more critically and is more likely to be discredited than information that confirms pre-existing attitudes (Ditto & Lopez, 1992; Edwards & Smith, 1996; Kuru et al., 2017). Even in cases where assessments of credibility are based on less effortful heuristic information processing, scholars have found that support for one's views and expectations generally leads to more favorable credibility judgments (Metzger et al., 2010).

It is, consequently, expected that people's evaluations regarding the credibility of crime-related news items will depend on how attitude-congruent individuals perceive these news items to be. In this regard, xenophobic individuals are likely to react differently to references to nationality than those with low degrees of xenophobia. This prediction is supported by the theoretical framework of chronically accessible racial stereotypes, as set forth below.

3. The role of xenophobia and racial stereotypes

Group stereotypes consist of specific traits, behaviors, and circumstances that individuals associate with group members (Kunda, 1999). One of the most prevalent stereotypes about many ethnic minorities is that they are more aggressive and inclined toward criminality than members of the ethnic majority (Ceobanu, 2011; Hurwitz & Peffley, 1997; Simon & Sikich, 2007). Empirical findings indicate that crime-related news that refers to perpetrators as foreign citizens or members of ethnic minorities are likely to foster such racial stereotypes among audience members (Dixon, 2008; Domke, 2001; Eberl et al., 2018; Entman, 1994; Gilliam et al., 1996; Gilliam & Iyengar, 2000). In this regard, research has shown that perpetrators who belong to an ethnic minority tend to be particularly memorable to news consumers, which is conducive to the emergence of stereotypes (Dixon & Maddox, 2005). Eventually, racist stereotypes created by crime-related news may also influence individuals' social behavior, as they, for instance, tend to increase individuals' impulsive facial-threat perception of strangers with dark skin (Arendt, 2017).

Mental associations between crime and ethnic minorities can, over time, become chronically accessible (Dixon, 2006, 2008; Dixon & Azocar, 2007). In these cases, the overlapping cues of the stereotype and the stimulus only need to be minimal to trigger activation (Andersen & Chen, 2002). Indeed, studies have shown that for individuals with chronically accessible racial stereotypes, exposure to a crime-related news item tends to be sufficient to activate their stereotypical perception that ethnic minority members are criminals and lead them to deem them responsible for the crime (Dixon, 2007; Dixon & Azocar, 2007; Schmuck et

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al., 2018). Although the racial stereotype equating ethnic minority members with criminals is prevalent in many societies, the stereotype's strength, accessibility, and threshold for activation vary among individuals (Allen et al., 2009; Higgins, 2000). Those who generally feel threatened by immigration are likely to be more prejudiced against immigrants and hold stronger racial stereotypes than individuals who do not feel threatened (Stephan & Stephan, 2000). Moreover, due to selective exposure mechanisms and custom-tailored news feeds in today's digital news environments (van Aelst et al., 2017), such xenophobic individuals will be more frequently exposed to news that nourish their stereotypical perception of criminal ethnic minorities. The frequent exposure to stereotype-consistent news is, in turn, likely to not only reinforce pre-existing racial stereotypes but will, over time, also contribute to making them more chronically accessible (see Higgins, 2000).

Although probably to a lesser extent, individuals with low degrees of xenophobia may have also internalized the cultural stereotype that ethnic minorities are inclined to criminality (Devine, 1989; Greenwald et al., 2003). Nevertheless, because low-prejudiced individuals have decided that the negative racial stereotype is inadequate, they may intentionally inhibit stereotypical thinking whenever racial stereotypes are activated (Devine, 1989; Gawronski & Bodenhausen, 2006). Consequently, these individuals tend to intentionally initiate non-prejudiced thinking to resolve the experienced conflict between the racial stereotype and their non-prejudiced views (Devine, 1989).

Ultimately, one can expect that crime-related news items will activate chronically accessible racial stereotypes among xenophobic individuals. Consequently, news items that refer to perpetrators as foreign citizens are likely to be perceived as more stereotype-consistent, more attitude-congruent, and, thus, more credible than news items that do not correspond to the racial stereotype of criminal foreigners. Such effects are unlikely for individuals with low degrees of xenophobic attitudes because either racial stereotypes will not be activated, or they will be intentionally suppressed. However, if these less xenophobic individuals intentionally initiate non-prejudiced thinking, news items that support racial stereotypes may be perceived as less attitude-congruent and, thus, less credible than news items with unspecified perpetrators.

> *H1: The stronger an individual's xenophobic attitudes, the higher the perceived credibility of crime-related news items with references to foreign nationality, compared to news items without references to nationality.*

As already mentioned, some mainstream media have decided to always refer to the perpetrator's nationality, regardless of whether it is foreign or domestic. Eventually, by referring to perpetrators as domestic citizens, mainstream media aim to prevent audience members from criticizing them for neglecting important information. Yet, drawing on the outlined theoretical reasoning, it can be expected that news items, which refer to perpetrators as domestic citizens, contradict the racial stereotype of criminal foreigners and will, thus, be perceived as less credible than news items, which refer to perpetrators as foreign citizens.

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H2: The stronger an individual's xenophobic attitudes, the higher the perceived credibility of crime-related news items with references to foreign nationality, compared to news items with references to domestic nationality.

4. Method

4.1 Participants

For the experimental study, 261 participants were recruited. Each participant completed four trials, resulting in 1,044 trials. The sampling strategy applied quotas for gender, age, and education based on official statistics of the German population to draw a quasi-representative sample (female = 50%, M_{age} = 45.9, SD = 18.57). Approximately 35% of the participants had completed nine years of education, 30% had completed ten years, and 25% had completed at least 12 years. Data were collected with the commercial online access panel *Respondi* in Germany in March 2020. A randomization check for age, gender, education, and xenophobic attitudes showed that the experimental groups did not significantly differ with regard to these variables.

4.2 Procedure

At the beginning of the web-based survey experiment, the participants were told that the study aimed to analyze the quality of news reporting about five different issues: digitalization, crime, science, immigration, and the economy. Subsequently, they were asked about their attitudes toward these issues. Here, participants' levels of fear-based xenophobia were measured through questions about their stance on immigration. To disguise the focus of the study, the questions were presented as part of a larger set of filler questions concerning issues other than immigration. Participants were then told that the software would randomly assign them to one of the five issues. After a short break in which participants were exposed to an hourglass icon on their screens, participants were informed that their selected issue was crime and that they would now be presented with four crime-related news items. In each of the following four trials, participants were exposed to news items and were asked directly afterward to answer questions about the perceived credibility of the news.

In random order, participants were presented with and responded to four different news items, instead of only one, to increase the generalizability of the findings. All four news items were drawn from online local newspapers but were shortened to prevent participant fatigue. The resulting length of each news item was approximately the same. The layout differed among them, and the name of the newspaper, dates, and location details were blurred. Each news item dealt with a criminal incident: a rape in a park, a violent fight between adolescents, rioting young men in a city, and two men using a machete to threaten a bouncer who did not permit them to enter his club (for each news item in the original German and English translations, see the appendix). The participants were exposed

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to each of the four news items in random order. All the criminal incidents in the experimental stimuli included violent behavior against other individuals. These types of crime were chosen because they are particularly likely to trigger racist stereotypes. After all, ethnic minority members are often stereotyped as aggressive and violent. Other types of crime, such as fraud or burglary, may cause different effects on news audiences.

The news items were experimentally altered in so far as they either referred to the criminal(s) as having a) foreign nationality, b) domestic (German) nationality or c) provided no reference to nationality at all. Thus, the study applied a between-subjects, single-factor design with three levels (foreign nationality reference vs. domestic nationality reference vs. no nationality reference). Apart from the experimental alteration, the news items were identical. In each of the four trials, participants were randomly assigned to one of the three conditions. Moreover, to control for the effect of different foreign nationalities, the news items randomly varied the group to which they referred (Afghan, "a North African citizenship," Nigerian, Bulgarian). These nationalities were selected because they represent some of the most stigmatized ethnic minorities in Germany and are therefore likely to suffer from the racial stereotype of criminal foreigners. Therefore, these examples are most likely to be consistent with the racial stereotypes of xenophobic individuals.

At the end of the survey, the participants were debriefed. They were informed that this study aimed to analyze the effect of references to nationality on the credibility perceptions of news media. Second, it was emphasized that for this purpose, the nationalities named in relation to the crime were purely fictional and not based on reality.

4.3 Measurements

Fear-based xenophobia. The moderator variable was measured with five items taken from the fear-based xenophobia scale by van der Veer et al. (2013). For each of the measurements in this study, the participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement with the particular items on a 7-point Likert scale, from 1 = *do not agree at all* to 7 = *completely agree*. The five items for fear-based xenophobia were as follows: "Immigration in this country is out of control," "immigrants cause an increase in crime," "with increased immigration I fear that our way of life will change for the worse," "I doubt that immigrants will put the interest of this country first," and "I am afraid that our own culture will be lost with an increase in immigration." The five items were mean scored in an index with good internal consistency ($M = 4.28$, $SD = 1.71$, $\alpha = 0.95$).

Perceived news credibility. A scale used by Molyneux and Coddington (2019) was adopted to measure perceived news credibility. Participants were asked whether they agreed that the news item was "trustworthy," "fair," "informative," "accurate," "biased," and "opinionated," as well as whether it "tells the whole story." The seven items were mean scored, with $M = 4.64$, $SD = 1.46$, and $\alpha = 0.95$.

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4.4 Analysis

The data analysis was conducted with the software R (version 3.6.2). It mainly applied the lme4-package developed by Bates et al. (2015) for mixed-effects models. The advantage of mixed-effects analysis is that it controls for correlated error structures. The intraclass correlation (ICC) for the respective models ranged from 0.36 to 0.65, which indicates that the mixed-effect approach is the adequate analysis technique. The four trials (Level 1) were nested within each participant (Level 2). The participants' and news items' intercepts were allowed to vary.

In Step 1 of the analysis, for exploratory reasons, the main effects of the experimental conditions (foreign nationality, no reference to nationality, domestic nationality) and xenophobic attitudes on the dependent variable (perceived credibility) were investigated. Foreign nationality was applied as the reference category of the experimental conditions in order to be consistent with the hypothesis tests that were conducted in Step 2. All hypotheses predicted that the effects of references to foreign nationality would differ from effects of references to domestic nationality and no references to nationality, whereas there were no predicted different effects between references to domestic nationality and no references to nationality.

5. Results

5.1 Step 1: Main effects

The findings of Step 1 showed that credibility perceptions did not significantly change when participants were presented with news items that provided no reference to nationality or referred to the perpetrators as domestic citizens, compared to when they were presented with news items that referred to the perpetrators as foreign citizens (see Table 1, Step 1).

Table 1. Fixed effects of experimental conditions and xenophobic attitudes on perceived news credibility

	DV: Perceived News Credibility			
	B	d	SE	p
Step 1				
Intercept	4.38	5.33	0.23	< .001
No nationality[a]	0.02	0.02	0.07	.784
Domestic nationality[a]	0.04	0.05	0.08	.618
Xenophobic attitudes	0.05	0.06	0.04	.246
Step 2				
Intercept	3.75	4.41	0.25	< .001
No nationality[a]	0.99	1.16	0.20	< .001
Domestic nationality[a]	1.00	1.18	0.20	< .001
Xenophobic attitudes	0.20	0.24	0.05	< .001
No nationality[a] x xenophobic atttitudes	-0.22	-0.26	0.04	< .001
Domestic nationality[a] x xenophobic atttitudes	-0.22	-0.26	0.04	< .001

Note. $N = 261$. [a]Reference group: foreign nationality.

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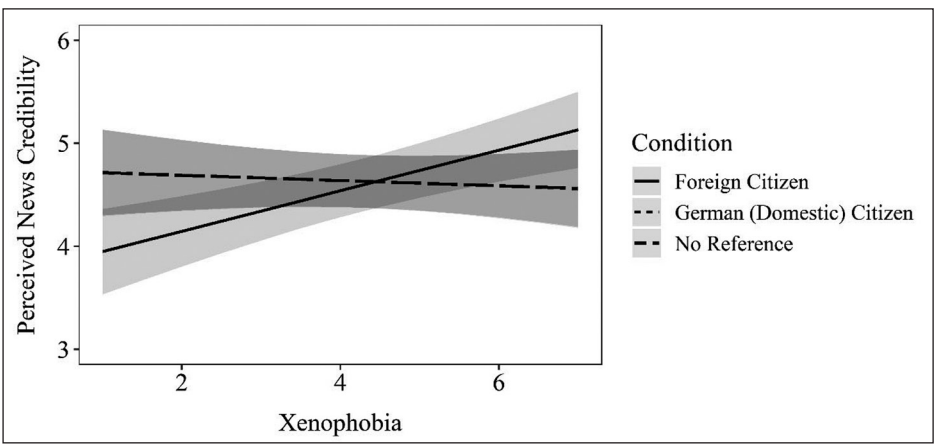
5.2 Step 2: Cross-level interactions (H1–H3)

H1–H2 were tested in Step 2. For this purpose, cross-level two-way interactions between the experimental conditions (Level 1) and xenophobic attitudes (Level 2) were added to the analysis. It was predicted that the stronger the individuals' xenophobic attitudes, the more credible they would perceive news items with references to foreign nationality, compared to news items without references to nationality (H1) or with references to domestic nationality (H2). The findings showed that xenophobic attitudes significantly moderated both the effect of no references to nationality on perceived credibility and the effect of references to domestic nationality (see Table 1, Step 2).

For a more nuanced understanding of this finding, the interaction has been illustrated in Figure 1. Additionally, the least-square means of perceived credibility were contrasted separately for participants with weak (1.5 standard deviation below the mean, corresponding to 1.72) and strong (1.5 standard deviations above the mean, corresponding to 6.85) xenophobic attitudes. The findings showed that participants with weak xenophobic attitudes perceived news items with references to domestic nationality, $M = 4.70$, $SE = 0.18$; $t(838) = 4.64$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.72$, as well as those without references to nationality, $M = 4.70$, $SE = 0.19$; $t(835) = 4.56$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.71$, as significantly more credible than news items with references to foreign nationality, $M = 4.09$, $SE = 0.18$. For participants with strong xenophobic attitudes, the effects were reversed. These participants perceived news items with references to domestic nationality, $M = 4.56$, $SE = 0.19$; $t(844) = -3.98$, $p < .001$, $d = -0.64$, and those with no references to nationality, $M = 4.57$, $SE = 0.19$; $t(827) = -4.17$, $p < .001$, $d = -0.59$, as significantly less credible than news items with references to foreign nationality, $M = 5.10$, $SE = 0.18$. Thus, both H1 and H2 were supported.

Figure 1. Interaction effects of experimental conditions and fear-based xenophobia on perceived credibility



Note. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals. Levels of xenophobia correspond to 1.5 SD below the mean (weak) and mean (medium), and 1.5 SD above the mean (strong) on xenophobia.

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6. Discussion

Whether news media should inform the public about the nationality of criminals, has become a controversial issue in many Western countries (Brown, 2016; Herczeg & Pöttker, 2018; Semenova, 2017). First and foremost, the heated debate has been sparked by right-wing populists, who constantly accuse mainstream media of deceiving the public by deliberately disguising the migrant backgrounds of perpetrators (Haller & Holt, 2019; Krämer, 2018). This narrative is likely to fall on fertile ground among the considerable numbers of Western audience members who believe that mainstream media downplay the negative crime-related consequences of immigration (Beyer & Matthes, 2015; Holt, 2019; Krämer, 2018). Hence, to prevent the loss of credibility, it has been suggested that journalists should always inform the audience about the nationality of criminals—be it domestic or foreign. However, whether this strategy will enhance the audience's credibility perceptions has been untested. The present research provides first evidence on this issue.

In support of the hypotheses, the results suggest that the effects of references to nationality, or the absence thereof, depend on the strength of an individual's xenophobic attitudes. Participants with strong xenophobic attitudes perceived crime-related news items with references to foreign nationality as more credible than news items with references to domestic nationality or without references to nationality. This effect can be explained by the individual's chronically accessible racial stereotype, which becomes activated when the individual is exposed to crime-related news. In other words, strongly xenophobic individuals automatically associate delinquency with ethnic minorities and, thus, deem them responsible for the crime. Subsequently, information that is inconsistent with the racial stereotype of foreign criminals is more likely to be discredited. Overall, these findings largely correspond to research on chronically accessible stereotype activation (Dixon & Azocar, 2007; Schmuck et al., 2018) and cognitive information processing (Fischer et al., 2005; Kuru et al., 2017; Metzger et al., 2010; Metzger et al., 2020; Nickerson, 1998; Oyedeji, 2010). Credibility perceptions of crime news with domestic nationality references and crime news without nationality references did not significantly differ at any level of xenophobic attitudes. Thus, it appears as if it is precisely the reference to specific foreign nationalities and not the reference to *any* nationality that makes individuals perceive crime news as more or less credible. This finding supports the assumption that the effects of foreign nationality references on credibility perceptions were triggered by the activation of the racial stereotype of criminal foreigners.

For participants with low degrees of xenophobia, the effects were generally reversed. These individuals perceived news items with references to foreign nationality as significantly less credible than news items with references to domestic nationality or without references to nationality. This finding supports the assumption that when presented with references to foreign nationality, participants with low degrees of xenophobia may intentionally have activated their non-prejudiced views while deliberately inhibiting stereotypical thinking (Devine, 1989; Gawronski & Bodenhausen, 2006). Due to this mechanism, these participants may have

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discredited news items with references to foreign nationality because they reject the racial stereotype it presents. It is, however, also possible that no racial stereotype was activated and that these participants generally discredit news items with references to foreign nationality because they expect them to foster stereotypes and stigmatization among the public. Moreover, individuals with weak xenophobia may have assumed that news items with references to foreign nationality were more likely to come from right-wing alternative media sources, which they probably automatically associate with low credibility.

6.1 Contribution and implications

First and foremost, this study adds a crucial aspect to the literature that has, to this point, focused on the effects of ethnic cues in crime-related news reporting on the stigmatization of ethnic minorities (e.g. Dixon, 2007, 2008; Domke, 2001). Moreover, by investigating how stereotype activation and cognitive information processing influence credibility perceptions of news audiences, this study has shed light on some of the mechanisms that may cause individuals to reject mainstream media. Although scholars have started to address the conflict-laden relationship between right-wing-leaning individuals and mainstream media (Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019; Fawzi, 2019), more studies are necessary to understand the role of specific media content. In the end, whether individuals trust mainstream media or not, substantially depends on how credible they perceive the mainstream media's news items to be. Thus, to get to the roots of the "Lügenpresse" accusations, one must, among others, investigate what kind of news coverage certain audience segments perceive as not very credible.

For media practitioners, the findings of this study are rather concerning. They cannot please their entire audience: The choices that enhance credibility perceptions for strongly xenophobic individuals appear to diminish credibility perceptions for weakly xenophobic individuals. Moreover, an editorial policy that always provides references to nationality, regardless of whether the nationality is domestic or foreign, is also unlikely to be rewarded by the entire audience. In addition to these challenges, journalists are likely to have ethical concerns with regard to references to nationality in crime-reporting, because of their potential to foster stigmatization and prejudices. This being said, news media will need to cautiously balance the risk of fostering stereotypes against the risk of losing credibility when making concrete decisions about how to deal with references to nationality in crime reporting.

Lastly, this study's findings have implications for the societal trend toward polarization. If strongly xenophobic individuals perceive media that report about foreign criminals as generally more credible, they may increasingly turn to alternative right-wing media that nurture these racial stereotypes. These developments diminish the mainstream news media's ability to "unite the public under one regime of 'objective' truth" (Broersma, 2013, p. 44) and may drive society further apart. Even if mainstream news media decide to always provide references to nationality, xenophobic individuals will perceive them as less credible if the nationality is not foreign but domestic. Right-wing alternative media are likely to bene-

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fit from these psychological responses; these media tend to not only overemphasize the criminal activities of ethnic minority members in comparison to domestic majority members but also inform about migrant roots even when perpetrators hold domestic citizenship.

6.2 Limitations and future research

As with any study, this one comes with limitations. First of all, the multiple trials may have caused some spill-over effects. It is, for instance, possible that racial stereotypes may have been activated through a news item with references to foreign nationality and remained activated or more easily accessible during the subsequent trials. However, both the order of the news items and the assignments to the different experimental conditions were randomized to mitigate this concern. Yet, to prevent spill-over effects, in future research, the study design should only contain one trial per participant.

Second, this study presented participants with news items by unidentified media brands to control for the possible effects of individual brand preferences. The experimental setting, thus, corresponded to many online environments in which users are continuously exposed to unfamiliar information sources. However, credibility perceptions of familiar brands may be rather stable and only change over time. To analyze how the perceived credibility of familiar news sources may be affected by references to nationality, researchers may have to combine longitudinal content analysis with longitudinal survey studies. Such a research design could shed light on the effects of mainstream media's editorial policy decisions regarding nationality references and elucidate how these decisions affect audiences' trust in mainstream media sources.

Third, news media's credibility is particularly likely to suffer if they do not inform the audience about a perpetrator's foreign nationality and this information is perceived as highly relevant by large segments of the audience. This was the case with the sexual assaults against women on New Year's Eve 2015 in Cologne (Herczeg & Pöttker, 2018). In the wake of these incidents, German news media were sharply criticized and questioned. Such critical public debates about the media's performance are likely to result in lower levels of media trust among specific audience segments. The effects of such aftermaths would, hence, be worth exploring. For smaller and less exceptional crimes, public outrage, such as the one after the New Year's Eve in Cologne, is unlikely but may still occur in right-wing echo chambers.

Fourth, this study investigated the credibility perceptions of news items about crime that includes violent behavior toward other individuals. These types of crimes are particularly likely to trigger racial stereotypes of aggressive and violent foreigners. It is, however, unknown whether other types of crime, such as fraud or burglary, may trigger similar effects to the ones found in this study. Thus, future research may investigate the effects of nationality references in news items about different types of crime. Moreover, this study investigated the effects of references to stigmatized nationalities. Further studies may examine whether similar effects occur for less stigmatized nationalities.

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Fifth and last, some have argued that one reason why news media should always name a perpetrator's nationality is that if they do not, users will start to speculate and spread false rumors online. The findings of this study suggest that strongly xenophobic individuals may be particularly susceptible to these kinds of user-generated content. If one suspects the media of disguising information about a perpetrator's migrant background, one is probably prone to believe sources that claim that the perpetrator was a foreigner. Thus, accounting for the role of user-generated content when investigating the impact of references to nationality would be another promising avenue of future research.

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