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Pictures that Polarize: News Images Affect Appraisals of Political Outgroups by Arousing Negative Emotions

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This study investigates how people's emotional responses to politically divisive news images can impact attitudes and behavioral intentions toward political outgroup members. In an online experiment ($N = 368$), participants viewed one of two news images related to rallies involving the U.S. gun policy issue, either showing political ingroup or outgroup rallygoers. Exposure to news images of political outgroup rallygoers heightened threat-related negative emotions in participants, resulting in reduced empathy (and increased anxiety) toward political outgroup members. These negative emotions also led to more negative opinions of political outgroup members and a greater likelihood of participants reporting an intention to act antagonistically toward them.

Keywords: news images, emotions, political outgroup evaluations, media effects, polarization

News images can shape public perception and catalyze social and political change (Gartner, 2011; Gibson & Zillmann, 2000; Zillmann et al., 1999). They are processed rapidly and often automatically by viewers (Powell et al., 2019), help draw attention to the news story (Knobloch et al., 2003), and evoke emotions that can influence attitudes and behaviors toward social and political issues (Fahmy et al., 2006; Powell et al., 2015). However, people's emotional responses to news images and the resulting attitudinal shifts do not always follow a uniform process, as individuals' pre-existing understandings and values

shape how they interpret such images (Domke et al., 2002). For example, a news image of a rally advocating stricter gun laws in the U.S. may not elicit sympathy or support for the cause, particularly when the cause conflicts with the viewer's political beliefs and worldview.

In recent years, American society has become increasingly divided over social issues, much of which is driven by emotional responses toward opposing groups or ideologies (i.e., affective polarization; Iyengar et al., 2019). This polarization is not unique to the United States. In South Korea, public opinion on gender equality has grown more polarized, fueled by feelings of victimhood and animosity between feminists (primarily young women) and anti-feminists (primarily young men; Kim, 2024). In many European countries, affective polarization is particularly evident in contentious debates over immigration and climate change policies (Herold et al., 2023).

Political polarization undermines democracy by intensifying hostility between opposing groups, making voters more accepting of anti-democratic actions against their rivals (Arbatli & Rosenberg, 2021). Media portrayals of a divided electorate can reinforce citizens' perceptions of polarization and increase the animosity felt toward opposing parties (Levendusky & Malhotra, 2015). Within this context, examining people's emotional responses to news images of politically divisive issues—especially those depicting political outgroup members—and understanding how these emotions shape attitudes and behaviors toward these groups can deepen our understanding of media's broader impact in a politically divided society. To this end, this study is the first to explore how viewing news images of political outgroup members evokes emotional responses in viewers, which in turn influence their attitudes and behavior toward those outgroup members.

Previous research on news framing—the way news presentation shapes perceptions of issues (see Scheufele, 2000)—has explored individuals' emotional responses to news images and their effects on perceptions of events such as the 2009 Gaza conflict (Brantner et al., 2011), the Central African Republic's civil war (Powell et al., 2015), and the 2005 London bombings (Iyer et al., 2014). However, the relationships among news images, emotions, and their effects in politically divisive contexts remain unstudied. Examining emotional responses to politically divisive news images is important—not to determine if viewing these images changes attitudes, as partisan views tend to remain stable (Freeder et al., 2019; Stanley et al., 2020), but to understand how these emotions influence perceptions of political outgroup members. This approach differs from traditional framing studies, which primarily focus on how news images affect views on issues.

People's emotional responses to news images depicting political outgroup members are particularly significant in today's polarized climate. Negative biases toward political outgroup members are common (Achenbach, 2024; Crawford et al., 2013), accompanied by a growing reluctance to engage with them (Buliga & MacInnis, 2020; Motyl et al., 2014). Yet, these members frequently appear in the news, often in images from rallies, as visuals of such events typically accompany stories on politically divisive issues like gun policy and racial justice. When encountering online news images of political outgroup members, how do people feel? And how do these emotional responses influence their attitudes and behavioral intentions toward those outgroup members?

The present study addresses these questions through an online experiment examining participants' emotional responses to news images related to the gun policy debate in the United States. Participants were randomly assigned to view an image of either a gun rights rally or a gun control rally,

with experimental conditions varying based on whether the rallygoers' views aligned with or opposed the participant's own.

Two competing theories frame the investigation of emotional responses to news images of political outgroup members. The first is intergroup contact theory, which suggests that increased exposure to outgroup members can improve attitudes toward them (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew, 1998). The second is integrated threat theory (Stephan & Stephan, 2000), which suggests that people perceive the outgroup as a threat, and heightened threat leads to negative perceptions of outgroup members, particularly in politically charged contexts (Lin & Haridakis, 2022). The following section provides a brief overview of these theories and reviews research on the role of emotions in shaping attitudes and behavioral responses toward outgroup members.

LITERATURE REVIEW

People tend to favor their ingroup and view outgroup members more negatively (Tajfel, 1981). Belonging to a social group increases individuals' confidence in their understanding of the social world and their place within it (Abrams & Hogg, 1988), contributing to ingroup favoritism. Conversely, outgroups are often perceived as undermining the ingroup's worldview and values (Branscombe et al., 1999), which can lead to outgroup animosity. Research on outgroup prejudice has largely focused on two interrelated factors that contribute to such animosity. The first is that people rarely come into contact with outgroup members and therefore increased intergroup contact may improve attitudes toward the outgroup (intergroup contact theory; Allport, 1954). The second is that people tend to perceive the outgroup as a threat (integrated threat theory; Stephan & Stephan, 2000).

Intergroup Contact Theory

Social psychological research on intergroup contact theory (Allport, 1954) has shown that increased interaction with outgroup members leads to more positive evaluations of the outgroup (for a meta-analysis, see Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Through intergroup contact, people develop familiarity and positive attitudes toward outgroup members, as repeated interactions reduce anxiety about engaging with them (i.e., intergroup anxiety) and increase empathy toward them (i.e., intergroup empathy; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). These findings extend to mediated contexts as well. Media exposure to outgroup members often functions as a form of mediated intergroup contact, which can also improve people's attitudes toward outgroup members (see Park, 2012, for a review). Even simply reading about outgroup members in news articles can, over time, serve as intergroup contact that fosters more favorable evaluations of the outgroup (Wojcieszak & Azrout, 2016).

However, most research on intergroup contact—both direct and mediated—has focused on intergroup relations in which the ingroup significantly outnumbers the outgroup and holds higher social status (Hayward et al., 2017). Examples of outgroups examined in the research literature include Muslim and Polish immigrants in the Netherlands (Wojcieszak & Azrout, 2016), Black Americans (Dale & Moyer-Gusé, 2021), and members of the gay community (Ortiz & Harwood, 2007); all of which are minority groups in societies where a clear status asymmetry favors the ingroup.

In contrast, research on intergroup contact with *political* outgroup members, whether in interpersonal and mediated settings, remains limited. What is known suggests that the valence of contact with political outgroup members matters: a negative contact experience increases outgroup hostility, while a positive contact experience reduces it (Wojcieszak & Warner, 2020). Specifically, positive

contact may arise when people learn individuating information about a political outgroup member, which can, in turn, improve attitudes toward the broader outgroup (Koetke et al., 2023). In mediated contexts, people's attitudes toward political outgroup members can become more positive when they identify with and feel empathy for a fictional TV character affiliated with the political outgroup (Brooks et al., 2024).

Overall, the literature reveals uncertainty on whether intergroup contact theory would apply to—or even be reversed in—mediated encounters with political outgroup members who are real people (as opposed to TV characters), are more or less on equal footing with the ingroup, and are clearly opposing ingroup values. In the case of the U.S., roughly equal numbers of people identify as Democrats and Republicans (Gallup, n.d.), and this balance is reflected in the composition of the U.S. Congress (House Press Gallery, n.d.) as of 2025. Without a clear power differential between these two political groups, Democrats and Republicans alike may perceive their respective outgroup members as threatening, possibly to equal extents (given the even number of people in both groups) and in similar ways (as the outgroup threatens the ingroup's worldview and values; see Brandt & Crawford, 2020).

Integrated Threat Theory

According to integrated threat theory (Stephan & Stephan, 2000), perceived threats from outgroup members can lead to negative attitudes and prejudice. The theory outlines four primary types of threat: realistic threats (to resources, power, or physical safety), symbolic threats (to values, beliefs, or identity), intergroup anxiety (feelings of anxiety toward outgroup members), and negative stereotypes (prejudice arising from negative beliefs about the outgroup; Stephan et al., 2008).

Integrated threat theory has been widely supported in intergroup threat literature (for a meta-analysis, see Riek et al., 2006). Particularly relevant to the present study is the idea that outgroup members can threaten individuals' social identities and values. As a result, intergroup contact may trigger threat-related negative emotions and increase intergroup anxiety, ultimately worsening perceptions of the outgroup (Crisp et al., 2009; Dépret & Fiske, 1999; Voci & Hewstone, 2003). Bringing this idea into the context of political ingroups versus outgroups, political partisanship serves as a social identity for many Americans, particularly during periods of heightened political salience (West & Iyengar, 2022). For example, election season is a time of increased political salience, as are times when politically divisive issues (e.g., U.S. gun policy, racial justice, women's reproductive rights) are prominently highlighted in the media. News reports on such issues often feature images of rallies and protests, which can evoke emotions such as anger and fear (Casas & Williams, 2019). Because these images depict political outgroup members actively engaging in activities that oppose ingroup values and worldviews, they may be particularly threatening.

Most research on mediated intergroup contact using visual stimuli has utilized segments of television shows featuring various stigmatized outgroup characters, who are often depicted in a positive or empathetic light (e.g., Bond, 2021; Brooks et al., 2024, Dale & Moyer-Gusé, 2021; Schiappa et al., 2006). While the use of such visual stimuli offers ecological validity, the use of news images could potentially offer equal ecological validity and even greater external validity, as people are more likely to encounter news images of political outgroup members in their daily lives than to watch television narratives featuring them. Moreover, news images can evoke emotional responses in people (Schäfer, 2020) and this process can be automatic (Dimberg et al., 2002). In the context of the present study,

exposure to news images of political outgroup rallygoers may intensify threat-related negative emotional responses rather than mitigate them, based on the literature reviewed.

H1: Viewing a news image of political outgroup members will evoke more threat-related negative emotions than a news image of political ingroup members.

The Impact of Negative Emotions on Attitudes and Behavioral Intent Toward Outgroup Members

As discussed thus far, viewing news images of political outgroup members may evoke negative emotions, particularly feelings of threat. But how would these threat-related negative emotions influence people's attitudes and behavioral intentions toward outgroup members? An experiment conducted by Arceneaux (2017) found that inducing anxiety in participants by showing them images of wild animals baring their teeth reduced empathy toward racial/ethnic outgroup members. A similar pattern emerged in an experiment by Richins et al. (2021), in which participants who experienced fear after viewing images of commonly feared objects (e.g., spiders, snakes) reported reduced empathy toward outgroup members. These findings suggest that experiencing negative emotions in response to visual stimuli—even those unrelated to the outgroup—can lead to more negative attitudes toward outgroup members.

Therefore, when feelings of threat are induced in mediated contexts—for example, by viewing images of political outgroup members advocating values that conflict with those of the ingroup, as in the present study—the resulting effect on attitudes toward the outgroup is likely to be negative. People may experience reduced intergroup empathy as well as increased intergroup anxiety, given that lower empathy is associated with higher anxiety toward outgroup members (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008).

H2a: Stronger threat-related negative emotions will decrease intergroup empathy toward political outgroup members.

H2b: Stronger threat-related negative emotions will increase intergroup anxiety toward political outgroup members.

Furthermore, research provides ample evidence that feeling negative emotions such as fear and anger not only increases negative evaluations of outgroup members (e.g., Bukowski et al., 2014; Dasgupta et al., 2009; DeSteno et al., 2004; van Prooijen et al., 2015) but also heightens negative behavioral intentions toward them (e.g., Andersen et al., 2017; Mackie et al., 2000).

H2c: Stronger threat-related negative emotions will result in more negative evaluations of political outgroup members.

H2d: Stronger threat-related negative emotions will heighten participants' intentions to engage in antagonistic behavior toward political outgroup members.

The hypotheses mentioned thus far collectively suggest the following mediation models in H3a–H3d:

H3: Threat-related negative emotions will mediate the relationships between news image (political ingroup vs. outgroup) and all outcome measures. Exposure to news images featuring political outgroup members, compared to images of political ingroup members, will evoke stronger threat-related negative emotions. These negative emotions, in turn, are expected to reduce intergroup empathy (**H3a**), increase intergroup anxiety (**H3b**), worsen outgroup evaluations (**H3c**), and heighten intentions to engage in antagonistic behavior toward political outgroup members (**H3d**).

METHODS

Pretest

Stimuli Selection. Ten news images of gun policy-related rallies in the U.S. were pretested with U.S. participants recruited from Prolific. The purpose of the pretest was to choose a pair of stimulus images—one showing a gun rights rally and one showing a gun control rally—for the experiment and to confirm that the two selected images closely match one another in terms of visuals and content.

The ten news images were selected based on several criteria. First, each image had to have been published by a media outlet and used in the pretest and experiment without any alterations through photo editing to ensure the ecological validity of the images. Second, each image needed to appear generic to avoid evoking specific incidents (e.g., the Uvalde school shooting) that could have personal meaning for participants. Third, each image needed to prominently feature people’s faces, as opposed to silhouettes or other forms of face obscuration with signs or flags. Fourth, each image needed to depict peaceful protests to prevent ceiling effects from overly provocative or emotionally charged visuals, such as angry protestors or those in military gear, which could overwhelm participants’ reactions.

Participants and Procedure. Fifty-four U.S. participants from Prolific’s online sample of respondents participated in the pretest. After providing consent, participants were informed that they would evaluate ten news images related to the gun policy issue in the United States. Specifically, five images depicted gun rights rallies and five depicted gun control rallies. For each of the ten images, participants answered an attention check question (‘Does this image depict a gun control rally or a gun rights rally?’) and six questions assessing various characteristics of the image. The final sample comprised 50 participants, after excluding four who answered at least one attention check question incorrectly.

To assess the news images, participants rated each image using seven-point semantic differential items. They rated how the image made them feel (1) calm/alert, whether the image was (2) positive/negative, (3) attention-grabbing/unremarkable, (4) visually simple/visually complex, (5) whether the situation conveyed in the image was ambiguous/clear, and (6) how the image compared to others they had seen on the topic of U.S. gun policy (similar to typical images/different from typical images) (adapted from Powell et al., 2015). The order of presentation for the images was randomized to prevent systematic assimilation/contrast effects. Once participants had viewed and evaluated all ten images, they were thanked and compensated for their time.

Results. Responses to the six questions were analyzed using repeated measures ANOVA with Holm-corrected post-hoc tests to control family-wise error rate (Holm, 1979). The final pair of news images selected for the main study—one depicting gun rights rallygoers and another depicting gun control rallygoers—did not differ in terms of how arousing, positive/negative, attention-getting,

complex, ambiguous, or unusual they were (all post-hoc t -values $< |2.74|$, all p -Holm > 0.17). Thus, it is unlikely that any differences on the critical dependent measures of the experiment are affected by these characteristics of the images.

Experiment

Participants and Design. For the experiment, 486 participants were recruited from Prolific's online sample of U.S. respondents. Within Prolific's recruitment options, a quota sampling method was used to ensure an equal number of Democratic/liberal participants and Republican/conservative participants. For statistical power of 0.8, assuming a small-to-medium effect where $d = 0.30$ (derived from Powell et al., 2015), G*Power recommends a total sample size of 352, or 176 for each of two groups (Faul et al., 2007). In the present study, participants were oversampled to the extent permitted by available funding. Oversampling was necessary to create experimental groups with views on U.S. gun policy that were clearly similar to (ingroup) or different from (outgroup) the people depicted in the news images.

In the general population, roughly 20% of Republicans support gun control, while roughly 20% of Democrats support gun rights, opposing their parties' dominant opinions on U.S. gun policy (Pew Research Center, 2019). This trend was reflected in the sample of participants recruited on Prolific. Out of the initial 486 participants, 118 individuals (24.6%) held views on gun control contrary to their party's prevailing stance. These included Republicans/conservatives who viewed the right to own guns as unimportant to their personal sense of freedom and Democrats/liberals who considered it important. These participants were excluded from the final dataset, as it would be challenging to determine if their divergent views would affect the experimental manipulation (seeing those with divergent views from their own party's). The final sample comprised 368 participants ages 19 to 82 (192 males; $M_{\text{age}} = 42.83$, $SD = 14.31$).

The study was a true experiment where participants were randomly assigned to see one of the two news images of gun policy-related rallies in United States. The experimental groups for this study were determined by two factors: the participant's political partisanship, as determined by their reported party affiliation, and the news image that the participant saw. Based on these factors, participants were divided into experimental groups (news image: political ingroup vs. outgroup). The group that viewed a news image of political *ingroup* members ($n = 176$) included: (1) Republicans/conservatives who viewed the news image depicting a gun rights rally, and (2) Democrats/liberals who viewed the news image depicting a gun control rally. By contrast, the group that viewed a news image of political *outgroup* members ($n = 192$) included: (1) Republicans/conservatives who viewed the news image depicting a gun control rally, and (2) Democrats/liberals who viewed the news image depicting a gun rights rally. Independent samples t -tests indicated no statistically significant differences between these two groups (news image: political ingroup vs. outgroup) in terms of demographic factors such as age, gender, race, political party affiliation, political ideology, and their beliefs on gun rights/control (all $ps > .33$, $ds < 0.10$).

Procedure. After consenting to participate in the study, participants were told that they would view a news image related to the gun policy issue in the U.S., and that the image they see will be decided by random assignment. To maintain data quality, participants were asked to view their assigned image and then type approximately 50 words about what they saw in the image and what they thought about the people shown in the image. Including this writing prompt ensured that participants would

actually view the image, at least closely enough to describe what is going on in it. The writing prompt also ensured that participants noticed the people depicted in the image, thereby serving as a manipulation check.

Once participants viewed their randomly assigned news image and answered the writing prompt about the image they saw, they completed measures assessing their emotional responses to the image. Participants then completed measures assessing their intergroup empathy (i.e., feelings of empathy toward people with opposing views on U.S. gun policy), intergroup anxiety (i.e., feelings of anxiety toward people with opposing views on U.S. gun policy), outgroup evaluation (i.e., perceived likability of people with opposing views on U.S. gun policy), and antagonistic behavioral intent (i.e., intent to engage in antagonistic behaviors toward people with opposing views on U.S. gun policy). The order of the measures, as well as the order of items within each measure, were randomized. Finally, participants indicated their political affiliation, their beliefs about gun control/rights, and some standard demographic questions. Upon study completion, participants were thanked and financially compensated for their time and effort.

Experimental Measures

Emotional Responses to News Images. Emotional responses were assessed using Iyer et al.'s (2014) measure of emotional responses to news images. Items in this scale include three positive emotions related to compassion (e.g., sympathetic, empathetic, compassionate) and nine threat-related negative emotions (e.g., anxious, outraged, worried). Each of these 12 items was assessed on a five-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 5 = *extremely*; negative emotions $\alpha = 0.94$, positive emotions $\alpha = 0.71$). Higher numbers on these scales indicate stronger experiences of positive/negative emotions.

Intergroup Empathy. Intergroup empathy was assessed using an adaptation of Capozza et al.'s (2013) measure of intergroup empathy. The original scale's items were worded to assess people's intergroup empathy toward immigrants, so the items were reworded to assess people's intergroup empathy toward individuals who hold opposing views on the gun policy issue in the United States. Sample items in the scale include: "I understand the feelings of the people who hold views opposite to my own on the 'gun control vs. gun rights' issue (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*)," and "I feel in tune with people who hold views opposite to my own on the 'gun control vs. gun rights' issue (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*)" ($\alpha = 0.88$). Higher scores on this scale indicate greater empathy regarding the outgroup.

Intergroup Anxiety. Intergroup anxiety was assessed using an adaptation of Capozza et al.'s (2013) measure of intergroup anxiety. The original scale's items were worded to assess people's intergroup anxiety toward immigrants, so the items were reworded to assess people's intergroup anxiety toward individuals who hold opposing views on the gun policy issue in the United States. The scale consists of four items, each asking participants how much they feel a specific emotion—*anxious*, *worried*, *relaxed*, and *restless*—when thinking about people with opposing views on U.S. gun policy (1 = *not at all*, 5 = *extremely*; $\alpha = 0.83$). Items were reverse coded as necessary so that higher scores on this scale indicate greater anxiety regarding the outgroup.

Outgroup Evaluation. Participants' evaluation of political outgroup members was measured using an adaptation of Vezzali et al.'s (2010) measure that rates outgroup members on 5-point semantic differential scales such as "undesirable-desirable," and "negative-positive" ($\alpha = 0.86$). Items were

recoded as necessary so that higher scores on this scale indicate more favorable evaluations of the outgroup.

Antagonistic Behavioral Intent. Antagonistic behavioral intent was measured using an adaptation of Brambilla et al.'s (2013) scale assessing people's desire to interact with a target person (or in the case of this study, political outgroup members). The scale consists of seven items, each beginning with the prompt: "If I meet a person/people who holds views opposite to my own on the 'gun control vs. gun rights' issue, I would like to..." followed by a specific behavior. The behaviors are: "cooperate with them," "confront them," "oppose them," "argue with them," "avoid them," "have nothing to do with them," and "keep them at a distance." Responses were recorded on a scale from 1 (*definitely won't*) to 5 (*definitely*) ($\alpha = 0.81$). Items were reverse coded as necessary so that higher scores on this scale indicate greater antagonism toward the outgroup.

RESULTS

Descriptive and Correlational Analyses

The critical independent variable in this study—whether participants saw a news image of political ingroup or outgroup members—was coded 1 for ingroup image and 2 for outgroup image. Table 1 provides descriptive statistics and a zero-order correlation matrix for all study variables. Negative emotions were rather low, and positive emotions were rather middle-of-the-road, but these means are to be expected as participants were simply responding to online questionnaires (an activity that is unlikely to generate much in the way of either negative or positive emotions). All of the dependent measure means (intergroup empathy, intergroup anxiety, outgroup evaluation, and antagonistic behavioral intent) are near the midpoint of the scales.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics and Zero-Order Correlations for Study Variables

Variable	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. News image ^a	368	1.52	0.50	–						
2. Positive emotions	368	2.75	1.48	-.50***	–					
3. Negative emotions	368	1.90	1.01	.18***	-.003	–				
4. Intergroup empathy	368	3.40	1.34	.07	.09	-.22***	–			
5. Intergroup anxiety	368	2.52	0.96	-.06	.19***	.63***	-.30***	–		
6. Outgroup evaluation	368	2.54	0.90	.07	.08	-.28***	.64***	-.43***	–	
7. Antagonistic behavioral intent	368	2.74	0.80	-.005	.02	.38***	-.56***	.47***	-.66***	–

^a 1 = Political ingroup image, and 2 = Political outgroup image.

** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

As one might expect, negative emotional responses were positively correlated with intergroup anxiety and antagonistic behavioral intent ($r_s > .37$, $p_s < .001$), but negatively correlated with intergroup

empathy and outgroup evaluation ($r_s < -.21, p_s < .001$). Negative emotions were more pronounced when viewing an image of outgroup rallygoers ($r = .18, p < .001$), while positive emotions decreased ($r = -.50, p < .001$), which was also consistent with expectations. Contrary to expectations, positive emotions were positively correlated with intergroup anxiety ($r = .19, p < .001$), albeit far less so than negative emotions ($r = .63, p < .001$). Finally, positive emotions were uncorrelated with negative emotions, intergroup empathy, outgroup evaluation, and antagonistic behavioral intent ($r_s < .10, p_s > .09$).

The experimental manipulation (news image: political ingroup vs. outgroup) was uncorrelated with the dependent measures ($r_s < .08, p_s > .18$), but mediation does not require a zero-order effect of the independent variable on the dependent variable (Zhao et al., 2010). The four dependent measures were correlated with one another in predictable ways ($r_s > |.29|, p_s < .001$), creating a coherent nomological network (Cronbach & Meehl, 1955) and providing support for the construct validity of the dependent measures.

Mediational Analyses

Because not all of the four dependent measures were highly correlated with each other, each was analyzed separately instead of being combined into a composite measure. However, the analytic approach was identical for all four dependent measures. Each analysis used Hayes's (2022) PROCESS Model 4, a simple model where the independent variable (news image: political ingroup vs. outgroup) predicts the dependent variable (attitudes/behavioral intent toward political outgroup members), with a single mediating variable (negative emotional responses to news image). All models were run using standardized path estimates, with 5000 bias-corrected bootstrap samples.

Exploratory analyses using positive emotions as a mediating variable were not conducted, as positive emotions showed no correlation with three of the four dependent measures and unexpectedly exhibited a positive correlation with intergroup anxiety, as shown in the correlational analyses. Thus, all analyses tested the basic model of news image (political ingroup vs. outgroup) \rightarrow negative emotions \rightarrow attitudes/behavioral intent toward political outgroup members. Or, stated more simply: $X \rightarrow M \rightarrow Y$.

Intergroup Empathy. As can be seen in Figure 1, all paths in the first model (upper left of Figure 1) predicting intergroup empathy were statistically significant (all $p_s < 0.03$). Consistent with H1, participants who saw a news image of outgroup rallygoers felt more negative emotions in response to seeing the image ($\beta = 0.35, z = 3.45, p < .001$), and consistent with H2a, this led to lower empathy toward political outgroup members ($\beta = -0.24, z = -4.67, p < .001$). Consistent with H3a, the overall mediation effect was statistically significant: Seeing a news image of political outgroup members increased participants' negative emotional responses, which in turn decreased their empathy toward political outgroup members ($\beta = -0.09, z = -2.80, p = .006, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.16, -0.04]$).

There was a direct, positive effect of seeing a news image of political outgroup members on intergroup empathy ($\beta = 0.22, z = 2.14, p = .03$). This relationship indicates that, at the same level of negative emotional response (i.e., controlling for negative emotions), participants who viewed images of outgroup rallygoers reported greater empathy toward the outgroup compared to those who viewed images of ingroup rallygoers. However, in light of contrasting earlier findings—that the correlation between image type (political ingroup vs. outgroup) and intergroup empathy was negligible—the direct, positive effect of image type on intergroup empathy observed in this model should be interpreted cautiously. This will be further discussed in the Discussion section below.

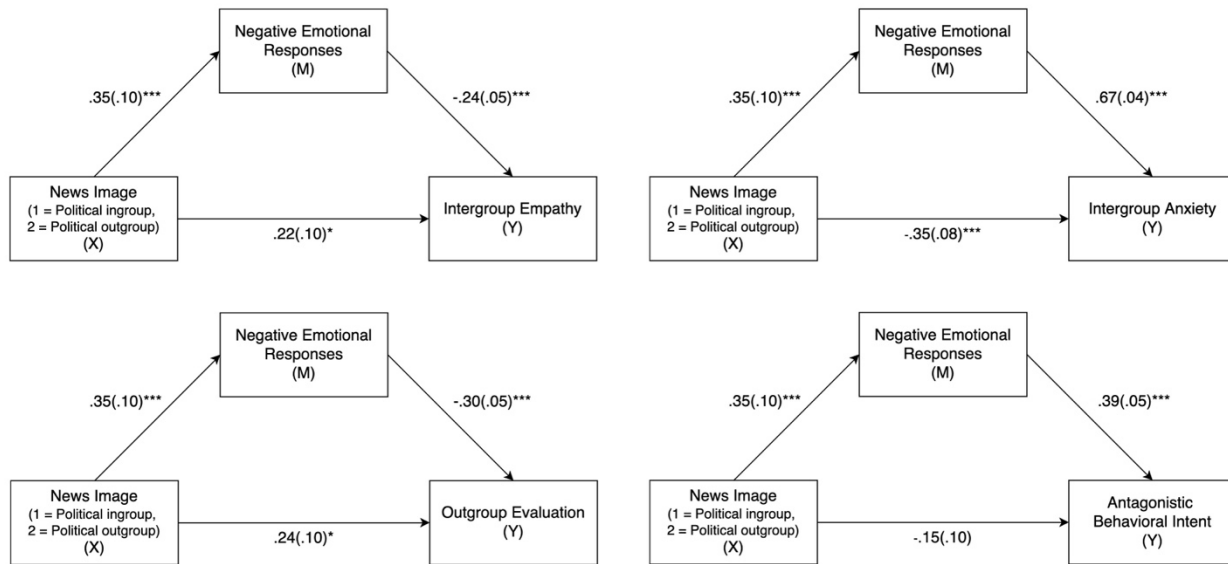


Figure 1. Mediation models presenting the mediating effects of negative emotional responses on the relationship between news image type (political ingroup vs. outgroup) and attitudes/behavioral intent toward political outgroup members. Path values are the standardized path coefficients (standard errors). * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Intergroup Anxiety. All paths in the second model predicting intergroup anxiety (Figure 1, upper right) were statistically significant (all $ps < 0.001$). Because the support of H1 has been discussed and the test of H1 is identical across all models, it will not be reiterated in the discussion of the remaining outcome variables. Consistent with H2b, participants' negative emotional responses led to greater intergroup anxiety toward political outgroup members ($\beta = 0.67$, $z = 16.68$, $p < .001$). Consistent with H3b, the overall mediation effect was statistically significant: Seeing a news image of political outgroup members increased participants' negative emotions, which in turn increased their intergroup anxiety toward political outgroup members ($\beta = 0.24$, $z = 3.38$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.10, 0.38]).

The direct effect of seeing a news image of outgroup rallygoers on intergroup anxiety was statistically significant and negative ($\beta = -0.35$, $z = -4.44$, $p < .001$). Again, this contradicts earlier findings indicating a negligible correlation between image type (political ingroup vs. outgroup) and intergroup anxiety, thereby suggesting the need for cautious interpretations, as detailed in the Discussion section.

Outgroup Evaluation. All paths in the third model predicting outgroup evaluations (Figure 1, bottom left) were statistically significant (all $ps < 0.02$). Consistent with H2c, negative emotional responses led to worsened evaluations of political outgroup members ($\beta = -0.30$, $z = -5.92$, $p < .001$). Consistent with H3c, the overall mediation effect was statistically significant: Seeing a news image of political outgroup members increased participants' negative emotions, which in turn worsened their evaluations of political outgroup members ($\beta = -0.11$, $z = -2.98$, $p = .003$, 95% CI [-0.19, -0.05]).

As with previous analyses on intergroup empathy and intergroup anxiety, the direct effect of viewing an image of outgroup rallygoers on participants' evaluations of the outgroup was statistically significant and positive ($\beta = 0.24$, $z = 2.41$, $p = .02$), which contradicts earlier findings showing no correlation between image type and outgroup evaluation (see Discussion).

Antagonistic Behavioral Intent. Two of three paths in the fourth model predicting antagonistic behavioral intentions toward the outgroup (Figure 1, bottom right) were statistically significant ($ps < .001$). Consistent with H2d, negative emotional responses led to more antagonistic behavioral intent toward political outgroup members ($\beta = 0.39, z = 7.98, p < .001$). Consistent with H3d, the overall mediation effect was statistically significant: Seeing a news image of political outgroup members increased participants' negative emotions, which in turn increased their antagonistic behavioral intentions toward political outgroup members ($\beta = 0.14, z = 3.17, p = .002, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.06, 0.23]$). The direct effect of seeing an image of political outgroup members on antagonistic behavioral intent ($X \rightarrow Y$) was not statistically significant ($\beta = -0.15, z = -1.51, p = .13$).

DISCUSSION

This study identified a psychological process in which viewing a news image of political outgroup members increases threat-related negative emotions, which in turn influences attitudes and behavioral intentions toward the outgroup. Analyses demonstrated that threat-related negative emotions mediated the relationships between news image (political ingroup vs. outgroup) and several outcomes: intergroup empathy, intergroup anxiety, outgroup evaluation, and antagonistic behavioral intent. Participants who viewed a news image depicting political outgroup rallygoers reported increased negative emotions compared to those who viewed an image of ingroup rallygoers. These negative emotional responses led to reduced empathy (and increased anxiety) toward political outgroup members, more negative evaluations of the outgroup, as well as a greater self-reported likelihood of engaging in antagonistic behavior toward them.

The data strongly suggest that news images of politically divisive issues—particularly images depicting members of political outgroups engaged in a rally opposing one's own views—can evoke emotional responses in viewers that influence their attitudes and behaviors toward those across the political divide. The findings support integrated threat theory, as participants reported more negative emotions and less positive emotions when viewing images of outgroup rallygoers. The results also aligned with prior research (e.g., Andersen et al., 2017; Arceneaux, 2017; Bukowski et al., 2014; Dasgupta et al., 2009) indicating that negative emotional states can lead to negative attitudes and behavioral intentions toward outgroup members. Most notably, this is the first experiment to demonstrate how news images of politically divisive issues can evoke negative emotional responses in viewers, and how such negative emotions affect their attitudes and behavioral intentions toward political outgroup members.

In the mediation models discussed previously, the direct effects of news image type (political ingroup vs. outgroup) on three of the four dependent measures (intergroup empathy, intergroup anxiety, and outgroup evaluation) showed results inconsistent with the zero-order correlational analyses, warranting further discussion. The relationships among variables in the mediated paths all aligned with integrated threat theory, that contact with outgroup members evokes threat-related negative emotions that lead to negative attitudinal/behavioral outcomes. But when negative emotions were controlled for (as they are in the direct pathways of the mediation models), viewing a news image of political outgroup members increased intergroup empathy, reduced intergroup anxiety, and improved evaluations of the outgroup. These findings aligned with intergroup contact theory, which posits that contact with outgroup members improves perceptions of them. Thus, it appears that mediated exposure to political outgroup

members can improve people's attitudes toward the outgroup, at least in a hypothetical scenario where there is no difference in people's negative emotional responses.

While negative emotional responses partially explained how image type (political ingroup vs. outgroup) influenced intergroup empathy, intergroup anxiety, and outgroup evaluation, there are likely other unexplored factors that could also have impacted these relationships. For example, in this study, viewing a news image of political outgroup members increased negative emotions, which subsequently increased intergroup anxiety, suggesting positive relationships among these variables. However, seeing an image of political outgroup members had a negative direct relationship on intergroup anxiety. This discrepancy suggests the existence of an additional unknown mediation mechanism that has a negative relationship, competing with the positive relationships in the mediation pathway (competitive mediation; see Zhao et al., 2010). Similar explanations apply to the direct effects for intergroup empathy and outgroup evaluation. While the findings suggesting competitive mediation can contribute to theory development and point to areas for further research, they should not diminish the importance of the mediational effects observed in this study (see Rucker et al., 2011).

Following the above discussions, a limitation of this study is the unexplored potential mediation mechanisms. Two competing theories guided this study, and findings revealed two conflicting patterns, each corresponding to one of the theories. While the study demonstrated that mediated intergroup contact with political outgroup members evokes threat-related negative emotions, which lead to negative outcomes as shown in the mediation pathways, the direct pathways suggested the existence of an unexplored mechanism whereby mediated intergroup contact leads to positive outcomes. Further research exploring the nature and causes of this direct effect is needed to strengthen the theoretical framework.

Additionally, recent discussions in social psychology emphasize that intergroup contact is a subjective experience (Hayward et al., 2017). In the context of the present study, viewing a news image of political outgroup members may have been a neutral or even positive experience for some participants. Future research on news images, or news visuals more broadly, could investigate different mechanisms that facilitate a positive mediated intergroup contact experience with political outgroup members. For instance, seeing a news image depicting a peaceful rally of the political outgroup might alter how individuals categorize those outgroup members (recategorization; see Dovidio et al., 2017) by suggesting they are “not as bad as I thought”—that they are ordinary people with similar goals, albeit different approaches to achieving them.

Another limitation of this study is the generalizability of the findings to other news images involving various politically divisive issues. It would be valuable to investigate whether the findings replicate with news images of other issues that, like gun policy, have a wide partisan gap, such as racial justice, immigration, and climate change. Further, the stimuli in this study were news images of rallies, which are commonly featured in gun policy-related news coverage. Future studies could use news visuals depicting individuals rather than groups, as learning individuating information about a political outgroup member can reduce hostility and increase empathy by humanizing them (Koetke et al., 2023).

Despite these limitations, this research addresses a gap in the literature regarding how people's emotional responses to news images of politically divisive issues impact perceptions of political outgroup members. As more issues become highly politicized (e.g., the war in Ukraine; Wike et al., 2024), and as political group identities increasingly influence attitudes over facts or personal relevance

(Cohen, 2003; Collins et al., 2021), the psychological mechanisms identified in this study are particularly significant in exploring one facet of media effects on emotions and perceptions of political outgroups in a polarized context.

Conclusion

This study investigated how politically divisive news images—specifically those depicting political outgroup members participating in rallies that oppose one’s own views—can increase threat-related negative emotions. These negative emotional responses can, in turn, decrease empathy (and increase anxiety) toward political outgroup members, worsen evaluations of them, and increase the likelihood to engage in antagonistic behavior toward them. The experiment found support for a series of mediational pathways where negative emotional responses mediated the relationships between news image and attitude/behavioral intent toward political outgroup members. Findings from the present study are particularly meaningful as they take a first step in exploring how news images of politically divisive issues could affect people’s attitudes and behavioral intentions toward political outgroup members.

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