

Banning burkas and niqabs? Exploring perceptions of bias in media coverage of Islam and Muslims in Switzerland and their relation to people's voting intention concerning the burka-initiative

Dorothee Arlt, University of Bern, Institute of Communication and Media Studies, Switzerland
dorothee.arlt@ikmb.unibe.ch

Abstract

In Switzerland, Islam and Muslims are repeatedly the subject of political debates and, thus, of media reporting. While content analyses show a certain bias in Western media coverage of Islam and Muslims, relatively little is known about the audience's perspective on media bias in this context. Using data from an online survey of the Swiss population (n=976), this study examines people's perceptions of bias in the media coverage of Islam and Muslims in Switzerland and how it relates to their intention to vote on the popular initiative "Yes to a veil ban". The study was conducted in March 2019, two years before the actual vote took place on 7 March 2021. The results show that the majority of the Swiss non-Muslim population perceives the reporting as distorted. In the study's investigation of media bias perceptions, attitudes towards Islam and Muslims, political orientation and personal contact with Muslims proved to be the most relevant influencing factors. By contrast, exposure to political information via traditional news media and social media was not associated with bias perceptions. Finally, a stronger perception that the media understate certain problems related to Islam and Muslims in Switzerland was positively related to people's intention to vote for a national ban on wearing burkas or niqabs in public.

Keywords

Hostile media effect, media bias, Islam and Muslims, burkas, niqabs, popular initiative "Yes to a veil ban", Switzerland

1 Introduction

In many European countries, the veiling of Muslim women has been an issue of public controversy. In most cases, however, this controversy is not so much about Muslim women as about Islamic customs and symbols, which have been instrumentalised by political, societal and intellectual leaders. Islam has been increasingly stigmatised by right-wing populist parties across Europe as a threat to national populations as a means of promoting stricter immigration policies (Betz, 2013; Kaya & Tecmen, 2019). Consequently, public debates about Islam are accompanied by issues such as the threat of Islamic terrorism, endangerment of public security, incompatibility of Western and Islamic values and difficulties in integrating Muslims into Western societies. Such arguments also surface in the arguments for the Swiss popular initiative "Yes to a veil ban", launched in March 2016

by Walter Wobmann, a politician affiliated with the right-wing populist Swiss People's Party (SVP), and his Egerkinger Committee, which previously launched the anti-minaret initiative, which has forbidden the construction of minarets in Switzerland since 2009. In general, the initiative demands a ban on face covering in public spaces and other places accessible to the public. However, as the Egerkinger Committee, by its own account, "fights against the advancing Islamisation of Switzerland" (Wobmann, 2019), the initiative is directed primarily against the Muslim minority in Switzerland and particularly against Muslim women's wearing of burkas or niqabs in the public. For this reason, the initiative is also popularly known as the burka-initiative.

In Switzerland, as a democratic society, the media create the public sphere in which controversial issues concerning Islam and Muslims in Switzerland in general



and the Swiss burka-initiative in particular are publicly debated. Consequently, various actors from politics, law, churches, Muslim organisations and non-profit organisations strategically circulate their positions, frames and narratives through the media to influence public opinion and political processes on these issues. However, in view of empirical findings on media coverage of Islam and Muslims in Western countries, the media's role in this context has to be evaluated critically. First, various scholars reveal that the media in Western countries have a strong tendency to associate Islam with terrorism, violence, conflict and religious extremism (Arendt & Karadas, 2017; Baker, 2010; Baker, Gabrielatos, & McEnery, 2013; Hoewe & Bowe, 2018; Kabir, 2006; Powell, 2011, 2018). Second, Western media cover Islam in a predominantly negative way in comparison to their coverage of Jews and Christians (Bleich, Stonebraker, Nisar, & Abdelhamid, 2015,) and Islam's quest for peace and religious tolerance (Bowe, Fahmy, & Matthes, 2015; Bowe, Fahmy, & Wanta, 2013). Third, several studies have found that Western media employ strategies to construct images of "us" and "them" and depict Muslims as an "alien other" for the West (Creutz-Kämpfi, 2008; Saeed, 2007; Silva, 2017).

These general findings also reflect media coverage in Switzerland. Swiss media have paid disproportionately more attention to Muslims in connection with political events (e. g., the vote on the anti-minaret initiative) and terrorist attacks (e. g., the attack on the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo*) compared to routine times without such incidences (Ettinger, 2018; Ettinger & Imhof, 2014). In particular, since the Madrid attacks in 2004, the imagined threat of Islamic terrorism in Switzerland has been established as a common frame to depict the Muslim minority in Switzerland as a problem and to question Muslims' willingness to integrate (Ettinger & Udris, 2009). Likewise, findings on the Swiss minaret initiative show that the initiative's supporters have succeeded in constructing their arguments of increasing Islamisation, Islamic terror and the es-

tablishment of parallel societies with their own law (Sharia) to evoke the perception that Islam is a serious threat to Swiss society (Ettinger & Imhof, 2014). Examining media coverage of religion in Switzerland, Dahinden, Koch, Wyss, and Keel (2011, p. 97) found that "while Christianity and its denominations are mainly presented in positive frames and positive narratives [...], the image of Islam is rather negative". In sum, existing research shows that media coverage of Muslims and Islam in Western countries predominantly depicts Muslims negatively, as incompatible with Western majorities and unwilling to integrate, with "Islam [...] dominantly portrayed as a violent religion" (Ahmed & Matthes, 2017, p. 219). In the case of Switzerland, "Muslims are represented in a massive majority in the media discourses [...], but they are in fact a minority in the sociological reality" (Lindemann & Stolz, 2014, p. 52).

In conclusion, researchers have sufficiently documented such biases in media coverage of Islam and Muslims using content analysis. In contrast, the audiences' perspective on media bias in this context has been little considered. While a few studies have investigated bias perceptions and their consequences from the Muslim minority perspective (Ahmad, 2006; Brown & Richards, 2016; Saleem & Ramasubramanian, 2019), to my knowledge, no study has taken a closer look at the majority, non-Muslim perspective.

Against this background, the first aim of this paper is to explore how widespread perceptions of bias in the media coverage of Islam and Muslims are within the Swiss population and how these perceptions relate to attitudes, political media use and personal contact with Muslims. Specifically, the perception relates to different sub-issues, including whether the media exaggerate or understate increasing Islamisation, the supposed danger posed by Islamic terror in Switzerland, the incompatibility of Islamic and Western values and the difficulties of integrating Muslims in Switzerland. The perception of bias in the reporting on these issues is particularly significant as right-wing populist actors typically use these four sub-issues to call

for stricter integration policies and strong assimilation, even to the point of requiring immigrants to completely abandon their own cultural identity. The second goal of this study is to examine the possible political consequences of the perception of bias in reporting in relation to the Swiss burka-initiative. Previous research has shown that perceptions of media bias have the potential to trigger social and political behaviours (see, for an overview, McLeod, Wise, & Perryman, 2017; Perloff, 2015; Tsifti & Cohen, 2013). Consequently, perceptions of media bias are of particular interest when the Swiss population, predominantly non-Muslim, had the opportunity to vote on the Swiss burka-initiative and, thus, to a certain extent, decided how to react to a religious, in this case, non-Christian, minority living in Switzerland.

2 Literature review

Research on the audience perspective on perceptions of (hostile) media bias was triggered by the pioneering experimental study of Vallone, Ross and Lepper (1985), who exposed Israeli and Palestinian supporters to the same neutral television news coverage of the 1983 Beirut Massacre. Scholars found that both partisan groups perceived the television news as biased against their own position, while non-partisans classified it as neutral. Thus, on both sides of the controversy, partisans have a tendency to perceive media coverage as biased against or even hostile to their side, which is called the “hostile media phenomenon” (Vallone et al., 1985).

The original concept states that people with strong beliefs about an issue perceive neutral issue-related media coverage as biased against their viewpoints; however, the concept's assumption that media coverage is neutral and balanced is hardly tenable in the prevalent reality of news selection and production. Knowing this, Gunther and his colleagues expanded the original concept and tested it using explicitly one-sided media coverage (Gunther & Christen, 2002; Gunther, Christen, Liebhart, & Chih-Yun Chia, 2001; Gunther,

Miller, & Liebhart, 2009). The findings of these studies show that even if partisan groups agree that news coverage is biased in one direction, both sides still consider the same coverage “relatively less sympathetic – along the continuum of bias – to their own positions” (Gunther et al., 2009, p. 751). Consequently, it does not matter whether media coverage is actually neutral or biased because partisan groups will always perceive a relative negative bias in relation to their own position (Gunther et al., 2001, p. 313), which is called the “relative hostile media effect”. To date, the original concept and its extension have been proven in numerous experimental and non-experimental studies with different partisan groups and a variety of controversial issues, including topics such as immigrants/immigration (Matthes & Beyer, 2017; McKeever, Riffe, & Carpentier, 2012) and refugees (Arlt, Dalmus, & Metag, 2019; Arlt & Wolling, 2016; Merten & Dohle, 2019), among others.

Concerning the factors that explain perceptions of media bias, previous research has provided strong evidence that a person's level of involvement plays a major role in the process of forming hostile media biases. In general, hostile media perceptions are stronger among individuals who are highly involved cognitively (Hansen & Kim, 2011; Perloff, 2015). However, scholars have used very different indicators to represent people's cognitive involvement (see Gunther et al., 2009; Matthes, 2013), including political partisanship/party affiliation (e.g., Dalton, Beck, & Huckfeldt, 1998; Glynn & Hoge, 2014), political ideology (e.g., Arlt et al., 2019; Hwang et al., 2008; Matthes, 2013), issue attitudes (e.g., Arlt et al., 2019; Hwang, Pan, & Sun, 2008; Matthes, 2013; Matthes & Beyer, 2017), issue importance (Matthes, 2013; Matthes & Beyer, 2017) and issue interest (Arlt et al., 2019).

Studies from the United States using political partisanship as an indicator of involvement have found that perceptions of media bias in general seem to be stronger among conservatives than among liberals (Dalton et al., 1998; Eveland & Shah, 2003; Glynn & Hoge, 2014; Lee, 2005, 2010).

However, studies that consider the role of political ideology (measured as political orientation on the left-right spectrum) on bias perceptions in the context of media coverage of refugees and immigrants can only partly confirm this tendency. While Arlt and Wolling (2016) found that Germans with a stronger affiliation to the right-wing conservative end of the political spectrum perceive the media coverage as being biased in favour of refugees, Arlt et al. (2019) could not confirm such a relationship for German and Swiss people in a later study. In addition, two studies that considered political ideology as a control variable found no relations with perceptions of bias in media coverage of illegal immigrants (Matthes & Beyer, 2017) and refugees (Merten & Dohle, 2019).

Concerning the role of issue attitudes, findings from hostile media studies that focus on immigrants and refugees show that people with negative attitudes towards immigrants (McKeever et al., 2012) and refugees (Arlt et al., 2019; Arlt & Wolling, 2016; Merten & Dohle, 2019) more strongly perceive the media coverage as biased against their views. In support of this research, Matthes and Beyer (2017) found that people who believe that immigration should be limited perceive media coverage as biased in favour of illegal immigrants.

It seems plausible that perceiving media coverage of a certain issue as biased requires at least a certain degree of experience with an issue, if not personal involvement. From a communications science perspective, the media are often considered the primary source of information for the public on most issues and developments in the real world. For this reason, scholars have started to consider media exposure as a relevant factor in the process of forming perceptions of bias under non-experimental, field conditions. For example, scholars have found that exposure to news media in general (Barnidge, Sayre, & Rojas, 2015) and to news transmitted via social networks in particular is positively related to perceptions of media bias (Rojas, Barnidge, & Abril, 2016). With other types of news media, the relationship is not as clear. Ho et al. (2011) discov-

ered a positive relation between the use of newspapers for news and hostile media perceptions but no such relationship for television news use. Matthes (2013), in contrast, found no relation for newspaper news use but a negative one for television news.

In an analysis of issue-specific media exposure, McKeever et al. (2012) found a positive correlation between exposure to news coverage of immigrants and perceptions that news coverage was biased in favour of immigrants. Similarly, Arlt and Wolling (2016) found that higher exposure to news coverage of refugees was positively related to people's perceptions that media coverage was biased in favour of refugees. Using a different measurement to assess hostile media perceptions, Arlt et al. (2019) found that Germans who frequently received information about refugees from newspapers perceived the media as less biased against their views; for people living in German-speaking Switzerland, however, the researchers found a negative correlation between receiving information about refugees from the television and bias perceptions. Overall, the findings from existing research on the role of media exposure are rather mixed.

Finally, in addition to considering the role of media exposure, this paper examines how people's direct experience with an issue – in this case, personal contact with Muslims – relates to perceptions of media bias. Building on intergroup contact theory (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew, 1998), the intergroup contact hypothesis suggests that the personal intergroup contact of majority society members with racial minority members has the potential to reduce prejudices and aversion against this outgroup (Dixon & Rosenbaum, 2004; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Accordingly, it was also found that personal contact with Muslims can reduce negative attitudes towards this outgroup (Ahmed, 2012; Brockett & Baird, 2008). Considering this finding in the context of hostile media perceptions, it seems reasonable that a higher level of personal contact with outgroup members leads more strongly to the perception that media coverage is biased against this spe-

cific outgroup because increased contact makes people more sympathetic. The first evidence for this assumption can be found in a study by Arlt and Wolling (2016), who identified an indirect effect of personal contact with refugees on bias perceptions mediated through positive attitudes towards refugees.

Concerning the relation between media bias perceptions and behavioural consequences, most scholars have examined this relation with reference to the corrective action hypothesis (Rojas, 2010). According to this hypothesis, people are more likely to become involved in corrective political behaviours if they perceive the media as biased against their political views, prompting them to seek to correct these wrongs (Rojas, 2010). Such political reactions have been confirmed by numerous studies (Barnidge et al., 2015; Feldman, Hart, Leiserowitz, Maibach, & Roser-Renouf, 2017; Ho et al., 2011; Rojas et al., 2016). For example, Barnidge et al. (2015) found a positive relationship between perceptions of hostile media and political participation. Similarly, Rojas et al. (2016) observed that perceptions of media bias influence people's participation in voting for a new president in Colombia. Finally, a recent study showed that people who perceived the media's reporting as being in favour of the European Union (EU) were more likely to vote for an anti-EU party in European Parliamentary elections and vice versa (Kleinnijenhuis, Hartmann, Tanis, & van Hoof, 2019).

3 Research questions, hypotheses and the research model

An examination of existing research shows that various content analyses reveal a negative bias in reporting on Islam and Muslims by the Swiss media. However, there have been no studies of how consumers of news perceive media bias in this thematic context. Therefore, the first aim of this study is to explore whether and to what extent the Swiss population perceives the media coverage of Islam and Muslims as

distorted. In support of this objective, the first research question is:

RQ1: How widespread are perceptions of bias in media coverage of Islam and Muslims among the Swiss population?

Moreover, this paper explores how perceptions of media bias relate to attitudes, media exposure and personal contact with Muslims. Based on previous research findings on the role of involvement in the process of perceiving the media as biased, I propose the following hypotheses regarding two different indicators of people's involvement:

H1a: Negative attitudes towards Islam and Muslims will be positively correlated with perceptions of media bias in favour of Islam and Muslims.

H1b: Political orientation to the right end of the spectrum will be positively correlated with perceptions of media bias in favour of Islam and Muslims.

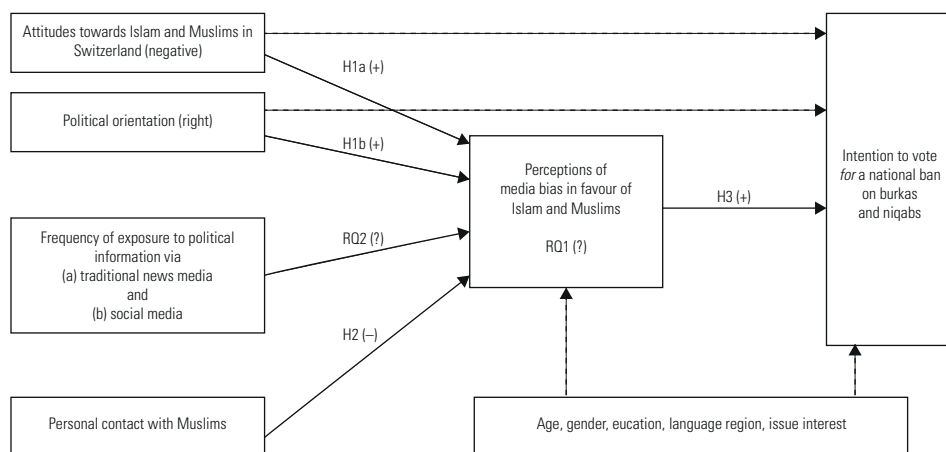
Concerning the role of media exposure for media bias perceptions, findings from previous research are not consistent. These relationships seem to differ depending on whether news exposure in general or exposure to news and information via different media forms (e.g., television, newspaper and social networks) has been considered. Thus, I have formed the following question:

RQ2: What is the relationship between perceptions of media bias in favour of Islam and Muslims and exposure to political information via (a) traditional news media and (b) social media?

With reference to the assumptions of intergroup contact theory, I propose the following hypothesis about personal contact with Muslims:

H2: Personal contact with Muslims will be negatively correlated with perceptions of media bias in favour of Islam and Muslims.

Figure 1: Research model



Regarding the potential consequences of bias perceptions, previous research has provided strong empirical evidence that people who perceive the media as biased against their own political position tend to become politically active to correct these perceived wrongs. Applied to the context of the current study, I assume the following hypothesis:

H3: Perceptions of media bias in favour of Islam and Muslims will be positively correlated with the intention to vote for a national ban on wearing burkas and niqabs in public in Switzerland.

I control for demographic factors (sex, age, education), the German- and French-speaking language region and issue interest on perceptions of media bias as well as on voting intentions. In addition, I consider the effects of attitudes towards Islam and Muslims and political orientation on voting intention as it seems quite likely that they will be strongly related. Taken together, these assumptions lead to the final research model, which is shown in Figure 1.

4 Methods

The following chapter comprises three sections. First, information on data collection and the sample, second a description of the operationalisation of all relevant variables, and finally an explanation of the data analysis procedure.

4.1 Data collection and sample

The empirical basis for this study is data from a standardised online survey conducted by the professional Swiss survey institute DemoSCOPE, using the Intervista online access panel. The data gathering took place in March 2019. Based on quotas for age, gender and language region, a sample representing the German- and French-speaking populations of Switzerland over the age of 15 with internet access was obtained. After removing the most obvious carelessly invalid responses ($n=39$) based on response time and long-string analysis (see Curran, 2016), the sample consisted of $n=976$ respondents (50 % male, 50 % female; 74 % German-speaking and 26 % French-speaking) between 15 and 74 years old, with an average age of 46 years.¹ The sample was slanted towards

1 Observations with *response times* below the cut-off value of 429 seconds, that is, one

highly educated respondents as 35% had a university degree. Moreover, Muslims ($n=9$) were seriously underrepresented in the sample. For this reason, and to avoid in-group biases concerning attitudes and perceptions of bias in media coverage of Islam and Muslims, these nine cases were excluded from the study.

4.2 Measures

With reference to studies on *bias perceptions* concerning the refugee issue (Arlt & Wolling, 2016; Merten & Dohle, 2019), this study used four items to measure people's perceptions of bias in media coverage of different aspects publicly debated in relation to Islam and Muslims in Switzerland. The *perception of an increasing Islamisation in Switzerland* refers to the impression that Islam as a religious community is spreading rapidly and that the proportion of Muslims in the Swiss population continues to rise. Closely related to the perception of increasing Islamisation are fears of the native non-Muslim population related to radicalism attributed to Islam and of Islam being something (culturally) foreign. These fears are expressed in the *perception of a threat to public security caused by Islamist terror in Switzerland* and an *impression of Islam's incompatibility with Western values and lifestyles*. As a consequence, these fears lead to the *perception that it is difficult for Muslims to integrate into Switzerland*. For each item, respondents were asked to specify on a five-point scale (from 1, "strongly overstated", to 5, "strongly understated") whether the media overstate or understate this aspect. To test the hypotheses, the items were compiled into an index (mean [M]=3.0, standard deviation [SD]=0.9, Cronbach's $\alpha=.87$) representing respondents' perceptions that the media understate issues pertaining to

Islam and, hence, are biased in favour of Islam and Muslims in Switzerland.

The intention to vote for or against the national popular initiative "Yes to a veil ban", which includes wearing the burka and niqab, was measured with one item. On an eleven-point scale (from 0, "against", to 10, "for"), respondents were asked to indicate how likely it was that they would vote for or against a national ban on wearing the burka and the niqab in Switzerland ($M=6.2$; $SD=3.6$). In March 2019, the majority of the Swiss population (63%) said they would vote for the burka-initiative, while 33% said they would vote against it. Approximately four percent of respondents were undecided at the time of the survey. In the actual vote, which took place two years later on 7 March 2021, the Swiss voted narrowly in favour of the veil ban (yes: 51.2%; no: 48.8%, Bundeskanzlei BK, 2021).

Attitudes towards Islam and Muslims living in Switzerland. With reference to studies on Islamophobia and anti-Arab prejudices (Elchardus & Spruyt, 2014; Kunst, Sam, & Ulleberg, 2013; Lee, Gibbons, Thompson, & Timani, 2009), people's attitudes were examined on two dimensions, Islam in general and Muslims living in Switzerland in particular, each with four items.² Analogous to the measurement of attitudes towards immigrants in the European Social Survey, opposite pairs of statements were formed about different aspects of Islam, such as culture, values, gender equality and security, to obtain variance in the answers (see Table 1). On a scale from 0 (e.g., "Women are respected in Islam") to 10 (e.g., "Women are oppressed in Islam"), respondents could indicate which statement corresponded most closely to their opinion. For further analysis, the items were compiled into an index representing respondents' negative attitudes towards Islam and Muslims liv-

standard deviation below the mean calculated response time, excluding outliers with standardised values above 2 were excluded. For the *long-string analysis*, we checked the longest string of identical responses within a battery of questions with reverse formulated items.

2 For the index, one pair of statements had to be deleted (Fundamentalist Muslims are a real threat to public security in Switzerland/ Fundamentalist Muslims do not pose any threat to public security in Switzerland).

Table 1: Operationalisation of attitudes towards Islam and Muslims living in Switzerland

Operationalisation	M ^a	(SD)
Pairs of statements for measuring attitudes towards Islam		
Women are respected in Islam. // Women are oppressed in Islam.	7.4	(2.6)
Islamic and Western European values are not compatible. // Islamic and Western European values can be easily reconciled.*	5.5	(2.9)
Islam stands for peaceful coexistence. // Islam advocates acts of violence.	5.3	(2.9)
Islamic customs threaten Western culture. // Islamic customs enrich Western culture.*	5.3	(2.8)
Pairs of statements for measuring attitudes towards Muslims living in Switzerland		
Most Muslims in Switzerland respect Western values. // Most Muslims in Switzerland do not respect Western values.	4.4	(2.7)
In Switzerland, Muslim women and men have equal rights. // In Switzerland, Muslim men dominate their wives.	6.2	(2.6)
For most Muslims in Switzerland, the local laws stand above the rules of the Koran. // For most Muslims in Switzerland, the rules of the Koran take precedence over local laws.	4.9	(2.9)

Notes: ^a Mean (M) and standard deviation (SD) on an eleven-point scale, where 0 and 10 mark the poles; $n=875-915$; *items have been reversed.

ing in Switzerland ($M=5.5$, $SD=2.0$, Cronbach's $\alpha=.84$).

Political orientation was measured by a single item, which asked respondents to place themselves on a left-to-right scale ranging from 0 “left” to 10 “right” ($M=4.7$; $SD=2.3$). Of the respondents, 46% placed themselves left of the centre and 35% right of the centre.

To measure people's behaviour in *gathering political information via traditional news media versus social media*, respondents were asked to indicate on a seven-point scale (from 1, “never”, to 7, “daily”) how often they obtained information on political issues using the following media outlets: public broadcasting ($M=4.8$; $SD=2.1$), private broadcasting ($M=2.7$; $SD=1.9$), boulevard newspapers and freesheets, e.g., *20 Minuten* ($M=4.0$; $SD=2.1$), national newspapers ($M=3.4$; $SD=2.2$), Facebook pages/posts from media outlets ($M=3.0$; $SD=2.3$), Facebook pages/posts from political parties and/or politicians ($M=1.9$; $SD=1.7$) and Twitter posts from media outlets ($M=1.7$; $SD=1.6$) and political parties and/or politicians ($M=1.5$; $SD=1.3$).

Personal contact with Muslims was measured by one item, which asked respondents to indicate on a seven-point scale (from 1, “never”, to 7, “daily”) how often they had personal contact with Muslims, such as through family and friends,

work, neighbourhood contacts or leisure activities ($M=3.9$; $SD=2.0$).

Issue interest was assessed using one statement asking respondents to indicate on a five-point scale (1, “not at all interested”, to 5, “strongly interested”) how strongly they were interested in issues concerning Islam and Muslims ($M=3.2$; $SD=1.0$).

4.3 Data analysis

To test the research model, a structural equation model (SEM) was calculated (maximum likelihood estimations) for $n=821$ cases with valid data for all the relevant variables using the “Analysis of Moment Structures” statistical software program (AMOS 24). As a starting point, an SEM that contained all the theoretically postulated relationships as well as the effects of the control variables was specified (see Figure 1). The model also assumed correlations between independent and control variables.

The model fit was not satisfactory in the first step ($\chi^2/df=5.3$; $CFI=.98$; $RMSEA=.07$; $p<.001$), using the ratio of chi-square values and degrees of freedom ($\chi^2/df<3$), the comparative fit index ($CFI>.95$) and the root mean square error of approximation ($RMSEA<.06$) as model fit indicators, as well as presuming that the model should not significantly differ from the data (Hu & Bentler, 1999; Kline, 2011). According to the modification indices, some media effects on voting intentions

Table 2: Perceptions of bias in media coverage of Islam and Muslims

	M (SD) ^a	perceived non-bias (adequate)	perceived bias ^b	direction of perceived bias	
		%	%	over-state- ment ^c	under-state- ment ^d
Media coverage of the increasing spread of Islam in Switzerland is...	3.0 (1.1)	30	70	38	32
Media coverage of the threat to public security caused by Islamist terror in Switzerland is...	2.9 (1.1)	36	64	35	29
Media coverage of the incompatibility of Islam with Western core values is...	3.0 (1.1)	33	67	36	31
Media coverage of the difficulty of integrating Muslims in Switzerland is...	3.1 (1.0)	39	61	28	33

Notes: ^a Mean (M) and standard deviation (SD) of data measured with a five-point scale (1 "strongly overstated", 2 "rather overstated", 3 "adequate", 4 "rather understated", 5 "strongly understated"); ^b points 1, 2, 4 or 5 on the scale; ^c points 1 and 2 on the scale; ^d points 4 and 5 on the scale.

were missing; they were supplemented in a second step.³ Hence, the adapted model achieved a good model fit ($Chi^2/df=1.3$; $CFI=.99$; $RMSEA=.02$; $p<.238$).

5 Results

As a first step, this study examined the existence of bias perceptions concerning media coverage of Islam and Muslims among the Swiss population (RQ1). The findings show that perceptions of media bias are very widespread (see Table 2): The great majority of the Swiss population perceives the reporting on the Islamisation of Switzerland (70%), the endangerment of public security through Islamist terror (64%), the incompatibility of Islam with Western values (67%) and the difficulty of integrating Muslims into Swiss society (61%) as biased. If the direction of the perceived bias (overstatement versus understatement) is also taken into account, around one-third of the population feels

that the media either exaggerate or understate reporting on the various aspects that are often discussed as problematic in connection with Islam and Muslims in public discourse. About one-third (between 30% and 39%) perceives the reporting on these aspects as adequate.

In an investigation of the factors influencing these bias perceptions (see Table 3), the findings of this study clearly confirm the role of people's involvement: People with more negative attitudes towards Islam and Muslims ($\beta=.52$; $p<.001$) and a stronger political orientation to the right ($\beta=.20$; $p<.001$) perceive the media as more biased in favour of Islam and Muslims. Hence, both H1 hypotheses, H1a and H1b, were strongly supported by the data.

Concerning the various variables tested to examine the relationship between exposure to political information and bias perceptions (RQ2), no relationships were found – neither for traditional news media nor for social networks.

Concerning the relation between bias perceptions and direct contact with Muslims, the results reveal that people who have more personal contact with Muslims have less of an impression that media coverage is in favour of Islam and Muslims in Switzerland ($\beta=-.08$; $p<.01$). Thus, H2 was supported by the data.

With respect to the control variables, the results show that bias perceptions are more pronounced among older people ($\beta=.13$; $p<.001$), men ($\beta=.07$; $p<.01$),

3 The modification indices suggested that effects occurred through exposure to political information via private television news, national daily newspapers and Twitter. Although media effects on political participation were not the focus of this study, the proposed modifications confirm the findings of several studies in political communications research. Accordingly, the modifications are theoretically quite plausible, which is why the model was modified.

Table 3: Standardised direct effects on perceptions of bias

Dependent variable: Perceptions of media bias	β	p
Age (in years)	.13	***
Male	.07	**
Education (high)	-.03	ns
German-speaking part of Switzerland (yes)	.11	***
Issue interest (high)	.07	*
Attitudes towards Islam and Muslims (negative)	.52	***
Political orientation (right)	.20	***
Exposure to political information via public broadcasting	.01	ns
Exposure to political information via private broadcasting	-.01	ns
Exposure to political information boulevard newspapers and freesheets	.01	ns
Exposure to political information via national newspapers	.01	ns
Exposure to political information via Facebook pages/posts from media outlets	-.04	ns
Exposure to political information via Facebook pages/posts from political parties and/or politicians	.03	ns
Exposure to political information via Twitter posts from media outlets	-.01	ns
Exposure to political information via Twitter posts from political parties and/or politicians	-.05	ns
Personal contact with Muslims	-.08	**

Notes: *** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$; not significant (ns).

Table 4: Standardised direct effects on voting intention

Dependent variable: intention to vote for a national ban of wearing the burka and the niqab	β	p
Age (in years)	.07	*
Male	-.04	ns
Education (high)	-.06	*
German-speaking part of Switzerland (yes)	-.04	ns
Issue interest (high)	.05	ns
Attitudes toward Islam and Muslims (negative)	.26	***
Political orientation (right)	.16	***
Exposure to political information via private broadcasting	.14	***
Exposure to political information via national newspapers	-.10	***
Exposure to political information via Facebook pages/posts from media outlets	-.07	**
Perceptions of bias in media coverage of Islam and Muslims	.26	***

Notes: *** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$; not significant (ns).

people living in the French-speaking part of Switzerland ($\beta = .11$; $p < .001$) and those with a stronger interest in issues ($\beta = .07$; $p < .01$). Overall, the tested variables explain 47 % of the variance in people's bias perceptions.

Concerning the behavioural consequences of bias perception, perceptions of media bias still turned out to be one of the strongest predictors of voting intentions, and this finding held even after controlling for the strong effects of Islamophobic attitudes ($\beta = .26$; $p < .001$) and political ori-

entation ($\beta = .16$; $p < .001$) (see Table 4). The more people perceived the media coverage as biased in favour of Islam and Muslims, the greater their intention to vote for the burka-initiative ($\beta = .26$; $p < .001$). Therefore, the findings strongly confirm H3.

Moreover, as indicated by the modification indices, there are three direct effects of media exposure on voting intentions. People who frequently use private television news for political information ($\beta = .11$; $p < .001$) showed a greater intention to vote for the burka-initiative. By contrast, peo-

ple who frequently use national newspapers ($\beta = -.10$; $p < .05$) and Facebook pages/posts from media outlets ($\beta = -.07$; $p < .01$) for political information showed a lower intention to vote for the initiative. Finally, older ($\beta = .07$; $p < .05$) and less-educated people ($\beta = -.06$; $p < .05$) reported a greater intention to vote for the initiative. Overall, 43% of the variance can be explained by these variables.

6 Discussion and conclusion

This study examines perceptions of bias in the media coverage of Islam and Muslims in the Swiss population, how these perceptions relate to attitudes, media exposure and personal contact with Muslims and what possible consequences arise from these perceptions with regard to the intention to vote on the burka-initiative. Hence, the study contributes to the audience perspective – here the perspective of the non-Muslim Swiss population – on perceptions of bias in media coverage of Islam and Muslims, which has not been considered in previous research.

The descriptive results show that the majority of the Swiss population perceives the reporting on various issues that are controversially discussed in connection with Islam and Muslims as distorted. These perceptions of bias in the reporting refer both generally to Islam (an increasing spread of Islam in Switzerland, threats to public security posed by Islamic terror, and cultural differences between Islam and the West) and specifically to Muslims living in Switzerland in relation to their integration into Swiss society. Moreover, the findings show that the Swiss do not agree on the direction of the media bias: While around one-third has the impression that the media tend to exaggerate these aspects, approximately another one-third has the impression that the media tend to understate the same aspects.

Contrasting the subjective bias perceptions of the three different thirds of the Swiss population with actual findings from objective media content research provides an interesting starting point for future re-

search. Media content research has clearly shown that reporting on Islam and Muslims is predominantly negative; however, this “negative bias” is only perceived by approximately one-third of the Swiss population. Subjective perception and actual reporting coincide only for those who perceive the reporting as too negative. By contrast, subjective perception and media-mediated reality diverge in the other two groups. Particularly interesting is the group that has the impression that the media understate certain “problems” in relation to Islam and Muslims in Switzerland even though content analyses prove a general negative bias in the media’s coverage of Islam and Muslims. It can be assumed that this group contains a large number of people with very specific, rather radically conservative patterns of attitudes. However, to date, media bias research has mainly examined individual attitudinal variables instead of a complex structure of interrelated attitudes. Hence, with a view to future research, it would be helpful to pursue a more typological approach to identify groups with differently pronounced media bias perceptions and their complex structure of attitudes.

With regard to possible explanations for bias perceptions, the findings of this study strongly confirm the substantial role of people’s involvement in promoting perceptions of hostile media bias as indicated in previous research (Hansen & Kim, 2011; Perloff, 2015): Perceptions of bias in media coverage of Islam and Muslims are particularly noticeable among persons with pronounced Islamophobic attitudes and a political orientation to the right. This finding underlines the challenge for journalists in reporting objectively on such controversial issues as audiences will rarely perceive and evaluate media coverage impartially; rather, they will perceive the coverage subjectively based on their personal angles. Nevertheless, it is crucial that journalists and the media take up this challenge and try to report on various aspects of Islam in a differentiated way, particularly because some topics, such as Islamist terror, are negative, while others are not. The present findings justify the need for greater differ-

entiation in reporting; for example, the recipients hardly distinguish between the danger posed by Islamist terror in Switzerland and the difficulty of integrating Muslims into Swiss society in their perceptions.

In contrast to previous research, this study finds no significant relationship between media use for political information and media bias perceptions. One possible explanation is the very strong effect of Islamophobic attitudes ($\beta = .52$) on media bias perceptions, which covers possible effects of media use on media bias perceptions. However, evaluating the situation more critically, it can be questioned whether the relationships between media use and media bias perceptions are really as “simple” as originally assumed in this study. Various studies have found relationships between exposure to news media and attitudes towards immigrants (e.g., Beyer & Matthes, 2015; De Coninck et al., 2018; Eberl et al., 2018; Jacobs, Meeusen, & d’Haenens, 2016). Consequently, it seems reasonable to expect that media exposure does not affect bias perceptions directly but indirectly through Islamophobic attitudes. Hence, such an alternative effect model needs to be theorised and tested in greater depth in further research.

There are two further explanations for the lack of evidence of relationships between media use and media bias perceptions. The first concerns the measurement of media exposure and is also a limitation of this study. Islam and Muslims are regularly subjects of controversial political debates in Switzerland; thus, people’s behaviour patterns in gathering political information have been used as an indicator for contact with media content about Islam and Muslims. Consequently, political information behaviour does not necessarily mean that recipients actually consume media content about Islam and Muslims. To solve this problem, one would have to assess people’s issue-specific media usage differentiated according to the type of media. In the best case – if the resources allow it – one would not use self-reported measures of media usage but more elabo-

rate methods to observe actual media use behaviour (e.g., tracking techniques).

The second explanation could be the often-abstract rather undifferentiated measurement of media perceptions and media use in survey studies. In most cases, recipients are asked about their general use of television news or newspapers but not which news programme or newspaper they consume specifically, despite the fact that there are significant differences, for example, between news from private and public broadcasters or between quality and tabloid news. Similarly, recipients are asked about their perceptions of media bias in general and not in specific media outlets that they use or not. However, if one assumes that recipients choose and consume media content selectively, depending on dispositional factors (Valkenburg, Peter, & Walther, 2016), then a fundamental weakness of this research strand becomes apparent. To solve this problem and gain more precise insights into the complex relationship between media use and media perception, it is, therefore, necessary to record both use and perception in a much more differentiated way in future research. This would, among other benefits, allow researchers to investigate the extent to which perceptions of bias differ according to media content that recipients use themselves and to media content they do not use.

In addition to involvement and media exposure, direct contact with Muslims was tested as an additional explanatory factor. As expected, people with more personal contact with Muslims perceived the media coverage as less favourable towards Islam and Muslims and sought to counteract the effects of negative attitudes towards Islam and Muslims, at least in the present study. Hence, this study provides direct evidence for the relevance of personal experiences/contact in processes leading to hostile media perceptions. However, this approach certainly needs to be deepened in further research. In particular, the effects of the type and context of the personal contact must be taken into account as it seems plausible that it makes a difference whether the personal contact is experienced as

positive or negative and whether this contact takes place in a personal or a professional context (Freitag & Rapp, 2013).

With regard to behavioural consequences of bias perceptions, the findings of this study strongly support the corrective actions hypothesis (Rojas, 2010); that is, Swiss people who have the impression that the media understate certain problems related to Islam and Muslims in Switzerland showed a greater intention to vote for a national ban on burkas and niqabs. The findings presented here should not be overestimated with regard to the actual vote on the burka-initiative that took place two years later. Nevertheless, the present findings should encourage Swiss voting research to take greater account of the media, and media perceptions in particular, as a factor explaining voting behaviour.

In addition to the limitations related to the theoretical conceptualisation and the operationalisation of media exposure, a limitation of this study is its reliance of cross-sectional data. Consequently, this study reveals only correlations between involvement, bias perceptions and voting intentions but no causal relationships. Future research should collect more panel data to investigate causal relationships between the variables associated with the causes and consequences of bias perceptions.

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