Bachelor Thesis

The Impact of News Framing on the Perceived Threat of Terrorism in the Netherlands, and the Role Indirect Contact May Play in Reducing it

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Table of Contents

Abstract

Berlin, Paris, and London are only a handful of cities which have been experiencing first-hand the current rise in terrorist events. Parallel to this, the world is witnessing a spike in news stories tackling the issue of terrorism and the shared fears that come along with it. In this thesis, I will discuss the link between the framing of news and the perceived threat of terrorism both with regard to global and Dutch literature. Moreover, I will consider the applicability and effectiveness of possible intervention techniques in decreasing one's perceived threat of terrorism. The research, based on 121 Dutch residents, focuses on the case-study of the Netherlands to investigate whether the mere framing of a terrorist attacker as Dutch or Muslim does in fact influence one's level of perceived threat. A third condition was included to test the effectiveness of extended contact as an intervention technique. Results found no significant differences between the three conditions with regard to one's level of threat perception. The study's implications and potential shortcoming are presented to offer possible insight for future research.

Keywords: perceived threat of terrorism, the Netherlands, news framing, indirect contact

"Everybody's worried about stopping terrorism. Well, there's a really easy way: stop participating

in it".

- Noam Chomsky -

In today's highly technological society, televisions, computers, and other news outlets play a central role in shaping attitudes and beliefs. People rely on televised programs and advertisements to decide which products to buy, shape their hobbies, and even choose their lives' directions (Park, 2005). In such a technological era, much is extrapolated from the arguments of news anchors and adapted to real-life experiences and encounters (Ortiz & Harwood, 2007). Within these media discourses, a narrative that has been gaining a lot of popularity and coverage since the terrorist attack on the World Trade Centre on September 11, 2001 (9/11), is undoubtedly the one of terrorism.

Such a rise in popularity can easily be witnessed by looking at how frequently news broadcasts have been covering the issue of terrorism in recent years. In fact, studies have shown that reports on the matter of terrorism have spiked from the pre-9/11 to the post-9/11 era, having become increasingly more present in everybody's daily lives (Kern, Just, & Norris, 2003). Throughout the 1970s, international newspapers such as the New York Times averaged one story concerning terrorism just about every two days. However, during the 1980s the number of such issues rose to two per day. Similarly, U.S. televised news broadcasts on the issue rose from one a week in the 1970s to around four per week in the 1980s. Nevertheless, the true spike happened with the 9/11 attack on U.S. national soil. Before then, American citizens had never witnessed such a devastating event within their borders and had felt a general sense of immunity. For this reason, the twin tower attack truly struck the American public to its core and simultaneously the world witnessed a spike in terrorism-related stories, as U.S. news coverage rose "from around 178 [stories] in the 12-months prior to September 2001 to 1345 stories in the twelve months afterwards" (Kern et al., 2003, p. 290).

The fear of terrorism can be understood under the wider concept of perceived threat. Many theories, such as the Intergroup Threat Theory, try to understand threat perception by looking at its antecedents and influence on attitudes and behaviors (Stephan & Stephan, 2000). Threat perception appears to be a cross-cultural phenomenon, often linked to prejudice, which differs depending on the individual's characteristics and demographics (Kern et al., 2003; Nellis & Savage, 2012; Velasco González, Verkuyten, Weesie, & Poppe, 2008). Moreover, when discussing the increased media coverage of terrorism, it is important to understand the impact that this has on the public's level of threat perception. Analyses of the framing of predominantly American News, have shown that stories are becoming increasingly more biased since 9/11, with Muslims often being portrayed in negative or denigrating ways (Powell, 2011). This, in turn, has been observed to influence the public's perception through factors such as repetitiveness of the message and one's motivation for watching the news (Nellis & Savage, 2012). Furthermore, theories such as the ones of Vicarious Learning and the Parasocial Contact Hypothesis, later examined in this thesis, have advanced arguments for why media framing appears to have such a strong influence on the public's decisions and behavioural attitudes (Ortiz & Harwood, 2007; Schiappa, Gregg, & Hewes, 2005). Lastly, a number of intervention techniques have emerged from what scholars refer to as the Contact Hypothesis, which explains threat and prejudice reduction as stemming from contact between different groups (Allport, 1954). This thesis will primarily tackle indirect forms of contact which have proven successful in reducing inter-group threat in situations where direct contact was not possible (Vezzali, Stathi, & Giovannini, 2012).

Relevance and Research Question

Throughout the years, a lot has been said about the topics of threat perception and news framing, yet not much about the link between the two. With terrorist attacks on the rise and a corresponding spike in media coverage of these issues (Fox & Gilbert, 2016), the matter has never been more crucial. Specifically, the case of the Netherlands is one which has been researched even

less by international scholars, and thus, my decision to adopt it as the focus of my thesis. With this study, my aim is to contribute to the little literature available on the matter, hopefully influencing and aiding future research with new and fresh insights. In addition, I believe in the importance of reversing this vicious cycle of fear, prejudice and threat which has been growing among the Dutch and global population (Velasco Gonzales et al., 2008). Therefore, the emphasis on finding possible intervention techniques to oppose this negative loop and ideally apply this knowledge to real-life scenarios, in order to have a tangible impact on society. Thus, I present my research question which summarises the interests of this thesis:

RQ: Does news framing impact threat perception of terrorism in the Netherlands, and does indirect

contact reduce this influence?

The Course of Action

With the aim of answering this research question, I will initially analyse the theories and hypotheses, already formulated on the matter, which will then be applied to the specific case of the Netherlands. I will first focus on the basis of perceived threat to provide the reader with a solid starting point from which to continue. Through cross-national examples, I will try to further explain the relevance of the study and will make use of established theories to understand why individuals tend to perceive a threat. I will then focus on the topic of media framing. After having given a definition of this, I will turn to an analysis of Western media framing of Muslims and give examples depicting inter-cases similarity in news coverage. I will then merge the two topics of media framing and threat perception, and examine the influence that the former has on the latter. After having looked for variables accounting for inter-personal differences, I will analyze theories which could explain the influence that news framing has on perceived threat. Lastly, a number of interventions, primarily surrounding the topic of contact theory, will be presented in order to supply the reader with possible solutions that might help reverse an otherwise gloomy trend of threat and fear. The knowledge

acquired will ultimately be applied to the specific case of the Netherlands, on which this thesis has concentrated its data collection.

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Understanding Perceived Threat

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Threat perception is an old and interesting concept which has long fascinated international scholars for being at the very core of human and animal beings. Perceiving threat can be characterized by a deep sense of vulnerability, of fear of loss and lack of control. It is generally understood as a negative and worrisome expression of an individual's fears and anger (Cohen-Louck, 2016), but it can also be acknowledged for its positive attributes. In fact, feeling threat is a healthy and evolutionarily advantageous characteristic which made human beings prosper throughout the course of history, thanks to its power of awakening a sense of alertness and readiness for action (Schaller, Simpson, & Kenrick, 2013).

In today's intercultural world, threat perception is often a dominant factor in public discourses and has been an ever more popular topic among international news outlets. Perceived threat is experienced daily by a great number of individuals and therefore its relevance is undeniable. This cross-cultural phenomenon is unconstrained by barriers and influences people independent of their nationality, gender and wealth (Gallup, 2002; Nellis & Savage, 2012; Sjöberg 2005).

Multiple theories have tried to explain this sense of vulnerability, yet a unique interpretation has not been universally defined. This section will make use of two prominent theories, the Intergroup Threat Theory and the Ethnic Competition Theory, in order to clarify the argumentation concerning the topic of terrorism threat perception.

Intergroup Threat Theory

Intergroup Threat Theory (ITT) was first developed by Stephan and Stephan (2000) and tries to give a comprehensive understanding of perceived threat by dividing it into four basic subgroups: symbolic threat, realistic threat, intergroup anxiety and negative stereotyping. In accordance with the

model, symbolic threat is understood as one stemming from perceived intergroup differences in cultural ideologies, traditions, values, and beliefs. It describes the fear of having one's traditions and values irremediably influenced by a foreign culture and it is often experienced as a threat to the wider in-group's lifestyle. Realistic threat is conceptualised as one concerning political, physical and economic differences. Individuals experiencing this kind of threat fear competition over scarce resources, job opportunities, and material group interests. Furthermore, the ITT also describes negative stereotypes as a basic type of threat as they create expectations towards the out-group and thus, support future prejudice. Lastly, intergroup anxiety relates to a more individual form of threat which arises from the thought of interacting with the out-group. These four basic types of threat mediate the relationship between one's antecedents of threat and his attitudes and prejudices towards out-group members (Figure 1). In-group identification, contact, knowledge of the out-group and intergroup conflict are all examples of antecedent which contribute to one's overall feeling of threat (Velasco González, Verkuyten, Weesie, & Poppe, 2008).

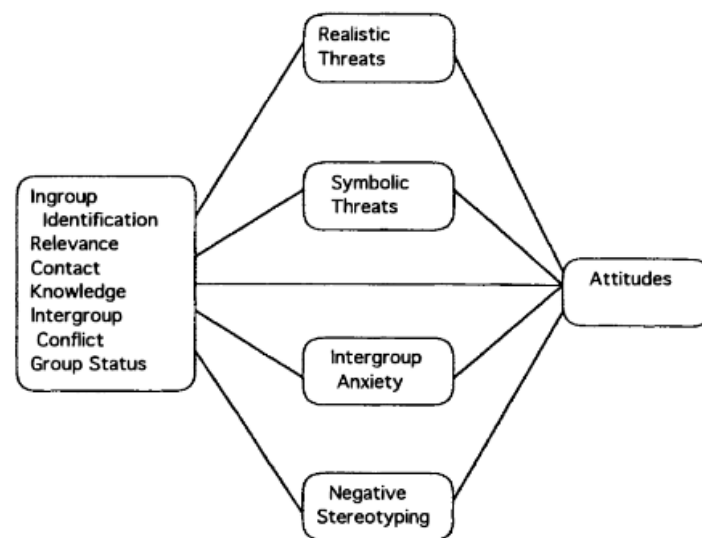*Figure 1.* A model of the ITT.

Ethnic Competition Theory

A valid alternative to ITT is the Ethnic Competition Theory (Savelkoul, Scheepers, Tolsma, & Hagendoorn, 2010). This theory is based on the understanding of two complementary, yet distinct,

theoretical frameworks: the Social Identity Theory and the Realistic Group Conflict Theory. The first one originates from the concepts of categorisation and social identification, and it assumes that people experience an intrinsic need to affirm their group's superiority over others. As a result, individuals tend to attribute positive characteristics to the in-group (social identification), while simultaneously applying negative connotations to the out-group and all its members (social contra-identification). On the other hand, Realistic Group Conflict Theory argues that competition between groups over resources and beliefs can cause tensions between members of a community and eventually enhance negative intergroup attitudes and prejudices. All in all, Ethnic Competition Theory brings the Social Identity Theory and the Realistic Group Conflict Theory together by assuming that "the processes of social identification and social contra-identification become intensified under conditions of actual intergroup competition and/or perceptions of ethnic threat, which eventually will induce negative attitudes towards out-groups" (Savelkoul et al., 2010, p.743).

Evidence for the Cross-Cultural Application of these Theories

The ITT and the Ethnic Competition Theory offer frameworks from which to study the reasons behind perceived threat. Cross-cultural evidence from the application of these two theories has been found in countries ranging from the Netherlands to the U.K., thus emphasizing the relevance of this international issue (Turner & Crisp, 2010; Velasco Gonzales et al., 2008). Results have reported great differences between varying cases, based, for example, on a nation's ethnic composition, wealth, and kind of public discourse.

In the specific case of the Netherlands, researchers have tested the ITT framework to understand the Dutch population's perceived threat with regard to Muslim minorities and Islamic terrorism (Velasco Gonzales et al., 2008). In their study, they discuss an international poll from 2005 which revealed that more than half (51%) of the Dutch respondents held adverse opinions of Muslims. These results appear to be the highest among the analysed countries, with France reporting only a 36% and Great Britain an even lower 14% of unfavorable attitudes towards Muslims. Moreover, 50%

of the Dutch participants argued that the Western and Muslim lifestyles are incompatible and cannot thrive in the same environment. With regard to their own experiment, the authors found a general trend for higher symbolic threat than realistic threat among Dutch participants. The prevalence of the more abstract and value-based type of threat can be explained by the predominant nature of public discourse in the Netherlands which often highlights sociocultural conflict and division over competition for tangible resources (Velasco Gonzales et al., 2008).

The low integration and high perceived threat of Muslims was mirrored by a 2001 report by the Dutch Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia which reported 42 instances of violence and hateful behaviour in the three weeks following 9/11 (EUMC, 2001). Similar patterns of behaviour were observed in the United Kingdom, where "a six-fold increase in religious hate crimes against Muslims in the London area" (Turner & Crisp, 2010, p.8) was observed in the month following the London bombings.

These results clearly depict a cross-national variability in perceived threat and tolerance, with the Netherlands generally reporting high levels of prejudice and threat with regard to Muslim minorities.

Variables Influencing Threat Perception

From a meta-analysis of studies describing threat perception, one can gather a number of variables that partially explain the differences in perceived threat both between individuals and between countries. Gender, for example, appears to considerably affect one's level of threat perception, with females generally being more fearful of terrorism both with regard to the self and the family. Furthermore, the meta-analysis found age to be a significant predictor of threat while wealth was not. In general, young people appeared to be more fearful than older individuals. This finding, researchers argue, could possibly be explained by the fact that with age, individuals learn about the rarity of terrorist attacks and start to marginalise their importance (Nellis & Savage, 2012). Nevertheless, results appear to vary, as another study found older people to be more traditionalist,

closed and threatened by terrorist attacks (O'rourke & Sinnot, 2006). Moreover, studies have shown that education can be a significant predictor of one's attitude towards Muslim minorities. In fact, research found that in the Netherlands education inversely correlated with one's level of fear for Muslims, with lower educated individuals fearing these minority members the most (Velasco Gonzales et al., 2008). In the same study, they also found that individuals who strongly identified with the Dutch in-group and culture were also the ones to feel most threatened by the Muslim identity and societal values. Lastly, the variable of proximity can also be seen as a strong predictor of terrorism threat perception (Kern et al., 2003). Individuals who reportedly experienced an attack first-hand, or endured losses from a terrorist event, portrayed a more stereotypical image of Muslims and were warier of minority members. However, the variable of proximity can also be understood in terms of one's temporal vicinity to the event. With regard to this, data both from Sweden and the U.S. found that individuals were generally more likely to feel the greatest threat in the months immediately following 9/11. Nonetheless, terrorism threat perception gradually decreased over time as individuals became less and less frightened by the terrorist event (Gallup, 2002; Sjöberg 2005).

Threat perception appears to be a complex and multi-sided concept, hard to categorize under a single and universal theory. The Intergroup Threat Theory and the Ethnic Competition Theory can be appreciated as successful tools to understand threat from different angles and their applications demonstrate how greatly variable terrorism threat is between countries. Moreover, variables such as gender, age, and proximity indicate that this particular kind of threat does not simply differ between countries but also between individuals and groups.

The Power of Framing News

One fundamental characteristic of media coverage lies in the way in which news stories are portrayed, modeled, and distributed to the public. This process goes under the name of media framing. This can be a very powerful tool in influencing the public's perception of threat, feelings, and actions. In addition, framing can be used as a way of directing the public's attention and attitude towards one

or the other side of the political narrative. During the Bush administration, for example, news framing was used by the major American media outlets to boost the president's approval ratings and support for his war in Iraq (Kern et al., 2003). This was often done through an alarming and dehumanizing media rhetoric which compared the enemy to animal figures, such as vermin, and even diseases. This hateful narrative, not merely adopted by U.S. media but by Western broadcasts in general, resulted effectively in depersonalising the "other" and influencing the public's beliefs and attitudes towards Islam, ultimately fostering the audience's support for the president's war in Iraq (Steuter & Wills, 2010).

In this thesis, I will approach the topic of framing as described by the following definition: framing news, relates to the way in which "news stories are made, i.e. how pieces of information are selected and organized to produce stories that make sense to their writers and audiences'' (Ryan, 1991, p. 53).

The Orientalism Discourse

One of the strengths of framing resides in the idea that, by adopting alarming and worrisome tones, news broadcasts can instil a climate of threat among the public, thus encouraging certain attitudes towards specific groups. In fact, if one was to turn on the television right now, especially in this global climate of fear and unsettlement, there would be a fair chance of stumbling upon stories discussing the difficult integration of minority members. As a matter of fact, framing is often used as a tool to highlight the differences, instead of reinforcing the relationships, between individuals of different ethnic groups. Following this line, scholars have discussed the Western media's practice of emphasizing the divergence between the East and the West under the concept of 'Orientalism' (Little, 2002).

When looking for information about global issues, people often turn to news anchors for insight. For this reason, Western individuals often tend to hold a superficial and simplistic understanding of Islam, as they merely view it in terms of the topics they have heard from the media,

such as oil, terrorism, and war. This often limits the public to a view where the West is presented as superior, both technologically and economically, dominating and fundamentally good. On the contrary, the Islamic world generally gets a negative connotation of violence, poverty, and gender inequality. This division, which lies at the core of the concept of Orientalism, entails that rich and diverse cultures often get unfairly simplified to the practices of a few fundamentalist and outlying groups, therefore leading to dangerous and detrimental overgeneralisations permeating the Western public's mind (Powell, 2011).

From these studies, one can see how news outlets create an ideology, such as the one of Orientalism, which ultimately becomes unquestioned common sense upon which the public learns and acts. These beliefs are then further reinforced by the individual's inner biases, as studies have shown that people tend to perceive information related to the in-group in a more clear, organised way and generally have a better memory for facts that depict similarity of the in-group and diversity of the out-group (Park & Rothbart, 1982; Wilder, 1981). Similarly, research has shown that individuals tend to forget positive information concerning the out-group much faster than when it relates to the in-group (Howard & Rothbart, 1980). Lastly, people are also more likely to attribute the blame of negative events to the personality of members from the out-group rather than to that of individuals from the in-group (Gaertner, Dovidio, Anastasio, Bachman, & Rust, 1993). These findings substantiate the idea that individuals tend to have strong in-group biases and favouritisms which support the effectiveness of media framing and the ideologies, such as the one of Orientalism, which news outlets tend to advance.

An Analysis of Media Framing

Not surprisingly, global media has been experiencing an increasing bias towards Muslim minorities since the happenings of 9/11. Research has found that, according to 67% of Muslim Americans, U.S. media generally grew increasingly more biased since the 9/11 attacks (Powell, 2011). These results are in line with the analysis, conducted by the same study, of American news

coverage of 11 terrorist attacks following September 2001. In general, the findings highlight a great divergence between the coverage of international and national perpetrators, while supporting the existence of an Orientalism discourse dominating the media narratives.

At the dawn of the attacks, the coverage immediately began to relate the happening to terrorism and label the attackers as Muslims, even before there was any kind of certainty. Then, a constant repetition of words such as violence, religion, Muslim, and Islam, from all the major networks, reinforced the public's fear and division from the depicted minority.

An important distinction was then made between national and international attackers, with international terrorism generally being depicted as more violent and threatening. Domestic aggressors were normally described in detail, personally, and the family was often mentioned. They were often labeled as mentally unstable to show the public that the attacker was an outlier, a lone wolf in an otherwise safe community and not affiliated to any larger fundamentalist group. His motives ranged from attention seeking to a desire in spreading fear, yet they were all described as planned and personal schemes of action. On the other hand, international terrorists were described as aggressive, violent and extremist. News broadcasts labeled the attackers as chaotic, dangerous and seeking vengeance for the murders of fellow countrymen by the U.S. diplomacy. In contrast to national aggressors, international attackers were de-personalized through an immediate linkage with larger fundamentalist groups and no mentioning of the family.

Due to the increasing globalisation of the news, people are nowadays able to find similar information in any corner of the globe. Reporting is becoming more and more globalised and therefore, we are witnessing an increasing similarity in global news framing and coverage. Following this line, researchers have suggested that American news coverage of terrorist attacks might often resemble that of other international broadcasts, such as Dutch and British (Ruigrok & Van Atteveldt, 2007). For this reason, I believe that the previous framing analysis could also be seen as representative of other international news coverage of terrorist attacks in the post-9/11 era.

The clear division in the coverage of national and international attackers, schematised in Figure 2, supports the Orientalism discourse and reinforces a general fear of Islam which is nowadays even more strongly widespread among the Western public. As a consequence, the damaging label of "terrorist" often spills over to the millions of innocent Muslims living abroad, who feel they are no longer 'free' to practice their religion without fearing judgment, hate, and repercussions.
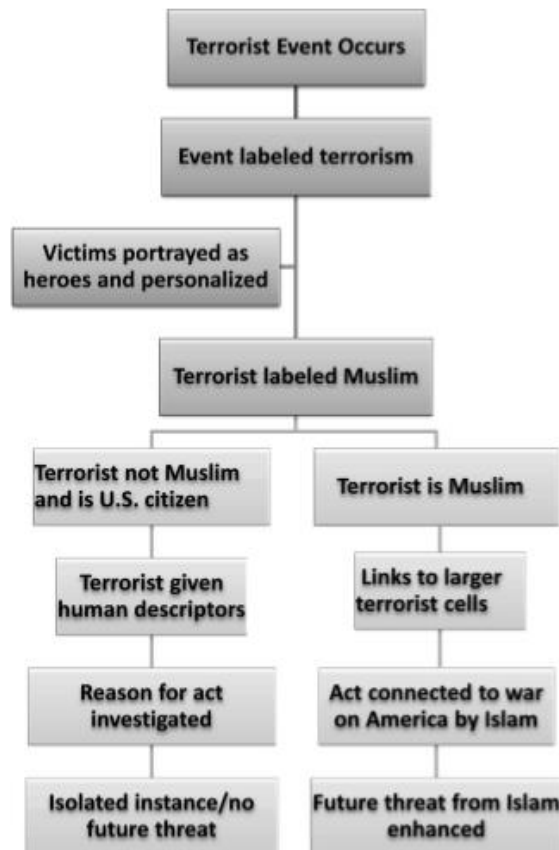
Figure 2. Image Depicting Typical U.S. Media Coverage of Terrorist Episodes.

How Does Media Framing Influence Perceived Threat?

After 9/11, the spike in news coverage of terrorism and its negative framing was mirrored by an increase in the audience's concern over the issue. In fact, when asked about the biggest problem affecting their country, "the proportion [of American respondents] nominating 'terrorism' shot up from zero in the three months prior to September 2001 to almost half of the population (46%)

immediately after 9/11" (Kern et al., 2003, p.290). However, alarming news frames and hateful discourses have not merely been influencing the American public, as similar effects have been observed cross-nationally (Wike & Grim, 2010).

Thus far, we have seen that individuals' decisions, beliefs, and actions are often shaped by broadcast discourses. Studies show that variables such as the frequency of exposure to TV news and the repetitiveness of the message, all influence the perceived threat of individuals towards terrorist agents and, in turn, inspire a fearful attitude among the general population (Kern et al., 2003; Nellis & Savage, 2012). More specifically, they report that both frequency and repetitiveness are positive predictors of one's level of fear for terrorism, with regard to both the self and others. Nevertheless, credibility was not a significant predictor of threat perception. In fact, individuals seem not to care too much about the truthfulness of the reports, as long as these meet their beliefs (Nellis & Savage, 2012). State of the art examples of these findings can be observed in the 2016 American election, in which, many argue, a vast number of voters were influenced by what appeared to be untrue and often biased sources of information (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017).

On an individual level, scholars have found three more variables influencing the effectiveness of media framing, namely: intentionality of viewing, motivation to watch the programme and attention paid to the story (Nellis & Savage, 2012). Intentionality was reported to be a very strong predictor of threat perception. Individuals who intentionally watched terrorism-related broadcasts felt both more threatened and less safe. Moreover, individuals holding strong motivations to watch, such as personal loss or proximity, reported significantly higher levels of fear. Nevertheless, while still supporting the effects of media framing, attention was observed to be a weaker predictor of fear among the public (Sotirovic, 2001).

Social Cognitive Theory

When discussing the relationship between terrorism news and threat perception, several theories and hypotheses can be used to acquire a deeper understanding of why media framing has

such a potent influence on its audience. Firstly, one could make use of Albert Bandura's concept of vicarious learning, namely the innate tendency of individuals to internalise emotions, beliefs, and behaviours which they have not necessarily experienced first-hand, and consequently, re-enact these in real-life contexts. Vicarious learning stands at the core of Social Cognitive Theory which argues that individuals can learn vicariously from social interactions, experiences and even media portrayals (Ortiz & Harwood, 2007). According to this theory, people become emotionally and behaviourally influenced by televised models and then, through abstract modeling, apply what they have learned from the media to their everyday interactions. In turn, this would explain why negative frames could harm the relationship between Muslim minorities and the prevalent majority of a country. Individuals watching the news get so immersed into these perpetually negative portrayals of Muslims that they vicariously learn to fear Islamic cultures and, as a result, live their lives in a climate of constant threat of terrorist attacks.

The Cultivation Hypothesis

Other frameworks that could be used to explain this duality between media framing and perceived threat of terrorism are the Cultivation Hypothesis and the Parasocial Contact Hypothesis. The first suggests that "frequency of media consumption, which overemphasizes violence and other extreme events, leads viewers to a distorted worldview reflective of television rather than reality" (Nellis & Savage, 2012, p.749). This would explain, for instance, the often-exaggerated fear of being a victim of terroristic attacks, which is statistically very unlikely (Doob & Macdonald, 1979). Moreover, it would support the finding that frequency of consumption is a strong predictor of perceived threat (Chiricos, Padgett, & Gertz, 2000).

The Parasocial Contact Hypothesis

The Parasocial Contact Hypothesis argues that media discourse can foster in the viewer a seemingly intimate and genuine face-to-face bond with the protagonist of the story, thus, allowing the spectator to form feelings and attitudes towards the individual (Schiappa et al., 2005). For this

reason, as long as media coverage continues to depict Muslim individuals as dangerous and violent, without clarifying that this only represents an outlying fundamentalist minority, the public will react accordingly and will apply these hateful feelings to their everyday encounters with minority members. Furthermore, the study suggests that individuals will often equate fictional life to real-life and thus, a constant reproduction of violence on television could translate to increased perceived threat in an individual's real-life. As a result, this could directly influence one's life choices, as a study found that after watching the news, following "the 9/11 attacks, 53% of the U.S. population changed their plans, including not going to work that day" (Powell, 2011, p.92).

A great number of studies have so far supported the idea that the media's portrayal of a story deeply influences its public, both mentally and emotionally. The degree to which one will be affected is dependent on a multiplicity of variables, such as motivation and intentionality to watch, the repetitiveness of the story and the frequency of exposure to the news. Nonetheless, nobody seems to be truly immune to this powerful characteristic of television broadcasts. Models such as the Social Cognitive Theory and the Parasocial Contact Hypothesis describe exactly this: humans' innate vulnerability to vicarious learning.

Breaking the Loop – Possible Interventions

Intergroup threat, prejudice, and racism are without a doubt truly harmful practices to a peaceful societal co-habitation. While many argue that media foments these tensions, a number of scholars have tried to come up with tools and solutions to reduce these ethnic divisions (Dovidio, Eller, & Hewstone, 2011; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008; Pettigrew, Tropp, Wagner, & Christ, 2011).

Contact Theory

Within the field of threat perception, a very solid tool to decrease perceived threat has proven to be contact theory. This theory argues that contact can significantly improve intergroup relations in situations of tensions and group divergence, especially under the optimal circumstances of equal

status, similarity of goals and support from institutions (Allport, 1954). For intergroup relations to improve and intergroup threat to decrease, contact must take place. This can be in the form of direct, face-to-face interaction or indirect contact, through, for example, stories and illustrations (Dovidio et al., 2011; Vezzali, Stathi, Giovannini, Capozza, & Trifiletti, 2015). Allport's theory works by means of group inclusion and recategorization. By engaging with the "other", group members learn about these individuals' unique traits and strengths, thus effectively reconstructing their opinion of the out-group. Contact allows the two groups to share their ideas and beliefs, thus, theoretically prompting an attitude and opinion change in both parties (Gaertner et al., 1993).

Findings from a meta-analysis of studies concerning the application of the intergroup contact theory have demonstrated how this theory is strongly supported by cross-cultural and cross-situational results (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). The vast amount of studies in support of this theory prove that intergroup contact theory is not merely effective in reducing prejudice and threat perception under optimal conditions, but also fosters positive outcomes in non-optimal circumstances (Vezzali, Stathi, & Giovannini, 2012).

Nonetheless, when group differences are too great and major tensions make peaceful direct contact an unlikely reality, as in the case of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Allport's theory proves insufficient. For this reason, within the field of contact research, scholars have come up with alternatives and adaptations of the original theory. Among these, one can find numerous studies supporting forms of indirect contact, such as imagined or extended contact, which are seen as powerful adaptations of the original theory in that they offer compelling and effective alternatives in complicated situations (Vezzali et al., 2012).

Indirect Intergroup Contact

Indirect contact works through vicarious learning. This aspect makes it a relevant intervention strategy for the issue depicted in this thesis. As previously discussed, vicarious learning is a tool through which people get emotionally and behaviourally influenced by televised models. Thus, if

broadcasts were to make use of the knowledge from indirect contact theory and, for example, depict more imagery of positive relationships between minority and majority members, people would vicariously learn to interact with their ethnic counterparts and, in theory, threat would significantly decrease. In order to achieve optimal results, anchors would have to consider a few variables that have been shown to mediate the successfulness of the outcome. Firstly, typicality has been found to significantly influence the generalisability of an encounter. The more typical the minority member appears to the public, the more people will generalise a positive encounter to the whole minority (Binder et al., 2009). Secondly, the contact should be relaxed, positive and comfortable in order to elicit the best reaction in the public (Turner & Crisp, 2010). Showing positive contact appears to be of central importance, as a study found that negative contact with a minority member increases prejudice more than a positive encounter decreases it (Barlow et al., 2012). This weakness of the contact theory could explain why individuals appear to be so sensitive to negative news frames and less influenced by the occasional positive depiction of Muslims by Western media.

Personalisation is described as another key element for the reduction of threat perception (Turner & Crisp, 2010). In previous paragraphs, we have seen that news frames often tend to de-personalise international attackers, thus reinforcing the view of the Muslim minority, and the Islamic religion at large, as one single and homogenous group. In the public's imagery, this often leads to the generalisation that all members of the minority believe in the same, fundamentalist principles. As a result, the inevitable outcome of media framing is often fear and division.

However, if anchors were to broadcast positive stories of Muslims, personalising and distancing them from the narratives of violence and terror, they could effectively reverse the poisoning trend adopted by Western media. A good example of such a story stems from the case of Bana Alabed, the seven year old Syrian girl from Aleppo who became famous worldwide for sharing her heartbreaking stories through Twitter (McKernan, 2016). Thanks to her stories, individuals worldwide started empathising with this young girl and began to understand the true nature of the

Syrian conflict. This represents a positive instance of media successfully reducing prejudice through indirect contact. Nevertheless, this is merely one positive story in an ocean of alarming news. Reversing the trend of perceived threat is possible, but it will require many more stories such as this one to truly make a difference.

So far, this thesis has discussed applications of a specific kind of indirect contact, namely imagined intergroup contact. This form of contact differentiates itself from others for its applicability in all contexts. Further results in support of imagined intergroup contact come from a study which applied this to the context of British perceptions of Muslim minority members (Turner & Crisp, 2010). By simply asking participants to imagine a relaxed and comfortable meeting with a Muslim individual, they demonstrated that such an easy practice was already highly effective in reducing both threat and prejudice towards the out-group. Moreover, the authors found that the exercise led to increased interest in interaction with minority members and reduced explicit prejudice. In sum, whilst direct contact remains the most effective and long-lasting form of intervention, imagined intergroup contact distinguishes itself as a fair alternative due to its applicability and malleability.

Besides imagined intergroup contact, scholars have come up with further adaptations of Allport's theory, an example being extended contact. This other successful form of intervention argues that prejudice and threat can be reduced by the mere knowledge that one or more members of the in-group have friends within the out-group. In fact, it has been shown that a mere depiction of tolerance by an in-group member can trigger positive responses in the rest of the group (Turner & Crisp, 2010). Once again, if television framing were to illustrate positive interaction, for example between Western and Muslim individuals, this could theoretically reduce threat perception in the public by means of extended contact. There is great potential for good in news framing, all we need to do is start using it to lessen rather than widen distances among groups.

Additional Intervention Techniques

When discussing prejudice and threat reduction, other powerful forms of intervention appear to be multiculturalism endorsement and recategorization (Gaertner et al., 1993; Velasco Gonzales et al., 2008). With regard to the former, researchers have observed that individuals with a more open-minded and multi-ethnic outlook on life scored lower in both realistic and symbolic threat perception, therefore showing that multiculturalism endorsement could be used as an aid to reduce inter-group division (Velasco Gonzales et al., 2008).

An additional threat-reducing technique could reside in the concept of recategorization, as described by the Common In-group Identity model. By recategorizing different groups under one overarching community, studies have shown that "attitudes toward former out-group members will become more positive through processes involving pro-ingroup bias" (Gaertner et al., 1993, p.6). This model works through the personalisation, and consequent generalisation, of the individual experience to the larger out-group. As a result, people begin to understand and appreciate the uniqueness of the individuals they welcome to the group and, as a consequence, become more involved and interested in the out-group at large. Once again, one can see how personalisation plays a very important role in the discourse of terrorism threat. While television frames tend to strive for de-personalisation, interventions often work by means of personalisation.

Finally, a less conventional application of contact theory aims at reducing prejudice through narrative fiction reading. According to a study, reading about positive encounters with minority members broadens the readers' perspectives, boosting their empathy and understanding for these individuals (Johnson, Jasper, Griffin, & Huffman, 2013). A more open and less prejudicial attitude towards minorities, the article suggests, could result in reduced threat and fear toward the out-group members. Lastly, when testing for this specific kind of indirect contact, the study found that if students were given the task to read a narrative depicting Muslim individuals in a positive light, they would consequently show less prejudicial attitudes both at an explicit and implicit level.

In addition, reading fictional narratives has been reported to help individuals overcome original inhibitions and boundaries, successfully fostering interest in future contact with out-group members (Vezzali et al., 2012). Similar results were achieved through the reading of highly popular fantasy novels, such as Harry Potter, thus asserting the applicability and potential of this kind of intervention (Vezzali et al., 2015).

This section's aim was to depict the current trends in intervention with regard to prejudice and threat reduction. Multiple adaptations of Allport's contact theory were hereby proposed. There appears to be no single universal kind of treatment as each presents unique features and is most applicable under specific characteristics. Nonetheless, whilst direct contact is traditionally preferable for its stronger effectiveness and longer lasting effects, indirect contact offers a valid alternative for situations in which direct contact is not possible.

The Present Study

The aim of this research was to study whether the mere framing of a news extract would be sufficient to shape the participants' level of perceived threat and danger. By tackling the specific case of the Netherlands, this study's ultimate goal was to contribute to the international literature discussing the link between the news and terrorism threat, hopefully having a positive impact on future research and societal issues.

More specifically, this study tried to assess whether the mere definition of an attacker as Western (Dutch national) or Muslim, would be enough to shape the respondents' attitudes and beliefs towards the events portrayed in the story. The results would, in turn, allow for a greater understanding of the true nature, power and influence of media framing.

Based on an understanding of the international literature invested in the topic (Kern et al., 2003; Velasco Gonzales et al., 2008), the first prediction of this research was that by simply changing the description of the attacker, in an otherwise identical story, the participants (given the Muslim

description) would portray higher levels of perceived threat of terrorism. According to the finding that media framing and labeling of the attacker strongly influences the public's reaction to the event (Powell, 2011), this research also predicted that participants would appraise the attacker in different ways, according to the condition they were subjected to. Therefore, this study's first hypothesis states the following:

H1: A news fragment depicting a Muslim attacker, will elicit more terrorism threat and negative appraisal of the attacker, than would an identical story describing a Dutch attacker.

The second point of interest of this research was to investigate the application and success rate of an intervention technique aimed at reducing perceived threat of terrorism. Based on the knowledge acquired from contact theory, this study made use of a specific adaptation of this, namely extended contact. From previous research, we know that prejudice and threat tend to be reduced when individuals become aware of instances of positive contact between members of the in-group and the out-group (Turner & Crisp, 2010). With this in mind, the author developed an intervention condition where, alongside the Muslim attacker story, he proposed an extract illustrating positive contact between Western and Muslim individuals. This was done to prompt the effect of extended contact and theoretically reduce the negative bias experienced by reading the story describing the Muslim attacker. The resulting hypothesis is as follows:

H2: Due to the effect of extended contact, terrorism threat and negative appraisal of the Muslim attacker will decrease when compared to the effect of a no-intervention condition.

Methods

Participants

The current study based its analysis on a sample of 121 participants, randomly assigned to one of three conditions, namely *Dutch attacker*, *Muslim attacker,* and *Intervention.* Due to the nature of the research, which tackled the specific case of the Netherlands, the study expressly looked for individuals living in the Netherlands. Respondents were reached through social media and snowball sampling and freely decided to take the questionnaire. Participants were not given monetary compensation for the completion of the questionnaire.

After an initial analysis of the sample, one could immediately see how females appeared to dominate the distribution, as they represented 68.9% of the respondents. Participants were generally highly educated with 66.4% having completed, or currently completing, their Bachelor's degree. Moreover, the sample was very young as 73.9% indicated their age as being in between 18 and 24. The respondents' majority was also Dutch, yet only by a very little lead (52.1%), and a very large size of the sample (78.2%) currently lived in Utrecht, thus portraying high proximity to the fictional attack depicted in the survey's story. Lastly, respondents appeared to have little interest in news reports, as the majority indicated they watch news broadcasts either 0 (22.7%) or between 1 and 3 times (35.3%) per week.

Procedure

After being presented with a welcoming page, which briefed them over the length of the survey (5-8 minutes) and informed them of the absolute anonymity and confidentiality of their answers, individuals were randomly directed to one of the three conditions. Here they had to read either one or two short paragraphs, depending on their condition. Participants from all three conditions were invited to read a brief news extract describing a fictional terrorist attack in Utrecht's Central Station. The story was adapted from a CNN article describing the Olympia Shopping Mall shooting, which happened on the 22nd of July 2016 in the German city of Munich (Schoichet, Ellis,

& Hanna, 2016). The extracts were nearly identical between the three conditions, as they only differed in the description of the attacker. The *Dutch attacker* story defined the attacker as an "18-year-old Dutch individual, originally from Alphen aan den Rijn" (see Appendix 1) while the *Muslim attacker* and *Intervention* conditions described him as an "18-year-old Muslim individual, originally from Morocco, who had lived in Utrecht for at least two years" (see Appendix 2). In order to avoid any form of discomfort or alarmism, respondents were made aware of the fictional nature of the story before starting to read the extract. After a critical analysis, no additional ethical issues were found with regard to the study.

Furthermore, before reading the news extract, participants in the intervention condition were asked to read an additional paragraph describing an instance of positive contact between Western and Muslim individuals (see Appendix 3). The story was retrieved from an online article describing a 16-year-old British Muslim individual who stood blindfolded in the British city of Nottingham offering hugs to strangers in order to challenge the division between the different ethnicities. The guy reportedly wore a sign specifying his religion, thus making the passers-by aware of him being Muslim (Glanfield, 2015).

The stories were presented in such a way that the wording and framing clearly resembled the sources from which they came. This was done to increase the authenticity of the news extracts, which in turn, influenced the story's validity in the eyes of the respondents. The inclusion of the intervention story was based on studies which have shown that extended contact can be elicited through media such as texts and narratives (Johnson et al., 2013).

Lastly, after having read the stories, participants were asked to complete a survey which was identical for all three conditions. This allowed the author to test the effects of news framing and extended contact.

Measures

The questionnaire was conceived to be short but grasping many different variables. Besides the one or two stories, it presented a number of items which measured perceived threat, both on a symbolic and realistic level, the subject's appraisal of the attacker and one's biggest fears with regard to terrorist attacks. Moreover, demographic variables such as *gender, age* and *education* were taken into consideration in order to test for their effects on the outcome, as studies have found these to be significant in influencing one's level of perceived threat (Nellis & Savage, 2012).

Perceived threat was assessed by means of 5 questions, measured on a 5-point Likert Scale ranging from "not at all" (1) to "very much" (5). The questions asked respondents about their threat of being the victim of a terrorist event and whether they feared more attacks happening in the future (see Appendix 4). Respondents were also questioned about their anxiety regarding others, such as close family and friends, as studies have found that people often have diverging fears when it comes to perceiving the self or others as possible victims of terrorist attacks (Nellis & Savage, 2012). In addition, threat perception was assessed both on a symbolic and realistic level. In agreement with the original definition, *symbolic threat* was measured by asking participants about their fear of having their traditions, values, and beliefs altered by foreign influences while *realistic threat* was determined by asking individuals about their concerns in losing their lives, jobs or houses in the event of an attack (Stephan & Stephan, 2000). Lastly, perceived threat was also analysed as an overarching construct constituted by the variables measured through the five questions. After having conducted a factor analysis through SPSS, the five variables were found to represent a coherent factor. A reliability analysis of these items also proved to be satisfactory ($\alpha = .789$), thus reinforcing the legitimacy of the construct (Santos, 1999).

Respondents' *appraisal of the attacker* was based on adjectives found to be consistent with cross-national results depicting Westerners' attitudes towards Muslim individuals (Pew Global Attitudes Project, 2007; Wike & Grim, 2010). In order to observe one's perception of the attacker,

the survey asked participants to rate, on a 5-point Likert Scale ranging from "not at all" (1) to "very much" (5), to what degree they would expect the individual to be *warm, friendly, caring, distant, selfish* or *cold* in his everyday life before the terrorist event. After having conducted a factor analysis of these six items, one factor was found. Nevertheless, *selfish, cold* and *distant* were re-coded as they reported negative values from the analysis. After an initial reliability analysis of the six items (α = .763), *distant* was found to have a poor Item-Total Correlation of 0.269 and was therefore removed from the study. A second analysis found the resulting construct of *attacker appraisal* to be more reliable (Santos, 1999), with a Cronbach's α of 0.789.

Asking about the attacker's characteristics in his private life, allowed the researcher to understand the level to which the framing of the news extract influenced one's depersonalisation of the individual. This was done in accordance with the finding that international terrorists are generally depersonalised and understood as being very violent, detached from their families, and part of a wider network, while national attackers tend to be appraised as lone wolfs, planners, and often suffering from some form of mental illness (Powell, 2011). Based on these findings, the current survey also asked respondents whether they believed the attacker was part of a larger group and whether they believed him to be mentally insane (see Appendix 5). The questions were answered on a 5-point Likert Scale ranging from "he definitely is not" (1) to "he definitely is" (5). The author predicted the sample to respond in accordance with the results portrayed by the previous study.

Additionally, one's predominant concerns over terrorist attacks were also assessed. Individuals were offered several options such as "the constant feeling of danger" and "the impossibility to control the event" from which they could choose. These options, together with others measuring symbolic and realistic threat and fear regarding others versus the self, were adapted from an analysis invested in the study of terrorism threat perception (Cohen-Louck, 2016).

Proximity was measured by asking individuals about their country of origin and the city they were currently living in. Participants were also questioned, on a 5-point Likert Scale ranging from 0

to 10+, about the frequency with which they watched national and international news. Measuring these two variables appeared to be of central importance as studies have shown proximity to the event and frequency of media consumption to strongly influence threat perception (Kern et al., 2003; Nellis & Savage, 2012). Lastly, the *Intervention* condition presented an additional question which was used to check whether participants were already aware of the contact story, as this could have had an influence on one's answers to the survey

Statistical Analysis

All of the statistical analyses pertaining to this research were done through SPSS Statistics 24 and primarily consisted in different variations of ANOVA. An α value of 0.05 was adopted as a threshold for significance.

Perceived threat was compared among conditions both as a whole construct, by means of an ANOVA, and as five independent items, by means of a MANOVA. Moreover, when testing for the influence of demographic variables, factorial ANOVAs were run in order to assess the interaction between the different demographic variables and one's condition. One's appraisal of the attacker was measured both as a whole construct and as several independent items. The statistical procedures adopted in this case were the same as for perceived threat. In addition, group differences in both mental illness and group affiliation were tackled by means of two independent ANOVAs. Lastly, participants' main concerns with regard to terrorist attacks were compared by means of Chi-Square Tests which illustrated possible differences between conditions. A t-test was used to establish whether one's awareness of the intervention story played a role in the individual's level of perceived threat.

Missing Data

There were instances of missing data in the dataset. Among the whole sample, less than 2% of the responses were missing. These were excluded on an analysis by analysis case.

Results

Perceived Threat

In general, after having read the story and completed the survey, participants appeared to perceive little threat of terrorism and terrorist-related events. When observing the five perceived threat variables independently, these were shown to largely mirror the wider construct of threat perception as people predominantly reported little to no threat of terrorist attacks. The only divergence came from the fear of future terrorist attacks, as here almost half of the sample reported some form of threat.

In order to test the hypotheses, perceived threat was compared across the different conditions. Participants reported slightly different levels of threat perception (see Table 1), yet the analysis of variance showed no significant difference between the means of the three conditions, $F(2, 119) = 1.02, p = .363$. This illustrated that independent of the condition they were put in, participants reported very similar levels of perceived threat (Figure 3).
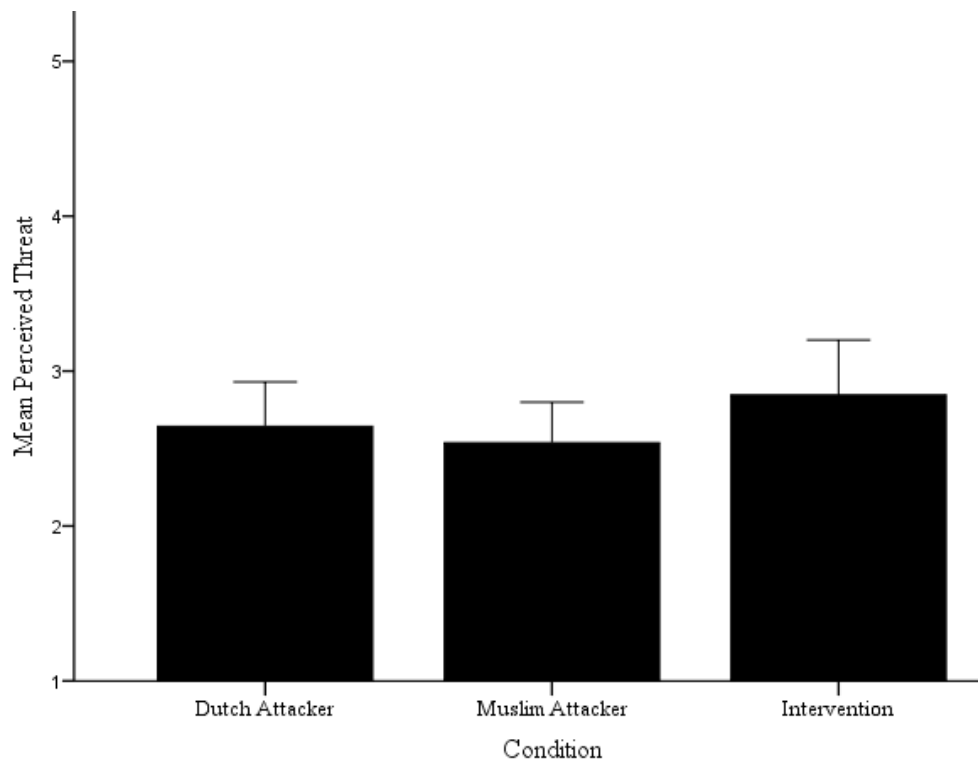

Figure 3. Mean perceived threat for the three experimental conditions. The error bars indicate the standard error of the mean.

Furthermore, when approached as five independent items, the analysis found the means of the individual variables measuring threat perception to vary very little between the three conditions (Table 1). Once again, these differences were found to be non-significant, $F(2,117)= 1.00$, $p = .447$.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for Threat Perception.

Perceived Threat	Dutch Attacker		Muslim Attacker		Intervention	
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Threat to Self	2.39	1.12	2.30	1.15	2.45	1.26
Threat to Others	2.66	1.32	2.50	1.21	2.74	1.18
Future Attacks	3.32	1.08	2.89	1.18	3.13	1.31
Realistic Threat	2.20	1.33	2.26	1.22	2.52	1.39
Symbolic Threat	2.61	1.38	2.76	1.49	3.39	1.36
Combined Perceived Threat[1]	2.64	0.93	2.54	0.90	2.85	0.99

[1]Average of the five perceived threat items.

When testing for the interaction effect of one's condition with several demographic variables on one's level of threat perception, only *proximity* and *gender* were found to reach significance. As one can see from Figure 4a, participants from Utrecht felt higher threat in the *Dutch attacker* and *Muslim attacker* conditions while participants not from Utrecht experienced the highest threat perception when in the *Intervention* condition (see Table 2). This overall interaction effect was found to be significant, $F(2, 118) = 3.60$, $p = .030$, $\eta_p^2 = .060$. In addition, the eta squared reported such effect to be moderate, as according to Cohen's guidelines. Nevertheless, when looking at the three conditions separately, individual ANOVAs only found significant differences for the *Muslim attacker* condition, $F(1, 45) = 4.50$, $p = .040$, $\eta_p^2 = .093$. For the *Dutch attacker* condition, the difference in proximity did not seem to significantly influence one's level of perceived threat, $F(1, 41) = 0.16$, $p = .696$. Similar results were found for the *intervention* condition, $F(1, 30) = 3.04$, $p = .092$.

Table 2

Descriptive statistics for the interactions of condition with gender and proximity.

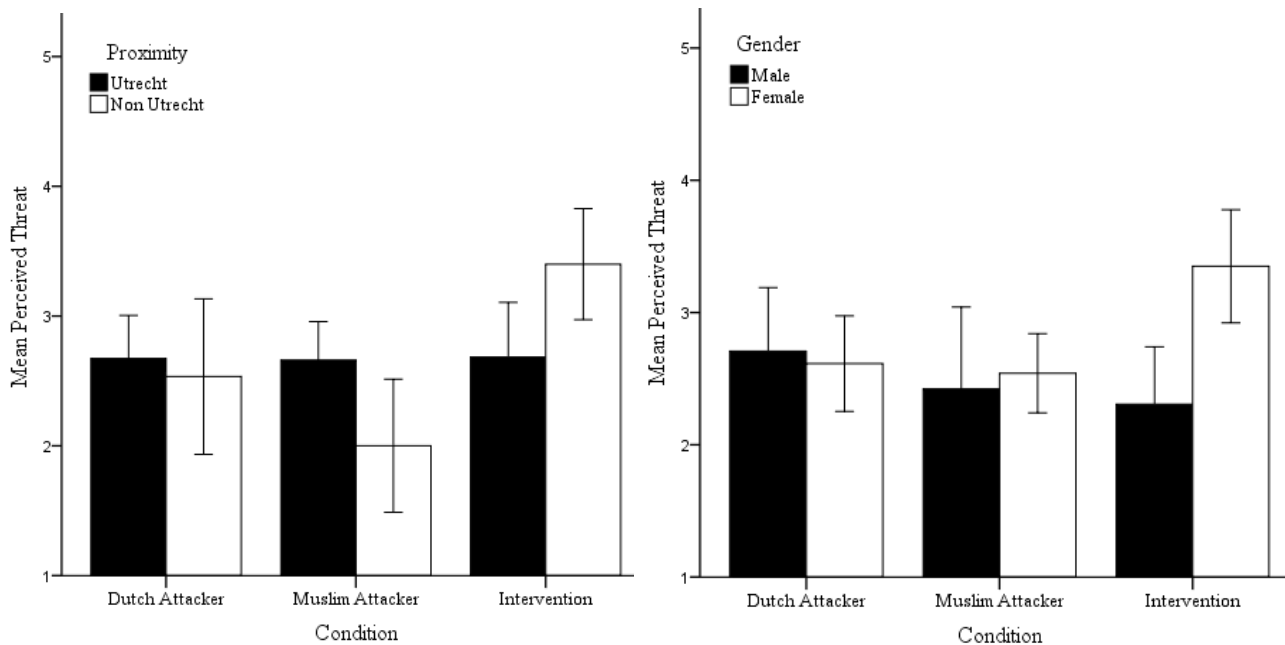| Gender	Dutch Attacker		Muslim Attacker		Intervention	
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Males	2.71	0.87	2.42	0.93	2.31	0.84
Females	2.61	0.97	2.54	0.91	3.35	0.86
Proximity	Dutch Attacker		Muslim Attacker		Intervention	
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Utrecht	2.67	0.95	2.66	0.89	2.68	1.04
Non-Utrecht	2.53	0.90	2.00	0.81	3.40	0.57

Figure 4. The effects of proximity (Figure 4a left) and gender (Figure 4b right) on the level of perceived threat experienced in different conditions. The error bars indicate the standard error of the mean.

With regard to *gender,* Figure 4b shows that males perceived higher threat than females in the *Dutch attacker* condition, while females did in the other two (see Table 2). The interaction effect of *gender* and condition on perceived threat was found to be significant, $F(2, 118) = 3.56$, p = .032, η_p^2 = .059. Eta squared reported an effect size of moderate entity. However, when tackling the conditions

independently, the difference in perceived threat was found to be significant only in the *intervention* condition, $F(1, 30) = 11.69$, $p = .002$, $\eta_p^2 = .287$. Individual analyses of both the *Dutch attacker* and *Muslim attacker* conditions presented non-significant results, respectively $F(1, 41) = 0.09$, $p = .767$ and $F(1, 45) = 0.12$, $p = .729$.

Perception of the Attacker

Independent of the condition, people were generally moderate when rating the attacker as a member of a larger terrorist group ($M = 3.19$, $SD = 0.87$) or suffering from some form of mental illness ($M = 3.53$, $SD = 0.89$). However, no significant differences were found between conditions for both *group* affiliation, $F(2, 117) = 0.60$, p $= .552$, and mental illness, $F(2, 118) = 0.12$, p $= .890$.

When asked to rate their appraisal of the attacker with regard to both warm and cold traits, participants had a general tendency to see him as fairly cold (M $= 2.67$, SD $= 0.66$). An analysis of variance showed no significant differences among conditions, $F(2, 118) = 2.77$, p $= .066$. Similarly, when tackled as independent elements, the five items did not significantly differ among conditions, $F(2, 117) = 1.77$, p $= .067$. Lastly, no demographic variable was found to have a significant effect on the differences between conditions.

Concerns Over Terrorism

The participants' predominant concerns with regard to terrorist events were also measured. Whilst only around 25% of the total respondents felt unprepared or vulnerable to the attacks, 73.6% indicated their greatest fear to be the idea of losing a loved one (Table 3). Nevertheless, for all the options the analyses found no significant differences among conditions.

Table 3

Percentages of people who were reportedly afraid of the following items. The Chi-Square values depict the lack of significant differences among the three conditions

Types of Fear					
	Dutch Attacker	Muslim Attacker	Intervention	Chi-Square	*p*
Being a victim yourself	50%	36.2%	43.8%	1.74	.419
Loosing people close to you	73.8%	74.5%	71.9%	0.07	.967
Having your life changed	23.8%	23.4%	28.1%	0.26	.878
Inability to predict the attack	54.8%	57.4%	43.8%	1.52	.467
Impossibility to control the event	54.8%	59.6%	50%	0.72	.699
Being unprepared	33.3%	23.4%	21.9%	1.59	.451
Being vulnerable	33.3%	21.3%	18.8%	2.58	.275
Constant feeling of danger	26.2%	23.4%	28.1%	0.23	.890

For all variables: N = 121 and df = 2

Lastly, with regard to the *Intervention* condition, the analysis found slight differences in perceived threat between the respondents who were aware of the contact story ($M = 2.64$, $SD = 0.93$) and individuals who were not aware of it ($M = 3.01$, $SD = 1.03$). However, this difference was found to be not significant, $F(1, 30) = 1.07$, $p = .309$.

Discussion and Conclusion

The aim of this study was to investigate the link between media framing and terrorism threat perception in the Netherlands. Based on an understanding of Dutch and international literature invested in these two topics, the author's interest was to study this link in order to offer novel insight within the specific field of terrorism threat perception. Furthermore, in order to have a more tangible and direct impact on society, the second focus of this thesis was on finding a possible solution to decrease the hateful spiral caused by the predicted link between media framing and terrorism threat. Based on international literature reporting on an ever-growing divisive rhetoric within the media (Byng, 2010; Powell, 2011), this research's relevance seemed undeniable.

This study's first hypothesis stated that: "A news fragment depicting a Muslim attacker, will elicit more terrorism threat and negative appraisal of the attacker, than would an identical story

describing a Dutch attacker". After an in-depth analysis of the data, the current research was found to bear no significant results to confirm the hypothesis. As a result, the study failed to corroborate the findings outlined in the literature which emphasize a clear link between news framing and threat perception (Gadarian, 2010; Nacos, Bloch-Elkon, & Shapiro, 2007). Nonetheless, one could argue that the non-significant outcome of the research could be representative of a general habituation to word "terrorism". In fact, research shows that as this term becomes more and more present in everyone's daily lives, people gradually start to get used to it and the word ultimately loses its ability to affect one's level of perceived threat (Woods, 2011).

Another argument that could explain the non-significant results is that the Dutch population might simply be less threatened by terrorist events than other analysed countries, such as the UK or the United States. In fact, despite the numerous terrorist attacks which happened in recent years, these have never targeted the Dutch territory directly. Whilst countries such as the United States, Germany, and France witnessed brutal attacks directly on their national soil, Dutch citizens have always learned about them from news outlets and indirect sources (Lui, 2017). If one were to interpret this through the concept of proximity it would make sense for the Dutch to feel less threat than other countries. From the literature, we have learned that proximity is a key variable in influencing threat perception; the closer one is to the event, the higher the probability he will be feeling fearful and threatened (Kern et al., 2003). For this reason, the lack of success in confirming the international results could also be due to the simple fact that the Dutch perceived less threat of terrorism than populations who experienced these events first-hand. Nevertheless, this is a mere supposition and future research will be needed to verify the accuracy of this argumentation.

This thesis' second hypothesis investigated the possibility of reducing threat perception by eliciting extended contact in the reader. Due to the lack of group diversity in perceived threat, examining the unsuccessfulness of the intervention seemed quite redundant. Nevertheless, regardless of the result, presenting only one short paragraph might have been inadequate. The decision to use a

short extract came primarily from the nature of the survey which was constrained by both time and funding. As a result, the questionnaire was planned to be brief and to the point. However, in hindsight, the story was probably too short to effectively trigger an emphatic response in the reader. In fact, research has shown that when presented with stories describing instances of positive contact once a week for six weeks, participants showed a higher level of acceptance and lower prejudice towards minorities (Cameron & Rutland, 2006). Moreover, weekly meetings might not even be necessary as studies have shown that reading a novel (Vezzali et al., 2015), or even simply 10 pages from it (Johnson et al., 2013), could be sufficient to alter one's stand over minority members. With this in mind, the current research should have provided participants with a more complete and demanding form of intervention in order to achieve the hypothesised results.

Limitations

Among the numerous limitations that contributed to the unsuccessful outcome of this research, the inadequacy of the sample's distribution was undoubtedly a very important one. Due to the sampling technique adopted in this research (participants were either reached through social media or snowball sampling), it was impossible for the researcher to control or influence the nature of the sample, which was soon found to be highly homogeneous and unrepresentative of the Dutch population at large. The vast majority of the respondents were, in fact, young, highly educated students who showed little to no interest in watching the news. In addition, whilst all respondents lived in the Netherlands, only half of them had Dutch origins. This greatly contributed to the low external validity of the research.

Nevertheless, the analyses also found some minor, yet significant, results. Respondents from Utrecht reported significantly higher threat than individuals from outside Utrecht when presented with the story concerning the Muslim attacker. This result is in line with studies which emphasize the importance of proximity when measuring perceived threat (Kern et al., 2003). Moreover, within the intervention condition, gender was found to significantly influence one's level of threat perception.

In fact, females appeared to experience more threat than males when given the news extract. This finding is in accordance with the international literature, as researchers have found that females often tend to perceive higher threat than males when it comes to terrorism (Nellis & Savage, 2012).

Another major shortcoming of the study was that its sample appeared to have little interest in watching the news. This had probably a considerable impact on the results, as the whole research was based on news discourses and news framing. Moreover, as we are living in a world which is gradually redirecting its appetite for knowledge from televised to online sources (Dutta-Bergman, 2004), the choice of tackling televised news as the main focus of this research might have contributed to the lack of significant results. In fact, new forms of media, such as online networks and platforms, have been found to be more efficient in influencing students' beliefs than traditional forms of media, such as newspapers or televisions, due to their convenience and diversity of news (Hao, Wen, & George, 2014). In fact, the study suggests, online media platforms have a higher appeal on students due to the ease with which they allow individuals to retrieve both national and international news. Therefore, one could argue that future studies should focus their analysis on online news platforms rather than televised ones.

However, specific characteristics of a large part of the sample could also explain the lack of significant results reported by the study. In fact, as this thesis stems from the University College Utrecht's bachelor's degree, the campus' online platforms were where the current survey was most energetically advertised. Due to this, and looking at the international nature of the sample, it is safe to assume that most participants came from University College Utrecht. It is necessary to mention that students within this University College live in a separate campus where an open-minded and tolerant mentality is strongly encouraged. A similar kind of international campus environment has been the focus of several studies which have found that international students tend to portray both a more cosmopolitan attitude and a higher cross-cultural interest (Carlson & Widaman, 1988). Similarly, others have found that "people with border-crossing experiences and transnational social

relations are more likely to adopt cosmopolitan attitudes with respect to foreigners and global governance" (Mau, Mewes, & Zimmermann, 2008, p.1). Lastly, studying abroad was found to positively correlate with less anti-immigrant attitudes (O'rourke, & Sinnott, 2006). These findings are closely tied to the concept of deprovincialisation, characteristic of international students, which has been described as one's tendency to embrace foreign cultures and challenge one's cultural standards and implied beliefs (Martinovic & Verkuyten, 2013). This tolerant and non-judgemental mentality of a large part of the sample could have been the reason why the story depicting the Muslim attacker did not elicit higher perceived threat than the Dutch one did. By being themselves international, respondents might have compared their status of foreigners to that of the Muslim attacker and empathised with him, thus lessening their feeling of perceived threat.

Furthermore, the homogeneity in age and education could have also played a role in the lack of differences between groups. In fact, young people are often appraised as being more tolerant and open to foreign cultures than older individuals (O'rourke & Sinnott, 2006). Similarly, studies have also found one's level of education to positively correlate with one's tolerance of immigrants (Savelkoul et al., 2010). In fact, with lower education comes higher competition for jobs and resources, and thus, greater threat of low-wage immigrants. Bearing in mind the immigrant status of the Muslim attacker, it does not come as a surprise that the sample, predominantly young and highly educated, did not depict a higher threat level when reading about this individual.

One last factor that might have influenced the lack of significant differences in perceived threat is that, in order to heighten one's feeling of proximity to the event, the author was bound to create a fictional story about an attack in Utrecht. However, to avoid possible ethical issues, the respondents were briefed about the fictional nature of the extract. This could have influenced one's feeling of perceived threat, as research has shown that individuals feel less personal involvement and higher detachment when they are aware of the fictional, rather than factual, nature of the story (Genette, Ben-Ari, & McHale, 1990).

Implications for Future Studies

As we have observed, multiple factors contributed to the lack of significant results, yet an acknowledgment of the research's limitations will hopefully contribute to better and improved future studies. First and foremost, the high homogeneity of the sample strongly contributed to the low external validity and low power of the study. The current sampling method, primarily dictated by the nature of the research, appeared to be unfit for the study. Therefore, future studies should adopt different sampling techniques that will ensure a more heterogeneous and news-interested pool of respondents. Moreover, it would be interesting to find both respondents with high (e.g. the United States) and low (e.g. the Netherlands) proximity to terrorist events in order to test for possible differences between the two groups. Future research should not merely focus their attention on televised news but expand their study to online sources of information so to be in line with the public's trend and demand. Additionally, it might be a good idea to target only individuals native to the country of interest in order to avoid the international bias experienced in this study.

Lastly, with regard to the intervention technique, future studies should present participants with a more challenging and lengthy text which might elicit a greater feeling of extended contact within the reader. It would be ideal to have participants undergo a series of sessions in order to ensure a more successful intervention, yet a narrative, or a long extract from it, might also be enough to ensure a more favourable outcome in the future.

Conclusion

In this thesis I have discussed the relationship between the framing of news stories and the perceived threat of terrorism. Through an analysis of the international literature, I have presented the reader with an overview of the current state of affairs concerning this link between news framing and threat perception, and the possible forms of intervention aimed at reducing the latter. Regardless of the non-significant results found by this study, my thesis offers insight into the field of terrorism threat perception and provides the reader with a solid base which can be built upon in future research.

With terrorist events on the rise and hateful narratives evermore present in the speeches of many global politicians, I believe it is of utmost importance to understand the true power of news framing and the dynamics behind threat perception in order to consider ways to ease the social tensions characteristic of the complex era we live in.

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Appendix

1. Dutch Attacker Story

"Utrecht shooting: 9 victims, gunman dead, police say"

(CNN) - At least nine people were killed and 16 others injured Friday in a shooting rampage at a busy train station in Utrecht, The Netherlands, police said. Police searched for attackers, thinking there might be three, and found a man who had killed himself on a side street near Hoog Catharijne shopping mall, police has said. Based on surveillance video and witness statements, police concluded he was the sole gunman. The unidentified attacker was an 18-year-old Dutch individual, originally from Alphen aan den Rijn. The man was not known to police and his motives are unclear, authorities said. No group has so far claimed responsibility. Many children were among the casualties. The shooting comes as recent terrorist attacks have put Europe on high alert. Not long ago, 52-year-old Briton Khalid Masood, deliberately drove a car into pedestrians along the south side of Westminster Bridge and Bridge Street, injuring more than 50 people, four of them fatally. He was said to have an interest in jihad but, yet, no links have been found with bigger terrorist groups. Similarly, on the 7th of April a lorry careered down a busy shopping street in Stockholm, killing four and injuring 15. This comes less than a year after the Nice and Berlin attacks which left respectively 86 and 12 victims.

2. Muslim Attacker Story

"Utrecht shooting: 9 victims, gunman dead, police say"

(CNN) - At least nine people were killed and 16 others injured Friday in a shooting rampage at a busy train station in Utrecht, The Netherlands, police said. Police searched for attackers, thinking there might be three, and found a man who had killed himself on a side street near Hoog Catharijne shopping mall, police has said. Based on surveillance video and witness statements, police concluded he was the sole gunman. The unidentified attacker was an 18-year-old Muslim individual, originally from Morocco, who had lived in Utrecht for at least two years. The man was not known to police and

his motives are unclear, authorities said. No group has so far claimed responsibility. Many children were among the casualties. The shooting comes as recent terrorist attacks have put Europe on high alert. Not long ago, 52-year-old Briton Khalid Masood, deliberately drove a car into pedestrians along the south side of Westminster Bridge and Bridge Street, injuring more than 50 people, four of them fatally. He was said to have an interest in jihad but, yet, no links have been found with bigger terrorist groups. Similarly, on the 7th of April a lorry careered down a busy shopping street in Stockholm, killing four and injuring 15. This comes less than a year after the Nice and Berlin attacks which left respectively 86 and 12 victims.

3. Intervention Story

"British Muslim schoolboy, 16, stood blindfolded in city centre offering free hugs to 'try and show not all members of his religion are terrorists'"

A British Muslim teenager stood blindfolded in a busy city centre offering free hugs to shoppers in a bid to try and show members of his community that 'not all people of his religion are terrorists'. Yusef Pirot, 16, stood in the middle of Nottingham city centre for two hours with a sign around his neck saying 'I trust you. Do you trust me? Give me a hug' in the wake of the Paris terror attacks. Heart-warming video footage, which has been viewed over two millions times, shows strangers approaching the youngster to take him up on the offer and embrace him in the middle of the street. He said: 'I wanted to combat the stereotype about my religion and prove that not all Muslims are terrorists. We want peace. I was shocked by the Paris attacks - why would anyone want to hurt another human being and why would they kill innocent people for no reason? The stereotype is not right and these extremists are brainwashed - what they're doing is not what Islam is about'. He added: 'There were businessmen, groups of girls, old ladies, black, white and Asian people. A real mix. I was amazed at the reaction'.

4. Questions Measuring Perceived Threat

- How concerned are you personally about being yourself the victim of a future terrorist attack in the Netherlands?

- How concerned are you personally about having people close to you being the victims of a future terrorist attack in the Netherlands?

- How worried are you about the likelihood of there being another terrorist attack in the Netherlands in the near future?

- How concerned are you to lose your life, your house or your job in the event of an attack?

- How concerned are you about the possibility that an attack would alter your, or your group's, values, traditions or beliefs?

5. Questions Measuring Mental Illness and Group Affiliation

- To what degree do you think the attacker from the story is a member of a greater fundamentalist group? (e.g. ISIS, Al-Qaeda)

- To what degree do you think the attacker from the story is suffering from some kind of mental illness?