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# Testing the Effects of British Conservative Tabloids on Anti-Immigrant Attitudes & Policy Support

A Moderated Mediation Approach

Rodolfo Leyva



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## ABSTRACT

In the UK, conservative tabloids (CTs) have over the past 20 years, increasingly exposed their large readerships to highly negative and emotionalized depictions of immigrants. This survey-experiment tested the direct and indirect effects of consuming such reporting on accordant sociopolitical judgements. Findings suggest that exposure to typical British CT articles (*viz.*, those featuring immigrant criminality framings), induced anti-immigrant attitudes, which in turn, mediated the likelihood of voting for politicians running on anti-immigration platforms. Additionally, the effects of CT immigration coverage on said attitudes and voting intentions are enhanced by the perceived believability of the presented news information -particularly amongst self-identified conservatives and lower formally educated individuals. Overall, this study empirically affirms the hitherto untested proposition that the British right-wing press' continuous circulation of derogatory and alarmist representations of immigrants is fomenting xenophobic public sentiments and support for more stringent and punitive immigration policies. The theoretical and political implications of this research are discussed.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

In the UK, conservative tabloids (CTs) currently dominate a centralized media landscape. *The Sun* and *Daily Mail*, for example, were at time of this research, the first and second most read newspapers in the nation, with a respective monthly circulation of 1,545,594 and 1,343,142 (Mayhew, 2018), along with 30.2 and 29.6 million unique monthly visitors to their websites (Tobbit, 2018). Given the mass reach and uptake of their content, CTs are a critically important if not leading source of news for possibly the majority of Britons (Fenton, 2018; Reeves & Vries, 2016). Hence, despite being tabloids, these mainstream outlets are expected to follow the same regulatory codes of practice for accurate and ethical reporting as their quality press competitors. And indeed, British CTs do generally claim to conduct objective and professional journalism. However, their reporting, particularly on sociopolitical issues, is consistently ideologically biased, emotionalized, and misleading (Fenton, 2018; Gabrielatos & Baker, 2008; Innes, 2010), and, therefore, has great potential to negatively sway public opinion and policy decisions (Blinder & Allen, 2016).

As a case in point, British CTs frequently circulate derogatory depictions of refugees, asylum seekers, and economic migrants that are usually coupled with implied or explicit calls for stricter border controls (Binder & Allen, 2016; Gabrielatos & Baker, 2008; Innes, 2010). Such advocacy journalism was notably heightened in the lead up to the 2016 referendum to leave the European Union, during which, CTs dedicated considerably more space to the issue of immigration. This largely consisted of propagating evocative misrepresentations that discursively constructed immigrants as dangerous, terrorist sympathizing, or benefits-scrouring foreigners who threatened traditional British 'values' and way of life (Louçã & Fonseca, 2019; Moore & Ramsay, 2017; Rzepnikowska, 2018). Correspondingly, CTs have been repeatedly cited, including in a report by the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI), as major contributors to the Brexit outcome and rise in xenophobia, racist criminal incidents, and public support for authoritarian populist prescriptions that followed (ECRI, 2016; Moore & Ramsay, 2017; Rzepnikowska, 2018).

Yet, although this causal inference is perfectly logical, the available scholarship has not actually tested a causal or even correlational relationship between British CT consumption and hostile attitudes towards immigrants. Moreover, research on the socio-cognitive outcomes of engagement with real-life, prevalent, and emotive issue-specific framings via either general media or specific newspaper consumption, is limited to a handful of studies (Arendt, 2010;

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Figueroa-Caballero & Mastro, 2018).<sup>2</sup> Therefore, to help fill these empirical gaps, the present survey-experiment tested the effects of exposure to the actual immigration coverage of popular British CTs on accordant attitudes and policy support. It also further conceptualised and tested how these effects are modulated by interactions between the perceived believability of the presented news information, political ideology, and formal education. In so doing, this research helps to address the need for more complex conceptualizations of and research on how the characteristics of specific news outlets interact with pertinent individual-level characteristics and reading contexts to mediate and/or moderate attitudinal effects related to the reporting of particular issues (Newton 2019; Slothuus and De Vreese 2010). Accordingly, this article continues with a brief review of the media effects and political cognition literature that informed this study's theoretical framework and hypotheses. It then proceeds to discuss this study's methodology, findings, and limitations.

## 2 THE EFFECTS OF NEWSPAPERS ON POLITICAL ATTITUDES

Due to commercial imperatives and other editorial constraints, newspapers often emphasize some aspects of stories over others. This manifests in their reporting being embedded with subtle and blatant textual and/or visual cues and frames (e.g., emotive wording, innuendoes, salacious imagery, and sensationalistic headlines). These bits of selected and discursively inflected information are employed to help guide readers' attention towards, and successive adoption of, the communicator intended interpretations and judgements about an issue (Kühne, Weber, Summer, 2015). These informational bits can also transmit into readers' minds a sense of the most urgent social problems and concomitant viable policy solutions (Shen & Edwards, 2005). And, serve as heuristic devices that allow readers to quickly draw inferences from and evaluate the presented information (Sheets, Bos, & Boomgaarden, 2015). Correspondingly, extensive media effects research shows that framed political news messages can have an appreciable influence on public opinion (Brader, Valentino, & Sahay, 2004; Figueroa-Caballero & Mastro, 2018; Haider-Markel & Joslyn, 2001; Lee & Chang, 2010; Shen & Edwards, 2005). However, this print media influence varies and is conditional on several individual-level characteristics and reading contexts.

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<sup>2</sup> That is, most experimental studies on the effects of, for example, immigration frames on target attitudes, use subtly manipulated and fictitious news articles and framings that are analogous to real news coverage, but which are nonetheless limited in ecological validity.

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To elaborate, most leading media effects models are premised on the notion that stimulus registration of any kind, activates proximal schemas i.e., generative and neocortically stored knowledge structures (Arendt, 2013; Moy, Tewksbury, & Rinke, 2016; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2006). These structures are made of an adaptable network of interconnected syntactic units that represent the commonalities of frequently experienced informational instances (Ghosh et al., 2014). As such, they can pertain to a wide range of mental representations (e.g., beliefs, attitudes, values, discourses, events). But, an individual schema contains subject-specific, context-sensitive, and hierarchically slotted information that is varyingly fragmented and connected to other schemas (van Kesteren et al., 2012). Exposure to political news messages can, therefore, gradually a) form new, or b) bolster or c) change the syntax and weight of existing, schema structures and associations. In the first instance, these distinct socio-cognitive outcomes are primarily determined by the degree of correspondence between a media stimulus and the availability, accessibility, and applicability of a reader's pre-existing schemas during exposure or a following target judgement (Arendt 2010; Lecheler & De Vreese, 2011). Take, for example, individuals with weak political positions or little to no prior knowledge on the subject matter that an article presents to them. In these cases, the salient interpretations and connections provided by the article's framings can become more readily accepted and encoded, because these readers are less likely to have counter cognitions or information available that could raise their incredulity (Haider-Markel & Joslyn, 2001; Lee & Chang, 2010). Moreover, if encoded, the news information remains accessible for a short time afterward, making it likelier to be primed in and utilised to interpret and evaluate a subsequently encountered and related attitude object. This can then result in the development of a new belief or attitudinal schema formation (Arendt, 2012; Moy et al., 2016; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2006).

On the other hand, in individuals with stronger political positions or knowledge on the topic that a news article presents to them, a different schema process and outcome normally happens. In these cases, if the article's source cues or issue framings are recognized as credible and congruent with perceiver political predispositions, then the higher the probability is that its message will be uncritically accepted. Conversely, if the article's cues and frames are perceived as untrustworthy or discrepant, then its message is likelier to be resisted and rejected (Arpan & Rainey 2003; Haider-Markel & Joslyn, 2001; Hartman & Weber, 2009). Two leading explanations for this posit the following. 1) People are cognitive misers who to save time and mental energy, avoid effortful and controlled reasoning. Instead, they tend to make quick evaluations and decisions by relying on peripheral information and heuristics. 2) People are also inclined to hold on to and rationalize their firm and long-held beliefs when faced with counter-attitudinal information -a phenomenon known as motivated reasoning. While these two explanations are based on different modes of information processing (i.e., Type 1 versus

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Type 2), the cognitive and psychological tendencies that they posit effectively suggest that rather than carefully weigh and examine the argumentative merits and evidence of a political news article, knowledgeable readers or those with strong opinions will normally form immediate conclusions based largely on the extent to which the available cues and frames align with their existing ideological orientations and preconceptions. Though, news consumption can in certain instances cause changes to the belief-content and valence of longstanding schemas. This may occur, for example, when a reader is motivated to deeply assess a news story's veracity or arguments, as this deliberative processing can lead them to take in new facts or perspectives (Lecheler & De Vreese, 2011; Moy et al., 2016). That said, exposure to political news generally results in a bias towards maintaining and reinforcing established beliefs and opinions (Igartua & Cheng, 2009; Igartua, Moral-Toranzo, & Fernández; 2012).

Additionally, irrespective of whether consumed news information is encoded into a nascent schema, or assimilated or accommodated into a robust schema network, the resulting mnemonic construct stays momentarily accessible. During this temporal interval, it has the capacity to guide future related judgements and opinion formations (Price & Tewksbury, 1997; Shen & Edwards, 2005). The strength of this capacity is proportional to a given schema's recency and frequency of activation, but can also be circumstantially potentiated by a media message's hedonic tone (Baumgartner & Wirth, 2012; Brader et al., 2004). In particular, negative wording and imagery that connote or denote a pressing threat, capture attention and stimulate emotional reactions more strongly than neutral stimuli. The combination of these elicited affective and cognitive reactions moderate what information is believed and learned, which can then mediate policy preferences (Arendt, 2013; Figueroa-Caballero & Mastro, 2018; Igartua et al., 2012; Kühne et al., 2015). This is thought to occur because emotionalized-alarmist media content concurrently activates frame-consistent memory associations and emotions, along with an evolutionary endowed aversive motivational system. The latter of which when triggered, steers a person to automatically attend to and encode threat-related information. All these simultaneously triggered processes hence lead "to an intensification of the mood state; rendering mood-related thoughts and memories more accessible than unrelated cognitions" (Baumgartner & Wirth, 2012, p. 5). As a consequence, fewer cognitive resources are left available for the processing of peripheral or discordant information; making it more difficult to reject or not be implicitly swayed by the media message (Arendt, 2013; Kühne et al., 2015; Matthes & Schmuck, 2017). Ergo, the more a news article's framed presentation of information induces fear, anger, or anxiety, the more its message can direct a reader's opinions and support for certain policies (Brader et al., 2004; Seate & Mastro, 2015).



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## 3 THEORISING THE ATTITUDINAL EFFECTS OF BRITISH CT'S

Concordantly, British CT reporting of immigration regularly employs stereotypical descriptions; presents highly sensationalistic cases of crimes committed by immigrants; and cites dubious studies and numeric figures on the harms of immigration (Binder & Allen, 2016; Gabrielatos & Baker, 2008; Innes, 2010). For example, in a study of the topics covered by all of the major British print and television news outlets during the 2016 Brexit campaign, Moore and Ramsay (2017) found that negative coverage of immigration was predominantly concentrated amongst CTs. This included several stories that associated European nationals with crime – the cases for which were in many instances presented in a selective context that made their fairness and objectivity difficult to determine. Also, these stories normally featured headlines such as the ones below:

'More than 30,000 Europeans a year are arrested in London: 80 people a day are held as Brexit campaigners say staying in the EU would put huge pressure on prisons' – *Daily Mail*, 3 May, 2016

'HALF of all rape and murder suspects in some parts of Britain are foreigners' – *Express*, 23 May, 2016

'London could be next: Nigel Farage warns Brexit is the only way to stop rampaging jihadis and Cologne sex attackers from coming here' -*The Sun*, 28 April, 2016

Moreover, unlike in other news outlets, the aforementioned issue-specific reporting is contextually unique in that it doesn't usually feature competitive framings or counter-arguments (Gabrielatos & Baker, 2008; Ramsay & Moore, 2017); meaning that audiences are often just exposed to single considerations. In other words, British CT reporting on immigration is routinely and pronouncedly propagandistic in tone and rhetoric (ECRI 2016; Greenslade, 2006; Innes, 2010). As mentioned previously, the effects of this CT reporting on British public opinion have not been empirically investigated. However, nascent experimental research from other national contexts offers insights that shed light on what these effects might entail. In brief, this research demonstrates that attention to print news frames that connect immigration to rising crime increases hostile attitudes and negative emotions, and reinforces the belief that immigrants are detrimentally impacting the host country. The explanation being that this type of single issue and highly emotionalised news framing can simultaneously instantiate strongly negative feelings and relevant schema associations, and in so doing, subliminally shape a reader's beliefs and attitudes (Arendt, 2013; Igartua et al., 2012;; Igartua & Cheng, 2009; Seate & Mastro, 2015).

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Another group of studies further indicate that the inducement of anti-immigrant attitudes via exposure to negative media framings of immigrants mediates congruent policy preferences. For example, a Dutch experiment by Sheets et al., (2015), exposed participants to a news article containing a frame that linked immigrants to street crime, and a source cue for the Dutch Freedom Party -a far-right populist party. The findings showed that this frame and cue combination indirectly raised the probability of intentions to vote for the Freedom party through activating anti-immigrant attitudes. Similarly, an American experiment by Figueroa-Caballero & Mastro (2018), had participants attend to television news reports of a drunk driving fatality that clearly and repeatedly pointed to the perpetrator's undocumented immigrant status. This increased unfavourable immigration attitudes which subsequently increased the time in jail that participants thought the perpetrator should spend. Notably, although the treatment stimuli used in these experiments differed by medium, they all contained highly salient threat-related information. Therefore, based on the theorizing and research discussed so far, the following hypotheses are proposed.

H1: Exposure to typical British CT articles about immigrants will generate greater anti-immigrant attitudes than exposure to control news stimuli.

H2: Anti-immigrant attitudes will mediate the effects of exposure to CT immigration coverage on the likelihood of voting for politicians running on anti-immigration platforms.

Additionally, it is posited here that British CT immigration coverage may have a stronger influence on the attitudes and policy preferences of politically conservative readers. This conjuncture is inferred from the following well-established empirical observations. First, susceptibility to the attitudinal effects of single-issue framings of political topics is often largely dependent on partisanship and news source credibility (Arpan & Raney, 2003; Hartman & Weber, 2009; Slothuus & de Vreese, 2010). Second, political cognition research shows that relative to liberals, conservatives are more sensitive to threat-related information; prone to employing heuristic over systematic information processing; endorse harsher punishments for perpetrators of crime; and limit their exposure to novel information (Crawford, 2017; Jost & Amodio, 2012; Pennycook & Rand, 2019; Shook & Fazio, 2009). These cognitive and behavioural traits can reduce conservatives' information gain and "probability of correcting invalid assumptions of negativity", thus leading them to hold a "greater number of negative attitudes (and, hence, a less balanced perception of their world) than liberals" (Shook & Fazio, 2009, p. 2). Third, compared to centrists and liberals, British conservatives traditionally hold less favourable views on immigration (Webb & Bale, 2014). They also have a strong preference for reading mostly CTs (Roberts, 2017), which to some degree indicates that they trust the

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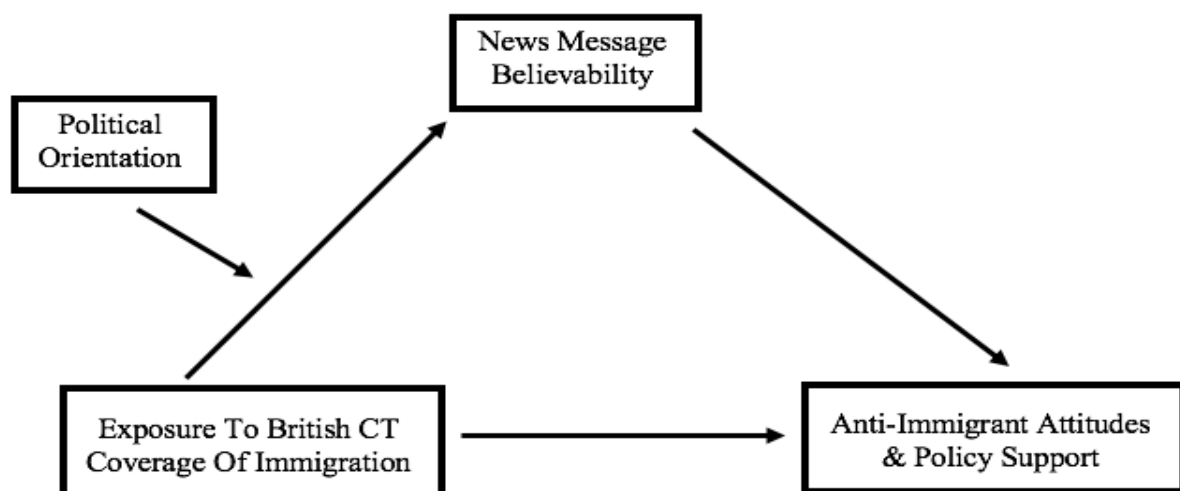
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accuracy of these publications' reporting. It follows from all these otherwise disparate empirical findings that British conservatives are likely better able and motivated to integrate the concepts primed by CT immigration coverage with their political ideology schemas. Exposure to such coverage should, therefore, heighten these schemas' availability, accessibility, and applicability. And, to the extent that they can then increase credulity towards the presented news information. This may in turn induce greater anti-immigrant attitudes and voter support for congenial policies. Hence, the following hypotheses are proposed.

H3: Perceived believability of the news content will enhance the effects of exposure to British CT immigration coverage on anti-immigrant attitudes

H4: intentions to vote for anti-immigration politicians, and this process will be especially strong among conservatives (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1:** Hypothesized conditional process model



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Lastly, the mediated relationship between exposure to British CT immigration coverage, news believability, and anti-immigrant attitudes and policy support may also be moderated by a reader's level of formal education. To wit, every subsequent level of formal education that an individual goes through usually equips them with greater relevant knowledge; skills to acquire new knowledge, and the ability to systematically critique and evaluate incoming information (Haider-Markel & Joslyn, 2001; Matthes & Schmuck, 2017). Further, studies suggest that due to this cognitive affordance and armament, higher-educated individuals are better able to correct for negative stereotypes instantiated by, and as so resist the communicative effects of, racial media messaging (Matthes & Marquart, 2013; Schmuck & Matthes, 2015). Consistent with this reasoning, individuals with low-formal education should normally have less developed stores of pertinent knowledge at their disposal; making them less capable of counter-arguing and resisting racialised news messages. So if exposed to typical British CT articles on immigration, they may thus be less suspicious about the credibility of the news information presented to them. If these assumptions are correct then, in theory, lower-formally educated individuals should be more likely to draw on the prevalent anti-immigrant news framings featured in said articles during subsequent related judgment tasks. Therefore, it is expected that the influence of CT immigration coverage on anti-immigration attitudes and policy support will be mediated by perceived news believability -which will itself be conditional on formal education. This postulation is specified in the hypotheses below.

H5: News believability will enhance the effects of exposure to British CT immigration coverage on anti-immigrant attitudes

H6: voter support for anti-immigration politicians -particularly amongst low-formally educated readers.

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## 4 METHODOLOGY

### 4.1 Design and Participants

This study employed a web-survey experiment design with the between-subjects factor consisting of *group* with two levels (treatment, control). The opening url page masked the research as a study on whether audiences retain the same amount of information from digital, print, and television news sources, and whether this varies across different demographic groups.<sup>3</sup> After this, participants completed pre-test measures that assessed the moderators. They were then randomized into either a treatment or control condition and exposed to study materials via a questionnaire.

Qualtrics was commissioned to administer the web-survey to a random cross-sectional British sample of eligible voters. In total, 180 participants from the ages of 18-49 ( $M = 35.5$ ,  $SD = 13.2$ ), were recruited during April 2018, and included in the analyses. Of these, 37% were male, 63% female. Additionally, 90.6% identified as White, 5% as Asian, 0.6% as Black, and 3.9% as Mixed-Race.

### 4.2 Procedure

Participants completed three reading tasks that were disguised as attention-memory tests and presented across the questionnaire in between covariate measures and several filler items. Before each task, a pop-up note notified participants that they would be shown a couple of totally random articles, and instructed them to read each carefully as they might later be tested on what was displayed. For task #1, participants read two web articles -each shown for 30 seconds. For task #2, participants read two web articles -each shown for 20 seconds. The articles used for these two reading tasks were cropped to fit into one display page, and featured the organizational logo, headlines, cover images, and the first one-three paragraphs. For task #3, participants read one whole short article with no time limits. After this, they completed a distractor task that required them to attend to three separate screenshots featuring television news headlines and anchors reporting information that was unrelated to the study. Lastly, they answered post-test measures for the dependent variables, which were also fitted in between distractor questions.

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<sup>3</sup> This mild deception was considered necessary to avoid the potential priming effects that could have been induced by informing participants of the study's true intent, and which could have compromised responses to the outcome measures.

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Furthermore, the time limits for the first two reading tasks were arbitrarily decided on. However, they were placed to keep with the masked purpose of the study and limit the potential for participants to notice patterns and decipher the study's true intent, whilst still giving them enough time to process the presented information. Incidentally, industry figures from the US indicate that on average, people spend 15 seconds reading an online article, with around 60% only reading the headline (Haile, 2014; Weinschenk, 2015). If these figures happen to also be true of Britons, then the timing durations for tasks #1 and #2 would roughly mirror actual online reading sessions.

## 4.3 Materials

In keeping with this study's ecological approach, the articles used for all three reading tasks in the treatment condition came from *The Sun*, *The Daily Mail*, and *The Daily Express*. During the time of this study, these CTs were the 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, and 7<sup>th</sup> most popular publication in the UK (Tobbit, 2018). Further, their reporting of immigrants has been repeatedly cited by content and discourse analysis studies for being especially derogatory and alarmist (Gabrielatos & Baker, 2008; Greenslade, 2005; Moore & Ramsay, 2017). Accordingly, treatment participants ( $n = 90$ ) were exposed to 5 typical CT articles featuring sensationalistic headlines that explicitly portray immigrants as dangerous criminals and/or welfare cheats. The participants assigned to the control group ( $n = 90$ ), were exposed to 5 articles featuring apolitical content not related to the study. These articles were selected from the magazines *Rolling Stone*, *Vogue*, *Popular Mechanics* (see appendix for examples of the stimuli materials used for both the treatment and control groups).

## 4.4 Dependent Variables

*Anti-Immigrant attitudes:* These measures were designed with a four-point forced-choice response scale (1= Strongly Disagree, 4 = Strongly Agree). This was done to limit satisficing and social-desirability effects, which is a prevalent concern for politics related survey questions (Krosnick et al., 2002). Participants were asked what extent they agreed that immigrants: 1) commit more crimes than natural-born citizens, and 2) come to the UK to take advantage of the welfare system. The scores were averaged to create a composite variable ( $M = 2.6$ ,  $SD = .77$ ,  $r(178) = .59$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

*Voter support for anti-immigration politicians/policies:* Supporters of prominent xenophobic nationalist parties like the UK Independence Party, are less likely to answer survey questions about what parties they intend to vote for (Kaufmann, 2015). Because of this, voting intentions

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for specific politicians or parties were not measured. Instead, participants were asked to indicate, on a four-point forced-choice response scale (1= Very Unlikely, 4 = Very Likely), their likelihood of voting for a politician who will genuinely work to: 1) cut immigration rates; and 2) increase government efforts and resources to deport illegal immigrants. The scores were averaged to create a composite variable ( $M = 2.8$ ,  $SD = .89$ ,  $r(178) = .81$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

## 4.5 Mediator & Moderator Variables

*News Believability:* At the end of the questionnaire, participants were asked what extent they agreed on a four-point forced-choice response scale (1 = strongly disagree, 4 = strongly agree), that all of the newspaper articles presented to them were 1) credible and 2) accurate. The measures were averaged to create a composite variable ( $M = 2.6$ ,  $SD = .63$ ,  $r(178) = .69$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

*Political Ideology:* Participants were presented with three superordinate classifications and asked to select the one that best reflected their political leanings and beliefs. 32.2% identified as conservative, 38.9% as centrist/moderate, and 28.9% as liberal. It should be noted that as, in other studies, political ideology here refers to both ideological and partisan orientation. Although such conceptualisation and instrument are commonly applied in US studies, this may not be as applicable to the UK context where party ideologies are a bit more nuanced. Nevertheless, the above measure was deemed by the author to be good enough for the current study.

*Formal Education:* Participants selected their highest education degree from a list of four items. Going from lowest to highest-ranked education qualification. 25.6% of participants reported having earned a General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE); 22.8% an A-level qualification or equivalent; 20.6% a college diploma (e.g., HNC or HND); and 31% an undergraduate university degree or higher.

## 4.6 Covariates

The following media selective-consumption measures were taken to partly control for the effects of the possible negative, neutral, and positive immigration news framings that participants may have encountered prior to this experiment.

*CT Consumption:* To correspond with the treatment materials, participants indicated their frequency (1= Never, 5= Very Often) of receiving news from *The Sun*, *The Daily Mail*, and *The Daily Express*. These measures were averaged to create a composite variable ( $M = 2.2$ ,  $SD = 1.0$ ,  $\alpha = .77$ ).

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*Left-wing print news consumption:* Participants indicated their frequency (1= Never, 5= Very Often) of receiving news from three major publications known to be leftist in orientation: *The Guardian*, *The Daily Mirror*, *The New Statesman* ( $M = 1.9$ ,  $SD = .91$ ,  $\alpha = .73$ ).

*Television news consumption:* Participants indicated their frequency (1= Never, 5= Very Often) of receiving news from the four major British television news organizations *viz.*, *BBC News*, *Sky News*, *Channel 4 News*, *ITV News* ( $M = 3.0$ ,  $SD = .83$ ,  $\alpha = .68$ ).

## 5 ANALYSES & FINDINGS

An analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to test (H1). Results show that the treatment group expressed significantly greater anti-immigrant attitudes than the control group ( $M_{\text{treatment}} = 2.77$ ,  $SD = .76$ ;  $M_{\text{control}} = 2.43$ ,  $SD = .73$ )  $F(1, 179) = 9.11$ ,  $p = .003$ , *Cohen's D* = .45. Furthermore, t-tests and chi-square tests showed no difference between the treatment and control groups on any of the demographic or covariate measures; indicating successful randomization. Nonetheless, an analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) test was run to control for the potential confounding effects of these additional measures. The results again showed a significant main effect for exposure to CT immigration articles on anti-immigrant attitudes, with the treatment group reporting stronger anti-immigrant attitudes  $F(1, 169) = 6.919$ ,  $p = .009$ . These findings are consistent with the predictions for H1.

Additionally, a hierarchical regression procedure was conducted in which the regular CT consumption variable was entered in the final block as the main predictor variable, with the treatment condition and other measures entered in separate blocks to hold their effects constant. The standardized  $\beta$  coefficients show that the treatment condition ( $\beta = .20$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and consumption of leftist publications ( $\beta = -.24$ ,  $p < .05$ ) had significant effects on anti-immigrant attitudes. Over and above the effects of these variables, CT consumption had the strongest significant positive effect of all of the entered predictors ( $\beta = .24$ ,  $p < .05$ ), and explained 2% of the total variance in the model *Adjusted R*<sup>2</sup> = .11,  $F(12, 167) = 2.95$ ,  $p < .001$ . These results indicate that participants who more frequently read *The Sun*, *The Daily Mail*, and/or *The Daily Express*, are more likely to hold strong anti-immigrant attitudes. It must be noted that this cross-sectional analysis is correlational and not the main focus of this study. Still, it is worth mentioning here since it lends an added degree of external validity to the findings from the H1 tests above.

To test H2, a bootstrapping approach for estimating indirect effects in simple mediation was employed using Hayes' (2013) PROCESS macro (model 4) with 10,000 bootstrap estimates for the construction of 95% confidence intervals. The bootstrap intervals for the estimated indirect

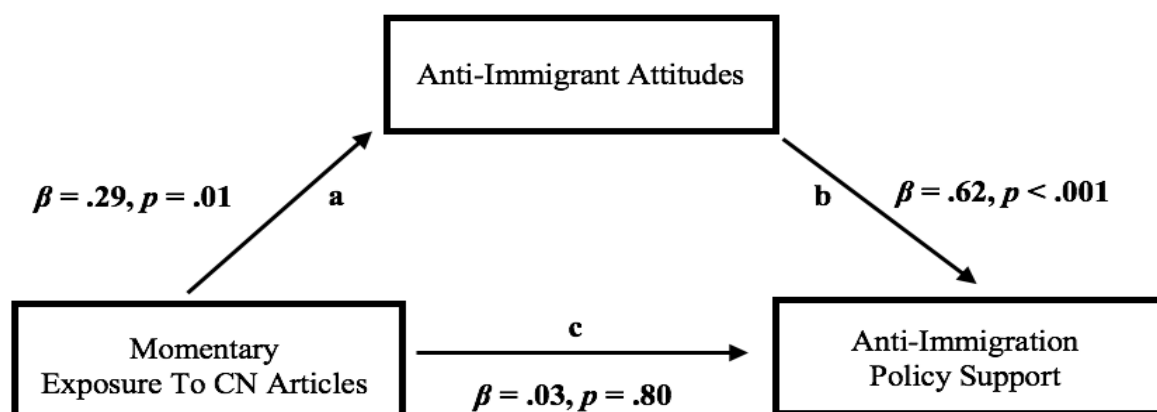


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effects suggest that anti-immigrant attitudes ( $B = .18$ , *Bootstrap SE* = .07; [CL] = [.0446, .3590],  $p = .02$ ), fully and positively mediated the effects of momentary exposure to CT articles on voter support for anti-immigration politicians (see Figure 2). These findings support the predictions for H2. This bootstrapping procedure was repeated with regular CT consumption entered as the predictor variable. The bootstrap intervals for the estimated indirect effects suggest that anti-immigrant attitudes ( $B = .11$ , *Bootstrap SE* = .05; [CL] = [.0161, .2179],  $p = .04$ ), fully and positively mediated the relationship between CT consumption and voting for an anti-immigration politician. Again, although based on a predictor fashioned from cross-sectional data, these findings help further validate the empirical regularities observed in the H2 test.

**Figure 2.** Mediation analysis indicating relations between momentary exposure to CT immigration coverage, anti-immigrant attitudes, and voter support for anti-immigration politicians, with all other measures controlled for.



To test H3, a moderated mediation test was conducted using Hayes' (2013) PROCESS macro (model 7) with 10,000 bootstrap estimates for the construction of 95% confidence intervals. This multiple linear regression based test is suitable for examining interactions between experimental independent variables and continuous independent variables. In this case, treatment exposure was entered as the predictor (X), news believability as the mediator (M), political ideology as the moderator (W), and anti-immigrant attitudes as the dependent variable (Y). All other demographic and covariates measures were entered as controls. This procedure was also employed to test H4, H5, and H6, but with the relevant moderator and dependent variables substituted. With regards to the H3 test, the expected interaction between treatment exposure and political ideology on perceived news believability was significant ( $B = .27$ , *Bootstrap SE* = .13; [CL] = [.0115, .5355],  $p = .04$ ). Additionally, the test yielded a significant

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moderated mediation index of .09 *Bootstrap SE* = .05; with a 95% bootstrap [CL] = [.0079, .2181]. Notably, the conditional indirect effect(s) of X on Y shown in Table 1 were only significant for self-identified conservatives. These results lend support for H3.

**Table 1.** Results of the conditional process model for (H3)

Predictor variables (R2 = .23, p < .001)	Anti-Immigrant Attitudes (Y)				
	B	SE	T	P	
Constant 1.	2.2	.53	4.32	.000	
Treatment Exposure	.30	.12	2.49	.013	
News Message Believability	.32	.12	2.64	.008	
Gender	-.19	.12	-1.55	.121	
Age	.00	.00	.891	.374	
CT Consumption	.12	.08	1.55	.122	
Leftist Publication Consumption	-.18	.09	-1.97	.049	
TV New Consumption	-.02	.09	-.311	.756	
Ethnicity	-.04	.12	-.342	.732	
Formal Education	-.05	.04	-1.14	.254	
Conditional indirect effect(s) of X on Y at values of the moderator:					
Mediator	Moderator	Effect	Boot SE	BootLLCI	BootULCI
News Believability	Liberal	-.0447	.0498	-.1621	.0420
News Believability	Centrist	.0257	.0354	-.0280	.1154
News Believability	Conservative	.0961	.0609	.0095	.2476

The results for the H4 model yielded the same significant interaction between the treatment condition and political ideology on news believability as the test for H3. Moreover, the moderated mediation index was also significant at .08 *Bootstrap SE* = .05; with a 95% bootstrap [CL] = [.0047, .2224]. The conditional indirect effect(s) of X on Y, as shown in Table 2, indicate that the believability of the articles augmented the effects of exposure to British CT immigration coverage on voter support for anti-immigration politicians -particularly amongst conservatives. These results lend support for the predictions for H4.

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**Table 2:** Results of the conditional process model for (H4)

Predictor variables (R2 = .43, p < .001)	Voter Support for Anti-Immigrant Politician (Y)				
	B	SE	T	P	
Constant 1.	2.2	.63	3.48	.000	
Treatment Exposure	.20	.14	1.46	.144	
News Believability	.30	.12	2.49	.013	
Gender	-.10	.14	-.725	.469	
Age	.00	.00	.921	.358	
CT Consumption	.16	.12	1.34	.181	
Leftist Publication Consumption	-.26	.12	-2.10	.036	
TV New Consumption	.08	.13	.648	.517	
Ethnicity	-.01	.15	-.097	.922	
Formal Education	-.10	.05	-1.72	.086	
Conditional indirect effect(s) of X on Y at values of the moderator:					
Mediator	Moderator	Effect	Boot SE	BootLLCI	BootULCI
News Believability	Liberal	-.0418	.0513	-.1669	.0367
News Believability	Centrist	.0240	.0342	-.0286	.1127
News Believability	Conservative	.0898	.0604	.0076	.2401

Results for the H5 model showed that the interaction between treatment exposure and formal education on news believability was not significant ( $B = -.15$ , *Bootstrap SE* = .08; [CL] = [-.3200, .0157],  $p = .07$ ). However, the moderated mediation index was  $-.05$  *Bootstrap SE* = .03; with a 95% bootstrap [CL] = [-.1287, -.0010]. As this confidence interval does not include zero (Hayes, 2013), then one can conclude that the indirect effect of exposure to CT immigration coverage on anti-immigrant attitudes through perceived news content credibility is significantly and negatively moderated by formal education. Specifically, the conditional indirect effect(s) of X on Y shown in Table 3, were only significant for low-formally educated participants, which is consistent with the predictions for H5.

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**Table 3.** Results of the conditional process model for (H5)

Predictor variables (R2 = .22, p < .001)	Anti-Immigrant Attitudes (Y)				
	B	SE	T	P	
Constant 1.	1.9	.48	4.06	.000	
Treatment Exposure	.30	.12	2.55	.011	
News Believability	.32	.12	2.55	.011	
Gender	-.18	.12	-1.56	.119	
Age	.00	.00	.794	.428	
CT Consumption	.13	.08	1.58	.114	
Leftist Publication Consumption	-.18	.10	-1.79	.075	
TV New Consumption	-.02	.09	-.289	.772	
Ethnicity	-.02	.11	-.178	.858	
Political Ideology	.08	.08	1.02	.307	
Conditional indirect effect(s) of X on Y at values of the moderator:					
Mediator	Moderator	Effect	Boot SE	BootLLCI	BootULCI
News Believability	Low-Education	.0823	.0547	.0043	.2211
News Believability	Mid-Education	.0248	.0357	-.0294	.1149
News Believability	High-Education	-.0326	.0482	-.1391	.0580

Finally, the results for the H6 model generated the same non-significant interaction effect between treatment exposure and formal education on news believability as the test for H5. However, the results showed a significant moderated mediation index of  $-.04$  *Bootstrap SE* =  $.03$ ; with a 95% bootstrap [CL] =  $[-.1250, -.0001]$ . Moreover, the conditional indirect effect(s) of X on Y shown in Table 4 were only significant for low-formally educated participants. Overall, these results indicate that the perceived credibility and accuracy of the presented news content enhanced the effects of exposure to British CT immigration coverage on voter support for anti-immigration politicians -particularly amongst low-formally educated individuals. They are thus consistent with the predictions for H6.

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**Table 4.** Results of the conditional process model for (H6)

Predictor variables (R2 = .18, p < .001)	Voter Support For Anti-Immigration Politicians (Y)				
	B	SE	T	P	
Constant 1.	1.5	.63	2.48	.014	
Treatment Exposure	.22	.14	1.51	.132	
News Believability	.29	.12	2.41	.016	
Gender	-.09	.14	-.681	.496	
Age	.00	.00	.762	.447	
CT Consumption	.15	.22	1.29	.198	
Leftist Publication Consumption	-.25	.13	-1.89	.059	
TV New Consumption	.09	.12	.700	.484	
Ethnicity	.02	.14	.159	.873	
Political Ideology	.16	.10	1.46	.144	
Conditional indirect effect(s) of X on Y at values of the moderator:					
Mediator	Moderator	Effect	Boot SE	BootLLCI	BootULCI
News Believability	Low-Education	.0754	.0543	.0026	.2244
News Believability	Mid-Education	.0228	.0342	-.0244	.1166
News Believability	High-Education	-.0299	.0459	-.1391	.0490

## 6 DISCUSSION

Several content analysis studies consistently show that, over the past 20 years, British CTs have continuously circulated derogatory and alarmist representations of immigrants. Researchers have thus argued that British CTs are helping to foment xenophobic public sentiments and calls for stricter immigration policies (Blinder & Allen 2016; Gabrielatos & Baker, 2008; Greenslade, 2005; Moore & Ramsay, 2017). However, whilst this is a logical causal inference to draw, it has to date, been assumed but not actually been tested. This study attempted to fill this empirical gap by directly testing the effects of momentary exposure to typical British CT stories about immigration (*viz.*, those featuring salient immigrant criminality framing) on concomitant sociopolitical judgements. The findings revealed that, all other factors being equal, such momentary exposure can indeed lead to greater anti-immigrant attitudes, which may, in turn, potentially increase the likelihood of voting anti-immigration politicians. These

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direct and indirect attitudinal effects were also significantly correlated with regular selective-consumption of popular British CTs. Additionally, follow up analyses suggest that the effects of CT immigration coverage on accordant attitudes and voting intentions are further enhanced by the perceived believability of the news information -particularly amongst self-identified conservatives and individuals with low formal education. These findings, therefore, lend empirical support to the aforementioned and hitherto untested causal inference. Moreover, they contribute nuanced contextual insights on how mainstream and trusted news publications can cultivate, and interact with relevant individual-level characteristics to potentiate, outgroup prejudices that can undermine democratic deliberations.

That is, this study's examination is premised on the notion that the way in which news is presented can direct the ways that individuals construct and employ their schemas towards an attitude object. Hence, as Brinder and Allen (2016, p. 4) argue, "media coverage provides depictions of immigrants, asylum seekers, and refugees that may form the raw material from which members of the public build their understandings of these complex, heterogeneous categories". Further, I must reiterate that CTs are immensely popular in Great Britain, and frequently report on immigration (Innes, 2010; Moore & Ramsay, 2017). So it is not too much of a leap to assume that a considerable proportion of Britons are regularly exposed to CT reporting on immigration. The possible detrimental implications of this regular exposure can thus be speculated on via combining the theoretical insights of the media framing, affective-priming, and political cognition theorizations discussed earlier, with the empirical insights of this study. To wit, in the first instance, attention to a usual British CT story about immigrants could instantly induce fear and/or anger, and successively instantiate and implicitly cultivate negative associations, opinions, and feelings about immigrants. Over time, the repeated instantiation of these contiguous schemas and emotions via regular selective or incidental exposure to CT immigration coverage augments their activation potential and interconnectivity; raising their probability of being automatically co-activated in future related contexts. This then potentiates their corresponding dispositional orientations, such that when triggered by relevant stimuli -media or otherwise, they may spur unkind and even malicious behaviours. As suggested by this study, these behaviours may include voting for a politician that will work to reduce immigration rates and expedite government efforts to deport undocumented immigrants.

Furthermore, and again in the specific context of contemporary Britain, individuals with a right-wing ideological persuasion and/or lower levels of formal education could be especially susceptible to the socio-cognitive development theorized above. This is partly because conservatives regularly read CTs (Roberts, 2017), and tend to view immigration as an important issue (Blinder & Richards, 2018). Additionally, conservatives in general, tend to be

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influenced by and responsive to threat-related information that communicates physical threats (Crawford, 2017). With regards to lower formally educated individuals, they have been found to be less critical towards media that attempt to evoke cultural threats, and to have less accurate information about immigrants than more educated citizens (Matthes & Marquart, 2013). Matthes and Sshmuck (2017) further argue that compared to higher educated individuals, lower educated ones are less inclined to correct prejudicial thoughts, and have less cognitive resources and motivation to counter-argue negative framings of immigrants. When all these factors are considered together, it can be conjectured that during encounters with immigrant-criminality news framings, conservatives and lower-formally educated individuals are likelier than their demographic counterparts to rely on heuristic cues and gut feelings to process the presented information. The end result being the acceptance and incorporation of the communicator prescribed judgements and interpretations into their existing schema networks, which can orient future related judgements such as electoral-policy decisions. Although neither emotions nor mode of cognitive processing were measured by this study, the results are highly consistent with a growing body of experimental research (e.g., Igartua & Cheng, 2009; Iguarta et al., 2012; Kühne et al., 2015; Sheets et al., 2015). Nonetheless, the processes outlined should be tested in future research.

Lastly, this study's results also need to be verified with additional research, so firm conclusions should not be drawn from them. This important qualification notwithstanding, two other key contextual factors should be taken into consideration. First, even as if this study suggests, CT immigration coverage predominantly influences the attitudes of conservatives and low-formally educated individuals, these groups, in tandem, make up at least half of the British public. Second, newspapers, and CTs especially, play a uniquely central role in influencing British politics (Fenton, 2018; Reeves & Vries, 2016). Hence, if this study's findings and theorizations hold for the population, then they raise serious concerns over the impact of contemporary right-wing media on Britain's democratic functioning. More specifically, it has been long understood that a healthy democracy is contingent upon a well-informed and rational citizenry that is conditioned to intelligently, sensibly, and objectively deliberate and vote on political issues. The press is supposed to facilitate these deliberative processes by providing citizens with objective, unbiased, and reliable information. If instead, mainstream and influential news outlets bombard citizens with biased, misleading, and sensationalistic information designed to bypass logical reasoning by arousing fear of and anger towards vulnerable minority groups and compassionate policies; then democratic participation can be compromised and result in large-scale detrimental outcomes. The most pointed and recent example of this being the 2016 majority decision to exit the EU. This leave vote was openly advocated for by CTs based largely on the supposed looming threat and harms posed by

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ostensibly uncontrollable immigration; and has and will continue to have deleterious macroeconomic consequences for years to come. Notably, leave voters were on average socially conservative and less educated than remain voters (Blinder & Richards, 2018). The aftermath of this vote has also seen scores of violent racist attacks on and increasing rates of public hostility towards immigrants (Rzepnikowska, 2018). Of course, the right-wing press cannot and should not be held solely responsible for these outcomes, as these are the result of a myriad of complex sociopolitical, demographic, and psychographic factors. Nevertheless, CTs may certainly have played a meaningful role in spurring these happenings by providing ready justifications for the dehumanization and harsh treatment of migrants and refugees.

## 7 LIMITATIONS

This study has strengths in its between-subject design with a control condition, robust covariate controls, and non-student sample. The realistic digital news simulations and non-laboratory setting also combined to enhance this study's ecological validity, given that the CTs examined in this research reach over 20 million more readers through their websites than through their print circulation (Tobbit, 2018). However, as this study entailed a one-shot experiment on a hot-topic political subject matter, its results are susceptible to a social desirability response bias, and based on a limited snapshot of Britons' attitudes towards immigrants. Also, even though the reading tasks for the treatment condition were masked as attention-memory tests, and despite the use of multiple distractor items in the questionnaire, participants were made to directly attend to, if only briefly, a somewhat large number of articles about immigration. This means that some participants could have realized the purpose of the study and corrected their biases, or used the primed immigrant concept more deliberately when answering the attitudinal outcome measures. Any of these factors may have skewed or otherwise impacted the results. Therefore, future research utilizing a longitudinal or repeated measures design, along with larger and stratified representative samples, subliminal and/or dose-dependent treatment conditions, and more in-depth political ideological and implicit attitudinal outcome measures is needed to confirm if the findings from this research are generalizable to the UK population.



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## Appendix

*Example of articles shown to the treatment group.*

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## Kurdish illegal immigrant 'claimed more than £32,000 in benefits after entering UK in back of a truck'

- Kerim Koroglu pocketed cash for over six years after sneaking into UK in 2002
- Koroglu, an Alawi Kurd, swindled £32,549 from Hackney council in east London
- He denies obtaining property by deception and possession of a false identity

By [ALEX MATTHEWS FOR MAILONLINE](#)  
**PUBLISHED:** 17:35, 1 August 2017 | **UPDATED:** 15:21, 11 January 2018

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A Kurdish illegal **immigrant** is accused of swindling £32,000 in benefits after being smuggled into Britain in the back of a truck.

Kerim Koroglu, 49, pocketed handouts he was not entitled to collect for more than six years after he sneaked into the country in August 2002, jurors heard.

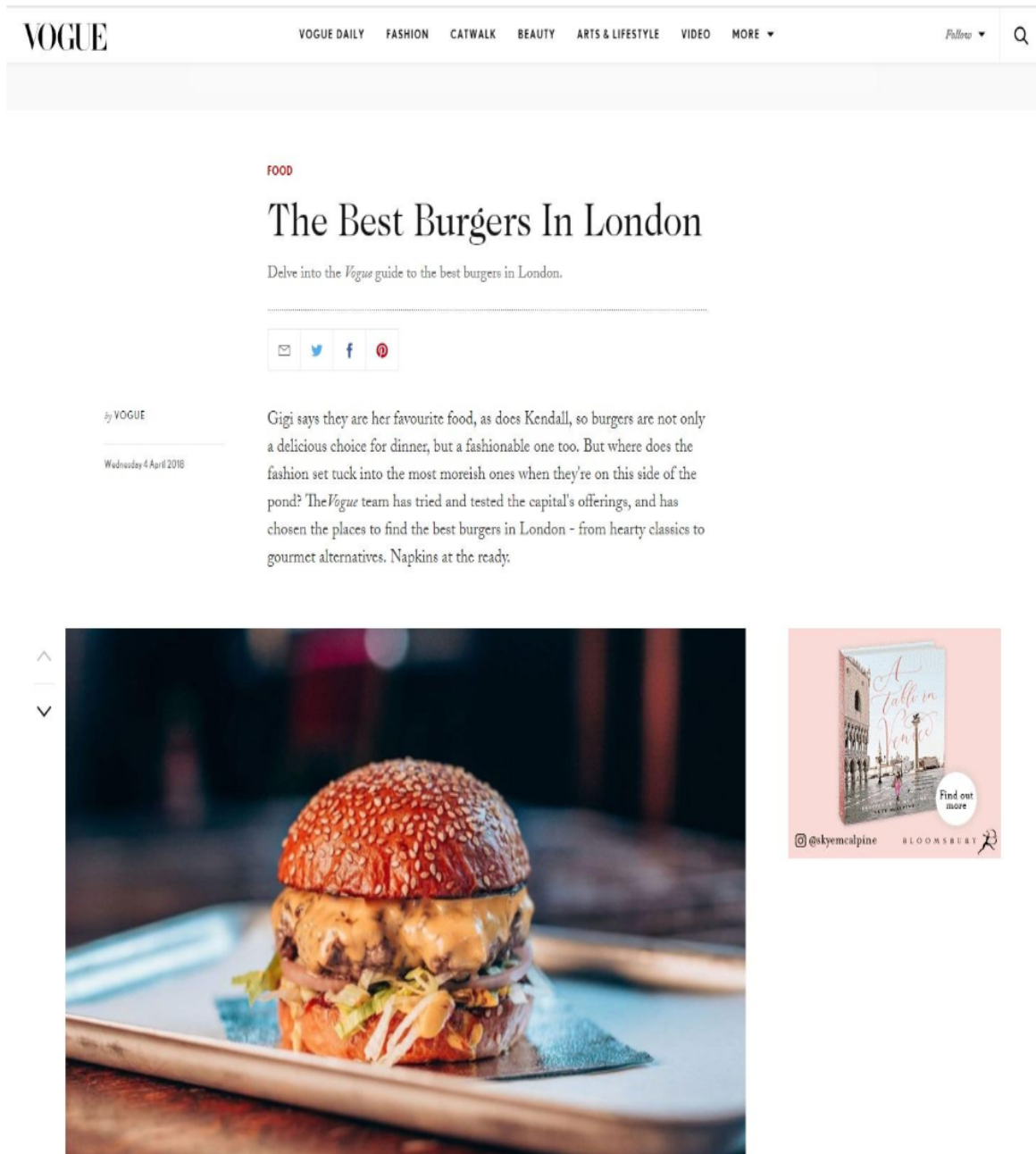


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*Example of articles shown to the control group.*





## Media@LSE Working Paper Series

Media@LSE Working Paper Series will:

- Present high quality research and writing (including research in-progress) to a wide audience of academics, policy-makers and commercial/media organisations.
- Set the agenda in the broad field of media and communication studies.
- Stimulate and inform debate and policy. All papers will be published electronically as PDF files, subject to review and approval by the Editors and will be given an ISSN.

An advantage of the series is a quick turnaround between submission and publication. Authors retain copyright, and publication here does not preclude the subsequent development of the paper for publication elsewhere.

The Editor of the series is Bart Cammaerts. The Deputy Editor is Nick Anstead. The editorial board is made up of other LSE academics and friends of Media@LSE with a wide range of interests in information and communication technologies, the media and communications from a variety of disciplinary perspectives (including economics, geography, law, politics, sociology, politics and information systems, cultural, gender and development studies).

### Notes for contributors:

Contributors are encouraged to submit papers that address the social, political, economic and cultural context of the media and communication, including their forms, institutions, audiences and experiences, and their global, national, regional and local development. Papers addressing any of the themes mentioned below are welcome, but other themes related to media and communication are also acceptable:

Communication and Difference

Mediation and Resistance

Globalisation and Comparative Studies

Media and Identity

Innovation, Governance and Policy

Media and New Media Literacies

Democracy, Politics and Journalism Ethics

The Cultural Economy

Contributions are welcomed from academics and PhD students. In the Autumn Term we also invite selected Master's students from the preceding year to submit their dissertations which will be hosted in a separate part of this site as 'dissertations' rather than as Working Papers. Contributors should bear in mind when they are preparing their paper that it will be read online.

### Papers should conform to the following format:

6,000-10,000 words (excluding bibliography, including footnotes)

150-200 word abstract

Headings and sub-headings are encouraged

The Harvard system of referencing should be used

Papers should be prepared as a Word file

Graphs, pictures and tables should be included as appropriate in the same file as the paper

The paper should be sent by email to Bart Cammaerts ([b.cammaerts@lse.ac.uk](mailto:b.cammaerts@lse.ac.uk)), the editor of the Media@LSE Working Paper Series

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