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The role of labelling bias in the portrayals of acts of 'terrorism': representations of Muslims

versus non-Muslims.

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**Abstract**

Several high-profile negative events involving Muslim perpetrators have recently been covered by the media. We investigated whether the same negative actions are more likely to be labeled 'terrorism' when they are committed by Muslims than when they are committed by White non-Muslims. In Experiment 1 ($n = 60$), using a real article about a Muslim perpetrator and a modified version about a non-Muslim perpetrator, we found that participants were more likely to identify a crime as terrorism when it was perpetrated by a Muslim. The label 'terrorism' also mediated the effect of Muslim identity on negative judgments of the behavior. In Experiment 2 ($n = 60$) we replicated the results of Experiment 1 and clarified that the effects persisted when we used a real article about a non-Muslim perpetrator and a modified version about a Muslim perpetrator. We discuss implications for cross-group communication and representations of Muslims in the media.

## Introduction

Recently, several stories in the news media have drawn a connection between Muslims and terrorism[1–4]. This negative media attention is associated with a variety of adverse outcomes including increased prejudice against Muslims in general[5,6]. However, another concern is the potential identity-based bias in the usage of the label 'terrorism'. Specifically, some argue that Muslim perpetrators are more likely to be labeled terrorists than White, non-Muslim perpetrators, even if their behaviors are not meaningfully different[7,8]. In two experiments this research investigates this potential labeling bias and compares two possible explanations for its occurrence.

### Muslims and Mass Killings in the Media

Several recent, high-profile mass killing events involving Muslims as perpetrators have received considerable attention in the Western media. This includes, but is not limited to, a 17-hour hostage situation in Sydney, Australia in which 2 hostages died[1], the killing of 12 Charlie Hedbo employees in Paris in January, 2015[2], the killing of a further 130 people in central Paris and near the Stade de France in November, 2015[4], the killing of 147 people at a University in Garissa, Kenya in April 2015[9], and the continued dangerous and destructive rise of the so called 'Islamic State' in Palmyra, Syria [3].

These media portrayals have the potential to increase prejudice against Muslims as a group, despite Muslims' extremely limited involvement in and support for mass killings [5,6,10]. For example, one study found that a mere 12 minutes of exposure to terrorism-themed news sufficed to increase prejudice against Arabs in general[11]. Beyond these negative effects, however, some have argued that reports about mass killings are themselves biased: specifically that the label 'terrorism' is more readily applied to killings perpetrated by Muslims than those perpetrated by non-Muslims.

Terrorism is difficult to define; Schmid and Jongman list 109 distinct definitions of terrorism[12]. However, most of these definitions offer 4 identifying features: the use of force or violence; targeting non-combatants; attempts to influence an audience beyond or larger than the victims themselves; and using violence as a means to an end. In the United States a large and growing number of mass shootings occur each year. As of October 1st, 2015, there had been 294 mass shootings in that year alone, several of which fit all 4 criteria[13]. However, when these acts are carried out by White non-Muslims, they tend not to be referred to as terrorism.

A recent, noteworthy example is that of Robert Lewis Dear, a White, conservative Christian who attacked a Planned Parenthood, killing 3 people and injuring 9 others, for apparently political reasons (i.e., an opposition to abortions). Former governor Michael Huckabee labeled the incident an act of domestic terrorism, but Senator and potential 2016 presidential candidate Rafeel Edward "Ted" Cruz did not, explicitly stating a belief that Christians do not commit acts of terrorism[7]. An article in the Huffington post makes this accusation of bias in labeling explicit[8]: "Why isn't "terrorism" applied? Because the killer is a White Christian. Only Brown Muslims can be terrorists."

**Terrorists because they are Bad or Bad because they are Terrorists?**

This current research investigated whether this double-standard in labeling occurs, as well as two possible explanations for it. According to Social Identity Theory, we have social, group-based identities as well as personal, individual identities, and we are motivated to see our own groups in a positive light[14]. Consequently, we tend to judge members of our own groups more positively than members of other groups. For example, one experiment found that White mock jurors judged Black defendants as guiltier, more violent and more aggressive than White defendants [15]. Similar experiments have also found that White Dutch children judged the same behavior more negatively if it was perpetrated by a Turkish-Dutch

child than if it was perpetrated by a White Dutch child[16], and that participants ascribed more negative motives to politicians' behaviors if these politicians did not agree with the participants' own political views [17]. Particularly relevant to this research, a cross-sectional study found that both Palestinian and Jewish Israelis were less likely to judge their ingroup's behavior as terrorism, and more likely to judge the others' behavior as terrorism [18]. If the bias in the use of the terrorism label is primarily based on social identity concerns, a more negative judgment of Muslims' behaviors should drive the use of the terrorism label.

However, it is possible that the process is driven more by stereotype activation rather than social identity processes. If one is aware of the stereotypes of a particular group, the mere presence of members of that group, or of characteristics attributed to the group, may activate related stereotypes in a way that need not be conscious or deliberate [19]. For example, a recent experiment found that participants showed higher anti-Arab attitudes after playing a terrorism themed game, despite the fact that there were no Arab characters in the video game itself [20]. If the bias in the use of the terrorism label is primarily based on social stereotype activation, the use of the terrorism label should precede, and may lead to, a more negative judgment of Muslims' behaviors.

Though prior research has investigated other forms of bias in labeling and judgments of behaviors, no empirical research to date has investigated whether the same actions are more likely to be labeled as terrorism if they are perpetrated by Muslims, nor investigated (i.e., compared) the two proposed explanations for this effect. We fill this gap in the literature in two studies described below.

### Current Research and Hypotheses

We expected that attacks carried out by Muslims (rather than by White non-Muslims) would be more likely to be labeled 'terrorism' and that this effect was due to the activation of the terrorist label rather than the increased negative judgments of the behaviors. Specifically,

in two experiments all participants read about the same attack, but half the participants were told that the perpetrator was Muslim while the other half were told that the perpetrator was a White non-Muslim. Despite the fact that the behaviors were same, we hypothesized that participants would judge the Muslim's behaviors more negatively and that this effect would be mediated by an increased tendency to label the behaviors 'terrorism'.

## Experiment 1

### Method

**Participants and design.** Sixty White, non-Muslim, British people (i.e., a non-student sample) living in London (29 males, 31 females, mean age = 22.47, $SD = 3.49$) were randomly assigned to read either (1) a newspaper article about a terrorist attack perpetrated by a Muslim (Muslim perpetrator condition), or (2) to read an almost identical article about a terrorist attack perpetrated by a White non-Muslim (non-Muslim perpetrator condition). This sample size was based on prior research that used a similar paradigm to investigate anti-Black prejudice[15]. All participants then indicated the extent to which they considered the perpetrator's behavior to be terrorism and reported their judgments of the perpetrators' behavior. After completing these measures, all participants were thanked and debriefed.

**Materials and Procedure**. We used a real newspaper article[21] as the stimulus. This 349-word article described a plot by a Muslim-American soldier, Jason Abdo, to use an explosive to kill other American soldiers. Participants in the *Muslim perpetrator* condition were given this article unedited. Participants in the *White non-Muslim perpetrator* condition were given an edited version of this article that was exactly the same, except that the necessary information was altered to change the perpetrator from a Muslim to a White non-Muslim. For example, the name "Naser Jason Abdo" was changed to "James Douglas Ross" and his religion was changed from "Muslim" to "Christian". Otherwise the article and the

actions described in it were exactly the same. All participants were given 5 minutes to read the stimulus material before completing the dependent measures.

To indicate whether they perceived the perpetrator's behaviors to be terrorism, participants responded on a 7-point Likert scale *(1 = Not at all, 7 = Very much)* to the single item: "Do you consider the behaviors described in this article to be terrorism?" To report their (negative) judgments of the behaviors described in the articles participants indicated their agreement on 7-point Likert scales *(1= Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree)* with the following three statements ($\alpha$ = .64): "I see the behaviors described in the article as negative behavior", "The behaviors in the article could be justified" (reversed), "The behaviors described in the article could have reasonable explanations" (reversed). Though scale reliability did not quite reach recommended cut-off values (i.e., $\alpha$ = .70), all items loaded well onto a single factor (.67 < $\lambda$ < .85) and item deletion did not improve scale reliability, so all three items were retained. To control for possible order effects the order in which participants completed the dependent measures was randomized. Correlations between variables were not high enough to suggest multi-collinearity (.16 < $r$ < .58), thus all variables were used as described. While completing these measures participants were not aware that there were multiple conditions, nor were they aware that this experiment aimed to compare responses to Muslim and White non-Muslim perpetrators. Only after completing the questionnaires were participants were debriefed in full.

**Results and Discussion**

Male and female participants were not unevenly distributed across conditions (Fisher's Exact Test, $p$ = .61), nor was there a significant difference in age between the Muslim and White non-Muslim conditions; $M$ = 23.27 vs. $M$ = 21.68, $t$ (58) = 1.81, $p$ = .08. We therefore did not include either age or gender as predictors in the subsequent analyses.

**Differences between conditions.** The means and standard deviations of both dependent variables are shown in Table 1; correlations between variables are shown in Table 2. As predicted, though the behaviors were exactly the same, participants were more likely to perceive the behaviors as terrorism if they were carried out by a Muslim perpetrator ($M =$ 5.87, $SD =$ 1.59) than if they were carried out by a White, non-Muslim perpetrator ($M =$ 3.80, $SD =$ 1.86); $t$ (58) = 4.62, $p <$ .001, $d =$ 1.2. However, Muslim identity did not directly lead to a more negative assessment of the perpetrator's behavior; ($M =$ 5.24, $SD =$ 1.12 vs. $M =$ 4.86, $SD =$ 1.15), $t$ (58) = 1.28, $p =$ .21, $d =$ .34.

**Mediation analyses.** We specifically predicted that the perception of the Muslim perpetrator's behavior as terrorism would mediate the relationship between ethnicity and negative judgment (rather than the negative judgments mediating the relationship between ethnicity and perceptions of terrorism). We tested these relationships using PROCESS Macros[22] (model 4 with 95% confidence intervals based on 1000 bias-corrected bootstrap tests; see Figure 1). As expected, we found that (Muslim) perpetrator ethnicity increased perceptions of the behaviors as terrorism ($b =$ 1.03, $p <$ .001), which in turn predicted negative judgments of the behavior ($b =$ .39, $p <$ .001). Perpetrator ethnicity did not directly increase negative judgments of behavior ($b =$ -.21, $p =$ .15). However, perpetrator ethnicity indirectly increased negative judgments indirectly via perceptions of the behavior as terrorism ($LLCI =$ .23, $ULCI =$ .64, point estimate = .41).

Furthermore, also as hypothesized, the alternative model was not supported by our data because perpetrator ethnicity did not directly increase negative judgments of the behavior ($b =$ .19, $p =$ .21). When testing that model, negative judgments of the behavior did predict increased perceptions of the behaviors as terrorism ($b =$ .86, $p <$ .001), and perpetrator ethnicity also directly increased perceptions of the behaviors as terrorism ($b =$ .87, $p <$ .001).

However, perpetrator ethnicity did not increase perceptions of terrorism indirectly via negative judgments of behavior (*LLCI* = -.06, *ULCI* = .45, point estimate = .17).

In sum, our results supported our hypotheses. Despite identical behaviors, Muslim perpetrators were more likely to be perceived as terrorists, which led to increased negative judgments of their behaviors. We were also able to rule out the alternative hypothesis, i.e., that Muslim behaviors are judged more harshly which leads to increased perceptions of their behaviors as terrorism.

## Experiment 2

In Experiment 2 we sought to rule out the possibility that the effects found in Experiment 1 were due to some unaccounted-for characteristic of the original article (compared to the modified article). In Experiment 1 we took great care to ensure that the 2 articles were identical, except for the information necessary to alter the ethnicity of the perpetrator. Nonetheless, it remains possible that the original article (which was in fact genuine) seemed more realistic or credible to the participants. Alternatively, the original article may have been received differently because participants may have remembered the events to which it referred. To rule out these explanations for our findings, Experiment 2 was a replication of Experiment 1, except that the article containing the White, non-Muslim perpetrator was the original, unedited article, while the article containing the Muslim perpetrator was the modified version of the article.

### Method

**Participants.** As in Experiment 1, sixty White, non-Muslim, British people (i.e., a non-student sample) living in London (20 males, 40 females, mean age = 21.20, *SD* = 3.48) were randomly assigned to read a newspaper article about an attack perpetrated by a White non-Muslim, or to read an almost identical article about an attack perpetrated by a Muslim. All participants then indicated the extent to which they considered the perpetrator's behavior

to be terrorism and reported their judgments of the perpetrators' behavior. After completing these measures, all participants were thanked and debriefed.

**Materials and procedure.** As in Experiment 1, all participants were given 5 minutes to read the stimulus material. We used a real newspaper article[23]. This 304-word article described the Oslo Bombings and Utoya Attack committed by Anders Breivik: a White, Christian Norwegian. Participants in the *White non-Muslim perpetrator* condition were given this article unedited. Participants in the *Muslim perpetrator* condition were given an edited version of this article that was exactly the same as the original, except that the necessary information had been altered to change the perpetrator from a non-Muslim to a Muslim. For example, the name "Anders Breivik" was changed to "Abu Abbas" and the description "blond, blue-eyed, right-wing Christian" was changed to "brown haired, brown-eyed, right-wing Muslim". Otherwise the article and the actions described in it were exactly the same.

After reading their assigned articles, participants completed the same measures used in Experiment 1: the single-item measure of perceptions of the behavior as terrorism, and the 3-item measure of negative judgment of the perpetrator's behaviors ($\alpha = .78$). As in the previous experiment, the order of presentation of the measures was randomized and participants were not aware that there were multiple conditions or that the experiment aimed to compare responses to non-Muslims and responses to Muslims. After completing the questionnaires participants were debriefed in full.

**Results and Discussion**

Male and female participants were not unevenly distributed across conditions (Fisher's Exact Test, $p = 1.00$), nor was there any difference in age between the non-Muslim and Muslim conditions; $M = 20.70$ vs. $M = 21.70$, $t(58) = .1.12$, $p = .27$. We therefore did not include either age or gender as predictors in the analyses that follow.

**Differences between conditions.** The means and standard deviations of both dependent variables are shown in Table 3 and correlations between variables are shown in Table 4. As predicted, despite the fact that the behaviors were exactly the same, participants were more likely to perceive the behaviors as terrorism if they were carried out by a Muslim perpetrator ($M = 5.87$, $SD = 1.55$) than if they were carried out by a White, non-Muslim perpetrator ($M = 4.77$, $SD = 2.22$); $t(58) = 2.22$, $p = .030$, $d = .58$. In this experiment participants also judged the behaviors more negatively when they were committed by a Muslim perpetrator ($M = 5.86$, $SD = 1.21$) than when they were committed by a White, non-Muslim perpetrator ($M = 5.03$, $SD = 1.68$); $t(58) = 2.17$, $p = .034$, $d = .58$.

**Mediation analyses.** Again, we specifically predicted that the perception of the Muslim perpetrator's behavior as terrorism would mediate the relationship between ethnicity and negative judgment. We tested these relationships using PROCESS Macros[22] (model 4 with 95% confidence intervals based on 1000 bias-corrected bootstrap tests; see Figure 2). As expected, we found that (Muslim) perpetrator ethnicity increased perceptions of the behaviors as terrorism ($b = .55$, $p = .03$), which in turn predicted negative judgments of the behavior ($b = .60$, $p < .0001$). When perceptions of the behavior as terrorism was taken into account, perpetrator ethnicity did not directly increase negative judgments of behavior ($b = .08$, $p = .52$). However, perpetrator ethnicity did increase negative judgments indirectly via perceptions of the behavior as terrorism ($LLCI = .04$, $ULCI = .70$, point estimate $= .33$).

In sum, the results of Experiment 2 also supported our hypotheses. Despite identical behaviors, Muslim perpetrators were more likely to be perceived as terrorists, which led to increased negative judgments of their behaviors. When the effect of the label 'terrorism' was taken into account, the perpetrator's Muslim identity only had an indirect effect on perceptions of the negativity of the behaviors.

## General Discussion

In the wake of numerous, unpredictable mass killings, negative emotional reactions are expected. However, it remains important to assess negative behaviors without bias, and to avoid racial, ethnic or religious prejudice in our perceptions of, or responses to, these negative events. In two experiments we found that White, non-Muslim participants perceived the same behaviors more negatively and were more likely to label these behaviors 'terrorism' if they were done by Muslims, rather than by White non-Muslims. We also found that the label, "terrorism", preceded the more negative judgments of the behavior, rather than the reverse. We discuss these findings in relation to study design, limitations, suggestions for future research, and implications for representations of Muslims in the media.

**Limitations and Possible Future Research**

This current research has a number of noteworthy strengths. As we used a genuinely experimental design, we can make causal conclusions about the relationships between Muslim identity, the use of the "terrorism" label, and negative perceptions of the behavior. Furthermore, we used real newspaper articles in both experiments, increasing the external validity of our findings. Also, much social-psychological research is criticized for the over-use of non-representative student samples [24,25]. Through the use of non-student participant samples, we further increased the generalizability of our findings.

Nonetheless, both experiments do have limitations. Self-presentation biases and possible demand characteristics are potential problems for many kinds of social psychological research. However, we took care to hide the true hypotheses of the experiments from the participants; they were unaware of the number and nature of the conditions in each experiment, and had no reason to suspect that comparisons were being made between judgments of Muslims and of non-Muslims. Furthermore, if participants were motivated to present themselves in a positive, egalitarian light, they should have judged the Muslim

perpetrators less negatively. This would make or pattern of results, in which the Muslim perpetrators were judged more negatively, still more significant.

Though we found evidence of bias against Muslims, we acknowledge that our study design may have conflated a number of possible identities. Though we never described any of the Muslim perpetrators racially, the use of names like Abu Abbas and Nasser Abdo may have suggested non-White perpetrators. As such, religious Muslim identity may have been conflated with ethnic identity making it unclear which was primarily responsible for our effects. We do not believe that this limits the practical implications of our findings; the real-world debate about the label of "terrorism" is often concerned with comparisons between perpetrators who are non-White and Muslim and those who are White and non-Muslim. Nonetheless, future research may wish to disentangle the effects of ethnicity and religion. Contrasting the labels applied to, for example, Caucasian Muslims compared to ethnically Middle-Eastern Christians might shed important light on the conditions under which the terrorist stereotype is activated and the strength of the perceived link between ethnic and religious identity.

**Implications**

The question of bias in the use of the label 'terrorism' has been publicly raised multiple times[7,8]. However, each mass killing event differs in many ways including the perceived motivations behind the attack, the methods used by the perpetrator, and the number of people killed or injured. Hence, without controlled experimentation, it was difficult to determine whether the religious identity of the perpetrator played a role in the use (or avoidance) of the label. By presenting participants with one of two identical stories that differed only in the identity of the perpetrator, these two experiments clearly showed that religious identity does play a significant role; despite identical behaviors, Muslims are more likely to be seen as terrorists and their behaviors are interpreted more negatively.

We also found that this bias in labeling precedes the more negative judgments of Muslims' behaviors, rather than being a result of it. The explanatory primacy of the label does not detract from the reality of the more negative judgments, which themselves are a form of bias against Muslims. Furthermore, this negativity is compounded with other biases, such as the media's tendency to under-represent minorities in positive roles and to over-represent minority groups as perpetrators of crimes[26]. Put together, these tendencies encourage a climate in which Muslims are represented in very narrow, largely negative ways, usually with reference to terrorism. Nonetheless, understanding the importance of stereotype activation in this case points to useful interventions that may reduce labeling bias. Certain strategies, such as chronic egalitarian goals [19], and counter-stereotypical imagery [27], have been shown to reduce stereotype activation. Furthermore, if one understands that stereotype activation has occurred, further steps can be taken to prevent that stereotype activation from being translated into action[28].

## Conclusions

It might be difficult to provide a clear-cut or objective solution to the problem of anti-Muslim labeling bias in descriptions of acts of violence. Since the attacks of September 11, 2001 in the United States, and the subsequent Global War on Terror (Sides & Gross, 2013), the term 'terrorism' has become an important part of the international vocabulary used to describe mass killings [7]. It might be difficult or impractical to abandon the term entirely. Also, as mentioned before, terrorism is difficult to define consistently, partially due to the political and subjective nature of the term [12]. Thus, it might also not be possible to provide unambiguous, unbiased guidelines for the usage of the term. Nonetheless, these current experiments reveal that anti-Muslim prejudice plays an important role in the current choice of vocabulary; the same behaviors are more likely to be called terrorism, and judged more negatively, when perpetrated by Muslims rather than White non-Muslims. Awareness of this

bias should encourage a certain amount of caution when using or avoiding the label "terrorism".

**Notes**

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*Table 1. Means and standard deviations of outcome variables according to condition in Experiment 1*

|  | Muslim perpetrator (original) | White non-Muslim perpetrator (modified) |
|---|---|---|
| Perception of behavior as terrorism | 5.87 (1.59) | 3.80 (1.86) |
| Negative judgment of behavior | 5.24 (1.12) | 4.86 (1.15) |

Notes: Standard deviations shown in parentheses.

*Table 2. Correlations between variables in Experiment 1*

|  | (1) | (2) | (3) |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Perpetrator ethnicity (0 = White, 1 = Muslim) | 1 | | |
| 2. Perception that the behavior is 'terrorism' | .52*** | 1 | |
| 3. Negative assessment of the behavior | .16 | .57*** | 1 |

Notes: (1) Pearson's *r* values shown. (2) * = $p < .05$, ** = $p < .01$, *** = $p < .001$

*Table 3. Means and standard deviations of outcome variables according to condition in*

*Experiment 2*

|  | Muslim perpetrator (modified) | White non-Muslim perpetrator (original) |
|---|---|---|
| Perception of behavior as terrorism | 5.87 (1.55) | 4.77 (2.22) |
| Negative judgment of behavior | 5.86 (1.21) | 5.03 (1.68) |

Notes: Standard deviations shown in parentheses.

*Table 4. Correlations between variables in Experiment 2*

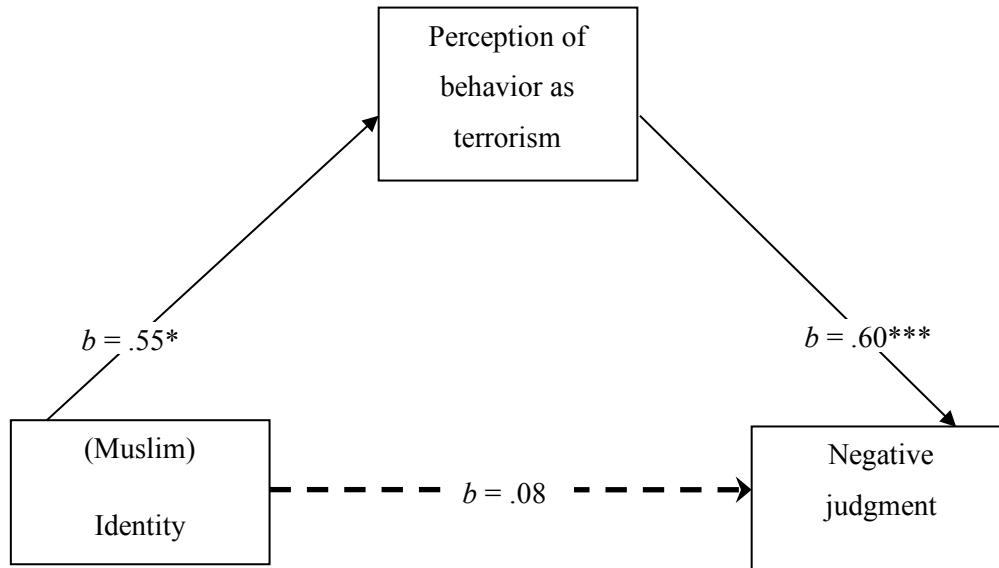|  | (1) | (2) | (3) |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| 1. Perpetrator ethnicity (0 = White, 1 = Muslim) | 1 | | |
| 2. Perception that the behavior is 'terrorism' | .28* | 1 | |
| 3. Negative assessment of the behavior | .27* | .80*** | 1 |

Notes: (1) Pearson's *r* values shown. (2) * = $p < .05$, ** = $p < .01$, *** = $p < .001$

*Figure 1. Mediation model showing the effect of perpetrators' Muslim identity on participants'*
*negative judgment of behaviors, mediated by perceptions of the behavior as terrorism (Experiment 1).*
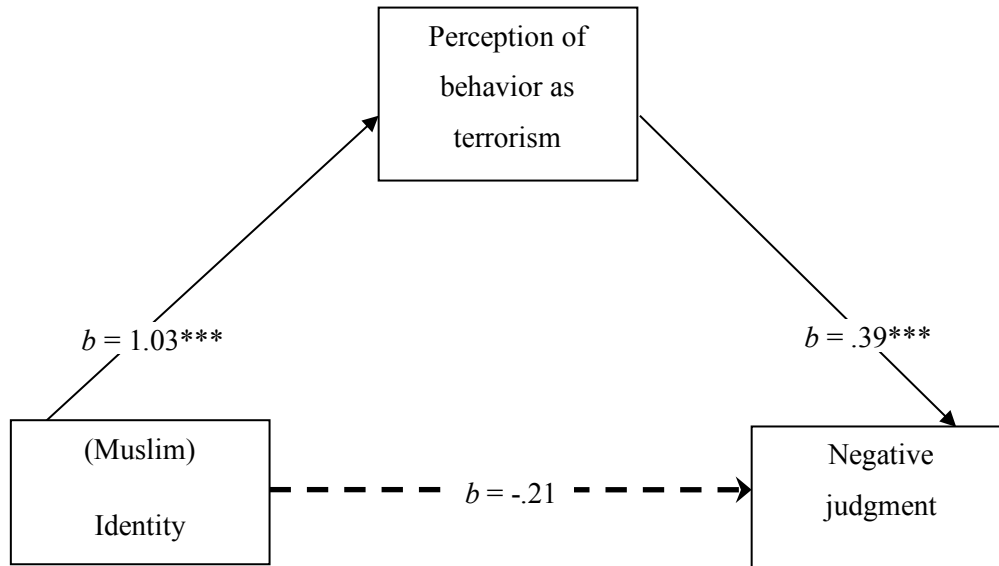


Note: * *p*<.05, ** *p* <.01, *** *p* <.001

*Figure 2. Mediation model showing the effect of perpetrators' Muslim identity on participants'*
*negative judgment of behaviors, mediated by perceptions of the behavior as terrorism (Experiment 2).*



Note: * *p*<.05, ** *p* <.01, *** *p* <.001