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Terrorism concern and persistence of negative attitudes towards Islam and Muslims

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Abstract

This study suggests that terrorism concerns can hinder the effect of prejudice reduction interventions based on education and outgroup knowledge. There is accordance in the literature that individuals who possess more knowledge about Muslim people and Islam are less likely to have anti-Muslim prejudice. We conducted secondary analyses of data from a representative sample of Australians ($N = 1,267$), and we found that terrorism concerns moderate the relationship between anti-Muslim prejudice and knowledge of Islam, wherein individuals with higher levels of terrorism concern have high anti-Muslim attitudes regardless of their levels of knowledge. In an experimental study manipulating terrorism concerns, a national sample of 502 Australians was randomly allocated to watch a news video about ISIS or a video portraying Muslims positively. Individuals who watched the ISIS video had significantly higher anti-Muslim attitudes and were significantly more likely to retain negatively framed information about Muslims than those who watched the positive video. Please refer to the Supplementary Material section to find this article's Community and Social Impact Statement.

KEYWORDS
anti-Muslim attitudes, Islam, prejudice, terrorism concern

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1 | INTRODUCTION

Knowledge about Islam and Muslims is a key component of interventions aimed at reducing anti-Muslim prejudice, such as school programs, training courses and media campaigns (Moritz et al., 2017). One of the main assumptions that underpin these social interventions is that increased knowledge about an outgroup is associated with lower levels of outgroup prejudice (Pettigrew and Tropp 2008; McBride 2015; Mak et al. 2017). In this article, we propose that heightened concerns about terrorism that are often incorrectly conflated with Islam might hinder the effectiveness of interventions aimed at reducing anti-Muslim prejudice that is based on knowledge of Muslims and Islam. Previous research found evidence that negative emotions such as anxiety, fear and anger, which are triggered by the perceived threat of terrorism, can affect knowledge acquisition and bolster motivated reasoning (Eysenck 1992; Lerner and Tiedens 2006; Huddy et al. 2007). Does this mean that terrorism concern (and associated negative emotions) can affect knowledge acquisition about Islam and Muslims, and consequently, anti-Muslim prejudice? And if so, how?

In this article, we explored the effects of terrorism concerns on the relationships between knowledge of Islam and Muslims and anti-Muslim prejudice in the Australian context. Australia provides an optimal case study for this research for several reasons. First, the average level of concerns associated with terrorism is high and has been shown to be at similar levels to that reported in the US and the UK (Martin and Sussman 2015; Oliphant 2016; Poushter 2017). This is surprising because Australia has not experienced the same level of terrorist incidents as the other two countries. Second, Australian citizens display disproportionately more negative attitudes towards Muslims than towards other ethnic and religious minority groups (Markus, 2017). Third, the issues of terrorism and negative attitudes towards Muslims are conflated with right-wing ideologies and political leaders emphasizing that Muslim immigrants are associated with increased terrorism threats (Akbarzadeh 2016). Fourth, there is a key public knowledge gap about Islam, documented by both quantitative and qualitative research (Mansouri and Vergani 2018). For these reasons, studying the Australian case will offer insights into the fundamental processes underpinning the relationships between (a) attitudes towards Muslims, (b) terrorism concerns and (c) knowledge of Islam. This analysis will offer a conceptual template for comparative studies in different contexts, such as North America and Europe.

2 | TERRORISM CONCERNS, ANTI-MUSLIM PREJUDICE AND KNOWLEDGE OF ISLAM

The conflation in public discourse between Islam and terrorism has been the focus of scholarly research in the fields of sociology, politics and social psychology (Modood, Triandafyllidou and Zapata-Barrero 2006; Ogan et al. 2014; Gilks 2020). Overall, other similar studies like this show that after the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the so-called "War On Terror", media and political leaders in Western countries have increasingly sought to associate Islam with terrorism in a highly mediatized public discourse (Weng and Mansouri 2021; Vertigans 2010). Numerous studies have found a consistent link between terrorism concerns and negative attitudes towards Muslims. This problematic linking is reported in Europe, Australia and the United States, where people are more anxious and worried about terrorism exhibiting more negative attitudes towards Muslims (Huddy et al. 2005; Skitka et al. 2006; Uenal 2016; Vergani 2018).

Internationally, researchers, policy-makers and practitioners have been looking for solutions to mitigate anti-Muslim prejudice and have identified knowledge of Muslims and Islam as a key factor that can reduce anti-Muslim prejudice (Moritz et al. 2017). More generally, previous research has found evidence that outgroup knowledge is associated with positive attitudes towards that particular outgroup (Pettigrew and Tropp 2008; Hooghe et al. 2008; Ülger et al. 2018). Outgroup knowledge is not necessarily associated with formal education: for example, people with high levels of formal education can have low knowledge of an outgroup because they have never been taught about the outgroup or have never been exposed to the outgroup community (Mansouri and Vergani 2018). Research has

found that the association between formal education and positive racial attitudes is not as strong as commonly assumed, and usually unobserved characteristics of individuals and their families play a confounding role in the association between education and racial attitudes (Wodtke, 2019). Therefore, in this article, we specifically focus on outgroup factual knowledge and its relationships with terrorism concerns and negative anti-Muslim attitudes.

Terrorism concerns are associated with additionally simplified political reasoning and assessments based on stereotypes rather than more rational and factual reasoning (Holman et al. 2016). They are also associated with negative emotions such as anxiety, fear and anger (Freyd, 2002; Huddy et al. 2005; Iyer et al. 2015). A negative effect of an outgroup is a strong predictor of prejudice (Stephan and Stephan 1985), and it can enhance selective attention to negative information about such an outgroup (Schemer 2012). Anxiety can boost the salience of negative thoughts (MacLeod et al. 1991), bolster defensively motivated reasoning (Eysenck 1992; Lerner and Tiedens 2006; Huddy et al. 2007), trigger searches for threatening information (Gadarian and Albertson 2014), and produce more limited and selective processing of information that heightens the sensitivity to threatening information (Lichtenstein et al. 1978).

Multiple research studies have reported identical findings based on the effects of traumatic events that can trigger anxiety and fear (such as floods and earthquakes), which reported that exposure to these events is associated with limited use of relevant and objective information to estimate the subjectively perceived level of risk (Tyler 1984). Mishra and Suar (2012) and Notebaert et al. (2016) found that there is a negative association between anxiety and disaster preparedness, which might result from anxiety-associated selective attention bias towards threat-relevant information. Individuals who are more exposed to risk (regardless of the source of the risk, which can be terrorism or a natural disaster) tend to use direct and indirect (especially from friends and relatives) experiences as the main predictors of risk estimation, instead of more objective information such as official statistics and risk assessments (Tyler 1984; Arian and Gordon 1993). Anxiety is associated with an attentional bias, which can exacerbate the detrimental effects of anxiety on behavioural preparedness (Mishra and Suar 2012; Notebaert et al. 2016).

Overall, this research suggests that high levels of terrorism concern might override the effect of knowledge on prejudice because of the quality of the knowledge retained by concerned individuals. In simpler words, we do not expect that individuals with greater terrorism concerns would retain less quantity of factual information about the source concern because previous research suggests that terrorism concerns can boost information seeking about the focus of concern in an attempt to lessen concern and regulate anxiety (Brader and Marcus 2013; Albertson and Gadarian 2015; Gross and Thompson 2009). Rather, we expect that terrorism concern would affect the quality of the knowledge retained because it bolsters motivated reasoning and makes concerned people retain more information that captures and reinforces priori-held negative characteristics of a threatening outgroup compared to people who are less concerned.

3 | HYPOTHESES

Taken together, the evidence presented in the previous section suggests that terrorism concerns might affect the relationship between anti-Muslim prejudice and knowledge of Islam and Muslims because it would result in concerned people prioritizing negatively framed knowledge about Muslims, which would, in turn, lead to a spiraling effect of increased anti-Muslim prejudice. We, therefore, hypothesize that *individuals with higher levels of terrorism concern will display higher levels of anti-Muslim prejudice, independent of their levels of factual knowledge of Islam and Muslims* (Hypothesis 1). In other words, we expect terrorism concerns to moderate the effects of knowledge of Islam on anti-Muslim prejudice, with the positive effect of knowledge on prejudice decreasing with the increasing levels of terrorism concerns.

> **Hypothesis 1.** Individuals with higher levels of terrorism concern will display higher levels of anti-Muslim prejudice, independent of their levels of factual knowledge of Islam and Muslims.

Testing this hypothesis will provide an important contribution to theory (and practice) about prejudice-reduction initiatives based on education and knowledge (Moritz et al. 2017). It will also underline the influence of the broader socio-political context on the success of these initiatives. However, testing this hypothesis alone would not clarify the causal path between terrorism concern, knowledge of Islam and Muslims, and anti-Muslim prejudice and would not explain how terrorism concern affects the relationship between outgroup knowledge and outgroup prejudice.

Research evidence suggests that anxiety can boost the selective processing of information and the retention of threat-sensitive information (Lichtenstein et al. 1978), motivated reasoning (Eysenck 1992; Lerner and Tiedens 2006; Huddy et al. 2007), and the use of selective and biased information to assess risks (Tyler 1984; Arian and Gordon 1993). Therefore, our second hypothesis is that *boosting terrorism concern will increase the amount of negatively framed information about Muslims and Islam retained by individuals, consequently boosting anti-Muslim prejudice* (Hypothesis 2). Testing this hypothesis will advance theoretical knowledge about the effects of terrorism on information-seeking. Albertson and Gadarian (2015) found that anxiety can boost the pursuit of knowledge about the focus of concern (for example, an outgroup), with the individuals anxious about politics becoming more politically aware and engaged. Valentino et al. (2009) suggest that under conditions of political anxiety, people can increase attentiveness and use political information more efficiently. Brader and Marcus (2013) found that anxiety can promote political attention and information seeking. In this article, we aim to advance knowledge in this field by focusing on the content of the information retained, and we propose that terrorism concerns increase the retention of negatively framed information about Islam and Muslims and therefore lead to anti-Muslim prejudice.

> **Hypothesis 2.** Boosting terrorism concern will increase the amount of negatively framed information about Muslims and Islam retained by individuals, consequently boosting anti-Muslim prejudice.

4 | STUDY 1

This is a secondary analysis of data collected as part of the study conducted by the 2016 Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (AuSSA), where we tested Hypothesis 1. Using the same dataset, previous research investigated the relationships between anti-Muslim prejudice and self-reported and factual knowledge of Islam and Muslims (Mansouri and Vergani 2018), but no study to date delved into the relationships between anti-Muslim prejudice, knowledge of Islam and terrorism concerns. About 1,267 questionnaires were administered through AuSSA surveys in four waves between May 2016 and May 2017. The respondents were selected randomly from the Australian electoral roll (voting is compulsory in Australia), of which 95% were citizens aged 18 years or over. The response rate was approximately 26%. The demographic characteristics of the sample are not dissimilar from the characteristics of the Australian population at large. The geographical distribution of the sample included 32% from New South Wales, 26.2% from Victoria, 17.4% from Queensland, 9.4% from Western Australia, 9.4% from South Australia, 2.9% from Tasmania, 1.8% from the Australian Capital Territory, and 0.6% from the Northern Territory. The average age of the sample was 55.20 (SD = 16), 47.8% of respondents were females ($N = 606$), and 69.2% were Australian-born. The ideological distribution of the sample was also representative in nature, with 18.9% aligning with the Australian Labor Party, 26.8% with the Liberal Party of Australia, 7.4% with the Greens, 3.3% with the National party and 37% declaring no political affiliation. The religious affiliation of the sample was mostly Christian (21.6% Catholic, 15.9% Anglican, 16.4% other Christians including Methodists, Pentecostals, Orthodox and unspecified other denominations), and few were not religious (36.6% declared no religion). Other religions were only marginally represented in this sample. Only 8 people in this sample were identified as Muslims. As for education, the survey asked "how many full years of schooling or education have you had? (including primary, secondary, university and vocational training, and excluding repeated years)". On average, participants depicted to have 14 years of education (SD = 4.07, median = 14, mode = 10).

4.1 | Variable description

4.1.1 | Terrorism concerns

To measure terrorism concerns, the survey asked: "How concerned would you be personally about your friend or a relative becoming the victim of a terrorist attack in Australia in the near future?" To capture the fear for oneself as well as for those who are close to participants, friends and relatives were included in the questionnaire because previous research shows that the loss of a significant other is a powerful source of concern. This item was adapted from measures of perceived threat used by Huddy et al. (2005). Respondents were asked to answer questions using a five-point scale, where 1 stood reflected "not at all concerned", 2 "slightly concerned", 3 "moderately concerned", 4 "concerned", 5 "very concerned".

4.1.2 | Anti-Muslim attitudes

The survey measured attitudes towards Muslims by eliciting the level of agreement with four statements on a five-point scale from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree". The statements were: "Practicing Muslims do not fit Australian society", "Practicing Muslims pose a threat to Australian society", "Practicing Muslims should be searched more thoroughly than others at airports and stations", "Counter-terrorism policies in Australia should focus exclusively on practising Muslims". The items loaded on a single factor with eigenvalue 3.1 explain 78.3% of the variance in the model. The items were combined for the analyses on a new scale ranging from 1 to 5 ($\alpha = 0.91$). The statements were used in previous research to capture anti-Muslim attitudes (Mansouri and Vergani, 2018).

4.1.3 | Factual knowledge of Islam

To measure respondents' factual knowledge of Islam, the survey asked five factual, multiple-choice questions about Islam used in previous research (Mansouri and Vergani, 2018). The questions were: "What is the main religious text for Muslims, like the Bible, which is for Christians?", "What does the word Ramadan indicate?", "Is Jesus a revered Prophet in Islam?", "Is Islam an Abrahamic religion as are Judaism and Christianity?", "Are the majority of Muslims Shia, Sufi or Sunni?" The participants were given three options for each question from which they were required to select an answer, wherein only one was correct. We created an index of knowledge about Islam and Muslims using a conventional scoring system that attributed 1 point to each correct answer and 0 to incorrect and "do not knows" (Luskin 2002; Luskin and Bullock 2011). The construction of our measure of knowledge of Islam and Muslims followed pre-established methods in the political sciences to create instruments for measuring "political sophistication" (Zaller 1992; Bartels 1996; Reichert and Print, 2019).

4.2 | Analytical approach

We first presented descriptive statistics and conducted bivariate correlations to test whether knowledge of Islam, anti-Muslim attitudes, terrorism concerns, and the individual-level control variables (i.e., gender, age, education, political party identification) are associated or not. We assessed whether terrorism concern moderates the relationship between knowledge of Islam and anti-Muslim attitudes using a linear model for the dependent variable anti-Muslim attitude. The model included knowledge of Islam, terrorism concern (moderator) and their interaction; and variables like gender, age (years), education (years of education), and party identification to control for confounding. All variables (knowledge and terrorism concern) were standardized. We reported the Johnson–Neyman regions of

significance to identify the values of the moderator that impact the relationship between knowledge of Islam and anti-Muslim prejudice. The analysis was conducted using the PROCESS package in SPSS (Hayes 2013). As the model testing moderation is a simple interaction, the independent variable and the moderator were mathematically interchangeable. The results are discussed in relation to the interaction plots and the literature to understand what is more likely to be the primary variable of interest, that is, the independent variable, and what is the moderator.

4.3 | Results

Firstly, we examined descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations to test the associations between the main variables of our study and the controls. Table 1 reports the bivariate correlations between continuous variables. We used a t-test to compare levels of terrorism concern, anti-Muslim attitudes, and knowledge by gender (Table 2) and party identification (Table 3). Female respondents had significantly more terrorism concerns, less anti-Muslim prejudice and less factual knowledge of Islam than male respondents. Right-wing respondents had significantly more terrorism concerns and more anti-Muslim prejudice than participants who do not identify with right-wing parties (including participants who identify with left-wing parties and participants with no party affiliation). There are no significant differences in the levels of factual knowledge of Islam between right-wing and non-right-wing participants.

TABLE 1 Bivariate correlations and descriptive statistics (Mean and Standard Deviation)

	M (SD)	1	2	3	4
1. Terrorism concern	2.63 (1.33)*	1			
2. Anti-Muslim attitudes	2.50 (1.03)	0.41**	1		
3. Knowledge	2.23 (1.35)	−0.20**	−0.20**	1	
4. Age	55.23 (16.23)	0.11**	0.26**	−0.09**	1
5. Education (years)	14.04 (4.09)	−0.15**	−0.29**	0.26**	−0.29**

$*p < 0.05$; $**p < 0.01$.

TABLE 2 Differences between men and women in terrorism concerns, anti-Muslim prejudice and knowledge of Islam (t-tests)

	Men		Women		
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	p-value
Terrorism concerns	2.50	1.28	2.66	1.33	.037
Anti-Muslim prejudice	2.53	1.06	2.38	0.99	.012
Knowledge	2.53	1.37	2.20	1.25	<.001

TABLE 3 Differences between participants who identify and do not identify with right-wing parties in terrorism concerns, anti-Muslim prejudice and knowledge of Islam (t-tests)

	Right-wing		Non right-wing		
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	p-value
Terrorism concerns	2.77	1.28	2.48	1.30	<.001
Anti-Muslim prejudice	2.79	0.98	2.31	1.03	<.001
Knowledge	2.34	1.22	2.38	1.36	.660

In response to the question about terrorism concern, 22.5% of our sample declared to be "not at all concerned", 32.8% to be "slightly concerned", 14.1% to be "moderately concerned", 16.3% 'concerned' and 10.7% "very concerned", while 3.7% chose not to answer the question. The mean score of the composite measure capturing negative attitudes towards Muslims was 2.58 (SD = 1.31, lowest = 1, highest = 5). As for knowledge of Islam, 8.1% of the respondents did not provide any correct answers, 15.9% furnished only one correct answer, 33.4% gave two correct answers, 19.7% three correct answers, 13.4% four correct answers, 6.6% all five correct answers, and data was missing in case of 2.9% respondents.

We also tested whether terrorism concern moderates the relationship between knowledge of Islam and anti-Muslim attitudes fitting a linear model (Table 4). After controlling for potential confounders, there was a significant interaction between terrorism concerns (moderator) and knowledge of Islam (p = .007), indicating that the effect of knowledge on anti-Muslim attitudes depends on the level of terrorism concern. Figure 1 displays the Johnson–Neyman regions of significance representing the differing "effects" (slopes) of knowledge on anti-Muslim attitudes at different levels of terrorism concern (thick black line). A single SD change in knowledge produces changes in anti-Muslim attitudes divergently depending on levels of terrorism concern. The dashed lines represent the 95% confidence bands; however, when the zero line is included in the confidence bands, the effect (slope) of knowledge on anti-Muslim attitudes is not significant. The vertical line denotes the point at which the confidence bands cross the zero line and defines the boundary between

TABLE 4 The model testing whether terrorism concern moderates the relationship between knowledge of Islam and anti-Muslim attitudes

	Standardized coefficient	Standard error	t-value	p-value
Knowledge	−0.07	0.03	−2.63	p = .009
Terrorism concern	0.37	0.03	13.39	p < .001
Interaction terrorism concern * knowledge	0.07	0.03	2.71	p = .007
Gender (female = 1)	−0.09	0.023	−3.48	p < .001
Age	0.14	0.03	5.08	p < .001
Education	−0.18	0.03	−6.232	p < .001
Party identification (Liberal/National = 1)	0.14	0.03	5.13	p = .001
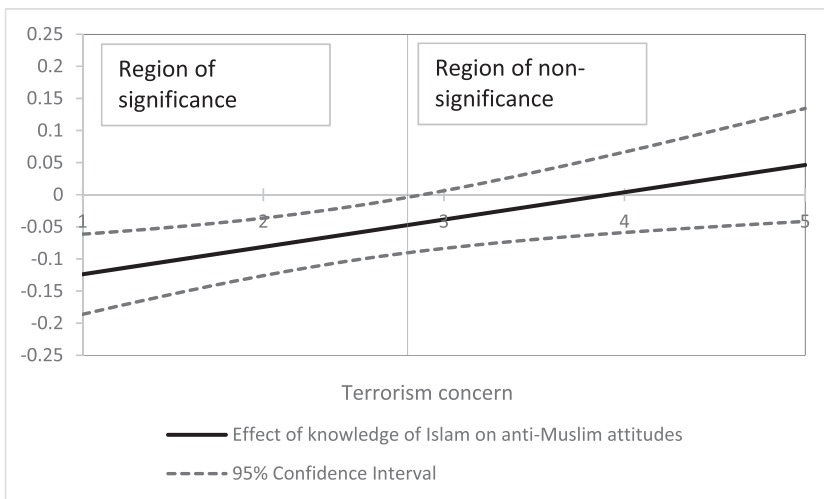
FIGURE 1 Moderation effect of terrorism concern on the effect of knowledge of Islam on anti-Muslin attitudes. Johnson–Neyman significance regions

the area where the slope of knowledge on anti-Muslim attitudes is not significantly different from zero versus the area where the slope is significantly different from zero. The plot indicates that knowledge has an effect on anti-Muslim attitudes only for people having levels of terrorism concern lower than 3 on the 5-point Likert scale (i.e., for values <3 of terrorism concern, the confidence region does not include zero). (Figure 1).

Our moderation analysis reveals that individuals with high levels of terrorism concern have a consistently high level of anti-Muslim attitudes, independent of their level of knowledge. In other words, more knowledge of Islam is associated with less anti-Muslim attitudes only among those with the a lower concern of terrorism. All four control variables were highly associated with anti-Muslim attitudes.

4.4 | Discussion

This study offers empirical support for Hypothesis 1, which provides the first important evidence about how the conflation of terrorism and Islam in the public discourse (Modood, Triandafyllidou and Zapata-Barrero, 2006) and the socio-political context of heightened terrorism concerns (Vergani 2018) hinder the effectiveness of prejudice-reduction initiatives based on education and knowledge of Islam and Muslims (Mansouri and Vergani 2018). However, the present study's findings do not reveal the mechanism that explains why terrorism concerns affect the relationship between knowledge and anti-Muslim prejudice and also do not provide any evidence about the causal path between the variables in the model. We assume that knowledge is the independent variable, anti-Muslim prejudice is the dependent variable and terrorism concern is the moderator, but our cross-sectional survey can neither confirm nor reject this assumption. To better inspect the dynamics of how terrorism concerns can affect the relationship between knowledge of Islam and anti-Muslim prejudice, we conducted a follow-up randomized controlled trial where we tested Hypothesis 2, which states that *boosting terrorism concern will increase the amount of negatively framed information about Muslims and Islam retained by individuals, and consequently anti-Muslim prejudice.*

5 | STUDY 2

A national sample of 502 Australians was randomly offered to watch either a news video about ISIS or a video portraying Muslims positively. The data collection was facilitated by the survey company Dynata. The participants were a national convenience sample of Australian citizens aged 18 years or over. The average age of the sample is 49.43 (SD = 17.9), 48.8% of respondents were females (N = 245), and 21.3% (N = 107) had a linguistic background other than English. The ideological distribution of the sample was representative, with 30.7% identifying with Labor, 31.3% with the Liberal party, 7.0% with the Greens, 4.8% with One Nation, 3.2% with the National party and 21.3% declaring no political affiliation. The religious affiliation of the sample was mostly Christian (51%) and not religious (40% declared no religion). Other religions were only marginally represented in this sample. As for education, we asked, "how many full years of schooling or education have you had? (including primary, secondary, university and vocational training, and excluding repeated years)". On average, participants had 14.8 years of education (SD = 4.32, median = 15, mode = 15).

5.1 | Design and procedures

We first asked all participants to read a text containing factual information about Muslims and Islam, including both positively and negatively framed factual information. The text is reported in full in Table 5. All participants were asked to read each of the four sections in the same order and to click to proceed to the next section.

After reading the text (Table 5), participants were randomly allocated to watch either a video where Muslim people were negatively framed (i.e., a four-minute news video about the resurgence of ISIS and the risk of a new wave of terrorist attacks) (N = 252) or a video where Muslim people were positively framed (i.e., a four-minute video about

TABLE 5 Positively and negatively framed factual information about the Sharia, the condemnation of terrorism by Muslim leaders, and the status of females in Islam

|	Positively framed information	Negatively framed information
Sharia	The overriding principle of sharia is justice. It is very broad and includes ordinary dimensions of daily life, for example how you behave towards other people and how you manage your family affairs.	However, extremist groups like Islamic state want to implement in a literal manner hardline aspects of Islamic law out of historical context, including the amputation of the hand for the thieves, and death by stoning for those who commit adultery or illicit sex.
Condemnation of terrorism by Muslim leaders	Many Muslim heads of state, politicians, organizational leaders and individuals regularly condemn acts of terrorism: For example, after the 2015 terrorist attacks in France, thousands of Muslim clerics worldwide passed a "fatwa" (i.e., Islamic legal opinion) against terrorist organizations such as ISIS, the Taliban and al-Qaeda, condemning them, and requested that these terrorist groups not be branded as "Muslim organizations."	At the same time, many Muslim citizens worldwide perceive that Muslim leaders do not sufficiently denounce acts of terrorism: For example, a 2011 pew survey found that about half of all U.S. Muslims think their own religious leaders have not done enough to speak out against terrorism and extremists.
Status of females in Islam	The Quran explicitly states that men and women are equal in the eyes of God and forbids female infanticide, instructs Muslims to educate daughters as well as sons, and insists that women have the right to refuse a prospective husband, gives women the right to divorce in certain cases.	However, interpretation of gender roles specified in the Quran varies between different countries and cultures and in the Islamic world, and there exist practices in certain countries that subjugate and oppress women (e.g., forced marriages, abductions, deprivation of education, restricted mobility).

the professional success of a female Muslim journalist in the United States) ($N = 250$). We posited that the video about ISIS – compared to the video about the Muslim journalist – would trigger terrorism concerns and associated negative emotions of anxiety, anger, worry and perceived threat (Vergani and Tacchi 2016). Previous research on the effect of positive and negative media news on outgroups suggested that this is an effective way to elicit positive versus negative emotions in an outgroup (Dixon and Azocar 2007; Dixon 2008; Schemer 2012). The video about the Muslim journalist is not a neutral control condition because it portrays a Muslim person within a positive frame. We did not use a neutral video about Islam (for example, a video about Mosque architecture) because we wanted our participants to think about Muslim people negatively framed (i.e., in the ISIS video) as opposed to positively framed (in the Muslim journalist's video).

After watching the videos, all participants were asked to complete a manipulation check to assess their levels of terrorism concerns and associated negative emotions, along with a knowledge quiz to assess their retention of the factual information presented in the text about Muslims and Islam and a measure of attitudes towards Muslims. Figure 2 visualizes the design of Study 2.

5.2 | Variable description

5.2.1 | Negative affect

To assess whether the video raised participants' concerns and associated negative emotions, we asked participants whether the video they watched made them feel "anxious, angry, threatened, concerned, worried". For each of the
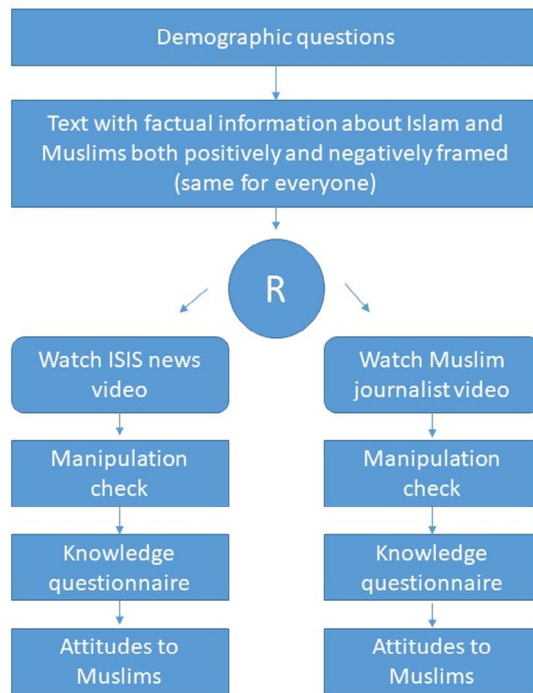
FIGURE 2 A visualization of the design of Study 2.

five terms, participants had to choose from a five-point scale, where 1 was "not at all", 2 "slightly", 3 "somewhat", 4 "moderately", 5 "extremely". The items loaded on a single factor with eigenvalue 4.19, explaining 83.85% of the variance in the model ($\alpha = .95$), and were merged in a single scale ranging from 1 to 5.

5.2.2 | Neutral knowledge

To measure respondents' retention of factual knowledge of Islam, we asked nine questions capturing information contained in the text displayed before the experimental manipulation. The first six questions were designed to capture neutral, factual information. Four questions were exactly the same as the ones used in Study 1, specifically: "What is the main religious text for Muslims, like the Bible is for Christians?", "What does the word Ramadan indicate?", "Is Jesus a revered Prophet in Islam?", "Is Islam an Abrahamic religion as are Judaism and Christianity?" Additionally, we asked: "How many Muslims are there in the world?" and "What is the percentage of Muslims in Australia?" The participants were given three options from which they were supposed to select an answer, where only one was correct. As in Study 1, we created an index of knowledge about Islam using a conventional scoring system that attributed 1 point to each correct answer and 0 to incorrect and "do not know" (Luskin 2002; Luskin and Bullock 2011) category of answers.

5.2.3 | Positively and negatively framed knowledge

The remaining three questions were designed to capture whether participants retained positively or negatively framed information about the Sharia, the condemnation of terrorism by Muslim leaders, and the status of women in

Islam. For example, we asked participants: "In your opinion, which of the following statements better describes the relationships between males and females in Islam? Please select one." The choices contained a factually correct and positively framed answer (e.g., "The Quran states that men and women are equal in the eyes of God"), a factually correct and negatively framed answer (e.g., "In the Islamic world, there exist practices that subjugate and oppress women"), and two factually incorrect answers ("The Quran states that males are more important than females" and "The Quran does not regulate relationships between males and females").

We created an index of negative/positive knowledge about Islam and Muslims using a scoring system that attributed 1 point to each positively correct answer, -1 to each negatively correct answer and 0 to incorrect and "do not know" answers. The composite "positively and negatively framed knowledge" index had seven levels, ranging from -3 to $+3$, with negative values indicating "negatively framed knowledge" and positive values "positively framed knowledge".

5.2.4 | Anti-Muslim attitudes

We measured attitudes towards Muslims by asking the level of agreement with four statements on a seven-point scale from "strongly disagree to strongly agree". The statements available were: "I would be reluctant to send my children to a school where the teacher wears a headscarf"; "I would be reluctant to move into an area where many Muslims were living"; "I would be reluctant to live near a Mosque"; "I would feel very concerned if one of my close relatives were to marry a person of Muslim faith". The items are an adaptation of the classic Bogardus social distance scale and have been used in previous research to measure discriminatory behavioural intentions against Muslims (Zick et al. 2010; Kauff et al. 2015). The items loaded on a single factor with eigenvalue 3.43, explaining 85.84% of the variance in the model. The items were combined for the analyses on a single scale ($\alpha = 0.95$).

Control variables
To control for known predictors of anti-Muslim prejudice and factual knowledge about Islam and Muslims, we asked three questions before presenting the text containing the factual information. As self-reported outgroup knowledge is a known predictor of factual outgroup knowledge (Mansouri and Vergani, 2018), we asked: "How much would you say you know about the Muslim religion and its practices?" (1- a great deal; 2- a lot; 3- a moderate amount; 4- a little; 5- none at all). As intergroup contact is also a known predictor of outgroup knowledge, we adapted two items from Barlow et al. (2009) and asked: "Please indicate how many Muslim Australians you have had two or more conversations with within the last 6 months? (Zero; one; between two and four; between five and ten; eleven or more)", and "Please indicate whether you have ever visited a Muslim-majority country? If yes, how many times? (Once, twice, three times, four times, five times or more)".

5.3 | Analytical approach

We first presented descriptive statistics of the main variables and the control variables. Secondly, present bivariate analyses, including partial correlations between the main variables (controlling for the experimental manipulation) as well as *t*-tests to explore the bivariate relationships between the categorical variables gender and political ideology, and the key measures of knowledge, attitudes to Muslims and intergroup contact. Thirdly, we compared known predictors of anti-Muslim prejudice (i.e., intergroup contact and conservative party affiliation) and outgroup knowledge (i.e., self-reported knowledge) between the two experimental conditions. To determine whether the exposure to the ISIS news video affected terrorism linked concerns, knowledge retention and attitudes towards Muslims, we conducted a *t*-test on the manipulation checks (i.e., negative affect) and dependent variables (i.e., positively and negatively framed knowledge and attitudes to Muslims). The analyses were conducted with SPSS version 26. Finally, we

conducted a causal mediation analysis under the counter-factual framework to assess whether part of the effect of the experimental treatment on anti-Muslim attitude (outcome) is mediated through "positively/negatively framed knowledge" (mediator) (VanderWeele 2015). In this approach, the Total Effect (TE) of the experimental treatment on the outcome is partitioned into a Natural Indirect Effect (NIE, mediated effect) and a Natural Direct Effect (NDE, via other mechanisms) and the percentage of the effect mediated by "positively/negatively framed knowledge" is estimated. We adjusted for potential confounders of the relation mediator-outcome, that is, age group (18–35, >35 years old), education (≤12, 13–15, ≥16 years of education), gender (male, female), having Muslim friends (yes, no), identifying with a right-wing party (yes, no) and self-reported knowledge of Islam (none at all, a little, a moderate amount, a lot, a great deal). The analysis was conducted using the procedure causalmed (SAS software, version 9.4). We reported the estimated TE, NIE, NDE, the percentage mediated and their 95% confidence intervals in our findings.

5.4 | Results

First, we examined descriptive statistics of the main variables of our study and the controls. For the six-item questionnaire measuring neutral, factual knowledge of Islam and Muslims, 5.6% of the respondents did not provide any correct answer, 7.4% gave only one correct answer, 12.2% two, 15.1% three, 19.3% four, 26.9% five and 13.5% had given six correct answers. The mean score of the composite measure capturing negative attitudes towards Muslims was 3.82 (SD = 1.88, lowest = 1, highest = 7). The average score (standard deviation) for items capturing anti-Muslim prejudice was as follows: "I would be reluctant to send my children to a school where the teacher wears a headscarf" (M = 3.47, SD = 1.97), "I would be reluctant to move into an area where many Muslims were living" (M = 3.88, SD = 2.04), "I would be reluctant to live near a Mosque" (M = 4.13, SD = 2.06), "I would feel very concerned if one of my close relatives were to marry a person of the Muslim faith" (M = 3.81, SD = 2.04).

As per the control variables, 5.4% of respondents declared that they know a great deal about Islam and its practices, 7.6% a lot, 23.1% a moderate amount, 44% a little, and 19.9% knew none at all. 53% of participants declared that they did not have any conversation with Muslim Australians in the last 6 months, 16.3% with one, 21.5% between two and four, 6.4% between five and ten, 2.8% with eleven or more. 61% of participants declared that they have never visited a Muslim-majority country, 14.1% once, 8.6% twice, 6.2% three times, 2.6% four times, 7% visited five or more times. Table 6 reports the bivariate correlations between the main variables in Study 2. Having higher levels of neutral knowledge of Islam had a significant but weak association with retaining more positively framed knowledge (r = 0.17), with having lower levels of anti-Muslim attitudes (r = −0.18) and with having lower self-reported knowledge (r = −0.10). Having higher anti-Muslim attitudes was associated with retaining more negatively framed knowledge (r = −0.19), with higher self-reported knowledge (r = −0.22) and with less contact with Australian Muslims (r = −0.36). Respondents who identified with a right-wing party on average retained more negatively framed knowledge about Muslims and Islam (F = 5.77, p = .02), had more negative attitudes towards Muslims (F = 28.83, p < .01), and reported to know more about Islam as a religion (F = 5.02, p = .03) than participants who did not identify with a right-wing party. Male participants on average had more neutral knowledge about Islam as a religion (F = 6.71, p = .01), more prejudice towards Muslims (F = 13.98, p < .01), more self-reported knowledge (F = 6.66, p = .01), and more contact with Australian Muslims (F = 4.40, p = .04) than female and non-binary participants.

Chi-square tests revealed no significant differences in the proportions of respondents in the two experimental conditions in relation to conservative party affiliation (p = .17), little or no self-reported knowledge of Islam (p = .44), contact with zero Australian Muslims (p = .32), and never having visited a Muslim country (p = .87). We had run a t-test to test whether the experimental treatment affected participants' concerns, worry, threat perception or emotions of anxiety and anger. As reported in Table 7, participants who watched the news video about ISIS were significantly more anxious, angry, threatened, concerned and worried than participants who watched the video about

TABLE 6 Partial bivariate correlations and descriptive statistics (Mean and Standard Deviation)

	M (SD)	1	2	3	4	6
1. Neutral knowledge	3.91 (1.54)*	1				
2. Positively and negatively framed knowledge	0.98 (1.50)	0.17**	1			
3. Anti-Muslim attitudes	3.82 (1.90)	−0.18**	−0.19**	1		
4. Self-reported knowledge	3.61 (1.03)	−0.10*	−0.06	0.22**	1	
5. How many Muslim people - conversation	1.94 (1.13)	−0.02	−0.03	−0.08	0.36**	1
6. How many Muslim countries - visited	2.00 (1.55)	0.12**	0.04	0.02	0.32**	0.30**

*p < 0.05; **p < 0.01.

TABLE 7 Participants' levels of concern, worry, threat perception, anxiety and anger in the two experimental conditions

The video made me feel …	Watched ISIS video	Watched video about Muslim journalist	p-value
Anxious	3.03 (1.29)	1.58 (1.08)	>.001
Angry	3.15 (1.33)	1.53 (.99)	>.001
Threatened	2.83 (1.37)	1.44 (1.04)	>.001
Concerned	3.58 (1.23)	1.78 (1.23)	>.001
Worried	3.30 (1.31)	1.63 (1.49)	>.001

Note: Means, standard deviations and p-values.

TABLE 8 Participants' levels of knowledge and attitudes to Muslims in the two experimental conditions

	Watched ISIS video	Watched video about Muslim journalist	F-value	p-value
Neutral knowledge	3.66 (1.75)	3.74 (1.67)	0.26	p = .613
Positively and negatively framed knowledge about Islam and Muslims	0.82 (1.52)	1.15 (1.47)	5.82	p = .016
Negative attitudes to Australian Muslims	4.13 (1.83)	3.51 (1.89)	13.52	p < .001

Note: Means, standard deviations and p-values.

the Muslim journalist. Subsequently, we ran a t-test to test whether the experimental manipulation affected participants' levels of knowledge and attitudes towards Australian Muslims. Table 8 reports the results of the statistical test. The results show that the experimental treatment had a significant effect on the "positively and negatively framed knowledge" index, with participants who watched the ISIS video remembering more negatively framed knowledge. Finally, we found that participants who watched the news video about ISIS were significantly more likely to display negative attitudes towards Australian Muslims.

Subsequently, we conducted a mediation analysis to assess whether part of the effect of the experimental treatment on anti-Muslim attitude was mediated through "positively/negatively framed knowledge". After adjusting for potential confounders (age, education, gender, having Muslim friends, identifying with a right-wing party and self-reported knowledge of Islam), "positively/negatively framed knowledge" mediated a small but significant proportion of the total effect of the experimental treatment on anti-Muslim attitude (Total effect: 0.777, 95%CI 0.460–1.093, p < .001; Natural Indirect effect [mediated effect]: 0.074, 95%CI 0.005–0.144, p = .037; Percentage mediated: 9.6%, 95%CI 0.4%–18.8%, p = .041).

5.5 | Discussion

This study offers empirical support for Hypothesis 2. This result is consistent with previous research on the effect of positive and negative media coverage of minorities and shows that news coverage can have a significant impact on people's perceptions of minorities and prejudice (Dixon & Azocar, 2007; Dixon, 2008; Schemer, 2012). Specifically, the participants who watched the video about ISIS had significantly higher levels of anxiety, anger, perceived threat, concern and worry than the participants who watched the video about the Muslim journalist. This result is consistent with previous experimental research showing that exposure to news coverage of terrorism significantly triggers negative emotions (see for example Iyer et al., 2015; Vergani and Tacchi, 2016).

Importantly, the participants who watched the video about ISIS retained more negatively framed factual knowledge about Muslims and Islam than the participants who watched the video about the Muslim journalist. A small but statistically significant part of the effect of terrorism concerns on anti-Muslim prejudice was mediated by "positively versus negatively framed knowledge" about Muslims and Islam. This is a novel finding that advances the theoretical knowledge on the effect of terrorism news coverage on information-seeking and prejudice by showing that terrorism concerns do not simply affect the quantity of knowledge about an outgroup, but rather its quality (that is, whether the knowledge retained is negatively or positively framed). The more negatively framed outgroup knowledge participants retained, the more outgroup prejudice they displayed.

Other variables contributed to explain the participants' knowledge levels and anti-Muslim attitudes. For example, and consistently with previous research (Huddy et al., 2005; Iyer et al., 2015; Vergani and Tacchi 2016), being male and identifying with a right-wing party were significant predictors of anti-Muslim prejudice. Conversely, having more contact with Muslims was associated with lower anti-Muslim prejudice (see Pettigrew and Tropp, 2008). Importantly, higher levels of self-reported knowledge about Islam were associated with lower factual knowledge about Islam and more anti-Muslim attitudes: this is consistent with previous research (Mansouri and Vergani 2018) and outlines the need to differentiate between self-reported and factual knowledge when conducting empirical research on the predictors of prejudice against minorities.

6 | GENERAL DISCUSSION

We first explored whether the relationship between knowledge of Islam and anti-Muslim prejudice was present only among people with lower terrorism concerns, but not among people with higher terrorism concerns, controlling key demographic and attitudinal characteristics. We tested and confirmed our hypothesis using a cross-sectional survey with a representative sample of Australians aged 18 years and over. Then, we conducted an experiment with a national convenience sample of Australians where we randomly assigned participants to either watch a video where Muslims are portrayed negatively (that is, a video about ISIS) or a video where Muslims are portrayed positively (that is, a story about a Muslim journalist in the US). Following exposure to the experimental manipulations, we assessed the amount of neutral, positively, and negatively framed knowledge about Muslims and Islam retained by the participants who watched the ISIS video compared to the participants who watched the Muslim journalist's video. Then, we measured attitudes towards Muslims. We found that watching a news video about ISIS triggered more negative affect, compared to watching a video portraying a Muslim person in a positive way. Furthermore, participants who watched the video about ISIS were significantly more likely to retain more negatively framed information about Islam and Muslims and to display more negative attitudes towards Australian Muslims. Part of the effect of terrorism concerns on anti-Muslim prejudice was significantly mediated by retaining negatively framed information about Muslims and Islam.

We propose that the effect of terrorism concern on knowledge retention is explained by an attentional bias towards the threat-relevant information, which pushed people who were more concerned to selectively focus on negatively framed information that confirmed their concerns about the threatening outgroup. This process is

consistent with previous research showing that terrorism concern and especially anxiety leads people to seek out threatening information (Gadarian and Albertson, 2014) and that anxiety boosts motivated reasoning (Eysenck 1992; Lerner and Tiedens 2006; Huddy et al. 2007). Similarly, our explanation is consistent with research showing that natural disaster-based anxiety is associated with an attentional bias and the use of selective and biased information to assess risks (Tyler 1984; Arian and Gordon 1993; Mishra and Suar 2012; Notebaert et al., 2016).

This article contributes to the literature on emotional and social attitudes towards outgroups by showing that terrorism concerns do not affect the quantity of factual knowledge retained by our respondents. Rather, terrorism concerns affect the quality of information retained, by making participants selectively focus on the factual information that frames the outgroup more negatively, thus contributing to reinforcing stereotypes and prejudice towards the outgroup. This work adds to the research on anti-Muslim prejudice and Islamophobia by revealing a key mechanism that underpins the formation of negative attitudes to Muslims via the media.

We believe that our findings have robust external validity because we identified a statistically significant association between the variables of interest in a representative sample of the Australian population (Study 1). Specifically, we found that terrorism concerns moderated the relationships between factual knowledge of Islam and Muslims and anti-Muslim prejudice. Subsequently, in Study 2 we conducted an experiment with a national sample of Australians, where participants were asked to watch a real news video in their homes as they would in their daily lives. In this experiment, we uncovered the causal path between the variables that we found to be associated in Study 1, and we examined the mechanism that explains the association. Therefore, we are confident that we captured a real phenomenon that exists outside the context of the study, in the real world.

The effects of the experimental condition on negative knowledge retention are statistically significant but small, possibly because our measures of positively and negatively framed knowledge were not able to capture enough variation in the respondents' levels of knowledge. This also limits our ability to detect an accurate mediation effect. We provide some evidence that mediation occurs, but it is not definitive, and hence further research should use an index of negative knowledge that includes more questions about a range of topics and difficulty levels. Our study looked solely at short-term knowledge acquisition; thus, an even more valid test of our hypotheses would involve the impact evaluation of a long-term intervention where individuals would be randomly assigned to attend an educational program about Islam over a longer period of time, and its effects on knowledge and prejudice would be tested.

It is possible that the implicit association between the negative actions of Muslims and Islam as a religion was stronger in the ISIS video than the implicit association between the positive actions of one single Muslim and Islam as a religion in the Muslim journalist video. However, the ISIS video was successful in boosting terrorism concerns and anti-Muslim prejudice compared to the Muslim journalist video, which allowed us to test Hypothesis 2. Importantly, neither of the videos made explicit reference to Islam as a religion, nor did they include any explicit statement about Islam as a religion. For this reason, we exclude that the effect of the ISIS video on knowledge retention in Study 2 is compatible with a mere-exposure effect. None of the issues about Islam and Muslim people that are asked in the knowledge quiz is addressed in the videos, and therefore, there cannot be a familiarity between the treatment and the knowledge quiz that could motivate a mere-exposure effect.

We acknowledge that the measures of terrorism concern and knowledge of Islam used in our studies might have limitations. Specifically, the measure of terrorism concern presented unbalanced response options (i.e., it offered one negative, no neutral and four positive options), potentially leading to inflate the proportion of people who declared to be concerned about terrorism. The measure of knowledge of Islam only focused on static and notional knowledge and did not engage with the deeper meaning of Islam and its message. The two measures have been developed in previous research using comparable samples (Huddy et al., 2005; Mansouri and Vergani, 2018), and they were both useful to capture a range of terrorism concerns and knowledge levels in our samples. Importantly, the instrument that we used to measure factual knowledge of Islam was developed by Mansouri and Vergani (2018) with the aim to have different levels of difficulty, in order to capture different levels of knowledge in a representative sample of the Australian population.

The findings of this study hold implications for scholars and practitioners interested in interventions aimed at increasing education and knowledge about Islam and Muslims. This study demonstrates how terrorism concerns, which can be heightened by content circulating in the media, can hinder the effectiveness of such interventions. In other words, this study's findings suggest that education programs aiming to reduce anti-Muslim prejudice can be more effective in contexts where the baseline levels of socially constructed concerns about terrorism are low. In environments where the threat perception and concern levels are politically framed to be high, the positive effects of prejudice-reduction interventions based on outgroup knowledge may be lessened. Taken together, the empirical findings reported in this article highlight the critical importance of responsible political leadership and nuanced media reporting, which can have a strong impact on terrorism concerns and consequently on the attitudes towards minority groups whose identities are conflated with the source of the perceived terrorism threat.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that we used for Study 1 is a secondary dataset (Australian Survey of Social Attitudes 2016). It is publicly available from the Australian Data Archive (https://ada.edu.au/). The data that we used for Study 2 is available on request due to privacy/ethical restrictions.

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