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Mobilizing Potential? Right-Wing Terrorism-Related Social Media Use, Fear, and Civic Engagement Among German Muslims

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ABSTRACT

Social media are one of the main sources of information about terrorism, including right-wing terrorism (RWT). Previous research has shown that (social) media contact with terrorism content impacts fear levels and socio-political attitudes in the general population. The present study sheds light on RWT-related active and passive social media use in one of the main target groups of right-wing extremist hate and violence—Muslims. Following self-categorization and intergroup emotions theory, we surveyed German Muslims ($N = 432$) to investigate how passive (e.g. seeing) and active (e.g. commenting) social media use relating to content about RWT correlated with fear of RWT and, subsequently, with civic engagement (e.g. volunteering in their community). We further tested how religious involvement and political ideology interacted with active and passive social media use in predicting fear. The results indicated that both active and passive social media use were positively related to fear. The association between active use and fear grew stronger with right-leaning political stances but was not moderated by religious involvement. Fear was associated positively with civic engagement. Additional results, limitations, and practical implications are discussed.

Right-wing terrorism (RWT) is one of the two most lethal forms of terrorism in Western countries, alongside Islamist terrorism (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2025). In 2023, five out of seven attacks in the United States were committed by perpetrators associated with the far right (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2024). In 2022, 30 completed right-wing extremist attacks, including non-fatal incidents, occurred in Germany, making it the country with the most attacks in Western Europe (Ravndal et al., 2023). In fact, right-wing extremism is considered the primary extremist threat to democracy in Germany (Bundesministerium des Innern und für Heimat, 2023). The majority of right-wing extremist violent incidents in Germany are directed at foreigners (Bundesministerium des Innern und für Heimat, 2023), reflecting right-wing extremist ideology centered on the supremacy of "natives" (European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation [EUROPOL], 2023). Within this ideological framework, Muslims have emerged as a main target of hate and violence. Many large-scale far-right terrorists referred to narratives that place the Muslim "other" as the central threat to a homogenized White, Christian, European identity (see e.g., Fekete, 2012).

As terrorists try to reach their aspired political goals by use of widespread fear (Moghaddam & Marsella, 2004), media reporting severely adds to the impact of terrorism by broadcasting the terrorists' message to large audiences (e.g., Altheide, 2007). Research has shown repeatedly that terrorism induces negative affect, such as fear (Jacobs & van Spanje, 2023; Nellis & Savage, 2012),

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and is associated with changes in sociopolitical attitudes (Godefroidt, 2023). Since social media has become one of the main sources of news worldwide (Ipsos, 2021), users can also encounter and interact with content related to terrorism. In the most extreme cases, this might mean the livestream of a terrorist attack, as was done by the far-right attacker of the Christchurch Mosque shooting in 2019, leaving 51 people dead (Macklin, 2019).

Despite the prominent threat of RWT, scholars point to a research bias toward Islamist terrorism, leaving potential effects of and associations with (mediated) RWT under-explored (Godefroidt, 2023; Schuurman, 2019). The limited previous research on RWT-related media use has further focused on the view of majority populations (e.g., Kaskeleviciute et al., 2023). To widen this narrow viewpoint, our study aims to explicitly integrate an underrepresented perspective by surveying Muslims from Germany. Drawing on social identity and intergroup emotion theory, we investigate how social media use related to RWT content is associated with fear and, subsequently, with civic engagement as a constructive coping mechanism (Albright & Hurd, 2021).

We further analyze if and how religious involvement and political ideology moderate the path from social media use to fear. Both moderators are important because they shape the identity relevance of exposure to right-wing terrorism content, and they help to explain heterogeneity within Muslim populations, avoiding a homogeneous treatment of the group. Building on prior research (e.g., Escobar-Viera et al., 2018), we specifically differentiate between active social media use relating to such content (sharing, commenting, liking) and passive use, that is, mere exposure. We test these associations with survey data from $N = 432$ Muslims living in Germany, aiming to address three pressing research gaps in the realm of mediated terrorism by focusing on (a) active and passive forms of social media use, (b) RWT, and (c) Muslim participants.

Right-wing terrorism and Islamophobia in Germany

Numerous scholars have sought to agree on a universally applicable definition of terrorism, yet this remains difficult (Weinberg et al., 2004) due to the term's normative and subjective nature (Hoffman, 2017). Most definitions, including ours, emphasize the use of violence and instigation of fear to influence public attitudes and to reshape political and social orders (Moghaddam & Marsella, 2004). Since 9/11, research on terrorism and media effects mainly investigated Islamist terrorism (Bjørgo & Ravndal, 2019; Godefroidt, 2023; Schuurman, 2019), even though politically motivated attacks predominate in Western countries[1] (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2025).

Right-wing extremism is rooted in "exclusionary nationalism, racism, xenophobia and/or related intolerance" (EUROPOL, 2023, p. 43), generally promoting ingroup supremacism. RWT in Germany primarily targets perceived foreigners (Bundesministerium des Innern und für Heimat, 2023) who do not fit into the far-right nativist vision of ethnic homogeneity. Major attacks include the murders of nine persons with migration background committed by the "National socialist underground" (2000–2007), the 2016 Munich shooting with nine fatalities, the assassination of the politician Walter Lübcke in 2019, and the Hanau attack targeting "foreigners" that left nine dead (2020). In the last decades, Islamophobia "has become the defining prejudice of the far right of the fourth wave" (Mudde, 2019, p. 28), reflected in "manifestos" such as Breivik's (Fekete, 2012), and conspiracy narratives like Eurabia or the Great Replacement (Carr, 2006; Obaidi et al., 2022).[2] Internationally, Muslims were directly targeted in the Christchurch Mosque attacks (2019), the Quebec City Mosque shooting (2017), and the Finsbury Park attack (2017).

Such attacks do not happen in a vacuum. In Western Europe, Islam is often viewed as alien and prone to violence (Said, 1997). Since 9/11, media coverage has repeatedly connected Islam to violence

[1]Western countries (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2024): Andorra, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom, United States of America, Vatican City, West Germany (1970–1990)

[2]These conspiracy narratives propagate that there is an extinction of white Europeans and North Americans happening, which is orchestrated by liberals with the goal of replacing the native population with nonwhite and specifically Muslim people.

and terrorism (Ahmed & Matthes, 2017), failing to differentiate between Islamist extremists and the vast majority of innocent Muslims (von Sikorski et al., 2021). Such reporting gives rise to fear and anti-Muslim sentiments (von Sikorski et al., 2017), making hostile views of Islam "a socially acceptable trend" in Germany (Hafez & Schmidt, 2015, p. 70). In the aftermath of Islamist terrorist attacks, Muslims frequently face online abuse (Awan, 2014; Castaño-Pulgarín et al., 2021) and offline hate crimes (Hanes & Machin, 2014). Islamophobia appears strongly driven by perceived threat (Ciftci, 2012), a dynamic that is intensified by media coverage of the so-called refugee crisis (Hangartner et al., 2019).

Muslims constitute about 6.6% of Germany's population (Pfündel et al., 2021), with 45.1% of a Turkish background due to labor recruitment beginning in the 1960s (Hunn, 2002; Pfündel et al., 2021). Eighty percent of first- and second-generation Turkish migrants report feeling strongly connected to Germany and wanting to stay permanently (Schührer, 2018). Despite these strong attachments, 53% of German Muslims report experiencing hostility or discrimination (Grewal & Hamid, 2022), particularly women wearing a Hijab (Schührer, 2018). At the same time, anti-Muslim attitudes among the German public reach agreement rates of up to 48.7%, including support for banning Muslim immigration (Decker et al., 2024). This opinion climate has serious consequences for Muslims: Perceived Islamophobia and discrimination are consistently linked to poorer mental health (Samari et al., 2018).

Social media use relating to right-wing terrorism content and fear: social identity and intergroup emotions

Terrorism is associated with changes in affect, policy preferences, and political ideology and is related to increased intergroup hostility (Godefroidt, 2023). The goal of terrorists is to reach beyond the immediate victims of their attacks toward a larger audience: "Terrorism is aimed at the people watching, not at the actual victims. Terrorism is a theater" (Jenkins, 1975, p. 4). Thus, terrorists rely on the media to disseminate their message. This mediation of terrorism can happen via extremists' own outlets, but most effectively when mainstream mass media report about terrorist activities,[3] for example, when an attack becomes headline news (Weimann, 1987). With the advent of the internet, terrorist actors have been quick to adapt to new channels of communication, such as social media platforms, where they can reach their supporters, the international community, and enemies alike (Weimann, 2008).

Building on the definition of terrorism outlined in the previous section, one of the most crucial effects of mediated terrorism is that it elicits fear in the audience. Fear is an aversive emotional state that arises in response to stimuli appraised as threatening, thus serving as a warning signal (Lerner & Keltner, 2000). Despite its vital functions, prolonged periods of fear and anxiety negatively impact well-being (Schneiderman et al., 2005). Intergroup emotions theory proposes that individuals can experience and learn emotions in intergroup situations, where negative emotions may arise based on different appraisals (Mackie et al., 2000, 2008). Following the appraisal-tendency framework, these emotions can shape how information is processed and evaluated (Lerner & Tiedens, 2006). Intergroup emotions theory is an extension of social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 2004), which posits that individuals identify with specific social groups and go to great lengths to maintain a positive image of their groups. This automatic categorization process is based on salient contextual information, such as ethnicity, nationality, or religious affiliation. Intergroup dynamics also shape how information encountered on (social) media is processed and appraised emotionally.

As social media has become one of the main sources of news worldwide (Ipsos, 2021), seeing and interacting with content related to terrorism may shape emotional and affective responses of social

[3]The concept of mass-mediated terrorism (Weimann, 1987, 2008) is related to other concepts, e.g., the medialization of science, as outlined by Weingart (2012). Mass media and terrorism may thus form a interdependent relationship in that terrorists seek public attention and media rely on news items to garner the attention of their audience.

media users. Depending on the moderation practices of the respective platforms, terror content on social media can be more harmful and/or graphic than that published in traditional media environments. Such social media content can be diverse and include classic online news posted by established news outlets, expressions of solidarity from other users (#jesuischarlie, #saytheirnames), or memes that ridicule terrorist organizations (McCrow-Young & Mortensen, 2021), but also hate speech (Kaakinen et al., 2018), misinformation, extremist propaganda, or, in extreme cases, the live-stream of an attack (see e.g., Macklin, 2019).

The far-right movement relies heavily on the construction of fear for its propaganda. Specifically, radical right-wing populist parties appeal to an imminent threat to "the people" (which in this case means the ingroup of white, native citizens) as justification for xenophobic and Islamophobic anti-immigration politics (Mudde, 2019). These "politics of fear" (Wodak, 2021, p. 6) are also increasingly visible on social media in the form of fear speech (Greipl et al., 2024). Right-wing actors, for example, claim a threat against white women by exploiting the trope of hypersexualized and violent Muslim men, asserting a need to protect Western culture against immigration (Leidig, 2021). Not as overtly toxic as explicit hate speech, such messages are less likely to be removed from social media platforms and can resonate with larger audiences (Saha et al., 2023). This way, far-right actors aim to incite fear in their target ingroup followership to mobilize support for their politics. At the same time, those users identifying or identified with groups portrayed as the threat in these scenarios—that is, Muslims, immigrants, and foreigners—may themselves feel threatened to become the target of hate and violence when exposed to such content.

Evidence from Islamist terrorism in traditional media supports the fear-inducing effect that terrorists aspire to (Jacobs & van Spanje, 2023; Nellis & Savage, 2012). Generally, consumption of online and social media news is positively related to fear of terrorism (Onat et al., 2023; Williamson et al., 2019). In non-Muslim samples, exposure to Islamist terrorism in the media is associated with fear (Jacobs & van Spanje, 2023; Nellis & Savage, 2012) and outgroup prejudice (Tamborini et al., 2017). Regarding RWT, a survey of adolescents and young adults in Germany found that exposure to related social media content is associated with fear (Kaskeleviciute et al., 2023). However, the authors sampled young individuals from the general population. Evidence suggests that Muslims in New Zealand reported more terrorism anxiety in the aftermath of the far-right Christchurch Mosque attacks (Byrne et al., 2022)—but the authors did not explicitly account for media effects.

Passive and active use of RWT content and its relation to fear

Active and passive social media use are expected to affect users' experiences differentially. Active use "refers to activities that facilitate direct exchange with others" (Verduyn et al., 2017, p. 281), whereas passive use involves merely consuming content, while remaining "outside the conversation" (Gainous et al., 2021, p. 467). Thus, active use encompasses cognitive engagement and dialogue, indicating greater involvement with the topic of the content.

Most research in this area focuses on well-being, typically assuming greater positive effects of active use and greater negative effects of passive use, though the evidence is mixed (Valkenburg et al., 2022). Roberts and David (2023) reported that passive use was linked to lower perceived social connection, which in turn was associated with lower well-being and greater stress, whereas active use might strengthen social connection. However, most social media users are lurkers who rarely share or engage with posts despite their regular exposure (Sun et al., 2014). Although lurkers primarily consume social media content passively, they may still actively seek out specific information, even if they do not post or comment.

Regarding political expression, Yu (2016) found that only active nonpolitical social media use promoted such behavior, whereas passive use did not. In contrast, Kruikemeier et al. (2014) argued that specific forms of political internet use were associated with political involvement, rather than a simple active versus passive distinction, especially among less politically interested users. Baboš and Világi (2024) conceptualized active social media use as online political engagement and showed that passive engagement was far more common

and either unrelated or negatively related to democratic attitudes, while active participation was linked to greater democratic support. Similarly, Schumann et al. (2024) found that actively selecting radicalizing information was more strongly associated with support for violent extremism than incidental exposure, and Pauwels and Hardyns (2018) showed that actively seeking extremist social media content predicted endorsement of extremism across ideological orientations.

Overall, the literature offers no clear guidance for our study. While it seems straightforward that there is a distinction between passive exposure and active consumption, little evidence addresses outcomes like fear and civic engagement. Given the generally negative effects of passive use on well-being, it may be more closely associated with fear, whereas active use may relate more strongly to civic engagement. Appraisal theory (see Nabi, 1999) suggests fear arises when situations are appraised as harmful, uncertain, and uncontrollable. Passive use may reinforce low perceived control, making fear a more likely outcome. By contrast, active use may foster a sense of agency and control by expressing opinions, more likely to elicit activating emotions that facilitate civic engagement.

However, prior research largely neglects social identity or intergroup emotions. As a vulnerable target of RWT, Muslim users who actively engage with such content and invest cognitive and affective resources may become more aware of group-based threat and thus experience greater fear. Moreover, no studies examine passive and active engagement with RWT-related content among minorities.

Drawing on prior findings and intergroup emotion theory, we propose that among Muslims, both passive exposure to RWT content and active interaction with it are positively associated with fear of RWT. By testing active and passive use separately, we aim to identify differences in fear associated with varying levels of engagement.

H1: (**a**) Passive and (**b**) active social media use relating to content about RWT are associated positively with fear of RWT in German Muslims.

The moderating roles of religious involvement and political ideology

Users' fear of RWT is likely shaped by individual factors, particularly religious involvement. According to the social identity approach, individuals' self-concept is organized around dynamically activated identity features (Tajfel & Turner, 2004; Tajfel et al., 1971). Among Muslims, stronger religious involvement, operationalized through self-reported religiosity and knowledge of Islam, signals the centrality of being Muslim within their self-concept. For religious minorities, such as Muslims in Germany, religious involvement is more than a mere testament of faith; it translates to social belonging and group membership. We argue that stronger involvement with one's Muslim identity is associated with higher fear.

Self-categorization theory suggests that when a group category becomes salient, depersonalization is triggered, such that "people come to see themselves and other category members less as individuals and more as interchangeable exemplars of the group prototype" (Hornsey, 2008, p. 208). Exposure to RWT content may heighten awareness of Muslims' prototypical vulnerability in Western societies, adding to fear, especially among those strongly involved religiously. Moreover, intergroup emotions theory posits that emotional appraisal depends on salient group membership and the strength of identification with that group (Mackie et al., 2008). Thus, RWT-related social media content may activate Muslim identity and elicit fear as a group-based response to a group-based threat. In both perspectives, identity salience and expected collective reactions should amplify fear of RWT among highly religious Muslims. Accordingly, we hypothesize that the relationship between RWT-related social media use and fear is moderated by religious involvement.

H2: The associations between (**a**) passive, and (**b**) active social media use relating to content about RWT and fear of RWT depend on the level of religious involvement in German Muslims. The association is stronger among individuals with higher religious involvement and weaker among those with lower levels of religious involvement.

According to social cleavage theory (Lipset & Rokkan, 1967), political ideology is a distinctive feature of European politics, structuring citizens along a left–right continuum. Political ideology reflects broader normative orientations toward minority protection, and therefore, perceived threats to the ingroup when confronted with RWT. On the one hand, meta-analytical evidence' suggests terrorism generally increases conservative attitudes and rally'-round-the-flag effects (Godefroidt, 2023). However, after RWT incidents, majority population respondents showed reduced support for "key right-wing extremist attitudes" (Pickard et al., 2023). Thus, political ideology may not only be driven by terrorism but also determine how individuals respond to ideologically motivated violence. Indeed, U.S. survey data showed that threat appraisal of RWT largely depended on political preference (Snook et al., 2024): Left-leaning individuals attributed more threat to RWT, whereas conservative participants estimated lower risks to themselves, close others, and the nation. Conversely, fear of (unspecified) terrorism was higher in conservatives (Onat et al., 2023).

Applied to this study, engagement with RWT content may increase fear among Muslim participants overall, but particularly among those with left-leaning political ideology. This assumes that left–right ideology functions similarly among Muslims in Western contexts as in majority populations. Supporting this, Yılmaz et al. (2016) found that the left–right classification, which is prominently used in Europe, was valid among young Turkish voters. Accordingly, and in line with Snook et al. (2024), the association between RWT-related social media use and fear may be stronger among left-leaning German Muslims. That is, a left-leaning orientation typically aligns with stronger support for minority rights, which may heighten sensitivity when German Muslims are exposed to right-wing extremist violence. Thus, fear may be amplified among those with left-leaning ideology when encountering right-wing content, as the content may be interpreted more strongly as a direct threat to one's group. Therefore, we theorize that political ideology shapes how media content about RWT is interpreted.

However, political ideology among immigrant-origin populations is context-dependent. Although immigrant-origin voters tend to lean left, immigrant-specific factors add little explanatory power to party identification, issue orientations, and candidate evaluations (Goerres et al., 2022). The results from a survey of Turkish Muslims in Belgium suggested that their political ideology was decisive in their voting choices in host and origin countries (Baysu & Swyngedouw, 2020): Right-leaning Muslims were more likely to support Belgian right-wing parties, though overall support was lower than in Turkey. In Turkey, voting was more strongly linked to religious identity, with strict Muslims favoring right-wing parties. Notably, an interaction emerged: In Belgium, strict Muslims were more likely than moderate Muslims to vote left-wing, motivated by disadvantaged group interests, whereas moderates voted in line with their ideological orientation. Thus, similar motivations could lead to left-leaning voting in Belgium and right-leaning voting in Turkey.

A comparable pattern appears among German Muslims, a religious minority with high percentages of first- or second-generation immigrants. Most support the Social Democratic Party or the Green Party (Acar, 2016), yet over 67% of Turks in several European countries supported the conservative Turkish president Erdoğan (Siggelkow, 2023). Stronger right-wing identification may reflect national ties to the country of origin and heightened identification with groups targeted by RWT, making a minority threat more salient and thus, a fear reaction more likely when exposed to RWT content. Given these potentially opposing moderating effects of political ideology, we pose the following research question:

RQ1: How does political ideology moderate the associations between (**a**) passive, and (**b**) active use of social media content about RWT and fear of RWT in German Muslims?

Associations of social media use, fear, and civic engagement

Fear is first and foremost a negative affective reaction in response to perceived threat that generates psychological stress (Lerner & Keltner, 2000), yet it may also foster constructive coping mechanisms such as civic engagement (Albright & Hurd, 2021). From a normative standpoint, social capital, trust, and civic engagement are vital for democratic functioning, and declining civic engagement raises

concern (R. D. Putnam, 1995). For minorities, civic engagement constitutes an important element of active citizenship (Peucker, 2020). Civic engagement goes beyond the narrower scope of political participation to encompass acts and activities "[. . .] aimed at the wellbeing of the community, broadly defined as the political community or society large, [their] neighborhood or a particular social, cultural or religious community group" (Peucker, 2016, p. 97). While political participation refers to formal activities like voting, campaigning, volunteering in, or working for political organizations (Frasure & Williams, 2009), civic engagement captures broader community connectedness (Adler & Goggin, 2005).

In Germany, civic engagement has increased over the past two decades (Simonson et al., 2021), though research on Muslim engagement remains limited and often prioritizes migration background over religious affiliation (see Peucker, 2016, for an overview). Yet, existing studies provide starting points for our considerations. For instance, Soliman (2017) traced how Muslims participate in culture-making, illustrating artistic and civic engagement grounded in mainstream German Muslim identities. Survey data from five Western countries, including Germany, further suggests that—contrary to right-wing populist beliefs—Islamic religious practice does not promote disengagement from the social and political community. Some behaviors, such as mosque attendance, may even promote organizational membership and political participation (Westfall, 2024). Similarly, Peucker (2020) found that for most Muslims who were active as volunteers in their communities, faith was an important motivator.

A severe public and political concern is that with increasing perceptions of intergroup hostility, Islamophobia, or exposure to right-wing extremist violence and terrorism, societal divides along cultural and religious lines may deepen and weaken societal cohesion. For one, Muslims may withdraw from mainstream public life, which would be in stark contrast to normative models of citizenship (R. D. Putnam, 2000). Supporting such concerns, findings show that perceived discrimination among Turkish Muslims in Germany and the Netherlands predicted stronger identification with their religious ingroup and less with their country of residence (Martinovic & Verkuyten, 2012). On the other hand, research on group-based threats, including discrimination, suggests they may, under specific conditions, prompt collective action (Adra et al., 2020; Albright & Hurd, 2021) and civic engagement (Britto et al., 2011; Mencken et al., 2022). For example, Muslims in New Zealand reported a greater sense of community after the Christchurch terror attacks (Byrne et al., 2022).

Insights from research on fear of crime further illuminate this dynamic. Although fear is associated with pessimism and risk sensitivity (Lerner & Keltner, 2001), it is not per se maladaptive. Scholars distinguish between functional and dysfunctional fear (Jackson & Gray, 2010): Under certain conditions, fear of crime can foster problem-solving and social involvement (Valente & Crescenzi Lanna, 2019) and can be addressed through constructive crime-prevention initiatives (Piscitelli & Perrella, 2017). Fear of crime has been positively associated with volunteering (Britto et al., 2011), a prominent measure of civic engagement. A more recent survey suggests a small linear relationship between fear of crime and community engagement in men, but a curvilinear relationship for women (Mencken et al., 2022). Adding to the complexity of the picture, scholars also concluded that fear of crime is unrelated to civic engagement (Lee & Cho, 2018) or that it hinders collective action (Miller et al., 2009).

Whether fear translates into civic engagement may depend on social hierarchies and group standing. In a U.S. Latinx sample, fear of deportation predicted political participation (e.g., protesting; Maginot, 2021). Fear motivates collective action when individuals feel personally affected (Albright & Hurd, 2021), as shown among migrant domestic workers in Lebanon (Adra et al., 2020). A survey conducted in response to the police killings of unarmed Black Americans in the United States suggests that for Black individuals, personal threat and identifying with the victim predicted collective action (Sheehan et al., 2022). In intergroup threat scenarios, threat appraisal in Black persons was linked to collective action to "help prevent things like the police shooting [. . .] from happening again" (Sheehan et al., 2022, p. 157). Taking these considerations into account, we argue that fear of RWT is positively associated with civic engagement and may serve as a coping mechanism for Muslim minorities confronting right-wing threat.

H3: Fear of RWT is positively associated with civic engagement in German Muslims.

It remains unclear how engaging with terrorism-related content affects civic engagement, particularly among minority members who are especially vulnerable. After 9/11, political interest and civic engagement increased in the United States (R. Putnam, 2002; Sander & Putnam, 2010). However, these increases were mostly observed at an attitudinal level rather than in observable behavior (R. Putnam, 2002) and predominantly among young and privileged populations (Sander & Putnam, 2010). One of the few studies on RWT effects found slight increases in civic engagement after the 2011 Norway attacks in Utøya and Oslo (Wollebæk et al., 2012). Another study examined changes in outgroup trust following these attacks (Solheim, 2020) but did not account for civic engagement or minority perceptions. Additionally, these studies did not integrate a media perspective.

The empowering potential of the internet and social media, particularly for marginalized communities, was recognized even before their widespread adoption (Mehra et al., 2004). A core assumption is that online activities can stimulate offline civic engagement, and early research linked internet access to higher civic engagement (Jennings & Zeitner, 2003). For social media, meta-analytical evidence suggests a positive association with civic engagement (Boulianne, 2015). Similarly, a meta-analysis of 106 studies showed that political digital activities, such as blogging, consuming online news, or participating in discussions, were positively related to offline engagement among adolescents and young adults (Boulianne & Theocharis, 2020). Active social media use during political events, such as hashtagging or live commenting, is also associated with political engagement (Vaccari et al., 2015). More broadly, online platforms can facilitate coping and collective action in times of crisis: After Hurricane Katrina, online communities evolved into offline civic initiatives (Ortiz & Ostertag, 2014).

Based on this evidence linking social media use and civic engagement, we transfer these insights to RWT-related content among German Muslims and hypothesize:

H4: (**a**) Passive and (**b**) active social media use regarding content about RWT are associated positively with civic engagement in German Muslims.

Taken together, prior research suggests that (1) social media use can differentially shape emotional and behavioral outcomes depending on whether it is passive or active, (2) fear in response to intergroup threat may either inhibit or stimulate civic engagement, and (3) minority group members' reactions are shaped by identity-related factors such as religious involvement and political ideology. At the same time, existing studies have rarely combined these strands: Work on terrorism has seldom differentiated between passive and active social media use; research on civic engagement has largely overlooked RWT-specific content and Muslim minorities; and studies on RWT have not systematically integrated a media-use perspective.

Addressing these gaps requires a more fine-grained analysis of how distinct modes of engaging with RWT-related content on social media relate to both fear and civic engagement among Muslims in Germany. Based on the gaps identified in existing research, we propose a research question to investigate how these types of social media use related to content about RWT are differentially associated with fear and civic engagement among Muslims:

RQ2: How do (**a**) passive and (**b**) active use of RWT-related content differ in their associations with fear and civic engagement in German Muslims?

See Figure 1 for a visualization of all hypotheses and research questions.

Method

Data were collected from May 4 to 10, 2022 by the professional polling company Gapfish via an online questionnaire using a web-access panel. We aimed to survey Muslims living in Germany. Given the

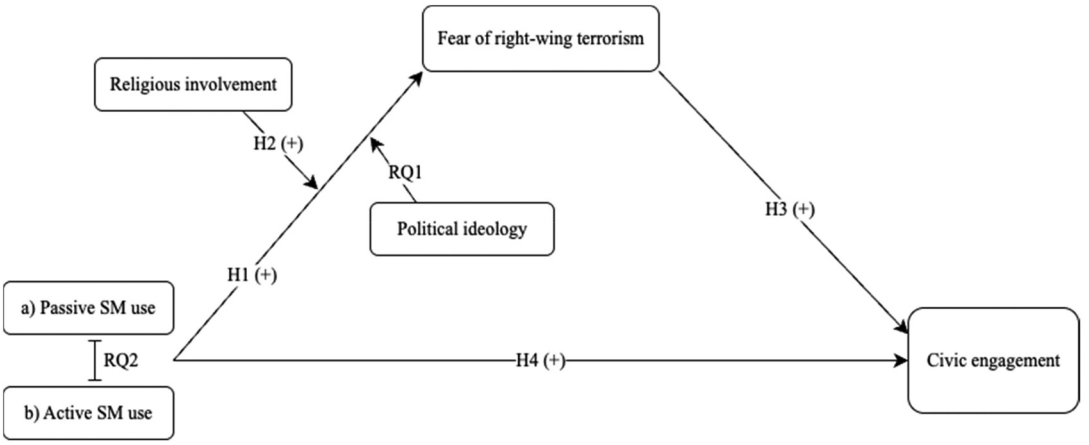


Figure 1. Hypothesized Model. *Note*. SM Use = social media use relating to content about right-wing terrorism.

challenges of reaching minority populations, we did not employ quotas. We still tried to reach a final sample as balanced as possible in terms of gender and education. Before entering the field, the study was screened by the Institutional Review Board of the Department of Communication at the University of Vienna (ID: 20220228_007, approved March 7, 2022). Participants were informed about the survey's broad content and were allowed to participate only after providing informed consent. Unrelated parts of the survey data from this data collection were used in another study (Kaskeleviciute et al., 2025).

Sample

Participants who agreed to three illogical attention check items (e.g., "My birthday is on 30th February") and participants who finished the survey in an unreasonably short time (less than one third of the median duration) were excluded. The final sample included $N = 432$ participants self-identifying as Muslims (78.94% Sunni, 11.11% Shia, 9.95% other), aged 18 and beyond ($M = 37.75$, $SD = 14.23$), and showed balanced gender distributions ($n_{male} = 219$, 50.69%; $n_{female} = 211$, 48.84%; $n_{other} = 2$, 0.46%). About every fourth participant (27.08%, $n = 117$) had converted to Islam. 26.85% ($n = 116$) indicated low formal education level, that is, no degree, elementary, or secondary school. 33.10% ($n = 143$) reported a high level of formal education, that is, a university degree or equivalent. Most participants indicated that either one of their parents ($n = 204$, 47.22%) or they themselves ($n = 134$, 31.02%) had migrated to Germany from a non-German-speaking country. We combined both forms of migration background into a dummy variable (78.24%, $n_{migrant} = 338$), because in both cases, individuals are likely to have been socialized in families with ties to non-German contexts.

Measures

A full list of items used to measure the main constructs, along with a table of zero-order correlations, is provided in the Appendix(see Tables A1 and A2). Unless stated otherwise, scales ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*), and items measuring one construct were combined to form mean-based indices.

Active and passive social media use relating to content about right-wing terrorism

We adapted items from Escobar-Viera et al. (2018) and Pagani and Mirabello (2011) to capture the frequency of passive and active social media use on scales from 1 (*never*) to 7 (*very often*). For passive social media use, participants were instructed to indicate how often they used social media to inform

themselves about "right-wing terrorism in general" and "right-wing terrorist attacks in particular" from 1 (*never*) to 7 (*very frequently*) (Spearman-Brown ρ = .95; *M* = 3.30, *SD* = 1.80). For active use, participants were asked how frequently they shared, posted, or commented on social media related to "right-wing terrorism in general" and "right-wing terrorist attacks in particular" (ρ = .96; *M* = 2.60, *SD* = 1.80).

Fear of RWT

Fear of RWT was measured with three items adapted from Crowson et al. (2006), such as "I am afraid that a right-wing terrorist attack could happen near me" (Cronbach's α = .95; *M* = 3.91, *SD* = 1.91).

Civic engagement

Civic engagement was gauged with three items taken from the behavior subscale of Doolittle and Faul's (2013) civic engagement scale (e.g., "I am involved in structured volunteer position(s) in the community"), from 1 (*never*) to 7 (*very frequently*); α = .85; *M* = 4.04, *SD* = 1.69.

Moderators

We assessed religious involvement with four items. Two items covered religiosity (e.g., "I would describe myself as very religious."), and two knowledge of Islam (e.g., "I know a lot about Islam and its contents"). Principal component analysis suggested one-dimensionality (α = .88; *M* = 5.29, *SD* = 1.44). Political ideology was assessed by asking participants to position themselves on a scale from 1 (*left*) to 10 (*right*) (*M* = 5.00, *SD* = 2.15).

Control variables

We used dummy variables to statistically control for male gender (as contrasted with female or other gender), low formal education, high formal education, and migration background. Additionally, age and political interest were included as covariates. Political interest was measured with a single item asking participants how interested they are in politics (*M* = 4.65, *SD* = 1.82).

Statistical analysis

We used the *lavaan* package (Rosseel, 2012) in R (V4.2.2; R Core Team, 2021) to construct the path model. The data set and script are available on OSF: https://osf.io/vky76. We used the maximum-likelihood estimator and mean-centered variables in interactions. Results are based on 5,000 bootstraps.

Results

Associations between RWT-related social media use and fear

Both H1a, predicting that passive social media use relating to RWT content was associated positively with fear of right-wing terrorism (*b* = 0.14, *SE* = 0.06, *p* = .025), and H1b, predicting a positive association between active social media use and fear (*b* = 0.24, *SE* = 0.06, *p* < .001), were supported. Neither religious involvement (*b* = −0.14, *SE* = 0.12, *p* = .274) nor political ideology (*b* = −0.14, *SE* = 0.09, *p* = .131) were related directly to fear.

Religious involvement and political ideology as moderators

Looking into the moderation effects of passive social media use and religious involvement on fear, the results suggest no significant interaction (*b* = 0.04, *SE* = 0.04, *p* = .334). Similarly, religious involvement did not moderate the relationship between active social media use and fear (*b* = 0.02, *SE* = 0.04, *p* = .646). Thus, H2a and H2b were rejected. RQ1 explored how political ideology moderates the

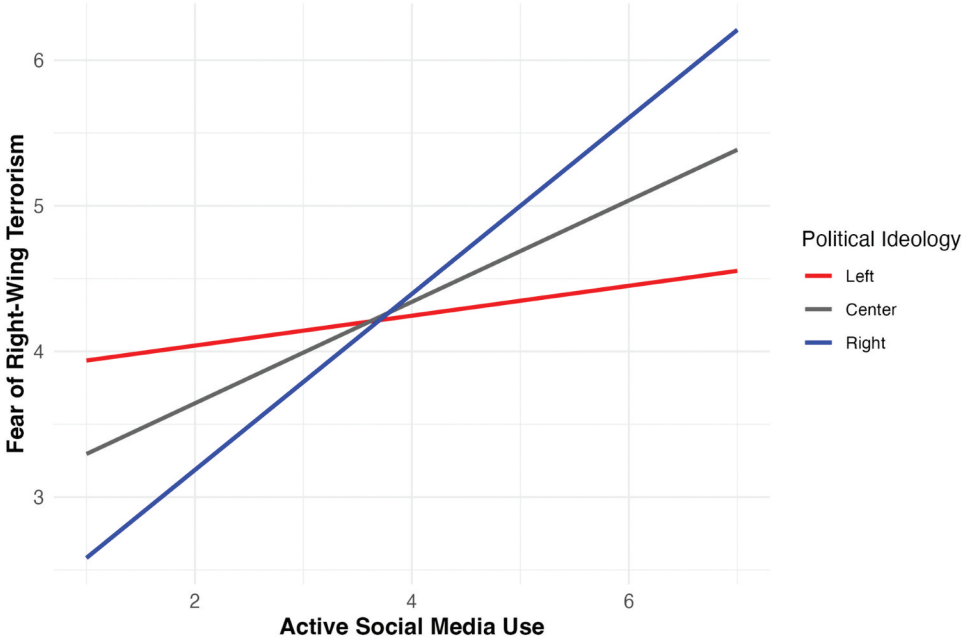


Figure 2. Interaction effect of active SM use with political ideology on fear. *Note*. Active SM Use = active social media use relating to content about right-wing terrorism. Political Ideology in Groups: Left (-5 < –2), Center (-2 < 2), Right (2–5).

association between (a) passive and (b) active social media use and fear. Results suggested no significant interaction of passive social media use and political ideology on fear ($b = -0.04$, $SE = 0.03$, $p = .115$). The interaction effect of active social media use and political ideology was positive ($b = 0.08$, $SE = 0.03$, $p = .002$). That is, the association between active use and fear grows stronger with more right-leaning political ideology. The interaction is plotted in Figure 2. For Muslims on the very left of the political spectrum, the association is not significant, as visualized in Figure 3.

Social media use, fear, and civic engagement

H3, predicting that fear was positively related to civic engagement, found support ($b = 0.08$, $SE = 0.04$, $p = .039$). The indirect effect of social media use on civic engagement via fear was not significant for passive ($b = 0.01$, $SE = 0.01$, $p = .198$) nor active use ($b = 0.02$, $SE = 0.01$, $p = .105$). H4a, which predicted that active social media use would be positively related to civic engagement, was confirmed ($b = 0.15$, $SE = 0.05$, $p = .003$), while the association between passive use and civic engagement hypothesized in H4b did not reach statistical significance ($b = 0.09$, $SE = 0.05$, $p = .056$). All standardized regression coefficients are displayed in Table 1.

Differential associations of passive and active social media use

RQ2 investigated how active and passive use of RWT-related social media content differed in their relationships with a) fear and b) civic engagement. As reported, both passive and active social media use significantly predicted fear of RWT, with a larger coefficient for active use ($b = 0.24$) than for passive use ($b = 0.14$). However, a direct comparison of the two coefficients indicated that this difference was not statistically significant, $\Delta b = 0.10$, 95% CI [−0.13, 0.32], $p = .379$. For civic engagement, only active social media use showed a significant association ($b = 0.15$), whereas passive use was not significantly associated with civic engagement. However, the difference between the active and passive use coefficients was also not statistically significant, $\Delta b = 0.03$, 95% CI [−0.16, 0.20], $p = .758$.

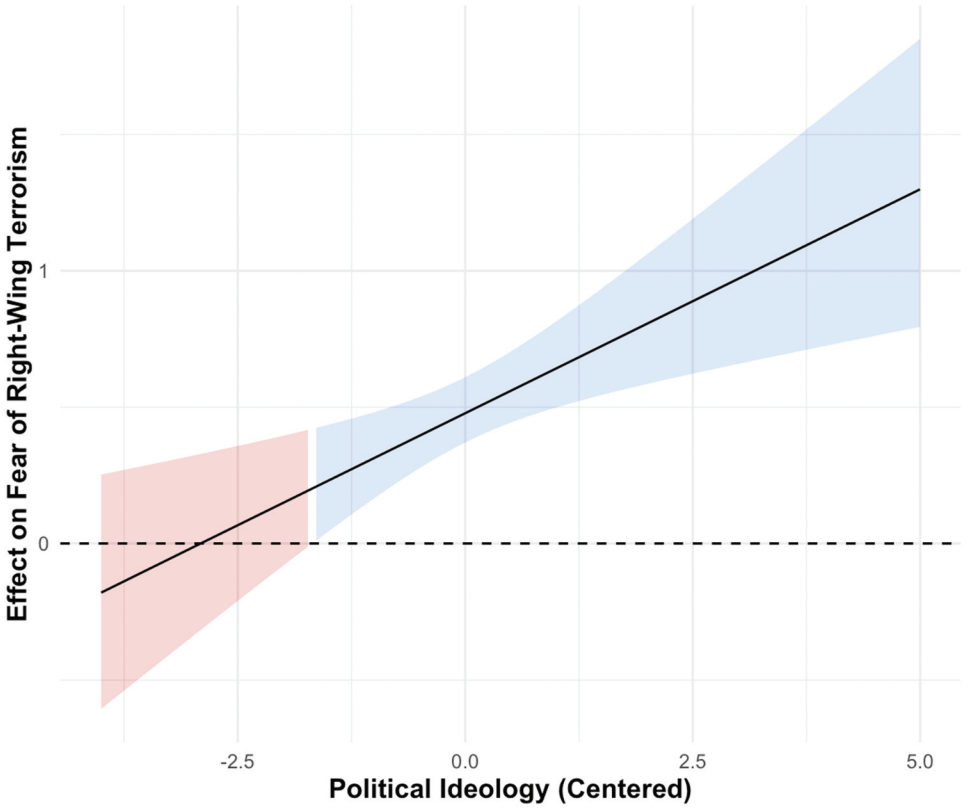


Figure 3. Johnson-neyman plot of regions of significance. *Note*. Active SM Use = active social media use relating to content about right-wing terrorism. Dark gray ribbon indicates significant regions, light gray ribbon indicates non-significant regions.

Table 1. Standardized regression coefficients.

	Fear of RWT		Civic Engagement	
	β	*SE*	β	*SE*
Passive SM use	0.14*	0.06	0.09	0.05
Active SM use	0.24***	0.06	0.15**	0.05
Religious involvement	−0.14	0.12	0.10	0.10
Political ideology	−0.14	0.09	0.29***	0.07
Passive SM use × Religious involvement	0.04	0.03	0.05	0.03
Active SM use × Religious involvement	0.02	0.04	−0.04	0.03
Passive SM use × Political ideology	−0.04	0.03	−0.04	0.02
Active SM use × Political ideology	0.08**	0.03	−0.01	0.02
Male	0.03	0.18	0.31*	0.14
Age	−0.00	0.01	−0.01	0.01
Low education	−0.10	0.22	0.21	0.17
High education	−0.07	0.20	0.23	0.16
Migration background	0.45*	0.21	−0.16	0.17
Political interest	0.02	0.05	.26***	0.04
Fear of RWT			0.08*	0.04
R^2	0.16		0.34	

Note: *SE* = standard error. Passive SM Use = passive social media use with content about right-wing terrorism. Active SM Use = active social media use with content about far-right terrorism. RWT = right-wing terrorism. $N = 432$. *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$.

Discussion

Our findings provide a coherent picture of how engagement with RWT-related social media content is linked to both emotional and behavioral responses among Muslims in Germany. Taken together, the results suggest that engagement with RWT content, whether passive or active, is embedded in a broader process in which mediated threat exposure is associated with fear, which in turn relates to civic engagement. These associations point to a dynamic interplay between media use, identity-relevant threat appraisals, and civic response within a minority context.

First, both active and passive social media use were positively related to fear. Merely encountering such content as well as actively interacting with it (e.g., liking, sharing, commenting) were linked to heightened fear of RWT. This finding extends previous research (Kaskeleviciute et al., 2023) by centering the affective experiences of a minority group that is a salient target of right-wing violence. Importantly, our findings challenge the general notion that primarily passive social media use is associated with negative affective outcomes (Valkenburg et al., 2022). In our study, active engagement did not prove protective. While active use has been linked to social connection and lower stress in other domains (Roberts & David, 2023), it is plausible that in the case of RWT, perceived connection to a threatened ingroup amplifies rather than attenuates fear.

At the same time, the mechanism underlying fear related to RWT content appears to be shaped more by political ideology than by religious involvement. Contrary to our assumptions derived from the social identity approach (Tajfel & Turner, 2004; Tajfel et al., 1971), religious involvement did not moderate the association between either form of social media use and fear. A likely explanation lies in the broader targeting logic of right-wing extremism in Germany, which frequently addresses "foreigners" or immigrants (Bundesministerium des Innern und für Heimat, 2023). Given that nearly 80% of our participants have a migration background, vulnerability to RWT may be perceived as tied not solely to religiosity but to multiple identity markers. Thus, engagement with RWT-related content may activate a shared sense of exposure that goes beyond levels of religious involvement.

Political ideology, however, moderated associations between active social media use and fear. While previous research in general population samples suggests that left-leaning individuals tend to perceive greater threat from the far-right (Snook et al., 2024), in our sample, the association between active use and fear was stronger for Muslims positioned further to the political right. This indicates that the meaning of left–right ideology may differ in our sample, which is characterized by a migration background and minority status. As prior work shows, a left-leaning political self-placement is associated with values of universalism and benevolence, whereas right-leaning self-identification comes with support for tradition, conformity, and security (Piurko et al., 2011). Further, individuals' cultural liberalism predicts a left-leaning political orientation, and economic liberalism, conversely, predicts a right-leaning orientation (Wojcik et al., 2021). However, the explanatory power of personal values is rather small, and cross-country comparisons show that even within Europe, these relationships vary. Moreover, political conservatism is associated with individual characteristics such as mortality salience and a heightened threat sensitivity (Jost et al., 2003, 2017). For Muslims in Germany, right-leaning identification may go hand in hand with stronger national ties to countries of origin or heightened sensitivity to threat, thereby intensifying fear when actively engaging with RWT content that targets foreigners. Interpreted through Appraisal Theory (Nabi, 1999), active engagement may foster more elaborate appraisals of RWT as harmful and uncontrollable, particularly among those whose ideological orientation aligns with greater threat sensitivity. Notably, political ideology did not moderate the link between passive use and fear, suggesting that ideological differences only play a role when individuals invest cognitive and expressive effort in engaging with threatening content.

However, there may also be alternative interpretations for this moderation, making future research necessary. Left- and right-leaning Muslims may differ in their media environments, including their social media use patterns beyond the active/passive distinction, such as the platforms they use or the types of accounts they follow. These differences may expose them to distinct contents: Right-leaning

users may be more embedded in networks where threat narratives are more salient, potentially amplifying perceived threat when actively engaging with RWT content. By the same token, left-leaning users may be more likely to encounter solidarity, potentially attenuating fear responses. Also, structural features of social networks, such as homophily and network density, may differ by ideology. These differences may explain why active engagement translates into fear only for right-leaning Muslims. Clearly, more research is needed to corroborate these claims.

Although fear is commonly linked to risk sensitivity and aversion (Lerner & Keltner, 2001), it was positively (albeit weakly) associated with civic engagement in our study. This aligns with research showing that fear and group-based threat can motivate collective action (Adra et al., 2020; Albright & Hurd, 2021) and civic engagement (Britto et al., 2011; Mencken et al., 2022). In this sense, the fear elicited by RWT-related content may function as a mobilizing rather than exclusively debilitating emotion. Given the democratic relevance of civic engagement, this finding suggests that attempts by far-right extremists and terrorists to spread fear do not necessarily manifest in disengagement within the targeted population.

The results regarding active and passive social media use provide further insight into this relationship, although the differences between the two forms of engagement should be interpreted cautiously. Active engagement with RWT-related content was directly and positively associated with civic engagement, whereas passive exposure was not. This pattern resonates with broader evidence linking active digital participation to offline engagement (Boulianne, 2015; Boulianne & Theocharis, 2020) and conceptualizations of active social media use as a form of online civic engagement (Baboš & Világi, 2024). At the same time, direct comparisons of the regression coefficients did not indicate that the association between active use and civic engagement was significantly stronger than that between passive use and civic engagement. Thus, while the pattern of significant and nonsignificant associations is consistent with the possibility that active engagement may be more closely connected to civic involvement, our data do not provide statistical evidence that these associations differ in strength. Similarly, although the coefficient for active use in predicting fear was larger than that for passive use, this difference was not statistically significant. Taken together, these findings suggest that both forms of engagement are relevant to understanding responses to RWT-related content, while providing limited evidence that active engagement is uniquely or more strongly associated with either outcome. Given the cross-sectional design, reverse dynamics are conceivable: civically engaged individuals may be more inclined to actively seek out and interact with RWT-related content.

Practical implications

As for practical implications, our study demonstrates that social media can serve as a key vehicle for empowerment among minorities. Civil society actors should thus ensure that minorities have access to safe spaces for dialogue on social media. Related to that, our study also suggests that fear, which is typically considered a paralyzing negative emotion, can also trigger democratically relevant outcomes such as civic engagement. Therefore, policymakers, NGOs, and other practitioners should not completely dismiss fear among minorities as something entirely detrimental. It can play an important role in stimulating engagement. Finally, the finding that politically right-leaning Muslims, independent from religious involvement, are particularly prone to fear responses suggests that practitioners should also take political ideology into account when designing spaces for civic actions of minority groups.

Limitations and future studies

First, because this study follows a cross-sectional design, it naturally has limitations regarding causality. We formulated the directions of the hypotheses based on theoretical and empirical considerations. Yet, methodologically, it is not possible to test causality. Future research endeavors should make use of longitudinal studies to monitor associations over time and

experimental designs to test causal relations. Second, our measure of civic engagement was adapted from an existing scale (Doolittle & Faul, 2013). This version of the civic engagement scale was not formally validated and focuses solely on the behavioral dimension of the construct. Additionally, the measure does not specify the context and kind of civic engagement, for instance, whether the civic engagement solely takes place in a religious context. This is connected to concerns about the role of civic engagement for democracy raised by other scholars (Theiss-Morse & Hibbing, 2005). Future research should offer a range of domains of civic engagement to add to the broader discussions of minority members' active citizenship. We further used a simple measure of political ideology that does not stand without criticism (Bauer et al., 2017), particularly because our findings also point to the complexity of political ideology. To disentangle the role of political ideology in Muslims' fear-appraisal of threats from the far-right and their civic engagement, it would be fruitful to assess ideology as a multidimensional construct.

It should also be noted that the correlation between fear of RWT and civic engagement is not very strong. Future research should aim to uncover which specific individual characteristics determine whether and under what conditions fear translates to civic engagement. It could also be beneficial to explore other emotions aside from fear. Anger, for example, has similarly been described as a seemingly negative emotion that may trigger beneficial outcomes (Lerner & Tiedens, 2006). Third, as we rely on self-reports, it is impossible to tell which specific content the participants saw or interacted with. Such online content can be very diverse, ranging from collective grief and sense-making in the aftermath of attacks (Eriksson, 2016) to tokens of solidarity, memes, and graphic recordings of terrorist attacks. It is likely that the specific contents impact the audience differently. A promising direction for future research is to employ mobile experience sampling methods to gain deeper insights into the specific types of RWT-related content that users, especially Muslim users, encounter online. Further, our study offers insights into a very specific context—Muslims in Germany. We would like to stress the heterogeneity within this group. To exemplify, we sampled Muslims who converted to Islam, who grew up in Germany as second-generation immigrants, or who migrated from Syria. Future research should carefully test whether the findings can be replicated across different cultural contexts, focusing on narrower, more homogeneous groups or controlling for additional individual characteristics of participants. Finally, although this is not a limitation per se, it should be kept in mind that most terrorist incidents do not occur in Germany or Europe—globally, conflict zones are most affected by terrorism (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2025).

Conclusion

Focusing on the perspective of Muslims in Germany, our study suggests a process in which RWT-related social media engagement contributes to fear across the sample, but the implications of this fear depend on the mode of engagement and the ideological positioning of users. Rather than depicting fear as uniformly detrimental, the results point to a more differentiated understanding: Among a minority population facing identity-relevant threat, mediated exposure to RWT may simultaneously heighten vulnerability perceptions and foster civic engagement as a form of constructive coping. This way, we contribute a novel perspective to social identity research in the area of mediated terrorism.

Open scholarship



This article has earned the Center for Open Science badge for Open Data. The data are openly accessible at https://re3data.org

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Appendix

Table A1. Full list of translated items and descriptive statistics.

Measures	M	SD
Fear of right-wing terrorism (adapted from Crowson et al., 2006)	3.91	1.91
I am afraid that there could be a right-wing terrorist attack near me.	3.96	2.02
I am afraid that a right-wing terrorist attack could hit me personally.	3.91	1.99
I am worried that I might be the victim of a right-wing terrorist attack.	3.86	2.01
Civic engagement (adapted from Doolittle & Faul, 2013)	4.04	1.69
I stay informed of events in my community.	4.06	1.87
I help members of my community	4.48	1.85
I am involved in structured volunteer position(s) in the community.	3.59	2.04
Religious involvement	5.29	1.44
I would describe myself as religious.	5.25	1.74
I feel very connected to my religion.	5.50	1.76
I know a lot about Islam and its contents.	5.22	1.55
I believe to have very good knowledge about Islam and its contents.	5.19	1.62

Table A2. Zero-order correlations for study variables.

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Passive SM use	–										
2. Active SM use	.60***	–									
3. Religious involvement	.14**	.12*	–								
4. Political ideology	.10*	.15**	.07	–							
5. Fear of terrorism	.29***	.31***	.06	.01	–						
6. Civic engagement	.35***	.35***	.22***	.27***	.21***	–					
7. Gender: male	.09	.08	−.09	.15	.03	.19***	–				
8. Age	−.03	−.13**	−.08	.05	−.07	−.05	.10*	–			
9. Low education	.00	.02	−.06	−.08	−.02	−.06	−.02	.13**	–		
10. High education	.02	.05	.04	.17***	.02	.13**	.13**	.01	−.43***	–	
11. Migration background	−.02	−.01	−.05	−.02	.11*	−.05	−.04	−.17***	−.01	.00	–
12. Political interest	.32***	.22***	.09	.19***	.12*	.41***	.21***	.11*	−.18***	.14**	−.04

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