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Facebook as a Safe Sphere: The Influence of Facebook Intergroup Communication on Reducing Islamophobia in the United States

Maisoon Osama Alsebaei*

Department of Journalism and Digital Media, King Abdulaziz University, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia

***Corresponding author:** Maisoon Osama Alsebaei, Department of Journalism and Digital Media, King Abdulaziz University, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, E-mail: malsebaei@kau.edu.sa.

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Abstract

Through an online survey of non-Muslim Facebook users in the United States (N=415), intergroup contact theory was used to examine the negative correlation between Facebook intergroup contact variables: Number of Muslim Facebook friends, number of non-Muslim friends who have Muslim friends on Facebook (extended contact), and frequency of Facebook intergroup activities (direct communication, passive communication, and broadcasting) and Islamophobia. Contact theory and hyperpersonal model of CMC were used to examine the influence of interpersonal communication with a Muslim on Facebook (N=250) as a moderator (low, average, and high attraction toward a Muslim) in intergroup contact effects. Results showed all Facebook intergroup contact variables have significant negative correlations with Islamophobia. Of Facebook intergroup activities, only passive communication predicts reduced Islamophobia. The study also found interpersonal attraction on Facebook moderates the negative relation between Facebook intergroup activities direct and passive communications, but not broadcasting and Islamophobia.

Keywords: Islamophobia; Online; Social media; Facebook; Internet; Extremism

Introduction

Islamophobia is a global phenomenon and has many Muslims living in America, concerned about proper integration into society. Islamophobia is a negative attitude that reflects "an exaggerated fear, hatred, and hostility toward Islam and Muslims that is perpetuated by negative stereotypes resulting in bias, discrimination, and the marginalization and exclusion of Muslims from America's social, political, and civic life" [1]. According to Gottschalk and Greenburg [2], Islamophobia is primarily not a consequence of a negative personal experience. Instead, it results from cultural representation of Muslims in mainstream media. In fact, only 38% of Americans have Face-to-Face (FtF) contact with a Muslim in person [3]. Thus, communication and media can offer channels where messages can enlighten and help bring diverse cultural vantage points together. Whereas the Internet, including social media, can facilitate cyberIslamophobia [4], it is also convenient that the online sphere, like Facebook, helps combat ignorant stereotypes, increase positive intergroup contact between ingroup members (non-Muslims) and outgroup members (Muslims), and overcome Islamophobia [5,6]. A growing number of studies have supported the use of Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) in increasing online contact to enhance intergroup interactions [7, 8].

In addition, the study of intergroup contact in CMC has shown that online communication with an outgroup individual improves intergroup impression. To be sure, Facebook affords interpersonal communication coupled with distinctive characteristics over other CMC contexts [9]. Unlike older Internet channels, such as email and chat rooms that offer less non-verbal cues, relationships and activities on Facebook are mostly publicly visible [10] at least in open Facebook groups and pages as well as for friends and friends of friends. Moreover, background information about an individual and visual cues (pictures, videos, etc.) are presented through different communicative activities on Facebook. Individuals on Facebook are also conferred with selective displays in their accounts creating positive self-presentation and thus forming constructive impressions [11], especially between Facebook friends (e.g., acquaintances, close friends) and friends of friends (extended contact) in an intergroup context.

Research has found that negative interaction, outgroup member lead to improvement of outgroup attitudes as a whole [12,13]. Thus, an ingroup member (a non-Muslim) needs to evaluate contact with an outgroup individual (a Muslim) as positive (e.g.,

affectionate, close, friendly) to provide an impulse for reducing negative attitudes [14]. White, Abu-Rayya, and Weitzel [15] found that online outgroup friendships moderate the relation between online intergroup participation and reducing negative attitudes. Put another way, positive evaluation of an outgroup member strengthens the engagement without group members and reduces outgroup attitudes.

Kessler argues that the online sphere is merely a tool to spread positive or negative information, but that could depend on how the Internet is used [6]. Although it is hard to engage those who have different perceptions, because people usually tend to follow people with similar perspectives, new media are evolving and one cannot ignore its influence [16]. Ignorance, therefore, can be combated with knowledge, and stereotypes with deep and honest individual portrayals.

Little is known about the impact that new media has on bridging differing mindsets and worldviews between groups [17]. One channel that deserves attention is Facebook. Some studies have supported the importance of online positive communication during intergroup contact [8]. However, these studies are experimental where quantity and quality of intergroup encounters were controlled generally in reducing Islamophobia [18,19] and specifically between non-Muslim and Muslims [20,15]. To the researcher's knowledge, no study has examined the moderating role of interpersonal communication with a Muslim on Facebook on the negative relation between Facebook intergroup contact and Islamophobia.

Therefore, the goal of this research was to fill the gap in examining how Facebook can bring diverse views and cultures together instead of provoking or fostering divergence by answering two main questions: (1) If the increase of positive Facebook contact with Muslims helps to counter Islamophobia using intergroup contact theory and (2) If interpersonal communication with a Muslim on Facebook (social attraction) as a moderator influences the negative relation between Facebook contact with Muslims and Islamophobia using intergroup contact theory integrated with the hyper personal model of CMC. In other words, because social attraction between different groups can vary from person to person (high, average, and low), the study examines if the negative correlation between Facebook intergroup contacts and Islamophobia depends on the level of online interpersonal attraction of an outgroup member.

Literature Review

Intergroup contact theory

The contact hypothesis [21] elucidates that increased FtF positive contact between opposing groups under certain conditions (equal social status, share common aims, cooperation, and support from institutional authorities) reduces negative outgroup attitudes. In their meta-analysis, Pettigrew and Tropp [22] have shown strong evidence of the effects of FtF contact in reducing prejudice and negative outgroup attitudes. Scholars also found that even when one or more of the contact terms are not in place, results still show a reduction in prejudice.

New extensions of intergroup contact were introduced to mitigate the challenges on FtF contact [23], including extended, imagined, and online contacts. Extended contact [24] states that the knowledge that an ingroup member has a friend relationship with an outgroup member can reduce prejudice. In addition, the advancement of CMC has enabled implementing the contact hypothesis on the Internet, known as Internet, or online, contact hypothesis [25]. The study of online contact also includes the study of the effects of social media on intergroup contact [26-28].

Hyperpersonal model of Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC)

The hyperpersonal perspective of CMC [29] suggests that online communicators are empowered by the technological characteristics of CMC. These communicators enable individuals to exchange affectionate messages which can improve interpersonal attraction and affect likability similar to, or better than FtF contact. Although CMC, especially text-based CMC, does not transfer all visual cues (e.g., eye contact, gestures, facial expressions, body position, etc.) at the same rate of FtF communication, CMC users overcome the lack of these cues by exploiting the medium's capabilities to enhance positive relations [30]. As the technology advances, CMC studies have expanded the scope of its research to include various multimedia forms and visual aspects of online interaction, such as Facebook [31].

In CMC, senders are able to take their time to compose and edit messages compared to FtF communication [32]. In other words, CMC senders are engaged in selective self-presentation in which they are able to control what information they are presenting [33]. Receivers can gain positive evaluations about an online communicator based on improved messages and existing social cues and thus feedback would increase selected behaviors. This communication cycle may enhance the overall quality of contact. In fact, research has supported this model in which online users were attracted to their online partners similarly to FtF partners. It has been found that users who engaged in online contact with an outgroup individual reported liking outgroup members [34] and reducing prejudice [35].

Islamophobia in the West

The ongoing historical tension between the Islamic and Western societies demonstrates that the perception of equality between cultures discussed by Said [36] is overlooked and manifested in the breakdown of communication between Islam and the West [37]. The heinous attacks of 9/11 are a milestone in augmenting Islamophobia [38] aside from the subsequent threats coming from the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, ISIS.

What is more, news media may have the potential for increasing negative outgroup attitudes. News media endorse more negative news about outgroup members than positive news [39]. In fact, there is a consensus that media generalize and depict Muslims with negative images and constantly over represent them to be terrorist suspects [40-43]. Connecting all of these local, national,

and international incidents have placed Islam in the forefront of political and social discussions [44]. Terms, such as Islamic terrorism and Islamic extremism are often used whenever Islam is presented [45].

Reducing negative attitudes outgroup attitudes on Facebook

Contact research on Facebook aimed to promote positive intergroup relations is relatively little and shows mixed results. Ruesch [46] found that while Facebook groups and pages enable opposing groups (Israeli-Palestinian groups) to connect as an alternative means for creating discussions, little positive intergroup contact was found. However, the results cannot be generalized because it is challenging to sustain positive intergroup relations for groups with political conflicts [47]. Moreover, out of the analyzed Facebook groups, only 19.2% of the groups were focused on positive intergroup contact.

In contrast, Mor, Nor, Maoz [27] found that moderate to peaceful intergroup posts on Facebook generated higher intergroup dialogue and acceptance. Another content analysis by Schumann, Schumann, van der Linden, and Klein [48] analyzed comments from Facebook groups with names that indicated social differences, such as gender, religion, and nationality and found a significant decrease in prejudice for both ingroup and outgroup members.

Schwab and Greitemeyer [49] also conducted an online survey on Facebook users from different European countries. Except for attitudes toward Jews, results indicated a significant positive relation between the percentage of outgroup friends on Facebook and outgroup attitudes toward immigrants, ethnic minorities, and Muslims. The study, however, asked European participants about their negative toward immigrants, Muslims, and Jews. A European (an ingroup) participant could be a Muslim, which would influence the validity of the overall result. Therefore, when asking questions about attitudes toward Muslims, for instance, the study needs to make sure that ingroup members are not Muslims.

Number of outgroup Facebook friends

Many studies related to Facebook interaction have highlighted the importance of examining the number of Facebook friends [50,51]. In studies related to Facebook intergroup contact, Farquhar and Davidson [52] found that the more unique groups in one's Facebook network, such as family and coworkers, the less social distance toward outgroup members was reported. Another study [49] used the Facebook application to garner the exact number of friends on Facebook from other countries. They found that the larger the number of Facebook outgroup friends, the more the participants favored outgroup members. Nonetheless, not all outgroup users on Facebook elucidate their country of origins or share their hometowns. What is more, retrieving information about race and religion on Facebook would be difficult to obtain using the Facebook application. Thus, a question about the number of Muslim friends on Facebook needs to be directly asked to Facebook ingroup users.

Number of extended friends

Pettigrew, Christ, Wagner, and Stellmacher [53] found that extended friendship can help to improve intergroup relations. One reason is that due to the extended friendship, anxiety could be weaker than with a classic interaction with outgroup members. It is also easier to apply this strategy on a larger scale without an ingroup member needing to have an outgroup friend, which can be applied on Facebook. The concept of extended Facebook friends was highlighted in one study. Using an experimental study, Schwab and Greitemeyer [54] showed participants Facebook screenshots of profile users from different outgroup individuals paired with the phrase "1 mutual friend" to stimulate that there is a connection between a friend of an ingroup member and individual from a foreign culture. Results show the intervention did not improve outgroup attitudes. Nevertheless, the failure of the study may be due to the fact that they used a study procedure instead of a natural environment where ingroup members acknowledge real cross-group relations on Facebook.

Frequency of Facebook activities with outgroup members

Previous research on Facebook found that users are able to interact through Facebook activities with a broader group of people and keep in touch with them [55,56]. Some studies divided Facebook activities into two modes of interaction: direct communication, such as writing comments, chatting, and liking, and broadcasting, such as writing on the wall and sharing [57,58]. Burke [57] added a third mode of social interaction, passive communication, where an online user reads profile pages and public interactions as well as views of links, pictures, and videos shared by other users.

It is apparent that there is a lack of research examining Facebook activities regarding intergroup encounters and its relation to outgroup attitudes. One study [52] examined general Facebook usage for users and did not find a correlation between Facebook intensity and social distance. Obtained Facebook usage, however, was not directed to frequency of Facebook intergroup activities. It follows, then, that examining Facebook behaviors should be limited to activities that involve intergroup contact.

The moderating role of online interpersonal communication with an outgroup member

Given the fact that online interpersonal communication increases attraction between members of different groups [35], the role of CMC in easing communication with an outgroup member is important to be reviewed.

Social attraction in CMC

Social attraction is referred as the degree to which a person is seen as a likely friend on CMC [59]. Schiappa, Gregg, and Hewes [14] found that social attraction of an outgroup character on television decreased prejudice and increased positive relation with gays. Similar results were found in increasing positive attraction after online contact [60-62].

Wang, Walther, and Hancock [8] concentrated on when and how CMC enhances interpersonal impressions of an outgroup member. The study found that in spite of individuals being ingroup or outgroup members, the distinctive characteristics of CMC influenced positive ingroup impressions. Facebook users would be more likely to present themselves in positive light to improve their overall social image [63]. Specifically on Facebook, Walther et al., [9] found that attraction plays a vital role in enhancing interpersonal perceptions regardless of whether the target was well known or less known on Facebook. Another study [64] found that attraction on Facebook is important in developing and maintaining relationships. Consistent with previous results, Sheldon [65] examined interpersonal attraction between recently added friends on Facebook and found that social attraction was related to forming positive relationships between individuals.

Therefore, an argument can be made about the moderating effects of interpersonal communication in CMC. White [15] assert that perceiving an outgroup as a friend "allows for the building of an important self-engagement context where trust can be developed trust being the cornerstone of positive outgroup feelings and attitudes" influencing the relation between contact and reducing outgroup attitudes. Accordingly, the study attempts to understand if the negative relation between online intergroup communication and Islamophobia depends on the level of social attraction (high, average, or low) toward a Muslim on Facebook. The research argues that positive online interpersonal communication with a Muslim would strengthen Facebook communication effects (such having Muslim Facebook friends and engaging in frequent activities with Muslims) on decreasing Islamophobia. Similar effects would be expected for extended contact, except that interpersonal communication is more likely to have a larger benefit on ingroup members who engage in Facebook communication rather than individuals who are only informed about the interaction.

Hypotheses

Considering the results from previous literature, this research study intends to examine the following hypotheses (Figure 1):

H1: There is a negative correlation between the number of Muslim Facebook friends and Islamophobia.

H2: There is a negative correlation between the number of extended Facebook contact and Islamophobia.

H3: Facebook intergroup activities (direct communication, passive communication, and broadcasting) related to Muslims and Islam on Facebook are negatively correlated to Islamophobia.

H4a: Social attraction toward a Muslim on Facebook would moderate the negative correlation between the number of Muslim Facebook friends and Islamophobia.

H4b: Social attraction toward a Muslim on Facebook would moderate the negative correlation between the number of extended Facebook friends and Islamophobia.

H4c: Social attraction toward a Muslim on Facebook would moderate the negative correlation between direct communication activities related to Muslims and Islam on Facebook and Islamophobia.

H4d: Social attraction toward a Muslim on Facebook would moderate the negative correlation between passive

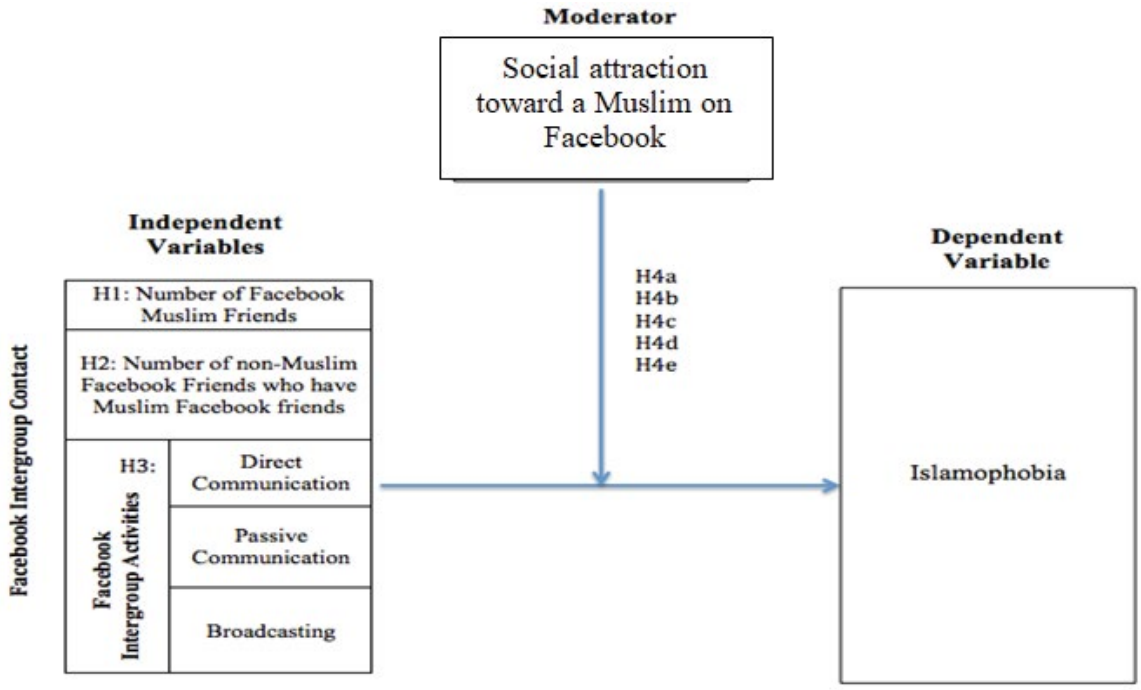

Figure 1: Conceptual framework for the study.

communication activities related to Muslims and Islam on Facebook and Islamophobia.

H4e: Social attraction toward a Muslim on Facebook would moderate the negative correlation between broadcasting activities related to Muslims and Islam on Facebook and Islamophobia.

Methodology

Sampling, participants, and procedure

The study utilized the purposive sampling for recruiting participants. Participants were recruited through a commercial survey platform: Qualtrics Survey. Participants were a non-Muslim, a Facebook user, currently living in the US, and 18 years old or older. Potential participants, who did not meet the requirements, were asked to exit the survey.

The sample consisted of 416 participants (62% of participants were female) who completed the informed consent and measures through an online survey between December 2017 and February 2018. No identifying information was collected. Of those participants, 250 participants had communicated with a Muslim on Facebook and answered questions related to such communication to examine the moderator. Table 1 provides the distribution of demographics, political affiliation, and religion.

Measures

Islamophobia (IS): Islamophobia scale [66] assessed fear related attitudes toward Islam and Muslims with two subscales of cognitive (I-CG) and affective-behavioral (I-AB) with high internal consistency for IS scale, as well as positively correlated subscales. A number of studies have successfully used IS scale [67,20]. Participants responded to 16 items on a 5-point Likert scale from (1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree). Items included "If I could, I would avoid contact with Muslims," and "Islam is a dangerous religion." The two IS subscales were combined and all items in the measure were added to form a composite score. A higher score indicates a higher level of Islamophobic attitudes (M=1.84, SD=.893, α=.98).

Number of muslim Facebook friends: This variable refers to the number of Muslims who are in the participant's Facebook friend list. A number of FtF intergroup contact studies have asked participants to quantify the number of outgroup friends [68]. Participants were asked to estimate how many of their Facebook friends are Muslims by selecting from the following options (1=Not at all, 2=1-5, 3=6-10, 4=11-15, 5=16-20, 6=21-25, 7=More than 25, and 0=I do not know). Table 2 shows the distribution of the number of Muslim Facebook friends.

Number of extended Facebook contact: This variable measures extended Facebook intergroup contact. Previous offline extended research asked respondents how many of their ingroup friends have outgroup friends [68,24]. Participants were asked to estimate how many of their non-Muslim Facebook friends have Muslim Facebook friends by choosing from the following options (1=Not at all, 2=1-5, 3=6-10, 4=11-15, 5=16-20, 6=21-25, 7=More than 25, and 0=I do not know). Table 2 shows the distribution of the number of extended Facebook friends.

Frequency of Facebook intergroup activities variables: Direct communication, passive communication, and broadcasting subscales [57] were adapted to measure positive intergroup activities on Facebook. These independent subscales were modified to fit activities associated only with Muslims or Muslim related content on Facebook. Participants were asked to rate how frequently they perform constructive activities with Muslims or Muslim related content on Facebook ranging from (1=never to 5=very). Constructive Facebook activities, communication and media materials can be described as positive, friendly, likable, and respectful [14]. The direct communication subscale, one-to-one interaction, includes four items, such as "Give likes under pictures or posts related to Muslims and Islam" (M=2.4, SD=1.011, α=.869). The passive communication subscale, consuming content on Facebook, composes three items; such as "View likeable multimedia content (e.g., photos, videos, etc.)" (M=2.76, SD=1.1, α=.874). The broadcasting subscale, one-to-many interaction, comprises of three items, such as "Share likeable multimedia content (e.g., photos, videos, etc.)" (M=2.38, SD=1.1, α=.911). Higher scores indicate higher Facebook intergroup activities. Table 3 provides frequencies of Facebook intergroup activities.

Social attraction: Social attraction toward a Muslim on Facebook assessed to what extent a non-Muslim perceives a Muslim Facebook user as a likely friend based on a previous interaction. It also measures whether communication between the two will continue. This variable was measured by using social attraction subscale from interpersonal attraction scale [59] which has been used consistently with reliability since its development across the communication fields [14], especially in CMC studies [9,35]. On a 7-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree to 7=strongly agree), participants were asked to indicate their feelings about a Muslim they have communicated with on Facebook, with higher scores indicating a more favourable perception. The social attraction measure (M=5.78, SD=1.133, α=.805) is composed of five items, such as "I would like to have a friendly chat with him/her again on Facebook," and "We could never establish a personal friendship with each other" (reverse coded).

Results

Coefficient correlation analyses

Coefficient correlation tests were implemented to examine correlations between all independent variables and the dependent variable, Islamophobia. Consistent with contact theory, results indicated that H1, H2, and H3 were supported. There were significant negative correlations between the number of Muslim friends (r=-.310, p<.001), extended Facebook contact (r=-.241, p<.001) and Islamophobia. Also, there were significant negative correlations for all Facebook intergroup activities: direct communication (r=-.295, p<.001), passive communication

Table 1: Results of demographics, political affiliation, and religion.

Variable		N	Per-cent	Vari-able		N	Per-cent	Vari-able		N	Per-cent	Vari able		N	Per cent	Vari-able		N	Percent
Age	18 to 24 years	56	13.5	Political Affiliation	Democrat	193	46.5	Educa-tion	Did not complete high school	9	2.2	Religious Affiliation	Christian	179	43.1	Race	White	289	69.6
	25 to 34 years	112	27		Republican	62	14.9		High school/GED	48	11.6		Jewish	11	2.7		Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin	38	9.2
	35 to 44 years	85	20.5		Indepen dent	125	30.1		Some college	109	26.3		Buddhist	8	1.9		Black or African American	62	14.9
	45 to 54 years	51	12.3		Not Political	17	4.1		Bachelor's degree	109	26.3		Hindu	2	0.5		American Indian or Alaska Native	14	3.4
	55 to 64 years	68	16.4		Other	18	4.3		Master's degree	84	20.2		Catholic	45	10.8		Middle Eastern or North African	5	1.2
	Age 65 or older	43	10.4						Graduate work/ Ph.D.	56	13.5		Prefer not say	9	2.2		Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander	3	0.7
													Non-religious	137	33		Other	2	0.5
													Other	24	5.8				

Table 2: Distribution of the number of Muslim Facebook friends and extended Facebook friends.

	None	01-05	06-10	11-15	16-20	21-25	More than 25	Don't know
Muslim FB Friends	82	116	49	16	12	11	29	100
	-19.80%	-28.00%	-11.80%	-3.90%	-2.90%	-2.70%	-7.00%	-24.10%
Extended FB Friends	21	37	38	20	10	4	87	198 (47.0%)
	-5.10%	-8.90%	-9.20%	-4.80%	-2.40%	-1.00%	-21%	

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Table 3: Frequencies of facebook activities related to Muslims and Islam on Facebook.

Facebook Intergroup Activities related to Muslims and Islam	Statement	M	SD
Direct Communication	Write comments	2.35	1.15
	Chat on Facebook Messenger	2.07	1.15
	Post on other's walls	2.12	1.08
	Give likes	3.06	1.37
Passive Communication	Read text	3.03	1.28
	View multimedia content	2.95	1.25
	View Muslims profiles	2.28	1.12
Broadcasting	Share text	2.47	1.19
	Share multimedia content	2.42	1.18
	Write on your timeline	2.24	1.14

(r=-.376, p<.001), broadcasting (r=-.282, p<.001) and Islamophobia.

Multiple regression analyses

To determine which Facebook activity related to Muslims influenced reduced Islamophobia, multiple regression analysis was computed and revealed only passive communication to significantly predict reduced Islamophobia, β=-.302, t=-4.869, p<.001.

More scrutiny on data revealed giving likes under direct communication to have the highest mean of all performed activities related to Muslims and Islam. Hence, additional analysis was conducted by keeping only the "giving likes" item under direct communication. Regression analysis revealed that both giving likes, β=-.147, t=-3.433, p=.001, and passive communication, β=-.238, t=-3.813, p<.001, were significant in predicting reduced Islamophobia.

Moderation multiple regression analyses

A moderator is a variable that determines the strength or the direction of the relationships between two other variables [69]. Scholars in intergroup contact have used moderators to indicate the effects of the independent variable on the dependent variable [70]. Following the 'PROCESS macro' by Hayes [69], hierarchical moderated multiple regression analyses were computed for H4a-H4e to assess the effects of moderating variables by entering an independent variable (X), a dependent variable (Y), and the moderator (M) into regression. Interaction effect was first reviewed between X and M. The effects of X on Y were then tested at three values of the continuous moderator: high (+1 SD above the mean), average (mean), and low (-1 SD below the mean) [71].

First, a significant negative correlation was obtained between social attraction and Islamophobia (r=-.546, p<.001). The interaction between the percentage of number of Muslim Facebook friends and social attraction toward a Muslim on Facebook did not significantly predict reduced Islamophobia, β=.023, t(1, 258)=1.204, p=.229, suggesting that social attraction did not moderate the negative relation between the number of Muslim Facebook friends and Islamophobia.

In the same vein, the interaction between the percentage of number of extended Facebook friends and social attraction toward a Muslim on Facebook did not significantly predict reduced Islamophobia, β=.022, t(1, 258)=1.297, p=.196. Accordingly, social attraction did not moderate the negative relation between the number of extended Facebook friends and Islamophobia.

Furthermore, the interaction between the percentage of broadcasting and social attraction toward a Muslim on Facebook did not significantly predict reduced Islamophobia, β=-.066, t (1, 258)=-1.458, p=.146. Attraction did not moderate the negative relation between broadcasting and Islamophobia.

However, the interaction term between direct communication and Islamophobia was significant, β=-.075, t (1, 258)=-2.192, p=.029, showing social attraction as a significant moderator of the negative relation between direct communication and Islamophobia. Specifically, the moderation effect of social attraction between Facebook Muslim friends and Islamophobia was significant only at higher level of social attraction, β=-.201, t (1, 258)=-3.837, p<.01.

The interaction term between passive communication and Islamophobia was significant, β=-.109, t (1, 258)=-2.132, p=.034, showing social attraction as a significant moderator of the negative relation between passive communication and Islamophobia. In particular, the moderation effect of social attraction between passive communication and Islamophobia was significant at both average social attraction β=-.117, t (1,258)=-2.485, p=.014 and high level of social attraction, β=-.241, t (1,258)=-4.222, p<0.01.

Discussion

The purpose of the study was to survey non-Muslim Facebook users about the best practices Facebook used to help them overcome Islamophobia. In general, results indicated that Facebook intergroup communication could improve intergroup relations, overcoming the lack of FtF contact between Muslims

and non-Muslims.

Muslim Facebook friends

The finding supports Allport's [21] contact theory and online Internet hypothesis [7], where the more a non-Muslim has Muslim Facebook friends, the less Islamophobia was reported. The result is also in line with Schwab and Greitemeyer [49] in finding a relation between the amount of outgroup friends on Facebook and positive outgroup attitudes.

Extended Facebook friends

Results showed that the more a non-Muslim participant acknowledges a cross-group friendship on Facebook, the less Islamophobia was reported. This finding correlates with previous studies about the effectiveness of extended friends (offline) in improving positive intergroup relations [9,72,73]. However, this finding contradicted Schwab and Greitemeyer's [54] experimental study. Therefore, the current finding is the first to challenge the prior study confirming that extended Facebook contact can shift stereotypes. It is possible that visibility on Facebook, compared to other CMC channels, could help ingroup members to be more cognizant of extended outgroup individuals without much effort.

Crisp and Turner [74] argue that actual contact is not essential to endorse tolerance. Rather, acknowledging that an ingroup friend has a cross-group network could result in an ingroup member imagining a positive contact with other members from different groups, which can be applicable on Facebook. While the scholars clarified that extended and imagined contacts do not have long lasting effects, extended contact could be taken into a further level by encouraging ingroup members (e.g., non-Muslims) to add the outgroup individual (e.g., Muslim) on Facebook and/or perform activities and social behaviors related to outgroup members.

Facebook intergroup activities

The study offers a new insight about the relation between Facebook intergroup communication and Islamophobia. Results revealed that participants are engaged in various activities related to Muslims and Islam. It proves what previous studies have discovered about CMC featuring a dynamic feedback loop where communication on Facebook improves relationships [32]. However, writing comments and broadcasting (or sharing) were not as effective as giving likes and passive communication in reducing Islamophobia.

It is possible that people usually give likes more than write comments because the latter requires more time and action [75]. This outcome is relatively similar to the result of a study by the Pew Research Center indicating that on a daily basis, 44% of Facebook users like content, 31% write a comment, while 19% send private messages on Facebook [76].

The result of giving likes and passive communication to predict reduced Islamophobia does not entirely support the findings of previous studies. Burke et al., [57] found that direct communication predicts bridging social capital, whereas Burke and Kraut [77] revealed that both direct (including writing comments and giving likes) and passive communications were associated with strengthening relations. The nature of activities and tests determined in these studies differs in several places. Burke and Kraut [77] concentrated on activities performed with a specific individual in relation to strengthening relationships with that individual instead of outgroup members and attitudes. What is more, direct communication in this research is more inclusive than prior studies. Case in point, writing comments encompasses writing under a Muslim's post and any general Muslim related content, like stories and news.

In addition, the constant technological advancement has enabled users to spend more time on Facebook, receive more graphic stories and watch Live Videos. Data showed that 35% of participants somewhat frequently to very frequently view multimedia content. This may turn the attention of the role of visual cues in making information more conspicuous and significant [56]. Facebook content can attract ingroup individuals' attention allowing them to understand more complex information about Muslims.

Another important explanation is that Facebook connections allow users to access information from various resources [78], such as reading rational information imbedded from blogs and posts of outgroup experiences (e.g., Muslims) circulated on Facebook. Data of this study revealed that almost 37% of participants are frequently engaged in Facebook behaviors in terms of reading text. This content could be more important to some ingroup members than mere commenting or sharing. The work from Bond et al., [79] found that political messages circulated on Facebook not only influenced Facebook users, but also their friends, and friends of their friends to vote.

The results also demonstrate that liking is not just about clicking the button, but bears profound meaning. It could be said that visual features in passive communication encourages users to give likes on Facebook. That said, people are giving likes because they are "emotionally driven" [75] from the Facebook content, which was shown to predict reduced Islamophobia. Especially with Facebook's reactions (e.g., emoji-like faces and heart) in accordance with the "like" button, users are able to show their empathy and solidarity under other users' content. Overall, results may draw attention to three central conclusions; the fact that users are less likely to write comments, are more likely to consume content and give likes, and therefore influence predicting reduced negative outgroup attitudes.

Interpersonal attraction

Results showed mixed results for interpersonal attraction as a moderator. In general, results support the hyperpersonal approach that CMC can idealize effective communication between opposing groups [35]. Online users take advantage of the Internet to exchange positive communication and increase social attraction [29]. First, analysis revealed that the negative relation between the number of Facebook Muslim friends and Islamophobia would affect whether a non-Muslim is socially

attracted to or not attracted to a Muslim on Facebook. Choosing to add more Muslim Facebook friends is beyond liking another Muslim. As such, non-Muslims could add a Muslim because he/she is a mutual friend with an ingroup friend on Facebook or member in a Facebook group who shares similar interests.

Second, results showed that extended contact through Facebook was shown to predict reduced negative outgroup attitudes but this relation does not depend on Facebook interpersonal communication. This result was expected since online extended contact is extremely inactive [54]. For ingroup individuals who have communicated with a Muslim on Facebook, social attraction (either high, average, or low) does not stimulate non-Muslims' attention to be conscious of and acknowledge intergroup contact on Facebook.

Third, although there was a negative correlation between broadcasting and Islamophobia, this relation seems to be distant from being socially attracted to a Muslim on Facebook. This result can be interpreted from different angles. On Facebook, broadcasting mostly represents an individual's identity. Previous research has shown a relation between Facebook participation (i.e., broadcasting) and self-presentation [31,80]. Facebook users, however, share on their walls to reflect upon themselves, like sharing hobbies and interests [77] and less tailored to a precise group of individuals.

Another possible clarification is that broadcasting could be influenced by what makes Facebook users feel secure and confident [81]. It is likely that because sharing and writing on other's walls on Facebook can be seen by other users from different cultural, political standpoints, and beliefs, some ingroup members (non-Muslims) have become more cautious about their intergroup activities. Especially when it comes to the topic of religion, certain Facebook users would be hesitant to share such related content [82].

Fourth, interpersonal attraction was found to moderate the negative relation between direct communication and Islamophobia at high level of social attraction. This finding further supports the idea that friendship formation moderates the negative relation between online intergroup contact and outgroup attitudes [15]. The result is also in line with Walther's hyperpersonal perspective indicating that likable CMC communication with outgroup members increased positive intergroup discussions [8]. Facebook is a proper channel that gives openness to maintain and strengthen direct contact [83], such as writing more comments, liking, and chatting with either the exact individual or another Muslim. However, when a person does not (or is less likely to) like a Muslim on Facebook, direct communication would not be affected. This conclusion is promising because it shows when low social attraction is presented, non-Muslims would still perform direct activities on Facebook related to Muslim and Islam. It may not strengthen the communication, but it will not hinder non-Muslims from communicating with Muslims or Muslim related content.

Lastly, when interpersonal attraction toward a Muslim was at average or high level, the level of passive intergroup communication on Facebook appeared to be a major determinant of reduced Islamophobia. One explanation for this finding could be that average and high social attraction would stand out more than low social attraction making ingroup individuals eager to observe and learn more about outgroup individuals (Muslims), which is easier to implement through CMC. It is noteworthy to indicate that lower levels of social attraction do not discourage ingroup individuals to garner positive information or hamper participants from reading about Muslim related content. This inference is in accordance with recent studies suggesting that ingroup individuals would benefit more from positive interpersonal communication than negative communication [84].

Limitation of the Study

This research is subject to important limitations. First, causation cannot be inferred due to the cross-sectional design used. The sample employed in the study makes it difficult to generalize to the Facebook population. It should be also underlined that respondents reported a low level of Islamophobia. During collecting data, there were not any related incidents that would impact participants' attitudes toward Muslims. The study was also skewed toward females, democrats, and White people. Further research may try to have an equal representation of demographic information to strengthen the results. Finally, during the operationalization of Facebook activities, some behaviors may have unintentionally been omitted.

Conclusion

In examining intergroup communication, such as in the name of reducing Islamophobia by different groups through CMC, relevant conclusions are supported. This research contributes by explaining how negative outgroup attitudes, like Islamophobia, can be decreased online in ingroup members (non-Muslims) using Allport's theory. Similar to FtF intergroup contact, the number of outgroup Facebook friends, the number of extended Facebook contacts, and Facebook intergroup activities were all supported. Using social media is an opportunity to help, to a certain degree, build bridges between different groups by accepting other cultures and overcoming ignorance. Over time, online contacts seem able, at least conceivably, to empower ingroup members to undertake numerous implementations related to outgroup members. This does not, of course, prevent different outcomes through similar mechanisms. Future research may examine how effectively the telling of stories is when it comes to actually transferring or communicating information in a way that can lead to change, such as porous boundaries between ingroup and outgroup members.

Contemporary communication therefore provides the opportunities for these kinds of communications and also for examination of the influence of interpersonal communication on Facebook intergroup contact effects. Precisely, the study was built on the online contact theory and hyperpersonal model of CMC. It was used to examine interpersonal communication on Facebook

as a moderator to understand the impact of individualized impressions on Facebook intergroup contact effects on a highly visual cues platform. Results provide evidence extending the hyperpersonal perspective integrated with the contact theory that effective interpersonal communication through CMC not just increases intergroup relations but also the desire of ingroup members to use CMC visual cues to communicate and read more about a specific group, likely acting as factors to reduce negative outgroup attitudes when implemented and considered fully. Future application of this idea, therefore, could conceivably reveal additional evidence, at least theoretically, of the impact of CMC in exceeding and influencing online intergroup contact effects, such as increasing intergroup connections and visualized consumption of outgroup content in the online sphere.

Core findings also further reinforce the relation between Facebook intergroup contact and negative outgroup attitudes not being in any way confined to people who communicate with outgroup members. This study confirms the inference that effective exposure to visual cues, *via* mediated content, can and should be considered when seeking to improve intergroup relations. Bridging gaps, especially with a global mind set and public scholarship on social media, should be able to lead to shared concepts and new ideas. Sharing of lived experience, therefore, can improve intergroup relations and create safer and more inclusive spaces where diverse individuals can interact openly and honestly.

Implications for Future Research

Future research can investigate if demographics and the exposure of news media would influence Facebook intergroup contact effects. It is also worthwhile to investigate the influence of Facebook use since intensity of using Facebook would differ from user to user and thus affect performing different Facebook activities and having friends from different cultures.

In addition, there is abundant room for further progress in distinguishing between different intergroup behaviors in Facebook activities. For example, researchers can differentiate between giving likes under an outgroup member's post, such as a personal text or picture, and outgroup (e.g., Muslims) related content, like pro posts about Islam. Direct communication also could be divided into composed and received direct intergroup communications and examine their relation to negative outgroup attitudes.

Another scope of investigation is to compare between pro and con Facebook intergroup activities to help understand at a micro-level the kind of activities that improve outgroup relations. Future research could also invest more on social media for better planning to address social issues between different groups by understanding how different social media platforms can differ in enhancing constructive intergroup relations compared to FtF communication. All told, there is a need for solid and more inclusive conceptual framework from a communication perspective to examine how different online communicative behaviors with outgroup individuals and/or outgroup related content, including textual and visual content, can shift Islamophobia.

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Conflict of Interest

The Author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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