Cross-Issue Agenda Setting from Racism to Immigration: Spreading Activation or Group Threat?

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CROSS-ISSUE AGENDA SETTING FROM RACISM TO IMMIGRATION: SPREADING ACTIVATION OR GROUP THREAT?

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Manship School of Mass Communication

by

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B.A. University of Bridgeport, 2014
M.A., University of Bridgeport, 2017
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The past five years have tested me in so many different ways. Being far from my family, working continuously on weekends to meet countless deadlines, receiving harsh rejections, dealing with the uncertainty of the job market, and coping with the COVID-19 pandemic are just a few examples of the many challenges I faced during my Ph.D. journey. This journey, and this dissertation, would not have been possible without the help, support, and encouragement from several exceptional people with whom I crossed paths. They say that when we achieve, we do so because others have helped. As cliché as it may sound, I believe a cliché has never been more appropriate than in my case. Naming all these people would be an incredibly hard task, so here I want to take a moment to thank the ones who helped make this happen.

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ABSTRACT

Little research to date offers evidence for the “cross-issue agenda setting effect,” that is, transfer of salience from media coverage of racism to perceived importance of immigration. Laboratory experiments afford the opportunity to facilitate causal inference in determining whether this cross-issue effect is due to a cognitive mechanism of spreading activation (as conventionally assumed in agenda setting research) or to a cumulative, affective process driven by perceived threat to a certain identity group. Observational data, on the other hand, allow to externally validate the experimental results beyond the constrained settings typical of laboratory experimentation.

This dissertation combines the strengths of these two methodological approaches by employing three controlled, laboratory experiments to test the psychological mechanisms at work behind the cross-issue effect. I then complement the results from the experiments with analyses of publicly available opinion data from Gallup polls’ most important problems questions paired with a content analysis of news coverage of racism in the New York Times over multiple years. The results from the experiments show that the cross-issue effect is hard to reproduce in laboratory settings and that the cognitive mechanisms assumed in agenda setting theory (spreading activation and agenda cueing) are not responsible for this phenomenon to occur. Non-significant results from the correlational analyses also indicate that the cross-issue effect is rare and does not automatically occur in real settings.

Together, these findings assert that the remaining explanation behind the cross-issue effect is a cumulative, affective mechanism based on perceived threat to a group identity. Exposure to what are perceived to be repeated complaints about racism is taken as an implicit attack to the ingroup by some individuals, resulting in a defensive response manifesting as
hostility to outgroups in the form of opposition to immigration. This conclusion offers an improved theorization of the phenomenon under investigation with important implications for both theory and practice.
CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

My own recent experiment found a “cross-issue agenda setting effect,” that is transfer of salience from racism news coverage to perceived importance of immigration (Santia, Pingree, Bryanov, & Watson, 2021). Exposure to news about White people being racist can increase the public’s perceived importance of immigration as a national problem. This is a troubling finding because it suggests that efforts to highlight racism may instead sometimes backfire and lead to hostility to outgroups. Whether this effect always occurs, whether it occurs only for certain types of racism coverage, and how exactly it occurs are open questions. I refer to this effect as a cross-issue effect from racism to immigration because the news stimuli employed in the experimental study focused on incidents of racism against African Americans, not against an immigrant racial group. To understand the apparently irrational link between media coverage of racism and perceived immigration importance, I locate the cross-issue effect at the intersection of agenda setting theory (McCombs, 2004; McCombs & Shaw, 1972) and group threat theory (Blalock, 1967; Blumer, 1958), which offer very different psychological mechanisms of effect that could explain these results. In particular, agenda setting has traditionally relied on cognitive mechanisms such as cognitive accessibility and agenda cueing whereas group threat hinges on an affective response driven by perceived threat to a group identity.

This dissertation aims to assess how well this cross-issue effect replicates in laboratory experiments as well as in observational data, and to test the psychological mechanisms at work behind the cross-issue effect. Little research to date has provided evidence of how placing media emphasis on one issue (e.g., racism) may affect perceived importance of another issue (e.g., immigration) – for an exception, see Mendelberg’s (2001) work on racial priming. Controlled, laboratory experiments offer the advantage of replicating this effect in a cheaper, faster, and
more practical way compared to the field experiment employed in my previous work. Laboratory experiments also afford the opportunity to facilitate causal inference in determining whether this cross-issue effect is due to a cognitive mechanism of information processing (as conventionally assumed in agenda setting research) or to an affective process driven by group threat. Observational data, on the other hand, allow to externally validate the experimental results beyond the constrained settings typical of laboratory experimentation.

This dissertation combines the strengths of these two methodological approaches to follow up on the cross-issue effect. In the chapters that follow, I employ three laboratory experiments to attempt to replicate the cross-issue effect and test its possible psychological mechanisms. I then complement these results with publicly available opinion data from Gallup polls’ most important problems questions paired with a content analysis of news coverage of the New York Times over multiple years. Together, the findings from these studies offer an improved theorization of the phenomenon under investigation with important implications for both theory and practice.

**Linking Racism and Immigration**

Agenda setting theory (McCombs, 2004; McCombs & Shaw, 1972) and group threat theory (Blalock, 1967; Blumer, 1958) offer competing psychological mechanisms to explain how media coverage of racism can increase perceived importance of immigration – i.e., the cross-issue effect under investigation.

**Group Threat**

Motivated by insights from social identity theory (Greene, 2004; Tajfel & Turner, 1979), group threat theory (Blalock, 1967; Blumer, 1958) provides a possible explanation as to why some individuals will link news stories on racism to increased immigration importance.
Specifically, group threat theory posits that perceived threat to the existing economic, cultural, and social order is a strong motivator for developing negative attitudes toward the group deemed as threatening and for engaging in specific behaviors aimed at protecting the interests and wellbeing of the ingroup (Kinder & Kam, 2009; Valentino, Brader, & Jardina, 2013; White, 2007). Following this logic, news about racism may be perceived by some individuals as an implicit criticism of the dominant group, and may activate a defensive response among some individuals, manifesting as opposition to immigration (Valentino, Brader, & Jardina, 2013; Winter, 2008). This is because immigrants are perceived by some individuals as a threat to the existing status quo and as contributing to the eventual loss of the in-group’s numerical majority, power, and privileges, particularly when the immigrants differ in terms of race from the natives and in places where resources are particularly scarce (Citrin, Green, Muste, & Wong, 1997; Dixon & Linz, 2000; Hopkins, 2010; Kinder & Kam, 2009; Valentino, Brader, & Jardina, 2013). A focus on the race or ethnicity of the migrants is likely to elicit racially motivated attitudes and strong resentment toward immigrants (Banks, 2016). Indeed, White Americans generally see themselves as belonging to the in-group – which is characterized by virtue, cooperation, and a high degree of trust – and feel threatened by immigrants because immigrants belong to the stigmatized out-group threatening the American way of life and the Protestant traditional values such as a strong work ethics. This racial threat felt by White Americans can be seen as a consequence of racial resentment and the belief that one’s group gain is another’s loss (Kidner & Sanders, 1996). Prior research in this realm has linked racism to immigration, such that exposure to racist messages has been found to influence immigration policy preferences and increase immigration strictness (Ayers et al., 2009; Brader, Valentino, & Suhay, 2008). Ayers and colleagues (2009) found that seeing immigrants as potential threats to traditional American
norms of individualism and the Protestant work ethic reinforces beliefs about the negative impact of immigration on American culture, jobs, and the economy and, more crucially, activates support for restrictive immigration policies. Similarly, Brader, Valentino, and Suhay (2008) found that cues about immigrants’ race can trigger anxiety, which in turn boosts opposition to immigrants and expansive immigration policies. This presumed mechanism of defense rooted in identity threat is worth investigating to understand how news about a certain racial group may be interpreted as a threat to one’s own group.

**Agenda Setting**

Agenda setting theory (McCombs, 2004; McCombs & Shaw, 1972), on the other hand, offers competing mechanisms to explain the cross-issue effect, including cognitive accessibility and agenda cueing. Cognitive accessibility is the propensity for information stored in memory to be activated, as a result of recent or frequent prior activation (Drew & Weaver, 2006; Higgins, 1996; Price & Tewskbury, 1997). Tversky and Kahneman’s (1973) classic model of accessibility postulates that individuals can use accessibility as a heuristic to estimate the frequency of an event, or the likelihood of its occurrence, “by the ease with which instances or associations come to mind” (p. 208). As applied in agenda setting, cognitive accessibility is conventionally deemed responsible for changes in perceptions of issue importance (Price & Tewksbury, 1997; Scheufele, 2000). In other words, people are more likely to mention issues that receive increased media coverage when they are asked to list the most important problems facing the nation because these issues are easy to recall (Price & Tewksbury, 1997; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). Emphasizing news coverage of racism through higher frequency or prominence of coverage may lead individuals of the public to think that racism is an important national problem when compared to other problems that receive less coverage. But news coverage of racism may
render race cognitively accessible in people’s mind and sway some individuals to activate racial predispositions about the group portrayed in the news (e.g., Dixon & Maddox, 2005; Oliver & Fonash, 2002). Cognitive accessibility of race may reinforce negative stereotypes and perpetuate negative social reality judgments about the group (Abraham & Appiah, 2006; Goidel, Parent, & Mann, 2011; Oliver, 1999; Ramasubramanian, 2011). More importantly, activation of thoughts about race may spread to other race-related concepts in memory, including immigration (Jardina, 2019; Valentino, Brader, & Jardina, 2013). Thus, news about racism may influence not only what people think about immigration (i.e., whether they support stricter immigration policies), but whether they think about immigration as one of the most important issues facing the nation (i.e., agenda setting effects of racism coverage on immigration).

Although some role for cognitive accessibility in agenda setting cannot be ruled out, assuming that people respond to the Most Important Problem question simply by relying on accessible information made more salient by the media appears to be an oversimplification of agenda setting effects. More recent work suggests that individuals do not always rely on accessible information in their minds when asked to form their judgments. Rather, they often engage in a more effortful, systematic mechanism of information processing which leads to more introspective, nuanced, and moderate opinions on the issue received from the media (Chaiken & Trope, 1999; Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). Besides cognitive accessibility, agenda setting also works through cueing. Exposure to media cues about importance of problems may help individuals find out what the most important national problems are without any actual exposure to news content (Pingree & Stoycheff, 2013; Stoycheff, Pingree, Peifer, & Sui, 2018). In this case, individuals may simply use cues from media workers to form their opinions on a variety of public issues (Pingree & Stoycheff, 2013; Stoycheff, Pingree, Peifer, & Sui, 2018).
A review of agenda setting literature indicates that scholars have overwhelmingly looked at agenda setting effects within issues, that is how news coverage relative to one specific issue affects public attitudes toward that same issue. This is because agenda setting theory has traditionally assumed a mechanism of issue independence derived from transfer of salience from the media agenda to the public agenda (McCombs, 2004). Little research to date has provided evidence of how media emphasis on one issue may affect attitudes toward an issue not directly related to it (for notable exceptions, see Mendelberg, 2001; Valentino, 1999; Valentino, Hutchings, & White, 2002). According to associative models in human memory, the mind is made up of networks of concepts linked to one another by association (Anderson & Bower, 1974; Collins & Loftus, 1975; Read & Miller, 1998; Smith, 1996). When one memory network is activated, this activation tends to spread to other connected concepts in the network, making the related information more readily accessible for use in subsequent exposure to relevant stimuli (Anderson & Bower, 1974; Collins & Loftus, 1975; Smith, 1996). This means that activation of one schema has the potential to spread to another closely linked schema through a process called “spreading activation” (Collins & Loftus, 1975; Valentino, 1999). This sort of reasoning is particularly interesting as it explains the potential to transfer accessibility from one issue to another that bears some sort of similarity (Berkowitz & Rogers, 1986; Smith, 1996). Among others, Cappella and Jamieson (1997) tested for activation of memory links in the context of American election campaigns and found that strategically framed news can activate knowledge and trigger feelings of cynicism or distrust, resulting in less support for certain public policies such as health care. Similarly, Valentino (1999) found that racial issues are inherently connected in memory and can be activated through news coverage of crime.
Spreading activation suggests that increased media emphasis on one issue may cross over to affect importance of other issues. The classic agenda setting experiments by Iyengar and Kinder (1987) tested for but did not find “hydraulic effects” in which emphasizing one issue reduced the importance of other issues. In a later experiment, Krosnick and Kinder (1990) tested the hydraulic pattern of media effects in relation to the Iran-Contra political scandal and found that media emphasis on these specific issues resulted in considerable decrease in importance of aid to Black individuals. Since then, recent theoretical developments have advanced the idea of a network agenda setting model (NAS) (e.g., Guo & McCombs, 2015; Guo, Vu, & McCombs, 2014; Vargo, Guo, & Amazeen, 2018). The NAS model, which is based on the associative network model of memory (Anderson & Bower, 1974; Collins & Loftus, 1975), incorporates concepts of cognitive mapping and social network theory to argue against the issue independence assumption. Specifically, this model proposes that certain issues are connected to each other through contextual meanings in the public’s mind, and that these connections can be transferred from the media to the public to make sense of the surrounding world (Guo, 2012). Accordingly, the media can directly or indirectly influence importance of interconnected concepts in the public’s mind (Guo & McCombs, 2015). For instance, if the media report two issues concurrently (e.g., the economy and unemployment), individuals will be likely to retrieve the connection between the two issues and associate shared meanings between two issues (Guo, 2012).

Despite recent published evidence for the NAS model (e.g., Guo & McCombs, 2015; Vargo, Guo, & Amazeen, 2018; Vargo, Guo, McCombs, & Shaw, 2014), it appears that after Iyengar and Kinder’s (1987) early tests of hydraulic effects, no experiment has reported a test of
agenda setting effects from news coverage of one specific issue to importance of other issues. A notable exception is my own recent work, which I discuss in detail in the next section.

**The 2018 Portal Study**

This section discusses the findings of my recent work related to the cross-issue agenda setting effect from racism to immigration (Santia et al., 2021). This work sets the foundation for this dissertation and suggests the need to investigate the possibility that media coverage of one issue (i.e., racism) may cross over to affect perceived importance of another issue (i.e., immigration). Exploring whether this occurs through the mechanisms of agenda setting or group threat is fertile ground to advance an improved theorization of the phenomenon under investigation with important implications from a media psychology standpoint.

Taking advantage of the interactive features typical of modern-day online news portals, my own experimental work offers evidence of cross-issue agenda setting effects from racism to immigration (Santia et al., 2021). The 2018 portal study employed a field experiment embedded in a purpose-built, online news portal similar to Google News to test agenda setting effects over a 12-day period in May 2018. The news portal displayed real, timely news content automatically pulled from Google News through RSS queries. For this study, we recruited paid U.S. adults (final N=1391) through the Amazon’s Mechanical Turk marketplace and asked them to use the portal like any other news aggregator and engage with the news content displayed for as much or as little as they wanted over the 12-day period. Although study participants were free to choose which news stories to read in detail, an experimental treatment manipulated prominence of news headlines appearing in a “trending stories” sidebar located on the portal’s main interface. Each participant was randomly assigned either to a condition with news headlines concerning anti-Black racism boosted in ranking while stories on guns were suppressed, or to a condition with
stories on anti-Black racism suppressed while stories on guns were boosted. To illustrate, in one condition, MTurkers were randomly exposed to real, timely news stories about anti-Black racism in a “trending stories” sidebar while in another condition participants did not see stories related to anti-Black racism and instead saw news stories on guns in an identical sidebar. The news stories appearing in this sidebar were real and were based on actual users’ behavioral inputs (i.e., clicks). This manipulation was carefully included in the experimental design in order to give study participants a sense of topics/issues other users of the portal were interested in reading. To maintain the degree of realism typical of field experiments, the stimulus stories included in the portal had to be real and timely. At the end of the 12-day period, the stories on racism that were included in the trending sidebar included a number of stories on incidents of racism toward African Americans, such as the “barbecuing while Black” incident in Oakland in April 2018 in which the apparent racial profiling was done by a White individual who called the police to complain about a group of Black Oakland residents gathered at a barbecue.

Boosting the ranking of such racism stories in the trending sidebar did not go unnoticed. This experimental treatment revealed a significant cross-issue effect, such that repeated exposure to a trending sidebar simulating users’ interest in news about anti-Black racism increased levels of perceived importance of immigration while also prompting support for stricter immigration policies among study participants (Santia et al., 2021). In other words, when participants saw racism news in the sidebar, their perceived importance of immigration increased, particularly among those who expressed a preference for the Republican Party. Respondent race also weakly moderated this cross-issue effect, corroborating existing work documenting the relationship between race and partisanship. Among non-whites, emphasizing anti-Black racism news
coverage increased importance of immigration while also increasing support for stricter immigration policies.

Here it is important to note that the 2018 portal study found strong user agenda setting effects rather than news media agenda setting effects as well as much stronger cross-issue effects of racism news on immigration importance than within-issue agenda setting effects for racism. When study participants perceived racism as a top issue among users of the portal, their perceived importance of immigration (not racism) significantly increased. One plausible explanation is that the social cues delivered through the manipulation of the trending stories sidebar might have exerted a stronger influence on study participants compared to the cues embedded in news content found in the portal. Social cues have been found to influence social reality judgements and to play an important role in opinion formation (e.g., Kaiser, Keller, & Kleinen-von Königslöw, 2021; Lee, Liang, Hahn, Lane, Weeks, & Kwak, 2021). This is also in line with the claim on the eroding power of the media in setting the public’s agenda in light of tremendous media transformations, a polarized media context, and pressing questions about a “new era of minimal effects” (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008; Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018; Edy & Meirick, 2018; Meraz, 2011; Shehata & Strömbäck, 2013; Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2011).

The results of the 2018 study were particularly striking because the racism news included in the sidebar focused almost exclusively on episodes of racism against African Americans (e.g., the barbecuing while Black event), not against an immigrant group. As mentioned earlier, the apparently irrational link between these two issues (i.e., racism and immigration) could be explained either through agenda setting processes or through group threat theory. While agenda setting hypothesizes knowledge activation and cueing as possible psychological mechanisms behind the cross-issue effect, group threat theory offers a competing rationale rooted in perceived
identity threat. The latter explanation suggests that the mere mention of racism may have activated a feeling of group threat among some study participants, and this may have led to increased perceived importance of immigration. Being able to firmly establish whether the cross-issue effect occurs through the mechanisms of agenda setting or group threat is critical because agenda setting may only lead to temporary effects whereas identity threat may induce potentially lasting effects.

Research Questions

The results from the 2018 portal study advance an interesting puzzle to solve: *social cues highlighting importance of racism news may translate into increased importance of immigration, but how does this happen? What are the psychological mechanisms at work behind this phenomenon, and how can we avoid this transfer of salience from one issue to another?* To my knowledge, this was the first experimental test that reported agenda setting effects from one issue to another, and it did so using repeated exposure over a 12-day period. If similar effects could be reproduced through a very brief exposure in a controlled, laboratory experiment, this would greatly facilitate isolating the mechanisms of effect. This calls for conducting updated experiments exploring whether and how increased media coverage of racism may affect perceived importance of immigration.

This dissertation seeks to complement and further extend this past work by investigating this cross-issue effect from racism to immigration through a series of more controlled, laboratory experiments. Given the advantageous properties of experimental methods in terms of internal validity, I will employ three separate experiments to isolate the causal link between racism and immigration. As Brader (2005) writes, “experiments permit stronger causal inferences by allowing researchers to rule out potential confounds through tight control over conditions and
random assignment of subjects to exposure” (p. 391). The expectation is that lab experimentation will allow to discern whether the cross-issue effect is due to an underlying mechanism of knowledge activation (i.e., as posited in agenda setting theory) or an affective response driven by perceived group threat. Observational data will then complement this data to grasp a more in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under scrutiny.

My core premise is that in-depth examinations of the psychological mechanisms at play behind the cross-issue effect are crucial to avoid the possibility of a backfire effect when covering controversial issues of societal interest such as racism. Given the existing link between race and immigration in U.S. society, knowing how to avoid this backfire effect is critical for journalists, editors, and media workers in general. Ultimately, the goal is to uncover potential strategies and remedies that can attenuate this transfer of salience from one issue to another.

**Looking Ahead**

This dissertation aims to replicate the cross-issue effect and untangle presumed psychological mechanisms through three separate online survey-experiments and related analyses of observational data. In the chapters that follow, I provide detailed information on the rationale, methodological procedures, and findings of these three experiments.

Chapter 2 attempts to replicate the 2018 portal’s results in a much simpler laboratory experiment, while adding in two other manipulations (i.e., a race prime and a gatekeeping criticism expression) carefully designed to help distinguish mechanisms of effect. Instead of 12 days of repeated exposure to real, timely news stories about racism as in the 2018 portal study, in Study 1 the stimulus presents just a few headlines related to racism within a single screenshot of Google News.
Chapter 3 presents an agenda cueing experiment (Study 2) designed for the same general purpose as the Google News screenshot experiment of Study 1. This study attempts to strengthen the treatment by replacing exposure to the screenshot of the Google News portal with a fictitious report summarizing the most important topics covered by the media from the previous week – a methodological approach previously found to produce strong agenda setting effects in a brief exposure laboratory experiment (Pingree & Stoycheff, 2013).

Chapter 4 presents a third experiment (Study 3) which attempts to further strengthen the treatments of Study 1 and Study 2 and to avoid unnecessary differences from the 2018 portal study. Study 3 uses an agenda cue about the most discussed topics on Twitter instead of an agenda cue about news. The results are consequential for understanding the presumed mechanisms at work behind the cross-issue effect with related implications from a media psychology standpoint.

Chapter 5 is entirely dedicated to analyses of real, observational data. Chapter 5 describes the methodological procedures of a content analysis of news headlines on the topics of racism and immigration that appeared on the New York Times during one-week periods prior to Gallup’s published surveys of the open-ended most important problems (from December 30, 2015 to January 2, 2022). This chapter also describes the methodological procedures for collecting publicly available data from Gallup’s Most Important Problem responses during the same timeframe (December 2015 to January 2022). Correlations between these two sets of data help illustrate real-world implications of the findings from the experimental studies.

Finally, Chapter 6 is devoted to the general discussion. This last chapter provides a summary of the findings from the three studies and discusses several key implications of the
findings for media scholars and media practitioners. It also plots the course for future directions in research in this realm.
CHAPTER 2. THE PROBLEM WITH ISSUE INDEPENDENCE AND COGNITIVE ACCESSIBILITY

Agenda setting is one of the most popular and widely studied theoretical approaches in mass communication research (Graber & Smith, 2005). Originally proposed by Walter Lippmann (1922-1991), agenda setting theory refers to the media’s ability to influence the public’s issue priorities by making coverage of some issues more prominent and frequent so that the public will perceive these same issues as more important compared to other issues that receive less coverage (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; McCombs, 2004; McCombs & Shaw, 1972). This media function to set the public agenda is captured best by Cohen’s (1963) famous statement that “the press may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about” (p. 13).

Since McCombs and Shaw’s (1972) seminal study in Chapel Hill, media scholars have found strong support for agenda setting processes through a variety of designs and measurement approaches. Although it seems impractical to examine all the numerous studies conducted in this research domain, a review of the literature reveals that agenda setting research has overwhelmingly looked at effects within issues, that is how news coverage of one specific issue (e.g., healthcare) affects the public’s perceived importance of that same issue (e.g., healthcare). This assumption derives from a mechanism of issue independence, which is presumed to facilitate transfer of media salience of one specific issue to perceived importance of that same issue (McCombs, 2004). According to this view, people’s tendency to minimize cognitive effort when asked to elaborate on their opinions leads them to rely on considerations that are easy to recall rather than carefully sifting through broader considerations (Price & Tewksbury, 1997; Zaller, 1992). Repeated and frequent exposure to certain concepts or topics makes them easier to
recall and, therefore, people will use these same concepts or topics when making political judgements in “an almost mindless, mechanical response based on rote learning from the media” (Takeshita, 2006, p. 276).

Only a few scholars, however, have tested this mechanism of issue independence and their efforts have been largely limited to the theoretical level (Cacciatore, Scheufele, & Iyengar, 2016; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007; Weaver, 2007). Much of nonexperimental work in agenda setting research is unable to predict effects across different issues due to the nature of the research designs. Issue independence has largely been assumed rather than empirically tested, even though more recent experimental developments) have challenged the issue independence assumption (e.g., Guo & McCombs, 2015; Guo, Vu, & McCombs, 2014; Santia et al., 2021; Vargo, Guo, & Amazeen, 2018). These studies indicate that some issues may be connected to each other in the public’s mind through contextual meanings, such that when the media emphasize coverage of one specific issue, salience of that same issue may affect the public’s perceived importance of other issues. Guo and colleagues (2014) note that “the news media can actually bundle different objects and attributes and make these bundles of elements salient in the public’s mind simultaneously” (Guo, Vu, & McCombs, 2014). To illustrate with an example, making people think about race could spread to make thoughts about immigration more likely to be activated, therefore making immigration one of the issues that come to mind when listing the most important problems affecting the nation. This same mechanism could occur through a prime about race, an implicit measure that would make race more salient in people’s mind and potentially activate other race-related concepts in people’s memory.

Study 1 provides a test for the issue independence assumption and the cognitive accessibility assumption to address some of the shortcomings arising from the current state of
agenda setting scholarship. In the next section, I present a review of agenda setting literature with a focus on its presumed psychological mechanisms. Next, I provide the rationale for conducting updated experimental studies that expand agenda setting theory beyond its original formulation and traditional assumptions.

**Mechanisms of Agenda Setting**

The agenda setting function of the media has been extensively documented since McCombs and Shaw’s (1972) seminal study, which found strong correlations between the issues respondents of Chapel Hill rated as the most important in the 1968 U.S. Presidential campaign and the number of television, magazine, and newspaper stories appearing in nine major news outlets concerning these topics. The findings supported what would become the basic agenda setting hypothesis: individuals of the public rate issues covered more often by the media as more important than issues covered less frequently (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). The authors concluded that the “media appear to have exerted a considerable impact on voters’ judgments of what they considered the major issue of the campaign” (p. 180).

Since McCombs and Shaw’s (1972) seminal study in Chapel Hill, media scholars have extensively investigated agenda setting processes through a variety of study designs and measurement approaches and found strong support the agenda setting hypothesis, that is the ability of the media to influence the public’s judgments about the relative importance of societal issues (e.g., Iyengar & Kinder, 1987). To a lesser extent, media scholars have paid attention to the mechanisms of effects behind agenda setting (Kosicki, 1993; McCombs & Valenzuela, 2020). Indeed, although some scholars called for increased investigations of agenda setting processes (Kosicki, 1993), the psychological mechanisms that underlie people’s formation of issue importance judgments are often overlooked in past research in this domain. One possible
explanation for this limitation is that experimental designs were (and still remain) a minority of studies in agenda setting research (for exceptions, see e.g., Bulkow, Urban, & Schweiger, 2013; Holbrook & Hill, 2005; Iyengar & Kinder, 1987). While nonexperimental studies are valuable for providing the theoretical foundations of agenda setting, they offer limited utility to making causal interpretations and firmly establishing the mechanisms at work behind agenda setting processes.

**Issue Independence**

Traditionally, agenda setting research has generally operated under an implicit assumption of issue independence: the media’s emphasis on one issue is assumed to affect only the importance of that same issue (McCombs, 2004). The classic agenda setting experiments by Iyengar and colleagues (e.g., Iyengar & Kinder, 1987) tested for but did not find “hydraulic effects” in which emphasizing one issue reduced the importance of all other issues. To my knowledge, no other agenda setting experiment has reported any tests of cross-issue effects other than my own recent work (Santia et al., 2021). Recent theoretical developments have advanced the idea of a network agenda setting model (NAS) (e.g., Guo & McCombs, 2015; Guo, Vu, & McCombs, 2014; Vargo, Guo, & Amazeen, 2018), which argues against the issue independence assumption and suggests that certain issues are connected to each other through contextual meanings in the public’s mind (Guo & McCombs, 2015). From this perspective, if the media report two issues concurrently (e.g., the economy and unemployment), individuals will be likely to retrieve the connection between the two issues (Guo, 2012).

Besides the NAS model (e.g., Guo, 2012; Guo & McCombs, 2015; Vargo, Guo, & Amazeen, 2018; Vargo, Guo, McCombs, & Shaw, 2014), my own recent work (Santia et al., 2021) has also challenged the conventional issue independence assumption. In an experimental
study using a customized, online news portal website similar to Google News, my co-authors and I found significant cross-issue effects of relative issue importance, such that repeated exposure to real, timely news stories about racism negatively affected people’s attitudes toward immigrants and immigration policies in general (Santia et al., 2021). Specifically, when research participants were exposed to an experimental manipulation that increased exposure to news about episodes of racism against African Americans, their perceived importance of immigration increased, particularly among those who expressed a preference for the Republican Party. One possible explanation for this cross-issue effect is rooted in theories of associative models in human memory, which argue that the mind is made of nodes linked to one another by association at varying distances (Anderson & Bower, 1974; Collins & Loftus, 1975; Read & Miller, 1998; Smith, 1996). When the distance between two nodes is large, activation of one node unlikely triggers activation of another node. However, when the distance between two nodes decreases, activation of one node likely spreads to other connected nodes and activates memories that share overlapping characteristics (Anderson & Bower, 1974; Collins & Loftus, 1975; Smith, 1996). This means that activation of one node has the potential to spread to another closely linked node through a process called “spreading activation” (Collins & Loftus, 1975; Valentino, 1999). To illustrate with an example, evoking the concept of “fruit” can activate nodes related to “apple” or “orange” or “pear” through the process of spreading activation (Collins & Loftus, 1975). Among others, Valentino (1999) found that racial issues are inherently connected in memory and can be activated through news coverage of crime. This resonates with one of the strongest stereotypes of Blacks as criminal, aggressive, and especially violent (Devine, 1989). Based on this line of argument, there exists a possibility that increased media coverage of one issue may cross over to affect importance of another issue. Understanding whether the cross-issue effect occurs through
spreading activation or through a different mechanism of effect is critical to expand our understanding of this phenomenon.

**Cognitive Accessibility**

Besides spreading activation, a cognitive accessibility mechanism, which assumes that agenda setting effects can be explained on the basis of accessibility, is often used to explain same-issue agenda setting effects (Iyengar, 1990; Price & Tewksbury, 1997). Grounded in psychological theories of knowledge activation (Higgins, 1996), cognitive accessibility is the propensity for information to be retrieved from memory and can be extended to cross-issue effects via spreading activation (Drew & Weaver, 2006; Higgins, 1996; Price & Tewksbury, 1997). Tversky and Kahneman’s (1973) classic model of accessibility postulates that individuals can use accessibility as a heuristic to estimate the frequency of an event, or the likelihood of its occurrence, “by the ease with which instances or associations come to mind” (p. 208). As applied in agenda setting, the cognitive accessibility mechanism presupposes that the media can make certain issues easily available and accessible for people through increased frequency and/or prominence of certain issues in news reporting. Individuals will then use media emphasis to determine importance of issues when judging issue priorities (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; McCombs, 2005; McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Price & Tewksbury, 1997; Zillmann, 1999). In this sense, the higher the frequency and/or prominence of media coverage of an issue, the higher the salience of this information in a news consumer’s mind (Dearing & Rogers, 1996). More specifically, cognitive accessibility posits that when asked the classic Most Important Problem question, respondents will likely list issues that are easily accessible in their minds based on the amount of coverage and relative prominence of these issues in the media (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; McCombs, 2005; McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Price & Tewksbury, 1997). Since human
cognitive capacity is finite and a vast majority of people prefer to spend as little cognitive effort as possible when forming their judgments (Zaller, 1992), individuals will opt to rely on readily available issues that attract a great deal of attention in the media to form their judgements (Price & Tewksbury, 1997; Takeshita, 2006).

Although accessibility has often been assumed as the mechanism through which the news media transmit their agenda into audiences’ perceived issue importance judgments (Iyengar, 1990; Price & Tewksbury, 1997), more recent empirical evidence of agenda setting effects seems to support other mechanisms occurring after knowledge is automatically activated. These include cognitive mechanisms such as agenda cueing and agenda reasoning (Pingree & Stoycheff, 2013) as well as affective mechanisms in which feelings about an issue are used as importance heuristics (Miller, 2007). Scholars that have empirically investigated the causal link between cognitive accessibility and agenda-setting effects (e.g., Carpentier, 2014; Lee, Liu, Choung, & McLeod, 2020; Miller, 2007; Miller & Krosnick, 2000; Nelson, Clawson, & Oxley, 1997) have generally found cognitive accessibility to be an incomplete explanation of agenda setting effects. Although media exposure certainly increases accessibility of problems frequently covered, assuming that people respond to the Most Important Problem question simply by relying on accessible information made more salient by the media appears to be an oversimplification of agenda setting effects. When asked which problems are the most important, people do not simply blurt out the first problems that come to mind (Miller, 2007). Instead, they are influenced by the media agenda either because they choose to accept the media’s apparent issue priorities as a cognitive shortcut for the difficult problem of prioritizing issues (i.e., agenda cueing), or because they learn persuasive reasons for why a specific issue is important from media content (i.e., agenda reasoning; Pingree & Stoycheff, 2013).
A small minority of studies have questioned the cognitive accessibility assumption and empirically tested it. For instance, Miller and Krosnick (2000) were the first to challenge the assumption that cognitive accessibility is the primary determinant for shifts in the public’s importance judgments. The authors found that agenda-setting effects are more likely to occur among people with high levels of political knowledge and trust in the media. Individuals who know more about politics and have higher levels of trust in the media are more likely to accept the media agenda compared to individuals who exhibit low levels of media trust and low levels of political knowledge. Miller (2007) later provided more direct evidence on the role of cognitive accessibility in agenda setting processes. Using three different experimental designs, Miller (2007) tested the hypothesis that agenda setting is due solely to increases in accessibility through a series of manipulations designed to isolate accessibility from content effects, and through direct measurement of accessibility using word completion tasks. In one of the experiments, Miller (2007) assigned undergraduate students to one of three experimental conditions dealing with newspaper articles about crime. One group of participants read a news story explaining that the crime rate was high, and that crime was a serious and growing problem while another group read that crime rate was a small and declining problem. The control group read a news story not related to crime. To “manipulate issue accessibility without corresponding content that implies the issue is important” (p. 708), Miller (2007) employed a word-completion task that contained words relevant to the issue of crime. She then compared the effects derived from the word-task conditions with the effects related to the conditions in which undergraduate students were exposed to newspaper articles about crime. Miller (2007) found agenda setting effects only in the conditions that exposed study participants to news articles about crime rather than the conditions featuring the word-completion task. Regardless of the news story they read, participants rated
crime as a more important issue compared to participants who did not read a news story about crime. More crucially, participants who read the crime high story were significantly more likely to mention crime as an important issue compared to those who read the crime low story. Individuals actively engaged with the media content they were exposed to and made subsequent judgments based on that content. These results seem to suggest that news content substantiating importance of an issue was the primary moderator of agenda setting effects rather than increased accessibility simulated through the word-completion task (see also Carpentier, 2014). Even though cognitive accessibility seems to play a role in agenda setting, it is not a sufficient condition for agenda setting effects to occur. Agenda setting is best explained by conscious cognitive and affective processes after knowledge activation.

Given this background, one could make the argument that the two mechanisms discussed above (i.e., issue independence and cognitive accessibility) may not offer an adequate explanation for how the cross-issue effect occurs. Many scholars have focused on alternative mechanisms of agenda setting effects that imply a more conscious process occurring after knowledge activation, including political knowledge (Miller & Krosnick, 2000), media trust (Miller & Krosnick, 2000; Tsfati, 2003), source credibility (Druckman, 2001), gatekeeping trust (Pingree & Stoycheff, 2013), news media content (Lee et al., 2020; Miller, 2007), goals and motivations (Higgins, 1996), need for orientation (Matthes, 2008; Weaver, 1977), and issue involvement (Bulkow, et al., 2013). These different explanations reveal how important it is to accurately isolate presumed causal mechanisms affecting agenda setting processes, in general, and the cross-issue effect, in particular. Consulting issue-specific theories (e.g., group threat) could also be useful when trying to understand how media coverage of racism may cross over to affect perceived importance of immigration.
Explaining the Cross-Issue Effect

The lack of substantial experimental work assessing the psychological mechanisms behind the cross-issue agenda setting effect provides the rationale for conducting updated studies in this realm of research. Study 1 employs an experimental test to determine whether and how increased media coverage of one issue (i.e., racism) may potentially cross over to affect presumed importance of another issue (i.e., immigration). The goal of Study 1 is to offer an improved theorization of the psychological mechanisms at work behind the cross-issue effect in a controlled, laboratory setting that resembles current patterns of news consumption. Controlled, laboratory experiments have been regarded as a valid methodology to discern the cause-and-effect relationship between two or more variables. This methodological approach seems appropriate to investigate how the cross-issue effect from racism to immigration works and the apparent psychological mechanisms that may determine how this phenomenon occurs. By allowing rigorous control over the stimuli participants are exposed to, Study 1 seeks to accurately detect the causal mechanisms behind the cross-issue effect and estimate the magnitude of this effect with a high degree of confidence.

At the most basic level, Study 1 provides a test of the issue independence assumption by anticipating transfer of media salience from racism to perceived importance of immigration. As mentioned above, agenda setting research has traditionally assumed a mechanism of issue independence based on the idea that issues covered by the media are easily available for people to use in their judgments when asked about the most important national problems. The cross-issue effect, however, seems to challenge this assumption as members of the audience somehow find a link between racism and immigration and connect the two issues in their minds.
Theories of associative models grounded in social psychology (Anderson & Bower, 1974; Collins & Loftus, 1975; Read & Miller, 1998; Smith, 1996) may be the key to identify how this connection occurs and to extend agenda setting theory beyond its original formulation. As noted above, theories of associative models suggest that the memory is made up of nodes linked to one another by association (Anderson & Bower, 1974; Collins & Loftus, 1975). In this sense, when one memory node is activated through media coverage, this activation has the potential to extend to other associated nodes and activate nodes that share similar characteristics (Anderson & Bower, 1974; Collins & Loftus, 1975; Smith, 1996). This sort of reasoning is particularly interesting as it explains the potential to transfer judgments from one issue to another that bears little or no surface similarity (Berkowitz & Rogers, 1986; Smith, 1996).

Study 1 provides an experimental test for the issue independence assumption, but it also tests the role of the mechanism of cognitive accessibility instead of simply assuming it. To this end, Study 1 employs a race prime manipulation to purposely increase cognitive accessibility of race and test its effects in a controlled laboratory environment. This race prime manipulation is based on previous social psychological research on automatic stereotyping processes, which posits that presence of a person can lead one to think about the concepts with which that person’s social group has become associated (e.g., Payne, 2001). Seeing a picture of an African American individual, for instance, could trigger thoughts that he is violent and criminal and subsequently reinforce the stereotypical perceptions associated with African Americans in general. Following this logic, Payne (2001) used a priming paradigm to examine the association between African Americans and criminality. Study participants were primed with a Black face or a white face, a gun or a tool and then were required to indicate whether the object displayed was a gun or a tool and to do so as quickly as possible. Payne (2001) found that participants exposed to Black faces
correctly identified guns more quickly than did people exposed to white faces and were more likely to misidentify a tool as a gun than were people exposed to white faces. This shows that simply seeing a Black person renders some concepts more accessible and can lead people to evaluate ambiguous behavior.

The rationale behind using the race prime manipulation in Study 1 is to establish whether individuals form issue judgments and decisions based on recently primed issues or whether they internalize the information received from the media in an effortful mechanism of information processing. To illustrate, if cognitive accessibility is the mechanism behind agenda setting processes, then increasing accessibility of race through an implicit, subtle experimental manipulation should make race and other race-related concepts more salient in people’s minds. Study 1 investigates how accessible race is in participants’ minds to test whether agenda setting effects are simply accessibility effects due to race-associated issues coming to mind in an easy and efficient way or whether other mechanisms offer a better explanation for these effects.

**Hypotheses and Research Question**

Based on the above considerations, Study 1 seeks to untangle the psychological mechanisms behind the cross-issue agenda setting effect found in the 2018 portal study (Santia et al., 2021). Study 1 starts by testing basic agenda setting effects, such that exposure to racism-related news will increase the public’s perceived importance of racism. Put formally:

**H1:** Exposure to racism-related news will increase perceived importance of racism.

If cognitive accessibility is the mechanism at work behind agenda setting, then any stimulus that causes activation of race-related concepts in memory should suffice to produce this effect. Thus, just like the previous hypothesis predicts effects of racism news, here I predict the
same effects of a minimal race prime employed as an experimental manipulation. According to the often-assumed mechanism of cognitive accessibility, exposure to a race prime should activate concepts related to race and lead to increased importance of racism. Thus, I predict the following:

**H2**: Exposure to a race prime will increase perceived importance of racism.

Little research to date provides evidence of how placing media emphasis on one issue may affect perceived importance of another issue. The results of the 2018 portal study show that there exists a possibility that increased media coverage of one issue (e.g., racism) may cross over to affect perceived importance of another issue (e.g., immigration). Here I aim to replicate this cross-issue effect by hypothesizing that:

**H3**: Exposure to racism-related news will increase perceived importance of immigration.

Following the same logic behind H2, I predict that a minimal race prime may also increase perceived importance of immigration:

**H4**: Exposure to a race prime will increase perceived importance of immigration.

Prior research establishes that agenda setting effects are stronger among those who trust the media more (Tsfati, 2003) and specifically among those high in gatekeeping trust – defined as trust in news organizations to devote more attention to the most important problems (Pingree & Stoycheff, 2013). Pingree, Quenette, Tchernev, and Dickinson (2013) showed that asking participants to express their own criticism of the media’s selection of stories can reduce gatekeeping trust, in turn leading people to reason for themselves more systematically during their MIP response instead of accepting media coverage as a heuristic cue. Such gatekeeping criticism expression can be employed as an experimental manipulation to induce more thoughtful
information processing among some individuals. Study 1 employs the same gatekeeping criticism expression previously employed by Pingree and colleagues (2013) to reduce the effects of heuristics including cognitive accessibility when individuals are asked to form their issue judgments. Randomly assigning some participants but not others to an open-ended question asking for an example of an issue the media covered a lot that was unimportant, and an example of an important issue the media did not cover enough (Pingree et al., 2013) should lead some individuals to introspect the information they receive from the media when asked what the most important problems of the nations are. Introspective, systematic processing should, in turn, reduce the influence of all heuristic cues, including accessibility of race. Therefore, I predict the following:

\textit{H5: Gatekeeping criticism expression will moderate the above effects.}

Existing research documents the relationship linking attitudes related to race with partisanship (Valentino & Sears, 2005), but neglects whether the cross-issue effect under investigation is dependent on party identification. Thus, I pose the following research question:

\textit{RQ1: Does party preference interact with the above effects?}

\textbf{Method}

Experiments are seen as the gold standard within media effects research because they allow the researchers to intervene deliberately and evaluate the causal impacts of exposure to media content (Potter & Riddle, 2007). Given the advantages of experimental designs in drawing causal inferences between exposure to media content and related effects, I conducted an online survey embedded in an experiment to test my predictions. The LSU Institutional Review Board approved the study on October 26, 2021 (IRB # IRBAM-21-0732) and the study was conducted on January 31, 2022.
Study 1 aims to reproduce the findings of the 2018 study in a more efficient brief exposure laboratory experiment. Instead of 12 days of repeated exposure to numerous real, timely news stories about racism as in the 2018 study, this study attempts to test the same effects by repeating just a few stimulus headlines within a single, purported Google News screenshot. Because the portal contained real, timely news stories automatically pulled from Google News on the top of each hour and constantly updated from a variety of sources, the level of ecological validity of the portal cannot be matched in a more controlled laboratory setting. In addition, the portal allowed study participants to directly engage with the news content during their own time and over an extended period of time (12 days). These unique properties allowed the researchers to estimate effects that are more likely to correspond to real-life behaviors in today’s high-choice media environment (Gerber & Green, 2012; Green, Calfano, & Aronow, 2014; Lecheler & de Vreese, 2017). Because Study 1 seeks to identify the psychological mechanisms at work behind agenda setting effects, in general, and the cross-issue effect, in particular, control over the design of the experiment is crucial to evaluate the causal impacts of such mechanisms.

Participants

For Study 1, I recruited a convenience sample of paid U.S. adults (final N = 988; 40.99% female, 58.91% male, 1% other) from the Amazon’s Mechanical Turk (MTurk) crowdsourcing platform and directed them to a Qualtrics online survey in exchange for reasonable monetary compensation ($1) for their time and effort. I took several approaches to ensure quality of data, including preventing respondents from taking the survey multiple times, blocking search engines from including the survey in their search results, and detecting bots. Study participants had to be U.S. residents and, although the sample is not representative of the general U.S. population, I relied on MTurk because this sample is believed to be more valid than undergraduate samples
and other Internet-based opt-in samples (Berinsky, Huber, & Lenz, 2012) and especially useful for online behavioral studies (Crump, McDonnell, & Gureckis, 2013). I argue that, although non-representative of the general population, the MTurk sample is appropriate for assessing the effects of the experimental manipulations on participants’ issue importance (Berinsky, Huber, & Lenz, 2012; Krupnikov & Levine, 2014; Mason & Suri, 2012).

In terms of the demographics, the sample skewed highly White as 83.08% of participants identified as White or Caucasian, 10.13% as Black or African American, 3.34% as Asian or Pacific Islander, 2.13% as Latinx or Hispanic, and 1.32% indicated other or multiple races/ethnicities. In response to the question “Which political party do you prefer?”, the sample had a noticeable Democratic bias – as it usually happens with MTurk samples (Berinksy, Huber, & Lenz, 2012) – with 63.50% of participants who indicated a preference for the Democratic Party, 32.41% for the Republican Party, and 4.09% who did not indicate even a slight preference for either party. The average age of participants was 36.12 years (SD = 10.45, min = 19, max = 72) and over 64% of participants indicated they had completed a four-year college degree.

Procedures

Study 1 employs a 2 (racism coverage: racism news included in the screenshot, no racism news included) X 3 (interventions: race prime, gatekeeping criticism expression, control) between subjects, fully factorial design. After acknowledging the informed consent form on the very first page of the survey, MTurkers who agreed to participate in the study were instructed to take a short pretest questionnaire on Qualtrics, which contained questions about demographic information (e.g., gender, race, and political preference) and pretest measures about perceived importance of several national issues. The pretest featured the closed-ended MIP question under the heading “How important are the following problems?” and included a battery of 17 different
issues. The issues included were the economy, international relations, COVID-19, education, health care, police mistreatment of minorities, climate change, racial conflict, sexual harassment and sexual abuse, gun control/gun rights, unemployment/jobs, the quality of our national debate, government/Congress/politicians, crime/violence, and poor leadership/corruption. Racism and immigration were both included within this 17-item battery in order to disguise the intent of the study.

After completing the short pretest survey, participants were directed to a new page where they encountered the screenshot of an online news portal resembling the characteristics of Google News. Participants were randomly assigned to see different screenshots, which were carefully manipulated according to the different experimental conditions. Regardless of the condition they were in, every participant encountered the following message at the top of the screenshot: “To refresh your memory about recent news events, please review this screenshot from Google News.” I used this disclaimer to give participants a sense of timeliness and ultimately to avoid suspicious interpretations of the news content.

I deliberately chose to expose participants to a screenshot of Google News because it seemed the closest alternative to replicate the method of delivery of the stimuli employed in the 2018 portal study. In order to maintain a degree of realism, the screenshot used the Google News logo on top of the page as well as the general interface layout, interface elements, and fonts of Google News. The screenshot featured a variety of real news stories on different topics, including hard news (e.g., politics) and soft news (e.g., entertainment), and was manipulated according to the different experimental conditions. The news stories featured in the screenshot were real stories drawn from Google News several days before the experiment was conducted. Each news story was presented as a headline and showed a thumbnail picture and a source label.
underneath. Each participant saw one screenshot containing a total of six real news headlines positioned in the main interface of Google News. Participants were not allowed to proceed with the study before they spent at least one minute on the screenshot’s page. After exposure to the screenshot, participants were asked to take a posttest questionnaire measuring eventual changes in the outcomes of interest. The posttest featured a variety of questions, including an open-ended version of the MIP question requiring participants to list the most important problems facing the nation in order of importance. Figure 1 below shows an example of the Google News screenshot employed in this study.

![Google News screenshot](image)

Figure 1. Example of the screenshot of the Google News portal
**Racism coverage condition**

To test my predictions and research question, this experiment employs an experimental factor in which half of participants saw racism-related news coverage while the other half of participants did not see news related to racism. This racism factor allows to test basic agenda setting effects as well as transfer of salience from one issue (i.e., racism) to another (i.e., immigration). The news stories on the topic of racism were featured as headlines in prominent positions of the screenshot and filler stories were identical across conditions. To illustrate, in the racism coverage condition, half of participants saw three out of six news stories on the topic of racism and these stories occupied spots #2, #4, and #5. In the no racism coverage condition, the other half of participants was not exposed to stories about racism and instead saw news on different topics that occupied the same exact spots of news on racism in the racism coverage condition (i.e., #2, #4, and #5). I selected the racism headlines from a variety of real news outlets based on whether the headlines clearly indicated that racism was the subject matter of the story in the headline.

The experiment was carefully designed so that the only difference between the treatment groups concerned the presence or absence of the racism news headlines in the stimulus page. Because I maintained all other properties of the stimulus presentation identical across the experimental conditions, I can confidently attribute eventual differences in the effects observed between the experimental conditions to the presence or absence of the racism news headlines in the main treatment.

**Race prime intervention**

To understand whether cognitive accessibility is the underlying mechanism behind agenda setting processes or whether study participants introspect information in a more rational
way, Study 1 employs a race prime intervention to increase accessibility of race in participants’ minds during actual exposure to the stimuli. This race prime intervention allows to test whether individuals will list racism as an important national problem simply because racism is highly accessible in their memory or because racism is deemed an actual issue of national concern. Participants who were randomly assigned to the race prime condition were exposed to color photographs of African Americans next to non-political news stories (e.g., sports news and entertainment news) included as fillers in the stimulus page. In the other conditions, participants did not see color photographs of African Americans. Instead, they saw pictures of white people next to otherwise identical filler stories in the stimulus page. To illustrate with an example, participants in the race prime condition saw a picture of an African American woman next to the headline “12 of the best new books to read in 2022” whereas the rest of participants saw a picture of a White woman next to the same news headline. This carefully thought intervention made the stimuli consistent across all experimental conditions.

**Gatekeeping criticism expression manipulation**

Study 1 also included a gatekeeping criticism expression manipulation asking participants to reflect on the role of media gatekeepers in covering issues of societal importance. Prior work from Pingree, Quenette, Tchernev, and Dickinson (2013) indicates that asking participants to express their own criticism of the media’s selection of stories can lead people to reason for themselves more systematically during their MIP response instead of accepting media coverage as a heuristic cue.

For this intervention, I randomly assigned some participants but not others to an open-ended question asking for an example of an issue the media covered a lot that was unimportant, and an example of an important issue that the media did not cover enough. Asking people to
reflect on how the media select stories based on factors other than issue importance can affect whether they interpret the presence of issues in news as a cue about issue importance, thus leading to a more systematic response to the most important problem question instead of simply accepting media coverage as a heuristic cue (Pingree, Quenette, Tchernev, & Dickinson, 2013).

**Control condition**

A control condition featured an open-ended expression prompt to make sure that effort required by all study participants was equal across all experimental conditions. Participants in the control condition were not exposed to any of the interventions described above. Also, instead of the gatekeeping criticism expression question, participants in the control condition were asked to list everything they had to eat or drink in the last 48 hours in an open-ended survey question adapted from and validated by previous work (Nyhan & Reifler, 2019). Table 1 below shows all the experimental conditions and the number of subjects assigned to each condition.

Table 1. Study 1 design (6 cells)

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<tr>
<th>Interventions</th>
<th>Control</th>
<th>Race prime</th>
<th>Gatekeeping criticism expression</th>
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<td>Racism coverage</td>
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<tr>
<td>No racism coverage</td>
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**Measures**

**Most important problems**

To test agenda setting effects, I measured perceived importance of problems through responses to the classic open-ended MIP question included as a posttest question: “What do you think are the most important problems facing the nation? Please list them in order of importance,
starting with the most important problem.” MIP responses were manually coded using the ranked MIP method previously developed by Pingree and Stoycheff (2013) and validated in subsequent studies (e.g., Santia et al., 2021). Following this method, I produced a precise count of the total number of issues every respondent mentioned in the open-ended question (M = 2.51, SD = 2.437) and then I recorded the number of the position of immigration and racism if they were mentioned among other issues. Intercoder reliability was acceptable (Krippendorff’s α > .70) for both racism and immigration. I calculated the issue importance scores for both racism and immigration by taking the ratio of the issue’s response position to the total number of issues mentioned and used these scores as dependent variables for my analyses. To illustrate, regardless of the total number of issues a respondent mentioned, if a problem was mentioned first, its assigned importance ratio was 1; if it was not mentioned, its importance ratio was 0; and, if it was mentioned halfway through the respondents’ list, it was coded as .50. For instance, if immigration was last in a list of 10 problems mentioned by respondents, the immigration importance score would be .10; if immigration was listed last in a list of only three problems, it received a score of 0.33.

The MIP open-ended answers were coded as immigration if participants answered illegal immigrants, immigration policies, border protection, border crossing, or immigration reform; and racism if participants answered racial divisions, race issues, racial inequality, Black Lives Matter, race relations, or racial discrimination.

Pre-test issue importance

Before actual exposure to the stimuli, participants were asked to indicate how important some problems were to them by choosing from a 17-item battery, including the economy, healthcare, climate change, sexual harassment, gun control, and so forth. In an attempt to avoid
seeing all issues as important problems affecting the nation, measures of perceived importance ranged from 0 labeled as “not very important,” to 5 labeled as “very important,” to 10 labeled as “extremely important.” As mentioned earlier, immigration importance (M = 7.35, SD = 2.249) and racism importance (M = 7.19, SD = 2.576) appeared among other issues to disguise the intent of the agenda setting manipulation. These closed-ended measures of issue importance were used as covariates in the analyses to guard against the potential confound of differential attrition across experimental conditions.

Results

Hypothesis 1 predicted basic agenda setting effects, such that exposure to racism-related news coverage will increase perceived importance of racism. To test this hypothesis, I used an analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) model, which included a two-level factor for the racism coverage manipulation (racism coverage included, no racism coverage included), a two-level dummy for the race prime manipulation (race prime included, no race prime), a two-level dummy for the gatekeeping criticism expression manipulation (gatekeeping criticism expression included, no gatekeeping criticism expression), and a three-level party preference factor (preference for the Republican Party, preference for the Democratic Party, or not even a slight preference for either party). The ANCOVA model included a two-way interaction between the racism coverage manipulation and the race prime dummy, a two-way interaction between the racism coverage manipulation and the gatekeeping criticism expression dummy, and an interaction term for the racism coverage manipulation and party preference. To guard against the possibility of systematic differences in attrition across conditions, the model also included the pretest measure of perceived importance of racism as a covariate (M = 7.19, SD = 2.576).
In the ANCOVA model predicting perceived importance of racism (adjusted $R^2 = .026$), the racism coverage main effect was not significant ($F[1, 740] = .711, p = .399$, partial $\eta^2 = .001$). Contrary to my expectation for the basic agenda setting hypothesis, exposure to racism-related news coverage did not significantly increase perceived importance of racism as a national problem among study participants. Although H1 was not supported, it is worth noting that the treatment group mean differences were in the predicted direction, as participants in the racism coverage condition expressed higher importance of racism ($M = .147$, SE = .050) relative to participants who were not exposed to racism-related news ($M = .088$, SE = .049).

Hypothesis 2 predicted that exposure to a race prime will increase perceived importance of racism. To test H2, I used the same ANCOVA model that I used for H1 as both hypotheses share the same outcome. The model (adjusted $R^2 = .026$) did not reveal a significant main effect for the race prime ($F[1, 740] = .162, p = .688$, partial $\eta^2 = .001$). Contrary to my expectation, exposure to a race prime did not significantly increase perceived importance of racism, thus indicating that cognitive accessibility may not be the mechanism at play behind agenda setting effects. Participants who saw pictures of African American individuals next to filler stories in the Google News screenshot expressed similar levels of racism importance ($M = .123$, SE = .039) of participants who instead saw pictures of White individuals next to identical filler stories in the screenshot ($M = .112$, SE = .035).

Hypothesis 3 predicted that exposure to racism-related news will increase perceived importance of immigration, thus providing a test for the cross-issue effect under investigation. To test H3, I used an ANCOVA model identical to the model used to test H1 and H2 except for its dependent variable and covariate. The dependent variable used here was based on perceived importance of immigration as measured in the open-ended MIP question whereas the covariate
was a pretest measure of perceived immigration importance (M = 7.35, SD = 2.249). In this ANCOVA model (adjusted $R^2 = .008$), the racism coverage main effect was not significant ($F[1, 732] = .114, p = .736, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .001$). Perceived importance of immigration was not significantly higher when participants were exposed to racism coverage (M = .124, SE = .042) compared to when participants did not see stories about racism in the stimuli (M = .104, SE = .042). Thus, H3 was not supported.

Hypothesis 4 predicted that exposure to a race prime will increase perceived importance of immigration – an additional test of an accessibility-driven version of the cross-issue effect found in the 2018 portal study. To test H4, I used the same ANCOVA model that I used to test H3 since both hypotheses share the same outcome. The model (adjusted $R^2 = .008$) did not reveal a significant main effect for the race prime ($F[1, 740] = .600, p = .439, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .001$). Contrary to my expectation, exposure to a race prime did not significantly increase perceived importance of immigration. Participants who saw pictures of African American individuals next to filler stories in the Google News screenshot expressed similar levels of immigration importance (M = .122, SE = .033) than participants who instead saw pictures of White individuals next to identical filler stories in the screenshot (M = .105, SE = .030).

Hypothesis 5 posited that exposure to the gatekeeping criticism expression condition will moderate the above effects. I tested H5 using the same ANCOVA models for the above hypotheses. In the ANCOVA model predicting perceived importance of racism (adjusted $R^2 = .026$), the main effect for the gatekeeping criticism expression intervention was not significant ($F[1, 740] = .025, p = .874, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .001$). The two-way interaction with the racism coverage manipulation was also not significant ($F[1, 740] = .049, p = .825, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .001$). Similarly, the ANCOVA model predicting perceived importance of immigration (adjusted $R^2 = .008$) did
not reveal a significant main effect for the gatekeeping criticism expression condition (F[1, 740] = .670, p = .413, partial \( \eta^2 = .001 \)). The two-way interaction with the racism coverage manipulation was also not significant (F[1, 740] = .555, p = .457, partial \( \eta^2 = .001 \)).

Finally, RQ1 asked whether party preference interacted with any of the hypothesized effects. In the ANCOVA model predicting perceived importance of racism (adjusted R\(^2 = .026\)), the interaction with the racism coverage manipulation was not significant (F[3, 740] = .101, p = .959, partial \( \eta^2 = .001 \)). Similarly, the ANCOVA model predicting perceived importance of immigration (adjusted R\(^2 = .008\)) did not reveal a significant interaction with the racism coverage manipulation (F[3, 740] = .226, p = .878, partial \( \eta^2 = .001 \)).

**Discussion**

Study 1 set out to investigate basic agenda setting effects (H1) – such that media emphasis on racism increases perceived importance of racism – as well as the cross-issue effect, meaning transfer of salience from racism importance to immigration importance (H3). Contrary to my expectations, the analyses I conducted did not offer support for any of my expectations. Exposure to a screenshot featuring news headlines on the topic of racism did not have any effect on perceived importance of racism or perceived importance of immigration. Study 1 also tested the role of a race prime manipulation to increase cognitive accessibility of race in people’s minds. I found no support for the presumed effects of the race prime manipulation in increasing perceived importance of racism (H2) and perceived importance of immigration (H4). Study 1 also tested whether an experimental manipulation (i.e., expression of gatekeeping criticism) could potentially induce a more systematic processing when judging issue priorities in an attempt to avoid transfer of salience from racism to immigration. Unsurprisingly given the lack of significant agenda setting effects, gatekeeping criticism also failed to reduce the strengths of
these effects (H5), and party preference did not interact with any of the above effects in response to RQ1.

The lack of significant agenda setting effects is surprising given that agenda setting effects have been extensively documented in the literature across a variety of study methodologies and designs since the McCombs and Shaw’s (1972) study. In retrospect, past agenda setting experiments, including my own, have employed a repeated treatment over multiple days. This study did repeat the topic of racism in a few headlines within the stimulus screenshot, but it seems likely that this was simply not a sufficiently strong and sustained treatment. It is also possible that the specific stimuli I used in this study were not credible enough. Specifically, the headline “Amy Cooper falsely accused black birdwatcher in 2nd 911 conversation” that I purposely included in the racism coverage condition could have seemed outdated as this episode happened in May 2020. This headline referred to a White woman, Amy Cooper, who mistakenly accused an African American birdwatcher, Christian Cooper, and called the police because she was feeling threatened by him. Amy Cooper ended up losing her job over her erroneous 911 call in 2020 and is now trying to get her wrongful termination lawsuit thrown out. I included this story in the racism coverage condition based on its presumed similarity with the stories on “barbecuing while black” that were included in anti-Black racism manipulation in the trending stories sidebar of the 2018 portal study. The headline on Amy Cooper seemed very similar to the stories that produced strong cross-issue agenda setting effects in the 2018 portal study. One could argue that even though the Amy Cooper story attracted a great deal of attention in the news, participants might have forgotten about it by the time this experiment was conducted and, therefore, may not have noticed its link to the issue of racism. Extant scholarship on framing reveals that issues may be framed very differently by the media to achieve specific effects and
help individuals make sense of the issue and alter public opinion on the issue. In retrospect, including this story may have likely weakened the effects of the racism manipulation.

Another possible explanation for the lack of significant agenda setting effects lays within the mere characteristics of controlled, laboratory experiments. Although laboratory experiments help researchers exercise control over the design and the subjects of their study to identify the causal mechanisms behind specific behaviors, exposure to the stimuli often occurs in a forced manner without giving participants the option to choose what to read or see. Forced exposure studies, such as those conducted by Iyengar and Kinder (1987), are unrealistic representations of today’s high-choice media environment, even though they continue to be used (e.g., Arendt & Obereder, 2016). Nevertheless, it is worth noting that contrary to the high level of engagement reached with the 2018 news portal, the static nature of the stimuli employed in Study 1 may have rendered the agenda setting manipulation ineffective. The screenshots of the Google News portal had to be prepared in advance, and therefore the stories could have been perceived as outdated or even irrelevant.

Study 1 needs to be contextualized according to several caveats. First, forced exposure to a few story headlines on the topic of racism may have not been enough to influence perceived importance of racism and, more crucially, immigration importance. A large body of experimental evidence suggests that exposure to story headlines can grab readers’ attention (Ecker, Lewandowsky, Chang, & Pillai, 2014), affect message credibility (Appelman & Sundar, 2016; Luo, Hancock, & Markowitz, 2020), and attitudes toward online news aggregators (Bryanov, Watson, Pingree, & Santia, 2020). However, the results of Study 1 suggest that exposure to racism headlines did not affect perceived importance of racism and, more importantly, did not transfer to perceived importance of immigration. One could make the argument that this is
conditional on the specific nature of laboratory experiments relying on a single shot, forced exposure. The 2018 portal afforded the possibility to examine potential effects derived from repeated exposure to real experimental stimuli over an extended period of 12 days, and this might have been the key ingredient for the observed effects of the 2018 portal study. One cannot exclude that forced exposure to seemingly unrealistic stimuli for a short minute may have failed to reproduce the expected effects in Study 1. Alternatively, failure to find significant results may provide further evidence for the declining power of the news media to influence online audiences (Djerf-Pierre & Shehata, 2017; Shehata & Strömbäck, 2013). Future steps should consider the many ways media messages vary across situations, audiences, and media formats and the magnitude of these effects in relation to the highly interactive, digital modern media world.

Second, exposure to a race prime may have not been enough for study participants to pick up race cues and link them with racism importance and immigration importance. The analyses reveal that the race prime manipulation did not produce the expected effects. On the one hand, it is plausible that this may be due to the fact that study participants may have not paid enough attention to the pictures of African American individuals included next to filler stories in the stimuli. On the other hand, non-significant results for the race prime manipulation may show that cognitive accessibility is not the psychological mechanism at work behind agenda setting processes as echoed by previous research in this realm (e.g., Miller, 2007; Pingree & Stoycheff, 2013). The cognitive accessibility explanation posits that bringing race to the top of the mind through an experimental intervention should activate race-related concepts when participants are asked to form their opinions in subsequent questions. Nevertheless, the race prime manipulation did not produce the expected effects and seemed to have largely failed to activate other race-related concepts. But if agenda setting effects are not accessibility effects, then there must be
other explanations as to why increasing media salience of one issue can result in increased importance of another issue. The interlinked shifts occurring in people’s minds have important implications from a media psychology standpoint. Therefore, exploring this effect further is imperative for media researchers to attenuate transfer of salience from one issue to another.

As for concerns with external validity, the limitations typically inherent to experimental research are also applicable in this case, especially given the use of a non-representative sample. The results may not generalize to the broader population so replication with a different sample (e.g., Prolific or Lucid) or even a representative sample is important for future experimentation in this area.

Given all the above consideration and limitations, additional work is needed to replicate basic agenda setting effects and the cross-issue agenda setting effect of the 2018 portal study. One plausible next step is to adopt an experimental stimulus somewhat different from the one employed in Study 1. Replacing the screenshot of Google News with a stronger stimulus may help replicate the effects of the 2018 portal study. Successful replication of these effects may in turn help disentangle the psychological mechanisms behind agenda setting processes. The next chapter reports the design and findings of a follow-up experimental study (Study 2), which seeks to address some of the limitations of Study 1 related to weak credibility of the stimulus employed.
CHAPTER 3. MECHANISMS OF AGENDA SETTING

Because Study 1 unexpectedly failed to replicate basic agenda setting effects as well as cross-issue effects, it did not allow for testing mechanisms of effect at work behind agenda setting. A strong enough stimulus to replicate the results of the 2018 portal study is an important first step. However, returning to the 2018 portal method of repeated exposure to real news content over multiple days may not be the only option, and is not ideal for isolating mechanisms of effect. Instead, this chapter turns to the experimental paradigm of agenda cueing research because it has been found to produce strong agenda setting effects using a brief exposure in laboratory experiments (Pingree & Stoycheff, 2013; Stoycheff, Pingree, Peifer, & Sui, 2018), but has never been used to test cross-issue effects.

Agenda cueing is relying on the perceived media agenda as a shortcut to avoid the work of deciding which problems are the most important (Pingree & Stoycheff, 2013; Stoycheff, Pingree, Peifer, & Sui, 2018). Deciding on the most important problems is a dauntingly complex cognitive task, so it makes sense to look for cues from others who appear to have done that task. If one believes that problems are covered frequently in news more or less in proportion to how important news workers think those problems are, then the perceived amount of news coverage of each issue can serve as a rough cue for issue importance.

In their novel experiments, Pingree and Stoycheff (2013) investigated the mechanisms of agenda cueing by exposing undergraduate participants to a modified version of a Pew News Coverage Index report summarizing media coverage from the previous week. This allowed strongly manipulating the perceived news agenda with a brief stimulus, and without introducing potential confounds via exposure to the content of news stories. The authors found significant agenda cueing effects, particularly among individuals with high gatekeeping trust, that is
individuals who trust that media workers choose issues to cover based on how important they think those issues are (Pingree, Quenette, Tchernev, & Dickinson, 2013; Pingree & Stoycheff, 2013). Agenda cues from traditional news media increased perceived importance of problems, thus demonstrating that exposure to the perceived media agenda can powerfully influence how individuals form their judgments and opinions.

Agenda cueing is conceptually similar to the peripheral model of information processing advanced by Bulkow and colleagues (2013), which is based on individuals’ personal involvement with the issue at hand. This means that if a person’s issue involvement is low, this person will be more likely to process information through the largely unconscious, peripheral route (Petty & Cacioppo, 1981). Conversely, when issue involvement is high, a person will be more likely to process information through the conscious, central route (Petty & Cacioppo, 1981). Bulkow, Urban, and Schweiger (2013) used a realistic, custom-made experimental news website filled with both real news articles and fictitious news stories on a given issue and allowed respondents to use the website over a period of several days to discern their reading preferences. This approach allowed the researchers to test that, as people are exposed to an enormous amount of information, two information processes are likely to occur: causal exposure can be sufficient to produce agenda-setting effects when involvement with issues is low or individual will process information through a central, more systematic route when involvement with issues is high. According to the peripheral model of information processing, people rely on time-saving strategies that require moderate effort. This model assumes that individuals want to be rational, but they do not devote sufficient attention to all information they encounter on a daily basis and often rely on peripheral cues and heuristic shortcuts to form their opinions on a variety of issues (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). When asked in a survey to list the most important
problems facing the nation, respondents tend to mention issues or topics that have received extensive coverage in the news as a sort of automated response. In this case, respondents decide to simply rely on cues from the media indicating what the most important problems are. Information is captured incidentally, through a superficial, temporary process to evaluate a stimulus (Price & Tewksbury, 2007). Put differently, since individuals attach different meanings to different issues, lower involvement individuals were more likely to rely on peripheral cues to form an opinion compared to higher involvement individuals, who instead were more likely to invest time, attention, and cognitive effort to find out how important an issue was (Bulkow et al., 2013).

In contrast to the peripheral model of information processing, Bulkow and colleagues (2013) also suggest that some people process information in a more systematic and deliberate way. When an issue or topic seems of high relevance, they will devote ample attention to it and think carefully about it. In this case, agenda setting effects will exert a stronger influence on individuals, especially when they have a high need for orientation. Interestingly, the researchers found that both routes can lead to the same results in terms of perceived importance of issues, even when issue involvement differs among participants.

Recent research offers additional explanations as to why individuals mention specific issues as the most important issues facing the nation, including political knowledge (Miller & Krosnick, 2000), media trust (Miller & Krosnick, 2000; Tsfati, 2003), gatekeeping trust (Pingree & Stoycheff, 2013), need for orientation in an increasingly complex world (Matthes, 2008), and the public’s involvement with a particular issue (Bulkow et al., 2013). These different explanations reveal the need to accurately isolate presumed causal mechanisms affecting agenda setting processes in a context that resembles current patterns of news consumption.
As noted above, agenda cueing seems a valid and efficient way to test basic agenda setting effects and the cross-issue effect from racism to immigration. Exposure to the perceived media agenda has been found to produce large agenda setting effects comparable in size to classic agenda setting experiments (Stoycheff et al., 2018). Study 2 tests whether media cues may affect perceived importance of specific problems (i.e., racism and immigration) by exposing study participants to a news report similar to the one used by Pingree and Stoycheff (2013) in their novel experiments. This seems a plausible remedy to the shortcomings of Study 1 related to low credibility of the stimuli. Indeed, agenda cueing presupposes that study participants should be able to pick up cues associated with importance of racism from a report simulating the perceived media agenda. In other words, by taking cues from the media, individuals of the public could effectively delegate the difficult task of making sense of relative importance of problems to media workers. This approach can help discern the role of cognitive accessibility in making sense of issues.

Study 2 maintains the same exact design of Study 1 but replaces the screenshot of Google News with a modified version of a Pew News Coverage Index report summarizing media coverage from the previous week (see Pingree & Stoycheff, 2013). Unlike Study 1, Study 2 does not manipulate actual exposure to news coverage but instead provides an experimental test for whether media cues about racism may increase perceived importance of racism and cross over to affect presumed importance of immigration. The goal of Study 2 is to address the shortcomings of Study 1 while offering an improved theorization of the cross-issue effect found in the 2018 portal study. Even though Study 2 maintains the static characteristics typical of laboratory experiments, including the highly controlled setting, and the one-shot, forced exposure to the
stimulus, it offers a fast, cheap, and efficient approach to test the psychological mechanisms of agenda setting processes.

Just like Study 1, Study 2 provides an experimental test to determine whether and how increased media coverage of one issue (i.e., racism) may potentially cross over to affect presumed importance of another issue (i.e., immigration). The goal of Study 2 is to offer an improved theorization of the psychological mechanisms at work behind the cross-issue effect in a controlled, laboratory setting. By allowing rigorous control over the stimuli participants are exposed to, Study 2 seeks to accurately detect the causal mechanisms behind the cross-issue effect and confidently estimate the magnitude of this effect.

Study 2 also provides a test for the issue independence assumption by anticipating transfer of media salience from racism to perceived importance of immigration and tests the role of the mechanism of cognitive accessibility in determining this effect instead of simply assuming it.

**Hypotheses and Research Question**

Study 2 borrows from past agenda cueing work to test how exposure to the perceived media agenda emphasizing the topic of racism can increase importance of racism (i.e., basic agenda setting effects). Thus, I propose the following hypothesis:

**H1**: Exposure to a racism agenda cue will increase perceived importance of racism.

Just like Study 1, Study 2 employs a race prime manipulation to purposely increase cognitive accessibility of race. This intervention allows to test whether agenda setting effects are simply accessibility effects due to race-associated issues coming to mind more easily. The race prime manipulation is based on previous social psychological research on automatic stereotyping
processes, which posits that presence of a person can lead one to think about the concepts with which that person’s social group has become associated (e.g., Payne, 2001). The race prime may activate concepts associated with racism and this may lead to an increase in perceived importance of racism. Accordingly:

**H2**: Exposure to a race prime will increase perceived importance of racism.

The results of the 2018 portal study show that there exists a possibility that increased media coverage of one issue (e.g., racism) may cross over to affect perceived importance of another issue (e.g., immigration). Since little research to date provides evidence of how placing media emphasis on one issue (e.g., racism) may affect perceived importance of another issue (e.g., immigration), Study 2 provides another opportunity to test the cross-issue effect from racism to immigration by using the perceived media agenda. Thus, I hypothesize the following:

**H3**: Exposure to a racism agenda cue will increase perceived importance of immigration.

Just as in Study 1, the accessibility explanation of agenda setting can be extended using spreading activation to suggest that a simple race prime could produce the cross-issue effect on immigration importance, without any mention of racism. Seeing pictures of African Americans may activate concepts associated with race, and these concepts may in turn link to other issues associated with race, such as immigration. Thus, I propose the following hypothesis:

**H4**: Exposure to a race prime will increase perceived importance of immigration.

Past research establishes that asking participants to express their own criticism of the media’s selection of stories has the potential to lead people to reason for themselves more systematically during their MIP response instead of accepting media coverage as a heuristic cue (Pingree et al., 2013). Just like Study 1, Study 2 also employs the same gatekeeping criticism
expression as an experimental manipulation to induce more thoughtful information processing and to reduce the effects of heuristics (including the cognitive accessibility heuristic as well as agenda cue-taking) when individuals are asked to form their issue judgments. Randomly assigning some participants but not others to an open-ended question asking for an example of an issue the media covered a lot that was unimportant, and an example of an important issue the media did not cover enough should lead some individuals to introspect the information they receive from the media when asked what the most important problems of the nations are (Pingree et al., 2013). Therefore, I predict the following:

**H5:** Gatekeeping criticism expression will moderate the above effects.

Existing research offers mixed evidence on whether agenda setting effects are dependent on party identification. Thus, I pose the following research question:

**RQ1:** Does party preference interact with the above effects?

**Method**

Experimental studies allow the researchers to intervene deliberately and evaluate the causal impacts of exposure to media content (Potter & Riddle, 2007). Thus, exploring the interlinked shifts occurring in people’s minds through an experimental approach should eliminate all possible alternative explanations in determining the psychological mechanisms behind agenda setting. To address the shortcomings of Study 1 and test the above hypotheses, I conducted an online survey embedded in an experiment.

Study 2 seeks to reproduce the findings of the 2018 study, even though it lacks the dynamic and realistic nature of the online news portal employed in that study. The LSU IRB approved Study 2 on February 18, 2022 (IRB # IRBAM-21-0732) and it was immediately filed on the same day. Study 2 uses the same experimental design of Study 1 even though it replaces
the screenshot of the news portal with a modified version a Pew News Coverage Index report purported to summarize the perceived media agenda.

Participants

For Study 2, I recruited a convenience sample of U.S. adults (final N = 406) from MTurk and directed them to a Qualtrics online survey in exchange for monetary compensation ($0.40) for completing the online study. Although non-representative of the general population, the MTurk sample seems an appropriate option for assessing the effects of the experimental manipulations on participants’ issue importance (Berinsky, Huber, & Lenz, 2012; Krupnikov & Levine, 2014; Mason & Suri, 2012). To ensure quality of data, I prevented respondents from taking the survey multiple times, blocked search engines from including the survey in their search results and detected bots.

The MTurk sample was predominantly White, as 91.6% of participants identified as White or Caucasian, 3.4% as Black or African American, 2.2% as Asian or Pacific Islander, 2.2% as Latinx or Hispanic, and 0.2% indicated other or multiple races/ethnicities. In response to the survey question “Which political party do you prefer?”, 63.1% of participants indicated a preference for the Democratic Party, 34.2% for the Republican Party, and 1% who did not indicate even a slight preference for either party. The average age of participants was 36.4 years (SD = 9.27, min = 20, max = 82) and over 44% of participants indicated they had completed a four-year college degree.

Procedures

Study 2 employs a 2 (racism cue: racism cue included, no racism cue included) X 3 (interventions: race prime, gatekeeping criticism expression, control) between subjects, fully factorial design. After acknowledging the informed consent form on the very first page of the
survey, participants who agreed to participate in the study were instructed to take a short pretest 
questionnaire on Qualtrics containing questions related to demographic information (e.g., gender, 
race, and political preference) and attitudes on several outcomes of interest, including perceived 
importance of various national issues. Perceived importance of issues was a closed-ended 
question appearing under the heading “How important are the following problems?” and 
included several issues, such as COVID-19, education, health care, climate change, sexual 
harassment and sexual abuse, gun control/gun rights, unemployment/jobs, and crime/violence. 
Racism and immigration were both included within this multiple-item battery in order to disguise 
the intent of the study.

After completing the short pretest survey, participants were then directed to a new page 
where they encountered a modified report from the Pew News Coverage Index (NCI) released by 
Pew’s Project for Excellence in Journalism. The NCI report adapted a modified version of the 
NCI report from Pingree and Stoycheff’s (2013) agenda cueing study and featured the results of 
a content analysis of approximately 1000 stories from the previous week in 52 mainstream media 
outlets. To illustrate, the NCI report summarized the most popular issues discussed in news 
coverage from the previous week (i.e., February 6 to 12, 2022) and featured the top four most-
covered stories in the news from the previous week. Participants were randomly assigned to see 
different screenshots, which were manipulated according to the different experimental 
conditions. Regardless of the condition they were in, every participant encountered the following 
message at the top of the report: “Please read the report below to remind you about current 
events content from the past week. This is the most recent News Coverage Index (NCI) report 
from the Pew Research Center. Each weekly NCI report is based on approximately 1000 stories
from 52 major U.S. news outlets.” This disclaimer was intended to give participants a sense of timeliness and ultimately to avoid suspicious interpretations of the content they were exposed to.

Participants were asked to read the report from the Pew Research Center for at least one minute before they were prompted to answer a series of questions assessing eventual changes in the outcomes of interest. The posttest featured a variety of questions, including an open-ended version of the MIP question requiring participants to list the most important problems facing the nation in order of importance. Figure 2 below shows an example of the modified version of the report employed in this study.
The conflict in Ukraine emerged as the top story this week in the news, accounting for 23% of all stories studied for this week's index. Media coverage featured the latest developments of Russia’s continued buildup of military forces around Ukraine and the U.S. response.

COVID-19 was the No. 2 story of the week, accounting for 16% of stories. COVID-19 news included stories about U.S. states that are easing or ending indoor mask mandates that apply to federal government offices and public buildings.

The third-biggest story was the economy. Economic news stories emphasized growing concerns about inflation alongside improvements in the labor market and consumer spending.

Education was the No. 4 story of the week. Education-related news included stories about declining test scores and graduation rates, as well as potential disruptions in schools as some states lift indoor mask mandates.

**About the NCI**

*The Pew Research Center’s weekly News Coverage Index examines the news agenda of 52 different outlets from five sectors of the media: print, online, network TV, cable, and radio. The weekly study, which includes some 1000 stories, is designed to provide news consumers, journalists, and researchers with hard data about what stories and topics the media are covering, the trajectories of that media narrative and differences among news platforms. The percentages are based on "newshole," or the space devoted to each subject in print and online and time on radio and TV.*

**Figure 2.** Example of the screenshot of the Pew News Coverage Index report

**Racism agenda cue manipulation**

To test my predictions and research question, this experiment employs an experimental factor in which half of participants saw a racism agenda cue while the other half of participants did not see the racism cue. This racism agenda cue manipulation allows to test basic agenda setting effects as well as transfer of salience from one issue (i.e., racism) to another (i.e., immigration). Specifically, the racism cue manipulation altered whether the fourth top story of
the week was racism or not. In the racism cue condition, half of participants saw racism as the fourth top story in the Index, occupying 12% of the newshole, while in the no racism cue condition, the other half of participants did not see racism as a top story but instead education. The other top three stories (i.e., Ukraine crisis, COVID-19, and the economy) were identical across all experimental conditions.

Race prime intervention

Just like Study 1, Study 2 also employed a race prime intervention to increase cognitive accessibility of race and to test whether individuals will list racism as an important national problem simply because racism is highly accessible in their memory. Participants who were randomly assigned to the race prime condition were exposed to a color photograph of an African American man as part of the Pew Research Center’s NCI team next to two White men who were also part of the team of researchers. Participants who were not assigned to the race prime condition instead saw pictures of three White men as part of the NCI team. The pictures were positioned at the bottom of the report and were consistent across all experimental conditions.

Gatekeeping criticism expression manipulation

Just like in Study 1, Study 2 also included a gatekeeping criticism expression manipulation asking participants to reflect on the role of media gatekeepers in covering issues of societal importance. Research by Pingree and colleagues (2013) shows that asking participants to criticize the media’s section of stories to cover can lead certain people to reason for themselves more systematically during their MIP response instead of simply relying on the cues from the media as a heuristic to process information. The gatekeeping criticism expression intervention employed in Study 2 asked participants to reflect on the role of media gatekeepers in covering issues of societal importance. Some participants randomly answered an open-ended question
asking for an example of an issue the media covered a lot that was unimportant, and an example of an important issue that the media did not cover enough. Asking people to reflect on how the media select stories based on factors other than issue importance can affect whether they interpret issues in news as a cue about issue importance, thus leading to a more systematic response to the most important problem question instead of simply accepting media coverage as a heuristic cue (Pingree, Quenette, Tchernev, & Dickinson, 2013).

**Control condition**

A control condition featured an open-ended question asking participants to list everything they had to eat or drink in the last 48 hours (see Nyhan & Reifler, 2019). Table 2 below shows all experimental conditions and the number of participants assigned to each condition.

Table 2. Study 2 design (6 cells)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interventions</th>
<th>Control</th>
<th>Race prime</th>
<th>Gatekeeping criticism expression</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racism cue</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No racism cue</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Measures**

**Most important problems**

To test agenda setting effects, I measured perceived importance of problems through responses to the classic open-ended MIP question included as a posttest question: “What do you think are the most important problems facing the nation? Please list them in order of importance, starting with the most important problem.” I manually coded MIP responses using the ranked MIP method developed by Pingree and Stoycheff (2013) and validated in other agenda setting
studies (e.g., Santia et al., 2021). Following this method, I produced a precise count of the number of issues every respondent mentioned (M = 1.94, SD = 2.33) and then I recorded the position of immigration and racism when mentioned by respondents in the open-ended question. Reliability was acceptable (Krippendorff’s α = .71) for both issue position variables. I calculated the issue importance scores for both racism and immigration by taking the ratio of the issue’s response position to the total number of issues mentioned and used these scores as dependent variables for my analyses. Just like in Study 1, MIP open-ended answers were coded as immigration if participants answered illegal immigrants, immigration policies, border protection, border crossing, or immigration reform; and racism if participants answered racial divisions, race issues, racial inequality, Black Lives Matter, race relations, or racial discrimination.

Pre-test issue importance

Before actual exposure to the stimuli, participants were asked to indicate how important some problems were to them by choosing from a 11-item battery including issues such as the economy, healthcare, climate change, sexual harassment, and gun control. To avoid seeing all national problems as very important, responses ranged from 0 labeled as “not very important,” to 5 labeled as “very important,” to 10 labeled as “extremely important.” Immigration importance (M = 7.58, SD = 2.52) and racism importance (M = 7.53, SD = 2.78) appeared among other issues to disguise the intent of the experiment. These closed-ended measures of issue importance were used as covariates in the analyses to guard against the potential confound of differential attrition across experimental conditions.

Results

Hypothesis 1 predicted basic agenda setting effects, such that exposure to racism cues will increase perceived importance of racism. To test this first hypothesis, I used an analysis of
covariance (ANCOVA) model, which included a two-level factor for the racism agenda cue manipulation (racism cue included, no racism cue included), a two-level dummy for the race prime manipulation (race prime included, no race prime included), a two-level dummy for the gatekeeping criticism expression manipulation (gatekeeping criticism expression included, no gatekeeping criticism expression included), and a three-level party preference factor (preference for the Republican Party, preference for the Democratic Party, or not even a slight preference for either party). The ANCOVA model included a two-way interaction between the racism cue manipulation and the race prime, a two-way interaction between the racism agenda cue manipulation and the gatekeeping criticism expression intervention, and an interaction term for the racism agenda cue manipulation and participants’ party preference. To guard against the possibility of systematic attrition as a treatment confound, the model also included the pretest measure of perceived importance of racism as a covariate (M = 7.53, SD = 2.78). By adding this pretest measure, an increase in issue importance from the pretest survey to the posttest survey can be interpreted as a treatment effect.

In the ANCOVA model predicting perceived importance of racism (adjusted $R^2 = .014$), the racism cue main effect was not significant ($F[1, 281] = 3.360, p = .068$, partial $\eta^2 = .012$). Contrary to my expectation for the basic agenda setting hypothesis, exposure to the racism agenda cue did not significantly increase perceived importance of racism as a national problem among study participants. Exposure to the racism agenda cue through the NCI report did not significantly increase perceived importance of racism ($M = .106, SE = .024$) compared to the condition where racism was not cued in the NCI report ($M = .124, SE = .039$).

Hypothesis 2 predicted that exposure to a race prime would increase perceived importance of racism. To test H2, I used the same exact ANCOVA model used to test H1 as both
hypotheses share the same outcome. The model (adjusted $R^2 = .014$) did not reveal a significant main effect for the race prime manipulation ($F[1, 281] = .463, p = .497$, partial $\eta^2 = .002$). Contrary to my expectation, exposure to a race prime did not significantly increase perceived importance of racism, thus indicating that cognitive accessibility may not be the mechanism at play behind agenda setting effects. Participants exposed to the race prime expressed similar levels of racism importance ($M = .123, SE = .034$) compared to participants who did not see the picture of an African American man as part of the NCI team of researchers ($M = .111, SE = .025$).

Hypothesis 3 provided a test for the cross-issue effect under investigation by predicting that exposure to a racism agenda cue will increase perceived importance of immigration. To test H3, I used an ANCOVA model identical to the model used to test H1 and H2 except for its dependent variable and covariate (i.e., immigration importance). In this model (adjusted $R^2 = -.007$), the racism agenda cue main effect was not significant ($F[1, 278] = .683, p = .409$, partial $\eta^2 = .002$). Perceived importance of immigration was not significantly higher when participants were exposed to the racism agenda cue ($M = .067, SE = .023$) compared to when participants did not see the racism agenda cue in the stimulus ($M = .089, SE = .038$).

Hypothesis 4 posited that exposure to a race prime would increase perceived importance of immigration. To test H4, I used the same ANCOVA model that I used to test H3 (adjusted $R^2 = -.007$). The analysis did not reveal a significant effect for the race prime ($F[1, 278] = .170, p > .05$, partial $\eta^2 = .001$). Contrary to my expectation, perceived importance of immigration was not significantly higher when participants were exposed to a race prime ($M = .073, SE = .033$) compared to when participants did not see pictures of an African American man in the stimuli ($M = .087, SE = .024$).
Hypothesis 5 posited that exposure to the gatekeeping criticism expression condition will moderate the above effects. I tested H5 using the same ANCOVA models for the above hypotheses. In the ANCOVA model predicting perceived importance of racism (adjusted $R^2 = .014$), the main effect for the gatekeeping criticism expression intervention was not significant ($F[1, 281] = .029, p = .864$, partial $\eta^2 = .001$). The two-way interaction with the racism cue manipulation was also not significant ($F[1, 281] = .681, p = .410$, partial $\eta^2 = .002$). Similarly, the ANCOVA model predicting perceived importance of immigration (adjusted $R^2 = -.007$) did not reveal a significant main effect for the gatekeeping criticism expression condition ($F[1, 278] = .022, p = .882$, partial $\eta^2 = .001$). The two-way interaction with the racism cue manipulation was also not significant ($F[1, 278] = .643, p = .423$, partial $\eta^2 = .002$).

RQ1 asked whether party preference interacted with any of the hypothesized effects. In the ANCOVA model predicting perceived importance of racism (adjusted $R^2 = .014$), the interaction with the racism cue manipulation was not significant ($F[3, 279] = .217, p = .641$, partial $\eta^2 = .001$). Similarly, the ANCOVA model predicting perceived importance of immigration (adjusted $R^2 = -.007$) did not reveal a significant interaction with the racism cue manipulation ($F[3, 276] = .017, p = .896$, partial $\eta^2 = .001$).

Discussion

Just like Study 1, Study 2 set out to investigate basic agenda setting effects (H1) and the cross-issue effect, from racism to immigration (H3) but I did not find support for any of my expectations. Existing research in agenda cueing has amply demonstrated that cues from the media about the importance of certain issues are sufficient to make people believe that such issues are of national concern (e.g., Pingree & Stoycheff, 2013). The results of Study 2 indicate that exposure to a report emphasizing racism as the fourth most-covered issue in the previous
week’s news did not affect perceived importance of racism or perceived importance of immigration. Study 2 also tested whether a race prime manipulation affected either issue via cognitive accessibility of race and found no support for this presumed effect on perceived importance of racism (H2) and perceived importance of immigration (H4). Similarly, Study 2 tested whether expressing criticism of media gatekeepers could induce a more systematic processing, but I also found no support for this effect (H5). In response to RQ1, party preference did not interact with any of the above effects.

Even though Study 2 employed stimuli very similar to the ones used by Pingree and Stoycheff (2013) in their experiments, exposing participants to a manipulated version of the perceived media agenda emphasizing racism did not successfully affect the public’s issue importance. It is possible that the treatment was again too weak. Racism was placed in the fourth spot in the stimulus for believability purposes, but in retrospect it perhaps could have been as high as the second most covered issue in the previous week. Similarly, exposure to a race prime may have not been enough for study participants to pick up race cues and associate them with racism importance and immigration importance. Non-significant results for the race prime manipulation again corroborate existing evidence indicating that cognitive accessibility is not the psychological mechanism at work behind agenda setting processes (see also Miller, 2007; Pingree & Stoycheff, 2013).

Agenda setting effects have been extensively documented across several methodologies and designs, including agenda cueing experiments similar to Study 2, so the failure of Study 1 and Study 2 to detect these effects is most likely due to weak treatments. Agenda setting effects are often impressively large relative to other media effects, but they do not occur on every issue every time. For example, in Iyengar & Kinder’s (1987) classic series of experiments, in 7 out of
13 trials the number of participants mentioning the treatment issue in the MIP was more than double that of the control group, but in 3 others no significant increase in importance was found (see Iyanger & Kinder, 1987, p. 24). Agenda cueing experiments have found a similar pattern: 6 out of 14 trials at least doubled the number of participants mentioning the treatment issue in the MIP, and another 3 produced no significant effects (see Stoycheff et al., 2018, p. 3).

Another difference between the present study and the 2018 portal study (Santia et al., 2021) was that in this study the stimuli were purported to represent the news media’s agenda, whereas the 2018 portal’s “trending stories” sidebar could instead be seen as the agenda of other news users. As explained in previous chapters, the trending stories sidebar displayed news headlines that users of the portal deemed of particular interest by clicking on them. Thus, it is possible that the cross-issue effect requires the perception that people in general are paying a lot of attention to racism, not merely that journalists are doing so.

Based on all the above considerations, it remains plausible that the News Coverage Index report employed in Study 2 did not replicate the findings from the 2018 portal study because it provided cues about the media agenda rather than the agenda of individuals of the public (or the so-called user agenda of the 2018 portal). Looking at past literature in this area, one plausible next step is to expose participants to a stimulus proving an indication of other users’ perceived agenda, such as a report highlighting the main issues discussed on Twitter – as done previously by Stoycheff and colleagues (2018). Previous work shows that Twitter generally follows the agendas of the news media (Parmelee & Bichard, 2011; Vargo, Guo, McCombs, & Shaw, 2014) and, therefore, investigating the influence Twitter on the public agenda may help explain agenda setting processes in the modern media environment – as done previously by Feezell (2018). Employing cues about which problems are being discussed most on Twitter may be the key to
reproduce the findings of the 2018 portal study, which in turn may help explain how the cross-issue effect occurs and the psychological mechanisms at work behind agenda setting processes.

The following chapter reports the design and findings of a follow-up experimental study (Study 3), which seeks to address some of the limitations of Study 1 as well as Study 2.
CHAPTER 4. THE POWER OF SOCIAL CUES

So far both Study 1 and Study 2 failed to reveal basic agenda setting effects. More importantly for the purposes of this dissertation, both experimental studies failed to replicate the cross-issue agenda setting effect found in the 2018 portal study, such that media emphasis on racism would affect perceived importance of immigration among study participants. As explained at the end of Chapter 3, one plausible explanation could derive from the kind of stimuli employed in both studies. The 2018 portal study revealed strong cross-issue agenda setting effects by employing a “trending stories” sidebar, which made study participants think that racism was an issue of national concern based on news content other users of the portal engaged with and clicked on to read in detail. In other words, the 2018 portal manipulated the user agenda, whereas Study 1 and Study 2 manipulated the news agenda.

Endorsement of social cues may have been the key element that led to the cross-issue effect in the 2018 portal study. The next logical step to explore agenda setting effects and replicate the results of the 2018 portal study is to employ a stimulus that delivers some sort of social cues to simulate the user agenda. Study 3 provides an additional experimental test to successfully replicate basic agenda setting effects and the cross-issue effect under investigation. The next section delves into the literature on social cues and is followed by a detailed description of Study 3.

New Gatekeepers

In today’s digital era, social cues have assumed a great deal of importance (Thorson & Wells, 2016). The rapid digitization of the media system, the growing complexity of the way citizens interact, and the subsequent fragmentation of online audiences have invariably challenged the dominant, top-down role of traditional gatekeepers, and as a result, new kinds of
gatekeepers (e.g., friends, social contacts, bloggers, algorithmic filters) have emerged as providers of information to massive audiences (Bruns, 2018; Chadwick, 2013; Thorson & Wells, 2016). These gatekeepers have introduced new dynamics that complicate the relationship between the media and the public. Social media platforms and information aggregation systems (e.g., news portals) have bypassed conventional gatekeepers by distributing powerful cues through their sociotechnical affordances, including recommendation systems and personalized algorithms (Beam, 2014; Perloff, 2021). These cues underpin major information delivery systems and determine what users are exposed to with subsequent effects on how they form opinions regarding that same information (Perloff, 2021; Thorson & Wells, 2016).

Sundar and Nass (2001) conceptualized these “social” heuristics as bandwagon cues. Previous studies manipulated presence or absence of social recommendations below news stories (Knobloch-Westerwick, Sharma, Hansen, & Alter, 2005; Messing & Westwood, 2014), or presence or absence of specific elements (e.g., sidebars, “recommended” sections, etc.) on webpages (Yang, 2016) and found that these cues affected other users’ behaviors, for example by increasing rates of exposure to specific news stories. Messing and Westwood (2014) found that social endorsements outperform other cues, such as source partisanship, when individuals are asked to select news. In other words, social cues have the potential to enhance news consumers’ likelihood to select stories if they were in some way endorsed by others, and in some cases increase the overall number of stories selected.

Here it is worth noting that, in an environment in which immediacy is crucial (Perloff, 2021), the supply of information is virtually infinite even though people’s ability to attend to and process this information is limited (Zaller, 1992). This poses the problem of too much information and too little time to attend to it all. Thus, individuals will not always be able to
process every aspect of every available message but instead will selectively devote their attention to some information to make political judgments.

Dual-process models from the psychological tradition provide a useful theoretical lens to understand how individuals can form perceptions of issue importance both by means of thorough central processing and peripheral, heuristic processing of information (Bulkow et al., 2013; Takeshita, 2006). The peripheral processing model presupposes that individuals will adopt mental shortcuts, or heuristics, to make sense of information effectively and rapidly form opinions (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). As explained by Fiske and Taylor (2008), heuristics are “mental shortcuts that are used to reduce complex cognitive tasks into simple mental operations that allow us to make judgments fairly efficiently and accurately.” Heuristics can be very powerful and can be presented in different forms, such as what Sundar and Nass (2001) conceptualize as “social heuristics” or “bandwagon cues,” that is powerful cognitive shortcuts that allow to evaluate online news stories based on other users’ ratings and personal preferences. In the words of Sundar (2008), “if others think that this is a good story, then I should think so too” (p.83). Applied to social media, these social cues can appear through a “trending” or “recommended” label associated with specific content (e.g., a news article, a tweet, a Facebook post, etc.) to provide an indication of other social media users’ preferences and evaluations.

Past research seems to suggest that social cues are potential mechanisms of information processing, which can increase perceived importance of certain problems. Cues have previously been studied in the context of agenda setting, and their effects have been found to be quite large not only to assess news content but also when applied in the context of social media platforms (Stoycheff & Pingree, 2018). Individuals can be highly susceptible to social cues from others when asked to form their judgements and opinions on various issues of concern – the classic
Gallup MIP question. Providing social cues about the importance of specific problems can make other individuals borrow these cues when asked what the most important national problems are.

This logic proved to be effective in experimental tests. Stoycheff, Pingree, Peifer, and Sui (2018) adapted the original news agenda cueing stimuli from Pingree and Stoycheff (2013) and found strong agenda cueing effects in the realm of social media. Using a modified version of the News Coverage Index report framed instead as a fictional Twitter Coverage Index report that summarizes the most frequently discussed topics on Twitter from the past week, the authors tested the effects of the perceived Twitter agenda on issue importance. The TCI report summarized the previous week’s most popular topics and presented the percentage of tweets dedicated to different issues (e.g., gun control and energy). The authors found that social cues about issue importance presented in the TCI report increased perceived importance of these same issues, thus demonstrating that social cues are powerful influences even when participants are not directly exposed to media content to form their judgments and opinions (Stoycheff, et al., 2018).

Study 3 employs social cues in an experimental setting to test their influence of the public’s issue priorities. Study 1 and Study 2 did not lead to basic agenda setting effects or the cross-issue effect under investigation. As mentioned earlier, one possible limitation could be the kind of stimuli used to generate these effects. Employing social cues about importance of certain topics could effectively influence perceived importance of these same topics among study participants. Since Study 1 and Study 2 failed to reproduce these effects when manipulating the media agenda, Study 3 manipulates the so-called “user agenda” by providing social cues – an approach similar to the one used in the 2018 portal study.
Hypotheses and Research Question

Extensive research in agenda cueing indicates that social cues have the potential to affect perceived importance of problems even without direct exposure to media content (Pingree & Stoycheff, 2013; Stoycheff, Pingree, Peifer, & Sui, 2017). Individuals of the public may delegate the difficult task of making sense of importance of problems to other individuals. Study 3 tests basic agenda setting effects, such that exposure to cues about importance of racism can affect perceived importance of racism. Accordingly:

\textit{H1: Exposure to racism cues will increase perceived importance of racism.}

Just like Study 1 and Study 2, Study 3 also employs a race prime manipulation to purposely increase cognitive accessibility of race in people’s mind. By employing this manipulation Study 3 tests whether priming race may render race-related concepts more accessible in people’s mind and whether this may lead to an increase in perceived importance of racism. Put formally:

\textit{H2: Exposure to a race prime will increase perceived importance of racism.}

Through its novel design, Study 3 provides an additional opportunity to test the cross-issue effect from racism to immigration by using cues from other individuals rather than cues from the media coverage. I hypothesize that:

\textit{H3: Exposure to racism cues will increase perceived importance of immigration.}

The race prime manipulation could activate race-related concepts and these concepts may in turn link to other issues associated with race, such as immigration. Therefore, I propose the following hypothesis:

\textit{H4: Exposure to a race prime will increase perceived importance of immigration.}
Method

To investigate the influence of social cues on perceived importance of racism as well as perceived importance of immigration, I conducted an additional online survey embedded in an experiment on February 28, 2022. The LSU IRB approved the study on February 28, 2022 (IRB # IRBAM-22-0222). To maximize power for the basic goal of replicating agenda setting effects, Study 3 employs a simplified version of the experimental designs of Study 1 and Study 2 by dropping the gatekeeping criticism expression condition and by presenting racism as the second most discussed issue on Twitter instead of the fourth (as in Study 2). Study 3 also replaces the modified version of the Pew News Coverage Index report employed in Study 2 with a Twitter Coverage Index report – as previously used by Stoycheff and colleagues’ (2018). The TCI report should provide an indication of the so-called user agenda by providing social cues from other individuals on importance of certain issues. Put differently, instead of summarizing the perceived media agenda, Study 3 advances the perceived social agenda in order to test the possibility of transfer of salience from racism to immigration as documented in the 2018 portal study.

Participants

A convenience sample of paid U.S. adults (final N = 399, 73.7% male; 26.3% female) was recruited from MTurk to take an online survey on Qualtrics in exchange for reasonable monetary compensation ($0.40). Of the sample, 87.7% of participants identified as White or Caucasian, 5.5% as Black or African American, 3.0% as Asian or Pacific Islander, 2.8% as Latinx or Hispanic, and 1.0% indicated other or multiple races/ethnicities. In response to the survey question “Which political party do you prefer?” 54.6% participants expressed a preference for the Democratic Party, 43.1% for the Republican Party, and 2.3% did not indicate
even a slight preference for either party. The average age of participants was 35.99 (SD = 17.92; min = 18; max = 66).

**Procedures**

Study 3 employs a 2 (racism cue: racism cue included, no racism cue included) X 2 (interventions: race prime included, no race prime included) between subjects, fully factorial design. Just as in Study 1 and Study 2, MTurk workers who agreed to participate in the study took a short pretest questionnaire on Qualtrics containing questions collecting participants’ demographics and attitudes on perceived importance of several national issues, including COVID-19, education, the economy, racism, and immigration. Participants were then exposed to a modified report from the twitter News Coverage Index (TCI) released by the Pew Research Center. The TCI report adapted a modified version of the TCI report from Stoycheff and colleagues’ (2018) agenda cueing study and featured the results of a content analysis of approximately 1000 topics that emerged from conversations on Twitter during the previous week – February 20 to 26, 2022. Just like the NCI report employed in Study 2, the TCI report employed for Study 3 featured the top most-important topics from the previous week. Participants were randomly assigned to see different versions of the report, which were manipulated according to the different experimental conditions.

Participants were asked to read the report from the Pew Research Center for at least one minute before they were prompted to answer a series of questions assessing eventual changes in the outcomes of interest. The posttest featured a variety of questions, including an open-ended version of the MIP question requiring participants to list the most important problems facing the nation in order of importance. Figure 3 below shows an example of the modified version of the TCI report employed in this study.
TWITTER COVERAGE INDEX (TCI)

The conflict in Ukraine emerged as the top issue this week on Twitter, accounting for 23% of all tweets studied in the weekly index of the Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism. Twitter users discussed the latest developments of Russia’s continued buildup of military forces around Ukraine and the U.S. response.

The economy was the No. 2 issue of the week on Twitter, accounting for 16% of all tweets. Tweets related to the economy emphasized growing concerns about inflation alongside improvements in the labor market and consumer spending.

The third-biggest issue was COVID-19. Twitter users discussed different topics related to COVID-19, including mask mandates and consequences of the pandemic on the health care system and the economy.

**About the TCI**

*The Pew Research Center's weekly Twitter Coverage Index examines the agenda of tweets. The weekly study, which includes some 1000 topics, is designed to provide citizens and researchers with hard data about what topics Twitter users are tweeting about and the trajectories of those narratives. The percentages are based on political Tweets about each issue.*

[Image: Pew Research Center's TCI Team]

Figure 3. Example of the screenshot of the Twitter Coverage Index report

**Racism cue manipulation**

The TCI report was accurately manipulated in the attempt of delivering social cues on importance of certain topics. To test the above hypotheses and research question, Study 3 employs a two-level racism cue factor in which half of participants saw racism as the second top
issue in the TCI report, accounting for 16% of weekly tweets, while the other half of participants did not see racism as a top issue in the report and instead saw the economy as the second top issue in the TCI report, also accounting for 16% of weekly tweets. The other top two topics concerned the Ukraine crisis and COVID-19, and these were identical across all experimental conditions.

*Race prime manipulation*

Just as in Study 1 and Study 2, Study 3 also employed a race prime manipulation to increase cognitive accessibility of race and to test whether individuals will list racism as an important national problem simply because racism is highly accessible in their memory or because racism is deemed an issue of national concern. This two-level factor exposed some participants to a color photograph of an African American man as part of the Pew Research Center’s TCI team. Participants who were not assigned to the race prime condition instead saw pictures of three White men as part of the same team. Since both Study 1 and Study 2 did not reveal significant effects relative to the gatekeeping criticism expression manipulation, Study 3 dropped this condition. The experimental design is in Table 3 below.

Table 3. Study 3 design (4 cells)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race Prime</th>
<th>Race prime included</th>
<th>No race prime included</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(N)</td>
<td>(N)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racism cue</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No racism cue</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Measures

Most important problems

Just like in Study 1 and Study 2, the classic open-ended MIP question: “What do you think are the most important problems facing the nation? Please list them in order of importance, starting with the most important problem” was used to measure perceived importance of problems. I coded participants’ responses through the ranked MIP method developed by Pingree and Stoycheff (2013). I produced a count of the number of issues every respondent mentioned (M = 2.06, SD = 2.14) and then I recorded the position of immigration and racism among the issues listed. Reliability was acceptable (Krippendorff’s α = .76) for both racism and immigration. The issue importance scores used as dependent variables in the models were calculated by taking the ratio of the issue’s response position to the total number of issues mentioned.

MIP open-ended answers were coded as immigration if participants answered illegal immigrants, immigration policies, border protection, border crossing, or immigration reform; and racism if participants answered racial divisions, race issues, racial inequality, Black Lives Matter, race relations, or racial discrimination.

Pre-test issue importance

Before actual exposure to the stimuli, participants were asked to indicate how important some problems were to them by choosing from a 9-item battery including issues such as the economy, healthcare, climate change, and gun control. Just like in Study 1 and Study 2, responses ranged from 0 labeled as “not very important,” to 5 labeled as “very important,” to 10 labeled as “extremely important.” Immigration importance (M = 8.45, SD = 2.32) and racism importance (M = 8.06, SD = 2.67) appeared among other issues to disguise the intent of the
manipulation. To control for participants’ preexisting attitudes toward these issues, I used these closed-ended measures of issue importance as covariates in the models.

**Results**

Hypothesis 1 predicted basic agenda setting effects, such that exposure to racism cues will increase perceived importance of racism. To test this first hypothesis, I used an analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) model, which included a two-level factor for the racism cue manipulation (racism cue included, no racism cue included) and a two-level factor for the race prime manipulation (race prime included, no race prime included). The ANCOVA model also included the pretest measure of perceived importance of racism as a covariate (M = 8.06, SD = 2.67).

In the ANCOVA model predicting perceived importance of racism (adjusted $R^2 = .034$), the racism cue main effect was significant ($F[1, 286] = 8.826$, $p = .003$, partial $\eta^2 = .030$), thus offering support for H1. Exposure to the racism cue in the TCI report significantly increased perceived importance of racism (M = .182, SD = .024) compared to when participants did not see racism as an important issue in the TCI report (M = .084, SD = .023).

Hypothesis 2 predicted that exposure to a race prime would increase perceived importance of racism. To test H2, I used the same exact ANCOVA model used to test H1. The model (adjusted $R^2 = .034$) did not offer support for H2 ($F[1, 286] = 3.143$, $p = .077$, partial $\eta^2 = .011$). Contrary to my expectation, exposure to a race prime did not significantly increase perceived importance of racism (M = .103, SD = .024) compared to when participants did not see the race prime (M = .163, SD = .023). This result again contradicts the cognitive accessibility mechanism for agenda setting effects.
Hypothesis 3 provided a test for the cross-issue effect under investigation by predicting that exposure to racism cues will increase perceived importance of immigration. To test H3, I used an ANCOVA model identical to the model used to test H1 and H2 except for its dependent variable and covariate. In the ANCOVA model predicting perceived importance of immigration (adjusted $R^2 = .011$), the racism cue main effect was not significant ($F[1, 285] = .784, p = .377$, partial $\eta^2 = .003$). Perceived importance of immigration was not significantly higher when participants were exposed to racism cues ($M = .076, SE = .017$) compared to when participants did not see racism cues in the stimulus ($M = .055, SE = .017$).

Finally, hypothesis 4 tested that exposure to a race prime would increase perceived importance of immigration. To test H4, I used the same ANCOVA model that I used to test H3 (adjusted $R^2 = .011$). The analysis did not reveal a significant effect for the race prime ($F[1, 285] = .1258, p = .263$, partial $\eta^2 = .004$). Levels of perceived importance of immigration were similar in the race prime condition ($M = .079, SE = .018$) and when participants did not see pictures of an African American man in the stimuli ($M = .052, SE = .016$).

**Discussion**

So far, I have employed three different experimental designs to detect basic agenda setting effects and the cross-issue effect from racism to immigration. Unlike Study 1 and Study 2, Study 3 revealed significant basic agenda setting effects for the issue of racism. By employing a stronger stimulus simulating the user agenda of the 2018 portal study, Study 3 found that cues about users’ perceived importance of racism have the potential to increase perceived importance of racism among other users. Participants in Study 3 seemed to pay attention to the perceived agenda of other individuals of the public and used these social cues when asked what the most important national problems were. This is in line with prior research indicating that online users
are greatly affected by social cues to form their opinions and judgments on a variety of issues (Knobloch-Westerwick, Sharma, Hansen, & Alter, 2005; Messing & Westwood, 2014; Stoycheff et al., 2018; Sundar & Nass, 2001). But even though Study 3 detected basic agenda setting effects, it failed to show occurrence of the cross-issue effect from racism to immigration.

Study 3 also provided a test for the effects of a race prime manipulation. Increasing cognitive accessibility of race did not affect perceived importance of racism (H2) and perceived importance of immigration (H4) among study participants. Exposure to a race prime did not lead study participants to pick up race cues and associate them with racism importance and immigration importance. Lack of significant results for the race prime contradicts the assumption that cognitive accessibility is the psychological mechanism at work behind agenda setting processes, as shown previously by Miller (2007), Miller and Krosnick (2000) and Pingree and Stoycheff (2013). Clearly, the other theorized mechanisms behind agenda setting processes besides cognitive accessibility have more empirical support. The race prime manipulation was intended to make race accessible in participants’ minds resulting in a higher chance of mentioning racism as an important problem, and also to activate other race-related concepts through spreading activation to increase immigration importance. The lab experiment context for all three studies involving brief exposure and immediate measurement of effects was well-suited for testing these accessibility heuristics. That the race prime manipulations did not produce any significant effects even on the importance of racism in any of the three experiments is fairly convincing evidence against this mechanism.

Overall, the basic agenda setting effects found in Study 3 indicate that the stimuli employed in this last study were more powerful compared to the screenshot of the news portal that was employed in Study 1 and the NCI report used for Study 2. This may have been due to
the use of a Twitter agenda cue instead of a news agenda cue, although in past agenda cueing research news cues have been found to be slightly more powerful than Twitter agenda cues (Stoycheff et al., 2018). Alternatively, it could have been because of moving the racism treatment up from the fourth most covered topic in the news to the second most covered topic on Twitter, or due to increased power resulting from dropping the gatekeeping criticism manipulation.

Contrary to my expectation, Study 3 did not reveal significant cross-issue effects from racism to immigration. Previously, in Study 1 and Study 2, the tests of the cross-issue effect could be seen as relatively inconclusive due to the failure to also find basic agenda setting effects; they could have been merely a result of weak treatments instead of incorrect theory. Here, the treatment seemed to be effective in its intended purpose of increasing racism importance on the perceived social media agenda, resulting in cueing effects on racism importance. The fact that this did not translate to effects on immigration importance suggests that the presence of racism on the perceived social media agenda does not produce a cross-issue effect. In other words, it suggests that the cognitive mechanism of agenda cueing is not responsible for the cross-issue effect. Thus, the remaining effects explanation for the 2018 portal study’s cross-issue effects is the affective mechanism based on perceived group threat. Exposure to what are perceived to be repeated complaints about racism is taken as an implicit attack to the ingroup, resulting in a defensive response manifesting as hostility to outgroups in the form of opposition to immigration. The failure to find cross-issue effects in two agenda cueing experiments (Study 2 and Study 3) illustrates that the mere perception that there has been a lot of attention to racism is not enough to produce this affective response; instead, repeated exposure to actual news about racism may be required.
Similarly, realistic interaction with news may be important for producing the cross-issue effect. The 2018 portal allowed repeated exposure to real experimental stimuli in a dynamic setting over an extended period of 12 days. Forced exposure to a static, inactive report for a short minute may have led to non-significant effects for the expected outcomes. All three experiments used screenshots artificially created as stimuli. Unlike the 2018 portal study, none of the experiments asked participants to engage with or navigate the stimuli in the way they might have wanted, for example by clicking on issues of interest or zooming in for more details. In retrospect, the lack of interactivity may have reduced the potential for affective responses that drive the cross-issue effect in real media use.

These limitations indicate that replication of effects might need to occur by employing a new portal as the main methodological approach. However, field experiments are difficult and costly. An alternative next step to complement the results of these three studies could be to employ real, observational data. This type of data could offer an indication of whether and how the cross-issue effect occurs and could also provide an external check for the results of the three experiments. Observational data in combination with the results of the experiments may help expand the theoretical horizons of agenda setting.
CHAPTER 5. OBSERVATIONAL ANALYSIS

Study 1, Study 2, and Study 3 employed three separate controlled laboratory experiments to reproduce the cross-issue effect of the 2018 portal study and examine possible underlying mechanisms behind this effect. Study 1 and Study 2 did not offer support for basic agenda setting effects and the cross-issue effect from racism to immigration. Study 3 instead found basic agenda setting effects for the issue of racism but did not find evidence of the cross-issue effect. This suggests that the mechanisms of cognitive accessibility and cueing traditionally assumed in agenda setting theory may not be at work behind the cross-issue effect. Failure to reproduce the hypothesized effects, however, may derive from the inherent characteristics of laboratory experiments, including the element of forced exposure and artificiality of stimuli. The static mode of delivery of the treatments in the three experiments may have been too weak to generate basic agenda setting effects. For all three experiments, I used a screenshot to deliver the treatments, and this may have precluded users to actively engage with the content they were exposed to in the way they might have wanted. Discouraging engagement through static, inactive stimuli may have failed to fully deliver the intended manipulations (Wimmer & Dominick, 1991). Alternatively, the results may provide evidence for the eroding power of the media in setting the public’s agenda in the new media landscape (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008; Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018; Edy & Meirick, 2018; Shehata & Strömbäck, 2013). Combining different methodologies and approaches could be a solution to assess agenda setting effects in light of tremendous transformations in the new media era.

Since the Chapel Hill seminal study, agenda setting scholars have largely employed observational designs and found strong correlations between the media agenda and the public agenda. Notably Funkhouser (1973) compared six years of Gallup public opinion surveys with
content analysis of news articles published in major magazines and found significant relationships between the public’s most important issues and the issues covered most extensively in magazines. Observational studies provide a way to complement and externally validate the results of the three experiments in real settings. To this end, I conducted an observational analysis based on secondary data. With observational data, I can test how patterns of media coverage of racism might influence perceived importance of racism (i.e., basic agenda setting effects) and immigration (i.e., the cross-issue agenda setting effect) in response to MIP survey questions over a specific period of time. This last stage of analyses offers a useful external check to further validate the experimental results and the applicability of the findings in real-world situations.

**Hypotheses**

Just like in the preceding studies, here I test basic agenda setting effects using observational data. Thus:

**H1:** *Perceived importance of racism will be positively related to the amount of racism coverage in the previous week.*

I also test the cross-issue effect from racism to immigration by hypothesizing that:

**H2:** *Perceived importance of immigration will be positively related to the amount of racism coverage in the previous week.*

**Method**

Unlike Study 1, Study 2, and Study 3, here I employ an analysis of media content and publicly available responses to the classic Gallup MIP question. For the media agenda, previous research has often used secondary data from Pew Research Center’s Project of Excellence in Journalism news index, which collects information on major issues discussed in U.S. media
outlets on a weekly basis. Since the PEJ news index seems to be unavailable online at the moment of this writing, I decided to operationalize the media agenda by relying on frequency of news stories on the topic of racism and immigration that appeared on the *New York Times* during one-week periods prior to Gallup’s published surveys of the Most Important Problems (MIP). The *NYT* is the most prestigious mainstream newspaper in the U.S., and, together with the *Washington Post*, the *NYT* plays a critical role in establishing the saliency of issues in the U.S. media agenda (Dearing & Rogers, 1996) in such a way that its agenda seems to influence the agenda of other news media – a process often called intermedia agenda setting (McCombs, 2004). The archive of the *NYT* is also publicly available and easily accessible through *Nexis Uni*.

Collecting frequency of mentions of the issue of racism and immigration in the headlines and lead sections of the *NYT* seems a valid method to simulate the media agenda and offer real-world evidence of agenda setting effects. To gather this data, I used the database *Nexis Uni* and conducted separate searches for stories on the topic of racism as well as immigration appearing on the *NYT* headlines and lead sections. I specified the dates for each month based on one-week periods before publicly available responses to the Gallup’s MIP question. I then recorded frequencies of mentions of stories on the topics of racism and immigration during each week prior to the Gallup question (see Table 4 below for more details). To code for racism stories, I used the following keywords: “racism,” “racial divisions,” “race issues,” racial inequality,” “Black Lives Matter,” “race relations,” and “racial discrimination.” To code for immigration stories, I used this set of keywords: “immigration,” “illegal immigrants,” “immigration policies,” “border protection,” “border crossing,” and “immigration reform.”
Table 4. Mentions of racism and immigration in the NYT

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dates</th>
<th>Total N of Racism Mentions</th>
<th>Total N of Immigration Mentions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>December 27, 2021 – January 2, 2022</td>
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<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 24 – November 30, 2021</td>
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<td>October 25 – October 31, 2021</td>
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<tr>
<td>August 25 – 31, 2021</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 25 – August 1, 2021</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 29 – July 5, 2021</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 24 – 31, 2021</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>March 24 – 31, 2021</td>
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<tr>
<td>February 22 – 28, 2021</td>
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<td>148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 27 – February 2, 2021</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>59</td>
</tr>
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<td>October 29 – November 5, 2020</td>
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(table cont’d.)
To test agenda setting effects, I gathered public opinion data relative to the issue of racism and immigration. I operationalized the public agenda by compiling publicly available responses to the monthly MIP Gallup polls. Since 1935, the Gallup Organization has routinely surveyed representative samples of the U.S. public on issues of national concern by asking the classic open-ended question “What do you think are the most important problems facing this country today?” Gallup data are easily retrievable online through the database Roper iPoll. For each MIP dataset of interest, I specifically searched for raw frequencies of mentions of racism and immigration in response to monthly MIP questions (see Table 5 below for more information.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dates</th>
<th>Total N of Racism Mentions</th>
<th>Total N of Immigration Mentions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<td>February 22 – 28, 2018</td>
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<td>December 26, 2017 – January 1, 2018</td>
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<td>November 27 – December 3, 2017</td>
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<td>October 25 – November 1, 2017</td>
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<tr>
<td>September 28 – October 4, 2017</td>
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<tr>
<td>July 26 – August 1, 2017</td>
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<td>June 28 – July 4, 2017</td>
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<td>May 31 – June 6, 2017</td>
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<td>March 29 – April 4, 2017</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>December 30, 2015 – January 5, 2016</td>
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on this data). Several scholars have used this type of data as an indication of the public agenda and paired it with issues emphasized in news media coverage to find evidence of the transfer of salience from the media agenda to the public agenda. Correlational studies between media exposure and public opinion polls have typically exceeded the .50 threshold (Wanta & Ghanem, 2007), and some studies have reported results over .70 (e.g., McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

Table 5. Mentions of racism and immigration from MIP responses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Total N of Immigration Mentions</th>
<th>Total N</th>
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*Note: This table includes all MIP data available from the Gallup Organization for the years 2021, 2020, 2019, 2018, 2017, and 2016. Data were retrieved from the database Roper iPoll.*
Results

The goal of this observational analysis is to understand whether news coverage of racism and immigration on the NYT influenced public attitudes in relation to perceived importance of both racism and immigration. To test my expectations, I employ correlational analyses between media coverage data and MIP coded responses. The results of these analyses should allow to estimate the real magnitude of the agenda setting correlation beyond artificial settings typical of laboratory experiments.

To test H1 and H2, I computed Pearson’s correlation coefficients. The results show a positive correlation between the media agenda and the public agenda for the issue of racism, \( r = .484, p < .001 \). Consistent with past literature and the results of Study 3, this analysis shows basic agenda setting effects from the media agenda to the public agenda for importance of the issue of racism, thus offering support for H1. I also found a significant correlation between news coverage of racism and perceived importance of immigration in the public agenda, \( r = -.255, p = .042 \). Note that although the relationship between racism coverage and immigration importance is significant, the negative sign signals that as racism coverage increased, perceived importance of immigration decreased. This finding is in the opposite direction of the cross-issue effect of the 2018 portal study. Instead of supporting the group threat explanation, this finding is consistent with what Iyengar and Kinder (1987) called hydraulic effects, such that increased importance of one issue in the media agenda diminishes importance of other issues in the public’s agenda.

To complement the results of the correlations, I also conducted a multiple linear regression analysis. This analysis allows me to examine whether NYT stories on racism and immigration predict perceived immigration importance among the public. The regression model explains a significant portion of the variance in immigration importance, adjusted \( R^2 = .218 \), F(2,
61) = 9.758, \( p < .001 \). There is a significant relationship between exposure to \( NYT \) mentions of racism and immigration and MIP responses regarding perceived importance of immigration, such that more exposure to racism news predicts a decrease in perceived importance of immigration (\( B = -0.321, p = .013 \)) while more exposure to immigration news predicts an increase in perceived importance of immigration (\( B = 0.553, p < .001 \)). These results offer further empirical evidence for agenda setting effects while also offering an external check to the experimental data.

**Discussion**

The observational analyses employed here allow to test patterns of media coverage of racism and their expected influence on perceived importance of racism (i.e., basic agenda setting effects) and immigration (i.e., the cross-issue agenda setting effect) as reported in Gallup’s MIP answers over the last few years. The correlational analyses employed here were intended to complement and externally validate the results of the 2018 portal study and the three experiments. I found basic agenda setting effects, such that \( NYT \) coverage of racism influenced perceived importance of racism among the public.

Despite evidence of basic agenda setting effects, it is important to note that I did not find support for the cross-issue effect that emerged from the 2018 portal study. Coverage of racism in the \( NYT \) did not lead to increased importance of immigration among people. Interestingly, I found evidence of hydraulic effects in which media emphasis on racism lowered perceived importance of immigration among individuals of the public (Lee, McLeod, & Shah, 2008; Pan & Kosicki, 1997). As noted by Higgins (1996), rival considerations compete with each other for activation and when one consideration is activated, others may lose their importance. In other words, when racism was highlighted in media coverage, the use of rival considerations (e.g.,
importance of immigration) renders such considerations unworthy of attention (see also Newman & Uleman, 1990). This finding has important implications because individuals who are more dependent on exposure to recent messages to make subsequent judgments may likely be affected more than individuals with higher levels of relevant knowledge, who in turn may be more motivated to process messages in a more systematic way.

One limitation that derives from these analyses is that operationalizing the media agenda by looking solely at coverage from the NYT may not fully capture the nuances of the media agenda in the modern media landscape, and this may be problematic when investigating agenda setting effects. It is likely that the agenda setting power of the NYT may have faded as new, alternative sources have appeared in the past few decades, and especially since the rise of cable television and online new sources. The shift from a low-choice to a high-choice, fragmented media environment has progressively allowed media consumers to personalize their media diets and consume information from a vast variety of sources (Cacciatore, Scheufele, & Iyengar, 2016; Edy & Meirick, 2018). This may signal the influence of other actors in setting the media agenda as well as the agenda of the public.

Similarly, another important limitation is in the attempt to simplify the vast complexities of public opinion by looking exclusively at Gallup polls’ responses to the classic MIP question. Although agenda setting studies continue to use MIP data to advance useful insights, this approach limits our understanding of the complexity of the public agenda – an argument also echoed by Edy and Meirick (2019) in their examination of the public agenda from 1975 to 2014. Factors like the broader political climate and the employment of different media frames to talk about racism and immigration, along with dozens of other important events and trends (e.g., economic crises, natural disasters, electoral campaigns, mass protests), influence how people
think about issues in meaningful ways. The observational analyses employed here are unable to account for how these factors may have influenced how people form their judgments about national issues and the relationship between the media agenda and the public agenda. This limitation calls for additional analyses that employ alternative sources (e.g., the U.S. Policy Agendas Project) aimed at gathering public opinion on a vast array of issues.

Failure to detect the cross-issue effect both in experimental settings and through observational data may indicate that the results of the 2018 portal study were idiosyncratic to that particular moment. With only the results of the 2018 portal study, the troubling implication was that attention to racism might always or often backfire and produce hostility toward outgroups. This observational evidence across multiple years strongly contradicts that depressing assessment and suggests instead that what is needed next is to figure out what kind of mechanisms seem to produce this backlash effect. This calls for additional work that replicates the methodology of the 2018 portal and further examines the role of other plausible mechanisms of effects beyond cognitive accessibility and agenda cueing.

In the concluding chapter, I provide a comprehensive assessment of the results of the studies employed in this dissertation with particular emphasis on their methodological limitations and implications for the study of agenda setting processes. Finally, I offer recommendations for future research in this area.
CHAPTER 6. SUMMARY OF RESULTS

In the 2018 portal study, my co-authors and I found empirical evidence for the cross-issue effect, such that repeated exposure to real, timely news stories about criticisms of White people being racist significantly increased perceived importance of immigration as a national problem, particularly among participants who expressed a preference for the Republican Party (Santia et al., 2021). This troubling finding suggests that attention to racism may sometimes backfire and produce hostility to outgroups, motivating this dissertation’s central questions about how common this effect is and how exactly it works. This dissertation sought to qualify the findings from the 2018 portal study by understanding mechanisms of how the cross-issue effect works in order to be able to recommend strategies for talking about racism without predicting such effect. Instead, the results of the studies reported here indicate that the cross-issue effect is unexpectedly difficult to reproduce in experiments and is likely at least uncommon in real media use: when viewed over several years of observational data, the correlation between racism coverage and immigration importance is negative, thus signaling that increased emphasis on racism in the media decreases perceived immigration importance. Ultimately, the big picture take-away of this is more reassuring than expected: this backlash against racism coverage appears to be much rarer than feared. The next step in this research program will be to attempt to understand what it was about the 2018 portal study (e.g., a particular kind of racism news, the unique characteristics of field experimentation) that produced the observed effect.

Replicating the cross-issue effect from the 2018 portal study in simple brief-exposure laboratory experiments was an important first step toward being able to efficiently test the underlying psychological mechanisms motivating this cross-issue effect. Originally, I planned two experimental designs to test mechanisms in two different ways: one design dedicated to
agenda setting mechanisms and one design dedicated to group threat mechanisms. Unexpectedly, the cross-issue effect proved difficult to replicate in a laboratory experimentation, so all three experiments employed in this dissertation used the first of the two originally planned designs (i.e., the one exploring mechanisms of effect for agenda setting), adjusting only the treatment strategies in an effort to increase treatment strength and find evidence for the hypothesized effects.

Three possible mechanisms of this effect were drawn from two rich bodies of research on agenda setting (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; McCombs, 2005; McCombs & Shaw, 1972) and group threat (Blalock, 1967; Blumer, 1958). I conducted three separate laboratory experiments to disentangle whether the cross-issue effect detected in the 2018 portal study was due to the cognitive mechanisms traditionally assumed in agenda setting theory (i.e., an accessibility heuristic or agenda cueing) or to an affective response driven by perceived group threat. The choice to employ controlled laboratory experiments was precisely due to the advantages offered by this method in terms of efficiently isolating the underlying mechanisms of effect through the introduction of carefully thought experimental interventions. Observational data then complemented the results of the three experiments and provided an external check beyond the artificial settings typical of laboratory experiments.

All three experimental studies conducted for the purposes of this dissertation failed to replicate the cross-issue effect emerged from the 2018 portal study. Even though I employed different types of stimuli in the three separate iterations, I found no empirical evidence for the anticipated cross-issue effect from racism news coverage to perceived importance of immigration. Contrary to my expectations, increased exposure to racism-related news headlines (Study 1), a racism news agenda (Study 2), and a racism social media agenda (Study 3) did not
increase the likelihood of listing immigration as an issue of national concern in response to MIP questions. The observational analyses reported in Chapter 5 also failed to offer evidence for the cross-issue effect over multiple years of data. News coverage of racism in the *New York Times* did not lead to increased importance of immigration in response to Gallup’s MIP questions. Rather, the opposite effect was found, such that emphasis on racism in the media agenda diminished immigration importance in the public agenda. Failure to detect the anticipated cross-issue effect raises a series of questions and considerations that are worth acknowledging and discussing in this last chapter. Doing so may allow to expand our current understanding of competing rationales for the cross-issue effect to occur and extend the theoretical base of agenda setting theory beyond its original formulation.

**Explaining Lack of Significant Results**

When taking together the results of the first two experiments, the first consideration worth making is that I did not find evidence for the basic agenda setting hypothesis. Exposure to racism-related information in the form of online racism news headlines (Study 1) and a racism news agenda cue (Study 2) did not affect perceived importance of racism. It is possible that failure to find basic agenda setting effects in two of the three experiments is due to weak, ineffective stimuli employed to simulate the media agenda. The racism news headlines included in the Google News screenshot in Study 1 could have been too weak to make people think that racism is an important issue affecting the country. Similarly, placing racism as the fourth important issue in the New Coverage Index report in Study 2 could have resulted in a very subtle manipulation. In both scenarios, study participants may have been unable to grasp that racism coverage was being emphasized and, as a result, they did not infer that racism was an important issue.
It is also possible that failure to detect basic agenda setting effects in the first two experiments is contingent upon the eroding power of the media in setting the public’s agenda in light of tremendous media transformations, declining media trust levels, increased media choices, and pressing questions about a “new era of minimal effects” (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008; Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018; Edy & Meirick, 2018; Shehata & Strömbäck, 2013). In particular, the proliferation of alternative and partisan media outlets has meaningfully shaped the influence of modern media on the public. Partisan news outlets have allowed individuals to overly accommodate supportive evidence for their inherent perspectives (e.g., partisan preferences) while dismissing inconsistent evidence challenging prior attitudes through the process of selective exposure (Arceneaux & Johnson, 2015). Allowing individuals to selectively expose themselves to news that align their pre-existing beliefs while actively avoiding dissonant arguments and views that counter one own’s preferences (Arceneaux & Johnson, 2015) has invariably coincided with a fragmentation of audiences, which in turn is believed to reduce the agenda setting function of the media (e.g., Djerf-Pierre & Shehata, 2017; Edy & Meirick, 2018; Shehata & Strömbäck, 2013). Yet this explanation of the eroding power of the media seems invalid when taking into considerations the results of Study 3. Exposing study participants to a different type of stimulus in Study 3 (i.e., social cues of importance of racism derived from the Twitter agenda rather than the media agenda) led to basic agenda setting effects for the issue of racism. Social cues suggesting importance of racism on Twitter significantly increased importance of racism among study participants, providing further evidence relative to the power of social cues in influencing the so-called “user-agenda” (Thorson & Wells, 2016). This basic same-issue agenda setting effect also serves as a successful manipulation check for Study 3. Significant agenda setting effects for the issue of racism indicate that the stimulus employed in
Study 3 was strong enough to potentially replicate the cross-issue effect – even if it failed to do so.

Here it is important to note that, just like the racism news headlines employed in Study 1 and the racism news agenda cue of Study 2, the racism Twitter agenda cue of Study 3 also did not affect perceived importance of immigration, making Study 3’s failure to produce a cross-issue effect more convincing evidence against the generality of this effect compared to the results of Study 1 and Study 2. The stimulus employed in Study 3 produced significant agenda setting effects for the issue of racism and, therefore, it was strong enough to potentially replicate the cross-issue effect. However, lack of significant cross-issue effects in Study 3 shows that replicating this effect is very difficult in laboratory settings that briefly expose participants to different stimuli.

Further, employing a race prime in all experimental designs should have increased racism importance according to the cognitive accessibility hypothesis. However, mere exposure to racism information or to a race prime, such as pictures of Black individuals carefully embedded in the experimental stimuli, did not necessarily activate perceptions that racism and other racism-related concepts, including immigration, are important national problems. The immediate-post treatment measurement of the MIP did not reveal significant results for the race prime, thus indicating that the cross-issue effect does not operate through the mechanism of cognitive accessibility. Of course, additional tests are needed to more conclusively rule out cognitive accessibility as the mechanism explaining the cross-issue effect and explore alternative mechanisms of effect. In retrospect, one could also argue that the race prime employed in Study 2 and Study 3 may have influenced the results in important ways. To reiterate, Study 2 and Study 3 used the picture of a professional Black man as part of a research team. This may have been
interpreted by some people as a counter-stereotypical picture and, therefore, it may have potentially reduced perceptions that racism is an important problem – as suggested by extant research on media stereotypes (Power, Murphy, & Coover, 1996; Ramasubramanian, 2011). Future studies should definitely incorporate different types of race primes to assess these effects more carefully.

Together, the results of the studies included in this dissertation advance the possibility of alternative psychological mechanisms behind the cross-issue effect, namely a defensive mechanism of identity protection rooted in group threat. Bringing up the topic of racism could activate group threat among some individuals and make them think that their group is under threat (Brader, Valentino, & Suhay, 2008; Valentino et al., 2013), which in turn may lead to a mechanism of defense aimed at protecting the interests and wellbeing of the ingroup (Valentino, Brader, & Jardina, 2013). Activation of this mechanism of defense may trigger a belief that outgroups represent a threat for valued resources, status, and privilege and this may motivate members of the ingroup to prefer race-targeted policies that benefit their groups and help them maintain their superiority, including affirmative action and immigration reform (Gilens, 2009; Jardina, 2019). This is because immigration arguably poses a threat to the existing status quo and contributes to the eventual loss of the ingroup’s numerical majority, power, and privileges particularly when the immigrants differ in terms of race from the natives and in places where resources are particularly scarce (Citrin, Green, Muste, & Wong, 1997; Dixon & Linz, 2000; Hopkins, 2010; Kinder & Kam, 2009; Valentino, Brader, & Jardina, 2013). Although the results of the three experiments seem to indicate that the cross-issue effect is due to an affective response rooted in group threat, this mechanism needs more testing in the future. This is critical for two main reasons. First, the group threat mechanism is inherently different from the
mechanisms of agenda setting and, therefore, it may be activated in different ways and under very different circumstances. Second, the group threat mechanism could potentially lead to much stronger effects compared to agenda setting effects. Agenda setting may only have temporary effects whereas identity threat may induce potentially lasting and impactful affective responses, which in turn may influence certain policy preferences over time (Ayers et al., 2009; Brader, Valentino, & Suhay, 2008). As for the cognitive accessibility assumption, additional tests are needed to further validate group threat mechanisms as the mechanisms at work behind the cross-issue effect.

Failure to replicate the cross-issue effect in three distinct experimental iterations could also be idiosyncratic to the 2018 portal study. Many internal as well as external factors could have influenced the results of the 2018 portal study in important ways, including the broader political climate, specific use of media frames, and public discourse around racism and immigration during that particular moment. A rich body of literature also suggests that people make use of their racial identities and their partisan identities to evaluate a vast array of political issues and concerns of debate in American politics (Gilens, 1999; Merolla, Ramakrishnan, & Haines, 2013). Moreover, because economic and socio-political circumstances vary greatly over the years, this may have led people to switch opinions about specific issues of societal concern from 2018 to the present moment. Given the myriad of circumstantial factors that may have prevented replication of this effect in more controlled laboratory settings and confirmation of the original finding, one can argue that the results of the 2018 portal study were not a fluke due to mere chance. Rather, the results were idiosyncratic to that particular moment, the broader political climate of 2018, and the way racism and immigration were framed in the media and by political elites.
Nevertheless, failure to replicate the cross-issue effect from the 2018 portal study is somehow reassuring, particularly for how journalists, editors, and other media practitioners cover issues of societal concern like racism and immigration. The results of the 2018 portal study may have suggested that the mere mention of racism automatically activates other race-related issues, which in turn may influence particular policy preferences such as immigration. However, the results of the three experiments employed in this dissertation seem to reveal that this effect is quite rare and may be contingent upon specific circumstances, including for example the broader political context or public discourse around issues of concern.

Non-significant basic agenda setting effects for two of the three experiments (Study 1 and Study 2) and non-significant cross-issue effects for all three experiments need to be interpreted in conjunction with the results from the observational data. As explained in Chapter 5, observational data revealed the opposite of the cross-issue effect, a hydraulic relationship in which increased media emphasis on racism is related to decreased immigration importance (Miller & Krosnick, 2000). Because individuals of the public have limited capability of attending to information (Zaller, 1992), increased emphasis on the issue of racism in the NYT news coverage reduced perceived importance of immigration. In the words of Miller & Krosnick (2000), immigration was “pushed into the cognitive background” (p. 82) when the NYT focused its coverage on the topic of racism. This finding is crucial because it shows that the media may tell people not only “what to think about” (Cohen, 1963, p. 13) but also “what not to think about.” Since perceived importance has been shown to be dependent upon the amount of processing attention (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007), emphasizing certain issues while downplaying others is likely to lead some individuals of the public to infer that the issues that are downplayed are less important than the ones that receive more coverage.
From a methodological perspective, it is possible that failure to detect the cross-issue effect in three separate experiments may be related to the unique characteristics of controlled, laboratory experiments. Forced exposure studies do not mirror current modes of media consumption in the evolving media environment, even though they continue to be widely used in agenda setting studies (e.g., Arendt & Obereder, 2016; Melek & Ulucay, 2019). One may argue that the element of realism afforded by the customized online news portal employed in the 2018 study may have played a crucial role in detecting cross-issue agenda setting effects from racism to immigration. The 2018 portal study relied on data collected in real time through a dynamic field experiment, which afforded participants the opportunity to actively engage with news content rather than being forced to specific news content (Gerber & Green, 2012; Green, Calfano, & Aronow, 2014; Lecheler & de Vreese, 2017). Since group threat appears to be the mechanism of effect, the portal may have facilitated this effect through repeated exposure to specific stimuli over an extended period of 12 days. Repeatedly seeing real, timely news stories about criticisms of White people being racist may have accumulated into an affective response – which is consistent with group threat mechanisms.

The cross-issue effect found in the 2018 portal study may also be contingent upon to the specific type of news stories that were featured on the portal at that time. To reiterate, the news portal exposed participants to a scrollable, chronological screen populated with real, timely news articles found on Google News from a variety of media outlets (e.g., CNN, Fox News, The New York Times, The Washington Post, Chicago Tribune, etc.). The racism news that where particularly prominent at the time of the experiment were episodes of racism toward African Americans, such as the “barbecuing while black” incident that occurred in Oakland in 2018 in which a White individual called the police to complain about a group of African Americans that
were hosting a social gathering. This consideration invariably calls for further explorations of the effects of different types of racism frames. Different kinds of stories may result in very different effects. Study 1 attempted to fill this gap by employing different headlines on the topic of racism but failed to assess the potential effects of different types of media frames on how people think about race and racism. As Kinder and Sanders (1996) note, “frames are interpretive structures embedded in political discourse … At the same time, frames also live inside the mind; they are cognitive structures that help individual citizens make sense of the issues” (p. 164). By employing different news frames covering the topic of racism, future research will successfully assess which racism stories have the potential to strongly influence audience issue priorities with regard to the topic of racism. Investigating the effects of various types of news coverage of racism yields valuable information about the potential of racism news to activate a sense of group attachment to protect the interests of their group by eliciting negative reactions among audiences.

**Limitations and Future Directions**

There are some limitations to consider when interpreting the results of the studies employed in this dissertation. First, each study relied on convenience samples recruited through Amazon’s Mechanical Turk crowdsourcing service. Even though MTurk offers a helpful and relatively low-cost alternative to nationally representative samples in terms of its workers’ demographic characteristics, socio-psychological attitudes, and political beliefs (Berinsky, Huber, & Lenz, 2012; Hargittai & Shaw, 2020; Shaw & Hargittai, 2021), it still hinders the ability to generalize the findings of the three experiments to other populations. On average, MTurkers have been shown to have better Internet skills and higher levels of active online engagement compared to nationally representative samples (Shaw & Hargittai, 2021). These
factors may have played a determining role in the experiments and may have skewed the results. Thus, additional studies using more representative samples, or even non-representative samples recruited from different platforms (e.g., Prolific or Lucid) are certainly desirable to replicate and externally validate the results of the three experiments.

Second, the immediate post-treatment measurement of racism importance and immigration importance may have skewed the results in important ways (Wimmer & Dominick, 1991). I deliberately chose to employ this approach based on the idea that accessibility effects tend to be short-lived (Althaus & Kim, 2006; Roskos-Ewoldsen, Roskos-Ewoldsen, & Carpentier, 2009). However, the results of the three experiments appear to indicate that even when measuring changes in the outcomes of interest immediately after exposure to stimuli, perceived importance of racism as well as immigration was not affected. Not only does this provide empirical evidence against the cognitive accessibility assumption rooted in agenda setting, but it also shows that the cross-issue effect might be a cumulative reinforcement effect that needs to be observed over an extended period of time. Indeed, the news portal employed in the 2018 study offered the advantage of measuring the outcomes of interest after 12 days of exposure to the stimuli. Existing research shows that the greater the time lag between the administration of stimuli and the measurement of outcomes, the longer the effects of the treatment are believed to last – as echoed by recent research by Jerit, Barabas, and Clifford (2013). Finding evidence of the cross-issue effect after 12 days indicates that the cross-issue effect might be a stronger effect than basic agenda setting effects.

Additionally, as noted above, the three experiments failed to discern the specific effects of different kinds of racism-related information on importance of issues (for exceptions see Druckman, 2001; Kim & Kiousis, 2012; Miller, 2007). Previous research in agenda setting has
mostly lumped together news coverage of one issue and only a small minority of studies have compared the relative effects of different types of media frames on the public’s issue priorities. The 2018 portal study seemed to suggest that news stories about criticisms of White people being racist led to the cross-issue effect. Identifying the effects of different kinds of racism-related news is definitely an important next step to advance knowledge in this domain of research.

**Future Steps**

Considering the limitations of the studies employed in this dissertation, additional tests are needed to more conclusively rule out agenda setting mechanisms as the mechanisms behind the cross-issue effect found in the 2018 portal study. One way to accomplish this would be through additional laboratory experiments that allow to establish the cause-and-effect relationship between exposure to news about racism and related effects on the public’s issue priorities. Ultimately, the best approach to address this limitation would be to recreate an information-rich, high-choice experimental environment in which to explore the mechanisms of the cross-issue effect. Employing a purpose-built news portal similar to the one used for the 2018 study could make the agenda setting manipulation stronger and replicate the cross-issue effect. The news portal offers increased external validity than forced exposure studies, and this may be the key to discern the conditions necessary for the cross-issue effect to occur. In the modern media landscape characterized by increased media choice, diversity of viewpoints, and abundance of opinionated content, laboratory experiments may be limited in their ability to confidently estimate cause-and-effect relationships that reflect the dynamics occurring in real world settings. The element of interactivity typical of the portal, coupled with repetition of
stimuli, heightened user engagement, and believability of stimuli, offer an opportunity to explore the cross-issue effect in a setting that resembles current modes of media consumption.

Relatedly, additional tests are needed to firmly establish that the group threat mechanism is the mechanism behind the cross-issue effect. One way to accomplish this could be through an experimental test that successfully reduces perceived identity threat through the introduction of specific experimental interventions. Thinking about an identity threat from a broader perspective could eventually reduce prominence of that threat and the need for a defensive response aimed at protecting one’s own identity from that threat. Following this logic, employing an experimental manipulation that effectively reminds individuals of their self-worth could allow individuals to respond more adaptively to information that is perceived as threatening (Sherman & Cohen, 2006; Cohen & Sherman, 2014). Existing research on self-affirmation shows that people that are self-affirmed are more open-minded toward information that counters their predispositions (Sherman & Cohen, 2006; Cohen & Sherman, 2014). Thus, asking individuals to write about a personally cherished value or personality trait that is important to them or about an experience when they were particularly proud of themselves could induce systematic information processing (McQueen & Klein, 2006; Sherman & Cohen, 2006). In other words, reminding individuals of their self-worth could render them able to respond more adaptively to perceived threat and increase their ability to make accurate judgments about threatening information they are presented with (Cohen, Aronson, & Steele, 2000; Nyhan & Reifler, 2019). Future experimental tests could employ an experimental intervention that allows individuals to express their self-worth to attenuate the pernicious effects of identity-reasoning and the introduction of biased processing of information related to racism. Not only will this intervention help discern whether group threat is the mechanism behind the cross-issue effect from racism news to immigration
importance, but it could also be used as a remedy to dampen this concerning transfer of threat from one group to another also deemed as threatening (i.e., immigrants).

Future research in this area should take also into account individuals’ idiosyncrasies when examining whether and how these factors may affect occurrence of the cross-issue effect. Factors such as participants’ media trust levels, their media diets, and strength of group attachment may fundamentally influence the way individuals process information related to racism and how they react to information perceived as threatening. Incorporating such measures in future research will be ideal to gather a more comprehensive assessment of the cognitive mechanisms behind the cross-issue effect.

Together, the findings from this dissertation offer an opportunity to expand the original framework of agenda setting theory. The author hopes this work can ignite the potential for new theoretical developments in this line of research.
APPENDIX. IRB APPROVALS

Study 1 IRB

LSU Office of Research & Economic Development

TO: Pingree, Raymond J
LSUAM | Sch of MCOM | Mass Communication

FROM: Alex Cohen
Chairman, Institutional Review Board

DATE: 12-Jul-2021
RE: IRBAM-21-0732
TITLE: Cross-issue agenda setting: Testing spreading activation

SUBMISSION TYPE: Initial Application
Review Type: Exempt
Risk Factor: Minimal
Review Date: 09-Jul-2021
Status: Approved
Approval Date: 09-Jul-2021
Approval Expiration Date: 08-Jul-2024
Exempt Category: 2a
Requesting Waiver of Informed Consent: Yes
Re-review frequency: Three Years
Number of subjects approved: 1000
LSU Proposal Number:

By: Alex Cohen, Chairman

Continuing approval is CONDITIONAL on:

1. Adherence to the approved protocol, familiarity with, and adherence to the ethical standards of the Belmont Report, and LSU’s Assurance of Compliance with DHHS regulations for the protection of human subjects.
2. Prior approval of a change in protocol, including revision of the consent documents or an increase in the number of subjects over that approved.
3. Obtaining renewed approval (or submittal of a termination report), prior to the approval expiration date, upon request by the IRB office (irrespective of when the project actually begins); notification of project termination.
4. Retention of documentation of informed consent and study records for at least 3 years after the study ends.
5. Continuing attention to the physical and psychological well-being and informed consent of the
individual participants, including notification of new information that might affect consent.
6. A prompt report to the IRB of any adverse event affecting a participant potentially arising from the study.
8. SPECIAL NOTE: When emailing more than one recipient, make sure you use bcc. Approvals will automatically be closed by the IRB on the expiration date unless the PI requests a continuation.

*All investigators and support staff have access to copies of the Belmont Report, LSU’s Assurance with DHHS, DHHS (45 CFR 46) and FDA regulations governing use of human subjects, and other relevant documents in print in this office or on our World Wide Web site at http://www.lsu.edu/research*
Study 2 IRB

Date: 18-Feb-2022
To: Raymond J Pingree
    LSUAM | Sch of MCOM | Mass Communication
From: Chair, Institutional Review Board
Re: IRB # IRBAM-21.0732
Title: Agenda setting: Study 2
Submission Type: Amendment

The experimental design and purpose is the same, but the stimulus is completely new. The same experimental treatments (emphasis on certain issues as well as a racial prime) are now being delivered within the context of a report that summarizes recent news coverage, instead of a screenshot of Google News. This is due to past research showing that this kind of report stimulus produces strong agenda cueing effects. The questionnaire has also been greatly shortened, resulting in the study taking less time and thus requiring less compensation per participant ($0.40 instead of $1). The project description and consent forms have been updated based on these changes.

Review Type: Exempt Review
Review Date: 18-Feb-2022
Risk Level: Minimal
Status: Approved
Approval Date: 18-Feb-2022
Approval Expiration Date: 08-Jul-2024
LSU Proposal Number: (if applicable)
By: Alex Cohen, Chairman

Continuing approval is CONDITIONAL on:

1. Adherence to the approved protocol, familiarity with, and adherence to the ethical standards of the Belmont Report, and LSU’s Assurance of Compliance with DHHS regulations for the protection of
human subjects*

2. Prior approval of a change in protocol, including revision of the consent documents or an increase in the number of subjects over that approved.

3. Obtaining renewed approval (or submittal of a termination report), prior to the approval expiration date, upon request by the IRB office (irrespective of when the project actually begins); notification of project termination.

4. Retention of documentation of informed consent and study records for at least 3 years after the study ends.

5. Continuing attention to the physical and psychological well-being and informed consent of the individual participants, including notification of new information that might affect consent.

6. A prompt report to the IRB of any adverse event affecting a participant potentially arising from the study.


8. **SPECIAL NOTE:** When emailing more than one recipient, make sure you use bcc. Approvals will automatically be closed by the IRB on the expiration date unless the PI requests a continuation.

*All investigators and support staff have access to copies of the Belmont Report, LSU’s Assurance with DHHS, DHHS (45 CFR 46) and FDA regulations governing use of human subjects, and other relevant documents in print in this office or on our World Wide Web site at [http://www.lsu.edu/research](http://www.lsu.edu/research)*

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Study 3 IRB

TO: Raymond J Pingree
LSUAM | Sch of MCOM | Mass Communication
FROM: Alex Cohen
Chairman, Institutional Review Board
DATE: 28-Feb-2022
RE: IRBAM-22-0222
TITLE: Agenda Setting: Study 3
SUBMISSION TYPE: Initial Application
Review Type: Exempt
Risk Factor: Minimal
Review Date: 28-Feb-2022
Status: Approved
Approval Date: 28-Feb-2022
Approval Expiration Date: 27-Feb-2025
Exempt Category: 2a
Requesting Waiver of Informed Consent: Yes
Re-review frequency: Three Years
Number of subjects approved: 500
LSU Proposal Number:

By: Alex Cohen, Chairman

Continuing approval is CONDITIONAL on:

1. Adherence to the approved protocol, familiarity with, and adherence to the ethical standards of the Belmont Report, and LSU’s Assurance of Compliance with DHHS regulations for the protection of human subjects.
2. Prior approval of a change in protocol, including revision of the consent documents or an increase in the number of subjects over that approved.
3. Obtaining renewed approval (or submittal of a termination report), prior to the approval expiration date, upon request by the IRB office (irrespective of when the project actually begins); notification of project termination.
4. Retention of documentation of informed consent and study records for at least 3 years after the study ends.
5. Continuing attention to the physical and psychological well-being and informed consent of the individual participants, including notification of new information that might affect consent.
6. A prompt report to the IRB of any adverse event affecting a participant potentially arising from the study.
8. SPECIAL NOTE: When emailing more than one recipient, make sure you use bcc. Approvals will automatically be closed by the IRB on the expiration date unless the PI requests a continuation.

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LIST OF REFERENCES


Goidel, K., Parent, W., & Mann, B. (2011). Race, racial resentment, attentiveness to the news media, and public opinion toward the Jena Six. *Social Science Quarterly, 92*(1), 20-34.


VITA

Martina Santia is a Ph.D. candidate in Media and Public Affairs in the Manship School of Mass Communication at Louisiana State University. Her primary research area is political communication, and she is particularly interested in the effects of racialized news coverage on public attitudes and behaviors. Martina’s research has appeared in Mass Communication & Society, The International Journal of Press/Politics, Perspectives on Politics, and Public Opinion Quarterly, among other journals. She holds an undergraduate degree in Mass Communications and International Political Economy & Diplomacy (2014) and a Master’s degree in Global Development & Peace (2017) from the University of Bridgeport in Bridgeport, Connecticut. Upon completion of her degree, Martina will begin to work as a postdoctoral researcher at the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications at Syracuse University.