



[en] Media Attributes and Attitude Change: Experiments on the Impact of Second-Level Agenda-Setting on Attitudes towards Syrian Refugees

Gizem Melek¹; Dilek Melike Ulucay²

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Abstract. This research examined how news content influences attitudes towards Syrian refugees in Turkey. The study aimed to understand if the way Syrian refugees are attributed in media – that is, media salience about Syrian refugees that comprise their image – would cause an attitude change in the public. More specifically, we intend to determine whether being exposed to positive news coverage about Syrian refugees would cause an attitude change in the public from negative to positive. For the purpose of the study, we have conducted a quasi-experimental research and used a pretest-posttest design to investigate the second-level agenda-setting effects. Two experiments (a pilot and a main experiment) were conducted during the Spring term of 2017 in Turkey. The participants were selected from a large private university in Turkey for the experiments. The t-test results suggest that positive media emphasis on the images of Syrian refugees had a positive impact on public opinion and caused an overall attitude change in the public.

Keywords: Attribute; agenda-setting; attitude change; Syrian refugees; experiments.

Atributos de los medios de comunicación y cambio de actitud: experimentos sobre el impacto del establecimiento de la agenda de segundo nivel sobre las actitudes hacia los refugiados sirios

Resumen. Esta investigación examina cómo el contenido de las noticias influye en las actitudes hacia los refugiados sirios en Turquía. El objetivo del estudio es comprender el modo de atribución de los refugiados sirios por los medios de comunicación, es decir, la conformación de su imagen. Más específicamente, pretendemos determinar si la cobertura de noticias positivas sobre los refugiados sirios causaría un cambio de actitud en el público de negativo a positivo. Para los fines del estudio, hemos realizado una investigación cuasi-experimental y se utilizó un diseño de prueba previa para investigar los efectos de establecimiento de la agenda de segundo nivel. Dos experimentos (un piloto y un experimento principal) se realizaron durante el trimestre de primavera de 2017 en Turquía. Los participantes para los experimentos fueron seleccionados en una gran universidad privada de Turquía. Los resultados de la prueba sugieren que el énfasis positivo de los medios en las imágenes de los refugiados sirios tuvo un impacto positivo en la opinión pública y causó un cambio general de actitud en el público.

¹ Yaşar University (Turquía)
E-mail: gizem.melek@yasar.edu.tr

² Yaşar University (Turquía)
E-mail: melike.taner@yasar.edu.tr

Palabras clave: Atribución; configuración de la agenda; cambio de actitud; refugiados sirios; experimentos.

Summary. 1. Introduction. 2. Theoretical Background; 2.1. Agenda-Setting; 2.2. Experimental Work in Agenda-Setting. 3. Method; 3.1. Pilot Experiment; 3.2. Main Experiment. 4. Discussion. 5. Limitations and Future Research. 6. References.

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1. Introduction

It has been over four decades since the agenda-setting theory became a new conceptual framework for research in media effects. The original vein of study mainly focused on analyzing the transfer of issue salience from the news media to the public (McCombs and Shaw, 1972; Funkhouser, 1973). Many studies stemmed from the Chapel Hill study, which determined that the news media set the public agenda (McCombs and Shaw, 1972). Since then, scholars have been discovering the factors that set the public agenda (McCombs and Shaw, 1993). Traditionally, agenda-setting theory suggests that the attention news media gives to certain topics matches with the public attention on the same topics. The theory also suggests that the media coverage of a certain topic has an impact on public perception (McCombs, 2005; Lee, 2005). Over the years, scholars determined many intervening factors, including audience's education level (Wanta, 1997), their need for orientation (Weaver, 1977), and the media exposure they had (Dearing and Rogers, 1996). Moreover, the transfer of salience is no longer defined as a one-way relationship. Instead, many studies now conceptualize agenda-setting effect as an interchangeable, bi-directional relationship between media and public.

In traditional agenda-setting studies, both issues and candidate images during election times have been monitored (Weaver, Graber, McCombs and Eyal, 1981). With the emergence of the second-level agenda-setting theory, the focus of research in the field has moved from what issues media report to how they report them. Also known as attribute agenda-setting or attribute salience, the second-level agenda setting covers characteristics and features of news content that describe objects (McCombs and Ghanem, 2001; Kiousis, 2005).

Researchers have brought attributes of issues and images together in some studies (Takeshita and Mikami, 1995) and experimental works have been conducted on how media coverage of attributes affects the agenda-setting process (Kiousis, Bantimaroudis and Ban, 1999).

The aim of this current research is to explore the implications of attribute agenda-setting on public attitudes regarding a current global issue: a refugee crisis, and in particular, Syrian refugees in Turkey. We have chosen this issue as a subject because, especially in 2016, 65.6 million people were forced to migrate to other countries due to conflict, violence, persecution or human rights violations. Even though there were other countries seriously affected, still, Syrians continued to be the largest population to be forcibly displaced in 2016 (UNHCR, 2016). According

to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 12 million people were forced to flee through internal and external movements due to the civil war in Syria. Statistics illustrate that this is the largest forcibly displaced population of the world. Turkey is the leading host country, accepting 2.8 million Syrian refugees – 98 percent of the entire refugee population in the country. (UNHCR, 2016).

Although receiving a massive influx of refugees is not new for Turkey, the Syria case is exceptional due to the extraordinarily high numbers and new policies for refugee management (Tolay, 2013; Memisoğlu and Ilgit, 2016). Among host countries, Turkey has become prominent because of its immediate responses to the refugee crisis. In April 2011, Turkey explicitly called for immigrants to come in and set up refugee camps to shelter Syrian refugees. With the new welcoming policy of Turkey, the country became the major host country. However, this mass migratory movement has raised new economic and security concerns (Memisoğlu and Ilgit, 2016). Hence, the perceptions and attitudes of local communities toward Syrian refugees appeared to be an inevitable issue (Tolay, 2013).

One of the important studies investigating Turkish public attitudes towards Syria was conducted by Tolay (2013). Tolay (2013) revealed that the Turkish public is confused about the terms “immigrants” and “refugees”, and has neither positive nor negative attitudes towards refugees. According to the results of the study, Turkish political polarization is also a determiner in forming the attitudes of the public. Another recent study aiming to uncover public attitudes towards Syrian refugees in Turkey pointed out that refugees are perceived both as a threat and beneficial element. For the participants of the study, Syrian refugees definitely cause economic concerns, such as an increase in the unemployment rate and huge expenses due to new policies. Additionally, refugees gave rise to security risks, including potential terror attacks or crimes. Particularly in 2016, 20 terror attacks, some of which were conducted by ISIS affiliated attackers, might have triggered a negative public opinion about Syrian refugees (Atassi, Botelho and Tuysuz, 2017). On the other hand, participants believe that hosting Syrian refugees has humanitarian benefits to Turkey (Topal, Özer & Dokuzlu, 2016). As for the social acceptance and integration research conducted by Hacettepe University Migration and Politics Research Center in 2014 (Erdoğan, 2015), similar results were observed. Hosting over 1.5 million Syrians in 3.5 years is highly perceived as a risk factor, which has direct implications on daily life. Social acceptance of Syrian refugees by Turkish society is noticeable, though.

The second group of studies focusing on Syrian refugees in Turkey is mostly covering their representation in news coverage on mainstream media. Doğanay and Çoban Keneş (2016) pointed out that by using rational and emotional justifications, portrayals of Syrian asylum seekers in Turkey are reflected as problematic; moreover, they are depicted as a “threat” in terms of problems related with the economy and security. Göker and Keskin (2015) also revealed that newspapers in Turkey position Syrian refugees as a determiner of social problems, while they are also defined as passive victims. Efe (2015) conducted another inclusive study describing the presence of Syrian refugees by the press. According to the findings of his study, Syrian refugees were mentioned under four main categories in news stories: problems of the refugees, local problems originated by the refugees,

political issues, and border security. As previous researchers revealed, Efe (2015) demonstrated that Syrian refugees are depicted as victims; nevertheless, they are presented as a burden for the Turkish economy and a danger to security. Efe (2015) also asserted that opponent media evaluates refugee policies in a critical manner, while partisan media supports the policies in a strong manner.

Although public attitudes towards Syrian refugees and their media presence in Turkey have been investigated several times, the issue has never been examined within the agenda-setting theory. The current study attempts to remedy to this lacuna and aims to reveal whether media salience of attributes is linked with strengthened attitudes towards Syrian refugees in Turkey. An experimental research study has been conducted to determine whether positive media attributes of refugees constitute an attitude change in the public from negative to positive.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Agenda-Setting

Traditional agenda-setting studies have dealt with the way salience of objects is transferred from news media to the public (McCombs and Reynolds, 2002). Therefore, the basic premise behind the theory is the transfer of salience from news agenda to public agenda. The first-level agenda setting deals with the salience of objects, such as issues, politicians, organizations, public figures etc., while the second-level agenda-setting deals with the salience of attributes (Kiousis and McCombs, 2004). The second-level of agenda-setting has noted deficiency in the systematic examination of the attitudinal results of agenda-setting. The agenda-setting studies investigating attitudes are somewhat limited, and they usually examine the way news media coverage of public issues primes public opinion in terms of the images of political leaders (e.g., Iyengar, 1990; Iyengar and Kinder, 1987; Iyengar, Peters, & Kinder, 1982; Krosnick and Kinder, 1990). According to the priming concept, media attention to various issues about political life determines how policy makers and political figures are assessed in the eyes of the public. For instance if the media emphasise an education issue, the public tends to judge political figures based on their performance of the education issue rather than on any other. Consequently, if the media highlights a political leader as having a positive performance on an education issue, he or she is likely to attract a positive assessment; on the other hand, negative media coverage of a political leader on the same issue would ensure a negative assessment.

Scholars have expanded the framework of agenda-setting theory to seek attribute salience as well as object salience. This exploration alludes to the second-level agenda-setting theory (Golan and Wanta, 2001; McCombs and Shaw, 1993). An object is described as a concept similar to attitude objects in psychology; therefore, an object is the component to which attributes refer. News topics, political figures, and messages are some examples of the aforementioned components (Lopez-Escobar, Llamas and McCombs, 1998). Various characteristics and traits comprise the image of these objects in the news, which is the basic argument behind the second-level agenda-setting theory. For instance, political

figures, as objects, have certain attributes that differentiate them from one another. These traits include their personality, approach to an issue, and professional qualifications (Kiousis and McCombs, 2004). In the current study, instead of political figures, we take Syrian refugees in Turkey as an object. We examine if the way Syrian refugees are attributed in media, in other words, the media salience about Syrian refugees which comprise their image, would cause an attitude change in the public. Specifically, we intend to determine whether or not being exposed to positive news coverage about Syrian refugees would cause an attitude change in the public from negative to positive.

2.2. Experimental Work in Agenda-Setting

Experimental studies of the agenda-setting theory mostly have been conducted by Iyengar and his colleagues (Iyengar et al. 1982; Behr and Iyengar, 1985; Iyengar and Kinder, 1987; Ansolabehere, Behr and Iyengar, 1993). In their experiments, Iyengar and his associates usually expose their subjects to television news in a naturally designed laboratory environment. They have been able to shift the public salience by altering the news stories on videotapes. In an experiment, for instance, subjects who watched television stories that had an emphasis on an economic issue thought the economy was the most important issue for the country, whereas subjects who did not watch the same series of news coverage had no such impact. In the current study, a similar approach is used, but with written news stories instead of television coverage, as Wanta (1988) suggests newspaper articles to be appropriate stimuli for agenda-setting experiments. In addition, in the current study, we are interested to find a causal link between positive media salience and attitude change in the public. Towards this purpose, the study is going to answer the following question:

- Research question: Does media salience (attribute salience) about Syrian refugees cause an attitude change in the public?

3. Method

We have conducted a quasi-experimental research study to examine the consequences of second-level agenda-setting tactics for attitudes towards Syrian refugees in Turkey. Iyengar and his colleagues led the experimental tradition in agenda-setting research. They altered the content of news videotapes to create changes in the perceptions of participants. The following studies apply the same technique by using print articles (cited in Chernov, Valenzuela and McCombs, 2011).

In this current study, we carried out two experiments, respectively. The first experiment was a pilot experiment with a relatively small sample of 20 participants in experimental group and 22 participants in the control group to explore and gain experience in order to determine any problems that might occur during the week of the experiment. For the main experiment we have constituted a much larger sample: 57 participants in the experimental group and 34 participants in the control group.

In both experiments, we have employed a design in which attitude change towards Syrian refugees in Turkey is examined by comparing pre-test and post-test results. We have used the immigrant attitude scale developed by Tartakovsky and Walsh (2016) for the threat–benefit theoretical model to measure the overall impact of the attribute salience. As the experimental stimuli, we also used modified news articles.

3.1. Pilot Experiment

- Participants: This study utilized 48 students (age range 18-28) from a large private university in Turkey for the experiment, which was conducted during class time in spring term of 2017. Of that group, 26 students were identified as the experimental group, and 22 students were assigned as the control group. Participation was voluntary, and students earned extra credits at the end of the experiment. During the experiment, six students from the experimental group decided to leave the experiment. Before the experiment, we explained that the aim of the study was to identify different types of news reading habits of university students in order not to influence their responses to the attitude scale.

- Measures: Both in the beginning and at the end of the experiment, the attitude scale developed by Tartakovsky and Walsh (2016) was used to measure the overall impact of the media salience. The original scale includes 41 items with 4 threat and 4 benefit subcategories. In this study 2 items were excluded because of the scope of the research, and a 39-item scale with 8 subcategories was conducted. Threat categories are economic threats, physical threats, a social cohesion threat, and a modernity threat. On the other hand, benefit categories are economic benefits, physical benefits, cultural diversity benefits, and humanitarian benefits. Participants responded to all items using a 5-point likert scale (from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”). Higher mean scores indicated a positive attitude towards refugees. Internal consistency of the scale was satisfactory (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .976$). The result of the pre-test illustrated that participants’ attitudes towards Syrian refugees are negative for the experimental ($M=2.58$) and the control group ($M=1.71$).

- Materials: News stories used as experimental stimuli specifically consisted of positive portrayals of the Syrian refugees in Turkey in order to influence attitudes of the students positively. In total there were 24 news stories; some of the stories were true, while others were fictitious. The students from experimental group were asked to read these stories in five consecutive days during 30-minute sessions. The name of the news source was hidden; therefore, it is assumed that students read the articles without any prejudice about the credibility of the source. At the end of each session, students answered five open-ended questions about the news stories, and thereby read the news properly. On the other hand, the control group did not read news articles and only responded to the attitude scale on the first and last day of the experiment.

- Data analysis and Results: A paired samples t-test was performed to test the significant difference between the points of attitude scale before and after the experiment. As indicated in Table 1, attitude points increased from pre-test ($M=2.761$, $SD=.687$) to post-test ($M=3.024$, $SD=1.073$) for the experimental

group. The increase in attitude points, however, is not statistically significant ($t = -.881, p = .389$).

Table 1. Results of t-test and Descriptive Statistics for the Experimental Group.

Experimental group	Pre-test		Post-test		t	p	n
	M	SD	M	SD			
	2.761	.687	3.024	1.073	-.881	.389	20

Results for the control group revealed no significant change from the first ($M = 1.668, SD = .472$) to the last day of the experiment, as expected ($M = 1.737, SD = .548$) ($t = -.575, p = .571$).

Table 2. Results of t-test and Descriptive Statistics for the Control Group.

Control group	Before the experiment		After the experiment		t	p	n
	M	SD	M	SD			
	1.668	.472	1.737	.548	-.575	.571	22

Even though there was some positive change in the experimental group, the overall results suggest that media salience did not cause an attitude change towards Syrian refugees.

3.2. Main Experiment

Analysing the pilot experiment, we have realised that even though the results were not significant, there was some change in attitude points from negative towards positive in the experimental group, while there was no change in the control group whatsoever. Therefore, we have presumed that the small sample size might have caused the statistically insignificant change. Hence, we have planned the main experiment with a larger sample size. The same procedure of the pilot experiment was employed in the main experiment. The time frame for the experiment was one week, between 10 and 14 April, 2017. During this week the news agenda regarding Syrian refugees was relatively calm. Hence, we have assumed that there was no external variables that could impact the participant's answers.

Participants: For this study, 91 students (age range 19-27) from a large private university in Turkey were recruited, which was conducted during class time in the spring term of 2017. Of that number, 57 students were identified as the experimental group, and 34 were assigned to the control group. Participation was voluntary, and students earned extra credits at the end of the experiment, as it was in the pilot experiment.

Data analysis and Results: A paired samples t-test was performed to test the significant difference between the points of attitude scale before and after the experiment. The results illustrated a statistically significant difference ($t = -3.392, p = .001$) in attitude points before and after the experiment. As displayed in Table 3, attitude points appear to increase from pre-test ($M = 2.19, SD = .765$) to post-test ($M = 2.71, SD = .107$) for the experimental group. These results suggest that media salience caused attitude changes towards Syrian refugees among students.

Table 3. Results of t-test and Descriptive Statistics for the Experimental Group

Experimental group	Pre-test		Post-test		t	p	n
	M	SD	M	SD			
	2.19	.765	2.71	.107	-3.392	.001	57

On the contrary, results of paired samples t-test for the control group revealed that attitude points were nearly the same on the first ($M=2.24$ $SD=.127$) and last day of the experiment, as expected ($M=2.22$ $SD=.767$) ($t=121$, $p=.905$).

Table 4. Results of t-test and Descriptive Statistics for the Control Group

Control group	Before the experiment		After the experiment		t	p	n
	M	SD	M	SD			
	2.24	.127	2.22	.767	.121	.905	34

4. Discussion

The strength of the causal linkage between media attributes and attitude change is statistically significant and demonstrates a need to further expand our knowledge about second-level agenda-setting effect on public attitude. The study aimed to examine the impact beyond political figures. Therefore, the object of the study was Syrian refugees. Previous studies have focused on political figures and suggested that the sheer volume of news coverage has an impact on attitudes (Kiousis and McCombs, 2004).

This current study explores the results of second-level agenda-setting for attitudes towards Syrian refugees in Turkey. For the purpose of the study, quasi-experimental research study with a pre-test and post-test design was employed to reveal the impact of news coverage on attitudes. The results of the pilot experiment demonstrated that the attitude level of the participants ($n=48$) might differ significantly after being exposed to news coverage on the condition that a larger number of participants are included. Therefore, the main experiment was conducted with 91 participants. The results illustrated a statistically significant difference ($t= -3,392$, $p=.001$) in attitude points before and after the experiment. These results imply that news coverage may alter the attitudes of the readers, despite the fragmented media causing clutter for the reader.

Traditional agenda-setting theory has argued that a fragmented media landscape created by the new media technologies has resulted in a fragmented public that has no social cohesion through a common agenda (McCombs and Shaw, 1993). However, the findings of our study indicated that social cohesion still exists, despite the fragmented media landscape of 2017. The majority of our subjects in the experiment have stated that they follow internet and social media to obtain news. Therefore, they are exposed to a variety of sources. However, we still see that they could be manipulated by constant exposure to a purposive set of news stories every day, just as in our experiment, even though they pursued their news routine on the internet in their daily lives during the week of our experiment.

As for the full engagement of our participants, at the end of each day during the experiment, we asked several questions to them to ensure that they read the news stories properly. We also changed the types of questions every day to prevent participants from figuring out the true nature of our experiment. At the same time, changing the types of questions also prevented participants from only scanning through stories to seek for answers to the questions, because they knew every day they would have to answer a different sort of question about the stories. For instance, one day we asked them to write three bullet points about each story they read, while another day we asked them to mark grammatical errors that were intentionally inserted in each story, just as Kiouisis et al. (1999) have performed in their study. This way, we were both able to have them carefully read the stories every day and also steer their attention away from the main goal of our experiment. The participants later indicated that they thought that the research was about determining their memory capacities and attention spans, which strengthened the validity of our results.

In terms of the scope of our research, we have focused on a huge global crisis: Syrian refugees in Turkey. In previous research, experimental studies have focused on political candidate images or a group of issues such as drugs, economics, global warming, etc. Therefore, a crisis such as refugees was never taken as a subject in agenda-setting studies. Also, as is explained earlier, public attitudes towards Syrian refugees and their media representations have been separately studied in Turkey. However, the issue has never been investigated within the framework of agenda-setting theory. That is the reason we decided to move the research from political candidates or list of issues to a different level by choosing one extraordinary issue, such as global crisis of refugees.

In previous studies, researchers have focused on the way media coverage of attributes affect the agenda-setting process, and studies have determined that media salience triggers public opinion and attitudes. For instance, Kiouisis and his associates (1999) determined that people's impressions of candidate personality traits mirrored media portrayals of those traits. In another study, Kiouisis and McCombs found that "increased media attention to political figures is correlated with higher levels of public salience and attitude strength" (2004: 36). Kiouisis also determined that "media salience of attributes is strongly linked with strengthened attitudes" (2005: 3). At the same time, Iyengar and his colleagues have been able to shift public salience by altering the news stories on videotapes (Iyengar et al. 1982; Behr and Iyengar, 1985; Iyengar and Kinder, 1987; Ansolabehere et al., 1993). In line with these previous studies, we were interested to see if media salience would have any impact on attitudes on this sort of matter. Our findings in this context and circumstances still support the aforementioned experimental research. With our experiment, we were able to capture a statistically significant change in attitudes from negative towards positive. Therefore, our findings suggest that a positive media emphasis on the portrayals of Syrian refugees had positive impact on public opinion and caused an overall attitude change in public.

5. Limitations and Future Research

The homogeneous structure of the sample is considered as a restriction of the study. It is assumed that a variety in demographics may help to identify new issues in attitude change and increase the reliability of the study. Further studies should focus on different participant groups from a variety of social and demographic groups. Especially in a Turkish context, these type of experiments could be conducted separately on people who are coming from different ideological backgrounds.

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Gizem Melek, PhD, is Assistant Professor in the Yaşar University (Turkey), Faculty of Communication, Dept. of Radio, Television & Cinema. She is graduated from Ege University (Turkey) in 2007 where she studied Sociology and she holds an MA in Journalism International (Broadcast) from the University of Westminster in London, UK. In 2015, she earned her PhD in Journalism at Ege University. The title of her thesis was "A Study on Hürriyet and Twitter within the Framework of Intermedia Agenda-Setting". Besides her academic work, she has six years of experience in the journalism and TV Production field in both Turkey and the UK. The places she worked include Izmir Life news magazine, NTV-nationwide Turkish news network, ITV-British TV network and the British Museum's Broadcast Unit.

Dilek Melike Ulucay, PhD, is Lecturer in the Yaşar University (Turkey), Faculty of Communication, Dept. of Public Relations and Advertising. She author holds a BA in English Language and Literature from Hacettepe University and a PhD in Communication Design and Management from Anadolu University. She worked as a language instructor in Gazi University, Anadolu University and Yaşar University respectively. Uluçay's research interests are corporate communication, new media and higher education. She is currently working at Yaşar University as a lecturer in the department of Public Relations and Advertising.