Do Information Shape the Perception of In-Group Toward Out-Group?

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Abstract

The present paper examined the effect of exposure of positive and negative information on the in-group perception (Hindus) towards the out-group (Muslims). The study was conducted with 50 Hindu graduate students (mean age=18.50 years, SD=1.50) of Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi by using pre and post-test design. The bipolar adjective rating scale was administered to examine the participants' perception towards Muslims. They rated their responses on 9-point scale twice before and after (pre and post) the exposure of positive or negative information about Muslims. The participants were randomly assigned into two groups (25 participants in each group) as treatment-I (exposure of positive information) and treatment-II (exposure of negative information) in order to examine the effect of positive and negative information on the perception of Hindus towards Muslims. Findings revealed significant difference (t=4.39, p<.01) between pre-test (mean=138.76) and post-test (mean=165.33) of treatment-I. It also reported significant difference (t=3.84, p<.01) between pre-test (mean=154.42) and post-test (mean=136.21) of treatment-II. Overall, positive information about a group may cause of positive perception toward a particular group and vice-versa. It suggests that information has potential to frame individual's perception toward the social groups. The implication of the findings will be discussed in the view of theoretical perspective for framing perception of the members of a group.

Abbreviations: SD: Standard Deviation; ICT: Information and Communication Technology.

Introduction

The world is becoming a more diverse place, with the mix of several social groups based on religion (e.g., Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, and Judaism), culture (e.g., dressing style, food, and marriage ceremony), and language (e.g., Sanskrit, Arabic, English, and Hebrew) and so on. Most of societies across the world are confronted with the challenges of cultural diversity that exists there. In the complex and dynamic social world, the big challenges for adaptive human behaviour are the appropriate social categorization, perception and evaluation of others. Stereotypes toward religious groups has been

represented a challenge to the value e.g., "unity in diversity" that is central to the Indian ethos.

An attitude is a set of beliefs that we hold in relation to various aspects of the social world. It can be related to individual, social groups, things, events or issues and it can be positive or negative [1]. Attitude toward social groups are based on previous knowledge and experience. It has been learned or acquired over time from direct and indirect experience with the social environment. In day to day life, person faces several experience and deals with different information about social groups and their respective members. These experiences and information accumulated in brain and make knowledge structure about particular social groups.

Attitudes are conceived as nodes in memory and connected in an associative network. Nodes are activated when we categorize some experience in terms of object, social group, person or issues, and multiple nodes become connected through experience of co-activation (such as 'Muslim' and 'Terrorist activities'). The more frequently any connection is experienced the stronger that connection becomes more prominent in a context. Drawing explicitly on this associative network model of attitudes, Fazio [2] argues that an attitude is an association between a referent (object, social group, person, issue) and its subjective evaluation. Thus, noticing an object in the environment and categorizing it as an instance of a particular type of object activates the node corresponding to that type of object in memory. Following this initial activation, activation run through from the object node to the evaluation node associated with the strength of the association. When the association between the object and its evaluation is strong enough, simply noticing the object cause the evaluation to become activated [2].

People are confronted with large amount of information via diverse channels (e.g., family, friends, colleagues, political leaders, mass media, and academic books) about a social group or their respective members [3]. School and schoolbooks mostly history books are often primary vehicles to provide information about social groups. Schoolbooks also express a society's ideology and ethos and impart values, goals, and myths which the society aims to transmit to new generations [4]. Description about persecution of some Muslim predators and rulers i.e. Mohammad bin Qasim, Mahmood Gajnavi, Muhammad Gouri, Taimoor Lang, Naadir shah and Aurangjeb are depicted negatively in history books because of their bad deeds. These historical characters imposed negative impression about Muslims which maybe a caused of negative perception to the Muslim community in our country.

Research has been indicated that highly charged emotional experiences tend to be recalled and shared with others more frequently than ones without emotional intensity [5,6]. There are many studies have been done to examine the effect of exposure of information on shaping perception by using hypothetical positive and negative behavioural description [7,8]. It has been indicated that an impression does not reflect all different attributes to the same extent, but tends to be disproportionately influenced by evaluative negative characteristics of the target group [9,10]. Negative or threatening information [11] was more influential in the formation of an evaluative personality judgment than positive information [12].

Crisp and Nicel [13] found that the exposure to negative information affects participants' attitudes toward their own group at the preconscious level but positive information has a negligible impact on attitudes toward other groups. At the conscious level while the exposure to positive information affects participant's attitudes toward out-group, but that negative information has a negligible impact on attitude toward own-group. It was evident that crime related stories provoked negative attitude and stories related to economic growth reinforce positive attitude toward immigrants [14]. It suggests that stereotypes consistent exemplars increase the perceived differences between groups, while an incongruent exemplar did not affect the stereotype [15]. It was indicated that exposure to admired Black with disliked White exemplars significantly weakened automatic pro-White attitudes for 24 hours beyond the treatment but did not affect self-report attitudes. But exposure to admired White with disliked Black exemplars increased automatic as well as self-report positive attitude [16].

Importantly, several studies have revealed the significant role of media in creating negative attitudes toward ethnic groups [17-20]. Media's influence on attitude and behaviour toward out-groups can be understood through social-cognitive theories, which highlight the role of priming processes in the short term and learning processes in the long term [21,22]. These studies suggest that our memories, thoughts, and decisions are based on complex associative networks of nodes representing cognitions and emotions. Although the information about the members of a social group which provided by various sources may have important implication for intergroup relations. Very few studies have been done to assess the role of information in framing and shaping mutual perception of social groups in Indian context. Thus, the

present study is designed to examine the effect of positive and negative information on the perception of Hindus toward Muslims. It was hypothesized that negative information would be associated with negative perception whereas positive information would be associated with positive perception toward Muslims.

Sample and Measures

The study was conducted with 50 Hindu undergraduate students (mean age=18.50 years, SD=1.50) of Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi. The participants were randomly assigned into two groups (25 participants in each group) as treatment-I (exposure of positive information) and treatment-II (exposure of negative information) in order to examine the effect of positive and negative information on the perception in terms of trait attribution for Muslims. In pre and posttest, bipolar adjective rating scale was used to assess participants' perception in terms of trait attribution to the members of Muslim group. It consisted of 27 bipolar adjectives i. g., good-bad, honest-dishonest. The participants were asked to rate their responses on a 9-point scale (1=extremely negative, 9=extremely positive). The alpha coefficient of scale was .92 for a given sample. Meanwhile the positive or negative information about out-group members (Muslims) were displayed through slide show for 5 minutes on computer screen. During exposure of the

information, 8 positive photographs (Treatment-I) and 8 negative photographs (Treatment-II) depicting Muslim personalities along with brief description about them were used for providing information to the participants. Participants were instructed to watch and read each slide (e. g., photograph along with brief description) carefully. In treatment II, in which negative information were exposed, after post-test, positive information were also exposed to them due to ethical concern. The participants were debriefed about the objectives, and proposed hypotheses of the study.

In pilot study, all photographs with description were rated by 50 participants on 9-point scale (1=extremely negative, 9=extremely positive) to determine the positive and negative valence of information. It was found that mean score of positive and negative information was 7.91(SD=.54) and 2.35 (SD=.71) respectively.

Results

The present study examined the effect of information i. e., positive information (treatment-I) and negative information (Treatment-II) on the trait attributions to the members of Muslim group by using bipolar adjective rating scale. The higher score indicated positive trait attribution whereas lower scores showed negative trait attribution.

Treatment groups	Pre-test		Post-test	t-ratio
Treatment-I (**Positive information**)	Mean *(SD)*	138.76 *(23.39)*	165.33 *(36.33)*	4.39***
Treatment-II (**Negative information**)	Mean *(SD)*	154.42 *(38.85)*	136.21 *(45.15)*	3.84***

Table 1: Mean, SD and significance of difference between pre-test and post-test of treatment-I and treatment-II on Trait Attribution measure.
***p>0.01

Table: 1 shows mean, SD and significance of difference between pre-test and post-test mean scores of treatment-I and treatment-II. Results revealed significant difference (t=4.39, p<.01) between pre-test (mean=138.76) and post-test (mean=165.33) of treatment-I. It also reported significant difference (t=3.84, p<.01) between pre-test

(mean=154.42) and post-test (mean=136.21) of treatment-II. It revealed that the Hindu participants rated the Muslims more positively due to the exposure of positive information whereas exposure of negative information led to negative trait attributions towards the members of out-group (Muslim).
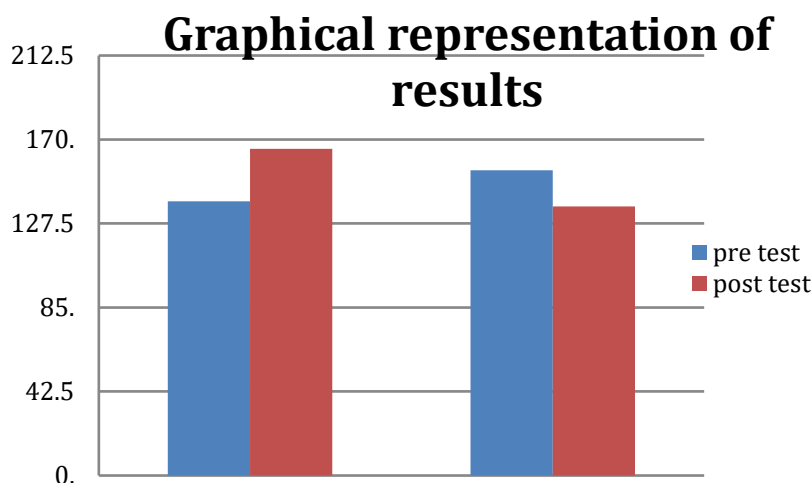
Table 2: Mean scores of pre-test and post-test of treatment-I and treatment-II on Trait Attribution measure.

Table 2 shows mean scores of pre-test and post-test of treatment-I and treatment-II. Graphical representation clearly depicted the effect of positive and negative information on the perception (Hindus) of a group towards out-group (Muslims). It shows that positive information about Muslims creates positive perception among them and vice-versa.

Discussion

The present study was designed to assess the effect of positive and negative information on the perception of a group (Hindus) towards out-group (Muslims). Findings revealed that exposure of positive information leads to positive change in perception while negative information has potential to create negative perception towards the members of Muslim group. It indicated that information can change the perception of people towards social groups. Findings of the present study also supported by previous studies, suggesting that information play an important role in shaping and directing attitude formation towards out-groups. Research [13,14,16,23] indicated similar findings that exposure of stereotype consistent exemplars increased negative attitudes whereas exposure of stereotype disconfirming information leads to relatively less change in existing attitudes towards out-group.

Another finding supported our results partially that exposure of negative information about out-group members led to increased negative perception towards that group as a whole whereas positive information did not affect the negative attitudes [15]. Inconsistent findings regarding exposure of positive information can be explained in terms of strength of pre-existing attitudes. Devine (1989) demonstrated that low-prejudice people can be able to inhibit the negative stereotype of African American and replace these with their egalitarian beliefs after exposed to inconsistent information about them. In contrast, high prejudiced people do not inhibit the stereotype.

Our findings suggested that information has an important and crucial role in creating social perception especially in the era of information and communication technology (ICT). Mass media, political leaders, cultural products, and schoolbooks play very important role in transmission of information about the social world. Information provided by these sources is very crucial to form attitude about social groups. Frequently and exaggerated exposure of negative information about a group or their respective members may be caused of prejudiced perception towards that group. Information provided by these sources about social groups or their respective members heightened accessibility of stereotypic traits commonly associated with those social categories which affect the social judgments about them. These phenomena can be also explained by availability heuristic, a strategy for making judgments on the basis of how easily specific kinds of information can be brought to mind. The easier it is to bring information to mind, the greater its impact on subsequent judgments or decisions [24-28]. It was evident that exposure of information about ethnic groups act as cognitive cues that shape and activate particular schemas through which perceiver make inferences about whole group and their respective members [29].

Overall, our findings reported that exposure of information may change the perception toward social groups. Positive information orients existing perception toward positive direction whereas negative information orients existing perception toward negative direction. It was suggested that information can play a crucial role in creating and changing social perception. By using appropriate strategies for monitoring the information-exposure, we can improve inter-group perception in order to promote social harmony and peace.

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