Propaganda in an insecure, unstructured world: How psychological uncertainty and authoritarian attitudes shape the evaluation of right-wing extremist internet propaganda

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Abstract

The amount of uploaded extremist propaganda on the internet is increasing. In particular, right-wing extremist as well as Islamic extremist groups take advantage of the opportunities presented by the internet to spread their ideas to worldwide masses. Both tackle in-group specific topics and address their audiences in their respective political, national or religious identities. Several factors, such as higher levels of authoritarian value orientations and threatening life situations (such as existential threats or psychological uncertainty) have been found to shape people's reactions towards radical groups as well as to propaganda. The current study investigated whether the response to extremist propaganda videos (namely, aversion felt for the video and the perceived persuasiveness of the video) is shaped by an individual's authoritarian attitudes and psychological uncertainty and whether this is a global process or in-group specific. Further, it considered the effects of exposure to extremist propaganda on the identification with one's in-group. In a laboratory experiment, German students were confronted with a right-wing extremist and an Islamic extremist video after manipulating their level of uncertainty (high vs. low levels of psychological uncertainty). The results confirmed that the interaction between authoritarianism and psychological uncertainty affected the evaluation of right-wing extremist videos addressing participants' national in-group. Under conditions of uncertainty, authoritarianism predicted less aversion and a higher persuasiveness of these videos. Further, psychological uncertainty increased the identification with participants' German nationality, irrespective of authoritarian attitudes. Notably, the effect was in-group bound: The same effect was not found for Islamic extremist propaganda referring to a religious out-group. The results are discussed regarding the potential of propaganda to foster behavioral intentions and engagement in extremist groups in specific threatening situations.

Keywords: Right-wing extremist videos, internet propaganda, identification

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Introduction

"*There is no such uncertainty as a sure thing.*"
(Robert Burns, cf. Platt, 1989)

Extremist movements are on the rise, and not just in Europe. Radical xenophobic political movements such as the "Old School Society" or "the Identitarian Movement" ("die Identitäre Bewegung") in Germany, and religious extremist groups such as the so-called Islamic state (IS) promote their ideas and aim at recruiting new members via propagandistic videos on the internet. The increasing number of such propaganda videos (Glaser, 2013; O'Callaghan, Greene, Conway, Carthy & Cunningham, 2015; Winter, 2015) has aroused public attention, created mass media reports and alerted global security agencies partly because interactions between extremists and their (yet to be) followers have been suggested to be an important factor for radicalization (Gill, Corner, Thornton, & Conway (2015). While propaganda of more extreme groups has accompanied the development of the internet since its beginning, web 2.0 functions offer its users the possibility to produce, upload, comment and distribute propaganda themselves. Mostly anonymously and in uncensored manner.

Audio-visual propaganda is a particularly suitable tool for propagators to reach a global audience and to raise interest in their actions and the reasons behind. Hegghammer (2006), for instance, cited young Jihadists in Saudi Arabia who named extremist videos as one means to persuade them of the urgency to fight Jihad. Extremist video propaganda often appears professionally produced and right-wing extremists, as well as Islamic extremists, ascribe propaganda a central role as recruiting tool (Payne, 2009; Pfeiffer, 2003). For instance, the self-declared "Islamic state" invests substantial resources in the production of high-quality audiovisuals aimed at reaching a global audience (Stern & Berger, 2016).

Contrary to the propagator's aims, recent studies demonstrated that young adults evaluated propagandistic videos negatively and rated them as uninteresting and non-persuasive (Rieger, Frischlich, & Bente, 2013). Nonetheless, the authors also revealed that higher levels of an individual's authoritarian attitudes decreased this rejection of propaganda and fostered the interest in, and the perceived persuasiveness of, extremist propaganda videos. Authoritarian needs appear to be especially triggered in times of social threats or insecurity, aiming at the maintenance of structure, stability and order (Duckitt, Wagner, du Plessis, &

Birum, 2002). Authoritarianism is a social attitude (Duckitt, 2013) entailing the co-varying components of authoritarian submission (i.e. the willingness to obey to authorities), authoritarian aggression (i.e. the punishment of those who do not obey), and conservativism. Research showed that authoritarian attitudes increase under conditions of social threat. Students that imagined a future in which their country had experienced some years of economic decline and social desintegration, perceived the world as being more dangerous and this worldview increases authoritarian attitudes (see also Duckitt, 2013).

Mass media reports that recent societal developments such as the Eurozone crisis and growing unemployment among young Europeans have jarred participants' confidence in the stability and order of the European society (Schlamp, 2015). In Germany, right-wing populist (such as PEGIDA, or the party AfD) and extremist movements (such as the Old School Society) capitalize on this insecurity and fuel public fears; for instance, regarding refugees fleeing to Germany (Spiegel Online, 2015).

Individuals seeking certainty, and who respond with authoritarian attitudes, have been found to identify more with their respective in-group (Chirumbolo, 2002). Identification, in turn, has been discussed to be a prerequisite for commitment and participation with an in-group (Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 1997). Through fostering political involvement (Huddy & Khatib, 2007) and behavioral intentions to become active (Ellemers et al., 1997), identification can therefore increase the likelihood for political participation (Fowler & Kam, 2007). According to uncertainty-identity theory (Hogg, 2000), uncertainty motivates individuals to identify with social groups that provide a distinctive "groupness", a so-called *entitative* identity (Hogg, Sherman, Dierselhuis, Maitner, & Moffitt, 2007), and that transmits clear behavioral norms (Hogg, 2014). Radical (Hogg, Meehan, & Farquharson, 2010) and extremist groups promise both entitativity (the distinction to all other groups) and clear behavioral norms. Hence, extremist groups can be particularly attractive as a source of uncertainty reduction (Hogg, 2014).

The current study addressed the question of whether an individual's authoritarian value orientation and psychological uncertainty shape the cognitive and emotional evaluation of right-wing extremist propaganda and foster national (German) identification. The study focused on the very first steps towards political participation in extremist movements, namely the circumstances under which extremist propaganda: a) can decrease people's *aversion* to the transmitted extremist ideology; b) is perceived as being *persuasive*; and c) fosters national

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identification with one's own nationality (i.e. the in-group addressed in right-wing extremist videos).

Extremism and Internet Propaganda

Internet propaganda has changed from an instrument to convince the masses to an instrument used by the masses (O´Shaughnessy, 2012). Social networking sites (such as YouTube and Facebook*),* online forums, blogs and Instant Messenger Services enable everybody to produce, upload and distribute their own propaganda material (English, Sweetser, & Ancu, 2011; Holtz, Kronberger, & Wagner, 2012; O´Shaughnessy, 2012; O'Callaghan et al., 2015; Winter, 2015). Even the production of one's own videos and films has become increasingly easy with the widespread availability of computers, cheap cameras and smartphones.

Also extremist groups have discovered these benefits and use the internet as their new home-base and operational area (Hoffmann, 2006). In terms of audiovisual output, the two biggest of these virtual propagators are right-wing extremists and Islamic extremists. Strategists from both ideologies also claimed internet propaganda as a powerful tool in their "war over minds" (Stern & Berger, 2016; Weimann, 2006, p. 118). In Germany alone, there are thousands of online forums, blogs, social media offers and, particularly, videos that disseminate their ideologies (Frankenberger, Glaser, Hofmann, & Schneider, 2015; Glaser, 2013; Hussain & Saltman, 2014). They use the internet to communicate with their own people (*in-group*), their enemies (*out-group*), as well as to other internet users (*potential in-group and global community*) (Rieger et al., 2013).

While in-group communication, such as training instructions or planning, is often uploaded in restricted areas such as closed forums (Busch, 2005), material for recruiting purposes is freely accessible on websites, social media applications and open discussion forums. Therefore the odds of stumbling over accordant material are high (Rieger et al., 2013). Extremists' digital communication has been described as "propaganda offensive" (Puschnerat, 2006), "attention-seeking terrorism*"* and the "marketing of fear*"* (Weichert, 2007). Extremists aim at creating a strong virtual community via propaganda (Egerton, 2011; Engelmann et al., 2010), and to transmit "a concrete example of what the utopian [community] can look like: a community of friends" (Sageman, 2008).

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Moreover, the internet allows users to actively participate in the (extremist) movement. Often, neither the materials uploaded on websites like Wikipedia, YouTube, Twitter, MySpace or Facebook, nor the actions demanded are directly recognizable as extremist. For example, "liking" fan-sites against pedophilia on Facebook can also mean "liking" the National Socialist organization behind it, without (the user) even noticing.

Videos that are uploaded on platforms like YouTube or shared via mobile phones play a significant role within the extremists' web 2.0 offers (Connelly et al., 2016; Frankenberger et al., 2015). Based on previous literature and actual user data (YouTube, 2016a, YouTube, 2016b), YouTube has been discussed as one of the most popular distribution channels for internet videos, also providing room for audiovisual propaganda and counter message material. Especially adolescents as heavy users of YouTube (Horizont, 2016) intentionally or non-intentionally may get exposed to propaganda via the video platform. Glaser (2013) reported that single right-wing extremist video clips can easily exceed 100,000 clicks. Audio-visual propaganda appears to be very attractive and is able to reach high numbers of recipients (Seib & Janbek, 2011).

Effects of Propaganda Videos

Although the influence of propaganda has historically always been considered negative (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2012), the actual effects of audiovisual internet propaganda have only seldom been investigated experimentally. Hence, empirical information on the causal effects of propaganda exposure is scarce.

Research in communication and media psychology demonstrates that media content can influence emotions, cognitions, knowledge and behaviors (Eveland & Schmitt, 2015; Schemer, 2012; Slater, 2007). That is not to say that extremist media content alone can be a major cause for radicalization to occur. Rather, propaganda might influence recipients' emotions and cognitions.

In the next part, we describe initial attempts to study the emotional and cognitive effects of propaganda which identified group membership, uncertainty and authoritarianism as relevant factors in this context.

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Group Membership and Propaganda Effects

One of the first exploratory studies on the effects of extremist propaganda videos addressed the response of British Muslims towards Islamic extremist videos via a series of focus group discussions (Baines et al., 2010). The reactions of participants towards different propaganda videos ranged from avoidance to approach. Altogether, participants showed some understanding that others might be influenced by such video clips but rated their own persuasion by the videos as low. Addressing right-wing populist messages, Arendt (2015) found his participants explicitly denied the persuasive potential of right-wing populist campaigns. Only on the implicit level and after a high dose of comparable populist statements, individuals started to show associations in line with the campaign's intent and associated foreigners more negatively.

With regard to comparative analyses of the effects of propaganda messages from distinct ideologies, Rieger, et al. (2013) demonstrated that the general reaction to both right-wing extremist as well as Islamic extremist videos was rejection. In particular, students evaluated propaganda directed towards their in-group (Right-wing extremism for Germans and Islamic extremism for Muslims) even more negatively than propaganda directed towards the respective other target audience. Their findings correspond to research on negative social identities (Ellemers, Kortekaas, & Ouwerkerk, 1999; Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 2002) and studies on the black sheep effect. Individuals have been found to respond to norm-violating in-group members even more harshly than to norm-violating out-group members, as the rejection of black sheep helps them to preserve an overall positive image of the group (Lewis & Sherman, 2010; Marques, Yzerbyt, & Leyens, 1988).

Relatedly, situational threats have been found to increase the acceptance of extremists and extremist propaganda. In a recent study, Frischlich, Rieger, Hein, & Bente (2015) showed that the salience of existential anxieties (namely the awareness of one's own mortality) increased the interest in, and the perceived persuasiveness of, extremist propaganda directed towards the participants' in-group. Propaganda directed towards a different target audience was not affected.

The stronger rejection of potential in-group propaganda is mirrored in basic research showing that negative in-groups motivate people to distance themselves from them (Arndt, Greenberg, Schimel, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 2002). In propaganda research as well,

belonging to the same national or religious group as an extremist propagator (a) activates negative social identity (Branscombe & Doosje, 2004; Branscombe, Fernández, Gómez, & Cronin, 2012); and (b) triggers strategies for dealing with this threat to the own identity. Strategy selection thereby varied with the recipient's educational level (Rieger et al., 2013). Students distanced more from in-group than from out-group propaganda while pupils from vocational schools showed the reverse pattern. Results are compatible with studies showing that self-selected (professional) identities are preferred and thus ease distancing from not self-selected negative in-groups (Ellemers, 2001). In sum, prior research indicates an overall negative evaluation of extremist propaganda and particularly harsh reactions towards propaganda addressing the recipient as in-group member.

Authoritarianism, Uncertainty, and Propaganda Effects

Beyond the effects of group membership, the studies by Rieger et al. (2013) have shown that authoritarianism (Altemeyer, 1988), or put differently, an authoritarian attitude, predicted a decreased derogation of extremist propaganda. Their findings are in line with research showing that authoritarianism (Altemeyer, 1988) promotes a more favorable attitude towards in-groups, more negative attitudes towards out-group members and right-wing extremist attitudes (Duckitt & Sibley, 2010). Authoritarianism has long been known as predictor for prejudice (for a review, see Sibley & Duckitt, 2008), to predict right-wing extremist attitudes among pupils (Fuchs, 2003), police officers (Gatto & Dambrun, 2012; Gatto, Kerbrat, & Oliveira, 2010), soldiers (Altemeyer, 1988) and to foster the acceptance of violence (e.g., Arlin & Benjamin, 2006; Crowson, 2009).

It is not surprising that an authoritarian value orientation increases the turning towards extremists who address the recipient as an in-group member. First studies on the relationship between authoritarianism and the evaluation of propaganda videos showed that higher authoritarian people tend to be less aversive towards in-group propaganda (Rieger et al., 2013).

As described in the introduction, authoritarian attitudes increase under conditions of social threats. While initial theories conceptualized authoritarianism as a stable personality trait (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950), recent research highlights the role of situative factors for authoritarian reactions. In particular, it has been shown that

authoritarian attitudes emerge when the world is perceived as threatening (Duckitt & Sibley, 2010). Authoritarianism has been described as "flight into security" (Oesterreich, 2005, p. 0) motivating the turning towards one's in-group (Duckitt et al., 2002). Compatible to this interaction between situational factors and individual attitudes, Ramírez and Verkuyten (2011) found Dutch participants tolerated a right-wing extremist rally in their hometown more when they valued order and safety and the speech was framed as freedom of speech. Noteworthy, the response was in-group bound: Dutch participants who valued order and safety did not evaluate the rally better (even when it was framed as freedom of speech) when it came from an Islamic extremist.

Unfortunately, this study did not address the participants' identification with their nation directly. This is problematic as identification has been found to crucially influence how individuals respond to, for instance, racist in-group members or past out-group aggressions by their in-group (Doosje, Branscombe, Spears, & Manstead, 1998; Johns, Schmader, & Lickel, 2005). Extremist propaganda aims at fostering in-group cohesion (Eatwell, 2006). An inspection of the effects of extremist propaganda on in-group identification thus seems desirable.

According to uncertainty-identity theory (Hogg, 2000; Hogg, Adelman, & Blagg, 2010; Hogg, Meehan, et al., 2010; Hogg et al., 2007), uncertainty motivates group identification. Uncertainty is considered an uncomfortable state which people strive to reduce. Hogg (2000) argues group identification to be an effective tool in reducing uncertainty because it is associated with social categorization of the self and others – a process which can lead to a depersonalization of the self in order to conform to group prototypes which can render the world more predictable and less uncertain. The basic assumption underlying uncertainty-identity theory is that uncertainty triggers the process of identification with a self-inclusive category, that people identify more strongly with groups when they feel uncertain and, in turn, that uncertainty-based identification reduces uncertainty (Hogg, 2000; Hogg et al., 2007; Mullin & Hogg, 1998; Reid & Hogg, 2005).

Research on group identification under uncertainty demonstrated that some groups are better to identify with than others. Hogg et al. (2007) found that participants identified more strongly with groups in uncertain situations when the group was highly entitative. Highly entitative groups which rested on clear boundaries, perceived internal homogeneity, clear internal structures, common goals and a common fate were found to be preferred as

uncertainty rose (Campbell, 1958; Hamilton & Sherman, 1996). Moreover, people even dis-identified from low-entitativity groups that fostered diversity as they provide little to resolve the uncertainty (Hogg et al., 2007; Yzerbyt, Castano, Leyens, & Paladino, 2000).

Extremist groups display a high level of entitativity to the outside (Kruglanski, Pierro, Mannetti, & De Grada, 2006). A group structured in this extreme way can be able to provide a very certain sense of the self in an uncertain world. Under higher levels of uncertainty, people prefer to identify with these groups (see Hogg, 2014 for a review of uncertainty and extremism). Indeed, Hogg, Meehan et al. (2010) found that under higher uncertainty, the usual preference for moderate groups changed towards a strengthened identification with a radical group.

Prior research already demonstrated uncertainty to increase identification with highly entitative groups. However, audio-visual propaganda directed towards a mass audience often aims at gaining support for their ideologies among non-extremist others sharing their national or religious identity (Payne, 2009). Extremists want to present themselves as speakers for "the Germans" or "the Muslims", and yet most Germans and Muslims would never consider them as speaking for their group (Decker, Kiess, & Brähler, 2016; Frindte, Boehnke, Kreikenbronn, & Wagner, 2012). In consequence, an inspection of the role uncertainty plays for the general identification with the group extremists capitalize on seems necessary to understand propaganda effects beyond direct links between the consumption of a video and the attraction towards a radical party.

Besides the effects on preferences for certain groups, Hogg, Meehan et al. (2010) discuss the relevance of this research and its impact on group actions, thus relating identification to political participation intentions:

> The most societally problematic feature of extremist or radical groups is precisely that their members identify strongly with a group that advocates and pursues radical actions. This action component of a group's identity is likely to become more important when what the group stands for is self-relevant and viewed as under threat. When, for example, people feel their security, prosperity, and lifestyle are under threat, they yearn to identify strongly with a group that can actually get things done to remove or buffer the threat—a radical group that has a forceful behavioral agenda. Against this background, self-uncertainty will

strengthen identification with assertive radical groups, perhaps transforming members into fanatics, zealots, true believers, and ideologues, and may also weaken identification with less assertive moderate groups. (p. 1062).

Confirming these thoughts, the authors found an effect of identification with a more radical group and people's intention to engage in specific group behaviors. These intentions were mediated by identification (Hogg, Meehan et al., 2010). One reason is because identification is associated with political involvement which motivates information-seeking and political participation (Huddy & Khatib, 2007). Additionally, Ellemers et al. (1997) provided evidence that people who highly identified with a group showed a stronger commitment to the group and its actions (see also Terry & Hogg, 1996). Expanding the traditional participation model, Fowler and Kam (2007) demonstrated that higher levels of social identification led to an increase in political participation. Thus, identification with the in-group addressed in a propaganda video can be regarded as a first small step towards joining an extremist group and even behaving according to their group standards.

Based on the literature, we predicted that higher levels of authoritarianism would lead to a more favorable evaluation of propaganda videos addressed at the participants' in-group (H1). In addition, higher levels of uncertainty were predicted to lead to a more favorable evaluation of propaganda videos directed towards the participant's in-group (H2). Furthermore, we were particularly interested in the interaction of psychological uncertainty and authoritarianism and asked how this interaction would influence participants' response towards extremist videos (RQ1). Finally, based on uncertainty-identity theory, we proposed that higher levels of uncertainty would lead to higher identification with the in-group addressed in the propaganda videos (H3).

The current study is an initial approach to assess both the evaluation of right-wing extremist propaganda when individual factors (authoritarianism) and situational factors (psychological uncertainty) provide the possibility for a more favorable evaluation (H1, H2, RQ1), as well as identification processes after exposure to propaganda (H3).

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Method

Sample

Fifty-one male German students (M_{age} = 24.74, SD = 3.83) participated. We recruited only male participants because previous research reported male individuals to be overrepresented in in extremist groups and movements (Claus, Lehnert, & Müller, 2010; Sageman, 2008). We also ensured that all participants were German because previous research identified specific response patterns to propaganda depending on the cultural background of the participant[4] (Frischlich, Rieger, Hein, et al., 2015; Rieger et al., 2013).

Procedure

First, participants filled out questionnaires which assessed their demographics (e.g. nationality, age, gender) and their level of authoritarianism (Petzel, Wagner, Nicolai, & Van Dick, 1997). To manipulate the variance of uncertainty, we followed the two-step procedure by Hogg, Meehan et al. (2010; Hogg et al., 2007). In step 1, participants read a newspaper article presented on the screen. Two different versions of the article were used in order to maximize variance within the level of induced uncertainty. Participants either read an article about prosperous future job chances for academics (n = 26) versus pessimistic job changes after completion of their studies (n = 25). In step 2, subjects were asked to write a short essay answering the following question "Please jot down which aspects this news article made you feel certain/uncertain about your own life and future" (Hogg, Meehan, et al., 2010).

Afterwards, participants were guided to another room in which they saw a right-wing extremist propaganda video and an Islamic extremist video in randomized order. Each video was approximately two minutes long. The videos were taken from the database of extremist videos by Rieger et al. (2013) and had been categorized as *Talking Head* videos. The right-wing extremist video showed three young right-wing extremists walking through the city of Frankfurt and explaining towards the camera the failures of the "system", the government and the duties of "each German". The Islamic extremist video shows a young Jihadi explaining in German the atrocities of Western invaders in Arab countries and the duties of "every Muslim" to fight Jihad against these invaders (Rieger et al., 2013). Before each video, participants were

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[4] Three participants were excluded because they indicated a non-German cultural background.

reminded that they could abort the experiment at any time. After each video, participants filled out a questionnaire in which they evaluated the video. At the end, they were asked for their identification as Germans. Finally, participants were thanked and debriefed. The debriefing entailed a clear explanation of the real purpose of the study and the full experimental design but also provided some room for participants' questions, e.g. regarding propaganda videos or extremism.

Measures

Authoritarianism. Authoritarianism was assessed with eight items (Petzel et al., 1997) on a 5-point scale (e.g., "The most important thing, children should learn is obedience and respect for parents and superiors", 1= "do not agree at all", 5 = "totally agree"). Reliability was satisfactory $\alpha = .76$.

Uncertainty. As described, uncertainty was induced and measured using the procedure established by Hogg, Meehan et al. (2010). The assessment of psychological uncertainty was based on a single item asking participants to indicate how *uncertain* they felt on a 9-point scale[5] .

Aversion and Persuasiveness. The video's felt aversion and perceived persuasiveness were measured using two scales developed by Rieger et al. (2013). Aversion was measured with three items (e.g., "I felt contempt", $\alpha = .82$). The persuasiveness scale consisted of four items (e.g., "The video was persuasive", Cronbach's $\alpha = .71$). All items were answered on a 4-point scale (1 = totally disagree, 4 = totally agree). Seven additional items served as fillers.

Identification. The identification measure was taken from Hogg, Meehan et al. (2010), asking on a 9-point scale how strongly participants identified as Germans.

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[5] We relied on a single item to assess uncertainty (1) in order not to make the concept too salient to participants and (2) in order to stick as closely as possible to the original procedure by Hogg et al. (2010).

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Results

Manipulation Check and Initial Analyses

A first analysis confirmed a successful manipulation. Participants with the uncertainty priming reported higher uncertainty (M = 4.16, SD = 1.93) than those without the uncertainty prime (M = 3.35, SD = 1.41). This difference was significant, $t(49)$ = -1.71, $p < .05$ (one-tailed).

We conducted independent t-tests to analyze whether aversion and perceived persuasiveness of the right-wing extremist video would differ depending on the uncertainty group. Neither of these tests yielded a significant result (all ps > .53). Thus, we decided to take the full variance of uncertainty into account and calculated the main analyses with the continuous (9-point) uncertainty measure (Hogg, Meehan, et al., 2010).

Main Analyses

Three hierarchical regressions for the dependent variables persuasiveness, aversion and identification reported after the right-wing extremist video were performed[6] (for an overview on the relations between the variables, see Table 1).

Table 1

	M	SD	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.
1. Authoritarianism	2.07	0.66	-	0.20	0.17	0.00	0.22
2. Uncertainty	3.75	1.72		-	0.10	0.04	.49**
3. Persuasiveness	1.27	0.36			-	-.33*	0.03
4. Aversion	2.90	0.92				-	0.07
5. Identification	4.82	2.30					-

*$p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

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[6] To further check whether the assumed relationships between authoritarianism, uncertainty and the evaluation of propaganda is an in-group-specific process, we calculated two hierarchical regressions with the same predictors and aversion and perceived persuasiveness in response to the Islamic extremist video. Neither of the models or predictors was significant.

In each regression, the mean for authoritarianism was entered in step 1, the mean for uncertainty was entered in step 2 and the interaction between both was entered in step 3 (all *z*-standardized).

The regression for felt aversion indicated that the final model could explain 18% of variance (R^2 = .18, 95%-CI [.881; 1.840], based on 1,000 bootstrapping samples). The interaction between authoritarianism and uncertainty was the only significant predictor, *B* = -.50, *SE* = .17, *t* = -2.97, *p* < .01, 95%-CI [-.845; -.161]. As this interaction points towards a moderation, it was further analyzed using the Johnson-Neyman technique. In doing so, one can detect so-called regions of significance for the moderation (Hayes & Matthes, 2009, p. 928). These are values of the moderator variable where the effect of the focal predictor (in the present case, authoritarianism) is significant. Analyzing this interaction in detail, under conditions of low uncertainty (*M* ≤ 2.55, 29.15% of participants are below this value), authoritarianism had a positive effect on aversion reported after right-wing extremist propaganda. However, when uncertainty increased, the effects turned negative and under conditions of high uncertainty (*M* ≥ 5.44, 12.50% of participants are above this value), individuals with authoritarian attitudes responded with reduced aversion to right-wing extremist videos (see Figure 1).
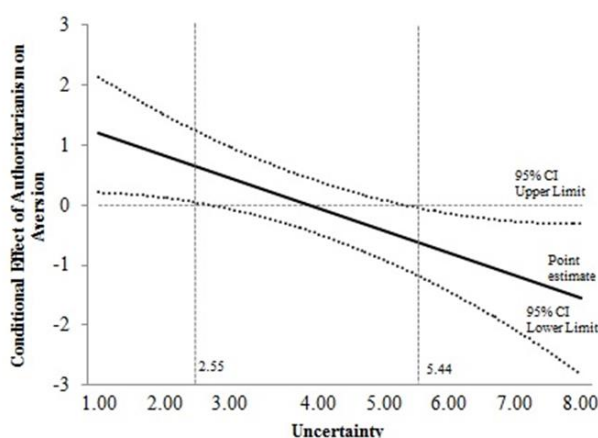

Figure 1. Interaction between authoritarianism and uncertainty on aversion reported after the propaganda video.

Results for perceived persuasiveness revealed that the final model could explain 13% of variance (R^2 = .13, 95%-CI [.789; 2.049] based on 1,000 bootstrap samples). The

interaction between authoritarianism and uncertainty was the only significant predictor, $B = .15$, $SE = .07$, $t = 2.09$, $p < .05$ (95%-CI [.008; .290]).

Again, using the Johson-Neyman technique, the region of significance for the moderator was found for higher levels of uncertainty (for $M \geq 4.80$ the confidence bands are entirely above zero: 35.41% of participants are above this value): Authoritarianism had a negative – though not significant - effect on the persuasiveness ascribed to right-wing extremist propaganda among individuals with low levels of uncertainty. However, when uncertainty increased and passed the threshold, authoritarianism significantly predicted an increased persuasiveness ascribed to right-wing extremist videos (see Figure 2).
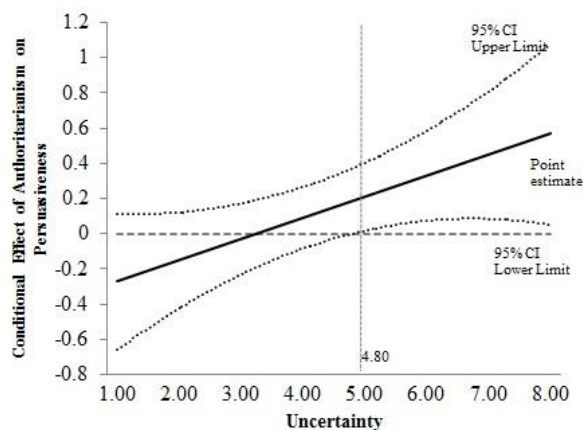

Figure 2. Interaction between authoritarianism and uncertainty on the perceived persuasiveness of the propaganda video.

Finally, the regression for identification could explain 27% of variance ($R^2 = .27$, 95%-CI [.743; 1.704], based on 1,000 bootstrapping samples). For identification, the only significant predictor was the level of uncertainty, $B = 1.11$, $SE = .31$, $t = 3.57$, $p = .001$, 95%-CI [.481; 1.728]. The higher the level of uncertainty, the more a participant identified with being German. Authoritarianism or the interaction between both predictors did not reach significance.

Discussion

The current study aimed at addressing the role of authoritarian value orientations (authoritarianism) and psychological uncertainty for the response towards current extremist propaganda videos and generated several findings of interest. First of all, uncertainty and authoritarianism conjointly decreased the derogation of right-wing extremist propaganda as aversive and fostered the perceived persuasiveness of the propaganda video. Highly relevant, the positive relation between authoritarianism and the attraction towards extremist ideologies such as transported within propaganda videos was fueled by psychological uncertainty. While under conditions of low uncertainty, authoritarianism even increased the rejection of extremist groups, potentially due to their challenge of the current social order; under conditions of higher uncertainty, the advantages of the clear worldview transmitted by extremist propaganda seemed to outweigh these disadvantages for individuals with authoritarian attitudes. In addition, uncertainty increased the identification with the national group addressed by the extremist propagator, irrespective of the authoritarian attitudes of the recipient.

Uncertainty emerged as a relevant factor for the identification with the national group-matching mass media concerns that insecurities fueled by right-wing extremists could motivate un-radicalized citizens to shift to the right (*Spiegel Online*, 2015). The results thereby underline prior studies on the role of existential threats on the persuasiveness of extremist propaganda (Frischlich, Rieger, Hein, et al., 2015) and the role of uncertainty for the turning towards extremist groups (for a review, see Hogg, 2014). Further, this study provides additional evidence for the idea that the response to propaganda is an in-group specific effect with in-group specific vulnerabilities (see Rieger et al., 2013). Calculating the same analyses for responses towards the Islamic extremist videos did not yield significant associations.

Based on general ideas on how to move the masses, interest in a group, its persuasive appeal and identification with it are important steps towards action (Ellemers et al., 1997). The results therefore also conceptualize the ways in which young adults are brought to politically participate in extremist groups by means of extremist internet propaganda. For political participation to take place, identification can be considered a necessary prerequisite; one the one hand for political involvement with a topic (Huddy & Khatib, 2007) and, on the other hand, for behavioral intentions to engage in group actions (even of radical groups, see

Hogg, Meehan et al., 2010). Terry and Hogg (1996) found that intentions to engage in the actions of a group only increased when identification was high. Since propaganda videos explicitly aim at addressing still inactive audiences and at recruiting new members (Holtz et al., 2012; Rogan, 2007), they can be considered a first gateway to increase identification with extreme groups and thereby could become a fruitful tool in mobilizing the audience towards participation in group actions.

Research further suggested that people distance themselves from negative examples of their in-group (Arndt et al., 2002). In light of research in the context of uncertainty-identity theory (Hogg, 2000), people tend to prefer more radical groups when they are uncertain and dis-identify with more moderate groups. Relatedly, Ellemers and colleagues (1997) discuss the idea that identification and less permeable group boundaries are related to engaging in group actions and sticking to the group instead of changing the group. In the context of propaganda, recent research has demonstrated that people might distance from moderate groups with more permeable group boundaries and identify more with groups which have a stronger structure and less permeability (Frischlich, Rieger, Rutkowski, & Bente, 2015). Our results suggest that this effect might be even stronger under conditions of threats, such as uncertainty. Future research should therefore include a direct test of behavioral intentions, actions (like mobility from one group to another or sticking to the same group) and political participation (such as commenting behavior in social media forums, or posting of videos).

Although the observed effects were small, the increasing amount of extremist propaganda on the internet (Glaser, 2013; Hussain & Saltman, 2014) and the high odds of being confronted with accordant messages (Rieger et al., 2013) makes them nonetheless relevant for practitioners. Moreover as the increased uncertainty in Europe following the Eurozone crisis (Reese & Lauenstein, 2014) and the current high number of refugees (UNHCR, 2014) are able to foster uncertainty in Europe. Our results suggest that these societal factors, when salient within an individual, might influence a person's willingness to listen to right-wing populist messages and propaganda.

Our results show that uncertainty and authoritarian attitudes work hand-in-hand increasing the effectiveness of extremist content. On the contrary, attempts to challenge extremist ideologies online, for instance via so-called counter-narratives (Briggs & Feve, 2013) should therefore address uncertainties and the transmission of authoritarian attitudes (Ashour, 2010; Frischlich, Rieger, Morten, & Bente, *in press*). Our findings underline

Dafnos' (2014) assumption that attempts to counter extremist ideologies need narratives offering the recipient alternative values and belief-systems. Particularly authoritarian sources transmitting peaceful values can foster peaceful instead of hostile inter-group attitudes under conditions of existential threats (Rothschild, Abdollahi, & Pyszczynski, 2009). As the found interaction effects suggest, authoritarianism therefore is not necessarily tied to a higher vulnerability for extremist groups and their propaganda but can also be tied to fostering counter-arguments that present a peaceful, but clearly structured message.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

Some limitations of the current work have to be mentioned. First of all, we examined only German males wherefore our results are not generalizable to other samples and women. However, prior research found comparable reactions among Muslims when confronted with extremist propaganda (Rieger et al., 2013) and no gender effects in the reactions of Germans towards right-wing extremist propaganda (Frischlich, Rieger, Hein, et al., 2015), or regarding the influence of uncertainty on the identification with entitative groups (Hogg et al., 2007). Nonetheless, a replication of our results in different samples would enhance confidence in this assumption. In a related vein, we examined a typical student sample. Although this limits the generalizability of our results to non-academic backgrounds (Hodson & Busseri, 2012), the observation of a decreased distancing among academics underlines the meaning of our findings. Prior research showed students to respond particularly negatively to extremist propaganda addressing them as in-group members (Rieger et al., 2013). Our study provided initial evidence that uncertainty is a relevant factor weakening this defense.

Regarding our materials, we only used two extremist videos. Although we selected prototypical stimuli based on prior research, future studies addressing the role of different propaganda formats seems to be a fruitful venue for research. This seems also important when considering that the amount of explained variance in our analyses was rather low. That is, although the results indicate that aversion felt towards extremist videos and their perceived persuasiveness are related to authoritarianism and uncertainty, other variables that add to an explanation were seemingly not included. Therefore, the presented results do not provide a full explanation of propaganda effects but rather point to the necessity to further investigate influencing factors.

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In relation to this point, our design is not able to clarify the question whether the increase in identification under higher levels of uncertainty was in part due to an approach to the right-wing extremist material or could be interpreted as an avoidant/defense reaction against Islamic extremist materials. Since this appears to be an important question when unraveling the effectiveness of in- and out-group propaganda, future studies should draw on these initial findings and investigate the group-specific impacts.

It has to be noted that our dependent variables focused on the initial responses towards extremist propaganda in terms of the aversion raised by the video and the perceived persuasiveness of its content, as well as the identification with the national group addressed by the propaganda. We did not measure actual behavior after the reception. Our findings are nonetheless meaningful as identification steers the behavioral intentions following the norms of one's in-group (Terry & Hogg, 1996). Behavioral intentions are a good predictor for the actual behavior (e.g., Ajzen & Fishbein, 1977). Research on social identity and the correspondence between attitude and behavior further demonstrates that the strongest correspondence between attitude and behavior exists when attitudes are normative and the groups people identify with are self-inclusive (Hogg & Smith, 2007). Nevertheless, future research examining the effects of identification on behavioral intentions and actual behavior is a necessary step in future research.

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