

Multiple existential threats and attitudes towards Muslims in Finland and Italy during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

We are currently living in a time of several existential threats: the global pandemic COVID-19, climate change, and the 'refugee crisis' caused by violent conflicts and humanitarian catastrophes in Syria, Afghanistan, and Ukraine. These threats do not only affect our well-being but also our sense of control and security, as well as identities and worldviews having also intergroup consequences. In this study, we investigated the links between perceived existential threats (i.e. COVID-19, climate change, and refugee crisis in 2015 that multiplied Muslim population in Europe), national and religious identities, and attitudes towards Muslims (i.e. Muslim refugees, Muslim minority, and Muslim converts) among Christian national majority group members in Finland and Italy in 2020. The results were analysed with multigroup structural equation modelling, and they demonstrated some key differences between how threats perceived from climate change and the refugee crisis in 2015 are translated into the reactions towards Muslims. While threats associated with the refugee crisis were detrimental to outgroup attitudes, climate change threats elicited more positive attitudes towards the outgroups studied. Our preliminary analyses suggested that COVID-19,

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in turn, seems to elicit feelings of worldview defence through higher levels of national identification with no negative attitudinal ramifications. While Abrahamic identity as a believer was directly associated with more positive attitudes towards Muslims in Italy, it did not account for the link between existential threats and outgroup attitudes. The results are discussed in light of how different threats increase or decrease intergroup harmony.

KEYWORDS

attitudes towards Muslims, COVID-19, existential threats, religious identification

In 2020, a global COVID-19 pandemic shook the world changing the lives of many in unpredictable ways both psychologically and economically. Although COVID-19 activated an existential threat of contagious disease (Tabri, Hollingshead, & Wohl, 2020), the new millennium came with several existential threats. In 2019, before the outbreak of COVID-19, young Europeans reported being most afraid of climate change and a new 'refugee crisis' (Mischke, 2019, May 13). Thus, in 2020, COVID-19 complemented at least two other well-documented current threats, namely environmental anxiety associated with climate change (Doherty & Clayton, 2011) and intergroup threats related to increasing immigration to Europe, particularly the influx of Muslim refugees (Landmann, Gaschler, & Rohmann, 2019). All of these existential threats threaten 'our' existence and activate the feeling that our way of life is in jeopardy (Hirschberger, Ein-Dor, Leidner, & Saguy, 2016) and may result in the need to strengthen the ingroup (Wohl, Branscombe, & Reysen, 2010). This study addresses the attitudinal reactions among majority group members towards the three perceived existential threats (COVID-19, climate change, and refugee crisis) in Finland and Italy in 2020. The significance of this inquiry is currently amplified by the ongoing war in Ukraine and the prospects of global economic depression.

Existential threats have been defined as actual or perceived threats to either the self's physical integrity or cultural worldview and sense of personal value that buttress the self-concept (Sullivan, Landau, & Kay, 2012). Existential threats can also represent a group- or collective-level concern for the ingroup's vitality, way of life, and future existence (e.g. Wohl et al., 2010). Existential threats activate a need to increase group cohesion—otherwise known as the worldview defence hypothesis (see Jonas & Fritsche, 2013; Wohl et al., 2010) and lead to outgroup negativity (e.g. Motyl et al., 2011). In a time of heightened existential threats, such as COVID-19, climate change, and a refugee crisis, an urgent quest for meaning and guidance is activated in people (Sullivan et al., 2012), and this results in the need to strengthen the identification with and search for support from the communities that are considered as significant ones in the context of a common security threat. Arguably, national and religious identities are among the most important and salient sources of a secure sense of belonging (Ysseldyk, Matheson, & Anisman, 2010).

In this study, we examine the ramifications of multiple existential threats on anti-Muslim attitudes among national majorities in Finland and Italy and the role of national and common Abrahamic identity in explaining them. We focus on attitudes towards three Muslim minority groups in Europe: Muslim refugees entering the European Union (EU) as well as Muslim minority groups and Muslim converts living in the country of study. In recent years, relationships between national majorities and Muslim minorities in Europe have gained much attention in the field of intergroup relations (e.g. Sarasin, Green, Bolzman, Visintin, & Politi, 2018; Sniderman & Hagendoorn, 2007), showing how Muslims are constructed as 'Others' (Voas & Fleischmann, 2012) and a security threat to Europe (e.g. Obaidi, Kunst, Kteily, Thomsen, & Sidanius, 2018). In this study, we argue that the type and salience of a particular existential

threat may result in the activation of either positive or negative intergroup attitudes, and thus simultaneously study the link between different existential threats and anti-Muslim sentiment. The present study contributes to previous research by not only studying multiple existential threats but also the simultaneous roles of national and Abrahamic identity in explaining the link between perceived existential threats and attitudes towards religious outgroups.

1 | EXISTENTIAL THREATS AND ATTITUDES

Following the principles of integrated threat theory (ITT; Stephan & Stephan, 1996; Stephan, 2014), past research has demonstrated that as a coping mechanism to perceived threats, individuals collectively mobilize and start protecting the intergroup boundaries (e.g. Wohl et al., 2010). For example, it has been found that individuals respond to various existential threats by derogating outgroups (Stephan, 2014), favouring ingroups (Giannakakis & Fritsche, 2011), or excluding minorities (Van der Zee & Van der Gang, 2007). Previous research has specifically shown that perceived symbolic (cultural) (Eskelinen et al., 2022) and realistic (material) threats (Esses, Dovidio, Jackson, & Armstrong, 2001) are both associated with more negative attitudes towards Muslims. Nevertheless, it seems that at best, perceived threats can also bring people together. For example, reminders of climate change as a global threat may promote support for peaceful reconciliation in international conflicts (Pyszczynski et al., 2012).

In this study, we share the interest of Hirschberger et al. (2016) and argue that in order to understand the intergroup ramifications of existential threats, we need to better account for the type and magnitude of different threats. Multiple existential threats have a propensity to unveil existing societal prejudices and they may have additive or opposite effects on prejudice towards cultural outgroups. Thus, in this study, we aim to examine the intergroup consequences of three simultaneously perceived existential threats (i.e. COVID, climate change, and refugee crisis). In the next sections, we will discuss past research on each existential threat separately.

1.1 | Intergroup threat elicited from refugee crisis threat

Most previous research has focused on intergroup threats, particularly symbolic and security threats associated with immigration and increasing cultural diversity as factors predicting prejudice towards cultural outgroups (Esses et al., 2001). Researchers have also stressed that this association is particularly prevalent in highly politicized intergroup contexts, due to accentuated group differences concerning national values, morals, beliefs, attitudes, and standards (Badea, Iyer, & Aebischer, 2018; Obaidi et al., 2018). Europe is currently facing a new refugee crisis caused by the war in Ukraine, which made more than 8 million Ukrainians to search for protection in the neighbouring countries and beyond (UNHCR, 2023). This study focuses on the previous refugee crisis caused by the war in Syria coupled with the prolonged conflicts in the Middle East, which multiplied the Muslim population in Europe in 2015, including Finland and Italy—the two contexts of this study. Research shows that that particular refugee crisis has fueled intergroup hostility in Europe and overseas with the national majorities increasingly capitalizing on threats due to religious radicalization posed by Muslim refugees (Cowling, Anderson, & Ferguson, 2019). Therefore, in this study, it can be expected that the more threat participants perceive from the refugee crisis bringing Muslims to Europe, the more anti-Muslim attitudes they will present in Finland and Italy.

1.2 | Disease-related threat from the COVID-19 pandemic

Disease-related threat is elicited by contagion avoidance that can vary from well-known contagious illnesses to non-contagious ones (such as obesity; Park, Schaller, & Crandall, 2007). It has presented much evidence of its ramifications for intergroup avoidance and prejudice towards ethnic and cultural outgroups (Cottrell & Neuberg, 2005),

for example during the H1N1 swine-flu epidemic (Huang, Sedlovskaya, Ackerman, & Bargh, 2011) but also SARS and Ebola (Clissold, Nylander, Watson, & Ventriglio, 2020). After the breakout of COVID-19, there was an increase in hate crimes, racism, and prejudice towards immigrants in Europe, particularly ethnically Asian-looking people and other groups originating from countries most severely affected by COVID-19 (Ruiz, Horowitz, & Tamir, 2020, July 1). In Tabri et al. (2020) study, the perceived existential threat stemming from COVID-19 elicited anxious arousal, which further manifested in prejudice towards Chinese people in the US (also see Clissold et al., 2020). Moreover, Sorokowski et al. (2020) have found a positive relationship between media exposure and prejudice towards four national outgroups (Mongolians, Chinese, Italians, and Hungarians in the United Kingdom and Poland; Study 1) and also a negative effect towards Italians followed by the exposure to news about coronavirus (Study 2). Nevertheless, the latter effect was not observed when a generalized measure of prejudice was considered.

However, most research on the effect of the COVID pandemic on intergroup relations has focused on attitudes towards Asians and Asian minorities—the target group associated with the origin of the COVID pandemic—but not on whether this existential threat of contagion elicits negative outgroup attitudes towards ethnic or religious others unrelated to the origin of pandemic. We contribute to this line of research and explore whether higher levels of COVID-19 threat are associated with more anti-Muslim attitudes in Finland and Italy.

1.3 | Climate change threat

Finally, pro-environmental attitudes have been linked to self-transcendence values (i.e. concern for the welfare of self and others; Schultz & Zelezny, 1999). In the political agenda, pro-refugee attitudes are often linked to pro-environmentalism (Lönnqvist, Ilmarinen, & Sorthaix, 2020). Indeed, Pyszczynski et al. (2012) conducted three studies on the effect of the threat of global climate change on attitudes towards peaceful coexistence and support for war. Their results showed that reminders of global climate change as a common existential threat resulted in decreased support for violence and increased support for peaceful reconciliation in international conflicts. Therefore, in this study, we expected that the more threat participants felt from climate change, the more positive would be their attitudes towards Muslim outgroups.

2 | ROLE OF NATIONAL AND RELIGIOUS IDENTITIES

As regards the psychological mechanism, based on the integrated threat theory (Stephan, 2014; Stephan & Stephan, 1996) and the worldview defence hypothesis (Jonas & Fritsche, 2013), we argue that group identities may explain the link between perceived threats and outgroup attitudes. Specifically, we argue that existential threats can strengthen both national identification and identification with one's worldview community, since both these identities constitute a sense of belonging to the superordinate groups, and have longevity and continuity both pre- and postexistence of the individual (Pauha et al., 2020). However, we suggest that these identity reactions possibly represent a dual pathway from perceived threats to outgroup attitudes, with national identity potentially being more exclusive while common religious identity more inclusive when it comes to the attitudes towards the religious minority groups.

The assumptions concerning the roles of national and religious identities in the link between existential threats and outgroup attitudes need to be made with great caution. Firstly, previous research on mortality salience hypothesis is conflictual when comes to whether cultural and worldview identities serve as a defensive mechanism against the effects of existential threats producing outgroup negativity because reminders of death have been shown to produce both hostile and peaceful reactions (for a review see Jonas & Fritsche, 2013). Thus, researchers have questioned the link between national identification and negative outgroup attitudes when one's mortality is more salient (Sætrevik & Sjøstad, 2019). Secondly, research based on the social identity theory has also shown that group

identification may be related to outgroup attitudes positively or negatively depending on the conceptualisation and meaning of a particular social identity in a particular intergroup context. For example, Roccas, Sagiv, Schwartz, Halevy and Eidelson (2008) argued for the need to distinguish between the importance (i.e. viewing the ingroup as a part of one's self-image), commitment (i.e. willingness to benefit the ingroup), deference (i.e. willingness to submit to ingroup norms), and superiority (i.e. viewing the ingroup as superior to others) modes of identification, with the last mentioned being assumed to be more clearly related to outgroup negativity (Roccas et al., 2008, p. 284). The defensive reaction of national group identification to intergroup conflicts has been shown in studies on nationalism (e.g. Mummendey, Klink, & Brown, 2001) and collective narcissism (e.g. Golec de Zavala, Cichocka, & Iskra-Golec, 2013) among national majorities. However, there is also evidence to suggest that during global existential crises, security threats may result in an increased inclusivity of one's community that may activate more positive attitudes towards outgroups (Drury & Alfarhli, 2019). Therefore, in this study, we explore the associations between perceived existential threats associated with COVID-19, climate change, refugee crisis, and national identification on the one hand, and between national identification and attitudes towards Muslims in Finland and Italy on the other hand.

Along with the sense of belonging to a national community, religion has been argued to be one of the most important sources of alleviating existential anxiety since it provides one with a sense of immortality and life after death. Van Tongeren, Raad, McIntosh, and Pae (2013) found that religiosity acts as a protective factor against existential threats, which made religious people less likely to defend their worldview. Similar findings have been made by Golec de Zavala, Cichocka, Orehek, and Abdollahi (2012), who found that intrinsic religiosity was related to less intergroup hostility when mortality was salient. In this study, we focus on religious identity as a common Abrahamic identity that underlines the communalities between Islam and Christianity and that does not draw group boundaries between these two faith convictions. In previous studies, perceiving Islam and Christianity having similar origins has been linked to more positive attitudes towards outgroups (Kunst et al., 2014; Marques & Paez, 1994). Therefore, in this study, we assume that stronger Abrahamic identity could act as a protective factor against existential threats and, in turn, alleviate their negative attitudinal outcomes.

3 | AIMS AND HYPOTHESES

In this study, we examine the link between three perceived existential threats (COVID-19, climate change, and refugee crisis) and anti-Muslim attitudes in Finland and Italy. To summarize our hypotheses, we expect higher levels of perceived COVID-19 (H1) and refugee threat (H2) to be associated with more negative outgroup attitudes, while climate change threat (H3) to be associated with more positive outgroup attitudes. As regards identity mechanisms, we expect that the more participants perceive existential threats from COVID-19, climate change, and the refugee crisis, the stronger their Abrahamic identity (H4), which, in turn, is associated with more positive outgroup attitudes (H5). We take an exploratory approach concerning the association between existential threats, national identification, and outgroup attitudes due to mixed evidence.

We study attitudes towards three different outgroups of Muslims: Muslim minority group members in general and converted Muslims living in the country of study in particular, as well as refugees (predominantly of Muslim background) entering the EU after the refugee crisis in 2015. We focus on anti-Muslim attitudes due to the increasing size and significance of the Muslim population coupled with their persistent discrimination in European countries. Especially during the so-called 'refugee crisis' in 2015, most refugees came from Muslim-majority countries (Wike, Stokes, & Simmons, 2016, July 11). Along with immigration, the conversion of native Europeans plays a role in the growing Muslim population in Europe. According to Karagiannis. (2011), there are likely 200,000–320,000 converts in Europe. Muslim converts are very specific groups as they are simultaneously members of the cultural ingroup (ethnic Finns, Italians), but also a religious outgroup (Muslim) that in the case of conversion is made salient. As research shows that shared multiple identities may serve as either bridges or barriers, that is, their presence may facilitate or deteriorate intergroup relations (Jasinskaja-Lahti et al., 2020), and as Muslim converts have not been

previously studied in terms of their potential gateway group membership, we did not formulate specific hypotheses for this group. Thus, we explore, whether majority group members display different reactions towards Muslim converts than towards two other Muslim groups.

We test our model in data gathered from community samples representing majority Christians (majority Protestants in Finland and Catholics in Italy) in Finland and Italy. At the time of data collection, these two countries represented two very different contexts in terms of dealing with COVID-19, which offered a fruitful ground to study disease-related threats. At the beginning of the pandemic, Italy was the most affected nation in Western societies. The high number of infected individuals and deaths led to dramatic measures to contain the disease and avoiding the health system to collapse. In contrast, experts have been saying that Finland has survived the pandemic relatively well compared to other countries (DW, 19th November 2020). Although the two countries receive different numbers of refugees due to their geographical locations, both countries are characterized by increasing debates about the integration of refugees (e.g. Wike et al., 2016), which highlights the importance of studying intergroup threats. Since Italy receives more refugees and at the time of study had a more severe COVID-19 situation, we explore whether Italy and Finland differ not only in terms of the magnitude of these perceived existential threats but also in the associations between these threats and attitudes towards Muslim outgroups. Concerning the climate change threat, it seems to be perceived relatively similarly in the two countries studied: the climate issue was a central theme in the social discourse, especially among younger individuals in both Italy and Finland before COVID-19 gained the temporal attention of the population in 2020 (Mischke, 2019, May 13).

4 | METHOD

4.1 | Data and participants

The data of this study comprise 695 respondents in total ($N_{\text{Finland}} = 258$; $N_{\text{Italy}} = 437$). Community samples of adult majority population were surveyed in April–May 2020 using the assistance of a private survey company in Finland and via research assistants in Italy. Before starting the data collection, the main research question was preregistered at <https://aspredicted.org/rx5d8.pdf> (Religiosity and prejudice during COVID-19, SPRING 2020'; #40040).¹ Participation was voluntary and anonymous. There was an almost equal distribution of males and females ($N_{\text{Finland}} = 47.0\%$; $N_{\text{Italy}} = 60.4\%$ females) with the age of respondents ranging from 18 to 84 ($M_{\text{Finland}} = 65.3$, $SD_{\text{Finland}} = 12.0$; $M_{\text{Italy}} = 43.6$, $SD_{\text{Italy}} = 15.1$).²

4.2 | Materials

Attitudes towards asylum seekers entering Europe, Muslims, and converted Muslims were measured by a feeling thermometer which is a good measure of outgroup attitudes (e.g. Verkuyten & de Wolff, 2002). Participants were asked to rate their feelings as follows: 'Please evaluate to what extent you feel positive or negative emotions towards different religious groups in [the country]. Use the 'feeling thermometer' to indicate your feelings, where +50 degrees mean very positive or warm feelings, and -50 degrees mean very negative or cold feelings'. They were then asked to rate their feelings towards 'asylum seekers entering Europe', 'Muslims', and 'converted Muslims' separately.

National identity was measured by three items that were adapted and shortened from previously used scales by Verkuyten and Yildiz (2007) to reflect the specific national identities of each country: 'I see myself as [Finn/Italian]', 'I am proud to be a [Finn/Italian]', and 'I feel connected to the [Finns/Italians]'. All three items were measured on a 7-point Likert scale with 1 (strongly disagree) and 7 (strongly agree) as endpoints, such that higher scores reflected stronger national identification. The scale was used as a latent variable in the analyses ($\alpha = 0.88$).

Abrahamic identity was measured by asking the believers to evaluate the degree to which they perceive Christians and Muslims to belong to the common religious ingroup. The measure included three items: 'Because Ibrahim/Abraham is the progenitor of Islam, and Christianity, one can say that Muslims, and Christians belong to the same 'family' of religions', 'Even though Islam, and Christianity are different religions, they all belong to the same group of religions', and 'Christianity and Islam have common roots'. All three items were measured on a 7-point scale with 1 (*strongly disagree*), and 7 (*strongly agree*) as endpoints. Higher scores hence reflected stronger Abrahamic categorization. The scale was used as a latent variable in the analyses ($\alpha = 0.92$).

Three existential threats were studied: COVID-19 ($r = 0.65$), refugees entering the EU ($r = 0.73$), and climate change ($r = 0.76$). They were all measured by two items 'To what extent do you consider the following global changes threaten the well-being of Finnish/Italian people?' and 'To what extent do you consider the following global changes threaten your own well-being?'

Control variables. In this study, we controlled for age which was measured as the year of birth but we recoded it to age as continuous measurement (18–84), education (1–7, higher scores reflecting higher education) gender (male = 1), and political orientation (1 = left-wing, 7 = right-wing).

5 | RESULTS

5.1 | Preliminary results

5.1.1 | Measurement model

First, confirmatory factor analysis was computed with all the items of religious and national identity, and existential threats (climate change, refugee, and COVID-19) to test whether our measurement model had a good fit for the data. To estimate the model, we will use Mplus 8.2 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998–2020) with robust maximum likelihood estimation taking into account the possible non-normalities of the data. The model fit was good $\chi^2(44) = 207.739$, $p < .001$; CFI = 0.946; TLI = 0.918; RMSEA = 0.073 [90% CI = 0.063–0.083], $p < .001$; SRMR = 0.029.

Second, to be able to make group comparisons, we computed a measurement invariance test. To be able to compare countries, we needed to achieve acceptable partial scalar invariance. To do this, we freed a covariance for national identification. Consequently, after freeing one item from the refugee threat scale, we achieved a partial scalar model that was acceptable, $\chi^2(101) = 281.870$, $p < .001$; CFI = 0.937; TLI = 0.918; RMSEA = 0.072 [90% CI = 0.062–0.082], $p = .002$; SRMR = 0.060, therefore we were able to proceed to the structural model being able to make cross-country comparisons.

5.1.2 | Descriptive statistics

Correlations can be found in Table 1. Correlations were computed separately for the Finnish and Italian samples. In the Finnish sample, perceived COVID-19 threat correlated with more negative attitudes towards refugees entering the EU. Otherwise, COVID-19 did not correlate with outgroup attitudes in Italy or Finland. In both samples, perceived refugee threat correlated negatively, whereas climate change threat correlated positively with attitudes towards all outgroups studied. Moreover, in both samples, COVID-19 threat correlated positively with national but not with Abrahamic identity. Whereas climate change threat was associated with higher levels of Abrahamic identity in both countries, climate change threat correlated positively with national identification in the Italian sample. Refugee threat was positively correlated with national identification in both samples. In the Italian sample, Abrahamic identity correlated negatively with perceived refugee threat. In the Finnish sample, Abrahamic identity was positively correlated with attitudes towards converted Muslims only, whereas in the Italian sample, it was positively correlated

TABLE 1 Correlations between the main constructs.

1. COVID-19 threat	1	0.54***	0.21***	0.00	0.21***	0.03	-0.03	-0.02
2. Climate change threat	0.44***	1	-0.03	0.18***	0.13*	0.13**	0.16***	0.10*
3. Refugee crisis threat	0.44***	0.10	1	-0.14**	0.14**	-0.28***	-0.40***	-0.29***
4. Abrahamic categorisation	-0.04	0.15*	-0.10	1	0.06	0.19***	0.12*	0.18***
5. National identification	0.14	-0.03	0.12*	-0.12	1	-0.01	-0.03	0.05
6. Attitudes towards Muslims in Finland/Italy	-0.08	0.17**	-0.27***	0.09	-0.08	1	0.60***	0.65***
7. Attitudes towards refugees entering the EU	-0.16*	0.13*	-0.29***	0.10	-0.09	0.77***	1	0.56***
8. Attitudes toward converted Muslims	-0.08	0.17**	-0.24***	0.15	-0.07	0.81***	0.75***	1

Notes: Lower diagonal: Finland, upper diagonal: Italy.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

with all outgroup attitudes. National identification did not correlate with any of the outgroup attitudes. In terms of threats, COVID-19 correlated positively with both threats in both countries, whereas climate change and refugee threats were not correlated.

We computed independent samples t -tests to compare the means of the variables studied in two countries. Finnish participants perceived less COVID-19 threat, $t(691) = -2.08$, $p = .038$ and climate change threat $t(691) = -10.85$, $p = .001$, but more refugee threat, $t(689) = 2.76$, $p = .006$ in comparison to the Italian sample. Italian participants identified more strongly as Abrahamic believers $t(684) = -8.23$, $p = .001$, but less with their national group $t(671.28) = 10.86$, $p = .00$ in comparison to the Finnish participants. Finally, Finnish participants reported more positive attitudes towards Muslims in general $t(671) = 6.98$, $p = .001$, refugees entering the EU $t(601.86) = 4.55$, $p = .001$, and Muslim converts $t(665) = 2.78$, $p = .006$, as compared to the Italian participants.

5.2 | Main results

5.2.1 | Structural model

A multi-group mediation model with country as the grouping variable was first fitted with robust maximum likelihood in Mplus 8.2 to examine our hypothesized predictions in the Finnish and Italian samples. (see Figures 1 & 2). First, we tested an unconstrained model including all control variables (education, age, gender, and political orientation). The model fit was good, $\chi^2(223) = 478.679$, $p < .001$, CFI = 0.941; TLI = 0.913; RMSEA = 0.058 [90% CI = 0.051–0.066], $p < .001$; SRMR = 0.070.

Based on the results, perceived threat related to COVID-19 was not associated with attitudes towards outgroups, rejecting H1. However, the results related to the links between threats related to the refugee crisis and climate change on the one hand, and attitudes towards Muslims partly supported our H2 and H3: higher threat perceptions related to the refugee crisis were associated with more negative attitudes towards all outgroups in both Finland and Italy. Furthermore, higher levels of climate change threat were associated with more positive attitudes towards all outgroups studied in Finland and towards Muslim refugees entering the EU in Italy. As regards the associations between perceived threats, national and Abrahamic identities, and outgroup attitudes, partly supporting our H4, only perceived threat related to climate change was associated with higher levels of Abrahamic identity. Perceived threats were not related to COVID-19 threats nor refugee crisis threats (although the link between COVID-19 threat and higher national identification was marginally significant in Italy). In line with H5, higher levels

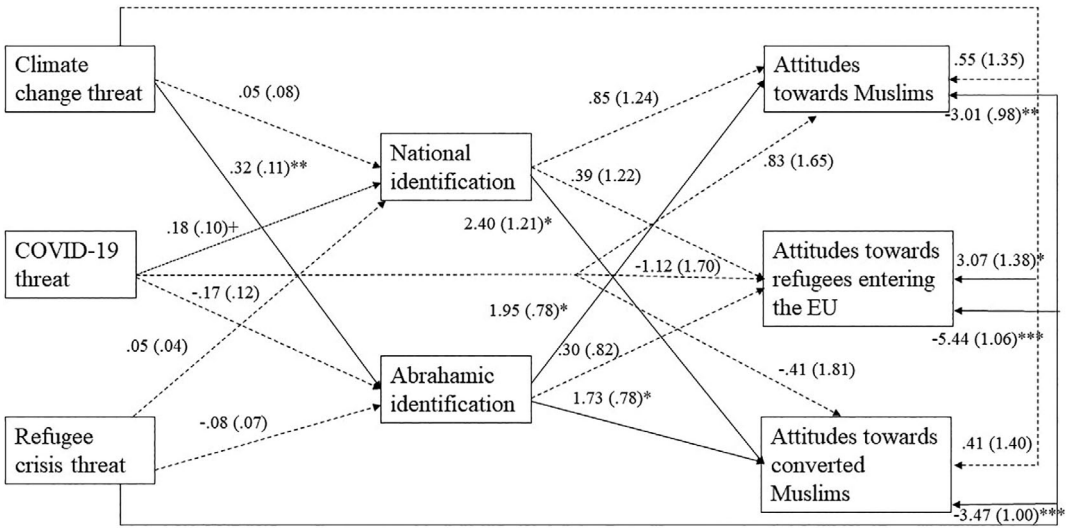


FIGURE 1 Italy: unstandardized structural results displaying the associations between existential threat, religious and national identification, attitudes toward Muslims groups.

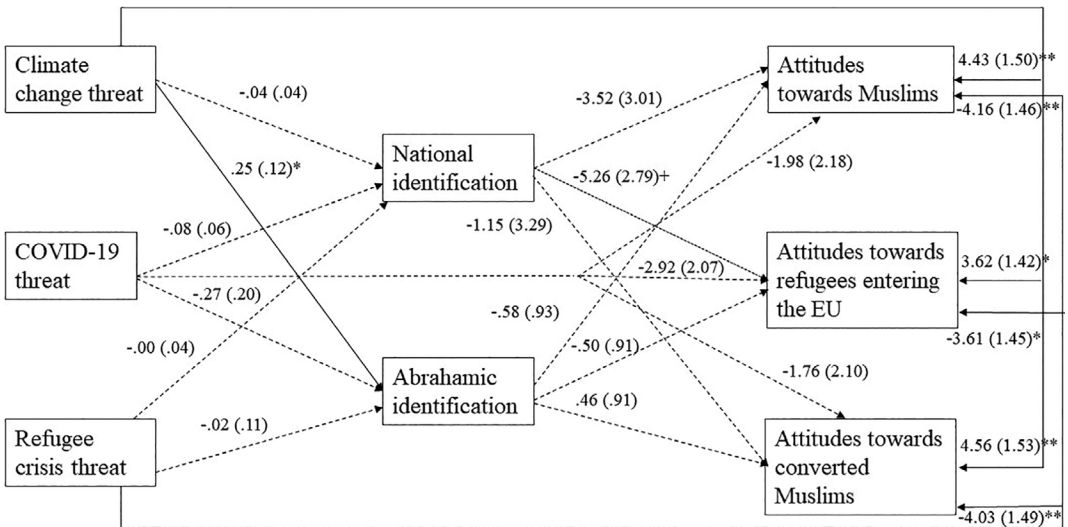


FIGURE 2 Finland: unstandardized structural results displaying the associations between existential threat, religious and national identification, attitudes toward Muslims groups.

of Abrahamic identification was associated with more positive attitudes towards Muslims and Muslim converts, whereas national identification was associated with more positive attitudes towards Muslim converts, but only in Italy (see Tables 2 and 3).

To assess the indirect associations between perceived existential threats and attitudes towards the Muslim outgroups via Abrahamic and national identities, we computed a bootstrap of 5,000 estimations to calculate the standard errors and confidence intervals of these indirect effects (Preacher & Hayes, 2008) in Mplus 8.2. Neither national nor religious identities mediated these associations. These results are available upon request from the author.

TABLE 2 Italy: unstandardized structural results displaying the associations between existential threat, religious and national identification, attitudes toward Muslims groups.

IV B (SE)	Abrahamic categorisation	National identification	Attitudes toward Muslims	Attitudes toward Muslim refugees entering EU	Attitudes toward Muslim converts
Abrahamic categorisation			1.95 (0.78)*	0.30 (0.82)	1.73 (0.78)*
National identification			0.85 (1.24)	0.39 (1.22)	2.40 (1.21)*
COVID-19 threat	-0.17 (0.12)	0.18 (0.10) ⁺	0.83 (1.65)	-1.12 (1.70)	-0.41 (1.81)
Refugee threat	-0.08 (0.07)	0.05 (0.04)	-3.01 (0.98)**	-5.44 (1.06)***	-3.47 (1.00)***
Climate change threat	0.32 (0.11)**	0.05 (0.08)	0.055 (1.35)	3.07 (1.38)*	0.41 (1.40)
Political orientation	-0.16 (0.09) ⁺	0.02 (0.07)	-2.80 (1.20)*	-4.97 (1.31)***	-2.38 (1.25) ⁺
Education	0.09 (0.05)	-0.06 (0.04) ⁺	1.39 (0.70)*	0.29 (0.75)	0.86 (0.75)
Age	0.00 (0.01)	0.01 (0.00) ⁺	-0.32 (0.07)***	-0.17 (0.08)**	-0.26 (0.08)**
Male (vs Female)	0.11 (0.17)	0.00 (0.12)	-3.24 (2.17)	1.02 (2.39)	-0.83 (2.30)

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.⁺ $p < .10$.**TABLE 3** Finland: unstandardized structural results displaying the associations between existential threat, religious and national identification, attitudes toward Muslims groups.

IV B (SE)	Abrahamic categorisation	National identification	Attitudes toward Muslims	Attitudes toward Muslim refugees entering EU	Attitudes toward Muslim converts
Abrahamic categorisation			-0.58 (0.93)	-0.50 (0.91)	0.46 (0.91)
National identification			-3.52 (3.01)	-5.26 (2.79) ⁺	-1.15 (3.29)
COVID-19 threat	-0.27 (0.20)	-0.08 (0.06)	-1.98 (2.18)	-2.92 (2.07)	-1.76 (2.10)
Refugee threat	-0.02 (0.11)	-0.00 (0.04)	-4.16 (1.46)**	-3.61 (1.45)*	-4.03 (1.49)**
Climate change threat	0.25 (0.12)*	-0.04 (0.04)	4.43 (1.50)**	3.62 (1.42)*	4.56 (1.53)**
Political orientation	-0.20 (0.07)**	0.02 (0.02)	-1.79 (0.97) ⁺	-1.89 (0.96)*	-2.60 (1.06)*
Education	0.07 (0.09)	-0.08 (0.04)*	0.18 (1.24)	1.33 (1.12)	0.55 (1.12)
Age	0.01 (0.01)	0.00 (0.00)	0.04 (0.10)	0.18 (0.10) ⁺	-0.11 (0.11)
Male (vs Female)	-0.19 (0.22)	0.05 (0.06)	0.03 (2.75)	-1.17 (2.58)	-0.33 (2.91)

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.⁺ $p < .10$.

6 | DISCUSSION

In this study, we demonstrated the different associations between the three existential threats present in Western societies in the 21st century and intergroup attitudes. At the time of data collection in 2020, the disease-related threat caused by the COVID-19 pandemic added to and temporarily overwrote the two other major global existential threats: climate change and migration from politically, socially, and economically unstable to wealthy societies, also called a refugee crisis. These multiple and simultaneously experienced threats challenge the social cohesion and current status quo in receiving societies (e.g. Mischke, 2019, May 13). In this comparative study, we analysed the perceptions of these multiple threats and their impact on attitudes towards vulnerable groups, such as Muslim minorities in Finland and Italy. Despite some country differences in the magnitude of threat experiences, with Italian participants being particularly threatened by COVID-19 and climate change, and Finnish participants by the refugee

crisis, our results clearly show some general patterns in the associations between these different threats and intergroup outcomes.

In general, threat associated with the refugee crisis was the main and negative predictor of outgroup attitudes, demonstrating that the higher this specific intergroup threat, the more negative are attitudes towards the Muslim outgroups studied. This seems to support previous research (e.g. Lönnqvist et al., 2020) that the refugee crisis is seen as one of the biggest current threats in European countries and that it has implications for intergroup relations. The fact that perceived threat stemming from the refugee crisis was particularly associated with more negative attitudes towards outgroups associated with refugees supports the sociofunctional threat-based approach to prejudice (Cottrell & Neuberg, 2005) that makes the fit assumption in the threat-prejudice response, with threats posed by specific groups triggering group-specific prejudices.

Partly perhaps due to the same reason, and in contrast to our assumptions, perceived COVID-19 threat was not associated with an anti-Muslim sentiment in this study. As much as the outgroups studied are a topic of permanent concern in societal and political discussions since the refugee crisis hit in 2015, they were not in the limelight during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the time of the study. As other studies have found, ethnically Asian people reported the most levels of discrimination in the beginning of the pandemic due to them being stereotypically connected to the origin of the virus (Ruiz et al., 2020 July 1).

Another explanation lies in the notion that the disease-related threat has a different nature as compared to the two other threats studied. Namely, pandemic hits the society as a whole and demands the collective mobilization of all its members (cf. Drury & Alfidhli, 2019). A study on the experiences of 20 non-White migrants in Finland during the pandemic concluded that the COVID-19 pandemic rather seemed to strengthen migrant communities, and also trust and cooperation between migrants and their country of settlement (Finell, Tiilikainen, Jasinskaja-Lahti, Hasan, & Muthana, 2021). Finell et al. (2021) also observed that specifically Somalian community has been engaged in the collective efforts to manage the pandemic and to support the intergroup solidarity and cohesion in the society due to the fact that this Muslim community is a target of pervasive discrimination in Finland, and that the attitudes towards this and other Muslim communities became even more negative after the beginning of the pandemic as refugees in refugee camps and reception centers have been presented as a health-threat to the larger community. Thus, although we had reason to expect disease-related threat associated with COVID-19 to be linked to more negative attitudes towards Muslim outgroup in this study (see also Clissold et al., 2020) and despite the correlation between these two variables in our preliminary correlation analyses, in this study, we could not reliably connect COVID-19 threat with intergroup outcomes. Therefore, although the lack of a negative association between the COVID-19 threat and outgroup attitudes needs to be seen as positive news, we cannot conclude whether it is a group-specific finding or an indication of the domain-specific reactions to different existential threats, and so this null result of the COVID-19 threat could not apply to other contexts, minority groups, and time frames.

Finally, in this study, more perceived climate change threat was associated with more positive attitudes towards all outgroups. These results show again the difference between different existential threats: while the refugee crisis bringing refugees and more cultural diversity to receiving societies represents a group-level threat that is reacted towards by strengthening the boundaries between 'us' and 'them', threat related to climate change is perceived as a more unifying challenge calling for unity.

In this study, we did not find strong evidence of the worldview defence mechanism, since neither Abrahamic nor national identities did explain the association between perceived existential threats and outgroup attitudes. The only tentative indications of the worldview defence came from two observations. Firstly, we found a marginally significant result that the COVID-19 threat was associated with increased national identification in Italy. As we measured the cognitive and emotional identification with the national majority group and not, for example, the perceived superiority or collective narcissism dimensions of identity, we suggest future research to account for the complexity of the national identification construct that may show different identity reactions when studying worldview defences to perceived threats (e.g. Mähönen, Brylka, & Jasinskaja-Lahti, 2014).

Secondly, perceived threat related to climate change was associated with increased Abrahamic identity, which in turn, was associated with more positive outgroup attitudes towards most of the groups studied in Italy. It is thus possible that facing a global threat, the moral universe expands by emphasizing more inclusive, common ingroup identities over more exclusive ones. As shown by previous research, common ingroup religious identification has the potential to elicit more positive attitudes towards outgroups (Kunst & Thomsen, 2015). Common ingroup identification can be linked to tolerant values, and as shown by Schwartz's (2007) cross-cultural study, universalism values predict less opposition to immigrants from different racial or ethnic groups and more participation in activities that benefit the wider society. This knowledge can help societies fight against climate change by amplifying common ingroup identifications, both religious and inclusive national ones, as a means to combat prejudice in times of intergroup conflicts. Nevertheless, we need to be careful in making any causal assumptions, since the indirect links between the perceived COVID-19 and climate change threats and outgroup attitudes via identities were not significant.

Future research could also assess the interaction effects of different existential threats on intergroup outcomes. Due to our cross-cultural data that resulted in the need to account for the country interactions in the model, we could not simultaneously assess interactions between different threats. Although the association of realistic intergroup threats (e.g. security) and negative outgroup attitudes have been documented (Stephan et al., 2008), its interplay with disease-related such as COVID-19 or climate change threats could confirm the reasoning we have made above. Over 2020, the economical situation has changed across the globe due to the pandemic, and many people have lost their jobs. Furthermore, now writing this article in 2022, the security situation in Europe has changed due to the Ukrainian war. Therefore, had we looked at security threats and their interaction with the COVID-19 threat, the role of both threats may have been different for outgroup attitudes. Future research could also assess other solidarity measures or framing of threats to see how this matters to how a disease-related threat such as a global pandemic is perceived.

6.1 | Limitations

Our study was not without limitations. First, we used a cross-sectional study design, therefore we cannot be certain that the direction of associations is as we have presented. Secondly, our existential threat measures consisted of only two items. By having more items, we could have a more nuanced measurement of these constructs. Yet, interitem correlations were high suggesting that the measure was reliable. Thirdly, we looked at attitudes towards refugees entering the EU. Although at the time of the study, this group was mainly associated with Muslims (e.g. Wike et al., 2016, July 11), the situation has since changed due to the Ukrainian war.

6.2 | Conclusion

Studying multiple existential threats present in society is important since it reveals some core differences in how they shape attitudes towards (religious) outgroups. First of all, climate change threat seems to awaken feelings of solidarity and protective feelings of inclusion, whereas refugee threat seems to elicit more protective feelings of exclusion. We did not find that the worldview defence mechanism was present since identification as neither common Abrahamic nor national identification did not mediate the association between existential threats and attitudes. The data were collected during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic; therefore, disease-related threat was highly present. Nevertheless, the COVID-19 threat was only marginally associated with higher levels of national identification in the Italian sample, which did not translate to attitudes. Only climate change threat was associated with higher levels of Abrahamic identity, which was in turn associated with more positive attitudes towards outgroups. Since we are living during times of multiple existential threats, it is important to turn a lens towards studying them simultaneously to see their differential roles in restoring or upkeeping intergroup harmony.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Due to the need to restrict the number of interactions tested in the model and to better explore the role of Abrahamic identity as a potential mediator in the link between perceived threats and prejudice, our study focuses on believers only

² The significant age difference between the Finnish and Italian samples was because the Finnish data was collected via phone interviews during the daytime.

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