

GENDER, MEDIA EXPOSURE, ATTITUDE TOWARDS IRAQ AND THE WAR, AND FEAR ABOUT THE WAR

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ABSTRACT

Do exposure to news about Iraq and the prelude to the war matter? Is there a gender difference in exposure to the news and its effects? A total of 135 male and 160 female undergraduate students voluntarily participated in a survey examining the relationships of news exposure, gender, attitudes toward Iraq and the war, and fear about consequences of the war. The data were collected using a self-administered questionnaire. Results of the t-test support the hypothesized difference in the level of news exposure, attitudes toward Iraq and attitudes toward the war across gender, but fail to support the hypothesized gender difference in fear about consequences of the war. Fear of consequences of the war was not related to attitudes toward Iraq and the war. Females were significantly less exposed to news about Iraq and the prelude to the war compared to that of males; females significantly had more unfavourable attitude toward Iraq and more favourable attitude about the war compared to that of males. Results of partial correlation analysis showed that news exposure had direct relationships with attitudes toward Iraq and attitudes toward the war, after controlling the effect of gender. Relationships of gender with attitudes toward Iraq and the prelude to the war were not significant when the effect of news exposure is controlled. The present study clearly provides further evidence on the direct role of news exposure on perception and attitudes.

Keywords: media exposure, news coverage, audience perceptions, media bias, news reporting, Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

News coverage about the prelude to the Iraq war not only attracts an international audience but also polarizes the international and national public opinion in regard to the

necessity and legality of the war. American and international public outrage over an “unjust” war manifested itself in large anti-war demonstrations in major cities prior to the war. Coverage about the prelude to the war in Malaysian news media was extensive. Malaysian audiences were exposed to the pros and cons of a military strike against Iraq, and the threat of Saddam’s tyrannical regime to world peace in the months leading up to the war. The government of Malaysia has been critical of the course of action planned and taken by the Bush administration. The tone of editorial news about the US’s preemptive policy in local media has generally been negative.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the level of exposure to the news about the prelude to the Iraq war and its effect on attitudes toward Iraq and the war, and fears of the consequences of such a war. The importance of this analysis is underscored by the fact that the local literature on the relationships between news exposure about an international crisis with attitudes and emotion has been scarce. Therefore, the findings of this study might enhance (or limit) the generalizability of findings observed in western countries on media exposure and their effects.

LITERATURE REVIEW

It is widely believed that during crisis or severe social disruption, such as a risk of war like the one in Iraq, there is an unusually high need for information and sense-making among individuals. According to the media systems dependency theory, the mass media are generally perceived to best satisfy these needs. For instance, Loges (1994) observed that when perception of uncertainty and threat in a crisis increases, dependency on newspaper and TV for the goals of understanding and orientation increases. Cacioppo and Petty (1982) pointed out that the need for cognition is a factor that is predictive of who pays attention to news in the media. Perse (1992) and Condra (1992), likewise, found in their studies empirical evidence that people with a higher need for cognition were more likely to pay attention to news in the media

The function of the mass media as an important source of information during times of war has led to a series of studies focusing on what people actually learn from war coverage. In two media effect studies during the 1991 Gulf War, Pan et al. (1994) found that exposure to newspapers and television news was positively related to the level of knowledge about the Persian Gulf War, and Bennett (1994) found that attention to media coverage of the war was a significant predictor of knowledge about the Gulf conflict.

While the need for news in the media during crisis is evident, the need might differ across gender. Though, according to the micro-media dependency theory, the degree to which people rely on the media for information is heightened during crisis, this is not constant across individuals (Lowrey 2003). The dependency is likely to vary according to a number of individual-level factors, including demographic factors. Gender is one of the socio-cultural individual-level factors that influence perception and behavior. In fact, males and females tend to use and understand language in different ways, attribute different kind of social presence to the same mode of communication, and perceive the usefulness of a medium differently (Gefen and Straub 1997). Several past studies have examined gender difference in media use and effect. Gidengil and Everitt (2002), for instance, in their study found that gender conditions the degree to which media messages about political leaders can be accepted. Their finding corroborates Zaller’s (1992) assertion in

his resistance axiom that viewers can be expected to resist messages that are at odds with their own predisposition, and that gender identity could provide one such source of resistance. In a study on gender gap in political culture and participation in China, Tong (2003) found gender difference in media habit, where male respondents scored significantly higher than females on media attention.

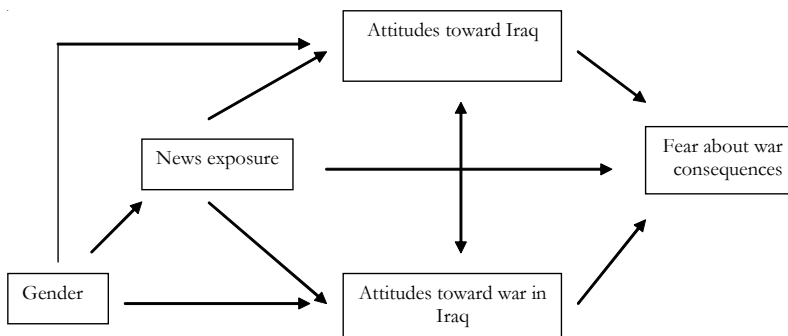
Drawing on the micro-media dependency theory and the relevant literature, this study hypothesizes that:

- Hypothesis 1: Level of news exposure about the prelude to the Iraq war differs across gender.
- Hypothesis 2: Attitudes toward Iraq differ across gender.
- Hypothesis 3: Attitudes toward the war in Iraq differ across gender
- Hypothesis 4: Fears about consequence of the war in Iraq differ across gender.

In addition to these individual-level factors accounting for the variation in dependency, the micro-media dependency theory also suggests that such varying dependency levels should lead to varying levels of attitudinal and behavioural effects produced by media messages (Lowery 2003). It is obvious that people learn from war coverage and that the coverage of Iraq represents such a learning process. The allegations that Saddam’s regime possessed weapon of mass destruction and therefore represented a potential threat to world peace can hardly be overlooked. The war as well as the consequences of war would have to become a major concern of the people as they caught up with the news coverage. Based on the assumption that a war had been inevitable and the consequences of this war had to be addressed, the study has hypothesized that:

- Hypothesis 5: Attitudes toward Iraq and the war in Iraq will be more negative among respondents with more exposure to news about the war.
- Hypothesis 6: Fear about consequences of the war will be stronger among respondents with more exposure to news about the war.
- Hypothesis 7: Negative attitudes toward Iraq will be associated with positive attitude toward the war.
- Hypothesis 8: Negative attitudes towards Iraq and positive attitudes toward the Iraq war will be associated with more fears about consequence of the war.

Figure 1: Proposed Model of Media Exposure Influences on Attitudes Toward Iraq and The War and Fear of War Consequences



In hypothesizing the relationships between news exposure and the three effects variables, the author is taking into account the potentially confounding effect of gender. The following figure summarizes the proposed association between gender, news exposure, attitudes toward Iraq and the Iraq war, and fears related to the consequences of this war.

METHODOLOGY

The data of this study come from a survey conducted one week before the start of the Iraq War on March 19, 2003. A total of 295 undergraduate students completed a self-administered questionnaire survey on a voluntary base between March 10th and 14th, 2003. The group-administered survey contained questions regarding students' media exposure and attention, attitudes toward Iraq and the Iraq War, and fear about the consequences of the war. Respondents were also asked to report their gender, age, ethnic, religious affiliation and their interest in politics. The questionnaire was distributed to students enrolled in communication, language, and human resource development classes at a public university in Selangor, Malaysia. It took about 10-15 minute to complete said questionnaire.

The sample contains slightly more female (54.2%) than male subjects (45.8%) of the average age of 22 year (SD= 1.54). About sixty-two percent of the respondents were Malays, and the other thirty-eight percent were non-Malays. In terms of interest in politics, 41.3% of the respondents indicated interest in politics, 41.0% not very much interested and 17.7% not at all interested.

Measures

- *Exposure to news about the prelude to the war in Iraq.* Respondents were asked to report on a four-point scale (1=very closely, 2=somewhat closely, 3=not too closely, 4=not closely at all) how closely they follow news about a possible war in Iraq, thus yielding a score on exposure to news. Respondents were also asked to indicate on three-point scale (1=a lot of attention, 2=some attention, 3=no attention at all) how much attention they paid to news about a possible war in Iraq on television news, daily news, newsmagazine, radio news, Internet, CNN and BBC," yielding summated scores on attention to news about a possible war in Iraq. The exposure score and the attention score were multiplied, resulting in a combined measure of level of exposure to news about a possible in Iraq. The scores ranged from 1 through 9, with a lower score indicating greater exposure to news about a probable war in Iraq.
- *Attitudes toward Iraq.* Attitudes toward Iraq and its involvement with weapons of mass destruction were assessed by asking respondents to examine six statements about Iraq and assess the truthfulness of the statements (1=true, 2=likely to be true, 3=unlikely to be true, 4=not true). Respondents were also asked on a four-point scale whether, for example, they believe that "Iraq had facilities to produce weapons of mass destruction." Respondents' answers for the six statements were then added and averaged giving composite scores of attitudes toward Iraq, with theoretical scores ranging from 1 (negative perception) to 4 (positive perception).¹ The reliability of the attitudes toward Iraq scale was .67.
- *Attitudes toward the Iraq war.* Attitudes toward the Iraq war were assessed by means of a series of five statements probing the respondents' opinion regarding a possible war against Iraq. Respondents were asked to report their agreement on a

four-point scale (1=completely agree, 2=agree, 3=disagree and 4=completely disagree) with statements such as “Saddam Hussein and the Iraq regime are a threat to world peace,” or “the Iraq regime must be ousted to end the suffering of the Iraqi people.” Again, respondents’ answers to the five statements were added and averaged giving composite scores of attitudes toward the Iraq war, with possible scores ranging from 1 (positive attitudes) to 4 (negative attitudes).² The reliability of the scale reflecting the attitudes toward Iraq war was .83.

- *Fear about consequences of war.* Fear about consequences of the Iraq war were assessed by probing respondents’ worries on a three-point scale (1=a great deal, 2= a fair amount, 3=not much) about six potential consequences of the Iraq war. For example, respondents were asked how worried they are that the “war with Iraq lead to an all out war in the Middle East,” or “Iraq might use biological or chemical weapons.” As before, respondents’ answers to the six questions were added and averaged, yielding composite scores of fear about war consequences, with possible scores ranging from 1 (high fear) to 3 (low fear).³ The reliability of the fear about the war consequences scale was .55
- *Demographics.* In addition to gender, respondents were also asked to report their age, ethnicity, religion, and their political interest measured on a four-point scale (1= very interested to 4=not at all interested).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

News about an international crisis normally draws people’s attention. The data of the present study clearly support this claim. While the scores on news exposure vary (ranging from 1 through 9), the mean score is 3.93 (SD= 2.04), indicating that many of the respondents in the study were interested in the news. Heightened interest in the news about a possible war can be expected because of the high uncertainty surrounding the Iraq issue that holds dire global implications. This finding corroborates findings of western studies in the sense that news information seeking behaviour increases during crisis. A post-hoc analysis was performed to determine the main source of news referred to by respondents. It was found that respondents rely more heavily on newspaper and television for the news.

The present analysis has also focused on gender difference on news exposure and its effects. Comparative analysis of news exposure about the prelude to the war across gender showed that males (mean= 3.26, SD= 1.75) had a higher level of news exposure compared to that of females (mean= 4.47, SD= 2.11). Furthermore, the results of the t-test showed that the difference between them is significant ($t = -5.369$, $p = .000$), as shown in Table 1. Thus, Hypothesis 1 is supported. Two possible interpretations can be offered here: (i) males have greater interest in international issues than females, and (ii) that males and females have different information needs. The finding on the gender difference in news exposure in this study is consistent with many studies that found males and females differ in their communication behaviour (see e.g., Gefen and Straub 1997; Tong 2003).

Table 1: T-test of Gender Difference in News Exposure, Attitudes toward Iraq, Attitudes toward the Iraq War and Fear about the War Consequences

Variable	Mean		t-value	p
	Male (n=135)	Female (n=160)		
Level of news exposure ¹	3.26 (1.75)	4.47 (2.11)	-5.369	.000
Attitudes toward Iraq ²	2.31 (.84)	2.11 (.79)	2.155	.032
Attitudes toward the war in Iraq ³	2.65 (.66)	2.46(.74)	2.255	.025
Fear about the war ⁴	1.45 (.39)	1.47 (.40)	-.454	.650

Note:

¹ The lower the mean the more the exposure to the news

² The lower the mean the more negative the attitudes toward Iraq (on a four-point scale)

³ The lower the mean the more favourable the attitudes toward war in Iraq (on a four-point scale)

⁴ The lower the mean the more fearful about consequences of the war (on a three-point scale)

Figure in brackets are standard deviations.

In addition, the present study found significant gender differences in attitudes toward Iraq and the War, thus supporting Hypothesis 2 and Hypothesis 3. As shown in Table 1, mean for males on attitudes toward Iraq is 2.31 (SD= .84) and mean for females is 2.11 (SD= .79), suggesting females had more negative perceptions toward Iraq compared to those of males. The analysis of mean difference showed that the difference is significant ($t = 2.155, \hat{n} = .032$).

It is interesting to note that even though males had greater exposure to the news but were not as negative toward Iraq as females, suggesting that greater exposure to the news about Iraq does not necessarily lead to a greater negative attitude toward that country. One could speculate that a greater exposure to the news may result in greater suspicion or doubt as to the US rhetoric about the existence of weapon of mass destruction in Iraq and the seriousness of the threat posed by Saddam’s regime, and hence, in the necessity of military intervention. Moreover, it is also reasonable to argue that the fact of being skeptical of US news media credibility may perhaps explain this finding. Local news reports opposing the military intervention option in the news media might have sensitized respondents to be critical of US initiatives and motives; anti-American sentiments is another possible explanation. As argued by Samuelson (2003), people just don’t heed the media that much. What they do absorb represents one factor in regard to what to believe and how to behave. Their experience, habits, views and prejudice count for more.

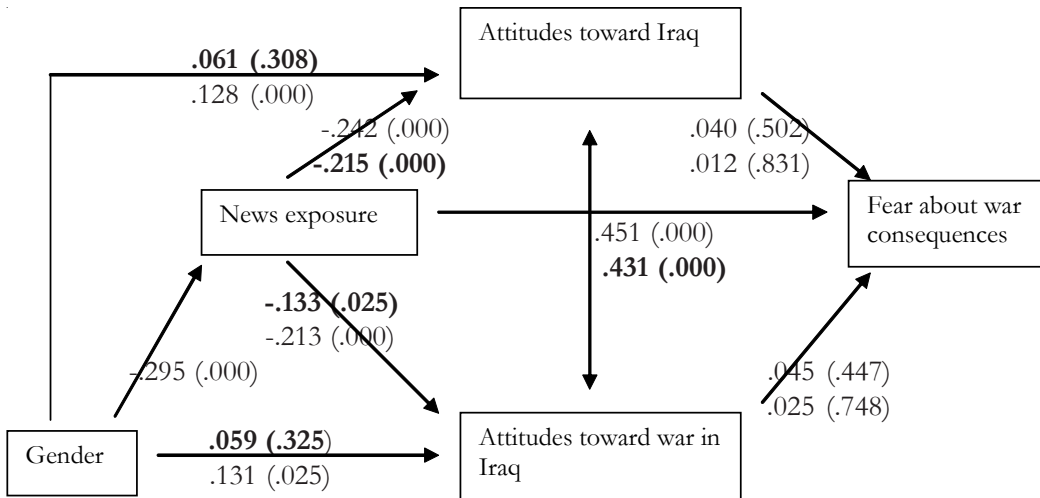
Consistent with their less negative attitudes toward Iraq, male subjects were also observed to have a more unfavourable perception towards war in Iraq. Results of the t-test showed that the mean for males 2.65 (SD= .66) is significantly higher than that of females, 2.46 (SD= .74), with t-value of 2.255 and significance level of .025.

In addition to the cognitive-based attitude, the present study also examined gender difference on fears about consequence of the war. Fears of consequences of war were observed among males (mean=1.45, SD= .39) and females (mean=1.47, SD= .40) respondents, but the difference was not significant. Overall, respondents were concerned that it might take a long time to make Iraq a stable country. There also might be another

terrorist attack. The hypothesized difference, Hypothesis 4, is not supported, suggesting that males and females alike are both equally fearful of the consequence of war. Thus far, the findings revealed the gender difference in regard to exposure to news, attitudes toward Iraq and attitudes toward the war. Equally important in the present analysis was the examination of the relationships between news exposure, attitudes toward Iraq and the war, and fear about consequences of war. As gender is found to be related to these variables, the potential confounding effect of gender was taken into consideration in examining the relationships of news exposure to the three media effect variables. Figure 2 summarized the nature of relationships among the studied variables.

It is apparent that news exposure during the build-up to the war has a direct influence on the attitudes toward Iraq and the attitudes toward the war, even after controlling gender. Based on the results of partial correlation analysis, the correlation between attitudes toward Iraq and news exposure is weak but still significant ($r=-.215, \tilde{n}=.000$), and the correlation of attitudes toward the war with news exposure is weak, but also significant ($r=-.133, \tilde{n}=.025$). Hence, Hypothesis 5 is supported. Note that gender difference in attitudes toward Iraq and the war is mediated by the news exposure variable. The relationships of gender with attitudes toward Iraq and the war were not significant when news exposure is controlled ($r=.061, \tilde{n}=.308$; $r=.059, \tilde{n}=.325$, respectively).

Figure 2: Bivariate and Partial Correlations among Gender, News Exposure, Attitude toward Iraq, Attitude toward the Impending War, and Fear about the War



Note:
 Figure in brackets are significant values.
 Figures in bold are partial correlations.
 Gender (male=dummy)

On the other hand, Hypothesis 6 is not supported in this study. The reason for this lack of support is not clear. The failure to observe the expected theoretical relationships might be attributed to weaknesses in measuring the fear of consequences of war. As reported earlier the reliability of the fear of consequences of war was quite low ($\text{Alpha} =$

.55). The same reasoning also applies to the non-significant relationships of attitudes toward Iraq and toward the war with fear of consequences of war (Hypothesis 8). Nevertheless, a moderate correlation is observed for attitudes toward Iraq and attitudes toward the war ($r = .431$, $n = .000$). The hypothesized relationship, Hypothesis 7, of attitudes towards Iraq and attitudes toward the war is therefore supported. The more negative is the attitudes toward Iraq, the more positive is the attitudes toward the war.

CONCLUSION

The present study provides insights into the nature of relationships of news exposure, gender, and media effects. More importantly, the findings clarify the role of news exposure in affecting cognitive-based attitude among student audiences. Overall, this study shows that news exposure matters. Respondents with more exposure to the news coverage about the preparation for the war and about Saddam's repressive regime were more negative toward Iraq and more positive toward the war. These findings support the notion of news framing and priming, where media framing means selecting some aspects of a perceived reality and making them more salient (agenda setting) in a communicating text, in news priming, in turn, means promoting a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment (Entman 1993). As a matter of fact the news media have this power to direct attention through the process of framing and the power to sustain that attention through the process of priming (Lasorsa 2002).

While attitudes toward Iraq and the war were correlated (weak negative relationship) with news exposure significantly, fear about consequences of war was not. The fact that wars always generate negative consequences, raising the substantive level of fear of consequences of war can be expected even though the exposure to the coverage of war may be low.

Another important finding of this study is the fact that gender carries an indirect influence on cognitive-based attitudes. It is the level of news exposure that explained the difference between males and females in their attitudes toward Iraq and the war. In other words, it is the level of news exposure that matters. While the present study shows a significant influence of news exposure on cognitive-based attitude, the findings also point to the need to examine in more detail whether differences in attitudes toward Iraq and the war is associated with audience's main source of news, that is, the exposure to news channels like CNN and BBC compared to the local news media.

Of course, a possible limitation of this study is the fact that it draws on responses by students. Nevertheless, as the study aims at exploring theoretical relationships rather than ascertaining population estimates, the use of student samples seems acceptable. As argued by Basil, Brown, and Bocarnea (2002) and Shapiro (2002), purposive samples and even student samples are legitimate ways to efficiently and inexpensively explore theoretical relationship, particularly when there is no particular reason to expect significant differences in psychological processes among adults in the phenomenon under scrutiny. Therefore, the findings can be generalized to larger population.

The timing of this study is another possible limitation. Because the fieldwork for this survey was conducted one week before the actual start of the war (March 27, 2003), all potential media effects have been limited to coverage of the prelude to war and not the actual war.

Acknowledgement

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NOTES

¹ *Attitudes toward Iraq.* These attitudes comprise the following: Iraq has facilities to create weapons of mass destruction; Iraq is obstructing the United Nations weapons inspectors; Iraq has biological or chemical weapons; Iraq is trying to develop nuclear weapons; Iraq has ties to Osama bin Laden's terrorist organization al-Qaeda; Iraq is hiding evidence from the United Nations weapons inspectors.

² *Attitudes toward the war in Iraq.* These attitudes comprise the following: Saddam Hussein and the Iraq regime are a threat to world peace; The Iraq regime must be ousted to end the suffering of the Iraq people; This war is a "War on Terrorism"; War is always wrong; A war is justified to bring down a dictatorial regime.

³ *Fear of consequence of the war.* The potential consequences included are: War with Iraq might lead to an all out war in the Middle East; Iraq might use biological or chemical weapon; It will take a long time to make Iraq a stable and peaceful country after the war; Allied forces might sustain a lot of casualties; There will soon be another terrorist attack; Many Iraqi civilians might be killed.

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