



# The effect of disgust-eliciting media portrayals on outgroup dehumanization and support of deportation in a Norwegian sample



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## ABSTRACT

Public discourse regarding the Roma has been heated in many western European countries. This study investigates whether feelings of disgust, elicited through negative media portrayals, can lead to more dehumanization and support of deportation toward this minority. While Study 1 ( $N = 30$ ) validated a measure of dehumanization in the Norwegian context, Study 2 ( $N = 195$ ) experimentally tested whether disgust-eliciting media portrayals would increase dehumanization tendencies on this validated measure and support of deportation toward the Roma. As expected, reading a newspaper article focusing on allegedly low hygienic standards among the Roma increased the feeling of disgust, which, in turn, led to higher degrees of dehumanization and support of deportation. While being the first study experimentally showing that disgust leads to dehumanization of a real societal minority group, the results also have important implications for how media discusses and presents social issues regarding devalued minority groups.

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## 1. Introduction

Filthy scum (. . .). They roam the earth and wear gross, gypsy attire as they play their tambourines and dance around in a disgusting gypsy circle. ([Urban Dictionary, 2008](#))

The Roma is a minority group in Europe with a long history. They are often condescendingly referred to as Gypsies ([Crowe, 2008](#)) and in most of the countries they are settled in, including Norway, they are perceived as a negatively viewed outgroup. Arguably, they represent one of the most stigmatized minorities in many countries, and the media continues to produce negatively biased portrayals of the Roma, repeatedly depicting them as criminals and troublemakers ([Waringo, 2005](#)). It is not uncommon to see articles likening the Roma to animals, or associating them with feces in public places and unhygienic standards ([Brekke, 2013](#); [Haagensen, 2012](#); [Rud, 2011](#)). Even dating back to the 1940s, testimonials by the Nazis stated that the Roma were filthy ([Lewy, 2000](#)). The negative media depictions of the Roma could play an important role in the prejudice many people show toward this outgroup, perhaps by exacerbating already existing negative attitudes ([Haagensen, 2012](#)). Such media portrayals might elicit specific negative emotions, such as feelings of disgust. The implications of this is important,

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because emotions have been found to be better predictors of prejudice and discriminatory behavior than stereotypes, and people show distinct emotional profiles to different outgroups (Chamberlin, 2004; Cottrell & Neuberg, 2005).

The emotion disgust could be particularly pertinent to the Roma, as many media portrayals have associated them with disgusting stimuli (Eggesvik, 2013; Rostad, 2013; Rud, 2011), and disgust is an especially important factor in extreme forms of prejudice (Taylor, 2007). The core characteristic of the feeling of disgust is repulsion, and can function as a signal for danger (Hodson et al., 2013). Disgust can be elicited in several ways, including bad odors and other revolutive physical objects, or by acts committed by other people, such as incest. The feelings of disgust evoke the need to protect the self from possible contamination—either physically or morally (Horberg, Oveis, Keltner, & Cohen, 2009). When reacting with disgust toward a particular group, the threat is therefore not toward the resources of one's own group, but instead there is a fear and danger of being contaminated.

People who are perceived as being low in warmth and competence are more likely to induce the feeling of disgust and contempt in others (Cuddy, Glick, & Fiske, 2007). This can be contrasted to outgroups that evoke feelings of envy because they are perceived as high in competence, but low in warmth. In support of this, a study looking at brain images of people watching outgroups perceived as low in warmth and competence showed that brain regions associated with the feeling of disgust were activated (Fiske, 2009; Harris & Fiske, 2006). Furthermore, areas associated with social cognition were deactivated, suggesting that the outgroups were perceived as less human (Fiske, 2009; Harris & Fiske, 2006). People with low or no levels of education, the poor or welfare recipients, homeless, immigrants and drug addicts are generally perceived as being low in warmth and competence (Fiske, 2012). The Roma, who are often poor and low in education (O'Higgins & Ivanov, 2006), is therefore a group, which could be perceived as low in warmth and competence. Thus, they might also be seen as disgusting. A study conducted in Norway indeed found that the Roma together with beggars and drug addicts were perceived as low in warmth and competence (Bye, Herrebrøden, Hjetland, Røyset, & Westby, 2014).

Most studies on the relationship between prejudice and emotions have been correlational, looking at which emotions are related to appraisals of different kinds of outgroups (Cottrell & Neuberg, 2005; Cuddy et al., 2007; Taylor, 2007). While a study by Hodson et al. (2013) looked at the link between disgust and negative attitudes toward a fictitious outgroup, no study has experimentally investigated the link between disgust and dehumanization tendencies toward a *real* outgroup. This is an important limitation because different results can be expected if a real outgroup is used as a target, because people already have preconceived thoughts and notions about such groups. Furthermore, while a large volume of studies on prejudice have been conducted (Paluck & Green, 2009), there are only a few studies on attitudes against the Roma in particular (Ljujic, 2011). The aim of the present paper is therefore to look at how media portrayals focusing on alleged insufficient hygienic standards among the Roma may elicit feelings of disgust, which in turn may predict biases such as dehumanization or even the most extreme forms of biases such as support of deportation.

## 2. Portrayals of the Roma in Norwegian media

An increasing number of Romas have come to Norway the past years, partly due to the legalization of begging in Norway in 2006 (Adolfsson, 2014). As a consequence, there has been a lot of focus on the Roma in the Norwegian media. Depictions of the Roma in Norwegian media often has a negative focus (Denne, 2012), drawing on generalized stereotypes and stigmatizing views about them (Adolfsson, 2014). For instance, in an article by Brekke (2013), published in the major Norwegian newspaper *Aftenposten*, the following quote by a Hungarian politician was cited: "The majority of the Roma are not capable of living with other people. They are ineligible to live amongst humans. These gypsies are animals, and they act like animals." In this article, the Roma are described as animals, not human beings. There are numerous additional examples in the media where the Roma have been likened to animals, and described in ways that can give animalistic connotations (Brekke, 2013; Haagensen, 2012).

In addition to articles comparing the Roma to animals, there are also examples of the Roma being described as disgusting or associated with disgusting stimuli. An example is how media portrayals of the Roma often have associated them with filthiness or excrements in their surroundings, also implying that they are the cause of this (Eggesvik, 2013; Rostad, 2013; Rud, 2011). The following quote about the Roma was written in a Norwegian newspaper: "(...) There was a certain amount of soaked feces in the area. There were feces almost right next to where they were standing and making food, just one meter away" (as cited by Romsaas in Rostad, 2013, own translation). These media examples coincide with psychological research. The tendency to associate devalued outgroups with disgust can also be found in the media. For example, Taylor (2007) found that hateful texts about outgroups often included various words related to disgust. This implies that disgust is an important emotion in prejudice.

Feelings of disgust toward outgroups which can result from negative media portrayals, can have serious implications—such as increased dehumanization and rejection tendencies (Hodson & Costello 2007; Cuddy et al., 2007; Neuberg & Cottrell, 2002).

## 3. Disgust as predictor of dehumanization

Dehumanization is a tendency to view others as less than human or even as inhuman (Haslam & Loughnan, 2012). Thus, it involves likening groups of people to animals, and is often manifested as an extreme form of prejudice (Haslam & Loughnan, 2012). Ingroup members are often perceived as more human than outgroup members (Haslam & Bain, 2007).

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