"We Have Nothing to Do With It": How Statements of Denial by Armed Actors Shape Public Perceptions and Emotions

Revise & Resubmit

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Abstract

Conventional scholarly wisdom suggests that armed groups claim credit for violent acts to send costly signals of resolve. However, many armed groups instead issue explicit denials of responsibility for attacks, posing a challenge to prevailing theories. If violence functions as a costly signal that builds reputation for resolve, why would armed groups disavow violence? Drawing on political psychology, we argue that denials are deliberate tools for narrative manipulation—crafted to create uncertainty, erode trust in government, and temper public outrage by activating cognitive processes, such as motivated reasoning and reappraisal, that allow individuals to reinterpret events in ways that reduce discomfort. To test this argument, we conducted a pre-registered survey experiment with a national sample of 1,616 U.S. adults. Participants were presented with a fictional attack attributed to an armed group by the government and randomly assigned to conditions in which the group denied, claimed, or remained silent about the attack. Our findings reveal that denials significantly reduce perceived culpability, undermine trust in government, and dampen outrage—demonstrating their effectiveness as psychological and strategic communication tools. This study refines theories of armed actors' political communication and offers insights for countering misinformation and strengthening public resilience in contested information environments.

Keywords: political violence, denial of responsibility, political narrative manipulation, trust in government, public outrage

8,956 words

INTRODUCTION

Politically motivated armed actors—including rebel groups, terrorist organizations, and paramilitary forces—utilize violence to signal resolve. Violence is typically intended to convey a costly signal of commitment to target audiences. Extant works focusing on this costly signaling logic suggest that armed actors demonstrate their unwavering dedication to their cause by engaging in inherently risky and resource-intensive actions (Kydd and Walter 2006; Biberman and Zahid 2019; Farrell 2020).

However, some armed actors exhibit a puzzling behavior that challenges this narrative—they actively deny involvement in violent attacks by issuing statements that dissociate themselves from these acts. Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) denied responsibility for the 2011 Marrakesh bombings, stating, "we have nothing to do with it" (al Jazeera 2011). The Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) denied involvement in the 2007 beheading of Philippine Marines (Abuza 2008) while the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) rejected accusations of assassinating Sri Lanka's Foreign Minister in 2005 (Reuters 2007). Although some statements of denial may be guided by genuine innocence, armed groups also disclaim attacks that they indeed committed (Kearns et al. 2014). For instance, Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) denied involvement in the 2008 Mumbai attacks, but subsequent investigations and confessions from arrested attackers confirmed the organization's responsibility (Le Monde 2008; Reuters 2008).

This behavior raises questions about the strategic and psychological motivations driving denial statements. Why would armed groups distance themselves from actions that could signal resolve and strength? Prior research largely treats denials as short-term tactical tools to avoid backlash or distance organizations from unsanctioned actions by rank-and-file members (Kearns et al. 2014; Abrahms and Conrad 2017; Hearty 2022). However, these explanations overlook

broader strategic dimensions, particularly the psychological mechanisms and information warfare tactics embedded in denial statements. This leaves gaps in the current literature that warrant further exploration and raises the question: Do denials reflect a deliberate effort to manipulate public opinion and psychological responses to political violence?

While prior studies identify tactical motivations behind denials—such as avoiding backlash—their effectiveness remains largely unexamined. To the best of our knowledge, no empirical work has systematically tested whether denials successfully achieve their intended objectives. This gap is particularly striking given widespread public skepticism toward armed groups. Moreover, the broader psychological impacts of denial statements, especially regarding their influence on public perceptions of government and emotional responses to political violence, remain entirely unexplored.

To address these gaps, we aim to investigate the psychological effects of denial statements on public reactions to political violence. Specifically, we argue that denial statements function as deliberate tools for narrative manipulation that shape public perceptions of blame, erode trust in government, and alter emotional responses. By fostering *uncertainty* about perpetrators' involvement, denials introduce *competing narratives* that challenge official attributions of responsibility and activate mechanisms such as *cognitive dissonance reduction* and *motivated reasoning*. These mechanisms allow individuals to reinterpret ambiguous events in ways that align with pre-existing beliefs or reduce emotional distress caused by perceptions of threat. As a result, denial statements may diminish confidence in the group's culpability, undermine trust in government credibility, and temper public outrage by disrupting moral clarity and encouraging *cognitive reappraisal*.

To test these expectations, we conducted a pre-registered vignette survey experiment with a national sample of 1,616 U.S. adults.[1] Respondents read about a fictional terrorist attack attributed to a fictional armed group by government officials and were randomly assigned statements in which the group either *denied, claimed*, or *remained silent* about the attack. The results reveal that denial statements successfully shape public perceptions, creating uncertainty about responsibility, reducing trust in government credibility, and dampening emotional outrage. These findings, representing the first systematic evidence regarding denials by armed actors, highlight the instrumental role of denial statements as non-violent rhetorical tools that complement violence by disrupting narratives and undermining institutional trust.

By empirically demonstrating the strategic utility of denial statements, this study extends theories of costly signaling and political communication, offering new insights into how armed groups use nonviolent means to shape perceptions, emotions, and government credibility (Johnson and Gillooly 2023). These findings contribute to the discussion in political psychology regarding the relationship between strategic communication and its psychological impact (Crenshaw 2000) and have important policy implications for countering misinformation campaigns and maintaining public trust in contested information environments. The government's ability to accurately attribute acts of violence is crucial for maintaining public trust and effectively addressing security threats. The erosion of credibility due to armed actors' communication efforts can significantly impede the government's capacity to respond to and preempt future acts of political violence.

[1] Although we discuss the generalizability of our findings beyond the U.S. in greater detail below, it is worth noting that recent evidence suggests that experimental studies conducted in the U.S. largely replicate across a diverse set of countries, including those with significant armed group activity, such as India, Israel, and Nigeria (Bassan-Nygate et al. 2024).

COSTLY SIGNALING AND DENIALS

A costly signal is a credible threat that imposes costs the sender would be reluctant to bear without intending to follow through (Fearon 1997). Scholars agree that acts of political violence function as costly signaling (Hoffman and McCormick 2004; Kydd and Walter 2006; Siegel and Young 2009; Spaniel 2019). Since militants are often weaker than their opponents, they cannot compel adversaries to comply with demands through force alone. Instead, public displays of violence demonstrate resolve and commitment to achieving political objectives.

While the logic of costly signaling suggests that armed groups would frequently claim responsibility for violent acts to distinguish themselves from rivals (Hoffman 2010), to build and rebuild reputations when entering new conflict zones (Hansen 2023) and recovering from leadership losses (Author 2023), or to establish collective identities, recruit, and set behavioral standards (Brown 2020), the reality often defies this expectation. Most violent acts go unclaimed (Hansen 2021), with 84 percent of attacks in the Global Terrorism Database lacking attribution. Moreover, rather than merely remain silent following an act of violence, armed groups often issue explicit denial statements actively disavowing involvement in violent attacks.

Denials by armed actors are not limited to violent acts alone. Armed groups also issue statements disavowing controversial practices, external ties, and internal developments. For example, in 2015, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) denied having a policy of forced recruitment (BBC 2015). In 2012, a Taliban spokesperson denied links to the LTTE, stating that the organization is "an independent liberation force" in Afghanistan (Reuters 2012). After U.S. claims of Mokhtar Belmokhtar's death in Libya in 2015, al-Murabitoon declared: "The news of the death of commander Khaled Abou El Abbas [Mokhtar Belmokhtar] in an American airstrike is false" (Joscelyn 2015). These examples illustrate how denials function on

multiple levels—to maintain public credibility, manage reputations, and shape perceptions of organizational cohesion. Simply put, they allow groups to influence public narratives about their practices. Yet, denials of violent attacks pose a different conceptual puzzle: Why would armed groups disavow costly actions that could otherwise signal strength, resolve, and credibility?

The issuance of denial statements presents a conundrum within the costly signaling framework. Traditional costly signaling theory assumes that violence is inherently communicative, with the costs borne by perpetrators enhancing the signal's credibility (Fearon 1997; Kydd and Walter 2006). However, denial statements disrupt this logic by obscuring the actor's association with the act and negating its communicative function. Unlike claims, which reinforce resolve and align with the costly signaling framework, denials depart from the framework's assumptions by decoupling the costs of violence from the actor's reputation, introducing uncertainty and ambiguity into the narrative.

Existing literature offers some explanations for this behavior, emphasizing that denial statements help armed groups avoid public backlash or mitigate the political costs of violence. Jenkins (1988) argues that plausible deniability is crucial for groups executing attacks for tactical goals but unable to claim responsibility publicly. Kearns et al. (2014) suggest that groups may deny involvement to distance themselves from actions that could harm their reputation or support base. Similarly, Hearty (2022) posits that denial statements help shape positive perceptions of a group's conduct, membership, and internal unity. However, these explanations focus primarily on the tactical utility of denials in avoiding short-term political costs. They do not fully address the broader strategic and psychological implications. Moreover, while backlash avoidance is intuitively appealing, current research lacks systematic evidence that denials effectively achieve their intended goals.

Addressing this gap requires experimental evidence to isolate the causal effects of denial statements on public perceptions. This is especially important because their effectiveness may depend on the public's willingness to trust information from potentially untrustworthy actors. The perceived trustworthiness of a communicator significantly affects the persuasiveness of their message (Pornpitakpan 2004; O'Keefe 2015). In the context of contentious actors, research highlights skepticism toward information sources linked to violence. For instance, Abrahms (2013) argues that observers infer intentions directly from actions, often perceiving violent actors as having malicious motives, regardless of their political goals. Accordingly, denial statements may be less effective—or even counterproductive—if the public sees a disconnect between a group's actions and its claimed innocence. Moreover, the literature has yet to explore the broader strategic utility of denial statements. If effective in shaping public opinion, these statements may influence perceptions beyond simply mitigating backlash.

To address these gaps, we examine denial statements as a strategic departure from the costly signaling framework of political violence. We argue that by denying responsibility for acts of violence, armed groups exploit the inherent uncertainty and ambiguity in conflict environments to challenge official narratives and erode government credibility. Denials disrupt expected signaling dynamics, transforming acts of violence into contested events where responsibility is unclear, forcing observers to navigate competing interpretations. This shift highlights the need to view denial statements not merely as tools for backlash avoidance but as deliberate strategies to manipulate public perception and psychological responses to violence—an argument we explore further in the next section.

PSYCHOLOGY OF DENIAL STATEMENTS

We outline three sets of interconnected theoretical expectations, rooted in political psychology, to examine how denial statements influence public opinion. First, we discuss how denial statements affect the public's belief in the group's involvement in violent acts. Second, we consider the implications of these denials on the perceived credibility of the government, particularly following governmental attributions of responsibility for acts of violence. Finally, we deliberate how denial statements alter individuals' emotional responses to political violence, specifically by reducing feelings of outrage. Taken together, these expectations provide a framework for understanding how denial statements operate not just as rhetorical tools but as mechanisms for shaping perceptions, emotions, and narratives in contentious political environments.

Public Perceptions of Involvement in Violence

Statements of denial by armed groups can significantly reduce public belief in the group's involvement in violent attacks, even when the government attributes the attack to them. First, despite coming from potentially untrustworthy actors, denial statements can create genuine *uncertainty* about responsibility. Existing studies suggest that such uncertainty can persist even in the face of compelling evidence (Cormac and Aldrich 2018; Brown and Fazal 2021). Recent experimental research supports this idea. For example, Hedgecock and Sukin (2023) find that uncertainty about a cyberattack's perpetrator significantly affects public support for retaliation. Similarly, Bloch and McManus (2024) show that denials of responsibility for covert actions can generate public uncertainty, influencing preferences for retaliation. Schiff et al. (2024) further

demonstrate that politicians can create informational uncertainty by denying credible scandal reports, helping them maintain public support.

Similar to other political actors, armed groups produce collective action frames that assign meaning to historical and contemporary political developments (Benford and Snow 2000). Consequently, denial statements introduce *narrative competition* by offering alternative explanations that challenge the government's account of violent events, thereby increasing ambiguity. When faced with conflicting narratives, individuals may hold contradictory beliefs about trust in the government's attribution and openness to the group's denial. As Festinger (1957) theorized, individuals seek consistency by trying to reconcile dissonant ideas to resolve cognitive dissonance. This process may involve motivated belief adjustment, where individuals gravitate toward the less threatening narrative—the denial—because it reduces perceptions of imminent danger. In resolving dissonance in favor of the denial, individuals lower their conviction in the group's involvement, allowing the denial to shape their perceptions even when it comes from a potentially untrustworthy source.

Second, denial statements can trigger *motivated reasoning*, where individuals process information to align with pre-existing beliefs, values, or preferences. Unlike cognitive dissonance, which stems from discomfort caused by contradictory information, motivated reasoning involves selective processing of information driven by prior beliefs, with individuals seeking evidence to support desired conclusions (Kunda 1990). Those already inclined to distrust the government or sympathize with armed groups may view the denial as more credible, filtering evidence to reinforce their worldviews (Kertzer et al. 2020; Bloch and McManus 2024). For instance, those with anti-government biases may see the denial as validating broader skepticism

toward state authority. Motivated reasoning, therefore, enables individuals to interpret information in ways that reduce their belief in the group's involvement.

Although prior studies that we draw from focus on denials by state actors, the underlying mechanisms— *uncertainty, narrative competition*, and *motivated reasoning*—may be even more relevant for non-state actors. Unlike states, which possess institutional legitimacy and enforcement power, non-state actors must actively construct and defend credibility through communication strategies to offset their lack of formal authority. Given their lack of formal authority, these groups rely heavily on symbolic and rhetorical strategies to destabilize dominant narratives, frame their actions, and discredit opponents. Denial statements create alternative explanations that compete with state narratives, shifting focus from blame to questions about evidence. Motivated reasoning may also be more potent for non-state actors, as their supporters are often ideologically predisposed to distrust governments. By issuing denials, these groups can reinforce pre-existing biases against state authority, activating identity-based reasoning that makes audiences more receptive to alternative narratives.

Hypothesis 1

Statements of denial by armed groups diminish individuals' conviction in the group's involvement in a violent attack.

Public Perceptions of Government Credibility

Regimes around the world seek to bolster their credibility among domestic populations through public discourse. However, public trust in state leaders and institutions fluctuates over time and across contexts and can erode (Kayyali 2020). Existing studies suggest that domestic populations disapprove of inconsistency and hypocrisy in government leadership (Tomz 2007; McManus and

Yarhi-Milo 2017). Likewise, recent survey experiments show that leaders face political costs when their lies are exposed (Maxey 2021; Yarhi-Milo and Ribar 2022).

While acts of violence may generate a "rally around the flag effect" (Hetherington and Nelson 2003), denial statements by armed actors, issued after governmental attributions of responsibility for violent acts, can undermine public faith in the government's credibility. When an armed group refutes government claims, it may foster perceptions of governmental deception or incompetence. Such skepticism rests on the idea that credibility depends on a government's perceived accuracy, integrity, and competence in assigning blame. Perceptions of deception may evoke betrayal, damaging trust in the government's integrity and leading individuals to question whether officials misled the public for political gain or to conceal failures. Alternatively, perceptions of incompetence may provoke uncertainty, raising doubts about the government's ability to gather intelligence and respond effectively to threats.

Denial statements may resonate more strongly in contexts where pre-existing skepticism toward government amplifies concerns about deception or incompetence. This skepticism can leave individuals increasingly doubtful of the government's ability to manage future incidents of political violence or its honesty in reporting threats accurately. Critics might argue that armed actors lack the credibility to discredit government authorities. Yet, this assumption underestimates armed groups' increasing capacity to utilize mass communication tools in their favor. Despite concerns about their trustworthiness, armed groups can attain significant levels of popularity (Tokdemir and Akcinaroglu 2016; Karakoç et al. 2022). To bolster their influence, armed groups have developed sophisticated propaganda apparatuses and leveraged social media platforms to amplify their narratives and challenge official accounts (Bestvater and Loyle 2023; Ying 2024). While violence remains a tool of communication, discourse has emerged as an

equally critical strategy for enhancing legitimacy. By combining violence with strategic messaging, armed groups can not only reinforce their credibility among supporters but also deepen skepticism toward governments, creating fertile ground for denial statements to take hold.

This mechanism is likely even more pronounced in politically contentious environments where armed groups sometimes assume de facto governing roles (Arjona 2016). In such contexts, denial statements can exploit institutional weaknesses, amplifying doubts about the government's credibility and competence. Yet, this dynamic is not limited to conflict-ridden or fragile states. Even in stable democracies with low levels of political violence, governments may face heightened credibility pressures. In these settings, inconsistencies in messaging or perceived political motives can lead audiences to suspect officials of prioritizing narrative control over truthful reporting. As a result, denial statements—despite originating from actors often seen as less credible—may still resonate with the public, deepening skepticism toward the government's honesty and capacity to manage threats effectively.

Hypothesis 2

Statements of denial by armed actors that follow statements of attribution by governments reduce individuals' conviction in the government's credibility.

Emotional Responses to Violence

An established body of research examines the role of emotions in shaping political processes (Marcus 2000; Pace and Bilgic 2019). Emotions are "affective responses to what happens in the environment and cognitive representations of the event's meaning for the individual" (Frijda 1994, 51). As Marcus (2003, 189) explains, emotions become attached to experiences and subsequently shape reactions and behaviors—whether favorable or unfavorable—toward people,

events, and circumstances. Given their power to influence judgment and behavior, emotions play a critical role in shaping political responses to violent events (Milliff 2023).

Acts of violence often evoke strong emotional responses among civilian populations. While such acts can generate positive emotions like hope and pride (Brandon and Silke 2007; Gross et al. 2009), they more commonly produce fear, anger, hatred, and sadness (Lerner et al. 2003; Nussio 2020; Kaakinen et al. 2021). Outrage, for example, is a frequent reaction to political violence—marked by moral indignation and a desire for revenge (Balcells 2017; Wayne 2023; Schnakenberg and Wayne 2024). Exposure to violence may also trigger feelings of humiliation (Barber et al. 2016), which, rather than suppressing action, can intensify the psychological drive for retribution (Barnhart 2017; Hall 2017; Masterson 2022).

However, as noted above, statements of denial introduce doubt and uncertainty about the responsibility for the attack. This uncertainty can disrupt emotional appraisals that are critical for the emergence of outrage. Research on appraisal theories of emotion suggests that emotions like anger and outrage arise from evaluations of events as intentional, immoral, and threatening (Ames and Fiske 2013, 2015). To experience moral outrage and a desire for retribution, individuals must perceive an event as caused by an identifiable agent acting with malicious intent and resulting in severe harm (Ginther et al. 2022). Denial statements complicate these appraisals by creating ambiguity about both agency (who is responsible) and intentionality (whether the act was deliberate). As a result, the moral clarity required for outrage to develop may be undermined, weakening the emotional certainty needed to sustain anger and calls for retribution (Carson 2018).

Moreover, denials can function as a *cognitive reappraisal* mechanism by prompting individuals to engage in a process of "taking a step back and viewing a provoking event in an

objective way" (Denson and Fabiansson Tan 2023). Cognitive reappraisal has been shown to reduce negative emotions like anger and increase support for conflict-resolution policies in communities affected by political violence, such as Israel and Colombia (Halperin et al. 2013, 2014; Hurtado-Parrado et al. 2019). By offering an alternative narrative that counters initial perceptions of hostility or aggression, denial statements may redirect attention toward gathering more evidence or questioning responsibility—fostering deliberation instead of impulsive moral judgment and outrage.

Finally, denials can further signal to the public that the alleged perpetrators of the attack wish to avoid escalation (Carson 2018; Lonergan and Lonergan 2022; Yoder and Spaniel 2022). By rejecting responsibility, armed groups may imply that they are not actively seeking confrontation, which can temper fear of further violence and introduce a sense of relief (Bloch and McManus 2024). This relief may stem from perceptions that the group is less threatening or more restrained than initially assumed.

Hypothesis 3

Statements of denial by armed actors reduce the outrage individuals feel in response to acts of political violence.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Following research that uses vignette experiments to analyze public responses to terrorism (Huff and Kertzer 2018; Baele et al. 2019), we employ a vignette survey experiment to examine the strategic utility of denial statements by politically motivated armed actors. Specifically, we assess their impact on individual perceptions, emotions, and trust in government credibility. The study design, including treatment conditions, research questions and hypotheses, as well as the

analysis plan were preregistered with AsPredicted.org on January 18, 2023, with documentation available.[2]

The survey experiment was conducted in January 2023 on a national sample of 2,016 U.S. adults recruited through the Lucid Theorem online panel—a period marked by heightened terrorism concerns, including threats from foreign terrorist organizations like the Islamic State and al Qaeda, as well as lone wolf actors (Wilson Center 2023). The Lucid Theorem panel, documented as largely representative of the broader U.S. population (Coppock and McClellan 2019), has been widely used in recent studies on public opinion and political violence (Armaly and Enders 2024; Armaly et al. 2022; Piazza 2024a; Piazza 2024b).

Due to the omission of certain dependent variable questions in one treatment condition (*attack without government attribution*), analyses for this study focus on a subsample of 1,616 respondents who were asked the full set of questions required to test our hypotheses. This adjustment ensures that all treatment groups included in the analyses are comparable in terms of available outcome measures, while preserving the internal validity of the experiment. As shown in the Appendix, respondents included in the analyses do not differ significantly from those excluded in terms of demographic characteristics.

To maximize accessibility, the survey was distributed in batches across different days and times, accommodating participants in various time zones. Participants provided informed consent before taking the survey and received a debriefing upon completion[3]. To address concerns about subject inattentiveness, multiple attention checks were included, and respondents who failed

[2] The registration number is #119157. An anonymous PDF copy of the preregistration is submitted along with the manuscript.

[3] Consent form, debriefing narrative, and IRB documentation available upon request.

these checks were excluded from the analysis (Westwood et al. 2022). Descriptive statistics for the sample are available in the Appendix.

Participants were presented with a fictional scenario simulating a terrorist attack attributed to a fictional armed group by government officials. To maximize emotional engagement, the experimental vignettes were designed to resemble authentic news reports, including images purportedly taken at the scene of the attack and statements from eyewitnesses. Participants were then shown a corresponding statement by the armed group based on their randomly assigned experimental condition.

Vignette Construction and Experimental Manipulations

All vignettes describe an explosion in a shopping mall in Overland Park, a suburb of Kansas City, resulting in casualties and injuries. Authorities attribute the attack to the International Resistance Movement, a fictional anti-American terrorist organization. The narrative includes details about the attack, the authorities' response, and eyewitness accounts. The full text of the vignettes appears in the first column of Figure 1.

All participants read the same fictional attack and the experiment's key manipulation is the nature of the armed group's response. While the original design included an additional treatment condition (*attack without government attribution*), this condition was excluded from the primary analyses reported here because respondents in this group were not asked questions related to their conviction in the group's involvement or their perception of government credibility. Consequently, the following four experimental conditions to which participants were randomly assigned were analyzed: *silent response* by the armed group, *denial* of responsibility by the armed group, *claim* of responsibility by the armed group, and *competing claims* of responsibility by two different groups.

Vignette Introduction	Condition	Experimental Manipulation
An explosion rocked a shopping mall yesterday in Overland Park, a suburb of Kansas City, killing eight people and wounding 20 in what officials are calling a foreign terrorist attack. Authorities say that a group called the International Resistance Movement, an anti-American terrorist organization that operates in several foreign countries, committed the attack. "We have credible evidence that the International Resistance Movement committed this bombing," said Martha Hoover of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS). Three of the victims were airlifted to a local hospital and are reported to be in critical condition. Others are reported to be in stable condition and may be released as early as tomorrow morning. The bombing occurred just before 11:00 am outside one of the main anchor stores in the mall. Police say that the explosive device used in the attack was placed inside a trash container outside of the store. It appears to have been detonated by a timer. First responders raced to the scene as shoppers helped survivors exit the building. "I had just come into the mall when I heard a loud crashing sound," said Jill McKnight, a local resident who was at the scene but avoided injuries. "Then everyone started screaming and running away. I'm still very scared." "This was clearly a terrorist attack," said Hoover. "The explosive device was sophisticated and is the type used by the International Resistance Movement," she added. Police working with DHS agents are interviewing eyewitnesses, reviewing security camera footage, and studying the explosive device used in the explosion to get more information and determine the International Resistance Movement's involvement in the explosion.	*Silent Response*	*No further manipulation*
	Denial of Responsibility	Several hours after U.S. authorities accused the group, the International Resistance Movement published a statement on a social media website to deny their involvement in the explosion. The statement read, "We are not responsible for the explosion in Kansas City. We have no information about the incident and only heard about it from the media. We reject the allegations that put the blame on our fighters. The allegations are irresponsible acts aimed at discrediting our movement."
	Claim of Responsibility	Several hours after U.S. authorities accused the group, the International Resistance Movement published a statement on a social media website to acknowledge their involvement in the explosion. The statement read, "The International Resistance Movement has struck against the United States. Our fighters managed to place explosive devices in the midst of a shopping mall in Kansas City. This strike is a warning; we do not sleep, and our movement will not quit."
	Competing Claim of Responsibility	Several hours after U.S. authorities accused the group, the International Resistance Movement published a statement on a social media website to acknowledge their involvement in the explosion. The statement read, "The International Resistance Movement has struck against the United States. Our fighters managed to place explosive devices in the midst of a shopping mall in Kansas City. This strike is a warning; we do not sleep, and our movement will not quit." The statement by the International Resistance Movement was followed by another statement published by the Liberation Brigades. "Our brave fighters carried out the recent explosion in the Kansas City shopping mall. This recent attack against the United States is a warning from the Liberation Brigades. Our attacks will continue; our movement will not back down," the Liberation Brigade's statement read.

Figure 1. Scenarios Used in Experimental Vignettes

Silent Response

The armed group remains silent and does not issue any statement regarding the attack or the government's attribution of the attack to them. This condition serves as a baseline for comparing the effects of the group's communicative actions. The participants in this condition only receive the standard vignette described above.

Denial of Responsibility

In this condition, the armed group explicitly denies responsibility for the attack, aiming to distance itself from the violence, reject allegations, and discredit the government's attribution. Participants in this condition read the standard vignette along with a denial statement issued by the group (see the third column of Figure 1 for verbatim text). As discussed earlier, we expect participants in this condition to exhibit diminished conviction in the group's involvement,

reduced trust in the government's credibility, and lower levels of outrage compared to respondents in other conditions.

Claim of Responsibility

In this condition, the armed group claims responsibility for the attack, acknowledging its involvement and framing the incident as a warning to signal its continued threat and resolve. Participants in this condition read the standard vignette along with a claiming statement issued by the group (see the third column of Figure 1). Unlike denials, claims of responsibility eliminate uncertainty about political violence by confirming the accused perpetrators' involvement. This is likely to reinforce individuals' trust in the government's attribution and amplify outrage, as the perpetrators are explicit and unequivocal about their threat and harm. Thus, this condition serves as the antithesis of the denial condition.

Competing Claims of Responsibility

In this condition, two different armed groups claim responsibility for the same attack, each issuing separate statements. Participants in this condition read the standard vignette along with claiming statements from both groups (see the third column of Figure 1).

This condition serves two purposes. First, it allows us to capture the full spectrum of possible armed group communication strategies following violent attacks (Author et al. 2024). Second, it tests whether uncertainty evoked by armed group communication alone shapes public responses, or if additional mechanisms—such as motivated reasoning, government deception, and cognitive reappraisal—play a role. Unlike a single claim of responsibility, which largely eliminates ambiguity about agency (who is responsible) and intentionality (whether the act was deliberate), competing claims introduce lingering uncertainty about responsibility. However,

unlike a denial of responsibility, which we theorize facilitates mechanisms such as motivated reasoning, government deception, cognitive reappraisal, competing claims are unlikely to evoke the same psychological and emotional effects. Therefore, we do not expect competing claims to generate the same impact as denials.

Measurement

After reading the vignette, participants were asked a series of questions aimed at measuring their emotional responses, perceptions of government credibility, and trust in the armed group's statement. To test Hypothesis 1—which posits that denial statements by armed groups reduce individuals' conviction in the group's involvement—participants were asked to assess the likelihood that the International Resistance Movement was responsible for the attack. The question asked, "How likely or unlikely is it that the International Resistance Movement is indeed responsible for the attack?". This provides a direct measure of the impact of the group's statement on perceptions of their involvement. The first dependent variable, *Group Involvement*, is coded as 1 if respondents indicated the group was very likely or somewhat likely responsible and 0 if they did not.

To test Hypothesis 2—which posits that denial statements by armed actors following government attributions reduce individuals' conviction in the government's credibility—participants assessed whether the government correctly identified the perpetrator of the attack. Participants were asked: "Do you think the government correctly identified the perpetrator of the attack?". The second dependent variable, *Government Credibility*, is coded as 1 if respondents indicated the government correctly identified the perpetrator and 0 if they did not.

To test Hypothesis 3—which posits that denial statements by armed actors reduce the outrage individuals feel in response to acts of political violence—participants selected their

emotions after reading the vignettes from a provided list (e.g., anxious, outraged, disgusted, calm, optimistic, resigned). The third dependent variable, *Outrage*, is coded as 1 if respondents reported feeling outrage and 0 if they did not.

In addition to the experimental measures, we collected demographic information—including age, gender, income, education, race, religion, and political affiliation—as well as data on participants' news consumption and social media usage. This information was gathered prior to the treatment vignettes and post-treatment questions. These variables are included as controls in our extended models. Descriptive statistics for all dependent variables, treatment variables, and control variables are presented in the Appendix.

U.S. Focus and Generalizability Abroad

We conducted our experiment in the United States for several reasons. First, the U.S. has experienced diverse forms of political violence, including mass shootings, domestic terrorism, and politically motivated attacks (Kleinfeld 2021), making it a relevant setting for studying public opinion following such events. Second, the U.S. provides a compelling case for examining public reactions to armed actors' messaging strategies. Its highly visible media landscape and increasingly polarized population create a rich context for investigating how denial statements influence public perceptions. Third, public opinion in the U.S. plays a critical role in shaping policy responses to political violence (Gershkoff and Kushner 2005; Huff and Kertzer 2018). Finally, as a global leader in counterterrorism and national security, the U.S. often shapes international policies and strategies (El Masri and Phillips 2024). Its military reach and history of foreign interventions suggest that insights from this context may inform broader patterns of public sentiment and counterterrorism responses in other countries.

Nonetheless, we recognize the importance of considering our findings' relevance beyond the U.S. context. While our results should be broadly applicable to countries with occasional political violence, they may also extend to settings experiencing higher levels of violence. First, repeated exposure to violence may not desensitize the public to messaging strategies like denials. Frequent violence often amplifies, rather than eliminates, uncertainty and skepticism about responsibility for attacks, deepening doubts about government credibility (Author and Co-author 2024). This skepticism creates fertile ground for denials to gain traction, particularly where audiences already question official narratives.

Second, denials may resonate more strongly in polarized societies shaped by prolonged violence. Groups with prior sympathies toward the denying actor—or animosities toward the government—may be especially receptive to messages that reinforce their existing beliefs. Thus, far from losing their impact in high-violence contexts, denials may thrive precisely because repeated exposure to violence fosters distrust, polarization, and psychological motivations that make audiences more receptive to narratives challenging official attributions of blame.

A second concern is that U.S. and foreign populations may differ systematically in dispositional characteristics, potentially altering their receptiveness to denial statements by armed actors. For instance, U.S. residents may be more (or less) liberal, prone to anger, hawkish, nationally chauvinistic, tolerant of political violence, or susceptible to conspiratorial thinking and populist attitudes. These factors could influence individuals' tendency to believe—or discredit—messaging strategies by governments and armed groups.

Bassan-Nygate et al. (2024)'s multi-site replication study suggests that treatment effects estimated in the U.S. are more likely to generalize to other countries when dispositional attributes exhibit low heterogeneity. This insight provides a useful framework for evaluating the

external validity of our findings[4]. To test for heterogeneous treatment effects, we interacted our denial treatment with measures of liberalism, anger disposition, hawkishness, national chauvinism, tolerance for political violence, conspiratorial thinking, and populist attitudes—all measured before the treatment vignettes. Our findings show no variation in treatment effects based on these dispositional attributes, suggesting that our results are likely generalizable beyond the U.S. context—a point we elaborate on further below.

RESULTS

We use multivariate logistic regression models to examine the effects of different statement types on public perceptions and emotions. Table 1 presents these models, analyzing the impact of denial statements by armed groups on three dependent variables: (1) individuals' belief in the group's involvement in a violent attack, (2) trust in government credibility, and (3) feelings of outrage in response to political violence. It includes naive models (1, 3, and 5) that test the effects of experimental conditions—*denial*, *claim*, and *competing claims*—without controls, and extended models (2, 4, and 6) that incorporate demographic, political, and media-related controls. Both sets of models yield evidence for the three hypotheses.

Impact on Perceptions of Involvement in Violence

The results in Models 1 and 2 provide strong evidence that denial statements significantly reduce individuals' conviction in the armed group's involvement in the attack. In the naive model (Model 1), denial is associated with a 0.857 decrease in the log-odds of believing the group was involved ($p < 0.01$). This negative relationship remains robust when controls are added in Model

[4] Bloch and McManus (2024) use a similar approach to assess the generalizability of their treatment effect.

2, where denial reduces the log-odds of perceived involvement by 0.803 ($p < 0.01$). By contrast, claims or competing claims do not produce a statistically significant change in perceived involvement.

Table 1. Logistic Regression Models of the Impact of Denial Statements

	H1: Group Involvement		H2: Government Credibility		H3: Outrage	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Experimental Condition						
Denial	-0.857***	-0.803***	-0.905***	-0.890***	-0.264*	-0.289*
	(0.264)	(0.284)	(0.162)	(0.171)	(0.142)	(0.149)
Claim	0.375	0.229	0.621***	0.597***	0.084	0.149
	(0.230)	(0.243)	(0.183)	(0.190)	(0.140)	(0.148)
Competing Claims	0.291	0.166	-0.177	-0.171	-0.025	-0.028
	(0.227)	(0.240)	(0.169)	(0.179)	(0.140)	(0.148)
Demographic Controls						
Age		0.983***		0.543***		0.404**
		(0.263)		(0.200)		(0.169)
Female		-0.022		-0.292**		0.060
		(0.178)		(0.129)		(0.107)
Income		0.078		-0.053		0.035
		(0.091)		(0.062)		(0.053)
Education		0.034		-0.141		-0.149*
		(0.141)		(0.103)		(0.085)
White		0.071		0.168		0.033
		(0.200)		(0.152)		(0.128)
Christian		-0.082		0.365***		0.283**
		(0.182)		(0.132)		(0.111)
Party Identification						
Republican-leaning		0.135		-0.042		0.147**
		(0.121)		(0.087)		(0.071)
Media Habits						
News Consumption		0.108		0.041		0.110**
		(0.067)		(0.051)		(0.043)
Social Media Usage		0.154		0.069		0.250**
		(0.197)		(0.147)		(0.122)
Time						
Duration (log)		0.344**		0.097		0.214***
		(0.148)		(0.094)		(0.076)
Constant	1.427***	-5.458***	0.893***	-1.767**	-0.034	-3.917***
	(0.172)	(1.234)	(0.121)	(0.896)	(0.099)	(0.735)
Observations	1,033	973	1,351	1,269	1,616	1,520
Akaike Inf. Crit.	953.227	883.481	1,624.601	1,513.623	2,238.771	2,070.268

*Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01*

Substantively, these coefficients indicate that denial statements produce a substantial decrease in the likelihood that respondents attribute responsibility to the group. Figure 2 (left panel) visualizes the predicted probabilities of attributing blame under different experimental conditions, highlighting a sharp drop in perceived involvement following denial statements, compared to the probabilities observed under the control condition, claims or competing claims. In the naive model (Model 1), the predicted probability of attributing responsibility to the group is approximately 80.6% in the control condition (e.g., Silent Response). However, when a denial statement is issued, this probability drops to 63.9%—a 16.7 percentage-point decrease. This effect persists even after accounting for demographic, political, and media-related controls in Model 2. These findings align with the hypothesized relationship (H1), demonstrating that denial statements can serve as a strategic tool for armed groups to cast doubt on their culpability.

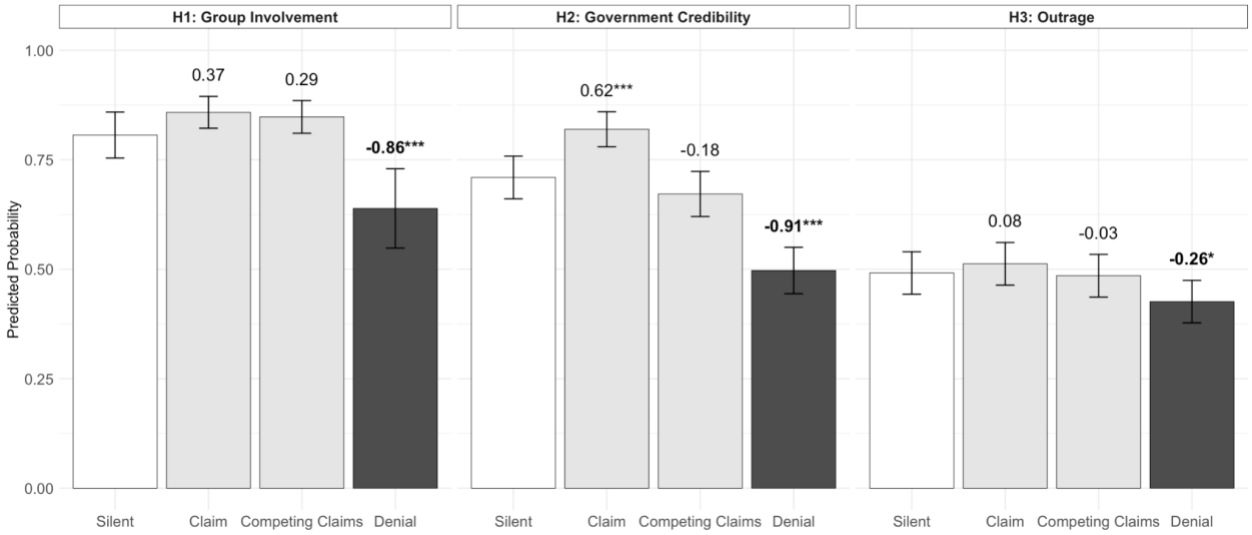

Figure 2. Effect of Denials on Public Perceptions and Emotion.
Note: Predictions are based on naive models without controls. Estimated coefficients for experimental conditions are included above error bars.

Impact on Perceptions of Government Credibility

The results in Models 3 and 4 provide strong evidence that denial statements significantly undermine individuals' confidence in government credibility. In the naive model (Model 3), denial is associated with a 0.905 decrease in the log-odds of believing the government's attribution of blame ($p < 0.01$). This negative relationship remains robust after accounting for controls in Model 4, where denial reduces the log-odds of perceived government credibility by 0.890 ($p < 0.01$). By contrast, claiming responsibility increases perceived credibility (0.621, $p < 0.01$ in Model 3; 0.597, $p < 0.01$ in Model 4), reinforcing that claims bolster government credibility, while denials erode it, while competing claims fail to produce statistically significant effects.

Substantively, these coefficients indicate that denial statements create considerable doubt about the government's reliability as a source of information regarding violent events. Figure 2 (middle panel) visualizes the predicted probabilities of trusting government credibility under different experimental conditions. In the naive model (Model 3), the predicted probability of trusting government credibility is approximately 71% in the control condition (e.g., Silent Response). However, when a denial statement is issued, this probability drops to 50%—a 21 percentage-point decrease. These findings align with the hypothesized relationship (H2), demonstrating that denial statements can serve as a strategic tool for armed groups to cast doubt on official attributions and erode trust in government credibility.

Impact on Public Outrage

The results in Models 5 and 6 provide some evidence that denial statements may reduce the levels of public outrage individuals feel in response to acts of political violence, although the

effects are more modest and statistically weaker compared to other outcomes. In the naive model (Model 5), denial is associated with a 0.264 decrease in the log-odds of expressing outrage, but this effect is only significant at the 90% confidence level. Similarly, in the extended model (Model 6), denial statements are associated with a 0.289 decrease in the log-odds of outrage, again reaching significance at the 90% confidence level. Neither claiming responsibility nor competing claims produce statistically significant effects on public outrage in either model.

Substantively, these coefficients suggest that while denial statements may help dampen emotional reactions to violent incidents, the effects are smaller and less conclusive than those observed for perceptions of involvement or government credibility. Figure 2 (right panel) visualizes the predicted probabilities of public outrage under different experimental conditions, illustrating a slight reduction in emotional intensity following denials. In the naive model (Model 5), the predicted probability of experiencing high levels of outrage is approximately 49% in the control condition (e.g., Silent Response). When a denial statement is issued, this probability decreases to 43%—a 6 percentage-point decrease.

These findings partially align with the hypothesized relationship (H3), suggesting that denial statements can serve as a potential tool for armed groups to mitigate public outrage, albeit with more limited effectiveness compared to their influence on perceptions of involvement and government credibility.

Heterogeneous Treatment Effects?

In addition to evaluating the main effects of denial statements, we examined whether these effects varied across different dispositional and attitudinal characteristics. As discussed in the research design, we tested for heterogeneous treatment effects by interacting the denial treatment with measures of liberalism, anger proneness, hawkishness, national chauvinism, tolerance for

political violence, conspiratorial thinking, and populist attitudes. These characteristics capture individual differences that could plausibly shape how respondents process denial statements and interpret the associated narratives. The questions asked to measure these traits are included in the Appendix.

The results, presented in the Appendix, reveal no evidence of significant heterogeneity in the effects of denials across any of the three dependent variables—*group involvement, government credibility,* and *public outrage*. This pattern suggests that the influence of denial statements is broadly uniform across ideological, emotional, and psychological profiles. Individuals with varying predispositions—whether more skeptical of government authority or more predisposed to anger—respond similarly to denial statements, reinforcing the robustness of the findings.

This uniformity also highlights the broad psychological appeal of denial statements. By introducing uncertainty and fostering narrative competition, denials appear to tap into universal cognitive processes—such as motivated reasoning, cognitive dissonance reduction, and emotional regulation—that transcend cultural or political boundaries.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The results of this study provide important insights into the strategic communication efforts of armed groups and their capacity to shape public opinion, emotions, and trust in government authority. By analyzing the effectiveness of denial statements, we advance understanding of how non-violent rhetorical tools complement violent actions to achieve broader strategic objectives.

The findings challenge prevailing scholarly views that focus solely on violence as costly signaling. Instead, they highlight denial statements as a strategic departure from conventional assumptions about militant communication. Rather than being dismissed as cheap talk, denials

should perhaps be treated as deliberate tools for narrative manipulation that exploit uncertainty and weaken the credibility of official accounts. These findings emphasize that armed groups can influence public perceptions not only through displays of strength but also through symbolic and rhetorical acts that reshape interpretations of violence.

The study also demonstrates that denial statements have psychological effects beyond rational assessments of blame—such as dampening public outrage. Although the effects on emotions are weaker and less consistent than those on perceptions, they underscore the emotional dimension of strategic communication. Armed groups can subtly temper emotional responses to violence, potentially weakening public support for retaliatory policies or counterterrorism measures (Wayne 2023). The absence of heterogeneous treatment effects reinforces the broad applicability of these findings. Regardless of ideology, emotional predispositions, or political attitudes, denial statements appear to activate universal psychological mechanisms, making their effects consistent across diverse audiences.

This study opens several avenues for further exploration. First, cross-national studies could test whether denial strategies resonate differently in contexts characterized by high political violence and media restrictions. Second, future research could investigate the long-term effects of denials, examining whether perceptions and emotions shift over time or persist as narratives evolve. Third, research could explore how media environments—including social media platforms—facilitate or constrain the spread and credibility of denial statements. Finally, field experiments could assess the effectiveness of counter-messaging interventions, testing governmental strategies designed to mitigate misinformation and bolster institutional trust.

Beyond academic debates, these results carry important policy implications. They highlight the complexities of information wars and the strategic calculations involved in

portraying innocence. Governments facing denial strategies must carefully balance transparency and credibility to avoid amplifying competing narratives. Strategies emphasizing fact-checking, rapid attribution, and communication consistency may be crucial to counteracting misinformation while maintaining public trust.

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“We Have Nothing to Do With It”: How Statements of Denial by Armed Actors Shape Public Perceptions and Emotions

Appendices

Appendix 1. Descriptive Statistics

Table A1 presents descriptive statistics for all variables included in the analysis, including their scales, means, standard deviations, and ranges. The sample consists of 1,616 respondents, with minor variations in observations for specific variables due to missing data.

Table A1. Descriptive Statistics

Variable	N	Mean	SD	Median	Min	Max
Dependent Variables						
Group Involvement	1033	0.821	0.384	1.000	0.000	1.000
Government Credibility	1351	0.676	0.468	1.000	0.000	1.000
Outrage	1616	0.479	0.500	0.000	0.000	1.000
Experimental Conditions						
Denial	1616	0.247	0.431	0.000	0.000	1.000
Claim	1616	0.250	0.433	0.000	0.000	1.000
Competing Claims	1616	0.250	0.433	0.000	0.000	1.000
Demographics						
Age	1616	47.058	16.941	46.000	18.000	92.000
Gender	1616	1.530	0.499	2.000	1.000	2.000
Income	1566	1.953	1.071	2.000	1.000	4.000
Education Level	1603	1.885	0.686	2.000	1.000	3.000
White	1616	0.731	0.444	1.000	0.000	1.000
Christian	1616	0.624	0.485	1.000	0.000	1.000
Political Party	1579	1.904	0.764	2.000	1.000	3.000
Media Consumption						
News Consumption	1616	4.476	1.385	5.000	1.000	6.000
Social Media Use	1616	0.377	0.485	0.000	0.000	1.000
Duration (log)	1616	6.788	0.720	6.713	5.043	13.434
Dispositional Traits						
Liberalism	1616	3.920	1.707	4.000	1.000	7.000
Disposition for Anger	1616	0.000	0.950	-0.050	-1.531	2.468
Hawkishness	1616	3.063	1.217	3.000	1.000	5.000
National Chauvinism	1616	2.728	0.816	3.000	1.000	4.000
Tolerance for Violence	677	0.382	0.813	0.240	-0.881	2.425
Conspiratorial Thinking	1616	-0.008	0.896	0.110	-2.265	1.259
Populism	1616	0.001	0.896	0.073	-2.564	1.634

Dependent Variables:

- Group Involvement (0–1): Measures perceived involvement of the armed group in the attack, with 0 indicating no involvement and 1 indicating involvement (M = 0.821, SD = 0.384).
- Government Credibility (0–1): Evaluates trust in government statements about the attack, where 0 denotes no trust and 1 denotes trust in government (M = 0.676, SD = 0.468).
- Outrage (0–1): Captures emotional outrage in response to the attack, with 0 reflecting no outrage and 1 reflecting the feeling of outrage (M = 0.479, SD = 0.500).

Experimental Conditions (Each condition was randomly assigned, and their means reflect a balanced distribution across treatment groups.):

- Denial (0–1): Indicates whether respondents were exposed to a denial statement (1 = denial, 0 = no denial) (M = 0.247, SD = 0.431).
- Claim (0–1): Indicates whether respondents were exposed to a claim statement (1 = claim, 0 = no claim) (M = 0.250, SD = 0.433).
- Competing Claims (0–1): Indicates whether respondents were exposed to a statement containing competing claims by two groups (1 = competing claims, 0 = no competing claims) (M = 0.250, SD = 0.433).

Demographic Variables:

- Age (18–92): Measured in years (M = 47.058, SD = 16.941).
- Gender (1–2): Coded as 1 = Male, 2 = Female
- Income (1–4): Measured in 4 categories, with 1 representing the lowest income group and 4 representing the highest (M = 1.953, SD = 1.071).
- Education Level (1–3): Coded as 1 = High School or Less, 2 = Some College, 3 = College Degree or Higher (M = 1.885, SD = 0.686).
- White (0–1): Dummy variable coded as 1 for White and 0 for non-White (M = 0.731, SD = 0.444).
- Christian (0–1): Dummy variable coded as 1 for Christian and 0 for non-Christian (M = 0.624, SD = 0.485).
- Political Party (1–3): Coded as 1 = Democrat, 2 = Independent, 3 = Republican (M = 1.904, SD = 0.764).

Media Consumption:

- News Consumption (1–6): Measures frequency of news consumption, where 1 represents never and 6 represents daily (M = 4.476, SD = 1.385).
- Social Media (0–1): Coded as 1 for social media users and 0 for non-users (M = 0.377, SD = 0.485).
- Duration (log) (5.043–13.434): Log-transformed response time (M = 6.788, SD = 0.720).

Dispositional Traits (Questions asked to measure these dispositional traits are included in Appendix 6.):

- Liberalism (1–7): Measures liberal ideology, where 1 = Very Conservative and 7 = Very Liberal (M = 3.920, SD = 1.707).
- Disposition for Anger (-1.531–2.468): Composite measure of anger disposition generated via factor analysis (M = 0.000, SD = 0.950).
- Hawkishness (1–5): Assesses hawkish attitudes, with 1 = Low and 5 = High (M = 3.063, SD = 1.217).
- National Chauvinism (1–4): Measures nationalistic attitudes, with 1 indicating low chauvinism and 4 indicating high chauvinism (M = 2.728, SD = 0.816).
- Tolerance for Political Violence (-0.881–2.425): Composite measure of tolerance for political violence generated via factor analysis (M = 0.382, SD = 0.813).
- Conspiratorial Thinking (-2.265–1.259): Composite measure of conspiratorial beliefs generated via factor analysis (M = -0.008, SD = 0.896).
- Populism (-2.564–1.634): Composite measure of populist beliefs generated via factor analysis (M = 0.001, SD = 0.896).

Appendix 2. Responses to Outcome Questions

H1: Group Involvement	*Percent of respondents*				
Question	Very unlikely	Somewhat unlikely	Somewhat likely	Very likely	Somewhat or very likely
How likely or unlikely is it that the International Resistance Movement is indeed responsible for the attack described in the news story you read?	4.81%	14.06%	49.67%	31.45	81.12%

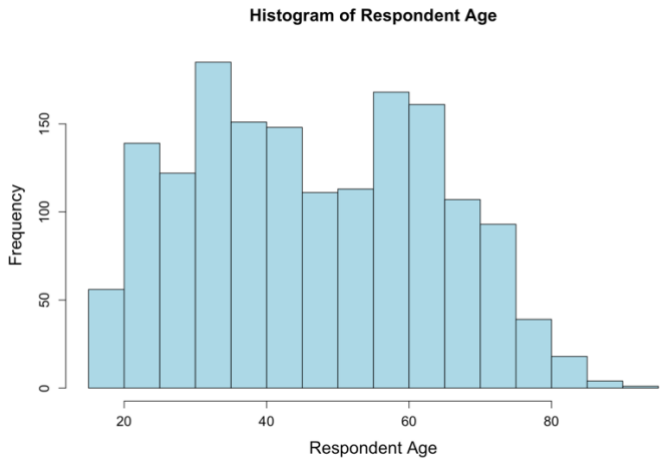
H2: Government Credibility	*Percent of respondents*	
Question	No	Yes
Do you think the government correctly identified the perpetrator of the attack described in the news story you read?	32.55%	67.45%

H3: Outrage	*Percent of respondents*	
Question	No	Yes
Which of the following emotions do you feel about the threat posed by terrorist attacks? Pick as many or as few as you like: Outrage.	52.1%	47.9%

Appendix 3. Sample Characteristics and National Representativeness

Age

Respondents' ages ranged from 18 to 92 years with a median age of 46 years. The distribution of age is approximately uniform across the sample, with a slight concentration of participants in their 30s, 40s, and 50s. Younger respondents (under 30) and older respondents (over 70) are less represented in the sample.



Ethnicity

The sample reflects ethnic diversity, with the majority identifying as White (73.1%), followed by Black or African American (10.8%) and other racial or ethnic categories. Specifically:

White: 73.1% (n = 1181)
Black or African American: 10.8% (n = 175)
American Indian or Alaska Native: 1.4% (n = 23)
Asian: 2.7% in total, distributed as:
- Asian Indian: 0.7% (n = 12)
- Chinese: 0.9% (n = 14)
- Filipino: 0.4% (n = 7)
- Japanese: 0.7% (n = 11)
- Korean: 0.3% (n = 4)
- Vietnamese: 0.2% (n = 3)
- Other Asian: 1.2% (n = 20)

Pacific Islanders: 0.2%, including:
- Native Hawaiian: 0.1% (n = 2)
- Other Pacific Islander: 0.1% (n = 1)

Some Other Race: 9.2% (n = 149)
Prefer not to answer: 0.9% (n = 14)

Religion
Protestant Christian: 25.2% (n = 407)
Catholic: 22.5% (n = 363)
Mormon: 0.8% (n = 13)
Jewish: 2.2% (n = 36)
Muslim: 1.2% (n = 20)
Hindu: 0.4% (n = 6)
Buddhist: 0.9% (n = 15)
Eastern Orthodox: 0.6% (n = 9)
Other Christian: 13.4% (n = 216)
Other non-Christian: 0.2% (n = 4)
Religious or spiritual but not affiliated with an organized religion: 6.1% (n = 98)
None or no-religion: 3.9% (n = 63)
Agnostic: 18.1% (n = 292)
Other: 4.6% (n = 74)

Political Affiliation
The sample includes a balanced representation across the Democratic, Republican, and Independent categories. Specifically:

Democrats:
Strong Democrat: 23.1% (n = 374)
Not very strong Democrat: 17.1% (n = 277)
Independent leaning Democrat: 10.5% (n = 170)
Other - leaning Democrat: 1.2% (n = 19)

Independents:
Independent - neither: 14.6% (n = 236)
Other - neither: 7.2% (n = 116)

Republicans:
Independent leaning Republican: 8.3% (n = 134)
Not very strong Republican: 7.1% (n = 115)
Strong Republican: 17.1% (n = 277)
Other - leaning Republican: 2.3% (n = 37)

Compared to national surveys, the sample shows a balanced partisan split but may slightly overrepresent Independents (22%) and weak party identifiers relative to the general U.S. adult population.

Income

Low-income households:
Less than $14,999: 15.6% (n = 250)
$15,000–$24,999: 9.6% (n = 146)
$25,000–$34,999: 11.0% (n = 177)

Middle-income households:
$35,000–$74,999: 25.6% (n = 410)
$75,000–$99,999: 14.7% (n = 231)

High-income households:
$100,000–$149,999: 9.6% (n = 159)
$150,000 and above: 4.8% (n = 77)
Prefer not to answer: 7.8% (n = 125).

Education Level

High school or less:
Some high school or less: 3.1% (n = 50)
High school graduate: 24.0% (n = 384)

Post-secondary education:
Vocational training: 2.8% (n = 45)
Some college, no degree: 20.8% (n = 332)
Associate's degree: 8.5% (n = 136)

College degrees:
Bachelor's degree: 22.6% (n = 361)
Master's or professional degree: 9.7% (n = 155)
Doctorate degree: 8.8% (n = 140)
Prefer not to answer: 0.8% (n = 13).

Appendix 4. Included vs. Excluded Subjects

The survey experiment was conducted in January 2023 on a national sample of 2,016 U.S. adults recruited through the Lucid Theorem online panel. Due to the omission of certain dependent variable questions in one treatment condition (attack without government attribution), analyses for this study focus on a subsample of 1,616 respondents who were asked the full set of questions required to test our hypotheses.

As shown in Table A2, respondents included in the analyses do not differ significantly from those excluded in terms of demographic characteristics.

Table A2: Comparison of Included and Excluded Subjects in Terms of Demographics

	Mean (Excluded Subjects)	Mean (Included Subjects)	t.test (p-value)
Age	46.702500	47.0575495	0.7030117
Female	0.517500	0.5297030	0.6623223
Income	8.354005	8.6787995	0.3924928
Education	4.618090	4.5739239	0.7000897
White	0.720000	0.7308168	0.6659261
Christian	0.607500	0.6237624	0.5509688
Republican-leaning	1.943590	1.9037365	0.3647412
News consumption	4.535000	4.4764851	0.4389027
Social media use	0.397500	0.3774752	0.4636665

Appendix 5. Discussion of Findings Regarding Control Variables

In models with *Group Involvement* as the dependent variable, the only demographic trait that is found to be a significant predictor is the respondent's age. Older respondents are more likely to believe in the group's involvement, as indicated by the positive and significant coefficient for age. Gender, represented by the female variable, shows a slightly negative but not significant effect. Income and education both show positive effects, but neither is significant. Similarly, being White has a small positive effect that is not significant. The coefficient for being Christian is negative but not significant. Lastly, leaning Republican has a small positive effect, but it is not significant, indicating that political affiliation does not strongly influence the respondent's conviction in the group's involvement in the attack.

In terms of the belief in the *Credibility of the Government's* attribution of responsibility to the armed group, age again shows a significant positive effect. Older respondents are more likely to trust the government's credibility. Gender plays a notable role here, with the coefficient for being female being negative and significant, suggesting that women are less likely to believe in the government's credibility. Christian has a positive and significant effect as well, indicating that Christians are more likely to trust the government's attribution of responsibility Income and education show small negative effects, but they are not significant. Being White has a positive but not significant effect, suggesting it does not strongly influence beliefs in government credibility.

Finally, in the *Outrage* models, age once again shows a significant positive effect. Older respondents are more likely to feel outrage. Education has a negative and significant effect, indicating that higher education levels decrease the likelihood of experiencing outrage. The coefficient for being Christian is positive and significant, indicating that Christians are more likely to feel outrage. Finally, leaning Republican has a positive and significant effect, suggesting that political affiliation influences feelings of outrage. Moreover, media consumption habits, including overall news consumption and social media use, have positive and significant effects on the respondent's emotional state following being exposed to fictional news about political violence.

Appendix 6. Survey Questions Measuring Dispositional Traits

Liberalism

	Percentage of respondents:						
	Extremely conservative	Conservative	Slightly conservative	Moderate	Slightly liberal	Liberal	Extremely liberal
In general, do you think of yourself as:	9.9	14.11	10.09	35.77	8.66	13.12	8.35

Anger Proneness

	Percentage of respondents:				
	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
Q1: In the past seven days, I was irritated more than people know.	16.83	27.85	34.1	14.67	6.56
Q2: In the past seven days, I felt angry.	21.35	30.38	31.99	12.75	3.53
Q3: In the past seven days, I felt like I was ready to explode.	45.36	24.2	17.2	8.54	4.7
Q4: In the past seven days, I was grouchy.	19.86	27.6	34.41	13.8	4.33
Q5: In the past seven days, I was annoyed.	11.51	23.89	38.99	20.17	5.45

Hawkishness

	Percentage of respondents:				
	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
The best way to ensure world peace is through American military strength.	12.87	18.56	31.81	22.9	13.86

Tolerance for Political Violence

	Percentage of respondents:			
	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
It is acceptable to use violence in advancing political goals these days.	60.4	24.44	10.33	4.83
Violence is sometimes an acceptable way for Americans to express their disagreement with the government.	50.19	27.78	16.09	5.94
Violence is justified if the members of the other side act violently first.	25.56	29.95	33.17	11.32
Using violence to achieve your political goals is never acceptable.	6.56	11.39	23.95	58.11

National Chauvinism

	Percentage of respondents:			
	Not at all superior	Not so superior	Very superior	Vastly superior
How superior is the United States compared to other nations?	5.2	34.96	41.65	18.19

Conspiratorial Thinking

	Percentage of respondents:			
	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
Unseen patterns and secret activities can be found everywhere in politics.	7.74	13.12	46.84	32.3
Much of our lives are being controlled by plots hatched in secret places.	18.63	26.3	38.12	16.96
Even though we live in a democracy, a few people will always run things anyway.	4.83	16.21	51.98	26.98
The people who really “run” the country, are not known to the voters.	11.2	23.95	39.11	25.74

Populist Attitudes

	Percentage of respondents:			
	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
People like me don't have much say in what government does.	7.74	22.28	42.08	27.91
Politics usually boils down to a struggle between the people and the powerful.	3.96	15.16	51.79	29.08
The system is stacked against people like me.	10.95	27.78	38.61	22.65
It doesn't really matter who you vote for because the rich control both political parties.	9.84	24.2	41.09	24.88
People at the top usually get there from some unfair advantage.	5.63	25	43.69	25.68
I'd rather put my trust in the wisdom of ordinary people than the opinions of experts and intellectuals.	12.5	33.04	38.24	16.21
When it comes to really important questions, scientific facts don't help very much.	26.36	37.07	26.79	9.78
Politics is ultimately a struggle between good and evil.	10.4	24.5	42.02	23.08

Appendix 7. Heterogeneous Treatment Effects of Denials on Public Perceptions of Involvement in Political Violence

To examine the potential for heterogeneous treatment effects of denials on individuals' perceptions of a group's involvement in violent attacks, we interacted our denials treatment with measures of dispositional attributes: liberalism, proneness to anger, hawkishness, national chauvinism, tolerance for political violence, conspiratorial thinking, and populist attitudes.

As shown in Table A3, several of these dispositional traits have independently significant effects on perceptions of the group's involvement. For instance, hawkishness and chauvinism increase the probability that individuals will attribute blame to the armed group accused by the government of perpetrating the attacks. However, more importantly for our purposes, none of the interaction variables yield statistically significant results, providing evidence against the possibility of heterogeneous treatment effects.

Table A3. Interaction of Denials with Dispositional Traits, Hypothesis 1

	Dependent variable: Group Involvement						
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
Denial	-0.749	-0.858***	-1.600**	-0.448	-0.738*	-0.855***	-0.867***
	(0.618)	(0.267)	(0.667)	(0.775)	(0.385)	(0.265)	(0.266)
Liberalism	-0.083						
	(0.052)						
Denial × Liberalism	-0.023						
	(0.134)						
Disposition for Anger		-0.162*					
		(0.093)					
Denial × Anger		0.048					
		(0.223)					
Hawkishness			0.127*				
			(0.074)				
Denial × Hawkishness			0.209				
			(0.187)				
National Chauvinism				0.258**			
				(0.113)			
Denial × Chauvinism				-0.153			
				(0.258)			
Tolerance for Violence					-0.097		
					(0.153)		
Denial × Violence					0.349		
					(0.336)		
Conspiratorial Thinking						0.130	
						(0.096)	
Denial × Conspiratorial						0.111	
						(0.271)	
Populism							0.026
							(0.101)
Denial × Populism							0.047
							(0.254)
Claim	0.366	0.353	0.395*	0.393*	0.559*	0.390*	0.375
	(0.230)	(0.231)	(0.231)	(0.231)	(0.326)	(0.230)	(0.230)
Competing Claims	0.296	0.282	0.309	0.298	0.522*	0.301	0.291
	(0.227)	(0.227)	(0.227)	(0.227)	(0.304)	(0.227)	(0.227)
Constant	1.760***	1.447***	1.036***	0.719**	1.050***	1.421***	1.427***
	(0.273)	(0.173)	(0.283)	(0.349)	(0.230)	(0.172)	(0.172)
Observations	1,033	1,033	1,033	1,033	442	1,033	1,033
Akaike Inf. Crit.	953.928	953.871	950.295	951.764	467.751	954.517	957.058
Note:							*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Appendix 8. Heterogeneous Treatment Effects of Denials on Public Perceptions of Government Credibility

To examine the potential for heterogeneous treatment effects of denials on individuals' perceptions of government's credibility, we interacted our denials treatment with measures of dispositional attributes: liberalism, proneness to anger, hawkishness, national chauvinism, tolerance for political violence, conspiratorial thinking, and populist attitudes.

As shown in Table A4, several of these dispositional traits have independently significant effects on perceptions of government credibility. For instance, hawkishness and chauvinism increase the trust in the credibility of government's attribution of blame to the armed group, whereas conspiratorial thinking decreases perceptions of government credibility. However, more importantly for our purposes, none of the interaction variables yield statistically significant results, providing evidence against the possibility of heterogeneous treatment effects.

Table A4. Interaction of Denials with Dispositional Traits, Hypothesis 2

	Dependent variable: Government Credibility						
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
Denial	-0.609*	-0.902***	-1.707***	-0.764	-0.614**	-0.928***	-0.910***
	(0.345)	(0.162)	(0.373)	(0.470)	(0.287)	(0.163)	(0.163)
Liberalism	-0.058						
	(0.041)						
Denial × Liberalism	-0.077						
	(0.078)						
Disposition for Anger		-0.106					
		(0.077)					
Denial × Anger		0.035					
		(0.146)					
Hawkishness			0.139**				
			(0.059)				
Denial × Hawkishness			0.254**				
			(0.109)				
National Chauvinism				0.505***			
				(0.093)			
Denial × Chauvinism				-0.052			
				(0.165)			
Tolerance for Violence					0.180		
					(0.138)		
Denial × Violence					-0.285		
					(0.276)		
Conspiratorial Thinking						-0.137*	
						(0.081)	
Denial × Conspiratorial						0.031	
						(0.149)	
Populism							-0.106
							(0.081)
Denial × Populism							0.071
							(0.145)
Claim	0.620***	0.625***	0.638***	0.668***	0.326	0.608***	0.623***
	(0.183)	(0.183)	(0.184)	(0.186)	(0.291)	(0.184)	(0.183)
Competing Claims	-0.172	-0.173	-0.171	-0.180	-0.366	-0.189	-0.172
	(0.170)	(0.170)	(0.170)	(0.172)	(0.262)	(0.170)	(0.170)
Constant	1.121***	0.887***	0.476**	-0.463*	0.848***	0.908***	0.894***
	(0.203)	(0.121)	(0.213)	(0.274)	(0.199)	(0.121)	(0.121)
Observations	1,351	1,351	1,351	1,351	520	1,351	1,351
Akaike Inf. Crit.	1,622.403	1,626.385	1,603.537	1,586.506	658.337	1,624.987	1,626.815

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Appendix 9. Heterogeneous Treatment Effects of Denials on Public Outrage

To examine the potential for heterogeneous treatment effects of denials on public outrage, we interacted our denials treatment with measures of dispositional attributes: liberalism, proneness to anger, hawkishness, national chauvinism, tolerance for political violence, conspiratorial thinking, and populist attitudes.

As shown in Table A5, several of these dispositional traits have independently significant effects on individuals' outrage. For instance, disposition for anger, hawkishness, chauvinism, conspiratorial thinking, and populist attitudes increase the probability that individuals will feel outrage following acts of political violence. However, more importantly for our purposes, none of the interaction variables yield statistically significant results, providing evidence against the possibility of heterogeneous treatment effects.

Table A5. Interaction of Denials with Dispositional Traits, Hypothesis 3

	Dependent variable: Outrage						
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
Denial	-0.605*	-0.264*	-0.637*	0.003	-0.159	-0.241*	-0.250*
	(0.309)	(0.142)	(0.336)	(0.415)	(0.242)	(0.142)	(0.142)
Liberalism	-0.109***						
	(0.034)						
Denial × Liberalism	0.088						
	(0.070)						
Disposition for Anger		0.106*					
		(0.060)					
Denial × Anger		-0.127					
		(0.125)					
Hawkishness			0.125***				
			(0.048)				
Denial × Hawkishness			0.114				
			(0.096)				
National Chauvinism				0.351***			
				(0.073)			
Denial × Chauvinism				-0.096			
				(0.143)			
Tolerance for Violence					0.021		
					(0.108)		
Denial × Violence					-0.231		
					(0.241)		
Conspiratorial Thinking						0.221***	
						(0.065)	
Denial × Conspiratorial						-0.025	
						(0.134)	
Populism							0.264***
							(0.066)
Denial × Populism							-0.140
							(0.129)
Claim	0.078	0.087	0.091	0.092	0.105	0.105	0.090
	(0.141)	(0.141)	(0.141)	(0.142)	(0.224)	(0.141)	(0.141)
Competing Claims	-0.014	-0.029	-0.024	-0.047	0.095	-0.009	-0.033
	(0.141)	(0.141)	(0.141)	(0.142)	(0.210)	(0.141)	(0.141)
Constant	0.390**	-0.033	-0.417**	-0.991***	-0.301*	-0.049	-0.040
	(0.164)	(0.099)	(0.177)	(0.222)	(0.156)	(0.099)	(0.100)
Observations							
Akaike Inf. Crit.	1,616	1,616	1,616	1,616	677	1,616	1,616
Note:							*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01