



Art of Death: Can Religious Artwork Manage Existential Concerns of COVID-19?



Kate Bushnell, Jee Eun “Jenny” Park, Erin Zimmerman,
Megan E. Edwards, Madhwa Galgali, Peter J. Helm, & Jamie Arndt
University of Missouri, Columbia

INTRODUCTION

Humans have a biological desire to survive, and an inherent awareness of their mortality. This discrepancy perpetuates the potential for death-related anxiety, a concern that has likely been heightened during the COVID-19 era. The Terror Management Theory proposes that cultural belief systems alleviate existential insecurity and, historically, many forms of art have represented cultural beliefs.¹

When mortality is salient (due to COVID-19), people may

1. **increase** reliance on their cultural belief systems, and thus be more favorable to culturally supportive art.
2. **decrease** openness towards other beliefs

PRESENT STUDY

Guiding Research Question: Can religious themed artwork help manage existential concerns elicited by the COVID-19 pandemic?

Specific Research Questions:

- a) **Death Thought Accessibility (DTA):** Will threatening COVID-19 headlines increase how much participants think about death (DTA)?
- b) **Liking:** Will Christians rate Christian paintings more positively than Hindu paintings after reading threatening COVID-19 headlines compared to benign headlines? Will Atheists rate both Christian and Hindu paintings poorly regardless of reading threatening (vs. nonthreatening headlines)?
- c) **Openness:** How will reading threatening COVID-19 headlines affect openness to experiences among Christians and Atheists after viewing worldview affirming/non-worldview affirming artwork?

PILOT: METHODS AND RESULTS

Pilot Study - October 2020

Participants: $N = 175$, Mturkers; M age = 43.70, $SD = 13.43$; 91 (51.7%) women

Procedure: Participants assessed 30 Hindu & 30 Christian paintings

Assessment Categories (scale 1-7):

- Liking
- Reflecting Christian/Hindu values
- Familiarity
- Conveying positivity/negativity

Results:

- Paintings were matched based on liking ratings
- 4 Christian paintings and 4 Hindu paintings were selected for the main study

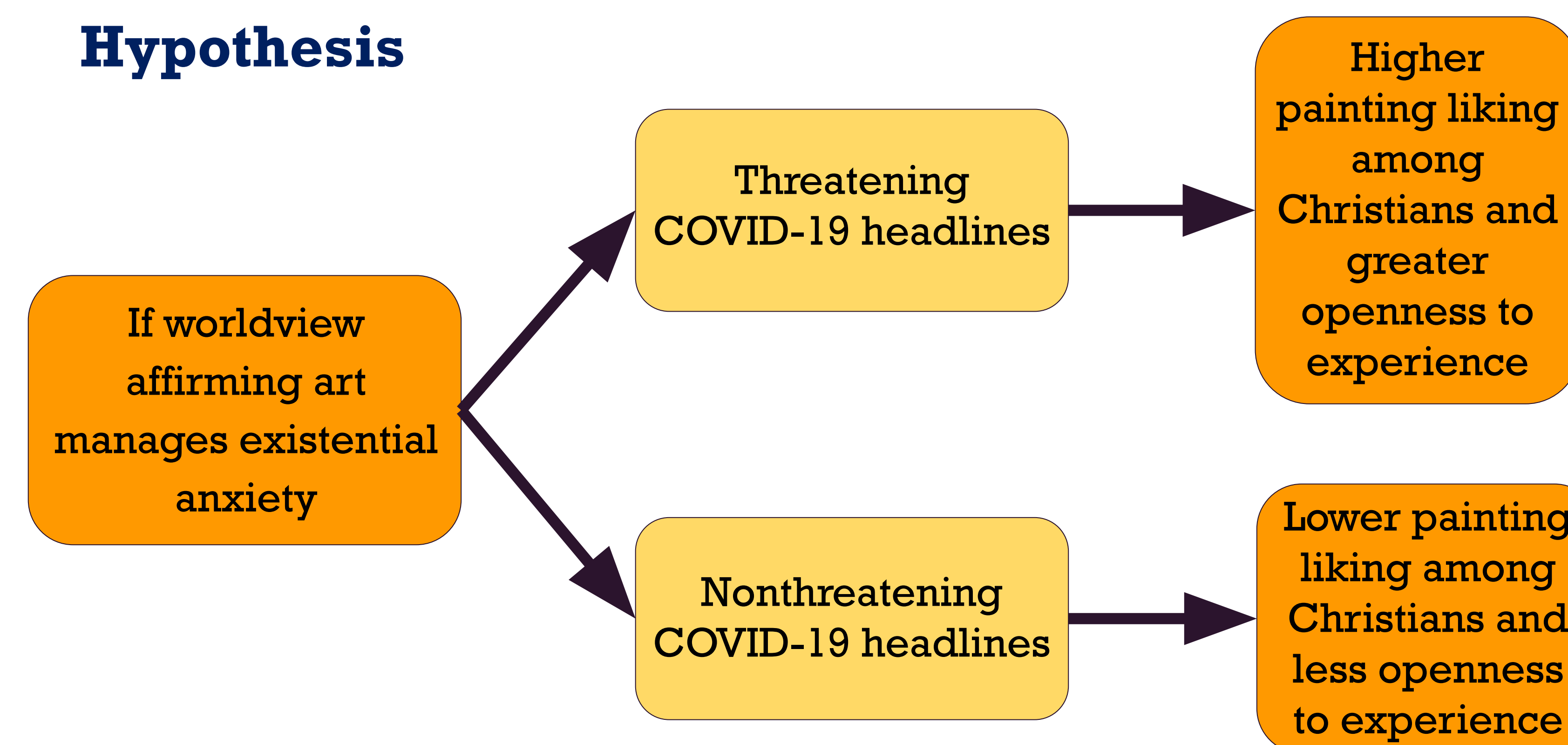


METHODS

Main Study - November 2020

- Participants** ($N = 390$, Mturkers): M age = 40.91, $SD = 12.73$; 220 (56.4%) women
- Viewed threatening or nonthreatening COVID-19 headlines
 - Threatening example: *COVID-19 death toll reaches an all-time high of over 200,000 in U.S.*
 - Nonthreatening example: *Only 0.07% of the US population has contracted COVID-19.*
 - Completed measure of DTA³
 - Rated liking of 4 Hindu and 4 Christian paintings from pilot study
 - Completed openness to artistic interests/aesthetic appreciation scale⁴

Hypothesis

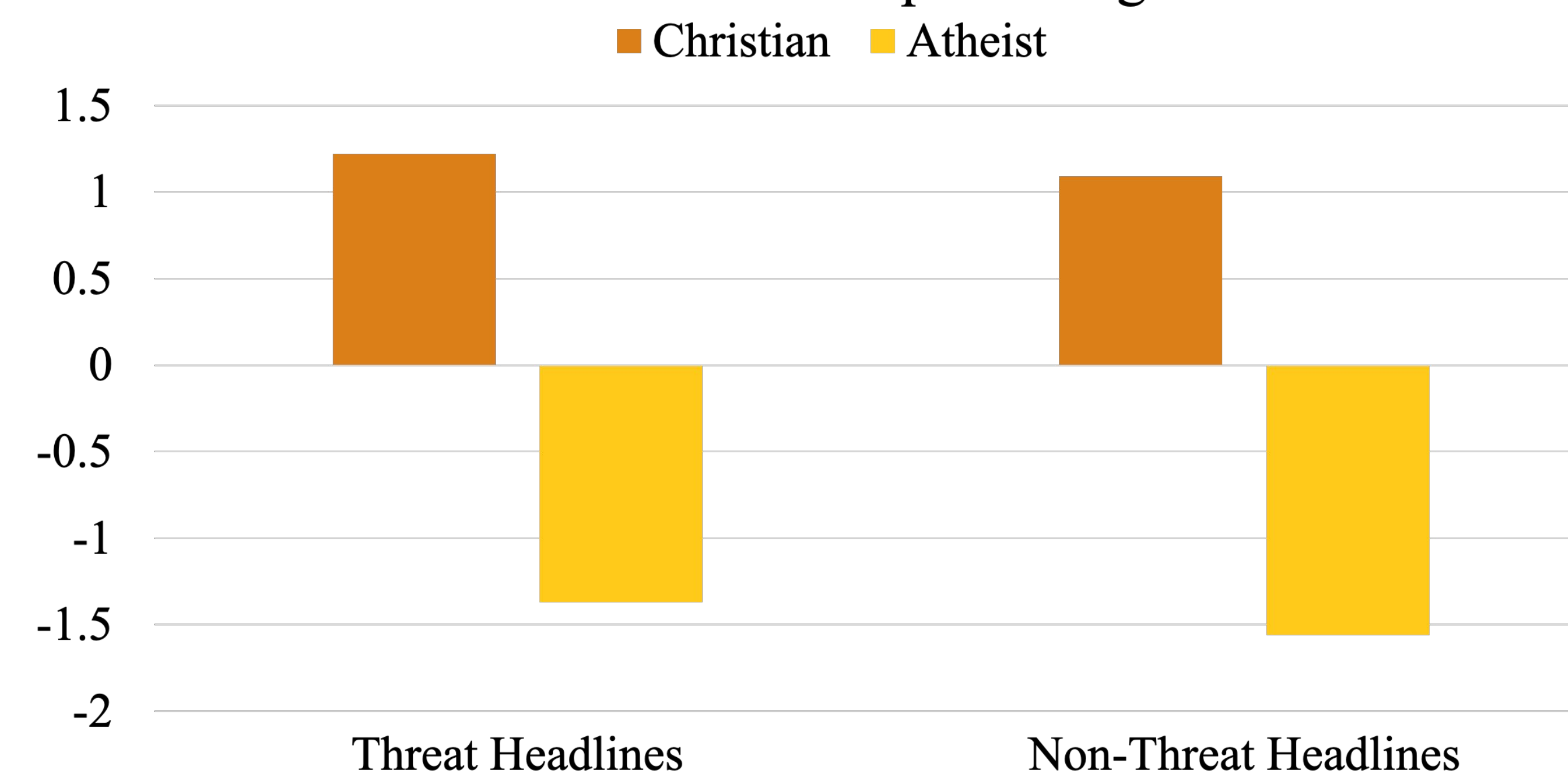


RESULTS

Only a slight difference in DTA by COVID-19 manipulation:

- Threatening Headline: $M = 1.51$ (.92)
- Non-Threatening Headlines: $M = 1.35$ (.92)
- $F(1,388) = 2.77$, $p = .097$

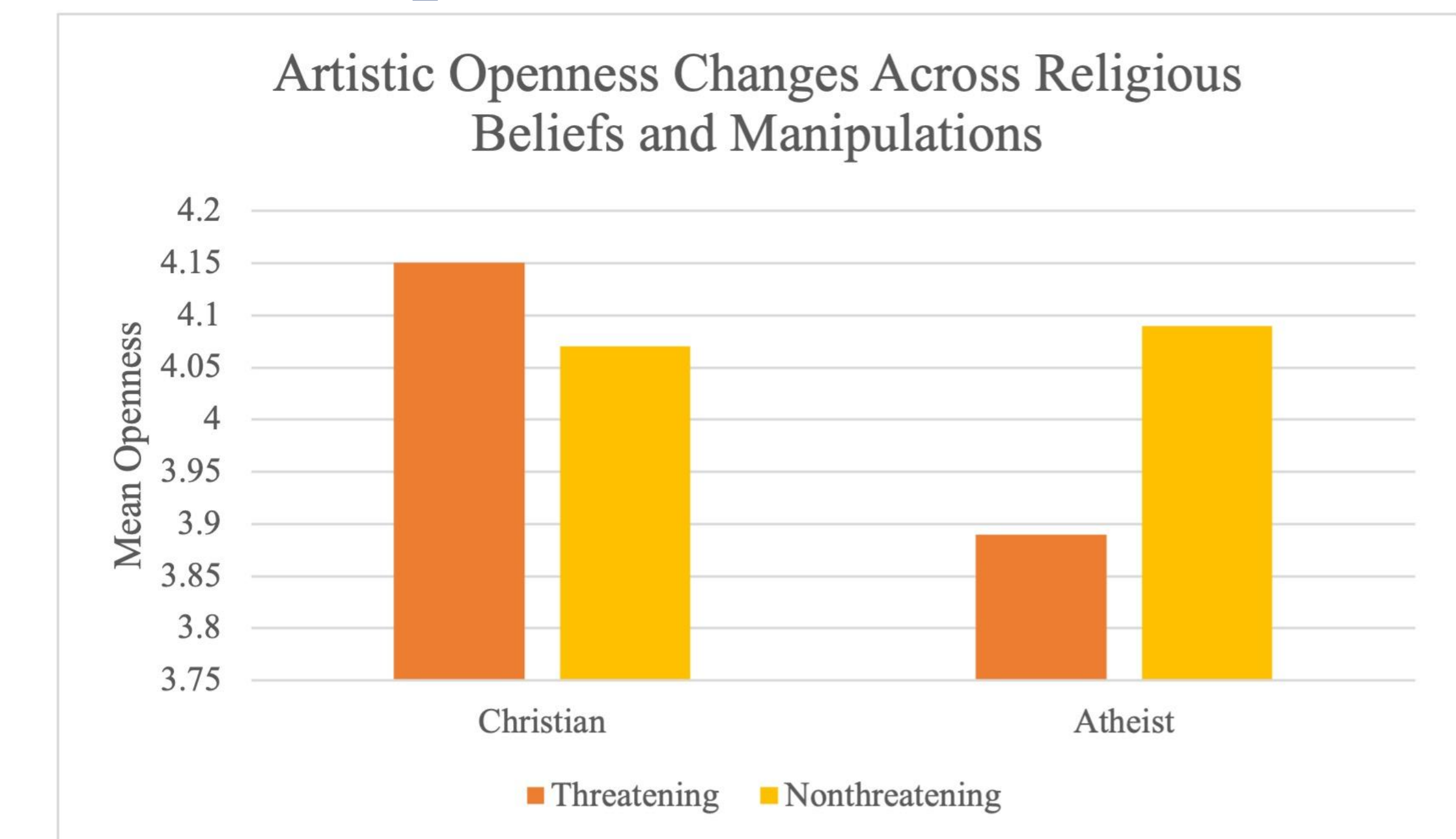
Difference in Liking between Christian and Hindu Paintings (Christian liking - Hindu Liking) by Condition and Participant Religion



Condition by Participant Religion Interaction: $p = .860$

RESULTS

Openness to Experience



Interaction: $F(1,340) = 3.70$, $p = .055$

- Within Threatening Manipulation
 - Atheists had lower openness than Christians, $F(1,161) = 6.53$, $p = .012$.
- Nonthreatening Manipulation
 - No difference in openness between participant religions ($p = .880$)
- Within Participant Religion
 - No condition differences in openness among Christians ($p = .402$)
 - Atheists had lower openness after threatening headline ($p = .073$)

DISCUSSION

Although threatening COVID-19 headlines increased DTA, there was no interaction between participant religion and COVID-19 condition on painting ratings. However, results support previous TMT findings which show that existential threats lower people's openness to experience, and suggest novel possibility that worldview-consistent art offers psychological protection.¹ It may be that because all participants viewed Christian and Hindu paintings, the artwork functioned as a worldview affirmation for Christians, but not for Atheists - resulting in lowered openness for Atheists after the threatening headlines (in accordance with Self-Affirmation Theory.)²

Proposed Process - When exposed to the threatening COVID-19 condition:

- Christian participants may have been protected by religious paintings
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Future Research

Research Question: Do these paintings make people feel more open if their beliefs are affirmed and, in turn, mitigate threat?

To further understand this interaction:

- A better validated mortality salience manipulation will be used
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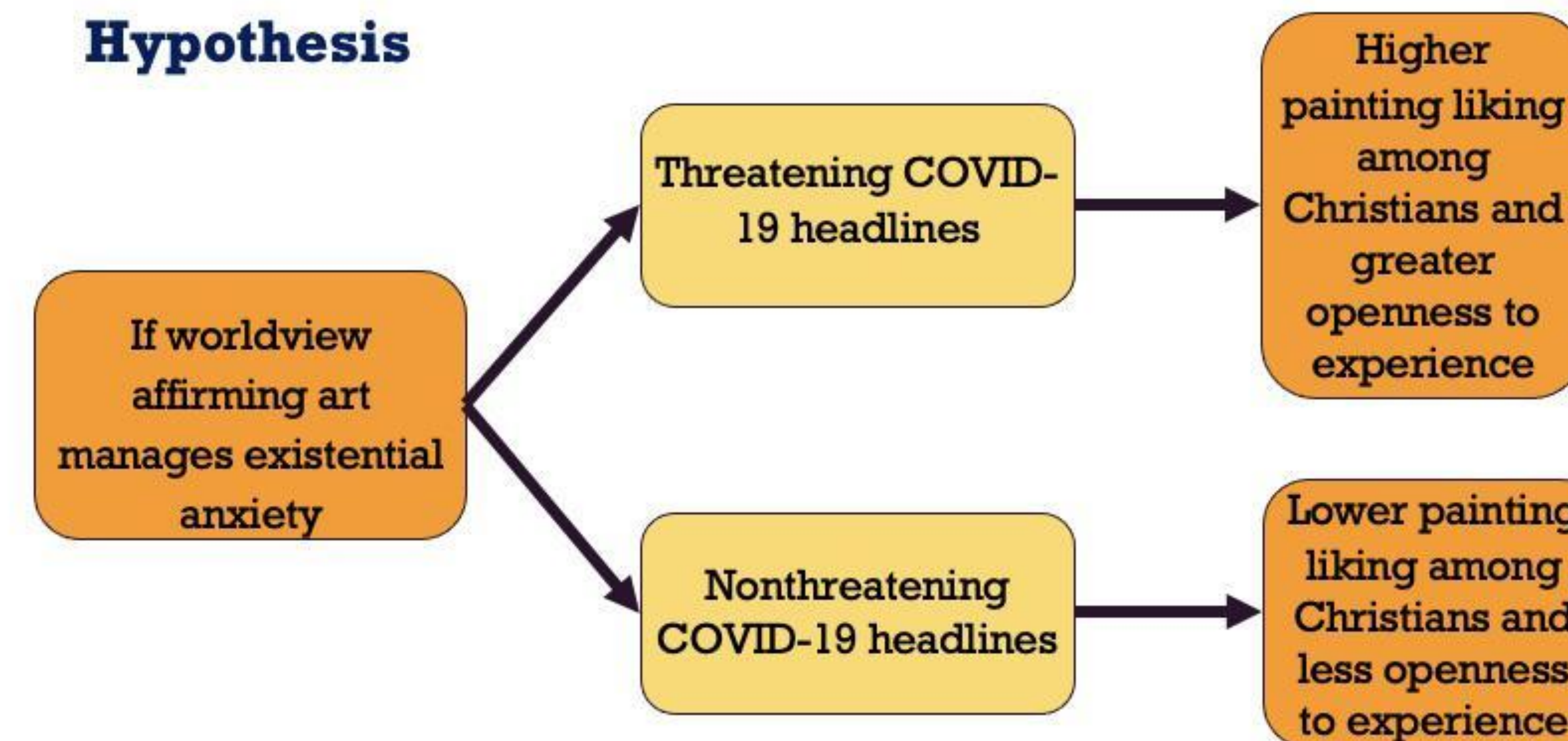


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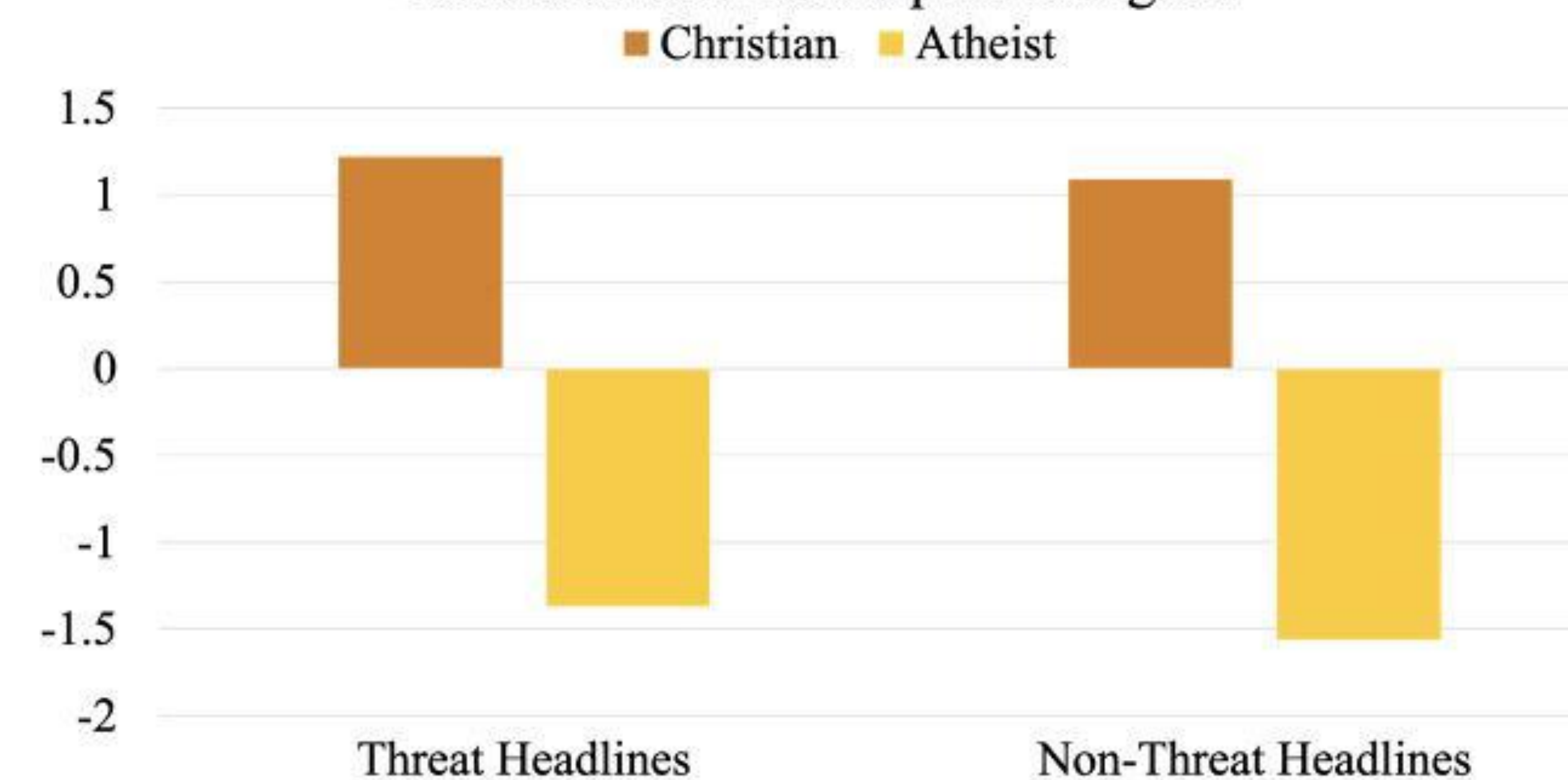


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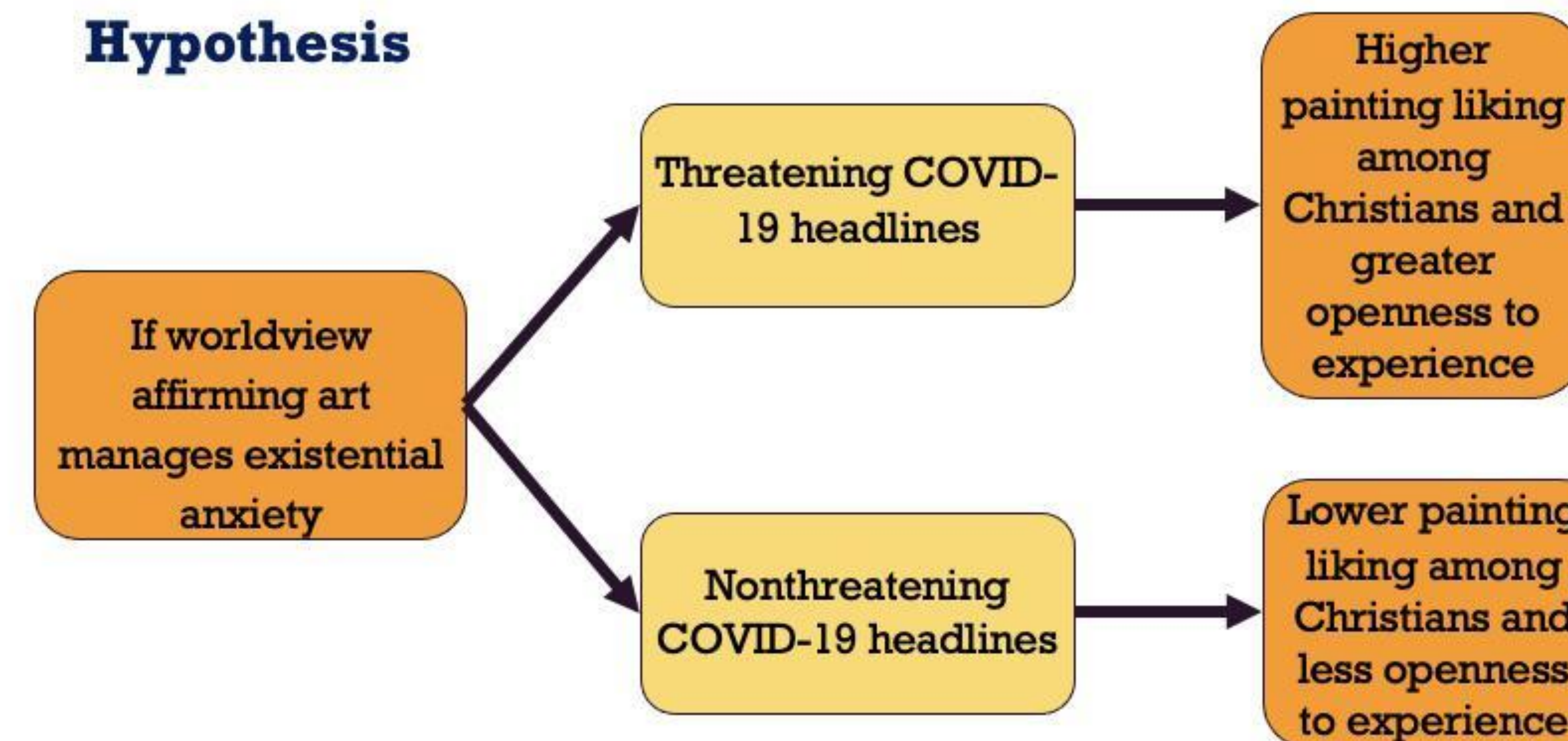
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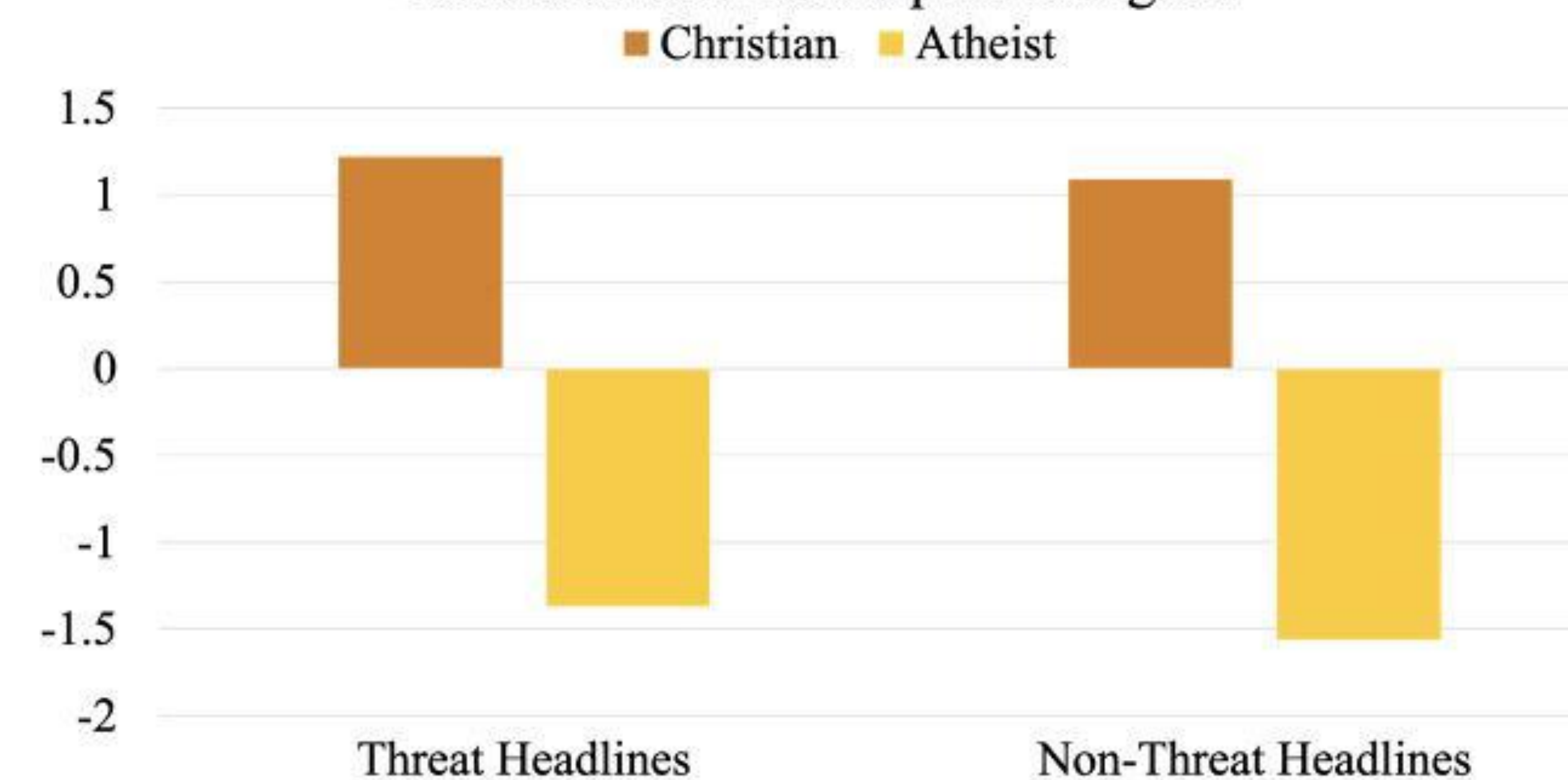


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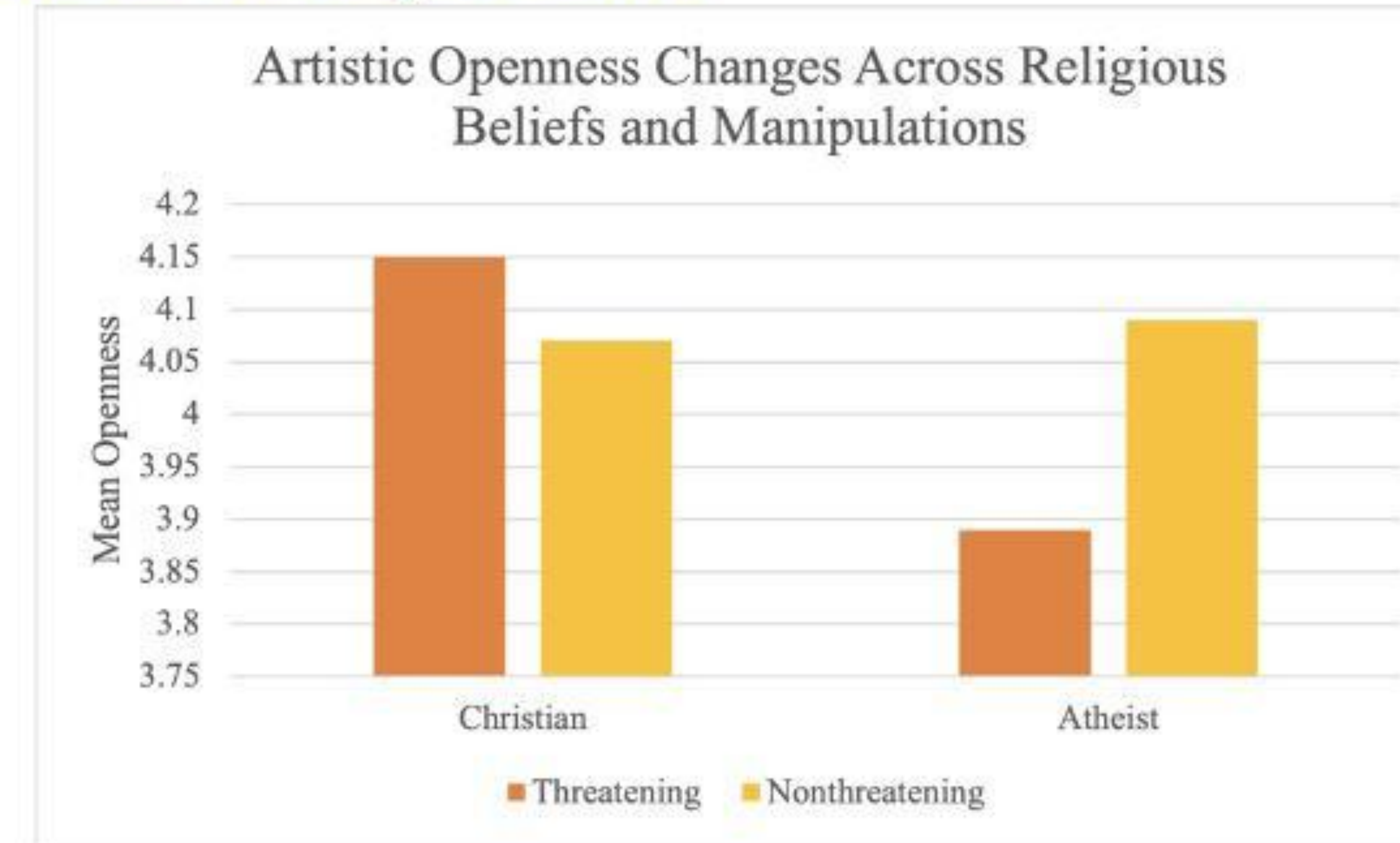
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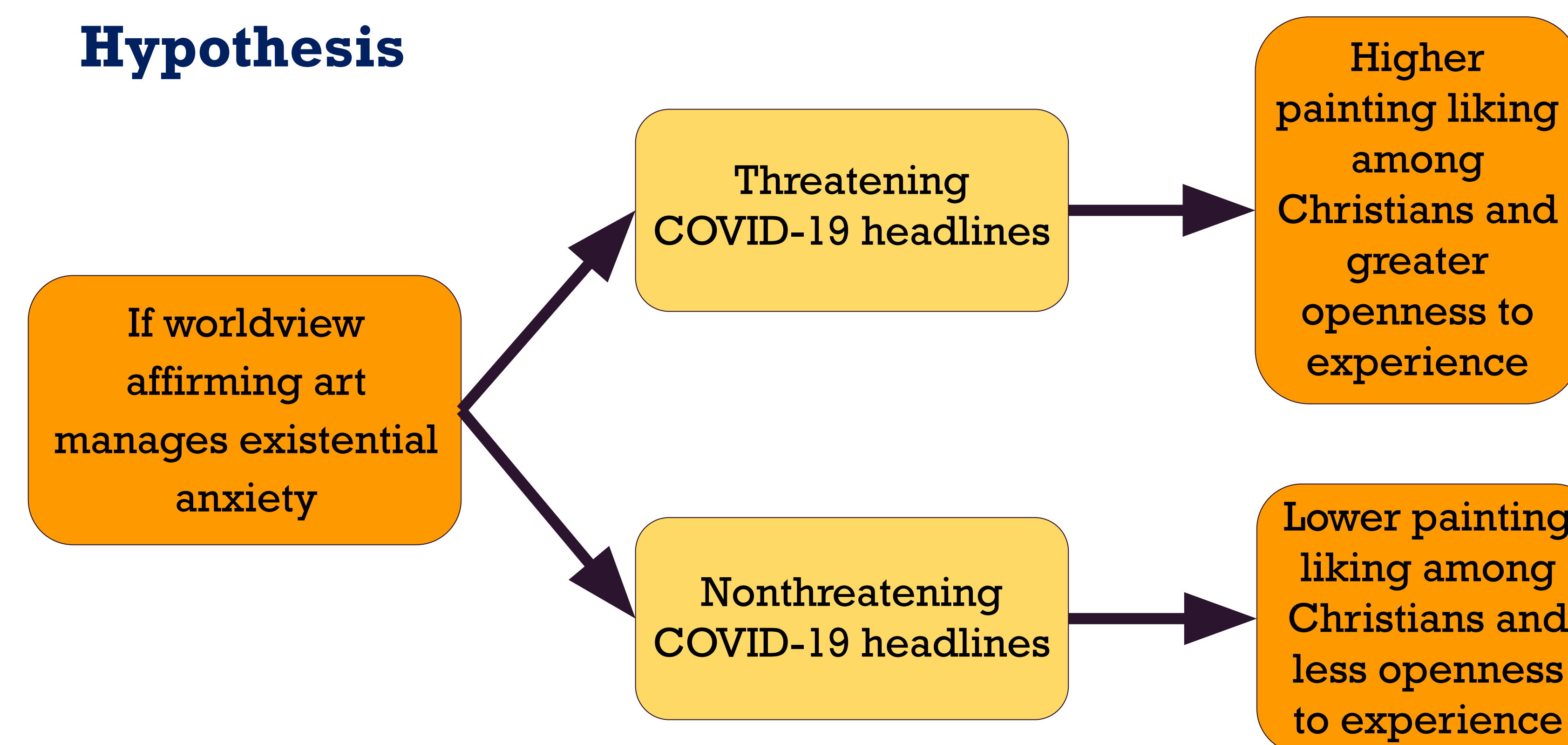


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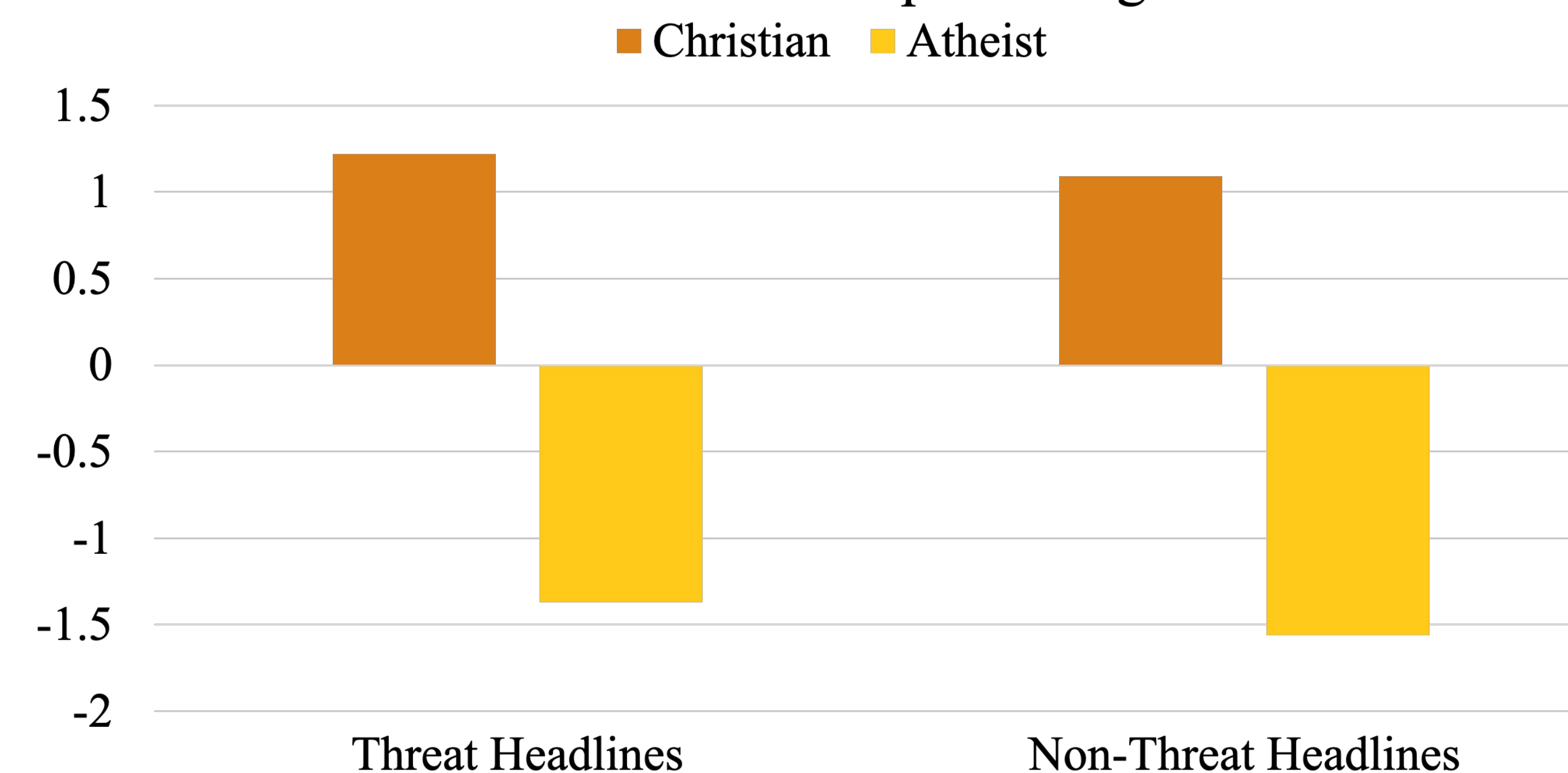


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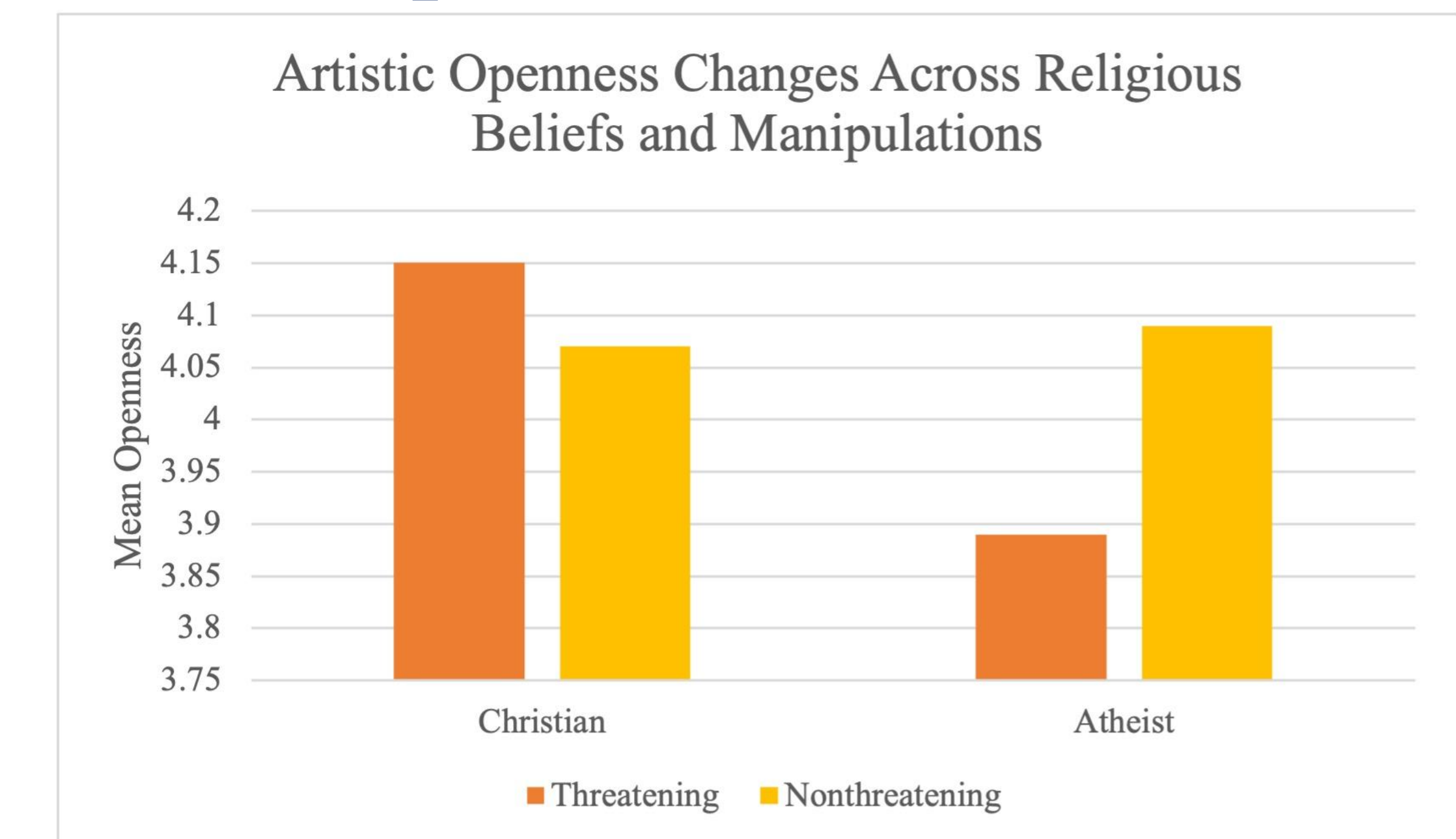
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