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## Hungry for McMindfulness? The Effect of Linguistic Framing on Perceptions of Vipassana (Insight Meditation)

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Hungry for McMindfulness? The Effect of Linguistic Framing on Perceptions of *Vipassana*  
(Insight Meditation)

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Science, Math, and Computing, and Division of Social Studies  
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By  
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Thank you to my mama, for passing on your childlike wonder, raising me to never stop questioning, learning, exploring, and for living outside the lines...

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### Abstract

Linguistic framing shapes the way we conceptualize social matters, moral and causal reasoning, and influences the way we perceive the world by constraining how we gather evidence about people, events and situations. There is a robust history behind the dichotomization of religion and the secular, which manifests in present day linguistic framing of meditation practices as “secular,” despite their ties to Buddhism or other religious traditions. This secularization has been criticized for its dilution or total erasure of Buddhist ideals, and conversely, as a form of “stealth Buddhism,” a tactic for recruitment of otherwise uninterested parties. The present study aims to assess the ways in which linguistic framing affects the perception of *vipassana*, one such practice. Based on previous research in cognitive psychology, cognitive linguistics, religious studies, and anthropology, I hypothesize that (1) Participants will perceive *vipassana* (Insight Meditation) as being more acceptable when it is framed as “secular” (as opposed to “Buddhist”), and (2) Participants will be more willing to engage in this practice when it is framed as “secular.” If these hypotheses are supported, the results of this study will contribute to the growing body of evidence which suggests that linguistic framing significantly influences thought. Additionally, such support would raise implications surrounding the ethicality of “secular” v. “religious” framing in regards to the dissemination of *vipassana* and other meditation practices in Western Europe and the Americas.

**Hungry for McMindfulness? The Effect of Linguistic Framing on Perceptions of *Vipassana*  
(Insight Meditation)**

In a 2010 interview with *Lion's Roar* magazine, Buddhist psychotherapist Miles Neale coined the term “McMindfulness” to describe “a kind of compartmentalized, secularized, watered-down version of mindfulness...Meditation for the masses, drive-through style, stripped of its essential ingredients, prepackaged and neatly stocked on the shelves of the commercial self-help supermarkets” (Fisher & Neale, 2010). Nowadays, yoga, meditation, mindfulness, and Zen are nearly as ubiquitous within American society as the famed golden arches themselves. Take Headspace, for instance, the app that has made “evidence-based meditation and mindfulness” into a \$3 billion business, touting over 70 million downloads and 100 million lives touched across 200 regions of the world (Headspace, 2023; Curry, 2023). Similarly, let us consider the diffusion of Zen Buddhism into the technologically saturated realms of network capitalism—what scholar R. John Williams refers to as *techné-zen*—or the hundreds of “Zen and the Art of [fill in the blank]” works that have gained notoriety across countless spheres since Eugen Herrigel’s 1948 release of *Zen and the Art of Archery* (Williams, 2011).

As a student of psychology and religion, I am particularly fascinated with the skillful incorporation of Buddhist philosophy and practices into the American psychological mainstream. Mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) may be the most recognizable product of this crossover, given its status as an empirically proven method for reducing stress, anxiety and depression, and treatment of more specialized issues, such as addiction and chronic pain (American Psychological Association, 2019). Encounters between Buddhism and psychology far predate the popularization of MBSR, however, and are discussed with varying degrees of transparency in regards to their Buddhist attributes; Readers may be surprised to discover, for



instance, that Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), a leading psychotherapeutic method—and bonafide household name—has philosophical roots in Buddhism (Diaz et. al, 2015).

It would be both egregiously overstated and ambitious beyond the scope of a senior project to argue that every encounter of Buddhism and psychology is de facto “McMindfulness.” On the contrary, researchers and practitioners of MBSR alike are hesitant to justify the indiscriminate usage of this term in regards to contemporary mindfulness-based techniques, even citing the Buddha’s own doctrine as confirmation of the acceptability and appropriateness of these practices (Anālayo, 2020). While it remains to be seen whether or not Headspace’ fame, CBT, or even MBSR fall under the category of McMindfulness, however, it must be noted that there is one striking commonality between them: in one way or another, they are all subject to secular framing.

*Vipassana*, or Insight Meditation as it is more commonly referred to today in the United States, is one such subject of the crossover between Buddhism and psychology, and it is no exception to the rule of the attempted secularization of Buddhism-based practices. This ancient Indian meditation technique, which is said to have been practiced by the historical Buddha himself, was rediscovered by Sayagyi U Ba Khin (1889-1971), and brought to Western Europe and the Americas by S.N. Goenka (1924-2013). Though *vipassana*/Insight Meditation (V/IM) is deeply rooted in Buddhism, Goenka deliberately marketed this practice as non-sectarian in “the West.”<sup>1</sup> Unbeknownst to Goenka, several of his students would go on to found the Insight Meditation Society (IMS) and Spirit Rock Meditation Center, spreading a fundamentally psychological form of V/IM throughout the United States and the world, one that in turn decontextualizes the technique almost entirely from its cultural and religious roots (Stuart, 2020).

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<sup>1</sup> While the dichotomization of “East” and “West” is highly debated, particularly within the field of religious studies, Goenka and his followers have historically used such terminology, and thus it will appear here (Stuart, 2020).

It is of note, for instance, that the Spirit Rock home page *does not mention Buddhism*, instead speaking of “insight into the practitioner’s moment-to-moment experience and of lifestyles that reflect these insights” (Compson, 2017). As for IMS, among its most renowned students is Jon Kabat-Zinn, the creator of the aforementioned Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction, the first and best-known mainstream “secular” mindfulness-based intervention (Compson, 2017).

Asserting that V/IM and other traditionally Buddhist techniques and concepts have been “secularized” begs several questions: What does it mean to “secularize” a practice? What are the effects of this “secularization” (i.e, do American individuals perceive a practice like V/IM differently when it is framed as secular, as opposed to “religious,” or “Buddhist”)? And relatedly, is this “secularization” deliberate on the part of promoters? My research has been guided by these questions as they relate to the framing and practice of V/IM. These queries are constituted on the basis of linguistic framing. Thus, before touching upon the particularities of V/IM and its secularization, it is essential to establish what it means to frame through language, and to explore the myriad of influences that this process may have on perception.

### **Linguistic Framing and Perception**

For centuries, the human mind was believed to be logical, abstract, transcendent of its bodily nature. Recently, however, there has been an Embodiment Revolution: a movement toward acknowledging that our bodies have everything to do with our minds, and that the meaning behind concepts and language is derived from our embodied experiences in the world. The embodied simulation hypothesis—that is, the theory that we understand language not as a series of static definitions, but through the active creation of mental representations—was born out of this revolution; Proponents of the hypothesis posit that, in turn, language shapes thought (Bergen, 2012).

In what has become somewhat of a watershed publication for the Embodiment Revolution, Benjamin K. Bergen elucidates the embodied simulation hypothesis by asking us to imagine that we are participating in a psycholinguistic experiment. We are seated in front of a computer, and shown the sentence, *The carpenter hammered the nail into the wall*. Having read the sentence, we are then shown an image of an object, such as a nail or an elephant, and asked to quickly discern whether that object was mentioned in the sentence. Of course, most of us would quickly say ‘yes’ to the image of the nail, and ‘no’ to that of the elephant. The primary interest of Bergen and colleagues, however, is in exactly *how* quickly each of us responds to the nail image, depending on whether it is shown in a horizontal or vertical orientation. Research suggests that on average, people are faster to make a ‘yes’ decision when the image is presented in the same spatial orientation as was implied by the sentence that was just read (Zwaan et al., 2002), and that this recognition performance is maintained even after a 45 minute delay (Pecher et al., 2009). Thus, people are quicker to say ‘yes’ when the image depicts the nail in a horizontal orientation, as opposed to when it is shown upright, or vertically. However, when they first read the sentence, *The carpenter hammered the nail into the floor*, people are faster, on average, to say ‘yes’ to an image that presents the nail in a vertical position, rather than horizontally.

One explanation for these findings is that people automatically construct a mental image of an object in its appropriate spatial orientation based on what a sentence implies. Even if the nail’s position or orientation is not explicitly denoted, our instant understanding of the sentence’s meaning enables us to create a mental image of the situation in which the nail was hammered in a horizontal or vertical position. Understanding the embodied simulation hypothesis allows us to entertain the possibility that linguistic framing may have very tangible effects on our mental

imagery, and thus the conclusions we draw, attitudes we form, and the subsequent actions we take toward a particular situation.

Today, this concept of framing has become omnipresent in the social sciences. According to Entman (1993), linguistic framing involves selecting certain aspects of a concept and foregrounding their salience in a promulgating text. Linguistic framing can be realized in just a sentence or throughout a text, and by making certain pieces of information more noticeable, meaningful, or memorable to audiences, this rhetorical strategy attempts to uphold a particular problem definition, consequential interpretation, moral assessment, and/or treatment recommendation for the concept described. Essentially, linguistic framing shapes the way we perceive the world by constraining how we gather information about people, events and situations (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999; Reali et. al, 2016).

Research in cognitive psychology and cognitive linguistics has provided a growing body of evidence to suggest that even the slightest linguistic choices may significantly influence perception, as well as social cognition, memory, moral and causal reasoning, problem solving, cultural and political attitudes, and various other cognitive processes (Reali et. al, 2016). By nature, the concept of linguistic framing implicates so many of our vital cognitive apparatuses for understanding and interacting with the world around us. As a result, the largely theoretical research discussed thus far has expanded to encompass examinations of linguistic framing's influence within various real world contexts.

The linguistic framing paradigm has, for instance, received substantial interest with respect to politics and political messaging. Recently, Mannetti et. al (2013) investigated the impact of persuasive political messages based on subliminal priming of recipients' regulatory focus (either promotion or prevention) and the linguistic framing of a message (either strategic

approach framing or strategic avoidance framing<sup>2</sup>). Results of these studies show that regulatory fit (i.e, linguistic framing that corresponds with a recipient's natural inclinations toward either 'promotion'/'approach' or 'prevention'/'avoidance') may (a) increase the impact of a political message, and (b) induce a more positive evaluation of, and intentions to vote for, the political candidate who is delivering this message.

Equally prevalent findings within the field of gender studies suggest that when unknown groups and equal status groups are contrasted against one another ("the effect to be explained" group v. "the linguistic norm" group), the group positioned as the norm is sometimes perceived as more powerful, more agentic, and less communal. Such perceptions may contribute to status-linked stereotypes, as group differences are described through the spontaneous positioning of higher-status groups as the linguistic norm. Based on these findings, Bruckmüller et al. (2012) took up the question of linguistic framing with respect to gender stereotypes. Upon reading about gender differences in leadership that were framed around a male rather than a female 'linguistic norm,' participants in this study considered gender differences in status to be larger and more legitimate, and applied gender stereotypes more readily. Interestingly, however, these effects did not generalize to participants who reported reading about gender differences, framed around either norm, in their leisure time. Together, these results suggest that the effects of linguistic framing on perceived group status and power and on group stereotypes generalize to domains where there are real differences in status, and contexts in which higher-status groups are the default standard for comparison, the linguistic norm.

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<sup>2</sup> Strategic framing involves the purposeful use of this technique by rhetors, social advocates and communications professionals in fields such as public relations and advertisers. The goals of strategic framing are to telegraph meaning and to focus audience attention on particular portions of a message or aspects of a topic in order to gain favorable response (Hallahan, 2007)

In the digital age, with the dissemination of misinformation on the rise, the influence of linguistic framing has become a particularly pertinent research topic within the medical and mental health spheres. Mayweg-Paus & Jucks (2015) sought to examine whether and how far ‘lexical hints’ (i.e, (a) appeals to credibility, and (b) the presence/absence of linguistic hedges, such as “mostly,” or “up to now”) influence laypersons’ comprehension of, and attitudes towards information on health issues. To this end, participants were asked to read an online article on a new approach to preventing influenza, and then to write an essay reporting their opinion on the topic, and to complete a questionnaire assessing their attitudes. Results indicated that when lexical hints were given, tentativeness led participants to focus more on the actual information in the text. Additionally, decisions more strongly favored the direction implied in the text when the source of the medical information was not reported. In a similar study, Zimmerman & Jucks (2018) examined the effect of linguistic framing employed by medical experts in online health forums. Their findings suggest that even subtle variations in framing may influence participants’ perceptions of the credibility of both the advice provided, and these experts themselves. In this vein, Reali et al. (2016) were interested in the effects of linguistic framing on perceptions of depression and depressed individuals. When depression was framed as a disease—”medicalized,” so to speak—rather than through metaphor (e.g., “sadness got a hold of her,” or “I am trapped inside depression”), participants’ perceptions of the depressed individual’s responsibility for their own suffering was significantly reduced. Additionally, disease-like descriptions and metaphorical frames influenced participants’ interpretations of the role of social causal factors in the development of depression.

The results of the aforementioned studies suggest that linguistic framing holds great power over our interpretation of, and attitudes towards the world. Even subtle twists of language

may influence who we vote for, what stereotypes we accept or face, how much compassion we express for those facing mental health struggles, and quite topically, amidst a global pandemic, what we decide to do with our bodies. Research suggests that the implications associated with framing of religion, religious practice, and “the secular” are just as strong. According to Palitsky et al. (2022), whose research on the relationship between linguistic framing, worldviews, and perceptions of mindfulness-based interventions (“MBIs”) has been integral to the present study, *religious framing* refers to “the signaling of associations with specific religions, religion as a general concept, or concerns deemed spiritual, through the way an MBI is presented to participants.” Crucially, as is the case for a great majority of the research surrounding linguistic framing, religious framing thus pertains to the *representation* of an MBI to participants, rather than to any essential attributes or qualities of the MBI itself. Rather, these studies use changes in language to denote different framings for MBIs, as does the present study with regards to V/IM. Given the pertinence of linguistic specificity, let us now examine our conceptions of religion, “the secular,” and some common assumptions about them.

### **Religion and “The Secular”**

The concepts of religion and secularism as they are commonly employed today arose during the modern period in Western Europe. Prior to this period, “religion” was intertwined in everyday life and culture, and was the primary lens through which the world was understood, and that which ordered social and cultural affairs. Thus, as Compson (2017) explains, “the idea of ‘religion’ as a noun indicating a set of beliefs and practices distinct from other aspects of life would have been entirely unfamiliar to premoderns”; Rather, when discussing the premodern period, it is more appropriate to employ “religious” as an adjective, understood as being a loyal orientation and obligation toward the powers that were thought to govern existence and destiny.

During the Enlightenment, the meaning of “religion” shifted to signify a system of beliefs, a historical phenomenon, and a set of institutions. Embedded within this new definition was the equally contemporary vision of “religions” as plural, discrete institutions:

“It was around this time that the idea of different and competing world religions appeared and disparate phenomena were reified into ‘isms’ such as ‘Buddhism’ or ‘Hinduism.’ No equivalent for these terms exists in Hindu or Buddhist texts. The introduction of these terms was one of the many consequences of European colonialism; categories born out of Western European concepts were applied to the cultural phenomena in ‘discovered’ lands. This included an increasing reification of practices into discrete and competing ‘isms,’ and identification of creeds and doctrines (as opposed to inner faith or piety) with ‘religion.’” (Compson, 2017, p. 26)

Evidently, our conception of “religion” and “world religions” is a product of the specific cultural and historical forces which characterized the European Enlightenment. The same can be said for the birth of “science” as we know it, the separation of science and religion, and for our contemporary idea of the “secular”:

“Whereas in premodern times, religion undergirded every aspect of public life, during the modern period, science became understood as the most reliable form of knowledge. Theology was deposed from its centuries-long reign as ‘queen of the sciences’ and the powers of church and state were separated. Religion became seen as more of a matter of personal faith than objective knowledge as the shared and pervasive religious worldviews of premodern times retreated. At the same time, the concept of ‘secular’ took on a new meaning. In medieval Europe, secular referred to the ‘temporal-profane’ world, in contrast to the ‘religious-spiritual-sacred world of salvation,’ the existence of which was taken for granted (Casanova, 2013, p. 29). However, during the modern period ‘secular’ took on the meaning of ‘devoid of religion.’ Cosmic, social, and moral orders were no longer understood as transcendent and religious, but this-worldly and immanent. On this understanding, which persists today, ‘secular’ and ‘religious’ are oppositional—the more secular a society, the less religious it is, and vice versa.” (Compson, 2017, p. 28)

Many scholars argue that the growing popularity of practices like *vipassana* and mindfulness in Western Europe and the United States is rooted in the modernist project. Many of the first Europeans to recognize Buddhism lauded its apparent compatibility with modern



science at a time of significant conflict between science and Christianity. Simultaneously, the turmoil resulting from colonization incentivized Asian Buddhists themselves to highlight those elements of Buddhist teachings most compatible with scientific humanism—which, conversely, meant downplaying its cosmological and mythological elements—in attempts to appeal to “the West” (Brown, 2019; Compson, 2017).

McMahan (2012) refers to this pattern of framing as ‘the enchanted secular,’ a kind of transtraditional spirituality. As Asian Buddhists in the early Modern period began presenting their own articulations of Dharma to the broader world, all the while engaging with Christian missionaries, they began to strategically adopt certain terms from the lexicons of Europe. Of the various terms that entered Buddhist vocabulary during this time, ‘spiritual’ quickly became, and arguably still remains, one of the most ubiquitous. McMahan provides an apt explanation for why this is so through analysis of Anagārika Dharmapāla’s *The Arya Dharma of Sakya Muni, Gautama, Buddha* or “The Ethics of Self Discipline” (1917). Throughout this work, Dharmapāla makes liberal use of the language of spirituality, seemingly as a qualifier of sorts. With nearly every use of the term, Dharmapāla draws upon explicitly *secular* discourses of the time (e.g, psychology with “psychology of spiritual growth,” modern political theory with “spiritualized democracy,” racial evolutionary theory with “spiritualized races,” etc.) (Dharmapāla, 1917). In so doing, McMahan argues that Dharmapāla appears to be infusing each of these disciplines into Buddhism, legitimizing the religion on a global level by aligning it with the most powerful discourses of the time.

The historical context behind the language of ‘religion,’ ‘the secular’ and ‘the spiritual’ reveals a pattern of intentional framing within discourse on Buddhism and Buddhist practice. I argue that by the mid-twentieth century, when Goenka began to set his sights on the global

dissemination of V/IM, the use of qualifiers like ‘secular’ and ‘spiritual’ was almost compulsory within these circles, and the power of such linguistic framing certainly was not lost on Goenka. Consideration for this history may also reveal the motivations behind his decision to promote V/IM as “non-sectarian,” scientifically validated, and desperately needed, or his students’ apparent need to emphasize the fact that this practice is “possible without the complications of rituals, robes, chanting and the whole religious tradition” (Compson, 2017, p. 9). In a world dominated by scientific modernism, where reason, experience and intuition were elevated above tradition, religion had come to be seen as its markedly inferior opponent. Thus, in order for V/IM to be deemed acceptable by a Euro-American audience, it *had* to be framed as secular (Stuart, 2020).

### **On the Present Study**

In the post-modern period, we have begun to wake up to the reality that there may not be such a thing as objective reason, and that what we tend to assume are universal conceptions of “religion” and the “secular” are culturally and historically bounded. Nonetheless, Palitsky et. al’s (2022) research suggests that within the United States, these frames may still produce distinct attitudes towards traditionally Buddhist practices. These researchers were concerned with the effect of linguistic framing, in relationship with American participants’ own religious and existential views (i.e, flexibility of religious worldviews, levels of scriptural literalism, and general openness), on their perceptions of mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs). Their first study examined differences in the way that an MBI is framed, vis-a-vis its religious associations (i.e, either “Buddhist,” “spiritual,” or “secular” framing), and found that together, these factors may influence attitudes towards and *prima facie* willingness to try mindfulness interventions. In a follow up study, participants received mindfulness guidance, once again framed as being either

“Buddhist,” “spiritual,” or “secular” (i.e., “Buddhist” framing condition evoked the Buddha; the “spiritual” framing condition emphasized benefits such as spiritual connection and growth; the “secular” framing condition specified that MBIs are not religious, and described them as evidence-based). When asked to indicate how acceptable they perceived this guidance to be, participants’ exposed to “secular” mindfulness indicated significantly higher rates of acceptability than those in the spiritual and Buddhist conditions.

It is of note that while participants were never specifically queried about their perceptions of the religious or spiritual content of the intervention they received, when prompted to share about their overall experience with mindfulness guidance, many participants voiced concerns about religious content. Additionally, both the spiritual and Buddhist conditions were generally more disliked. This indicates that secular framing may have been most amenable for the majority of participants, but not because of some inherently attractive quality of secularity itself; Rather, these results suggest that Buddhist and spiritual framing of mindfulness-based practices may connote explicitly negative perceptions among American audiences.

The goal of the present study is to examine whether secular framing of V/IM is more amenable to American audiences than religious, “Buddhist” framing. While close examination of participants’ worldviews is beyond the scope of this project, this study is designed as a partial replication of the research conducted by Palitsky et. al (2022). More specifically, I am concerned with the following research questions: (1) Does linguistic framing (i.e, either “secular” or “Buddhist” framing) influence an individual's willingness to try V/IM? (2) Does linguistic framing (i.e, either “secular” or “religious” framing) influence the perceived acceptability of V/IM? I hypothesize that (1) participants will be significantly more willing to try VIM when it is

framed as “secular” than when it is framed as “religious,” and that (2) participants will also perceive V/IM as being significantly more acceptable when it is framed as “secular.”

## **Materials & Methods**

### **Participants**

Based on a priori power-analysis, one hundred and two U.S. residents, aged 18+, were recruited through Prolific (see Appendix A) for participation in an online survey administered via Qualtrics. The study was presented to interested parties with the title “Language and Perception.” During the informed consent process, the participants were told that “The purpose of this online survey is to explore the role of reading on perception. You will read a passage, and be asked to complete a questionnaire asking you about the passage” (see Appendix B). Having completed the survey, participants were shown a debriefing statement (see Appendix C). Participants were compensated \$1.80 for their participation. Five participants were excluded from analyses due to failed attention checks (e.g., “If you’re reading this, please select ‘Strongly Disagree’) or incomplete surveys, resulting in a final sample size of 97 individuals.

### **Procedures**

Interested individuals followed a link from Prolific to Qualtrics to participate in the study. After providing electronic informed consent to participate, the participants were randomly assigned to either the “Buddhist” framing condition, or the “secular” framing condition. Participants in the Buddhist framing condition were asked to read a passage that uses the Pali term “vipassana” to refer to V/IM, highlights the Buddhist history behind the practice, and pulls from the traditional Buddhist lexicon to describe its benefits (see Appendix D); Participants in the secular framing condition were asked to read a passage identical in length, structure and comprehension level, but that instead refers to V/IM as “Insight Meditation,” highlights the

scientific basis behind the practice, and describes the practice as “non-sectarian,” using secular language to describe its benefits (see Appendix E).

Having read the passage assigned to their condition, participants then completed an 8-item questionnaire. All items used terminology that corresponded with participants’ condition (i.e, participants in the Buddhist framing condition were asked, “Do you like *vipassana* guidance?,” whereas participants in the secular framing condition were asked, “Do you like Insight Meditation guidance?”), but were otherwise identical between conditions. Items appeared in the following order: (1) assessment of participants’ prior experiences, (2) willingness question, (3) acceptability questions, (4) religious component question, and (5) assessment of participants’ religious worldviews (see Appendices F&G). To prevent questions about religion from influencing participants’ views on the study and thus their responses, questions querying religious attitudes were placed after questions about willingness to try VIM, and questions about the acceptability of the practice. An attention check question was placed randomly within the survey (i.e, “If you’re reading this, choose \_\_\_\_\_”), and participants who failed to answer this question correctly were excluded from the study. On average, the questionnaire took participants around 5 minutes to complete. In total, participation lasted around 7 minutes.

## **Measures**

### ***Prior Experience with V/IM***

To assess prior experience, participants were asked whether they have previously tried any form of V/IM Meditation in the past (dichotomous response: yes or no).

### ***V/IM Willingness Question***

Participants were asked about how willing they would be to use V/IM. This question took the form, “Which of the following best describes how you feel about using \_\_\_\_\_ ?” giving

participants the opportunity to answer on a 5-point Likert scale (scoring: 1=very comfortable with the idea; 5 =very uncomfortable with the idea).

### ***Intervention Acceptability***

Participants were asked to rate the acceptability of the intervention they were introduced to through their assigned passage. These ratings were provided via three Likert scales (e.g, 1=definitely yes, 5=definitely no) associated with the following questions: (1) “Do you like *vipassana*/Insight Meditation guidance?” (2) “Would you want to do this practice in the future?” and (3) “Would you recommend this practice to a friend?” These ratings were then averaged, giving each participant a composite acceptability score.

### ***Belief that V/IM Has a Religious Component***

Participants were asked about the extent to which they believe that VIM has a religious component using a single-item Likert measure, “In your opinion, is there a religious component to *vipassana*/Insight Meditation?” (1=definitely yes; 5=definitely no).

### ***Religion and Religious Affiliation***

Participants were asked the following questions on religion and religious affiliation: “Do you view religion as a positive or negative force?,” and “What is your religious affiliation?”. The former asked participants to answer on a 5-point Likert scale (scoring: 1=very positive; 5=very negative); the latter allowed participants to choose from 12 affiliative categories. After religious affiliations were endorsed, these responses were re-coded into a derived set of five descriptive religion characteristics including non-affiliated=0, Buddhist=1, Protestant=2, Catholic=3, or other=4 affiliations. Those who endorsed “atheist” or “agnostic” were regarded as non-affiliate.

### **Data Analysis**

Firstly, descriptive statistics for each variable were obtained and recorded. This included religious affiliation frequencies, which were used to characterize the sample. Proportions of religious affiliation were then compared to those found in the Pew Research Center's Religious Landscape Study (2017), as a means of estimating the representativeness of the sample.

Next, the effects of framing condition ("secular" or "Buddhist") on (H1) willingness to try V/IM and (H2) acceptability of the practice were examined via separate independent-samples t-tests. Exploratory analyses were then conducted to characterize and compare all other variables. Separate independent-samples t-tests were used to determine the effects of framing condition on (1) belief that the practice has a religious component, and (2) religious perspective. Additionally, an independent-samples t-test was used to determine the effect of prior experience with V/IM on willingness and acceptability scores. Lastly, a correlation matrix was employed to characterize the relationships between willingness, acceptability, religious component, and religious perspective.

## **Results**

### **Primary Analyses**

It was hypothesized that participants in the secular (IM) framing condition would be significantly more willing to participate in said practice than those in the Buddhist (V) framing condition. However, there was no significant effect of framing condition,  $t(95) = -0.264$ ,  $p = .792$  (See Table 1). In fact, participants in the Buddhist framing condition ( $M = 3.85$ ,  $SD = 0.872$ ) reported virtually equal willingness to engage in the practice as compared with those in the IM framing condition ( $M = 3.80$ ,  $SD = 0.842$ ).

It was hypothesized that participants in the Insight Meditation framing condition would perceive the practice as being significantly more acceptable than those in the Buddhist framing condition. However, there was no significant effect of framing condition,  $t(95) = 0.022$ ,  $p = 0.983$  (See Table 1). On the contrary, acceptability ratings between participants in the Buddhist framing condition ( $M = 3.58$ ,  $SD = 0.869$ ) and the secular framing condition ( $M = 3.59$ ,  $SD = 0.863$ ) were strikingly similar.

**Table 1.** *Willingness and Acceptability Scores Between Conditions (Null Hypothesis: No Significant Difference Between “V” and “IM” Conditions)*

Variable	Condition	M	SD	SE	t	df	p	Cohen’s D
Willingness Score	IM	3.80	0.842	0.126	-0.2641	95.0	0.792	-0.0538
	V	3.85	0.872	0.121				
Acceptability Score	IM	3.58	0.816	0.122	-0.0621	95.0	0.951	-0.0126
	V	3.59	0.827	0.115				

*Note.* Table 1 depicts the results of t-tests run to determine the effect of framing condition (“V” = *vipassana*, or “IM” = Insight Meditation) on willingness and acceptability. Consistent with the null hypotheses, there was no effect of framing condition on either willingness or acceptability.

### Exploratory Analyses

In addition to the primary analyses discussed above, participants were asked to endorse personal religious affiliation (see Table 2). Differences in religious affiliation groups were not observed between conditions,  $\chi^2(6, N = 97) = 3.77$ ,  $p = 0.437$ . There was no significant effect of religious affiliation category on participant’s willingness to engage with VIM, or their acceptability of the practice. The distribution of religious affiliation endorsements was also analyzed alongside data on the religious composition of the greater U.S. population (Pew Research Center, 2018). Across conditions, an abnormally high percentage of participants (44.3%) reported identifying as religiously unaffiliated. There were also significantly fewer Protestants (24.7%) and Catholics (14.5%) within this sample than there are within the American



population. Comparisons between the present study's sample and the greater U.S. population are expanded upon in the discussion section below.

**Table 2.** *Frequencies of Religious Affiliation*

<u>Religious Affiliation*</u>	<u>Condition</u>	<u>Counts</u>	<u>% of Total, Split By Condition</u>	<u>% of Total</u>
Non-Affiliated (0)	IM	17	17.5%	44.3%
	V	26	26.8%	
Buddhist (1)	IM	1	1.0%	1.0%
	V	0	0.0%	
Protestant (2)	IM	11	11.3%	24.7%
	V	13	13.4%	
Catholic (3)	IM	9	9.3%	14.5%
	V	5	5.2%	
Other (4)	IM	7	7.2%	15.4%
	V	8	8.2%	

*Note.* Table 2 depicts the frequencies at which participants endorsed each of five pre-derived religious affiliation categories, split by framing condition (“V” = *vipassana*, “IM” = Insight Meditation).

\*Participants originally endorsed one of 12 religious affiliative categories, which were then re-coded into the above set of five descriptive religion characteristics; See Appendix I for raw religious affiliation data.

Participants were asked about the extent to which they believe that VIM has a religious component using a single-item Likert measure: “In your opinion, is there a religious component to *vipassana* (or Insight Meditation, depending on their condition)?” (5=definitely yes; 1=definitely no). They were also asked to endorse their perspective on religion: “Do you view religion as a positive or negative force?” (scoring: 5=very positive; 1=very negative). Descriptives of each of these four measures can be found in Table 2.

**Table 2.** *Descriptives for Primary Measures, Religious Component, and Religious Perspective*

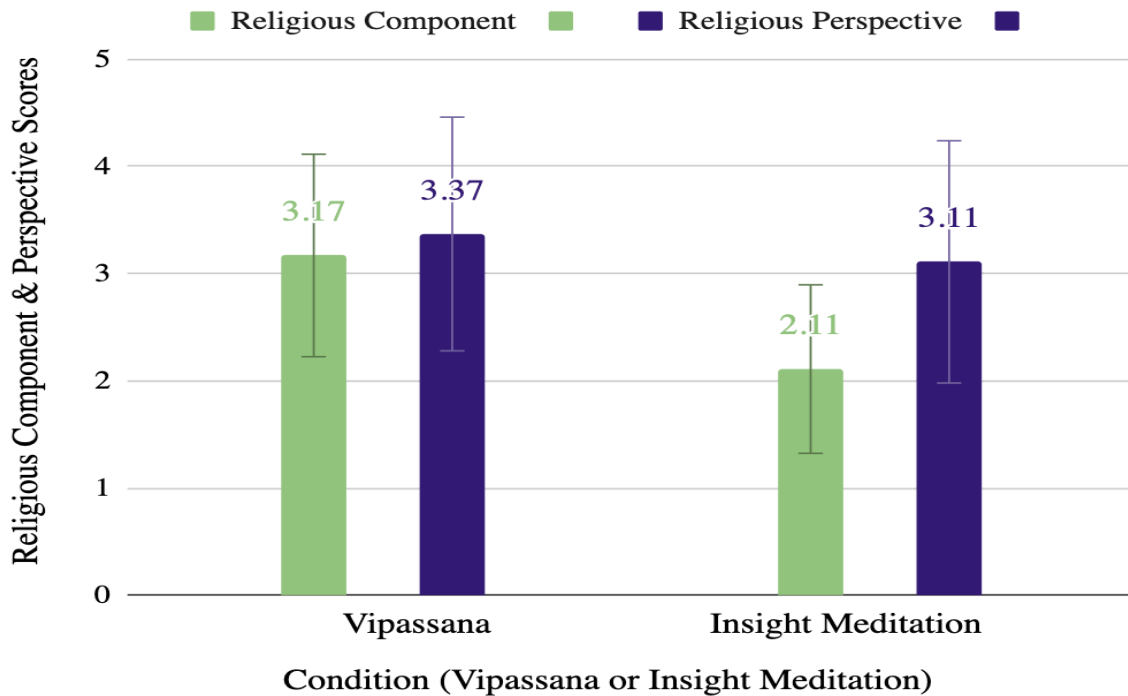
	Condition (“V” or “IM”)	Religious Component	Religion Perspective
N	IM	45	45
	V	52	52
Mean	IM	2.13	3.11
	V	3.17	3.37
Median	IM	2.00	3.00
	V	3.00	4.00
Standard Deviation	IM	0.786	1.13
	V	0.944	1.09
Minimum	IM	1.00	1.00
	V	2.00	1.00
Maximum	IM	5.00	5.00
	V	5.00	5.00

Notably, there was a significant effect of framing condition on whether or not the intervention at hand was believed to have a religious component  $t(95) = -5.8400, p = < .001$  (see Figure 1). Namely, participants in the Buddhist framing condition ( $M = 3.17, SD = 0.994$ ) were significantly more likely to perceive the practice as having a religious component than those in the Insight Meditation condition ( $M = 2.13, SD = 0.786$ ). Interestingly, further inspection of response distributions between conditions revealed that while participants in the secular framing condition were very likely to provide a negative response (i.e., Insight Meditation *does not*, or *definitely does not* have a religious component), whereas there was much more variability in the Buddhist framing condition. In this framing condition, more participants actually reported negative responses (i.e., *vipassana does not*, or *definitely does not* have a religious component) than those who were unsure. Participants in the Buddhist framing condition ( $M = 3.37, SD = 1.09$ ) also tended to report slightly more positive perspectives on religion than those in the

secular framing condition ( $M = 3.11$ ,  $SD = 1.13$ ), though this difference was non-significant ( $t(95) = -1.1278$ ,  $p = 0.262$ ) (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1**

*The Effect of Framing (Buddhist/“Vipassana” or Secular/“Insight Meditation”) on Religious Component & Religion Perspective*



*Note.* Figure 1 represents the effect of framing condition on participants' endorsement of the following one-item Likert measure: “In your opinion, is there a religious component to *vipassana* (or Insight Meditation)?”; 5=definitely yes; 1=definitely no. Overall, participants in the Buddhist framing condition were significantly more likely to perceive the intervention as having a religious component than those in the Insight Meditation condition ( $t(95) = -5.8400$ ,  $p = < .001$ ). Figure 1 also represents the relationship between framing and participant’s perspective on religion. There was no effect of framing condition on religion perspective.

There was a significant positive correlation between acceptability and willingness scores (Pearson’s  $r = 0.729$ ,  $p = < .001$ ); In other words, as participant acceptability ratings became more positive, they were also more willing, on average, to engage with VIM (see Table 3). Contrary to my hypotheses, however, there was no significant correlation between participant’s perspective

on religion and acceptability and willingness scores. The same can be said for religious component, acceptability and willingness scores: there was no significant correlation between participant's beliefs that VIM has a religious component and willingness or acceptability scores.

**Table 3.** *Correlation Matrix for Primary Measures, Religious Component, and Religion Perspective*

		Willingness Score	Acceptability Score	Religious Component	Religion Perspective
Willingness Score	Pearson's r	—			
	df	—			
	p-value	—			
Acceptability Score	Pearson's r	0.729 ***	—		
	df	95	—		
	p-value	< .001	—		
Religious Component	Pearson's r	-0.063	-0.029	—	
	df	95	95	—	
	p-value	0.538	0.776	—	
Religion Perspective	Pearson's r	-0.086	-0.137	0.069	—
	df	95	95	95	—
	p-value	0.404	0.180	0.503	—

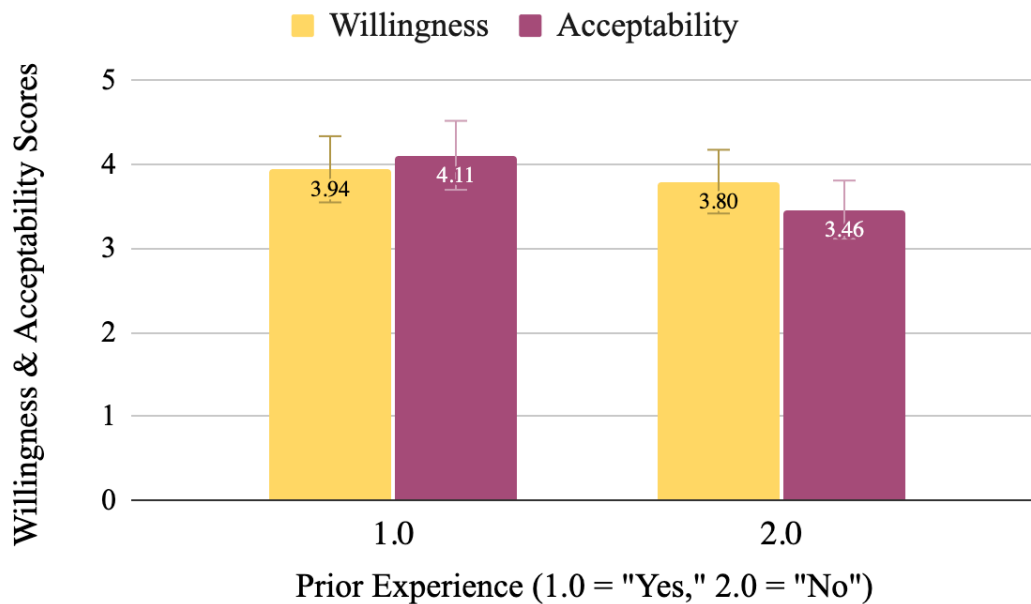
*Note.* \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$

Participants were asked to indicate whether or not they have had prior experience with VIM. Across conditions, participants who reported having had prior experience with VIM perceived the practice to be significantly more acceptable than those who did not have prior experience,  $t(95) = -3.197$ ,  $p = 0.002$ . There was no effect of prior experience, however, on how willing participants were to engage with VIM,  $t(95) = -0.657$ ,  $p = 0.513$  (see Figure 2). It should be noted, however, that prior experience data was not normally distributed ( $\chi^2 = 38.4$ ,  $p < .001$ ),

likely due to the fact that a majority of participants (81.44%) reported never having had experience with V/IM.

**Figure 2**

*The Effect of Prior Experience on Willingness & Acceptability*



*Note.* Figure 2 represents the effect of prior experience (“yes,” or “no”), across framing conditions, on participant’s willingness and acceptability ratings. On average, participants who reported having had prior experience with VIM perceived the intervention as significantly more acceptable. There was no effect of prior experience on willingness scores.

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of the influence of linguistic framing on perceptions of V/IM. The results of this study do not support the idea secular framing is more amenable to American adults than Buddhist framing. The significant difference between framing conditions in terms of perceived religiosity (‘religious component’ measure) does, however, provide supporting evidence for the general effectiveness of linguistic framing over perception.

### **Primary Analyses**

It was hypothesized that participants in the secular (IM) framing condition would be significantly more willing to participate in V/IM than those in the Buddhist (V) framing condition. However, there was almost no difference between the two conditions, suggesting that participants in this sample were just as willing to engage in V/IM when presented with a Buddhist framing of the practice as those who received a secular introduction.

It was also hypothesized that participants in the secular framing condition would perceive the practice as being significantly more acceptable than those in the Buddhist framing condition. Again, however, there was no effect of framing condition on acceptability ratings; This suggests that participants in this sample found the Buddhist framing of V/IM to be just as acceptable as its secular counterpart.

Across conditions, there was a significant positive correlation between willingness and acceptability scores. That is to say that as participants reported higher levels of comfortability with the idea of engaging in V/IM, they were likely to also find the practice more acceptable. This significant positive relationship between willingness and acceptability supports their validity as measures of overall amenability. It would therefore be fair to conclude that V/IM appears to have been amenable among this sample; On average, participants were quite comfortable with the idea of using V/IM, agreed that they would recommend the practice to others, and generally appeared to have liked the practice, regardless of how it was framed.

These results contradict the proposal, based on previous findings, that secular framing of mindfulness is most amenable for the most participants (Hayes & Shenk, 2004). Despite the common associations between MBIs and V/IM, results from this research suggest that framing may not play a significant role in perceptions of V/IM. While Palitsky et al. (2022) found that

different framings (“religious,” “spiritual,” or “secular”) of MBIs have a substantial influence on the prima facie amenability of these practices, and these findings were not replicated in the present study, it should be noted that even their results only provide limited support for the argument that secular framing is resoundingly most amenable; Studies 1a and 1b did not find unanimous superiority among secular framings of MBIs, and instead found perceptions to be dependent on participant religious and existential perspectives (Palitsky et al., 2022). Though the results of the present study do not provide evidence for any unmoderated effects of framing on perceptions of V/IM, analysis of religious perspective was restricted to responses from a single survey item, and existential perspectives were not queried at all. Thus, it would be unwise to come to a definite conclusion, based on results from this study, that perceptions of V/IM are not also dependent on participant religious and existential perspectives, or that there is no relationship between framing condition and perspectives on overall amenability of the practice.

### **Exploratory Analyses**

#### ***Religious Affiliation Distribution***

Proportions of religious affiliation groups in the present sample remained consistent between framing conditions. When compared with the religious composition of the greater United States population, however, several abnormalities emerged within the present sample. Whereas only 22.8% of Americans are religiously non-affiliated, almost half (44.3%) of participants in the present study were non-affiliated. Conversely, while nearly half (46.6%) of Americans identify as Protestant, this affiliative group only made up 24.7% of participants, and while Catholics make up 20.8% of the U.S., they only accounted for 14.5% of participants in the present study.

Taking into account the fact that my target sample was the greater U.S. population, these disparities in religious affiliation distribution point to a possible sampling error, thus calling into question the representativeness of the present sample. One possible explanation for this skewness may be linked to recruitment. I chose to advertise this study on Prolific because, given the time and resource constraints associated with Senior Project, online data collection appeared to be the most conservative option for maintaining adequate power, as opposed to student or convenience sampling. There are, however, a myriad of risks associated with online data collection, such as the risk of obtaining poor quality data due to lack of attention, comprehension, or honesty among respondents (Peer et al., 2022). Luckily, with respect to these and other measures, research suggests as compared with other online recruitment and data collection platforms (e.g, M-Turk, CloudResearch, or SONA), Prolific consistently provides good quality data (Roulin, 2015; Peer et al., 2022; Douglas et al., 2023), and this appears to be true of the present study: only five participants were excluded from data analysis due to failed attention checks, and there were no recorded instances of “straight-lining”<sup>3</sup>.

Still, due to the skewness of the present sample’s religious affiliation distribution as compared with that of the greater U.S. population, the question of representativeness remains. While there is a need for future research on the religious affiliation characteristics of Prolific users specifically, previous findings suggest that across MTurk samples, there are a very high number of Atheists and Agnostics (38.3% in Burnham et al., 2018) among MTurkers when compared to the general U.S. population. These findings are consistent with the abnormally high number of non-affiliated (those who identify as Atheist, Agnostic, or “Nothing in Particular”) participants (44.3%) in the present sample.

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<sup>3</sup> According to Peer et. al (2022), ‘straight-lining’ refers to a pattern of behavior wherein a respondent provides identical responses to items on a given scale, in turn producing poor quality data.



Though no other demographic data was collected, previous research has found that a striking majority (86.5%) of Prolific users report having completed at least some college (Douglas et. al, 2023), as compared with 62% of individuals aged 25+ among the general U.S. population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023), and while 37% of Americans aged 25+ have completed at least a Bachelor's degree, this is true of 51.41% of Prolific users. These documented gaps in educational attainment among Prolific users and the general U.S. population are relevant to the discussion of representativeness because a possible overrepresentation of individuals with experience in higher education could have affected the present data set.

Both skewed religious affiliation distribution and strong possibility of skewed educational attainment distribution among the present sample suggest that the results of this study may not be generalizable to the greater U.S. population. Interestingly, examining the intersection of religious affiliation, religious perspectives and educational attainment may also offer an interpretation for the lack of significant difference between framing conditions among this demographic group. Research suggests that attending college modestly increases preferences for institutional religion, while also reducing adherence to exclusivist views of religious truth claims, and increasing acceptance of idiosyncratic beliefs (Hill, 2011). Additionally, while many natural and social scientists identify as religiously non-affiliated, previous findings suggest that these patterns persist into professional life, manifesting for many as a kind of “spiritual atheism,” a distinct openness to religious beliefs and symbols, a pursuit of truth and higher meaning, and an acknowledgement that science and religion are not mutually exclusive, coupled with a staunch lack of commitment to any one religious institution (Ecklund & Long, 2011).

Presented only with the present sample's abnormal religious affiliation distribution, particularly its notably large proportion of non-affiliated participants, one might question

participants' apparent acceptance of and willingness to engage with V/IM, regardless of whether or not it is framed as explicitly Buddhist; If an individual identifies as Atheist, Agnostic, or otherwise religiously non-affiliated, would we not expect them to oppose a Buddhist practice like V/IM? Well, if we assume that the great majority (around 86.5%) of the present sample has likely received at least some level of higher education, this expectation is necessarily complicated. It is quite plausible that for many participants in this study, accepting and even expressing openness to trying V/IM says nothing of their own alignment (or lack thereof) with any given religious institution. Instead, the acceptance and willingness demonstrated toward both secular and Buddhist framings of V/IM in this study may be reflective of a demographic that is generally open to religious practice and cultural pluralism, regardless of personal affiliations.

#### ***The Effect of Framing Condition on Belief that V/IM Has a Religious Component***

There was a significant effect of framing condition when participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they believed V/IM has a religious component. On average, participants in the secular framing condition were certain of the fact that there is *no* religious component to Insight Meditation. Given the 'lexical hints' toward secularity (e.g., "non-sectarian," "scientifically validated," "experience the emotional and physical benefits," etc.) provided throughout their introduction to the practice, this resounding *no* from participants, alongside disparate reactions from their counterparts in the Buddhist framing condition, supports previous findings which suggest that 'lexical hints' may have a significant influence on perception and comprehension (Mayweg-Paus & Jucks, 2015).

Interestingly, while there was a significant difference between framing conditions in terms of whether or not V/IM has a religious component, the average response ( $M = 3.17$ ) among participants in the Buddhist framing condition seems to suggest uncertainty with respect to this

query. It is also notable that a higher percentage of participants in this condition seemed to believe that there is *no* religious component than those who were uncertain. These findings suggest that there was a lack of consensus among participants in the Buddhist framing condition regarding the religiosity (or lack thereof) of V/IM, despite the presence of ‘lexical hints’ (i.e., “ancient Buddhist technique,” “According to the Buddha, the ultimate benefit of *vipassana* meditation is Liberation,” etc.) at religiosity, similar to those that appear to have led to consensus in the secular framing condition.

It is important to recognize that the vignette used to introduce participants in this condition to V/IM was designed to be perceived as religious, and thus connotes Buddhist ideals, but does not ever explicitly use terms like “religion” or “religious” to describe the practice. It is entirely possible, therefore, participants’ failure to reach a consensus on the religiosity of the practice was reflective of convoluted study design. An alternative explanation could be that participants did, in fact, perceive a *Buddhist* component to V/IM, but that to some, that is not synonymous with religion or religious practice. This would align with historical framings of Buddhism as transcendent of ‘religious’ status, spiritual rather than religious (McMahan, 2012), as well as with the legacy of secular framing associated with *vipassana* specifically (Compton, 2017; Stuart, 2020; Goenka, n.d.). Perhaps the unequivocalty of the present finding does speak to the power of linguistic framing, after all. It is more than likely that the subtle ‘lexical hints’ given within one brief introduction to V/IM were not persuasive enough to overwrite participants’ pre-existing beliefs surrounding the religious status of the practice, or of Buddhism as a whole. Still, we must acknowledge the fact that the mere existence of these notions can be traced back to decades worth of deliberate secularization and spiritualization of *vipassana*—thus, back to the very same mechanism of linguistic framing that is the subject of this study.

### *The Effect of Prior Experience on Willingness & Acceptability*

When analyses were conducted based on whether participants had experience with V/IM prior to the present study, it was found that those who did have prior experience perceived the practice to be significantly more acceptable than those who did not have prior experience, but were no more willing to actually engage with it. Before drawing any interpretations from these findings, it must be noted that the present sample was non-normally distributed in regards to prior experience; A strong majority (81.44%, or 79 participants) of participants reported never having had prior experience with V/IM, meaning the power of any assumptions made about prior experience data are based on the statistical power of the much smaller sample (18.56%, or 18 participants). Thus, before any robust conclusions can be made about the effect of prior experience on perceptions of V/IM, further research should be conducted with a larger, more evenly distributed sample.

Still, significantly higher acceptability ratings among participants who had prior experience with V/IM may point to some level of familiarity bias, therefore aligning with previous research which suggests that familiarity guides recognition-based attitudes and decision-making (Schwikert & Curran, 2014). In the case of Buddhist meditation practices more specifically, studies suggest that concerns about religious or spiritual components of a practice like V/IM may be disarmed by familiarity with said practice, allowing even Christian chaplains and clinical health professionals at cancer centers to accept that which may not immediately fit within their religious or ethical frameworks (Mascaro et al. 2021; 2022). Given the previous research which suggests that prior experience with an intervention like V/IM is associated with higher acceptance of said practice, it seems the results of the present study may be indicative of this phenomenon at work.

### **Limitations & Future Directions**

Although these findings have been fruitful in illuminating the nuance associated with linguistic framing and its effects on perceptions of V/IM, it is necessary to acknowledge several potential limitations of this study. Firstly, the results should be interpreted with the understanding that the study relied on non-probability sampling. While recruiting from Prolific likely produced a more heterogeneous sample than, say, convenience sampling among Bard undergraduates, the Prolific population does not represent the full diversity of the U.S. population—this was evidenced by the striking number of religiously non-affiliated participants in this study, and the overall skewness of the sample in this regard. If further research aims to produce results that are generalizable to the greater population of the U.S., it could be fruitful to explore various other sampling methods, and will be imperative to collect more demographic data, in order to confirm the representativeness of the sample.

That said, it seems the present study may have reached a smaller, comparatively more homogenous pool of participants, whose unique attributes (i.e., religious affiliation and educational attainment, among other factors) may have influenced the results. While this study fails to substantiate previous findings which provide partial support for the unmediated effect of linguistic framing on the acceptability of practices like V/IM, the present results are consistent with the conclusion that amenability is often more demographic- and person-specific (Palitsky et al., 2022). Future studies should take this consideration into account, particularly with respect to sampling and study design; Researchers might recruit, for instance, specific religious populations (e.g., Mascaro et al., 2022), or focus solely on either participants who have, or those who have not had prior experience with V/IM, and should be mindful of the myriad of factors which may influence perceptions of V/IM in concert with the way it is framed.

Admittedly, though this study was meant to act as a partial replication of the research conducted by Palitsky et al. (2022), whose methodology did account for the relationships between religious and existential perspectives, scriptural literalism, individual openness, and linguistic framing, this level of nuance is not reflected in the design of the present study. Because of time and resource constraints, and personal interest in the relationship between linguistic framing and perceptions of V/IM specifically, I collapsed the empirically validated scales utilized by Palitsky et. al (2022) to assess these crucial constructs into a single survey item. Future researchers should avoid these pitfalls, paying equal attention to each of the factors that influence perceptions of V/IM.

Lastly, the results of this study reflect a lack of consensus among participants in the Buddhist framing condition surrounding the religiosity of V/IM. The unequivocal nature of these results points to a critical methodological oversight—because of my own biases and conceptualizations of religion and religious practice, I failed to account for the fact that others may not associate Buddhist-based practices with religion, or may not view Buddhism as a religion at all. The trouble is, there is no universal definition of religion, and it is especially tricky to anticipate participant preconceptions of practice like *vipassana*, which has been systematically distanced from religion. The diversity of thought surrounding religiosity that is demonstrated by these results further underscores the aforementioned importance of utilizing measures like the Existential Quest or the Truth of Teachings scale (Palitsky, et al. 2022) to assess the flexibility of participants' religious outlooks, their levels of scriptural literalism, and the various other dimensions through which personal conceptions of religion may be revealed. For the same reason, it would be productive to conduct qualitative research on participants' perceptions of V/IM, and of different framings of the practice—participants' responses to survey

measures may not capture capture the full extent of their attitudes or translate to their real life behaviors the way that their own words would (Palitsky, et al. 2022; Mascaro et al., 2022).

### **Conclusion**

This study was meant to provide insight into the effect of linguistic framing on participants' acceptance of and willingness to try V/IM. Primary findings suggest that among the present sample, there was no significant effect of framing condition. V/IM was generally amenable to participants, whether it was framed as Buddhist or secular. Perhaps, contrary to my original hypotheses, there is a significant portion of Americans—or at the very least, a significant portion of Prolific users—who are open to religious framing, and are ready to accept that a practice like V/IM can be both empirically validated and Buddhist, or religious, or spiritual, that these attributes are not mutually exclusive.

On the contrary, it would be equally fair to propose that S.N. Goenka simply was, indeed, so successful in framing V/IM as separate from religion—and framing himself as pragmatic, rational, separate from his own staunchly conservative Hindu upbringing—that this legacy of secular framing persists in modern conceptions of *vipassana* and other Buddhism-based practices (Stuart, 2020). If we accept this as highly plausible, it is easy to imagine that such pervasive notions surrounding V/IM, notions which have permeated discussions of Buddhism-based practices for decades, are significantly more influential in shaping perceptions of V/IM than a 150-word blurb on the practice, regardless of how blatantly “Buddhist” or “religious” it may have come across.

Throughout this research, I have often found myself lost in the weeds of ethical and existential ambiguity that can arise from interdisciplinary study. How does one maintain loyalty to the principles of psychology, to an experimental process that necessitates some level of

operationalization and objectivity, while also questioning this thirst for objective truth, and respecting the notion that there is no universal definition of religion? Why subject *vipassana* to the same black and white framing that I am trying to critique? Is there perhaps a more productive, nuanced way to discuss *vipassana*? To appreciate linguistic framing in its ubiquity?

Time and time again, I come back to the core commonality of Buddhism and psychology: the problem of suffering (Lindhal, 2015). *Vipassana* is a tool with which meditators are building safe spaces for collective experience and process of painful embodied emotions around racialized trauma (Gajaweera, 2021); It is a way to enhance pre-existing Christian faith practices (Steele, 2000); It is efficacious from our cells to our social lives (UC Davis, 2017). *Vipassana* can be each of these things and more, all at once, and in every instance, it is contributing to the alleviation of suffering. As researchers we must align ourselves with this goal, evolving toward frames that feel comfortable, inviting, and allow *vipassana* to liberate.

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**Appendix A**

Recruitment Text, posted on Prolific

**Language and Perception**

By Bard.edu

\$1.80•\$12.00/hr; 9mins; 102 places

In this study, we aim to learn about the effects of language on perception.

You will be asked to read a short passage, and then to answer 8 questions. In all, this survey will take around 7-10 minutes.

To take part in this study, you must be at least 18 years old, and must reside in the United States.

Thank you for your interest in this research!

Devices you can use to take this study: Desktop, Mobile, Tablet

## Appendix B

Consent Form, preceded Qualtrics survey



Congratulations, you are eligible to participate in research led by Sarah Eckert, a student of Psychology & The Interdisciplinary Study of Religions at Bard College! The purpose of this online survey is to explore the role of reading on perception. You will read a passage, and be asked to complete a survey. You have been invited to participate because you indicated that you are at least 18 years of age, and that you reside in the United States.

If you do choose to participate, you will first be asked to carefully read a brief passage. Next, you will complete a short survey on the passage you just read. In total, this process should last approximately 7-10 minutes.

In order to protect your privacy and ensure confidentiality, your answers to all survey questions will be anonymous. That is, you will not be asked to provide your name, or required to provide any other directly identifiable information. The data collected through this survey will be stored on a password protected computer, only accessible to the lead researcher, and will be destroyed by June 1st, 2024. Responses will only be published in summary form in Sarah Eckert's senior project, available in hard copy at the Bard College Stevenson Library and in digital copy at the Bard College Digital Commons.

We do not anticipate any risks from participating in this experiment. Because we will be taking precautions to ensure that your confidentiality is maintained, this risk is equivalent to everyday use of the Internet. If you decide to participate in this study, you will be compensated \$1.80 upon completion, and may learn something new!

Participation in this study is voluntary; You may absolutely refuse to participate. If you do decide to participate, you are free to skip any questions without penalty, and will still receive compensation upon completion of the survey. You may also choose to withdraw at any time, without penalty.

If at any point you have questions about participation in this study, you may contact Sarah Eckert (sc4947@bard.edu), or her faculty advisors Frank Scalzo (scalzo@bard.edu) and Dominique Townsend (dtownsend@bard.edu). Any questions specifically about your rights as a participant may be directed to the Bard Institutional Review Board (irb@bard.edu). Should you decide to participate, you may also contact any of these parties afterward.

By clicking the button below, you acknowledge:

- Your participation is voluntary.
  - You are at least 18 years old, and a US resident.
  - You are aware that you may choose to terminate your participation at any time for any reason.
- I consent, begin the study.
- I do not consent, I do not wish to participate.



## Appendix C

Debriefing Statement, succeeded Qualtrics survey



Congratulations, you just finished the data collection portion of this study—thank you so much for participating! As was mentioned in the consent form you signed, this study is concerned with the effect of linguistic framing on perception. More specifically, we want to know (1) if language influences the perceived acceptability of vipassana (Insight Meditation) among Americans, and (2) if language affects how willing Americans are to try this practice.

In this study, you were asked to read a short passage on this practice. One group received a passage written in “secular” language, while the other group’s passage featured the use of Pali and Sanskrit terms, and traditionally Buddhist framing. Having read their assigned passages, both groups were asked to fill out a survey designed to indicate how acceptable you believed the practice to be, and how willing you would be to try it in the future. We expect to find a significant difference in perception of Insight Meditation (vipassana) based on how this practice was framed. You were also given the opportunity to indicate your religious affiliation, and views on religion. We expect these factors to play a role in influencing perception.

If you’d like to know more about this research, please contact Sarah Eckert ([sc4947@bard.edu](mailto:sc4947@bard.edu))! If you have any questions concerning your participation in this experiment, or your rights as a participant, you may contact Sarah, her faculty advisors Frank Scalzo ([scalzo@bard.edu](mailto:scalzo@bard.edu)) and Dominique Townsend ([dtownsend@bard.edu](mailto:dtownsend@bard.edu)), or the Bard Institutional Review Board chair ([irb@bard.edu](mailto:irb@bard.edu)). Again, your participation is greatly appreciated—you will receive \$1.80 compensation in exchange for your help in our research!

## Appendix D

### Full Introductory Script, Condition 1: Buddhist Framing of *Vipassana*



#### **A Short Introduction to Vipassana Meditation**

##### **What is Vipassana?**

Vipassana, or insight meditation, is an ancient Buddhist technique for enhancing mindfulness. It is believed to be the form of meditation taught by the Buddha himself, and involves sustaining close attention to your thoughts, emotions, and sensations, through which you will ultimately gain clarity. In vipassana meditation, you simply observe your inner personhood instead of consciously controlling the experience. The goal is to help you:

- Quiet the mind.
- Focus on the present.
- See and accept thoughts, emotions, and sensations for what they really are.
- Worry less about the past and future as you learn to see the truth of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and selflessness.
- Respond to situations based on reality, instead of worries or preconceived notions.

##### **What are the benefits?**

According to the Buddha, the ultimate benefit of vipassana meditation is Liberation, or freedom from both suffering and the causes and sources of suffering. This is a huge achievement, and one that cannot be reached all at once. However, starting small and consistently practicing vipassana meditation offers the following benefits:

- Relieves stress.
- Reduces anxiety.

- Improves mental wellness, concentration and awareness.
- Frees the practitioner, over time, from prejudices and stereotypes.

### **How to practice Vipassana?**

If you're interested in trying vipassana meditation at home, follow these steps:

- Set aside 10 to 15 minutes to practice. The Buddha suggested that you meditate in a quiet place, when you first wake up in the morning.
- Choose a quiet area with little to no distractions. An empty room or a secluded spot outside are great choices.
- Sit on the ground. Cross your legs in a comfortable position. Engage your core, straighten your back, and relax your body.
- Close your eyes and breathe normally. Focus on your natural breath and what you feel.
- Be mindful of each inhale and exhale. Observe your thoughts, feelings, and sensations without reacting or judging.
- If you become distracted, simply observe the distraction and return to your breath.
- Aim to do this for at least 5 to 10 minutes when you first start. As you get used to this practice, work up to 15 minutes or longer of vipassana. When you succeed, you're on your way to a whole new awareness of life!

## Appendix E

### Condition 2: Secular Framing of Insight Meditation



#### A Short Introduction to Insight Meditation

##### What is Insight Meditation?

Insight Meditation is one of the world's oldest meditation practices used for enhancing mindfulness. This non-sectarian, scientifically validated practice involves sustaining close attention to your thoughts, emotions, and sensations, through which you will ultimately gain clarity. In Insight Meditation, you simply observe your inner self instead of consciously controlling the experience. The goal is to help you:

- Quiet your mind.
- Focus on the present.
- Accept thoughts, emotions, and sensations for what they really are.
- Reduce regrets by dwelling less on the past, and worry less about the future.
- Respond to situations based on reality, instead of worries or preconceived notions.

##### What are the benefits?

Numerous studies have examined the effects of Insight Meditation. In addition to higher rates of self-acceptance, competence, engagement, growth, and positive relationships among participants who practiced Insight Meditation, research suggests that the technique offers the following benefits:

- Relieves stress and reduces anxiety.
- Improves mental wellness.
- Promotes brain plasticity.

– Helps treat addiction.

### **How to practice Insight Meditation?**

If you're interested in trying Insight meditation at home, follow these steps:

- Set aside 10 to 15 minutes to practice. It's recommended that you do Insight Meditation when you first wake up in the morning.
- Choose a quiet area with little to no distractions. An empty room or a secluded spot outside are great choices.
- Sit on the ground. Cross your legs in a comfortable position. Engage your core, straighten your back, and relax your body.
- Close your eyes and breathe normally. Focus on your natural breath and what you feel.
- Be mindful of each inhale and exhale. Observe your thoughts, feelings, and sensations without reacting or judging.
- If you become distracted, simply observe the distraction and return to your breath.
- Aim to do this for at least 5 to 10 minutes when you first start. As you get used to this practice, work up to 15 minutes or longer of Insight meditation, and experience the emotional and physical benefits of this practice for yourself!

**Appendix F**

## Full Survey Script, Condition 1: “Vipassana” Questionnaire



1. Do you have any prior experience with *vipassana* practice?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
  
2. Which of the following best describes how you feel about using *vipassana* meditation?
  - a. Very Comfortable with the idea
  - b. Comfortable with the idea
  - c. Neither comfortable nor uncomfortable with the idea
  - d. Uncomfortable with the idea
  - e. Very uncomfortable with the idea
  
3. Do you like vipassana meditation guidance?
  - a. Definitely yes
  - b. Yes
  - c. Neither like nor dislike
  - d. No
  - e. Definitely no
  
4. Select the choice that best describes how you feel about the following statement: I would like to practice vipassana meditation in the future.
  - a. Strongly Agree
  - b. Agree
  - c. Neither agree nor disagree
  - d. Disagree
  - e. Strongly disagree
  
5. Select the choice that best describes how you feel about the following statement: I would recommend vipassana meditation to a friend.
  - a. Strongly Agree
  - b. Agree
  - c. Neither agree nor disagree
  - d. Disagree
  - e. Strongly disagree
  
6. If you're reading this, choose “strongly disagree.”

- a. Strongly agree
  - b. Agree
  - c. Neither agree nor disagree
  - d. Disagree
  - e. Strongly disagree
7. In your opinion, does vipassana have a religious component?
- a. Definitely yes
  - b. Yes
  - c. Unsure
  - d. No
  - e. Definitely no
8. Do you view religion as a positive or negative force?
- a. Extremely positive
  - b. Somewhat positive
  - c. Neither positive nor negative
  - d. Somewhat negative
  - e. Extremely negative
9. What is your present religion, if any?
- a. Protestant
  - b. Roman Catholic
  - c. Mormon
  - d. Orthodox such as Greek or Russian Orthodox
  - e. Jewish
  - f. Muslim
  - g. Buddhist
  - h. Hindu
  - i. Atheist
  - j. Agnostic
  - k. Something else
  - l. Nothing in particular

**Appendix G**

## Full Survey Script, Condition 2: “Insight Meditation” Questionnaire



1. Do you have any prior experience with Insight Meditation practice?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
  
2. Which of the following best describes how you feel about using Insight Meditation?
  - a. Very Comfortable with the idea
  - b. Comfortable with the idea
  - c. Neither comfortable nor uncomfortable with the idea
  - d. Uncomfortable with the idea
  - e. Very uncomfortable with the idea
  
3. Do you like Insight Meditation guidance?
  - a. Definitely yes
  - b. Yes
  - c. Neither like nor dislike
  - d. No
  - e. Definitely no
  
4. Select the choice that best describes how you feel about the following statement: I would like to practice Insight Meditation in the future.
  - a. Strongly Agree
  - b. Agree
  - c. Neither agree nor disagree
  - d. Disagree
  - e. Strongly disagree
  
5. Select the choice that best describes how you feel about the following statement: I would recommend Insight Meditation to a friend.
  - a. Strongly Agree
  - b. Agree
  - c. Neither agree nor disagree
  - d. Disagree
  - e. Strongly disagree
  
6. If you're reading this, choose “strongly disagree.”



- a. Strongly agree
  - b. Agree
  - c. Neither agree nor disagree
  - d. Disagree
  - e. Strongly disagree
7. In your opinion, does Insight Meditation have a religious component?
- a. Definitely yes
  - b. Yes
  - c. Unsure
  - d. No
  - e. Definitely no
8. Do you view religion as a positive or negative force?
- a. Extremely positive
  - b. Somewhat positive
  - c. Neither positive nor negative
  - d. Somewhat negative
  - e. Extremely negative
9. What is your present religion, if any?
- a. Protestant
  - b. Roman Catholic
  - c. Mormon
  - d. Orthodox such as Greek or Russian Orthodox
  - e. Jewish
  - f. Muslim
  - g. Buddhist
  - h. Hindu
  - i. Atheist
  - j. Agnostic
  - k. Something else
  - l. Nothing in particular

**Appendix H**

## IRB Approval Letter

**Bard College**

Institutional Review Board

Date: 2/14/2024

To: Sarah Eckert

Cc: Frank Scalzo; Dominique Townsend Nazir Nazari

From: Ziad M. Abu-Rish, IRB Chair

Re: Hungry for McMindfulness? The Effect of Linguistic Framing on Perceptions of Vipassana

**DECISION: APPROVAL**

Dear Sarah Eckert:

The Bard IRB committee has reviewed your proposal. Your application is conditionally approved, on the basis of the below requested modification, through February 13, 2025. Your case number is 2025FEB13-ECK.

Please notify the IRB if your methodology changes or unexpected events arise.

We wish you the best of luck with your research.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Z. M. Abu-Rish".

Ziad M. Abu-Rish, Ph.D.

IRB Chair

Associate Professor of Human Rights and Middle Eastern Studies

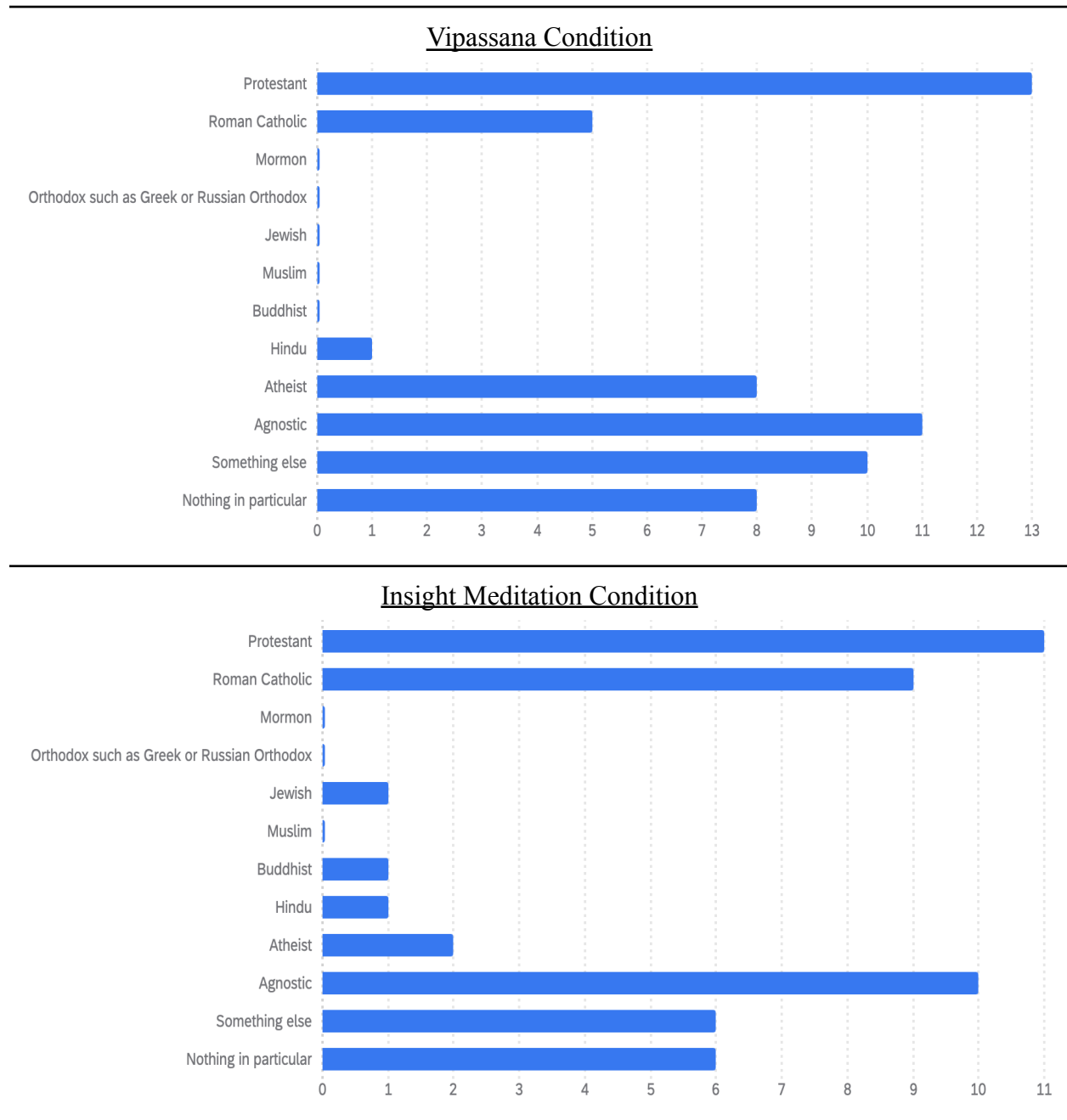
Bard College

[zaburish@bard.edu](mailto:zaburish@bard.edu)

Appendix I

Figure 1

*Participant Religious Affiliation Endorsements*



*Note.* For data analysis purposes, these endorsements were re-coded into a derived set of five religious affiliation categories: 0 = non-affiliated (included “Atheist,” “Agnostic,” and “Nothing in Particular”); 1 = Buddhist; 2 = Protestant; 3 = Roman Catholic; 4 = Other (included “Mormon,” “Orthodox,” “Jewish,” “Muslim,” “Hindu,” and “Something else”).

**Appendix J**

## OSF Pre-Registration



**Author:** Sarah Eckert (Bard College) - sc4947@bard.edu

**Advisors:** Frank Scalzo (professor) - scalzo@bard.edu, & Dominique Townsend (Bard College)  
- dtownsend@bard.edu

**1) Have any data been collected for this study already?**

No, no data have been collected for this study yet.

**2) What's the main question being asked or hypothesis being tested in this study?**

Participants will perceive vipassana (Insight Meditation) as being more acceptable when it is framed as "secular" (as opposed to "Buddhist"); Participants will also be more willing to engage in this practice when it is framed as "secular."

**3) Describe the key dependent variable(s) specifying how they will be measured.**

Acceptability of vipassana, depending on whether it is framed as "Buddhist" or "secular";

Participants willingness to try vipassana, depending on whether it is framed as "Buddhist" or "secular."

Having been exposed to the practice through a short passage, participants will be asked to answer three questions designed to test acceptability, and one designed to test willingness—participants' answers to these survey questions will be scored to provide separate measures of acceptability and willingness to try vipassana.

**4) How many and which conditions will participants be assigned to?**

Participants will be assigned to one of two conditions: (1) "Buddhist" framing condition, or (2) "secular" framing condition.

**5) Specify exactly which analyses you will conduct to examine the main question/hypothesis.**

To characterize the sample, after obtaining descriptive statistics of religious affiliation, the proportion of the five derived religious affiliation categories between conditions will be compared using a chi-square test. In order to determine the representativeness of the sample, religious affiliation proportions will then be compared to those found in the Pew Research Center's United States Religious Landscape Study (NW et. al, 2015). Next, the effects of framing condition (*vipassana*/Buddhist or Insight Meditation/secular) on (H1) willingness to engage in *vipassana* and (H2) acceptability of the practice will be examined via separate independent-samples t-tests. Having examined the primary hypotheses, all other variables will be tested through exploratory analyses. Separate independent-samples t-tests will be used to determine the effects of framing condition on (1) belief that the practice has a religious component, (2) religious perspective, and (3) prior experience. Additionally, a correlation matrix will be employed to characterize the relationships between willingness, acceptability, religious component, and religious perspective.

**6) Describe exactly how outliers will be defined and handled, and your precise rule(s) for excluding observations.**

We will exclude participants who complete the study in less than 30 seconds, and those who incorrectly answer the attention check question. With respect to t-tests run to test the effects of framing on acceptability and willingness, any values with a z-score of greater than 3 or less than -3 will be considered outliers. All outliers will be included in the data set, unless it can be

reasonably concluded that a specific outlier has resulted from an error, in which case this value will be excluded from the data set.

**7) How many observations will be collected or what will determine sample size?**

The sample size (102 participants) was determined based on a priori power analysis.

**Appendix K**

## Budget Proposal



<b>Project Title</b>	<i>Hungry for McMindfulness? The Effect of Linguistic Framing on Perceptions of Vipassana (Insight Meditation)</i>
<b>Description</b>	I intend to administer an online survey, through Qualtrics, which aims to assess the ways in which linguistic framing affects the perception of <i>vipassana</i> . Participants will be recruited and compensated through Prolific.
<b>Expected Number of Participants, &amp; Rationale</b>	102 participants <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Anticipated Cohen's <math>d = 0.5</math></li> <li>● Desired Statistical power level = 0.8</li> <li>● <math>p = .05</math></li> </ul>
<b>Expected Length of Study</b>	9 minutes
<b>Payment Rate</b>	\$1.80 per participant (\$12/hr)
<b>Total Expected Cost</b>	<p><b>Participant payments:</b> \$183.60</p> <p><b>Service fees:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Prolific fees (academic plan): \$61.20</li> <li>● VAT: \$12.24</li> </ul> <p><b>Total:</b> \$257.04</p>