

Understanding Mis- and Dis-Information Consumption in a Polarized Society –  
Analyzing Selective Evaluation, Subjective Perception of Opinion Leaders and Effects of  
Heuristic Cues in Post-decision

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This dissertation titled  
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## **Abstract**

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Spread of mis- and dis-information has emerged as one of the most concerning threat to democratic processes in the United States. Who is to blame for such a rise in the spread of mis- and dis-information is yet to be decided, however, this study aimed to explore how such forms of information is consumed and believed by the audiences. This research expands on our understanding of how ideological cues work to promote mis/disinformation consumption along with other factors like, political opinion leaders, cognitive dissonance and personal ideology. Furthermore, the study explores the two-step selective evaluation process, which an information consumer goes through before making any decision on the information. The decision is then further rationalized in post-decisional effects. A survey experiment was conducted on 429 respondents who showed that any information content will be palatable to them if those information carries ideologically confirming cues. Moreover, the study used opinion leader as manipulation to test cognitive dissonance, consonance, and resonance against the personal ideology of the respondents to further divulge into the process of mis/disinformation consumption. A deductive thematic analysis of audience responses gives a direction to the decision-making process when faced with congruent or incongruent information.

## **Dedication**

*In memory of*

*Late Shri Prithwish Ghosh Chowdhury*

*and countless others who lost their lives in this pandemic.*

*Dedicated to all those students who are finding it hard to breathe, struggling to keep their heads up – you're loved, you're heard, you're valued beyond your school.*

*One day more...*

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## Chapter 1: Misinformation, Disinformation, and the Post-Truth Era

### Introduction

“Well, we’re interrupting this because what the President of the United States is saying, in large part, is absolutely untrue. He began – and – we are not going to allow it to keep going because it’s not true.”

- *The News with Shepard Smith, CNBC.*

“You’re watching President Trump speaking live from the White House, and we’ve to interrupt here because the president has made a number of false statements, including the notion that there has been fraudulent voting. There has been no evidence of that. Allegations [have been made] by his campaign, but his campaign spokespeople were unable to provide any evidence.”

- Lester Holt, NBC News.

On November 5, 2020, in an unprecedented manner, TV news channels cut away from President Trump’s speech on voter fraud and illegal votes being casted in millions across the country. The step taken by the news channels to halt the broadcasting of a sitting president’s address to the nation is not only novel in its nature, but also a detrimental step taken to curb the spread of disinformation among its audience. Only CNN and Fox News ran the president’s address in full, however, immediately after the address, Anderson Cooper of CNN said that Trump is acting “like an obese turtle on his back, flailing in the hot sun, realizing his time was over.” Similarly, the Fox White House correspondent John Roberts iterated the feelings of his colleagues across the board by saying, “What we saw tonight is a president who believes that at the end of the day, when all the votes are counted, the election is not going to go his way, so he's trying to plan an alternate route to retain the White House.” These were *active* steps taken by journalists

and media organizations to control the spread of false information that do not carry any evidential support.

Next day, on November 6, media critic, Erik Wemple wrote in his opinion piece for *The Washington Post*,

There's no way to measure how much damage Trump has done in his countless hours of live appearances on U.S. television networks. It is unquestionably massive, however: People duck in and out of television news coverage; sometimes they catch the fact-checking segments, sometimes they don't. What they have caught is a full helping of this president, a man practiced in the mechanics of TV and dedicated to ensuring that his most dangerous falsehoods get top billing. Even those networks that cut off Trump on Thursday evening aired his opening about winning of "legal" votes. (Wemple, 2020, para. 15).

The whole conundrum can be summarized in Wemple's headline for the op-ed piece, "Four years too late" (Wemple, 2020).

However, it was not President Trump who unleashed an era of false information upon the society. Believing that is a misconception that has the potential to undermine media effects research carried on for decades. Martens et al. (2018) in a study for European Union states that, "fake news is not a new phenomenon at all; it is as old as the newspaper industry. The first occurrence of fake news was reported in the 16th century" (p. 8). It is true, even though we might see a surge in the use of the term "fake news" in the recent years, the idea or the conceptualization of the phrase existed since the beginning of press.

### **The Rise of Partisan Journalism**

Kuypers (2014) in his book, *Partisan Journalism*, uses the term "partisan press" to denote anything that was overtly sensationalized, misleading, and opinion-based information passed as news. He states that press used to utilize different kinds of

strategies in the years following U.S. independence to mobilize people to get out and vote (which at that time was a very new form of democratic participation). These strategies included directly catering to political parties and their messages. Showing loyalty to one party over the other and directly publishing stories that had no evidential credibility against the opponent. This sparked the beginning of the long journey of party press in the United States. The birth of party press also led to its by-product – partisanship in press and partisanship in consumption.

But how does partisanship and fake news relate? In an opinion letter to the *New York Times*, Nobel Laureate Paul Krugman (2014) makes an argument on fake news and partisanship. He says,

In practice liberals don't engage in the kind of mass rejections of evidence that conservatives do. Yes, you can find examples where "some" liberals got off on a hobbyhorse of one kind or another, or where the liberal conventional wisdom turned out wrong. But you don't see the kind of lockstep rejection of evidence that we see over and over again on the right.

However, it is the liberals in mainstream media who have condensed the right-wing media, fabricated news and conspiracy theories in a single construct and put them all under "fake news" (Farkas & Schou, 2018; Oremus, 2016). As a result, the right-wing conservative groups have retaliated by labelling the liberal media as "fake news". This kind of futile counterproductive debates have caused nothing but legitimizing the term "fake news" within the American and world vocabulary. Trump's rise to power and his subsequent election strengthened such belief, as he continues to use the term to target any criticism against him. This has resulted in his followers to adopt "fake news" as a weapon to undermine credible criticism against them and the former president (Jamieson, 2017; Rucker, Wagner, & Miller, 2017).

## What is “Fake News”?

Ha, Perez and Ray (2019) did an exploratory, longitudinal study to trace down the research done on fake news through Google Scholar and review the emergence of the subfield within media and communication research. Their study reveals that the first study on fake news was done in 2008, however the concept remained dormant until 2016, when it saw a sudden spike as a valid topic for communication research. Their study also revealed that throughout the 142 journal articles that consists of the keyword “fake news” in their title and are verified journal publications, the explicit definition of “fake news” varies. It has remained a complex concept to be able to define by scholars. Farkas and Schou (2018) hence, concluded that the ideal way to operationalize “fake news” is to call it a floating signifier.

Floating signifier is a post-Marxist concept that derives its meaning from a postmodernist view on relativism. Lacau (2005) essentially defined a floating signifier as a form of signifier that has no fundamental meaning but is represented by a hegemonic construct of socially agreeable norms. The members of each chain of meanings are distinguishable as they bear different logics, yet they are all tied by an equivalent form of meaning. This kind of social interactions are heavily used to create political identities, conflicts, and antagonisms (Lacau, 2005).

It is for this reason, perhaps that there is no fundamentally agreed upon definition of “fake news”. “Fake news” is many things, but where it all converges is that it is a form of information that is disseminated to cause reaction within the public or the mass. The least contested typologies associated with “fake news” are – *disinformation* and *misinformation* (Farkas & Schou, 2018).

The typologies of disinformation and misinformation varies in one key area – disinformation is a *deliberate* and *intentional* spread of false and misleading information for some form of gain, whereas misinformation is *unknowingly* spreading and sharing false and misleading information (Farkas & Schou, 2018). These two typologies have been widely accepted in the recent research on fake news (Fallis, 2015; Karlova & Fisher, 2012). It is in the *action* of the sender or the source that renders the definition to the typology of the information (Andsager, Austin, & Pinkleton, 2001).

The spread of misinformation and disinformation has been in a record high in the U.S. In a Pew Research Center survey conducted in 2019, almost 50% of the sample said that “made-up news/info” is a bigger problem within American democracy.

Misinformation and disinformation ranked higher on the chart than key issues like “racism”, “terrorism”, “climate change” and “violent crimes”. In the same survey, 57 % of Americans said that political leaders have a lot to do with made-up information being spread around. And most of the sample (53%) said that news media has a responsibility in reducing the spread of such false and made-up information (Mitchell et al., 2019).

### **Ushering in the Era of Post-Truth**

The relative surge and the apparent use of mis- and disinformation has rendered suspicion on the political communication spectrum. Assuming that the U.S. society has enjoyed an era of truth previously, Schlesinger (2017) addresses that this present era of insurmountable mis- and disinformation “has signaled a perception of change both in how the public domain is constituted and in the conduct of major protagonists in the media-political sphere” (p. 603). This new media ecosystem where the actors

intentionally take part in deliberate spread of false information to create a sense of confusion is the crux of the post-truth era (Ball, 2017; Corner, 2017; d’Ancona, 2017).

Post-truth or its implications, however, gained a momentum when Oxford Dictionary declared it as their Word of the Year in 2016 (OUP, 2016). Oxford’s choice of such a novel concept to bring forth was attributed to the surge in its usage in 2015. Donald Trump’s campaign rhetoric and his subsequent election ushered us into an overt disengagement with truth and facts and created an environment for misinformation to thrive (McIntyre, 2018). As a result, Oxford Dictionary defined post-truth as “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal beliefs.”

Lee McIntyre, in his book *Post-Truth* (2018), traced the development of scientific results and their denial by nonexperts as a contributing factor behind the present conception of post-truth era. McIntyre writes, “In some instances laypersons feel it is in their interest to *question* both the motives and the competence of scientists. And there is where ‘science denialism’ is born” (p. 18). However, science denialism is just a by-product of individual’s tendency to cope with unconfirming information – a voluntary act of choosing information that has positive emotional effect, rather than the one that causes psychological discomfort (d’Ancona, 2017). It is this selective consumption of information that must be thoroughly understood before we can delve further into the topic.



## **Chapter 2: Understanding Selective Evaluation, Cognitive Dissonance, and the Effects of Opinion Leaders – A Literature Review**

### **Selectivity in Information Consumption – Defining Selective Exposure**

Social psychologists have been studying the concept of selective exposure as a widely accepted principle in communication (Sears and Freedman, 1967). Hyman and Sheatsley (1947) and Klapper (1960), separately, concluded that political campaigns and mass communication, in general and of any kind, rarely has an impact because selective exposure in part of the audience, play a key role in information consumption. Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet (1948) found that because of selective exposure, political campaigns activate and reinforce the pre-existing notions among the audiences. In his theory of cognitive dissonance, Festinger (1957) said that whenever there are inconsistencies in what a person believes to be true and when the informational evidence suggests otherwise, that person will experience cognitive dissonance and look for rationalizations to minimize that state of dissonance and achieve consonance. Hence, Festinger (1957) said that selective exposure has an important role in reducing this cognitive dissonance and move towards a state of consonance.

It was also assumed that people are generally immune to persuasion as they are generally unacquainted to counterpropaganda (dissonance) because of selective exposure to information (McGuire, 1964). Starting with Hyman and Sheatsley's (1947) and Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet's (1948) experiments, selective exposure has popped up in research studies to explain and to find a causal relation between audiences/voters and the effectiveness of political campaigns, among other things.

Hence, Sears and Freedman (1967) define selective exposure as a form of *systematic bias* towards information consumption in the audience, whenever there is an unusual or counter-information in the communicated content. Sears and Freedman stressed on the term “*systematic bias*” (p. 195), whereas Festinger (1957), even though his definition is similar, used the phrase “*selective voluntary exposure*” (p. 147). The main idea behind the conceptualization is that people tend to expose themselves to information that are favorable and congenial to their existing notions than to those that are hostile or even neutral (Berelson & Steiner, 1964).

### **Selective Exposure Reformulated to Selective Evaluation**

To Sears and Freedman (1967), this selective exposure comes in the decision-making phase or while evaluating, *not* at the exposure phase. So essentially, Sears and Freedman consider information consumption as a two-level process. First, where an individual is exposed to varying information; and second, where the individual selectively chooses what information s/he will deliberate on and hence, actively consume. In their explanation, the resistance to information consumption (a form of selectivity) and its subsequent influence are found during the stages of information evaluation and *not* at the level of selective seeking and/or avoidance of information. The authors said that selectivity in exposure is a rarity and even if any form of selectivity occurs, there are lot of other factors that come to play in that selectivity, other than the ones proposed in dissonance theory (Freedman & Sears, 1965). This was a diversion from Festinger’s (1957) study on dissonance theory. The authors argue that Festinger was wrong in indicating that audiences selectively expose themselves to conforming information, rather, they suggest, that audiences selectively evaluate and consume information. But

before we divert ourselves, we should look at Frey (1986) who suggested, “Freedman and Sears’s (1965) pessimism should not, however, prevent us from redirecting our attention to selective exposure phenomena, especially since Festinger’s subsequent revision of dissonance theory (Festinger, 1964) provides a basis for deriving new predictions concerning selective exposure phenomena” (p. 43).

Festinger (1964) indeed reviewed his seminal study of 1957 and said that selective exposure is not the only determinant for cognitive dissonance reduction and neither cognitive dissonance is a unidimensional concept with linear effect. Before Sears and Freedman’s (1967) study, Festinger (1964) concluded that an individual will selectively look for consonant information or they will avoid dissonant information *once the decision has been made*. However, he states, if the same people feel that they can easily refute the dissonant information, or if the dissonant information may have some sort of gratifying value to the individual (like learning experience or for future argument), that individual will consciously seek out the dissonant information.

Festinger also addresses the concept of a curvilinear relationship where an individual will seek out dissonant information if they are given a choice to reverse the decision. If the choice is lacking, then subjects tend to go for consonant information to gain support for their already made decision. These two points suggests that Festinger himself was aware of the shortcomings in his theory and addressed them by incorporating the post-decisional effects in selective exposure and theory of cognitive dissonance, contrary to Sears and Freedman’s critique of the theory. Rhine (1967) also states that there have been major inconsistencies in deciphering Festinger’s theory, especially in

researchers' research design with restricted application of theory and flawed experimental designs.

Subsequently, researchers have pledged their allegiance to one of the two schools of thought – the Festingerian one and the Sears-Freedmanian one – without recognizing that Sears and Freedman and Festinger converge in their deliberation on selective exposure and the causation of such a phenomenon. It is along this line of thought that this researcher's conceptualization of selective exposure falls – a post-decisional approach to the concept of selective exposure in evaluation and deliberation of the information gathered in order to *actively* consume which information, from a plethora of exposed information.

### **Factors Affecting Selective Exposure**

Studies have been conducted to grasp the concept of selective exposure more effectively and to address the main factors that influence selective exposure and consumption of information. They are:

#### ***Education***

Sears and Freedman (1967) stated that education is a “massive” determinant in what kind of information and the number of channels to which an individual will be exposed. Higher the education level, higher the exposure to various messages and channels.

#### ***Utility of Information***

The utility and the usefulness of a particular information determines the exposure to that information (Sears & Freedman, 1967). For example, if someone is writing a

report on how factories are causing air pollution, then that individual will seek out information on the factories' effect on air quality.

### ***Quality and Credibility of Information***

Individuals in general prefer supportive information, however, if the individual is aware that the dissonant information is weak, the individual will choose the weak dissonant information with the same frequency as he will choose the strong supportive information (Kleinhesselink & Edwards, 1975; Lowin, 1967).

Lowin (1969) further addresses the impact of credibility of dissonant and consonant information source over selective exposure. If the dissonant information is coming from a low credibility source, the individual will prefer the dissonant information, but when the dissonant information is coming from a highly credible source, and there is a highly credible consonant information, the sample will choose the highly credible consonant information over the highly credible dissonant information. However, a highly competent dissonant source is selected over a lowly competent consonant source and vice-versa (Frey, 1987; Lowin, 1969). This is also evident in Festinger's crucial concept of 'ceiling-effect' where he says that every individual cognitive system has a threshold level of dissonance. Once that threshold is attained, the individual would prefer information that will argue against his/her original opinion (i.e., the pre-existing consonant opinion) than choosing the information that would support his/her original opinion.

### ***Refutation, Egotism, and Personality***

Feather (1962) studied a sample of smokers and nonsmokers to see how each group will react to the information that smoking causes lung cancer. He found that

egotism plays an important role in deliberate exposure to non-supportive information in order to refute the non-supportive arguments. This was also evident in Brodbeck's (1956) study where individuals chose disagreeing people in a one-on-one, face-to-face dialogue, so that they can argue and refute the disagreeing party's claims.

This kind of personality-based selective exposure can be attributed to research that dealt specifically on personality as an important factor in selective exposure. The five main personality influences on selective exposure are – self-confidence (Canon, 1964); dogmatism (Clarke & James, 1967); closed or open-mindedness (Kleck & Wheaton, 1967); repressive personalities are more prone to selective exposure than sensitive personalities (Olson & Zanna, 1979); and highly anxious people tend to lessen the impact of negative information and increase the effects of positive information (Frey, Stahlberg, & Fries, 1986). In the results of Feather (1962) and Brodbeck (1956), self-confidence plays a key role as refuting non-supportive information will not only boost their confidence, but also boost their ego.

### ***Gratificational Needs***

Kruglanski (1980) stated that in making predictions on epistemological behavior of individuals who partakes in selective exposure, there are three personal needs that needs to be considered:

- Fear of invalidity – from peers on their decision.
- Need for structure – to the decision that they have arrived.
- Conclusional needs – an inherent need to arrive at a conclusion regarding an event or an information.

These gratification needs also helps us to determine how voluntary selective exposure works in information evaluation and consumption. A prominent motivator behind one's seeking out of information is their need to compare themselves in order to validate a decision, opinion or self-worth.

### **Selectively Seeking Out Information to Compare One's Self-Worth**

Festinger (1954) addressed this gratification need in his social comparison theory, where an individual always acquires the meaning of one's own self through a comparative context. The reason for such comparison helps the said individual to evaluate similarities with other individuals, develop opinions and abilities and hence, denote a self-worth (Knobloch-Westerwick & Hastall, 2010).

This comparison also helps an individual to seek out role models. Bandura (2001) in his social cognitive theory states that media users like any human beings are observing creatures. They learn from media in order to expand their knowledge and skills and comply with their perceived role models. This role model is abstract and does not have to denote another human being. Bandura also says that since the media landscape has exploded with innumerable messages and hence, role models, it is essential for the individual to selectively expose themselves to role models that will provide them specific gratifications.

As it has been addressed by Festinger (1964) and Sears and Freedman (1967), the choice of one's role model and whether to pledge allegiance to that role model or not comes during the post-decisional period. It is assumed that the individual has already gathered information that helped him determine whether to follow that role model or not. A simple example would be whether we will follow someone on Instagram or Twitter by

an initial exposure to that person's social media content or that person's social credibility. Randomly choosing someone to follow is a rarity. Moreover, even if we randomly follow someone (given that the gratifying need that we are addressing is to increase our own followership), in most cases people unfollows when there is significant disconfirming content posted by that person.

Gillani et al. (2018) in a study with 174 participants used the web application Social Mirror to show that Twitter followers and followed pages are highly limited among users. Individuals prefer to follow ideologically and politically congruent accounts. Moreover, when pointed to their self-inflicted echo chamber, the participants did not show any cause for concern and judged their social media performance to be perfect, even though they are living in a self-induced cocoon.

### **Opinion Leaders as a Product of Selective Information Consumption**

Along this chain of thoughts, Popkin (1991) and Lupia, McCubbins and Arthur (1998) argue for audience's dependency on news outlets in line with the low information rationality model and for the search of heuristics. The authors argue that individuals in general have a low level of knowledge, as a result, they look to someone who might be able to provide them with the required information and hence, educate them.

The low information rationality model, however, addresses a central tenet to public opinion. It says that the low knowledge level in publics will seek out leadership in form of experts (perceived subjective or objective) and other notable figures to help them decide regarding an event or a policy. Hellevik and Bjørklund (1991) defined opinion leaders as "a person who exerts influence on the opinions of the others" (p. 158). They



are “to be found on every level of society and presumably, therefore, are very much like the people they influence” (Katz, 1957, p. 63).

What Katz (1957) indicated makes it easier to stratify the concept of opinion leaders and deconstruct the generally held notion that opinion leaders must be someone well-known or holding a position of power. As Noelle-Neumann (1991) argues, opinion leaders are not just those whom we see on TV every day or read on newspapers, but factors like personality strength, self-perceived leadership qualities and an aptitude at shaping other’s opinions determine who will be an opinion leader.

Shah and Scheufele (2006) furthers Noelle-Neumann’s conception and says that social standing within groups confer a sense of knowing, which reinforces that individual’s self-perception of opinion leadership. This self-perception of opinion leadership makes them to perceive themselves as “aesthetic arbiters, at the forefront of social trends and early adopters of innovation” (p. 3). Studies have provided evidence that led to the assumption of opinion leaders’ self-assurance and their self-perception as intelligent and independent people who *can* form quality personal judgment about public issues and hence, it is pertinent for them to share it with others (Chan & Mishra, 1990).

In order to gain that form of confidence, Ansolabehere, Behr and Iyenger (1993) and Hart (1999) suggested that opinion leaders will turn to newspaper information over TV as newspapers provide a greater context and perspective. However, Shah and Scheufele (2006) while judging the existing literature in the background of evolving technologies and medium of message, assert that political sophisticates or those who are more attuned to political information and are more engaged will prefer online news sources in the same way that they choose newspapers. Credible online news sources have

a multimedia reach that combines visual and literal aspects to provide a broader image of the event. Similarly, the researchers also mention that opinion leaders with similar kind of personality as political sophisticates will prefer TV news and programs that provide a contextual analysis (thematic), rather than just episodic news (Shah & Scheufele, 2006).

This lies in congruent to Iyenger's (1994) assumption that thematic news is better for gaining knowledge regarding a particular event and forming opinion based on that. This consumption of newspapers and internet will have a direct effect on the individual's engagement in community life. This shows that the medium of mass communication has a relationship with opinion leadership, even though previous research studies indicated otherwise (Noelle-Neumann, 1985; Weimann, 1991).

Opinion leadership is derived from one's strength of personality, which is a combination of self-confidence and social influence. This strength in personality will determine the extent of one's civic participation. This kind of civic participations are not a result of one's socio-economic status (Verba & Nie, 1972), personal resources (Verba et al., 1995) or informational variables (McLeod et al., 1996). The self-motivation behind civic engagement has been well addressed by Bandura (1991) in his theory of self-efficacy. It is one of the driving factors behind the self-perceived need to influence people's opinion and shape rhetoric, even if you do not hold a position of power in the society.

### **How Do People Choose Their Opinion Leaders?**

Katz and Lazarsfeld in their book, *Personal Influence* (1966), noted that people will pay more attention to interpersonal relationships than information coming from mass media as information that has been gathered through interpersonal relationships allow

them to serve two overlapping fundamental purposes – *social relationships* and *information gathering*. The sense of social relationships is vital when we as individual want to survive in a society. Compliance with our surrounding environment gives us a sense of familiarity and a platform for effective coexistence.

This ultimately helps the audience to form echo chambers. It is a phenomenon where people primarily interact with those who holds the same or similar interests and views (political or ideological). They tend to seek out and share information that essentially conforms with the existing beliefs and norms of the groups (Jamieson & Cappella, 2008; Sunstein, 2009). The idea of an echo chamber is rooted in concepts such as groupthink (Janis, 1982) and selective exposure theory (Klapper, 1960). However, similar to these, when transposed on social media, individual has shown exactly the same tendencies as they did offline (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001).

Moreover, social media has given rise to *affective polarization*, which is the tendency to dislike people who support different political parties (Rojas & Valenzuela, 2019). Hence, not only does people interact with those who share same political notions, but they deliberately employ affective polarization and shows dislike towards people holding opposite views.

Thus, the factors that affects the believability of the source of information depends on the interpersonal ties with the consumer, heuristics cues enabled by the source, and incongruency with preconceived notions. The credibility and the expertise of the source is rendered useless as both becomes a subjective point of deliberation to the consumer. However, the advent of social media and internet usage has made this more

complicated with other variables influencing self-perception of opinion leadership and its subsequent effects on audience members.

### **Effects of Heuristic Cues in The Selection Process**

While analyzing the predictors for trust and information consumption, Lee (2010) found that political ideology and political partisanship are key indicators for audiences' trust and subsequent consumption. Lee's (2010) study was an extension of his own previous study (Lee, 2005), which found similar results. The perceived credibility of a news source and an opinion leader, hence, is completely dependent on the audience members and how they derive such credibility based on ideologically confirming cues. This can be best described through cognitive processes.

Tversky and Kahneman (1974) formulated three kinds of heuristics that an individual might employ to judge the quality of the content presented under uncertainty. These heuristics are – representativeness, availability, and anchoring. Representativeness heuristics talks about the resemblances and favorability of available cues in the information and how audiences will prefer those immediately available cues to make a judgment. Similarly, availability heuristics shows that audiences will erroneously arrive at a judgment based on easily available cues rather than relying on actual evidence. And anchoring heuristics says that when given a starting point (anchor) to analyze a situation, the subjects will anchor their judgment on that starting point and adjust their judgment according to that anchor.

The credibility assigned to a news source or an opinion leader by the audience members are not independent of the cues disseminated by them. For the partisan audience consumers, those cues take precedence over the 'name' of the news source or the position

(social/political importance) of the opinion leader. The audiences assign a perceived credibility based on the cues from the news source and the opinion leader. More confirming the cues, higher is the assigned credibility. It is for this reason that there is a massive partisan disparity in news source consumption and trust on specific opinion leaders based on the ideology of the audiences.

In a Pew Research Study (Jurkowitz et al., 2020) conducted in 2019, shows that there is a massive gap between news consumption among Democrats and Republicans along the lines of the news media outlet. Around 67% of the Republicans consume Fox News, whereas the Democrats are distributed among CNN, ABC, NBC and CBS. CNN the top consuming news media outlet for the Democrats does not even appear on the Republicans' list, nor does Fox News appear on the Democrats' list. The most trusted news source for the Democrats is the most distrusted news source for the Republicans and vice-versa. There is also a vast difference in the types of news outlets that both the political parties consume. Democrats lean towards a liberal media outlet and the Republicans lean towards a conservative one. There is hardly any overlap. These evidences show that the trust and perceived credibility assigned to a news source is dependent on the content disseminated by the news source.

### **Online News Consumption and the Development of Individual & Subjective Opinion Leaders**

A unique opportunity that social media has provided is the ability to quantify one's social influence through the number of likes, comments, reposts and retweets, and followers. This boosts the self-perception of opinion leadership along with adhering a false sense of unfounded credibility (Weeks, Ardèvol-Abreu, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2017). As

Turcotte et al. (2015) argues that information shared over various social media platforms by self-perceived opinion leaders has the potential to be more influential than genuine news media outlets. These suggestions by opinion leaders affects more as individuals are social creatures who prefer suggestions from their close network than a third party because of their inherent need to connect with people (Bandura, 2001; Knobloch-Westerwick & Hastall, 2010).

This kind of social media influencers or opinion leaders are termed as *prosumers* (producers + consumers) by Weeks, Ardèvol-Abreu and Gil de Zúñiga (2017). Their study suggests that hard news and information is easier to consume across social media platforms when it acts as a passive content on social media. Individuals mainly log into social media platforms to connect with people based on what is happening in their friends' life. News and information that comes along is a byproduct of the main cause for logging into social media. As a result, people in general are passive consumers of news and information on social media (Bode, 2016; Wu et al., 2011). Bode (2016) also stated that there is a greater chance for political information to reach people on social media as none is seeking for it and everyone is equally exposed. She termed this phenomenon as *animated stimuli*. In animated stimuli an individual consumes hard political news (some of which could be unpleasant) with more gratifying information as pictures of your friends, their babies and dogs, etc. and hence, an unsatisfactory information becomes a satisfactory one.

This type of byproduct consumption of news and information as Weeks et al. (2017) suggests creates more political sophisticates and hence boosts their confidence to change other's minds. The opinion leaders derived from such a scenario lacks objective

credibility or expertise. It is on self-perception and groupthink, that these opinion leaders derive their subjective credibility. As study suggests that it is the use of social media, rather than expertise that assigns judgment to their opinion leadership (Weeks et al., 2017). The more they utilize social media in various forms – consumption, production, dissemination, political participation – the more they start to see themselves as influential and hence, they start to actively influence others. In short, your self-perception of opinion leadership is dependent on how media savvy you are.

### **Misinformation Consumption as a Result of Subjectively Perceived Opinion**

#### **Leaders**

When individual member chooses their opinion leaders based on cues, they are not aware of what the succeeding or future content will be. The available cues determine, let's say for a conservative person that the opinion leader is conservative and Republican because of his pro-Trump, anti-BLM past posts. These cues help to activate what a Republican is based on an aggregate of the 'Republican cues'. Because of this, the pro-Republican consumer will provide credibility to the source. Now, what comes later from that source is credible as far as the Republican consumer is concerned. The only way he can judge the facts is by corresponding it with other sources. Golman et al. (2017) and Hertwig and Engel (2016) refers to this kind of lack of rechecking and counter-evidential bias as information avoidance where individual will deliberately avoid any information that goes against his already held notions. Thus, the individual consumes misinformation thinking that it is genuine information because it came from *his* trusted source.

Moreover, internet has increased the number of sources than it was ever before. This has allowed individuals to seek out information sources that will conform to their

existing notions, rather than diversifying individual views (Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2010). Hence, they can seek out opinion leaders that will conform to them rather than sticking to the ones who might cause dissonance.

### **Internet, Biases, Selective Evaluation and the Inability to Store All the Information**

It was predicted that by increasing the choices of media outlets, people will be exposed to various viewpoints and will be able to expand their opinions in a more neutral way (Becker 1958; Downs 1957). However, research studies have shown that an increase in the number of channels has only enabled a more partisan audience and segregated them along political and ideological lines (Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2010; 2011; Mullainathan & Shleifer, 2005; Sobbrío, 2012; Stone, 2011). Stroud (2011) provided evidence to show that U.S. news media are becoming more and more biased in order to appeal to partisan audiences.

This holds true because the more the number of channels the higher is the choice of dissonant and consonant information. However, two immediate factors play in when the choices are vast and a decision is required (Sweeney et al., 2010):

- Time pressure to make a decision.
- Information avoidance – which is any “behavior intended to prevent or delay the acquisition of avoidable, but potentially unwanted information” (p. 341).

People tend to manipulate their beliefs by selecting information that they want to consume and deliberately avoiding information or a complete source of information altogether (Hertwig & Engel, 2016). And since human mind is limited and can only contain a limited amount of information, an ability to ignore things and avoid information



is a rational decision conceived by each to maintain sanity (Crawford, 2015). Thus, it all comes down to selective evaluation while storing information, as it is physically and cognitively impossible to store all the information that we receive, human minds will tend to be selective while evaluating.

### **Time Pressure and Immediacy in Information Consumption**

Temporal factors always influence in making judgments and decision for the audience member. Farago, Kende and Kreko (2019) used this need for immediacy among individuals as a major factor in determining false information consumption. They stated that people are vulnerable to false information because they rely on heuristics and superficial information processing, in order to reduce any form of effort in evaluation. This kind of cognitively effortless manner of news judgment (Metzger, Flanagin, & Medders, 2010) increases the chances of making error, however, the individual is gratified as the effort was so little.

Ecker et al. (2014) showed that individual audience members derive their first impression (first phase of exposure) from headlines. The immediate exposure to a headline will determine whether the reader will read the full story or not (second phase of evaluation). And it is the headline that creates the lasting impression, distorting the story, and hence when asked to recall, the readers tend to recall the headline quicker than the entire story.

Farago, Kende and Kreko (2019) hence comes up with three explanations to mis/disinformation consumption based on selective evaluation of news source:

1. Ideological asymmetry – conservatives are more likely to accept misinformation than liberals.

2. Power asymmetry – false information is more attractive to those who are political ‘losers’ or those who are not in power than those who are.
3. Symmetry – Partisan people consumes fake news equally as long as it confirms with their pre-existing beliefs.

Similarly, when “fake news” and misinformation comes packaged in entertainment channels it helps people to digest that information faster over hard news political information (Balmas, 2014). Wojcieszak (2019) also looks into the influence of exposure and selective evaluation on misinformation consumption and social identity, and they found out that in an online news media outlet, credibility of a news source becomes more pronounced if it is coming from an in-group member than from an out-group member. However, if the issue is highly polarizing and divisive, then the credibility of the news source and their prior experiences with that source (that has helped them to render credibility) takes precedence. But the author also addresses that in social media, news sources or sources of information walks a blurred line as most information consumed on social media are ‘shared’ by other people. It is not necessary for the information to come from an objectively credible source.

Hence, after a thorough synthesis of the existing literature on selective evaluation of information consumption based on political ideologies and the impact of opinion leaders on such consumption, the researcher seeks to answer the following questions:

**RQ1:** Do political ideology and polarizing cues in information affect its consumption?

**RQ2:** To what extent do opinion leaders influences active consumption of information?

## Chapter 3: Variables, Instruments and Stimuli, Hypotheses, Method

### Variables

To find answers for the research questions stated in the last chapter, this experiment will employ several variables on political ideologies and demographic information. The dependent variables will measure:

- 1). individual's assigned credibility to an information (DV1) based on a semantic differential scale for *truthfulness* and *accuracy*,
- 2). active consumption of an information (DV2) based on a semantic differential scale for *recommendation* and *sharing*.
- 3). information consumption choice under cognitive fatigue (DV3) to measure *ideological alignment*.

Both DV1 and DV2 are ordinal variables. DV3, however, is a nominal variable.

The experiment will include five independent, categorical variables:

- 1). political ideology of the individual (liberal or conservative) (IV1),
- 2). ideological cues in the information (liberal or conservative) (IV2),
- 3). political ideology of the opinion leader (liberal or conservative) (IV3).
- 4). opinion leader's agreement with the story (agrees or disagrees) (IV4).
- 5). presence of news source (yes or no) (IV5) (treatment for the experimental group).

The stimuli for both the control group and the experimental group will be manipulated to reflect independent variables, IV2, IV3 and IV4. In addition, the treatment for the experimental group will utilize heuristics and cues to administer the influence of prior experiences related to information source (IV5).

Two distinct news sources have been selected as the treatment: CNN and Fox News for liberal and conservative cues respectively. Both CNN and Fox News scored almost equally, -1 (CNN) and +1 (Fox News) in a political spectrum chart ranging from -10 to +10, where -10 indicates liberal audiences and +10 indicates conservative audiences (Mitchell et al., 2014; Sheridan, 2021).

The dependent variables measure how the independent variables may affect the consumption of mis- and dis-information. The first independent variable (IV1) tests the political ideology of the individual. Studies suggest that there is a disparity in misinformation consumption based on an individual's political ideology (Guess, Nyhan, & Reifler, 2018; Spohr, 2017; Vicario et al., 2019).

The second independent variable (IV2) is moderated within the stimuli to provide explicit cues to the participants on the ideology of the information – is the information liberal leaning or conservative leaning? Cognitive studies on heuristics and biases showed that individuals base their decision about information on the cues available in that information (Baron, 2006; Durante & Knight, 2012; Eveland & Shah, 2003; Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2010) and forms their opinion relative to those representative and availability cues (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974).

The third and fourth independent variable (IV3 & IV4) will test the influence of opinion leaders in consumption of information. The low information rationality model argues that audiences in general lacks knowledge on current events and hence seeks out opinion leaders to form a decision. These opinion leaders could be anyone from a politician to a neighbor (Katz, 1957; Lupia, McCubbins, & Arthur, 1998; Popkin, 1991). It is the audience member who assigns the degree of importance to the opinion leader

based on confirmation biases and ideological commonality (Jamieson & Cappella, 2008; Sunstein, 2009). Moreover, IV4 acts as a manipulation to evoke three cognitive processes – resonance, consonance and dissonance. Festinger (1957) proposed the theory of dissonance as a cognitive state that is caused by incongruent information. Consonance and resonance are similar but differs slightly. Consonance is the agreement with congruent information and resonance is the amplification of that agreement (Plăvitu, 2020).

### **Experimental Group Treatment – News Source**

The participants in the experimental group will be exposed to the fifth independent variable (IV5) as a treatment. The researcher expects that the presence of a news source for the information will provide necessary cues to the participants to influence their assigned credibility to the stories (Flanagin & Metzger, 2007; Fletcher & Park, 2017) compared to when a news source is missing. Sundar and Nass (2000) writes, “the source of the message is one of the most enduring variables in communication research particularly in studying the social psychology of persuasion” (p. 683). Their study revealed that individuals orient their perception towards a message based on its source. The name of the source of information acts as heuristical cues that guides audience members to judge the content and arrive at a decision (O’keefe, 2015; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986).

After identifying and understanding the dependent and independent variables, the researcher proposes the following hypotheses:

***H1. a:*** *An individual’s perceived credibility of information is dependent on their personal ideology.*

***H1. b:** An individual's perceived credibility of information is influenced by the source of information.*

***H1. c:** An individual's perceived credibility of information is affected by opinion leaders' ideology.*

The researcher aims to test these hypotheses using DV1, IV1, IV2, IV3, IV4 and IV5. The researcher hypothesizes that the participants will assign credibility to an information based on their political ideology and the ideological cues available within the information. Along the same line of thought, the researcher expects that based on the opinions of the opinion leader, the participants will change their assigned credibility to the information. The change in decision based on the opinion of the opinion leader will vary in relation to political ideologies of both the opinion leader and the participants.

Deriving from previous studies, the change of verb from a passive consumer to an active consumer has been rendered to the action of the consumer. Costera Meijer and Groot Kormelink (2014) identified 6 actions as an indicator for a passive consumer to become an active consumer. These indicators include – linking, sharing, liking, recommending, commenting, and voting. Thus, to understand how actively audience members consume information, the following hypotheses will also be tested:

***H2. a:** An individual's decision to actively consume information is dependent on their personal ideology.*

***H2. b:** An individual's decision to actively consume information is influenced by the source of information.*

***H2. c:** An individual's decision to actively consume information is affected by opinion leaders' ideology.*

These hypotheses will be tested using DV2, IV1, IV2, IV3, IV4 and IV5. In testing these, sharing, retweeting, and liking are operationalized as active consumption of information.

It has been argued that an audience member selects ideologically conforming opinion leaders to form an echo-chamber in order to reduce any form of cognitive dissonance (Janis, 1982; Klapper, 1960). They also exert the same attitude when they are seeking out opinion leaders online (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001). Festinger (1954) suggested that individuals cannot stay in a state of cognitive dissonance. They will have to reach a state of consonance through various means that are available at the individual's disposal (the process of rationalization). So, what happens when a liberal opinion leader agrees with a conservative information and vice versa? Or when a liberal opinion leader disagrees with a liberal information and vice versa? The following question, hence, is proposed to explore the possible rationalizations:

***RQ3:** How does an individual decide to conform (or not) with the opinion leader?*

Through this question, the researcher attempts to understand the rationalization that audience members might make to reconcile the cognitive dissonance. The researcher plans to explore this through the answers to the open-ended questions in the experiment.

Scholarship suggests that under cognitive fatigue, individuals prefer to read information that conforms with their existing beliefs and avoid information that could cause cognitive dissonance (Farago, Kende, & Kreko, 2019; Sweeney et al., 2010). Hence, they will choose to expose themselves to selective information after initial evaluation (Festinger, 1964; Sears & Freedman, 1967). Moreover, individuals tend to

derive most of the impression regarding an information from the headlines (Ecker et al., 2014). With this in mind, the researcher proposes the following hypothesis:

*H3: Individuals' information consumption preference is related to their personal ideology.*

To test this hypothesis the participants will be asked to select a headline to read at the last stage of the experiment. The headlines will be randomized and include polarizing conservative or liberal ideological cues. The ideology of the content chosen by the participants (DV3) will be tested in relation to IV1 – their personal ideology – to explore how cognitive fatigue may affect information consumption.

## **Experiment**

The researcher recruited paid workers to finish the experiment through Amazon Mturk. The researcher is aware of the shortcomings of an online survey, especially the ones that has been related to the disparity in income of the participants (Alavi, 2018; Couper, 2000; Gonzalez, 2002; Lehdonvirta et al., 2021; Matsuo et al., 2004) and attrition (Hox, 2008; Zhou & Fishbach, 2016). Online surveys limit the accessibility to lower income groups within the populations and hence, restricts a proper representation of the population. Gosling et al. (2004), however, said that their online survey data may not have been representative of the population in general, yet, when compared to other published findings, it yielded favorable results, especially in regard to gender, socio-economic status, geographic location, race, and age. Moreover, Buhrmester, Kwang and Gosling (2011) showed that random sampling through MTurk has little to no effect on the result, when compared to the traditional random sampling. They wrote, “MTurk alphas were within two hundredths of a point of the traditional-sample alphas” (p. 5), while



approving MTurk's veracity as a capable data collection platform for behavioral research (Mason & Suri, 2012).

To overcome the issue with attrition, Zhou and Fishbach (2012) tested the three strategies recommended by Reips (2000) that included: a) prewarning; b) personalization; and c) appealing to conscience. The researchers concluded that Reips' strategies were an effective way to reduce attrition in online surveys, especially when the online surveys reduce any option to control the environment of the responses. Hence, given the present condition of the pandemic and IRB's own restrictions on face-to-face experiments, online surveys seemed to be the most feasible methodology. And the researcher followed Reips' (2000) suggestion through clear description in the consent form, clear instructions before the survey starts and properly providing the respondents with the timeliness of the survey.

#### **Amazon Mturk Data Collection Process**

For the online experiments, the Qualtrics link was posted on MTurk along with the reward amount (\$0.80) and the estimated time to finish the survey (45 minutes). Once they clicked on the link, they were taken to the Qualtrics portal, where they were briefed about the study and asked to read the consent form. Once (or if) they agreed to proceed, they were exposed to eight stimuli. Each block of the stimuli contained mainly five components – a headline, a picture, the news story, a tweet and two equivalent questionnaires based on Likert scale. All the headlines and the corresponding stories have been manipulated to reflect just IV2 in the control group and to reflect IV2 and IV5 in the treatment group. Each story was followed by their corresponding opinion leader manipulation (IV3 & IV4). The order of the eight stimuli was randomized for every participant to reduce any sort of order-effect bias in data collection (Perreault, 1975).

They were asked to read the article on what appeared to be a digital news outlet. The control group read this information without the presence of a source. The experimental group received the source of the information with each story. Exposure time wasn't enforced. Participants were asked to read the articles carefully and answer the questionnaire that will follow. All the questions were modulated for forced response to reduce any form of selective exposure. Once they completed the study, they were thanked for their time.

### **Instruments and Stimuli**

The eight headlines for the stimuli were selected from the fact-checking and media tracking website, Allsides ([www.allsides.com](http://www.allsides.com)). The website categorizes news stories along ideological lines based on community feedback, editorial review, third-party analysis, independent research, and blind survey. The researcher selected four headlines that were categorized as 'Left' and four that were categorized as 'Right'. The specific articles were chosen to represent events that are current and polarizing. Similarly, the events are all related to national consciousness.

Maintaining the themes of the news reported and how the headlines were framed, the researcher changed the factual names, place, and events to represent stimuli for mis- and dis-information. For the experimental group, an information source was indicated for each story. CNN for the liberal stories and Fox News for the conservative stories. The control group, however, did not receive the name of the source and hence, any indication of the source was omitted to make it look like it was self-reported. All eight headlines and related stories are presented in Appendix A. Figure 1 shows an example of a stimulus

used in the instrument for the control group experiment. And Figure 2 shows a similar stimulus for the treatment group experiment.

## Figure 1

### *One of the Stimulus for Control Group*

World | US | Politics | Economy | Sports | Entertainment | Weather   Login

## **A setback for women everywhere: The case that could bring down Roe v. Wade and make abortion illegal in US**

By Tara Saleni Published on Oct 28, 2020



Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas swears in Amy Coney Barrett on Oct 27, 2020. Picture Courtesy: Leo Thurn, Getty Images.

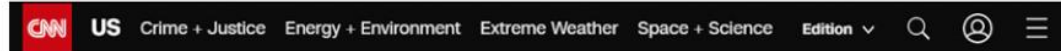
The appointment of Amy Coney Barrett to take over the empty seat of Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, not only was a huge blow to progressive liberal outlook of the country, but [now a new case has appeared](#) that will test the conservative majority of the Supreme Court.

The Supreme Court justices will meet on Wednesday to decide whether they are going to hear the case of Dobbs v. Free Women's Right and Health Organization, which includes a 2018 Alabama law that banned all abortions after 15 weeks of pregnancy. The law bars abortion in case of medical emergencies and fetal abnormalities along with rape and incest victims. The law was only in effect for a couple of hours until Alabama's only abortion clinic, Free Women's Right and Health Organization, legally challenged it.

If the court sides with the plaintiff, then [states will have power to determine abortion rights](#) within their vicinity – an act that has yet been restricted by the landmark 1973 case, Roe v. Wade. With six conservative judges and Barrett's refusal to support women's right, human rights in the United States are in jeopardy.

## Figure 2

### *One of the Stimulus for the Treatment Group*



#### **A setback for women everywhere: The case that could bring down Roe v. Wade and make abortion illegal in US**

By Tara Saleni, CNN

© Updated 6:22 PM ET, Tue Oct 27, 2020



Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas swears in Amy Coney Barrett on Oct. 27, 2020.  
Picture Courtesy: Leo Thurn, Getty Images.

(CNN) –The appointment of Amy Coney Barrett to take over the empty seat of Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, not only was a huge blow to progressive liberal outlook of the country, but [now a new case has appeared](#) that will test the conservative majority of the Supreme Court.

The Supreme Court justices will meet on Wednesday to decide whether they are going to hear the case of *Dobbs v. Free Women's Right and Health Organization*, which includes a 2018 Alabama law that banned all abortions after 15 weeks of pregnancy. The law bars abortion in case of medical emergencies and fetal abnormalities along with rape and incest victims. The law was only in effect for a couple of hours until Alabama's only abortion clinic, Free Women's Right and Health Organization, legally challenged it.

If the court sides with the plaintiff, then [states will have power to determine abortion rights](#) within their vicinity – an act that has yet been restricted by the landmark 1973 case, *Roe v. Wade*. With six conservative judges and Barrett's refusal to support women's right, human right in the United States is in jeopardy.

Each story was followed by five questions:

1). In the first two questions, participants were asked to rate the truthfulness and accuracy of the story on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = not at all true, 7 = completely true; and 1 = not at all accurate, 7 = completely accurate) (self-assigned credibility),

2). The third question asked the participant their likelihood of discussing the story with friends and family on a 7-point Likert scale (1= very unlikely, 7 = very likely),

3). The next two questions asked the participants their likelihood of recommending and sharing the story over Twitter and Facebook on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = Very unlikely, 7 = very likely) (active consumption and believability),

4). The last question was an open-ended question which seeks out the participant's rationale behind them sharing and recommending the story.

Once they answer these questions for a story, they will be exposed to a tweet related to that story. Each story has a tweet related to the content of that story.

A doctored image of tweet for each story were created by the researcher to give an illusion that the headlines were further retweeted by prominent political figures. These eight tweets were created using the online fake tweet generator Tweetgen ([www.tweetgen.com](http://www.tweetgen.com)). The doctored image includes the name of a prominent political figure, their opinion on the headline and the retweet of the headline (see Appendix A). Figure 3 shows the tweet that followed Figure 1 and 2 in the actual experiment.

**Figure 3**

*Doctored Tweet Stimulus*



Each of the doctored tweets were followed by five questions:

1) In the first two questions, participants were asked to rate the truthfulness and accuracy of the story on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = not at all true, 7 = completely true; and 1 = not at all accurate, 7 = completely accurate) (self-assigned credibility after opinion leader's influence),

2). The third question asked the participant their likelihood of discussing the story with friends and family on a 7-point Likert scale (1= very unlikely, 7 = very likely),

3). The next two questions asked participants their likelihood of recommending and sharing the story over Twitter and Facebook on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = Very unlikely, 7 = very likely) (active consumption decision following exposure to the opinion leader),

4). The last question was an open-ended question which seeks out the participant's rationale behind them sharing and recommending the story (rationale for dissonance or consonance).

### **Rationale Behind Assigning Opinion Leaders Based on Story Ideology**

Now, the choice of political figures is determined by their prominence, ideological leanings/party affiliation, and importance in current affairs. Table 1 below indicates how a political figure was assigned to each news story and whether they agreed or disagreed with the published story/headline in the doctored tweets. This particular manipulation is done to create cognitive dissonance and cognitive consonance.

**Table 1***Opinion leader manipulations*

Story Number	Story's Ideology	Opinion Leader's Ideology	Opinion Leader Agrees with the Story in Tweets
1	<b>Liberal (L<sub>1</sub>)</b> A setback for women everywhere: The case that could bring down Roe v. Wade and make abortion illegal in US	<b>Liberal</b> Nancy Pelosi (Democratic Party, Speaker of the House of Representatives)	No
2	<b>Liberal (L<sub>2</sub>)</b> Unredacted FBI Document Sheds New Light on White Supremacist Infiltration of Law Enforcement	<b>Conservative</b> Donald J. Trump (Republican Party, 45 <sup>th</sup> President of the United States)	Yes
3	<b>Liberal (L<sub>3</sub>)</b> Four years of Trump has killed democracy in America and Biden will have to work hard to bring it back	<b>Liberal</b> Kamala Harris (Democratic Party, VP of the United States)	Yes
4	<b>Liberal (L<sub>4</sub>)</b> 'People are not safe when there are more guns around, assault weapons ban needed,' researcher shows	<b>Conservative</b> Kevin McCarthy (Republican Party, Minority Leader at the House of Representatives)	No
5	<b>Conservative (C<sub>1</sub>)</b> Supreme Court Upholds Islamic Religious Freedom Before America's Safety	<b>Liberal</b> Chuck Schumer (Democratic Party, Senate Majority Leader)	No
6	<b>Conservative (C<sub>2</sub>)</b> Black Lives Matter leader states if US 'doesn't give us what we want, then we will burn down this system'	<b>Liberal</b> Joe Biden (Democratic Party, 46 <sup>th</sup> President of the United States)	Yes
7	<b>Conservative (C<sub>3</sub>)</b> Trump orders to Withdraw Over 2,000 Troops from Iraq, Political Experts Call Him the Ultimate Peacekeeper	<b>Conservative</b> Mike Pence (Republican Party, former VP of the United States)	Yes
8	<b>Conservative (C<sub>4</sub>)</b> The Constitution protects our right to own guns and we need to keep assault weapons legal,' expert says	<b>Conservative</b> Mitch McConnell (Republican Party, Senate Minority Leader)	No

Four of the eight stories (L<sub>1</sub>, L<sub>2</sub>, C<sub>2</sub>, C<sub>4</sub>) are designed to cause cognitive dissonance and two stories (L<sub>4</sub>, C<sub>1</sub>) were designed for consonance. The participants were



further asked to answer an open-ended question to elaborate their decision, which the researcher expects will provide evidence on the decision-making process of the participants to follow or ignore opinion leaders' opinion based on the political ideology of both the participant and the opinion leader, opinion leader's agreement with the story and the ideological cues evident in the information.

Two of the eight stories (L<sub>3</sub>, C<sub>3</sub>) were designed to test the extent of the resonance and its impact on decision-making when the information and opinion leaders act ideologically congruent and amplifies the impact of consonance. Consonance and resonance are similar but differs slightly. Consonance is the agreement; resonance is the amplification of that agreement (Plăvitu, 2020). Like the previous tests, the answers to the open-ended questions were collected to explore the reasons behind resonance and the factors affecting their agreement. All the eight questions, however, indicated the factors that influenced an audience in their assigned credibility and active consumption of information.

Participants then answered ten questions on a five-point Likert scale (1= strongly disagree, 3 = neither agree or disagree and 5 = strongly agree) that helped determine their political ideology. These questions were taken from Pew Research Center's *Political Typology Quiz*. These ten questions were then aggregated to assign a Liberal-leaning or Conservative-leaning label to the participants.

In addition, demographic questions such as age, gender, race, education, income, and religion were also asked to control the results of the study.

Once the participants answered the demographic questions, they were asked to select a story to further read before the survey ends. Six headlines were presented, and

the order was randomized for each participant. These headlines also contained politically/ideologically polarizing cues to motivate the choice. The themes of the headlines were taken from Allsides and modified to remove any form of identifiable information. Once they clicked on a headline, they were taken to the end of the survey. A disclaimer was provided at the end page. The choice of the headline is only required to test *H3*, the story is non-essential for *H3*.

The experiment used Qualtrics software to design the study and present both the treatment and control group questionnaire; and Amazon MTurk to recruit workers. The researcher predicts that the whole experiment will take 30 minutes to finish. Once the data was collected, it was analyzed using SPSS Statistics software.

## Chapter 4: Analyses and the Results

The objective of this study is to assess the influence of ideological cues, opinion leaders and personal ideology of individuals on active consumption of mis/disinformation and information processing. The dependent variables for this study were content credibility, active consumption of information and information choice under cognitive fatigue. The experiment involved a 2 x 2 x 2 x 2 mixed factorial design. Ideological cues in the information (liberal/conservative), political ideology of the opinion leaders (liberal/conservative), opinion leader’s agreement with the story (yes/no) were the within-subject factors while the presence of news source (yes/no) acted as the between-subjects factor (Table 2). The ideological cues in the stories and the opinion leaders’ ideology and agreement/disagreement to the stories acted as manipulation in providing heuristic cues to the audience within the context of their own personal ideology.

**Table 2**

*Mixed Factorial Analysis*

		Opinion leader ideology		Opinion leader ideology		Opinion leader ideology		Opinion leader ideology	
		Conservative	Liberal	Conservative	Liberal	Conservative	Liberal	Conservative	Liberal
News source present	Yes								
	No								
		Content ideology=Conservative		Content ideology=Liberal		Content ideology=Conservative		Content ideology=Liberal	
		OL’s agreement with story = Yes				OL’s agreement with story = No			

## **The Sample and the Respondents**

The online survey was tested with ten respondents twice (i.e., 20 total) through Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) to validate the instruments. The survey flow and spellings were corrected based on the results. Human Intelligence Task approval rating of over 98% was chosen in MTurk to ensure the quality of the subsequent results. The online survey was sent out twice on June 4 and June 7 for larger data collection. 432 responses were collected.

The data was cleaned based on three main criteria: Consent (those who said, *yes*), progress (those who completed the whole survey –100%), and attention (those who chose ‘C’, in the attention question embedded within the questionnaire). The new cleaned dataset (N=429) was then used for the analyses.

The sample was also checked for any outliers. Although there were 15 outliers for the time respondents took to complete the survey, none of the outliers were removed after an initial perusal. Regardless of the duration, all respondents had coherent answers to the open-ended questions and passed the attention-question. Therefore, the researcher chose to retain these cases.

The following table (Table 3) shows the demographic distribution of the sample based on gender, race, income and education, and personal ideology.

**Table 3***Demography X Political Ideology*

<b>Demographic category</b>	<b>Conservative-leaning</b>	<b>Liberal-leaning</b>	<b>Total</b>
<i>Gender</i>			
Male	123 (49.8%)	124 (50.2%)	247 (100%)
Female	69 (38.5%)	110 (61.5%)	179 (100%)
<i>Race/Ethnicity</i>			
African American/Black	28 (45.2%)	34 (54.8%)	62 (100%)
American Indian	1 (100%)	0 (0%)	1 (100%)
Alaska Native	1 (100%)	0 (0%)	1 (100%)
Asian	9 (37.5%)	15 (62.5%)	24 (100%)
Hispanic	7 (36.8%)	12 (63.2%)	19 (100%)
Latino	1 (33.3%)	2 (66.7%)	3 (100%)
Middle Eastern	1 (50%)	1 (50%)	2 (100%)
South Asian	1 (20%)	4 (80%)	5 (100%)
White	140 (45.9%)	165 (54.1%)	305 (100%)
Other	3 (42.9%)	4 (57.1%)	7 (100%)
<i>Age Group</i>			
Less than 22 (Gen Z)	2 (28.6%)	5 (71.4%)	7 (100%)

<b>Demographic category</b>	<b>Conservative-leaning</b>	<b>Liberal-leaning</b>	<b>Total</b>
23-38 (Millennial)	105 (49.8%)	106 (50.2%)	211 (100%)
39-54 (Gen X)	59 (41.3%)	84 (58.7%)	143 (100%)
55-73 (Baby Boomer)	23 (36.5%)	40 (63.5%)	63 (100%)
74 and above (Silent generation)	3 (60%)	2 (40%)	5 (100%)

*Religion*

Agnostic	12 (27.9%)	31 (72.1%)	43 (100%)
Atheist	12 (42.9%)	16 (57.1%)	28 (100%)
Buddhist	3 (42.9%)	4 (57.1%)	7 (100%)
Catholic/Roman Catholic	108 (53.5%)	94 (46.5%)	202 (100%)
Hindu	6 (40%)	9 (60%)	15 (100%)
Jewish	7 (58.3%)	5 (41.7%)	12 (100%)
Latter-Day Saints (LDS)	2 (40%)	3 (60%)	5 (100%)
Muslim	3 (60%)	2 (40%)	5 (100%)
Orthodox Christian	3 (42.9%)	4 (57.1%)	7 (100%)
Protestant	25 (38.5%)	40 (61.5%)	65 (100%)
Other	6 (30%)	14 (70%)	20 (100%)
Nothing in particular	5 (25%)	15 (75%)	20 (100%)

*Education*

High school graduate	9 (36%)	16 (64%)	25 (100%)
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<b>Demographic category</b>	<b>Conservative-leaning</b>	<b>Liberal-leaning</b>	<b>Total</b>
Some college, but no degree	21 (41.2%)	30 (58.8%)	51 (100%)
Bachelor's degree or equivalent	102 (47.2%)	114 (52.8%)	216 (100%)
Master's degree or equivalent	54 (48.2%)	58 (51.8%)	112 (100%)
Doctorate degree or equivalent	3 (50%)	3 (50%)	6 (100%)
Professional school degree (MD, etc.)	3 (21.4%)	11 (78.6%)	14 (100%)

*Annual Household Income (2019)*

Less than \$30,000	21 (36.2%)	37 (63.8%)	58 (100%)
\$30,000 - \$60,000	61 (42.4%)	83 (57.6%)	144 (100%)
\$60,000 - \$90,000	56 (50.5%)	55 (49.5%)	111 (100%)
\$90,000 - \$120,000	27 (48.2%)	29 (51.8%)	56 (100%)
\$120,000 - \$150,000	15 (42.9%)	20 (57.1%)	35 (100%)
\$150,000 - \$180,000	5 (41.7%)	7 (58.3%)	12 (100%)
\$180,000 - \$210,000	5 (62.5%)	3 (37.5%)	8 (100%)
More than \$210,000	2 (50%)	2 (50%)	4 (100%)

### **Explaining the Variables**

The dependent variables and the independent variables were created by computing and recoding different questions in the survey that the sample answered.

### ***Manipulations***



*Ideological cues in the information.* Eight informative stories, modelled after published online news stories, were provided to the respondents in the survey experiment. Out of these eight stories, four were treated with liberal ideological cues and the other four were treated with conservative ideological cues. Even though they were treated with ideological cues, all these stories were disinformation as these pieces of content were altered to satisfy the researcher's goal of seeking out evidence for disinformation consumption. The stories are not real-life information and none of the events occurred.

*Opinion Leader Tweets.* Each story was paired with a tweet from a politically important opinion leader. After reading a story, the respondents were exposed to a tweet from a political leader expressing their agreement or disagreement with the story. This agreement and disagreement on the part of the opinion leader also served as a cross-manipulation, as there were liberal stories where a liberal opinion leader disagreed with and there were conservative stories where a conservative opinion leader disagreed. The opinion leaders were also selected to represent polarizing ideological cues (like, Joe Biden for liberal or Donald Trump for conservative and so on). All these tweets were doctored and did not occur in real-life.

*Cognitive dissonance, consonance, and resonance.* As stated, each of the eight stories were assigned an opinion leader with either congruent political ideology as the story's ideology or with an incongruent ideology. To influence cognitive dissonance, consonance and resonance, the content of the doctored tweets was further manipulated to reflect confirmation with the story or disconfirmation with the story. Dissonance is measured when the story and the opinion leader have the same political ideology, but the opinion leader does not agree with the story (See story number 1 & 8 in Table 4).

Dissonance was also measured when the story and the opinion leader does not have the same ideology, but the opinion leader agrees with the story (See story number 2 & 6 in Table 4).

Consonance is measured when the story and the opinion leader does not have the same ideology and the opinion leader disagrees with the story (See story number 4 & 5 in Table 4). In a similar way, resonance is measured when the story and the opinion leader both belongs to the same political ideology and the opinion leader agrees with the story (See story number 3 & 7 in Table 4).

**Table 4**

*Opinion leader manipulations*

Story Number	Story's Ideology	Opinion Leader's Ideology	Opinion Leader Agrees with the Story in Tweets
1	<b>Liberal (L<sub>1</sub>)</b> A setback for women everywhere: The case that could bring down Roe v. Wade and make abortion illegal in US	<b>Liberal</b> Nancy Pelosi (Democratic Party, Speaker of the House of Representatives)	No
2	<b>Liberal (L<sub>2</sub>)</b> Unredacted FBI Document Sheds New Light on White Supremacist Infiltration of Law Enforcement	<b>Conservative</b> Donald J. Trump (Republican Party, 45 <sup>th</sup> President of the United States)	Yes
3	<b>Liberal (L<sub>3</sub>)</b> Four years of Trump has killed democracy in America and Biden will have to work hard to bring it back	<b>Liberal</b> Kamala Harris (Democratic Party, VP of the United States)	Yes
4	<b>Liberal (L<sub>4</sub>)</b> 'People are not safe when there are more guns around, assault weapons ban needed,' researcher shows	<b>Conservative</b> Kevin McCarthy (Republican Party, Minority Leader at the House of Representatives)	No
5	<b>Conservative (C<sub>1</sub>)</b> Supreme Court Upholds Islamic Religious Freedom Before America's Safety	<b>Liberal</b> Chuck Schumer (Democratic Party, Senate Majority Leader)	No

Story Number	Story's Ideology	Opinion Leader's Ideology	Opinion Leader Agrees with the Story in Tweets
6	<b>Conservative (C<sub>2</sub>)</b> Black Lives Matter leader states if US 'doesn't give us what we want, then we will burn down this system'	<b>Liberal</b> Joe Biden (Democratic Party, 46 <sup>th</sup> President of the United States)	Yes
7	<b>Conservative (C<sub>3</sub>)</b> Trump orders to Withdraw Over 2,000 Troops from Iraq, Political Experts Call Him the Ultimate Peacekeeper	<b>Conservative</b> Mike Pence (Republican Party, former VP of the United States)	Yes
8	<b>Conservative (C<sub>4</sub>)</b> The Constitution protects our right to own guns and we need to keep assault weapons legal,' expert says	<b>Conservative</b> Mitch McConnell (Republican Party, Senate Minority Leader)	No

*News Source.* For the Treatment Group, news source was used as the treatment manipulation. The control group received the stories, without any presence of a news source. The treatment group, however, received news source manipulation. All the four liberal stories were treated with a liberal news source (CNN) and all the conservative stories were treated with a conservative news source (Fox News). There were no cross-manipulation done with the news source component.

*Restructuring the data.* Credibility of information scale was based on two items about truth and accuracy of the information presented. Each question ranged on a 7-point Likert scale, leading to a total possible score from 2 through 14. All respondents were asked to answer the same questions before and after the opinion leaders' (OL) manipulation. Therefore, they answered 32 questions in total (about truth and accuracy) for the eight stimuli (8 stories x 2 before OL x 2 after OL). Similarly, the active

consumption scale was also measured based on two items about the respondent's likelihood of sharing the information on Facebook and Twitter. Each question ranged on a 7-point Likert scale, leading to a total possible score from 2 through 14. They answered 32 additional questions about sharing (8 stories x 2 before OL x 2 after OL). Once the scales were created by combining the two items, each respondent had four scores per story: credibility of information score before and after the opinion leader; and active consumption score before and after the opinion leader.

However, the choice of opinion leader that the researcher assigned to each stimulus, were further manipulated to reflect the "agreement/disagreement" factor. In order to make the data viable for the mixed factorial ANOVA, each story was restructured into cases. Meaning, each respondent had eight rows of data reflecting the eight stimuli in the survey. Each row (or story) had four scores associated with it: two information credibility scores and two active consumption scores. Further, the four binary, nominal factors—group, content ideology, opinion leader's ideology, opinion leader's agreement—acted as switches to activate and analyze the different manipulations across the cases.

### ***Dependent Variables (DV1, DV2, DV3)***

Perceived credibility of the content, active consumption of information and information consumption choice under cognitive fatigue were used as dependent variables for this study. All the three dependent variables were measured for both the control and the treatment groups. Perceived credibility was measured on two scales: truthfulness and accuracy of the content. Active consumption was measured through two scales: sharing over Facebook and Twitter. Information consumption choice under

cognitive fatigue was measured by asking the respondents to choose a story to further read at the end of the survey.

*Content Credibility.* After being exposed to each story in the stimuli, respondents were asked to rate the story on two different Likert scales of “Truthfulness” and “Accuracy” (1 = Not at all true/Not at all accurate and 7 = Completely true/Completely accurate). The dependent variable “Content Credibility” (DV1) was created by computing all the truth and accuracy score in the data (ta score). The truth and accuracy score were first created separately for liberal (taL1, taL2, taL3, taL4) and conservative stories (taC1, taC2, taC3, taC4) before opinion leader’s tweet manipulation. Reliability was determined using Cronbach’s Alpha ( $\alpha = .87$ , for the liberal stories and  $\alpha = .83$  for the conservative stories). Then another truth and accuracy score were created after the opinion leader’s tweet was introduced within the instrument to check the effect of the manipulation (OLtaL1, OLtaL2, OLtaL3, OLtaL4 and OLtaC1, OLtaC2, OLtaC3, OLtaC4). Reliability was also determined for these scales using Cronbach’s Alpha ( $\alpha = .77$  for the liberal stories and  $\alpha = .78$  for the conservative stories).

The liberal and the conservative stories’ truth and accuracy scores were then computed to create four more variables (LibTA, ConTA, OLibTA, OLconTA). The sum of the truth and accuracy scores before opinion leader’s tweet were computed to create an ordinal variable for all the stories (TAall) and another ordinal variable after the opinion leader’s tweet (OLtaAll).

*Active Consumption.* In a similar manner, the dependent variable “Active Consumption” (DV2) was created by computing all the share and recommendation score in the data (share score). The share score was first created separately for liberal (shareL1,

shareL2, shareL3, shareL4) and conservative stories (shareC1, shareC2, shareC3, shareC4). before opinion leader's tweet. Reliability was determined by using Cronbach's Alpha ( $\alpha = .96$  for the liberal stories and  $\alpha = .95$  for the conservative stories). Then another share score was created after the opinion leader's tweet was introduced within the instrument to check the effect of the manipulation (OLshareL1, OLshareL2, OLshareL3, OLshareL4 and OLshareC1, OLshareC2, OLshareC3, OLshareC4). Reliability was again determined by using Cronbach's Alpha ( $\alpha = .95$  for the liberal stories and  $\alpha = .96$  for the conservative stories).

The liberal and the conservative stories' share scores were then computed to create four more variables (LibShare, ConShare, OLibShare, OLconShare). The sum of the share scores before opinion leader's tweet were computed to create an ordinal variable for all the stories (Shareall) and another ordinal variable after the opinion leader's tweet (OLShareAll).

*Information consumption choice under cognitive fatigue.* At the end of the survey, the last question asked the respondents to select one headline out of six headlines to further read. Three of the six headlines were treated with liberal cues and the other three were treated with conservative cues. The choice of one of these, after finishing an almost 30 minutes-long survey, is measured as a variable for information choice under cognitive fatigue. Thus, the question Q259 is a categorical variable with six levels (each headline acting as a level). However, to conduct further analysis, the question was computed to a new two-level dependent variable (InfoChoice) by recoding the three conservative headlines into one conservative value and the three liberal headlines into one liberal

value. After recoding, InfoChoice is a two-level categorical variable (0 = conservative, 1 = liberal).

### ***Independent Variables (IV1, IV2, IV3, IV4, IV5)***

Political ideology of the individual, ideological cues present in the information content, political ideology of the opinion leader and the presence of the news source (control/treatment) were used as independent variables in the study. The first three independent variables were measured for both the control and the treatment groups. The fourth independent variable acted as a between-subjects measure for the control and the treatment group. Independent variables ideological cues present in the information content and the political ideology of the opinion leader were manipulated by the researcher to reflect liberal or conservative ideological cues.

*Personal Ideology.* The survey included ten questions to determine the political leaning of the participants. The ten questions were derived from Pew Research Center's *Political Typology Quiz* and were presented on a five-point Likert scale (where 1 = strongly disagree, 3 = neither agree or disagree, and 5 = strongly agree). There were five liberal questions, meaning a higher score on these questions reflected a more liberal ideological leaning compared to the five conservative questions, where a higher score meant a more conservative ideological leaning of participants. The questions weren't altered in any form. The reliability of all the ten questions were determined using Cronbach's Alpha ( $\alpha = .81$ ). The scale was internally consistent.

The independent variable, political ideology of the individual (IV1), was created by combining these ten questions. The five conservative questions were reverse coded to match the direction of the scale. The ten questions were then aggregated to form the

political ideology scale (PolidScale) where a participant could score from 10-50. A higher score on this scale meant a more liberal ideology of the participant, whereas a lower score reflected conservative ideology. The scale was then recoded into a categorical variable (PIdeology). Those who scored from 10 to 30 were coded as conservative. Scores 31 and above were coded as liberal. Both the scale and the nominal variable were used depending on the analysis.

*Story Ideology.* The independent variable, ideological cues in the information (IV2) was created in two steps. First, the data was restructured to convert the variables into cases. This allowed the researcher to work out the stories based on their ideology and run the factorial ANOVA in the later steps of the analysis.

After restructuring, the first four stories (1 thru 4) which carried liberal ideological cues were selected to represent liberal stories and the next four stories (5 thru 8) which carried conservative ideological cues were selected for conservative stories. The categorical independent variable, “StoryIdeology” was created with two levels (Liberal or conservative).

*Opinion Leader’s Ideology.* The independent variable, “opinion leader’s ideology” (IV3) was created through the story numbers, as each story have a set politically affiliated opinion leader (for example, story 1 has a liberal opinion leader, story 2 has a conservative opinion leader, story 3 has a liberal opinion leader, and so on), without any randomization or further manipulation (OLIdeology). This is a categorical variable with two levels (Liberal or Conservative).

*Opinion Leader’s Agreement with the Story.* These two independent variables (StoryIdeology and OLIdeology) interact in another level, where the researcher assigned



opinion leaders to each story and manipulated the tweets to reflect their agreement/disagreement with the story (IV4). This is also a categorical variable with two levels (agrees or disagrees). The agreement/disagreement interaction is required for analysis and to measure the responses based on such interaction. Hence, another variable was created (OLAgmnt) with two levels (agrees or does not agree) that will be used in further analyses. These interactions and manipulations are presented in Table 4 above.

*News Source/Treatment.* The independent variable “presence of news source” (IV5) is the manipulation for the treatment group. The news source as a manipulation was only provided to the treatment group. The control group did not receive any news source in their survey. Hence this was measured by creating a Group filter based on which questions the respondents answered. This is measured as a categorical variable with two levels (Control or Treatment).

The sample received the instruments for the Control/Treatment groups in random order as set in the Qualtrics Survey Flow. The variable “Group” was created in SPSS by recoding those who answered Q16\_1 (a Treatment Group question) into Treatment Group and all else into Control Group. The variable “group” is a categorical variable with two levels (Control or Treatment). The frequency distribution for the “Group” is presented in Table 5.

**Table 5***Group (Control/Treatment) Descriptives*

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Control	212	49.4	49.4	49.4
	Treatment	217	50.6	50.6	100.0
	Total	429	100.0	100.0	

**An Overview of The Analyses Conducted**

1. To test the hypothesis *H1a: An individual's perceived credibility of information is dependent on their personal ideology*, a correlation was conducted to see whether perceived credibility of information (truth and accuracy scores before opinion leader's manipulation) is dependent on the personal ideology of the respondents (PIdeology, nominal variable; PolidScale, ordinal variable) separately for the control and treatment groups. To further analyze, these variables were used to run an independent-samples t-test.
2. To test hypothesis *H1b: An individual's perceived credibility of information is influenced by the source of information*, a univariate analysis of variance was conducted with credibility score before opinion leaders' manipulation (BefOLta) as the dependent variable and personal ideology of the individual (PIdeology), ideology of the story (StroyIdeology), and presence of news source (Group) as fixed factors.
3. To test hypothesis *H1c: An individual's perceived credibility of information is affected by opinion leaders' ideology*, a 2 x 2 x 2 x 2 mixed factorial analysis of

variance was conducted to investigate how the perceived credibility of information is affected by opinion leader's ideology and their agreement and disagreement with the story. Story ideology (liberal or conservative), opinion leader's ideology (liberal or conservative) and opinion leader's agreement with the story (agrees or disagrees) were the within-subjects variables. News source (Group) was the between-subjects variable. Content credibility (TAScore) was the dependent variable. Respondents' personal ideology was treated as the covariate to control for its influences on the dependent variable.

4. To test hypothesis *H2a: An individual's decision to actively consume information is dependent on their personal ideology*, a correlation was conducted to see whether active consumption of information (share over Facebook and Twitter scores before opinion leader's manipulation) is dependent on the personal ideology of the respondents (PIdeology, nominal variable; PolidScale, ordinal variable) separately for the control and treatment groups. To further analyze, these variables were used to run an independent-samples t-test.
5. To test hypothesis *H2b: An individual's decision to actively consume information is influenced by the source of information*, a univariate analysis of variance was conducted with active consumption score before opinion leaders' manipulation (BefOLshare) as the dependent variable and personal ideology of the individual (PIdeology), ideology of the story (StroyIdeology), and presence of news source (Group) as fixed factors.
6. To test hypothesis *H2c: An individual's decision to actively consume information is affected by opinion leaders' ideology*, a 2 x 2 x 2 x 2 mixed factorial analysis of

variance was conducted to investigate how active consumption of information is affected by opinion leader's ideology and their agreement and disagreement with the story. Story ideology (liberal or conservative), opinion leader's ideology (liberal or conservative) and opinion leader's agreement with the story (agrees or disagrees) were the within-subjects variables. News source (Group) was the between-subjects variable. Active consumption (Share\_score) was the dependent variable. Respondents' personal ideology was treated as the covariate to control for its influences on the dependent variable.

7. To test the hypothesis *H3: Individuals' information consumption preference is related to their personal ideology*, a chi-square test of association was conducted between respondent's information choice under cognitive fatigue (InfoChoice; nominal) and their personal ideology (PIdeology; nominal). To further observe the relationship an independent-samples t-test was also conducted with respondent's political ideology scale (PolidScale; ordinal) as the test variable and their information choice (InfoChoice; nominal) as the grouping variable.
8. To answer RQ1, on whether political ideology and polarizing cues in information affect its consumption, *H1a* and *H2a*, were tested.
9. To answer RQ2, on judging the extent of opinion leader's influence on consumption of information, *H1c* and *H2c* were tested.
10. To answer RQ3, on how an individual decides to conform (or not) with the opinion leader, the researcher did a deductive thematic analysis of the answers to open-ended questions in the instrument.

## **Results**

### ***Section I***

The relationship between the perceived credibility of information and respondents' personal ideology was first tested through correlation using the ordinal variables, truth and accuracy score (LibTA, ConTA and TAall) and the personal ideology scale (PolidScale). The truth and accuracy score used for this analysis are the scores recorded before opinion leader manipulation to recuse any sort of influence in their judgment.

Table 6 presents the correlation between the dependent variable and the independent variables in the control group where there was no news source manipulation. The sample received the stories with their intended ideological cues, but without the partisan news source that might influence their scores and decision.

**Table 6***Correlations for Control Group: Information Credibility X Personal Ideology*

		LibTA (8-56)	ConTA (8-56)	TAall (16-112)	PolidScale 10 thru 50
Spearman's rho	LibTA OL (8-56)	1.000			
		(n = 212)			
	ConTA (8-56)	.314**	1.000		
		(n = 212)	(n = 212)		
	TAall (16-112)	.820**	.770**	1.000	
		(n = 212)	(n = 212)	(n = 212)	
	PolidScale 10 thru 50	.329**	-.443**	-.043	1.000
	(conservative to liberal)	(n = 212)	(n = 212)	(n = 212)	(n = 212)

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

There is a ‘very weak’ non-significant negative relationship between personal ideology of the respondents and their credibility score for all the stories ( $r_s = -.04$ ,  $p = .532$ ). The reason for that could be because the stories were manipulated to reflect ideologically partisan cues. As a result, the responses from a partisan audience cancelled each other to provide a non-significant result.

Hence, to further analyze and determine the relationship between the dependent variable and the independent variables, the stories were divided along the lines of partisan cues (LibTA for all liberal stories and ConTA for all conservative stories), and then tested for correlation. There is a significant, but weak relationship between the liberal respondents and the liberal stories in the survey ( $r_s = .33$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Similarly, a moderate

and significant relationship was found between the conservative sample and the conservative stories in the instrument ( $r_s = -.44, p < .001$ ).

In the treatment group, news source was used as a manipulation where two politically and ideologically partisan news sources (CNN for liberal and Fox News for conservative) were used to influence the responses of the respondents. Like the control group, as Table 7 shows, no significant correlation was found between audience's personal ideology and their truth and accuracy scores on all the stories (TAall) combined ( $r_s = -.113, p > .01$ ). The reason, as before, could be attributed to the fact that four stories were treated with liberal news source and the other four were treated with the conservative news source. As a result, the relationship that may have existed, would cancel each other based on the audience's own ideological beliefs.

**Table 7***Correlations for Treatment Group: Information Credibility X Personal Ideology*

	LibTA (8-56)	ConTA (8-56)	TAall (16-112)	PolidScale 10 thru 50
Spearman's rho LibTA (8-56)	1.000 (n = 217)			
ConTA (8-56)	.374** (n = 217)	1.000 (n = 217)		
TAall (16-112)	.793** (n = 217)	.828** (n = 217)	1.000 (n = 217)	
PolidScale 10 thru 50 (conservative to liberal)	.288** (n = 217)	-.456** (n = 217)	-.113 (n = 217)	1.000 (n = 217)

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

However, liberal-leaning respondents have a positive relationship with the liberal stories. Even though the relationship is weak, it is significant ( $r_s = .288, p < .001$ ). The conservative-leaning respondents, however, showed a stronger, significant relationship with conservative stories ( $r_s = -.456, p < .001$ ). This moderate relationship also indicates that conservative-leaning respondents perceived conservative stories to be more credible than liberal-leaning respondents did with liberal stories.

An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare content credibility score with the political ideology (PIdeology; nominal) of the respondent for both the control and treatment groups together (See Table 11 & 12 in Appendix C). There was a significant relationship in the scores ( $t(353.849) = -4.812, p < .001$ ), where liberal-leaning respondents considered liberal stories to be more credible ( $M = 38.5, SD = 9.9$ ) compared to conservative-leaning respondents' credibility score for liberal stories ( $M = 33.1, SD = 12.8$ ). Similarly, there was a significant relationship in the scores



( $t(426.943) = 6.996, p < .001$ ) for conservative-leaning respondents who considered conservative stories to be more credible ( $M = 37.5, SD = 9.7$ ) compared to liberal-leaning respondents' credibility score for conservative stories ( $M = 30.1, SD = 12.1$ ). This supports *H1a* which suggests that an individual's perceived credibility of information is dependent on their personal ideology.

## ***Section II***

To test *H1b* a univariate analysis of variance was conducted with credibility score before opinion leaders' manipulation (BefOLta) as the dependent variable and personal ideology of the individual (PIdeology), ideology of the story (StoryIdeology), and presence of news source (Group) as fixed factors (See Table 13 & 14 in Appendix C). The three-way interaction between personal ideology, story ideology and group were nonsignificant,  $F(1, 3418) = .010, p = .922, \eta^2 = .000$ . However, when the estimated marginal means were compared, slight changes were noticed between the groups based on the individual's personal ideology and the story ideology. On a total possible score from 2 through 14, liberal-leaning respondents gave slightly higher scores to liberal information with a liberal news source (CNN) ( $M = 9.74$ ) than what they gave to liberal information without a news source ( $M = 9.57$ ). However, with conservative-leaning respondents, the score remained the same whether a conservative news source was present (Fox News) for conservative information ( $M = 9.37$ ) or not ( $M = 9.40$ ). This shows that the presence of a liberal news source affected the liberal-leaning respondents more than conservative news source did for the conservative respondents. But the effects were not significant and hence, *H1b* which suggests that an individual's perceived credibility of information is influenced by the source of information is not supported.

### ***Section III***

A 2 x 2 x 2 x 2 mixed factorial analysis of variance (MANCOVA) was conducted to investigate how the perceived credibility of information is affected by opinion leader's ideology and their agreement and disagreement with the story (*H1c*) (See Table 15 & 16 in Appendix C). Story ideology (liberal or conservative), opinion leader's ideology (liberal or conservative) and opinion leader's agreement with the story (agrees or disagrees) were the within-subjects variables. News source was the between-subjects variable. Content credibility (TAScore) was the dependent variable. Respondents' personal ideology was treated as the covariate to control for its influences on the dependent variable.

The two-way interaction between an individual's perceived credibility of information (TAScore) and opinion leader's ideology (OLIdeology) was significant,  $F(1, 3409) = 30.422, p < .001, \eta^2 = .009$ . The three-way interaction between perceived credibility of information (TAScore), story ideology (StoryIdeology) and opinion leader's ideology (OLIdeology) were significant,  $F(1, 3409) = 7.512, p < .05, \eta^2 = .002$ . The interaction between perceived credibility of information (TAScore), opinion leader's agreement to the story (OLAgmmt) and story ideology (StoryIdeology), and opinion leader's ideology (OLIdeology) was also significant,  $F(1, 3409) = 10.081, p < .05, \eta^2 = .003$  and  $F(1, 3409) = 16.131, p < .001, \eta^2 = .005$ . Similarly, the interaction between perceived credibility of information (TAScore), story ideology (StoryIdeology), opinion leader's ideology (OLIdeology) and opinion leader's agreement to the story (OLAgmmt) was also significant,  $F(1, 3409) = 25.392, p < .001, \eta^2 = .007$ . Even though all these interactions have a weak  $\eta^2$  value, these

interactions are significant. Other differences were not statistically significant, which included any interactions with the group (treatment/control) variable.

Simple main effects pairwise comparisons were conducted to explore the only four-way significant interaction as reported in the previous paragraph. The mean reported in the following paragraphs is based on a scale of 2 through 14, with 8 being the mid-point of the scale.

*Resonance.* There were two stories that measured the effects of resonance – one for liberal-leaning respondents (story number 3) and the other for conservative-leaning respondents (story number 7). On average, the liberal respondents increased their content credibility score for a liberal story after noticing that the liberal opinion leader agreed with that story (before opinion leader  $M = 8.56$ ; after opinion leader  $M = 8.79$ ). However, the same pattern is not followed for the conservative side as on average the conservative respondents decreased their content credibility score for a conservative story after noticing that the conservative opinion leader agreed with the story (before opinion leader  $M = 8.61$ ; after opinion leader  $M = 8.21$ ).

*Consonance.* There were two stories that measured the effects of consonance (story number 4 & 5). On average, the conservative respondents increased their content credibility score for a conservative story after noticing that the liberal opinion leader disagreed with the story (before opinion leader  $M = 8.24$ ; after opinion leader score = 9.01). However, the same pattern was not followed by the liberal respondents as on average liberal respondents decreased their content credibility score for a liberal story when a conservative opinion leader disagreed with that story (before opinion leader  $M = 9.19$ ; after opinion leader  $M = 8.74$ ).

Consonance also occurred for conservative-leaning respondents when they came across a liberal story where a conservative opinion leader did not agree (story number 4) (before opinion leader  $M = 9.19$ ; after opinion leader score = 8.74). And for liberal-leaning respondents the same pattern was not followed for a conservative story where a liberal opinion leader did not agree (story number 5) (before opinion leader  $M = 8.24$ ; after opinion leader score = 9.01).

*Dissonance.* There were four stories that measured the effects of dissonance. For the liberal-leaning respondents, dissonance occurred in story number 1 (where a liberal opinion leader disagrees with a liberal story) and 6 (where a liberal opinion leader agrees with a conservative story). One way to reduce dissonance and achieve consonance is by conforming with the opinion leader and change the content credibility scores after being exposed to the tweet.

For story number 1, on average the liberal-leaning respondents decreased their content credibility score for the liberal story after noticing that the liberal opinion leader disagreed with that story (before opinion leader  $M = 9.44$ ; after opinion leader  $M = 8.32$ ). And for story number 6, on average the liberal-leaning respondents increased their content credibility score for the conservative story after noticing that the liberal opinion leader agreed with that story (before opinion leader  $M = 8.21$ ; after opinion leader  $M = 8.56$ ).

For the conservative-leaning respondents, dissonance occurred in story number 2 (where a conservative opinion leader agrees with a liberal story) and 8 (where a conservative opinion leader disagrees with a conservative story). The conservative-leaning respondents showed the same pattern for story number 8, where they reduced the

content credibility score after being exposed to the opinion leader's tweet (before opinion leader  $M = 8.37$ ; after opinion leader  $M = 8.15$ ). However, the conservative-leaning respondents diverted from the trend when they decreased their content credibility score for a liberal story after seeing that the conservative opinion leader agreed to it (before opinion leader  $M = 8.96$ ; after opinion leader  $M = 7.93$ ). The reasons for these changes are further analyzed through a thematic analysis of the comments provided by the respondents in Section VII of this chapter.

Another crucial point that needs to be addressed is that the sample was liberal leaning ( $M = 32.45$ , where 10 thru 30 = conservative and 31 thru 50 = liberal). This could influence the mean scores as the political ideology scale (PolidScale) has been used as a covariate to control the means and the results.

For all these interactions, the mean credibility score changed (increased or decreased) after the opinion leader manipulations. Hence, this supports *H1c* which suggests that an individual's perceived credibility of information is affected by opinion leader's ideology.

#### ***Section IV***

The relationship between active consumption of information (share over Facebook and Twitter) and respondents' personal ideology was first tested through correlation using the ordinal variables, share score (LibShare, ConShare and Shareall) and the personal ideology scale (PolidScale). The share score used for this analysis are the scores recorded before opinion leader manipulation to recuse any sort of influence in their judgment.

Table 8 shows the correlation between the dependent variables and the independent variable in the control group where there was no news source manipulation. The sample received the stories with their intended ideological cues, but without the partisan news source that might influence their scores and decision.

**Table 8**

*Correlations for Control Group: Active Consumption X Personal Ideology*

	LibShare (8-56)	ConShare (8-56)	Shareall (16-112)	Political Ideology Scale 10 thru 50
Spearman's rho	1.000 (n = 212)			
		.879** (n = 212)		
			.965** (n = 212)	
				1.000 (n = 212)
Political Ideology Scale 10 thru 50 (conservative to liberal)	-.205** (n = 212)	-.355** (n = 212)	-.281** (n = 212)	1.000 (n = 212)

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

There is a ‘weak’ significant negative relationship between personal ideology of the respondents and their active consumption for all the stories ( $r_s = -.28, p < .001$ ). This suggests that conservative-leaning respondents tend to actively consume the information more than liberal-leaning respondents.

To further analyze this relationship between the dependent variable and the independent variable, the stories were divided along the lines of partisan cues (LibShare

for all liberal stories and ConShare for all conservative stories), and then tested for correlation. There is a significant, but weak relationship between the conservative-leaning respondents and the conservative stories ( $r_s = -.36, p < .001$ ). However, the test also revealed that there is a significant, but weak negative relationship between the liberal-leaning respondents and their tendency to actively consume liberal information ( $r_s = -.21, p < .001$ ), which means that conservative-leaning respondents actively consume liberal stories as well. The correlation test also suggests that the conservative-leaning respondents tend to actively consume the information presented in the instrument more than the liberal-leaning respondents. All the relationships established based on the political ideology scale yielded negative results, showing a lean towards the conservative side.

In the treatment group, news source was used as a manipulation where two politically and ideologically partisan news sources (CNN for liberal and Fox News for conservative) were used to influence the responses of the respondents. As observed in the control group, the treatment group asserted the same trends (see Table 9). Conservative-leaning respondents tend to actively consume stories more than liberal-leaning respondents ( $r_s = -.24, p < .001$ ). Moreover, conservative-leaning respondents also showed a significant, but weak relationship in active consumption of conservative stories ( $r_s = -.34, p < .001$ ). Conservative-leaning respondents also showed a significant, but weak relationship in actively consuming liberal stories ( $r_s = -.13, p < .001$ ).

**Table 9***Correlations for Treatment Group: Active Consumption X Personal Ideology*

	LibShare (8-56)	ConShare (8-56)	Shareall (16-112)	Political Ideology Scale 10 thru 50
Spearman's rho LibShare (8-56)	1.000 (n = 217)			
ConShare (8-56)	.882** (n = 217)	1.000 (n = 217)		
Shareall (16-112)	.969** (n = 217)	.966** (n = 217)	1.000 (n = 217)	
Political Ideology Scale 10 thru 50 (conservative to liberal)	-.128 (n = 217)	-.335** (n = 217)	-.237** (n = 217)	1.000 (n = 217)

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare active consumption with the political ideology (PIdeology; nominal) of the respondent for both the control and treatment groups (See Table 11 & 12 in Appendix C). There was a significant relationship in the scores ( $t(410.732) = 3.275, p = .001$ ) where conservative-leaning respondents scored higher in active consumption of liberal stories ( $M = 30.21, SD = 15.6$ ) compared to liberal-leaning respondents' score on active consumption of liberal stories ( $M = 25.24, SD = 15.7$ ). Similarly, there was a significant relationship in the scores ( $t(416.637) = 5.910, p < .001$ ) where conservative-leaning respondents scored higher in active consumption of conservative stories ( $M = 30.84, SD = 14.8$ ) compared to liberal-leaning respondents' score on active consumption of conservative stories ( $M = 22.12, SD = 15.6$ ). In general, conservative-leaning respondents gave higher scores to



active consumption ( $M = 61.1$ ,  $SD = 29.6$ ) than what liberal-leaning respondents gave ( $M = 47.4$ ,  $SD = 30.3$ ). This supports *H2a* which suggested that an individual's decision to actively consume information is dependent on their personal ideology.

### ***Section V***

To test *H2b* a univariate analysis of variance was conducted with active consumption score before opinion leaders' manipulation (BefOLshare) as the dependent variable and personal ideology of the individual (PIdeology), ideology of the story (StoryIdeology), and presence of news source (Group) as fixed factors (See Table 15 & 16 in Appendix C). The three-way interaction between personal ideology, story ideology and group were nonsignificant,  $F(1, 3418) = .426, p = .514, \eta^2 = .000$ . However, when the estimated marginal means were compared, slight changes were noticed between the groups based on the individual's personal ideology and the story ideology. On a total possible score from 2 through 14, liberal-leaning respondents gave slightly higher scores to liberal information with a liberal news source (CNN) ( $M = 6.72$ ) than what they gave to liberal information without a news source ( $M = 5.94$ ). However, with conservative-leaning respondents, the score remained the same whether a conservative news source was present (Fox News) for conservative information ( $M = 7.73$ ) or not ( $M = 7.73$ ). This shows that the presence of a liberal news source affected the liberal-leaning respondents more than conservative news source did for the conservative-leaning respondents. But the effects were not significant and hence, *H2b* which suggests that an individual's perceived credibility of information is influenced by the source of information is not supported.

A  $2 \times 2 \times 2 \times 2$  mixed factorial analysis of variance (MANCOVA) was conducted to investigate how the active consumption of information is affected by opinion leader's

ideology and their agreement and disagreement with the story (*H2c*) (See Table 18 & 19 in Appendix C). Story ideology (liberal or conservative), opinion leader's ideology (liberal or conservative) and opinion leader's agreement with the story (agrees or disagrees) were the within-subjects variables. News source was the between-subjects variable. Active consumption (Share score) was the dependent variable. All the within-subjects variables and the between-subjects variables were controlled for the personal ideology of the respondents in the mixed-factorial ANOVA.

The two-way interactions between an individual's active consumption of information (Share\_score) and story ideology (StoryIdeology), and opinion leader's ideology (OLIdeology) were both significant,  $F(1, 3409) = 16.14, p < .001, \eta^2 = .980$  and  $F(1, 3409) = 13.231, p < .001, \eta^2 = .953$  respectively. The three-way interactions between an individual's active consumption of information, opinion leader's ideology and opinion leader's agreement with the story (agrees/does not agrees) was significant,  $F(1, 3409) = 8.756, p < .001, \eta^2 = .841$ . Other differences were not statistically significant, which included any interactions with the group (treatment/control) variable.

Simple main effects pairwise comparisons were conducted to explore the only three-way significant interaction as reported in the previous paragraph. The means reported in the following paragraphs is based on a scale 2 through 14, with 8 being the mid-point of the scale.

*Resonance.* There were two stories that measured the effects of resonance – one for liberal-leaning respondents (story number 3) and the other for conservative-leaning respondents (story number 7). On average the liberal respondents slightly increased their

active consumption score for a liberal story after noticing that the liberal opinion leader agreed with that story (before opinion leader  $M = 6.66$ ; after opinion leader  $M = 6.76$ ). However, the same pattern is not followed for the conservative side as on average the conservative respondents decreased their active consumption score for a conservative story after noticing that the conservative opinion leader agreed with the story (before opinion leader  $M = 6.61$ ; after opinion leader  $M = 6.48$ ). This result is similar to what we got for content credibility score while testing *H1c* in Section III of this chapter. However, the mean scores here are below the mid-point of the scale (8) and hence the trend noticed here is towards a less likelihood of sharing the information over social media.

*Consonance.* There were two stories that measured the effects of consonance (story number 4 & 5). On average the conservative respondents slightly increased their active consumption score for a conservative story after noticing that the liberal opinion leader disagreed with the story (before opinion leader  $M = 6.48$ ; after opinion leader score = 6.64) on a scale of 2 through 14. However, the same pattern was not followed by the liberal respondents as on average liberal respondents slightly decreased their active consumption score for a liberal story when a conservative opinion leader disagreed with that story (before opinion leader  $M = 6.95$ ; after opinion leader  $M = 6.75$ ) on a scale of 2 through 14. This result also reflected the trend noticed while testing *H1c* for content credibility score.

Consonance is also observed for conservative-leaning respondents for a liberal story where the conservative opinion leader does not agree with the story (story number 4) (before opinion leader  $M = 6.95$ ; after opinion leader  $M = 6.75$ ) on a scale of 2 through

14. however, the same pattern was not observed for liberal-leaning respondents for a conservative story when the liberal opinion leader disagreed with the story (story number 5) (before opinion leader  $M = 6.48$ ; after opinion leader  $M = 6.64$ ) on a scale of 2 through 14. However, the mean scores here are below the mid-point of the scale (8) and hence the trend noticed here is towards a less likelihood of sharing the information over social media.

*Dissonance.* There were four stories that measured the effects of dissonance. For the liberal-leaning respondents, dissonance occurred in story number 1 (where a liberal opinion leader disagrees with a liberal story) and 6 (where a liberal opinion leader agrees with a conservative story). One way to reduce dissonance and achieve consonance is by conforming with the opinion leader and change the active consumption scores after being exposed to the tweet.

For story number 1, on average the liberal-leaning respondents slightly decreased their active consumption score for the liberal story after noticing that the liberal opinion leader disagreed with that story (before opinion leader  $M = 6.97$ ; after opinion leader  $M = 6.72$ ). And for story number 6, on average the liberal-leaning respondents slightly increased their content credibility score for the conservative story after noticing that the liberal opinion leader agreed with that story (before opinion leader  $M = 6.53$ ; after opinion leader  $M = 6.71$ ).

For the conservative-leaning respondents, dissonance occurred in story number 2 (where a conservative opinion leader agrees with a liberal story) and 8 (where a conservative opinion leader disagrees with a conservative story). The conservative-leaning respondents, however, did not show the same pattern for either of the stories as

the liberal-leaning respondents. They slightly reduced the active consumption score for story number 2 after being exposed to the opinion leader's tweet (before opinion leader  $M = 6.92$ ; after opinion leader  $M = 6.41$ ). However, the conservative-leaning respondents did not make any noticeable changes to the active consumption score for story number 8 (before opinion leader  $M = 6.45$ ; after opinion leader  $M = 6.48$ ). The reasons for these changes are further analyzed through a thematic analysis of the comments provided by the respondents in Section VII of this chapter.

Another crucial point that needs to be addressed is that the sample was liberal leaning ( $M = 32.45$ , where 10 thru 30 = conservative and 31 thru 50 = liberal). This could influence the mean scores as the political ideology scale (PolidScale) has been used as a covariate to control the means and the results.

Even though the mean scores were below the mid-point of the scale, for all these interactions, the mean active consumption score slightly changed (increased or decreased) after the opinion leader manipulations. Hence, this supports *H2c* which suggests that an individual's perceived credibility of information is affected by opinion leader's ideology.

### ***Section VI***

To test *H3* a chi-square test of association was conducted between the variables, information choice under cognitive fatigue (InfoChoice) and political ideology of the respondent (PIdeology) for both the treatment and control groups together. Both of these variables are two-level categorical variable. There was a significant association between respondent's information choice under cognitive fatigue and their personal ideology  $\chi^2(1) = 4.663, p < .05$  (See Table 20 in Appendix C). 55.2% of conservative leaning

respondents chose conservative headlines to further read, whereas 44.7% of liberal leaning respondents chose conservative headlines to read. In a similar manner, 55.3% of liberal-leaning respondents chose liberal headlines to further read, whereas 44.8% of conservative-leaning respondents chose liberal headlines to read (See Table 21 in Appendix C). The choice interestingly is equally divided along ideological cues in the headlines and the personal ideology of the respondents. The researcher also noticed an interesting phenomenon in the choice of the headlines. While the choice for almost all headlines were normally distributed, one headline – “BLM attains the status of the greatest mass movement in this century, NAACP reports” – has the highest skewness. A whopping, 86.4% of the liberal-leaning respondents chose to read this headline further, compared to just 13.6% of the conservative-leaning respondents.

To further observe the relationship, an independent-samples t-test was also conducted between respondent’s information choice under cognitive fatigue (InfoChoice; categorical variable) and their political ideology (PolidScale; ordinal variable). The results indicate that there is a significant difference in mean political ideology between liberal and conservative headline choice,  $t(426.976) = -4.514, p < .001$ . The average score for liberal headlines was significantly higher ( $M = 34.09, SD = 7.7$ ) than the average score for conservative headlines ( $M = 30.76, SD = 7.6$ ) on a political ideology scale of 10 to 50, where 10 thru 30 = conservative and 31 thru 50 = liberal. This supports *H3*, which suggests that individual’s information consumption preference under cognitive fatigue is related to personal ideology.

## *Section VII*

For RQ3, where the researcher wanted to cultivate how individuals decide to conform (or not) with the opinion leader's opinion, the open-ended questions in the stimulus were analyzed thematically. The respondents were asked to elaborate on their decision-making process while rating on the truth and accuracy scores and the share scores. Miller and LaPoe (2016) used 10% of their sample to determine lists of visual categories and the intercoder reliability. However, the researcher in this study is trying to do a deductive thematic analysis to find further evidence for the test results. Hence, intercoder reliability is not needed as deductive thematic analysis derives its themes from literature to find a priori support for the results observed in data analysis (Crabtree & Miller, 1999; Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006).

To collect random respondents and observe their responses, unique identification number was assigned to each respondent through a new variable (ID). After the identification number was assigned, a random number sequence was generated first with 43 numbers (10% of the sample). However, due to unsatisfactory results of the open-ended answers, the pool was expanded to 20% and a sequence of 86 numbers between 1 and 429 was generated using [www.randomizer.org](http://www.randomizer.org). Based on the generated sequence, the responses were selected from the data for the thematic analysis.

*Spiral of silence and lack of self-efficacy.* The most prominent reply that came out of the respondents is a lack of self-efficacy in sharing information online in the fear that they will be trolled, 'cancelled' or face different sorts of consequences. One respondent wrote, "I do not talk about my political beliefs with my friends, and I never post anything on social media about my beliefs." Similar responses were also noted recurrently. "This

is hugely controversial and I'm not discussing online,” “I would only talk to people that I know and trust. I would not want to publicly express my views,” “I refrain from posting any political arguments on social media,” “I might discuss it in person but wouldn't share on social media.”

One respondent specifically mentioned that while friends and family are more accepting to the diverse views, there is a fear in social media that you might get cancelled for your views and have grave consequences on your career, “It is the same as before, family and friends are more accepting and social media will cancel you and you will lose opportunities.” Similarly, one other respondent wrote, “I would only privately support my side in politics. I would fear reporting publicly would lead to backlash.” Another respondent elaborated on how agreement with an information might not lead to share that story on social media. Agreeing with an information but refraining from expressing it under the fear of facing opposing views has been a crux of spiral of silence studies on social media platforms (Chen, 2018; Gearhart & Zhang, 2014; 2015; Noelle-Neumann, 1974; Olson & LaPoe, 2017; 2018). They wrote, “While I completely agree with this story, I only really talk politics with my parents and that is rare. I'd never share this on social media because I have a rule where I don't put my political views on social media.”

This is a fairly recurrent amongst respondents coming from either ideology as some stated, “I don't like Trump, and I have no interest in talking about it. Furthermore, I have no interest in bringing him up on social media. This is where his supporters are the absolute worst.” Comments like these, “I know how many people believe Trump's lies and those that believe them are likely to harass you any way that they can.” And these, “I would only discuss this story with people who are open-minded. No use calling Trump



worshippers down on myself or my family.” There is a constant fear of getting trolled and bullied online for the views that people might have. And that leads to self-censoring, as one respondent stated, “Having an unpopular political opinion is a death sentence, so it is smarter to quietly keep your opinions to yourself until cooler heads prevail. If that ever happens...”

*Resonance.* As tested for *H1c* and *H2c* in Section III and VI of this chapter, resonance was measured by the average mean score in the 2 x 2 x 2 x 2 mixed factorial ANOVA on how liberal-leaning respondents scored liberal stories, when a liberal opinion leader agrees with that story (story number 3); and how conservative-leaning respondents scored a conservative story, when a conservative opinion leader agrees with the story (story number 7). The tests revealed that for the liberal component there was an increase in mean score for both the content credibility score and the active consumption score after the opinion leader manipulation (Content Credibility: before opinion leader M = 8.56; after opinion leader M = 8.79; Active Consumption: before opinion leader M = 6.66; after opinion leader M = 6.76). However, similar pattern was not observed for the conservative component as both the content credibility score and the active consumption score decreased after the opinion leader manipulation (Content Credibility: before opinion leader M = 8.61; after opinion leader M = 8.21; Active Consumption: before opinion leader M = 6.61; after opinion leader M = 6.48).

To further observe the reasons behind the changes in score, the researcher investigated the open-ended questions. The liberal-leaning respondents' answers to story number 3 gives the researcher insight into what kind of decision-making process the respondent might have gone through and what kind of themes were mainly observed.

### **Complete agreement with the opinion leader**

One liberal-leaning respondent wrote, “I marked this one as highly accurate, because, to me, Trump was all of those nasty things and more. He chipped away at Democracy, our enemies became our friends, and everything he did hurt our country.” After the opinion leader manipulation, the same respondent wrote, “Even if she didn't post something like this, I completely agree with the content of the tweet. It seems very plausible that she would say that, but I'm not sure if she did or not.”

Similarly, another respondent wrote, “I gave questions 1 and 2 a score of 6 instead of 7 because democracy isn't dead yet, thanks to Biden being elected.” After being exposed to the opinion leader’s tweet, the same respondent said, “Sounds like the words of a vice president who recognizes the damage Trump to our democratic process.” The assertion of the opinion leader’s tweet on the respondent’s decision is observable through such comments as, “VP Kamala Harris is qualified to address justice issues. CNN would give voice to her views,” “Sounds like the words of a vice president who recognizes the damage Trump to our democratic process,” “Vice Pres. Harris was specifically elected to address these facts.”

Some liberal-leaning respondents misjudged the validity of the misinformation and stated, “I already known this story, so I would like to share my friends and family members in this story.” There was no way they could have known about this story, as all the stories provided in the instrument were conjured misinformation.

The conservative-leaning respondents’ answers to story number 7 gives the researcher insight into what kind of decision-making process the respondent might have gone through. As one conservative-leaning respondent expressed their exhaustion for the

lack of praise Trump has received for his work, “They would never give him (Trump) any praise.” Another conservative-leaning respondent refrained from saying much but indicated their approval to the story (through high scores) by saying, “[W]e live in a country with freedom of expression. I have nothing more to add.” Another conservative-leaning respondent added, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.”

One conservative-leaning respondent showed knowledge about political affairs, but still failed to recognize the misinformation. Before the opinion leader’s tweet they stated, “Nominated for multiple peace prizes, no new wars, started the Abraham accord, yes this man was and still is a peace keeper.” After the opinion leader’s tweet, the same respondent said, “Although I believe Pence to be a Rino [*sic*], he is right in stating what President Trump was hoping for, before ex vice president Biden came around and changed the plans.” The respondent being aware of the Abraham Accords (a statement for stable relationship between the Arab countries and Israel) and RINO (a pejorative applied to individuals who are elected as Republicans, but work as Democrats) showed the researcher that this respondent is politically engaged. However, they failed to understand that this story was a misinformation.

Some conservative-leaning respondents shared their complete trust in the story as stated in, “This was written in a way that is presenting facts and telling the facts of the story.” The same respondent after opinion leader’s tweet said, “I could believe Mike says this but I don't know how factual he is with his statement.” In the same tune, another conservative-leaning respondent wrote, “I think I remember this happening back when he was president, and he was even up for the Nobel peace prize for it.” After seeing the

tweet, they stated, “I’m not 100% sure, but I’m pretty sure that I read this somewhere.” And one conservative-leaning respondent just stated, “It is a famous news.”

Some respondents also identified with the content of the story and said, “I am promilitary and have friends both in and out of the service in multiple branches. I do share information about military issues like this.”

*Consonance.* As tested for *H1c* and *H2c* in Section III and VI of this chapter, consonance was measured by the average mean score in the 2 x 2 x 2 x 2 mixed factorial ANOVA on how liberal-leaning respondents scored liberal stories, when a conservative opinion leader disagrees with that story (story number 4); and how conservative-leaning respondents scored a conservative story, when a liberal opinion leader disagrees with the story (story number 5). The tests revealed that on average, the conservative respondents increased their content credibility and active consumption score for a conservative story after noticing that the liberal opinion leader disagreed with the story (Content Credibility: before opinion leader M = 8.24; after opinion leader score = 9.01; Active Consumption: before opinion leader M = 6.48; after opinion leader score = 6.64). However, the same pattern was not followed by the liberal respondents as on average, liberal respondents decreased their content credibility and active consumption score for a liberal story when a conservative opinion leader disagreed with that story (Content Credibility: before opinion leader M = 9.19; after opinion leader M = 8.74; Active Consumption: before opinion leader M = 6.95; after opinion leader M = 6.75).

To further observe the reasons behind the changes in score, the researcher investigated the open-ended questions. The conservative-leaning respondents’ answers to story number 5 gives the researcher insight into what kind of decision-making process the

respondent might have gone through. While addressing this story, we should cautiously acknowledge that the rhetoric around Supreme Court has been that it has become conservative because of its conservative skewed justices (Biskupic, 2020; Rivkin & Grossman, 2021). One conservative-leaning respondent agreed with the SCOTUS' decision, but immediately moved towards agreeing with the story, "It only makes sense that the Supreme Court would uphold religious freedoms, even for those who hate America." When the same respondent was exposed to the tweet of the opinion leader (liberal) who disagreed with the story, they responded, "Now I know it's true because Charles Schumer would only allow religious freedom for Muslims, he doesn't care about Christians or Jews." A similar form of disregard for Sen. Chuck Schumer were followed by other conservative-leaning respondents who said, "That statist authoritarian jerkwad (Schumer) saying he approves doesn't change that," and "Chuck is still a turn coat. He does not deserve my time or consideration."

One conservative-respondent approved the freedom of religion rhetoric, but showed their noncompliance with SCOTUS' decision, "I believe that people should worship as they see fit. I would hope that if they could protect the land in which they are residing they would choose to do it, but I am equally sure that many people wouldn't." Another conservative-leaning respondent, however, wrote that the event is factual and hence, their believability depended on that fact, "This seems like a factual event since there was a court hearing which this article is basically summarizing." One respondent just wrote, "Muslims are crazy."

The liberal-leaning respondents' answers to story number 4 gives the researcher insight into what kind of decision-making process the respondent might have gone

through, as one liberal-leaning respondent wrote, “I have felt this way for years so I would absolutely share the story. There is no need for assault weapons to be legal and I feel everyone should be aware of just how damaging they are.” After being exposed to the opinion leader (conservative) who disagreed with the story, the same respondent wrote, “The senator is an idiot and needs to be called out on his stupidity.” Rep. Kevin McCarthy is not a senator, but a member of the House of Representatives. Other liberal-leaning respondents expressed a similar sentiment, “Kevin McCarthy is a moron” and “Congressman McCarthy has no spine and no principles. What he has to share is worthless.”

One liberal-leaning respondent wanted to gather further information before actively consume the story and hence wrote,

I think gun violence and the accessibility of assault weapons in the USA is definitely something the country needs to address. I feel comfortable talking about this issue with select friends and family, but generally I still tend to not talk about these things openly a lot. I would never share this again on social media because I think this is such a political issue and I choose not to talk about these things on the platforms. And while I agree there needs to be an assault weapons ban, I'd really want to read the report/study to understand the method and analysis before sharing it with others because I'm personally not sure how scientific the study was.

After the opinion leader's tweet, the same respondent commented,

I think overall the story is still accurate, and while I would like to still read the actual report, I think Rep McCarthy is definitely misrepresenting the topic making it about all guns rather than specifically about assault weapons. This was happening during the BLM protests which were not riots, but of course the conservatives would depict it that way.

Consonance also occurred when liberal-leaning respondents saw story number 5 where a conservative story was disagreed by a liberal opinion leader. One liberal-leaning respondent wrote, “Clearly biased. If this did happen how is this different than a doctor

refusing an abortion due to religious reasons?” Another liberal-leaning respondent said that “As a human everybody should treat equally and show my support.” After being exposed to the tweet, they said, “I am with Chuck Schumer and agreeing this statement.” Before being exposed to the liberal opinion leader’s tweet, one liberal-leaning respondent showed extreme discontent with the story, “The language in this article, particularly in the title, seems biased and opinionated. I would not feel comfortable sharing or discussing the premise of the article for this reason.” However, after watching the tweet, they wrote that, “I do not know how accurate the statement that Muslims get religious immunity is. I agree with Chuck Schumer's comment but do not know that I would find this snippet interesting enough to share.”

In the same sense, a liberal-leaning respondent disagreed with the story, but agreed with the SCOTUS’ decision, “The headline is misleading. The Islamic men in the story are American citizens, whose rights were violated. The Supreme Court decision is a good one, and I would discuss it on Twitter alone.” When exposed to the opinion leader’s tweet, they wrote, “The truth is the truth. I would probably post it on Twitter alone because that's where I post these type of news items.” A similar pattern was followed when another respondent reacted to the story before the opinion leader’s tweet saying, “It sounds like we're not getting the full story as usual for Fox News. I have a feeling they're leaving a lot of important information out.” But once exposed to the tweet they said, “I agree Muslims should have freedom of religion. Sounds like a more reasonable story.”

However, one liberal-leaning respondent’s response stood out, as they specified the word “deport” for the Muslim individuals in the story, knowing that they are American citizens. They wrote, “I believe that the FBI would try to do this, but in this

case why not just deport them.” However, after reading the opinion leader’s tweet, they expressed their view as, “Religious freedom is a right in this country, but so is keeping this country safe. Why don't they, the FBI, go after the racist like the clan or is it their religious freedom.”

Another set of consonance occurred when the conservative-leaning respondents came across story number 4 where a conservative opinion leader disagreed with the liberal story. One conservative-leaning respondent just stated, “I support the second amendment.” Others expressed their deeper feelings about the liberal story against gun violence by stating, “To show how willing Americans are to give up their rights even though millions of Americans fought, bled and died for them. All Americans should already know this.” And “Our rights shall not be infringed, and the truth of the matter is that every single human being should have the ability to protect themselves from those who want to do harm.” The later conservative-leaning respondent, when exposed to the tweet said that “We have been able to see, when there is no good guy around with a gun, bad guys who care less about laws and bans, will ALWAYS use their power to hurt others.”

The same sentiment was also expressed by another conservative-leaning respondent, “People have been killing each other since the beginning of time, whether it be with rocks, sticks, knives, or whatever. Guns don’t kill, people kill!” And after reading the opinion leader’s tweet they said, “We can’t just de-invent something that has been part of the DNA of America since the beginning,” indicating the Second Amendment.

*Dissonance.* For the liberal-leaning respondents story number 1 (where a liberal opinion leader disagrees with a liberal story) and 6 (where a liberal opinion leader agrees



with a conservative story) were mainly manipulated to test cognitive dissonance. In story number 1, since it is a liberal story and the liberal opinion leader disagrees with it, liberal-leaning respondents can achieve cognitive consonance by following the liberal opinion leader and decrease their score after being exposed to the tweet. On the other hand, for story number 6, liberal leaning respondents will achieve cognitive consonance by following the opinion leader and increase the score for a conservative story after being exposed to the opinion leader's tweet.

A 2 x 2 x 2 x 2 mixed factorial ANOVA (MANOVA) was run to see the relationship with the content credibility and active consumption scores as the dependent variables, and story ideology, opinion leader's ideology, opinion leader's agreement with the story and the political ideology as fixed factors. In story number 1, on average liberal-leaning respondents decreased both of their scores (before opinion leader content credibility score,  $M = 9.95$ , after opinion leader content credibility score,  $M = 8.51$ ; before opinion leader active consumption score,  $M = 6.44$ , after opinion leader active consumption score,  $M = 6.06$ ) after being exposed to the opinion leader's tweet. Supporting the fact that they achieved consonance by reducing the score and following the opinion leader.

The same pattern, as stated, was also observed in story number 6. Where on average liberal-leaning respondents increased both of their scores (before opinion leader content credibility score,  $M = 7.26$ , after opinion leader content credibility score,  $M = 8.35$ ; before opinion leader active consumption score,  $M = 5.64$ , after opinion leader active consumption score,  $M = 5.82$ ) after being exposed to the opinion leader's tweet. This supports the fact that they achieved consonance by following the opinion leader and

scored the story higher. The  $t$  Test statistic is not significant for the truth and accuracy score before opinion leader (taC2) for story number 6, however, it is not important as we are not looking at the grouping variable (PIdeology) to compare between conservative-leaning respondents and liberal-leaning respondents in one testing variable, but we are looking at one group for the comparison between the testing variables.

### **Dismissing the opinion leader's tweet**

Some liberal-leaning respondents achieved cognitive consonance for story number 1 by dismissing the tweet and Nancy Pelosi's comments. One liberal-leaning respondent said, "This is a heinous situation, that all women in America should be aware of." Once they were exposed to the tweet, they wrote, "The tweet is incorrect, and I would not discuss it. Speaker Pelosi is incorrect in the tweet, Justice Barrett is not impartial in this regard." Another liberal-leaning respondent stated that they "Don't agree with any decision to take woman's rights away" and that they are "[I am] angry at this tweet." Rationalizations were also made by calling Nancy Pelosi irresponsible in one of the comments, "I do not believe Nancy Pelosi's assertion, nor is it substantiated by anything other than her opinion. This is irresponsible given her platform." And another pointed out Pelosi's lack of knowledge regarding Justice Barrett's position on pro-life, "I think Nancy Pelosi knows full well, after campaigning against every confirmation step of ACB, that she will do anything BUT protect women's right to choose. Amy is pretty religious and very Pro-Life."

Similar tone was recorded from other liberal-leaning respondents as well as one said, "I have strong feelings about women's rights and abortion. And would certainly discuss this with friends and family." And once exposed to the tweet they wrote, "I don't

discuss Nancy [P]elosi in any place or situation. it opens up conversations for hate hiding behind the internet.” Another liberal-leaning respondent expressed their general distrust in politicians when exposed to the tweet by saying, “I’ve been conditioned to understand that no one politician can really be trusted. This is regardless of party affiliation.”

### **Self-verification as a way of rationalization**

Interestingly, one liberal-leaning respondent said that they know Justice Barrett personally through interpersonal connections and stated that “I would discuss this with my sister who is a friend of Ms. Barrett but I am of the firm belief that abortion should not be decided by the government at all. This is a personal and moral decision that every WOMAN has the right to decide for herself.” But they showed their surprise at the tweet and stated that they will verify through their connections. “I find it difficult to believe that Ms. Pelosi would ever support anything that the conservative court does so I would once again have to talk to my sister about this as she has insider information.”

For story number 6, there are two things that are at play, 1. It is a highly polarized conservative story on BLM and 2. The tweet is by President Joe Biden, who has more authority and influence than Rep. Nancy Pelosi. Some liberal-leaning respondents conformed with President Biden to an extent, and some disregarded the tweet and criticized the president for such comments.

### **Conforming with the opinion leader**

As one liberal-leaning respondent while reading the story commented, “This kind of story is simply not worth sharing.” But changed their tone as soon as they got acclimated with the tweet, “Since I believe in the veracity of this statement my likelihood of sharing it rises exponentially.” This trend was noticed in others as well where one liberal-leaning respondent said while reading the story that the story “seems too extreme to be truthful or accurate.” President Biden’s tweet, however influenced them as they revised their opinion to state, “The story still seems very extreme, although seeing it retweeted by President Biden adds some legitimacy to it.”

Even though the liberal-leaning respondents were against the content of story number 6, there was a pattern observed where they would rationalize with their trustworthiness of the president and change their tone accordingly as one respondent noted, “Again, if Joe shared it, I would think that it was true because I have a high amount of trust for this president. Still, I think the words were probably taken out of context as they usually are.”

This going back and forth trend was observed in other cases as well. “Because all Americans are equal in U.S. so all black Americans should have all equal rights as every citizen and they should not be separated from every Americans and that is why I have these choices above.” But after being exposed to the tweet they said, “JOE BIDEN is right and the people should not be in violence because everyone have equal rights here and they should ask their rights in peaceful manner and that is why I choose my option above.” Similarly, other liberal-leaning respondents showed distrust to the story, but the tweet created doubt and they responded accordingly. Like here they commented for the story, “Anything Sean Hannity is associated with is not trustworthy. I would not entertain

comment on anything he is involved with.” But the tweet gave them a new chain of thoughts, “I trust Joe Biden and would discuss his positions with friends, family and co-workers with whom I share trust.”

### **Discrediting the news source**

Another liberal-leaning respondent accused Fox News as far-right news organization and blamed them for taking the comments out of context, “Fox News may be taking the BLM leader's words out of context here, but if he actually said, ‘burn down the system’, Fox, a far-right news source would certainly use the comment to further incite fear in White Americans.” But when exposed to the tweet, they took a more softer and tone and simply wrote, “I agree completely with the statement made by Joe.”

Accusing Fox News of other stuffs like typos, grammatical errors, and an entertainment organization was also noticed by the researcher as a way for the respondents to achieve consonance – a way to discredit the information source and the information. There were no grammatical errors or typos in any of the instruments. But one liberal-leaning respondent stated, “There are certain things about the article that make it read like a fake. Things such as typos and grammatical errors. It also reads heavily biased.” However, once exposed to Biden’s tweet agreeing with the story, the same respondent said, “I agree to the extent that we should be seeking peace amongst ourselves. However, I still don't like to talk about this over social media. Especially since I know people who oppose this movement.” Another liberal-leaning respondent said that they “don't consider Fox a ‘news’ organization. It is more like a ‘talk’ show.” But once they saw the tweet they stated, “The poster "Joe Biden" is blue check marked as verified, so I would believe he posted it.” One liberal-leaning respondent went to great details in

the background of how they don't consider Fox News to be a credible news organization as form of rationalization,

Fox News admitted in court that they are an entertainment network. So I have to think that most of their headlines and stories are to get increased traffic on their website or social media pages. While this may be an interview that actually occurred, I assume it was taken out of context to fit an agenda. I think that about any news outlet in the United States - I don't trust our media... even as an American.

The same respondent showed some skepticism about the believability of the tweet and how much they would consume the story, "I am skeptical that this tweet is real given that the word 'only' is used in conjunction with peace and intolerance... it seems contradictory - I may be reading into it too much, but you have to wonder." Similarly, another respondent said, "Biased and Fox News is an entertainment 'news' outlet so the mere mention of them made me reject this info." Once they saw the tweet their response was,

Biden is tweeting based on biased information; of course he would be expected to denounce violence- but I feel like Murphy's (from the article) words and interview were taken out of context to suit the needs of Fox News (I admit to my bias on this particular topic because the Black Lives Matter and the justified outrage from those who suffer from racial inequality is ALWAYS painted as terroristic and divisive because America would rather cling lies than own up to its atrocities).

A liberal-leaning respondent said that they won't speak of this story as they do not want to make anything worse, "I would not want to speak out on this so we do not make anything worse." But the message of peace in Biden's tweet made them change their mind. "I would speak out to preach about peace instead of violence." Some tried to divert the blame on the news organization rather than the source of the tweet as one respondent noted, "The point was made by the news to push an agenda and [B]iden is trying to reel it back. the issue isn't the leaders it's the news." And some agreed with the story after

watching the tweet, “You cannot make open threats like this with no consequences. I would share to make people aware of the true mindset.”

### **Discrediting the opinion leader**

However, not all shared the same sentiment as the tweet. Blame was diverted to Biden’s tweet as a form of rationalization after seeing the tweet. As one liberal-leaning respondent vehemently opposed the story by saying, “The nature of the article is hatred. It does call for action but in the most violent ways, and I cannot stand behind something as such. Afterall, that violence could also be exaggerated.” But once they saw the tweet, they turned against the president, “Given the president's mental state, anything he shares really does not suit my interest. His focus appears to be on the wrong things anyways.” Other comments that undermined President Biden included, “Tweet seems biased,” “That’s literally what they were saying all last summer and he’s [Biden] a major cause of the problem,” and “I definitely don't believe anything Biden endorses, so again I do not/will not share with others any information that I believe to be not true and/or absolutely ridiculous.” However, some were softer in their disagreement as one wrote, “I generally like Joe Biden but I don't agree with this tweet. I think the BLM representative should be able to discuss the context of what was said.” A liberal-leaning respondent pointed out the BLM leader mentioned in the story in their comments, “There is no Black Lives Matter leader, the movement itself is decentralized. This in itself renders the article as inaccurate.” And criticized Biden for sharing an inaccurate tweet, “The article the tweet refers to is inaccurate, and I think that the POTUS would ascertain the truth before reacting to a fake article like that, unlike the previous POTUS.”

One liberal-leaning respondent criticized the BLM leader mentioned in the story and the lack of action from the president's part as they wrote, "I would discuss this with friends and family in person because it is a travesty that a few individuals can commit felonious acts and not be held accountable for them. I am very good friends with a number of black people and they no more support this behavior than I do." After seeing the tweet, they pointed out that whatever the president said in the tweet must be followed through, "This may be what came out of President Biden's mouth but he has to have the courage to follow through with action. I would definitely speak to family and friends about this as some of them are directly involved with this."

For the conservative-leaning respondents story number 8 (where a conservative opinion leader disagrees with a conservative story) and 2 (where a conservative opinion leader agrees with a liberal story) were mainly manipulated to test cognitive dissonance. In story number 8, since it is a conservative story and the conservative opinion leader disagrees with it, conservative-leaning respondents can achieve cognitive consonance by following the conservative opinion leader and decrease their score after being exposed to the tweet. On the other hand, for story number 2, conservative-leaning respondents will achieve cognitive consonance by following the opinion leader and increase the score for a liberal story after being exposed to the opinion leader's tweet.

A 2 x 2 x 2 x 2 mixed factorial ANOVA (MANOVA) was run to see the relationship with the content credibility and active consumption scores as the dependent variables, and story ideology, opinion leader's ideology, opinion leader's agreement with the story and the political ideology as fixed factors. In story number 8, on average conservative-leaning respondents decreased both of their scores (before opinion leader



content credibility score,  $M = 9.73$ , after opinion leader content credibility score,  $M = 8.54$ ; before opinion leader active consumption score,  $M = 7.70$ , after opinion leader active consumption score,  $M = 7.67$ ) after being exposed to the opinion leader's tweet. Supporting the fact that they achieved consonance by reducing the score and following the opinion leader. However, the active consumption score before and after opinion leader's tweet saw a minute change, which we will discuss in the following paragraphs.

The same pattern, however, was not observed in story number 2. Where on average conservative-leaning respondents maintained their content credibility scores, but slightly decreased their active consumption scores (before opinion leader content credibility score,  $M = 8.28$ , after opinion leader content credibility score,  $M = 8.27$ ; before opinion leader active consumption score,  $M = 7.61$ , after opinion leader active consumption score,  $M = 7.44$ ) after being exposed to the opinion leader's tweet.

For story number 8, one of the ways the conservative-leaning respondents achieved consonance was by conforming with the opinion leader and decrease the scores. The other way they achieved consonance was by undermining the tweet and/or the opinion leader associated with it. The theme that came up often was an assertion of constitutional rights.

### **Asserting constitutional rights**

One conservative-leaning respondent wrote, "I would not post this anywhere, as I do not like any politics that are possibly going to undermine our constitution." Another conservative-leaning respondent, before being exposed to the opinion leader's tweet said, "I fully support and believe in the 2nd amendment." After the tweet they continued with their assertion, stating, "I support the 2nd amendment and will not pass around info

against it.” Similarly, another conservative-leaning respondent wrote, “1) The term assault weapon is a word created by the left, that actually does not mean anything. Most people do not even know that AR DOES NOT stand for assault rifle, it actually stands for Armalite Rifle. So the assault weapons portion of this story is utterly false.” And once they saw the tweet they responded, “SHALL NOT BE INFRINGED. I am not sure it could be any more clear to people. Our constitution was written so the government could not garner the amount of power they currently have.”

### **Discrediting the opinion leader**

One of the other ways the respondents achieved consonance was by discrediting the opinion leader. A conservative-leaning respondent wrote for the story, “Newspaper are just a way to tear America apart.” And after seeing the tweet their respond was, “McConnell is just as bad as the left.” The same tone was followed by another conservative-respondent, who said, “McConnell is an idiot. Always has been, always will.” Another conservative-leaning respondent commented on how McConnell’s tweet against the Second Amendment is authoritarian, “As far as the tweet, shocker, statists gonna be authoritarian.” One respondent was skeptical that McConnell might change his tone later and hence refused to share it, “McConnell always has an angle. While the facts in the tweet are correct, I would be hesitant in sharing it with my followers only for him to add caveats a day or so later.”

### **Refusal to accept opinion leader’s tweet**

Like the other two themes, the researcher also noticed that in order to achieve consonance, some conservative-leaning respondent refused to believe that a conservative opinion leader could disagree with a conservative story. This is highlighted as these

respondents did not say the same for other opinion leaders and their tweets. So, when they specifically refused to believe a tweet that was manipulated to test dissonance, the researcher assumes that it was a rationalization made to achieve consonance. As one conservative-leaning respondent wrote before the tweet, “This is common sense. Every American should know they have the right to bear arms.” The same respondent later commented, “I cannot imagine him saying that.” Similarly, other respondents said, “Based on other things I have heard of this man I do not think he said this,” and “I believe that he cares more about the second amendment.”

For story number 2, it is a liberal story, which means that the conservative-leaning respondents should have a low-level of dissonance. However, a conservative opinion leader’s agreement with the story should create a high-level of dissonance. But the tests suggests that for this case, there weren’t much effect of the dissonance on the conservative-leaning respondents. Even though, after analyzing the comments, some themes did stand out.

#### **Agreement with the opinion leader**

Some respondents disagreed with the story completely. However, the opinion leader’s tweet forced them to change their initial thought and arrive to an agreement. As one conservative-leaning respondent says about the story, “All these people are trying to get more riots started.” With such a strong comment on the story, the same respondent after seeing the tweet wrote, “Trump is correct.”

#### **Defending the opinion leader’s tweet**

Another common phenomenon that was observed in the responses was a need to defend Trump or what he tweeted. Most of these respondents provided elaborate

description on how the system is rotten and Trump is a victim of such a system. One conservative-leaning respondent noted about the story, “I am utterly disgusted at those who call themselves journalists in this day and age, and work for the mainstream media. They label everything racist, anyone who hold patriotic values is now a white supremacist. I just laugh when I see BS news like this anymore.” And once they saw the tweet, they employed defense tactics, “Trump knew the whole white supremacy notion was just a play by the media to garner more support from the left and to create major division within our country.” Similar theme was also noted in other conservative-leaning respondents as one said, “I thought this article was supposed to be based on facts.” And once they saw the tweet they agreed with the story and said that Trump responded accordingly, “Seems like something Trump would say in response to threatening of freedoms.” Then another conservative-leaning respondent blamed the liberals for the story and defended Trump for the constant problems he faced from the FBI during his presidency, “If anything, the FBI is infiltrated with liberals.” And after the tweet they wrote, “President Trump was too busy defending himself against the FBI to worry about who’s infiltrated it other than liberals.”

#### **Refusal to accept the opinion leader’s tweet**

Just like in previous stories, refusing to accept that the opinion leader could have tweet something that goes against the respondent’s confirmation bias, was also followed here as one respondent commented, “This one is laughable. Of course, Donald Trump would never tweet out anything like this. I don't see this as a true story, at all!” Or saying that this story is not something that they might discuss as this respondent said, “The story is too controversial to discuss.”

## Post Hoc Tests

To further explore the dataset, a series of post hoc tests were conducted in order to explore any relationship between the variables that were not hypothesized or were a part of any research questions.

### *Perceived credibility of information and social media use*

Table 10 shows the correlations between social media use, critical social media use along with the perceived credibility and active consumption scores assigned to the information content. There is a very weak, but non-significant relationship between conservative-leaning respondents and social media use ( $r_s = -.085$ ,  $p > .001$ ). However, when the respondents were asked whether they use social media in a critical way (which included, verification, analyzing different sources and responsible use of social media) liberal-leaning respondents showed a weak relationship ( $r_s = .153$ ,  $p < .001$ ). This means that the conservative-leaning respondents tend to use social media more than the liberal-leaning respondents, but the liberal-leaning respondents uses social media more critically and responsibly.

Liberal-leaning respondents also tend to trust a credible news source more than the conservative-leaning respondents ( $r_s = .21$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Conservative-leaning respondents tend to trust friends and families as information sources more than the liberal-leaning respondents ( $r_s = -.26$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

Another aspect that is revealed from these is that those who critically use social media tend to trust information from credible news source ( $r_s = .34$ ,  $p < .001$ ) over information coming from friends and families ( $r_s = .12$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Critical social media

users also perceived the content credibility of the stories provided in the experiment with more skepticism than usual social media users.

**Table 10**

*Correlations for Post Hoc Tests*

	SM use4	Critical SM use	TrustInfoF riends&Fa mily	TrustInfoS ource	Political Ideology Scale	Lib stories TA Bef OL	Con stories TA Bef OL	All Stories TA Bef OL	Lib stories Share Bef OL	Con stories Share Bef OL	All stories Share Bef OL
Spearman's rho	1.000										
SM use 4 (low through 20 (high)	(n=406)										
Critical SM use 6 (low) thru 30 (high)	.317** (n=406)	1.000 (n=406)									
TrustInfoFriends&Family (1 thru 5)	.364** (n=406)	.115* (n=406)	1.000 (n=406)								
TrustInfoSource (1 thru 5)	.344** (n=406)	.341** (n=406)	.231** (n=406)	1.000 (n=406)							
Political Ideology Scale 10 thru 50	-.085 (n=406)	.153** (n=406)	-.255** (n=406)	.206** (n=406)	1.000 (n=429)						
Lib stories TA Bef OL (8-56)	.287** (n=406)	.193** (n=406)	.226** (n=406)	.333** (n=406)	.306** (n=429)	1.000 (n=429)					
Con stories TA Bef OL (8 - 56)	.252** (n=406)	.071 (n=406)	.386** (n=406)	.047 (n=406)	-.451** (n=429)	.346** (n=429)	1.000 (n=429)				
All Stories TA Bef OL (16 - 112)	.306** (n=406)	.131** (n=406)	.378** (n=406)	.201** (n=406)	-.080 (n=429)	.805** (n=429)	.803** (n=429)	1.000 (n=429)			
	.329**	.064	.507**	.135**	-.164**	.577**	.531**	.686**	1.000		

Lib stories Share Bef OL (8-56)	(n=406)	(n=406)	(n=406)	(n=406)	(n=429)	(n=429)	(n=429)	(n=429)	(n=429)		
Con stories Share Bef OL (8-56)	.306** (n=406)	.030 (n=406)	.549** (n=406)	.060 (n=406)	-.346** (n=429)	.387** (n=429)	.694** (n=429)	.670** (n=429)	.880** (n=429)	1.000 (n=429)	
All stories Share Bef OL (16-112)	.332** (n=406)	.045 (n=406)	.548** (n=406)	.101* (n=406)	-.259** (n=429)	.491** (n=429)	.625** (n=429)	.690** (n=429)	.967** (n=429)	.967** (n=429)	1.000 (n=429)

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).



### **Demography and personal ideology**

Chi-square test for association was conducted between demographic categories (gender, age, race or ethnicity, religion, education and annual household income) and political ideology, but all tests yielded nonsignificant results ( $p > .001$ ). However, Table 3, above, provides the crosstabulations of demographic categories against political ideology.

## **Chapter 5: Discussing the Implications of the Result – Mis/Disinformation**

### **Consumption and Cognitive Processes**

An aim of this dissertation was to bridge media studies and psychology to understand how mis/disinformation consumption occur. It is a study to explore certain factors like, personal ideology, polarized cues in content, opinion leader's influence and news source (combined all together) and their effect on mis/disinformation consumption. Psychology and media have overlapped at numerous occasions. From Shannon and Weaver's (1949) introduction of the mathematical model and the concept of "noise" within communication system and information processing to Festinger's (1962) groundbreaking theory of cognitive dissonance, psychology has overtime helped in shaping the norms of information processing and the cognitive processes involved in the consumption of information by the mass audience.

In lieu of psychology's influence on media studies, Chamberlain and Hodgetts (2008) wrote,

Media research in psychology has largely functioned independently of new ways of understanding media and associated social practices central to everyday living; ways of theorizing and researching media that have been developed and taken up enthusiastically in other disciplines, most predominantly in media and communications (p. 1109).

As we move onto a new paradigm of media research where misinformation and disinformation has taken center stage to counter political communication fallacies and to propagate a cleaner and distinguished media-audience environment, finding out the reasons behind the evolvement of such a scenario is key to a sustainable solution. What it entails is that, as media researchers, we must delve deep into the workings of audience cognition to figure out why mis and disinformation are perceived to be credible information and why such information are actively consumed. However, before

addressing such issues that relate to the end-process of information consumption, we must look into the current state of media trust and how that modulates audience response.

### **Trust In Media is at One of its Lowest**

In August 2020, as the world riled against a deadly pandemic, Knight Foundation published a report on America's decreasing trust on media (Knight Foundation, 2020). This was not a unique report as audience's trust on news media has been on a steady decline for years now (Brenan, 2020). The year 2016 saw the lowest dip since Gallup started polling Americans on media trust in 1972. Even though the trust on news media has since improved, but it remains one of the lowest in the poll's history. This trust on media is deeply divided along the lines of political partisanship. Democrats have shown more trust on media than the Republicans over time. With the 2020 elections and Joe Biden's win, Republicans' trust on news media has hit a new low. Only 10% of the Republicans said that they trust media, compared to 73% of the Democrats. The partisan trust on media as Gallup concludes, "shows no signs of improving, as Republicans' and Democrats' trust moves in opposite directions. The political polarization that grips the country is reflected in partisans' views on of the media, which are now the most divergent in Gallup's history" (Brenan, 2020, para. 8).

### **Effects of a Named News Source – Understanding the Validity Whether News Source Have Any Effect or Not**

The statistics presented in the previous paragraph is indeed concerning. As the researcher's experiment has shown, the perceived credibility of information has nothing to do with the independent credibility assigned to the source of the information. Cues have more effect on perceived credibility than any other factors. Cues acts to activate confirmation bias. And confirmation biases assign trust and credibility. Audiences attribute higher levels of quality and fairness to biased, but like-minded sources (Jonas,

Frey, & Schulz-Hardt, 2005; Kahan, et al., 2009; 2010). As Metzger, Hartsell and Flanagin (2020) says, assigning quality and fairness (perceived credibility) comes later in information consumption. The audiences are first exposed to a multitude of information. Then, to understand which information are worth consuming they search for heuristic cues. Once the cues confirm with their set beliefs, they assign higher credibility to that information. Information which does not carry confirming cues are then censured. And thus, partisanship in media consumption is formed. Decades before Gallup started polling Americans on media trust, political communication scholars like Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet (1944) showed in their study that audiences seek out news information or sources that share their own viewpoints.

Now, how will news organizations carve out their niche audiences, after all news organizations functions as corporations and corporations need profit. To build their own consumer base, news organizations have started to appeal the audiences by supplying them with the cues that supports their confirmation biases (Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2010; 2011; Nelson-Field & Riebe, 2011). This is what the researcher did in the experiment as well. Providing the audiences with the cues that will evoke a favorable reaction. And as a result, audiences aligned with content that gave congruent cues, minimizing any form of dissonance that might occur.

Looking at this point from a frequentists' approach, both Tversky and Kahneman (1974) and Gigerenzer (1991) argued that cognitive illusions will disappear or minimize, when frequencies are taken into consideration over single events. For the study of this dissertation, there were eight stories that were provided to the respondents – four liberal and four conservative stories. The ideological cues still caused the cognitive illusions and promoted congenial results. Named news source still did not have any significant effects over ideological cues. The heuristic cues suggested by Tversky and Kahneman (1974)

will be the best explanation to understand the cognitive process that works in assigning credibility to an information. Heuristic cues are stored or processed because of the audience's prior experience with those cues. Those cues are stored according to the definition that the audience assigns to them (Pro-Trump is conservative/Republican, pro-Biden is liberal/Democrat and so on). Now based on what cues the news channel disseminates, the audience member assigns credibility to those news channels as long as the cues carries confirming results. Disconfirming cue carrier (the news channel) automatically becomes uncredible. The prior experience with the cues, prompts selective choice of news channels and hence, selective consumption of those news channels (Metzger, Hartsell, & Flanagin, 2020). It is the sense of familiarity – the sense of comfort – that the audience get from consonant news information that further factors in while assigning credibility to a news source.

The control group was provided information without a credible news source, whereas the treatment group were provided with a credible news source. CNN was used as a news source for the liberal stories and Fox News was used as a news source for the conservative stories. All the between-subjects analyses, that used news source as an independent variable for information credibility and active consumption, yielded non-significant results, showing that news source had little-to-no effect on the respondents. Why could this be?

The stories were manipulated with ideological cues. This means that the respondents in the experiment were provided with all the heuristic cues (representativeness, availability, and anchoring) to promote a quick judgment within the respondents (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974). The complying named news sources in the treatment group had no effect because the ideological cues already primed the audiences effectively and a decision was made based on those cues. However, to decide on whether

to believe an information and assign the degree of credibility, audiences go through layers of cognitive processes that provide them with viable reasoning behind their judgment.

### **How Might the Audience Reason While Consuming Polarized Information?**

Rips (1990) conducted a series of experiments to determine the reasoning that goes behind a subject's conclusion to a result. He gives us two types of reasoning – *deductive* and *inductive*. Deductive reasoning is a form which takes its cue from given beliefs to form new ones that follow from the former. An argument is said to be deductively valid if the conclusion stands for every given situation where all the premises are same. For example, if CNN criticizes Trump, then CNN is a liberal media outlet. Inductive reasoning is a form of reasoning which gathers support from the given beliefs, but not necessarily entails or is a direct consequence of the given belief. An argument is said to be inductively strong even if it may not be deductively valid, but the conclusion derived has a likely chance to be true when the premises are. For example, if Trump called CNN “fake news”, then all his critics are “fake news”.

In deductive reasoning there is a direct relation between the argument and the decision. In inductive reasoning the argument and the decision could be valid, but there are other factors that affect the decision beyond the argument.

### **For Reasoning, Operational Definition Is Important**

One of the most important things that holds prominence while we conduct a deductive or an inductive reasoning is the essentiality to operationalize the key terms used in a statement (Markovits & Nantel, 1989). Operational definition of variables and languages used, helps to provide a context or a meaning to what we are going to deliberate. In short, operational definition carries the cues that will activate a response from the information consumer.

The researcher in this dissertation embedded popular cues in the instruments. Cues like, pro-abortion, pro-gun laws, pro-Biden, white supremacy, were used as operational definition for liberal content. Similarly, pro-Trump, pro-guns, anti-Muslim, anti-BLM, were used as operational definition for conservative content. These cues worked in activating certain responses among the polarized respondents. And as the results suggest, the believability of an information content was dependent on the polarized cues present in the story and the ideological polarization of the audience member. When we want to make a concrete judgment, these cues help in assigning believability to those content and believability (or familiarity with the cues) of the evidence deters us from making implausible judgments and hence preserve the soundness of our *reasoning*. This is essential to an individual. A soundness in reasoning helps an individual to maintain dignity and socialize (Rips, 1990).

The believability also helps in quickly access the reserved heuristics and mental schemas from our memory to arrive at a judgment based on Tversky and Kahneman's (1974) judgment under uncertainty. People in general tends to look for preferential (or familiar) cues and derive causal explanation, where conditional probability becomes an indicator for reasoning.

### **Audiences Are the Ultimate Decisionmakers**

Katz and Lazarsfeld in their book, *Personal Influence* (1966) talks about how familiarity enables an audience member to choose their opinion leaders. Therefore, audiences prefer opinion leaders through interpersonal relationships over mass media. The interpersonal relationships are built upon mutual involvement in the same kinds of ideological views. Hence, self-perceived views and beliefs enables relationship, whether it is interpersonal or between an audience member and their political opinion leader. The audience decides whom to believe and follow. Like news media, the opinion leader

molds themselves to fit into the need of the audience. The researcher noticed the same form of attitude within the respondents of the experiment, where the ideological cues in the information took precedence over what the opinion leader said. The ideological cues in the content guided the respondent's reaction, upon which they decided on whether to follow with the opinion leader or not. Not the other way around.

The crucial implication of this result is that audience participation acts as a major modulating factor in news production. Corporations test their consumer's preferred ideology and produce news that will be accepted by the majority. News organizations are working to meet the demands of the audiences – audiences do not mold themselves with the supply of the news organization.

### **Favorable Cues Modulate Credibility Even to Mis/Disinformation**

While conducting the research and analyzing the test, one thing that the researcher wants to emphasize is that all the stories provided to the survey respondents were disinformation. They were false information provided with manipulations to evoke heuristic cues within the respondents. Even though all the stories were disinformation, none of the stories' credibility score was less than the mid-point of the scale (2 thru 14 scale, with 8 being the mid-point). All content credibility scores had a mean score of slightly above 8 points. However, all the active consumption/share scores were below the mid-point of 8. This means that the respondents considered these disinformation stories to be truthful and accurate but showed low efficacy in sharing them over social media. It is a crucial result as this shows that any information will score higher in credibility if it carries ideological cues that has the potential to provoke trustworthiness.

### **Self-Censorship on Social Media**

Even though the stories were scored higher in credibility, the active consumption scores digressed. This could be because the audiences' tendency to self-censor in order to



avoid any form of harassment and trolling on social media. Social media platforms have the potential to create online culture through shares, participation, and deliberate communication – a way to maintain fellowship over virtual channels (Carey, 1992). However, online participation is also directly correlated with offline participation (Liu & Fahmy, 2011). This means that those who are not politically active in the physical world, do not participate effectively in online world as well. Moreover, Olson and LaPoe (2018) conducted a study on academic activists and online trolls which showed that a lot of individuals (no matter how political sophisticates they are) self-censors so that they are not attacked by online trolls and harassment. They write, “The reason for remaining silent [online] included being viewed negatively, facing consequences in the workplace, and damaging relationships” (Olson & LaPoe, 2018, p. 280). This is a theme that was also observed by the researcher in this study while thematically analyzing the comments as one points out, “Having an unpopular political opinion is a death sentence, so it is smarter to quietly keep your opinions to yourself until cooler heads prevail. If that ever happens...”

### **Selective Evaluation Based on Ideological Cues**

Evidence suggests that consumers tend to only expose themselves to information that are congenial to their own set beliefs and views. It is a way of selectively exposing oneself to confirming information in order to reduce or avoid any form of dissonance (Festinger, 1957; Jones, 2002; Stroud, 2007; Sunstein, 2001). To control for the exposure of the respondents to disconfirming information, the instruments were manipulated for forced responses. Which means that the respondents had to read and rate information that were incongruent with their views. This was also a step taken to minimize partisan selective exposure (Mutz, 2006). As Sears and Freedman (1967) stated, while critiquing Festinger’s (1957) dissonance theory, that individuals cannot selectively expose

themselves because they are exposed to varying information that are beyond their control. Hence, the selectivity that might exist come to play in the evaluation stage. The way the individuals are going to evaluate the information depicts whether they consume the information or not (Festinger 1964). This kind of selective evaluation gives ideologically congruent information more preference over ideologically incongruent information (Flaxman, Goel, & Rao, 2016; Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2010; Oliveros & Várdy, 2015).

The selective evaluation in the researcher's experiment, was measured through the content credibility score that the respondents assigned to each story in the instrument. All the stimuli were manipulated with partisan ideological cues and were tested against personal ideology of the respondents. On average, liberal-leaning respondents gave a higher content credibility score to the liberal information ( $M = 38.5$ ,  $SD = 9.9$ ) compared to what conservative-leaning respondents gave to the liberal stories ( $M = 33.1$ ,  $SD = 12.8$ ). Similarly, conservative-leaning respondents considered conservative stories to be more credible ( $M = 37.5$ ,  $SD = 9.7$ ) compared to what liberal-leaning respondents thought of the conservative stories ( $M = 30.1$ ,  $SD = 12.1$ ). There is a clear distinction in information evaluation based on ideology. Given that all the information provided in the instrument were misinformation and lacks any truth – the differences collected in the content credibility scores based on ideology indicates that ideologically polarizing cues affects trust on information (Adams et al., 1985; Bimber & Davis, 2003; Druckman & Parkin, 2005; Jones, 2002; Lavine, Borgida, & Sullivan, 2000; Mendelsohn & Nadeau, 1996; Stroud, 2007; Taber & Lodge, 2006).

### **Understanding the Opinion Leader's Influence in Mis/Disinformation Consumption**

Similar to how the content of the stories were manipulated in the instrument, opinion leader's influences were also manipulated to test the extent of that influence and its effect on information consumption. Each story was paired with an opinion leader who

belonged to the same ideology as the content or the opposite. The opinion leader either disagreed with a story or agreed with a story. This manipulation was done to create three specific cognitive effects – resonance, consonance, or dissonance. Festinger (1957) proposed the theory of cognitive dissonance for the first time, where he said that whenever there are inconsistencies in what a person believes to be true and when the evidence suggests otherwise, that person will experience cognitive dissonance and look for rationalizations to minimize that state of dissonance. Minimizing the state of dissonance is a way of achieving cognitive consonance (Festinger, 1957). However, if the beliefs and the evidence align, there is no dissonance and a state of cognitive consonance is maintained – similar ideas, opinions and representing agreements are fulfilled (Plăvitu, 2020). Consonance and resonance are similar but differs slightly. Consonance is the agreement; resonance is the amplification of that agreement. As Plăvitu (2020) writes, “We shall immediately understand that consonance is opposed to dissonance, whereas resonance is a result of consonance” (p. 402).

For example, story number 1 (or story number 8) with liberal (conservative) content, liberal (conservative) opinion leader and the opinion leader’s disagreement with the story was used as a measurement for cognitive dissonance among the liberal-leaning (conservative-leaning) respondents. Story number 3 (or story number 7) with liberal (conservative) content, liberal (conservative) opinion leader and the opinion leader’s agreement with the story was used as a measurement for cognitive resonance among the liberal-leaning (conservative-leaning) respondents. Story number 4 (or story number 5), on the other hand, with liberal (conservative) content, conservative (liberal) opinion leader and opinion leader’s disagreement with the story was used as a measurement for cognitive consonance among the liberal-leaning (conservative-leaning) respondents.

## **Resonance Is Found in Information Consumption**

The evidence presented in Section III and Section VI of Chapter 4 suggests that opinion leader do impart influence on the respondent. *H1c* and *H2c* addressed opinion leader's influence on information consumption and both the hypotheses were supported. A change in scores of content credibility and active consumption were noticed once the opinion leader's tweet manipulation was presented. Further analyses revealed the consonance, resonance, and the dissonance factor. Resonance occurred for liberal-leaning respondents when liberal opinion leader agreed with the liberal story (story number 3) and hence, on average they increased the credibility and the active consumption scored upon the opinion leader manipulation.

However, the researcher did not notice the same change for conservative-leaning audiences' responses to the conservative story (story number 7) when the conservative opinion leader agrees with the story. On average the credibility and the active consumption score decreased. This could be because the sample was liberal leaning with a mean score of 32.45 on a scale of 10 thru 50, where 10 is the conservative and 50 is liberal. Since the PolidScale was used as a covariate for the 2 x 2 x 2 x 2 mixed factorial ANOVA, the skewness could impart its effect on the results. Age could also be a factor that affected this result. Mike Pence, the opinion leader for story number 7 is mainly popular in the 45-64 years-old demography (Jaimungal, 2020). The sample for this research mainly comprised of the 23-38 years-old (49.2%) and 39-54 years-old (33.3%) demography. Moreover, the January 6, 2021, insurrection at the Capitol divided the conservative opinion about the Republican Party, Donald Trump and anyone who were associated with the event. 45% of the registered Republicans approved of the insurrection, whereas a close 43% disapproved it (Smith, Ballard, & Sanders, 2021). The insurrection at the U.S. Capitol acted as a catalyst in deepening the line between

polarization along ideological scale and politicization along the political scale. This is further evident from the results of the experiment as 43% of those who leaned towards conservative side in the measurement identified as Democrats and 19% of those who leaned towards the liberal side in the measurement identified as Republicans. This shows that ideological perspectives can be different from political perspectives.

### **Consonance is Found in Information Consumption**

Story number 4 & 5 were measured for cognitive consonance where a conservative opinion leader disagreed with a liberal story and a liberal opinion leader disagreed with a conservative story. For story number 4, the researcher did not notice a cognitive consonance as the liberal-leaning respondents decreased their content credibility and active consumption scores after being exposed to the opinion leader's tweet disagreeing with the liberal story. This is queer in a sense that the explanation for such an attitude change can be contributed to the fact that either the liberal leaning respondents did believe the conservative opinion leader, or some respondents rated the tweet rather than the story when exposed to the tweet. Other explanation is that liberal-leaning respondents, as showed above, also falls in the Republican political scale and could influence the result. But rating the tweet is the more plausible explanation as the same pattern was followed in story number 5, where the liberal-leaning respondents increased the score for the conservative story after seeing that the liberal opinion leader disagreed with the story (Credibility score before opinion leader  $M = 8.23$ , Credibility score after opinion leader  $M = 9.01$ ; Active consumption score before opinion leader  $M = 6.48$ ; Active consumption score after opinion leader  $M = 6.64$ ). In both cases, the anomalic reaction from the liberal-leaning respondents could be because they rated the tweet, which is congruent to their own ideology and hence, an increase in score was noticed.

The conservative-leaning respondents, however, followed the expected norms of consonance and increased the score of a conservative story following the liberal opinion leader's disagreement and they decreased the score of a liberal story following the conservative opinion leader's disagreement.

### **Dissonance is Found in Information Consumption**

Cognitive dissonance was the most difficult to gauge among all the other cognitive process states. The researcher acknowledges that to measure cognitive dissonance a highly controlled environment is required with proper manipulations designed to measure specific attitude change and behavior. However, political communication has used cognitive dissonance to test confirmation bias (Knobloch-Westerwick, et al., 2015; Knobloch-Westerwick, Mothes, & Polavin, 2020), effects of media content (Bennett & Iyenger, 2008), selective exposure based on attitude (Bimber & Davis, 2003; Iyenger & Hahn, 2009; Knobloch-Westerwick & Meng, 2009) and information avoidance (Sweeney, et al., 2010). Cognitive dissonance has become a staple in understanding political information consumption. Keeping this in mind, the researcher thematically analyzed the open-ended answers to deliberate the choices respondents made while making their decision on scoring the information content provided in the experiment.

If we consider the cues provided in the stories as an anchor for the respondents to judge, the importance of those cues will determine their attitude towards the opinion leader's opinion. The more important is the cues in the story, the less importance they will give the opinion leader. Similarly, a less important cue will pump up the opinion leader's importance. Based on these, the measurement of achieving consonance is categorized by the rationalizations that the respondents employed while moving away

from the state of dissonance that the information caused them. These rationalizations can be distinctly separated into four main categories:

1. Dismissing the opinion leader's tweet/opinion – Respondents achieved consonance by dismissing the tweet or the opinion leader by calling them “idiot”, “stupid”, they lack understanding for the importance of the issue, and even declaring the tweets to be incorrect and callous.
2. Agreeing with or defending the opinion leader – The most common theme that was noticed was complete subjugation and aligning themselves with the opinion leader. This was most noticeable, when the respondents denounced the content of a story, but once exposed to the opinion leader's tweet agreeing with the story, they changed their tone and agreed with the opinion leader. This was also found in the quantitative analysis of the data, where the respondents increased or decreased the content credibility and active consumption scores of the information following the opinion leader's manipulation. In the same lane, another attitude was recorded, where respondents while agreeing with the opinion leader also defended the opinion leader's tweet that went against their held norms.
3. Discrediting the news source – Disconfirming story-opinion leader manipulations were rationalized by discrediting the news source both in the control group (where no news source was provided) and in treatment group (where the news source was provided). The ideological cues provided in the information prompted dissonant respondents to discredit the information as bias, “fake news” and claiming that the information (that do not conform) contains grammatical errors, spelling mistakes and typos.
4. Assertion of pre-existing beliefs and self-verification – Some respondents asserted their pre-existing beliefs about the cues present in the information in the

rationalization process, stating that those cues are more important than what the opinion leader said. And since the opinion leader did create a dent in fulfilling their confirmation bias, they stressed that they would verify the tweet, the information and why such comment was made by the opinion leader, before taking further steps to consume the information.

### **Behavior and Memory Works in Spreading Mis/Disinformation**

The categorization of resonance, consonance and dissonance provided above are the cognitive processes observed by the researcher. The cues in the stories were popular “polarized” cues. Continuous reinforcement of those cues with polarized ideology have allotted a definition to them – pro-abortion is liberal, anti-BLM is conservative. Devoid the cues of its polarized identity, and it will lose its effect. The cues in the information, in this study, acted as secondary stimulus, whereas the conservative/liberal ideology, based on which the cues were selected are primary reinforcers (Chomsky, 1959; Skinner, 1957). These primary reinforcers guide the cues to either end of the ideological spectrum.

While cues influence behavior, how these cues are stored in memory and recalled are crucial while judging the behavior. As stated, these cues carry a definition assigned through reinforcement. Once exposed to a cue, it activates certain compartments within the memory of the audience. Baddeley (2000) addressed memory as a multicomponent system and emphasized that cues are stored in a complex cognition rather than just memory, which evokes certain cognitive relationship beyond a simple and unitary memory recall as proposed by Broadbent (1958) and Atkinson and Shiffrin (1968).

Ghosh Chowdhury, LaPoe and Davis (2020) while discussing how stereotypes are sustained and propagated, talks about the effects of cues in decision-making. Their study builds up on schema theory, which suggests that information processing is related to the activation of cues in memory by certain reinforcers (or primes) and how those reinforcers



help in evaluating the information (Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Wyer & Strull, 2014). Hence, under uncertainty, when information verification is not possible, but a decision has to be made, the audience member will prefer to rely on favorable (or familiar) cues to make a judgment, while avoiding cognitive dissonance and achieving consonance as much as possible.

This is how media priming effect works. The heuristic cues prime the audience member, while activating stored information (Roskos-Ewoldsen, Roskos-Ewoldsen, & Carpentier, 2002). When the respondents were consuming the information in the instruments for this study, they weren't aware of the source, neither they had the opportunity to verify. The decision that they arrived at were simply based on the ideological cues with which each story was treated, and they assigned credibility to the information based on those cues. Even though all the stories in the experiment were disinformation, the researcher noticed that liberal-leaning respondents assigned higher credibility to those stories that carried liberal cues compare to conservative stories. Similarly, conservative-leaning respondents assigned higher credibility to those stories that carried conservative cues compared to liberal stories. Hence, mis/disinformation for this experiment were consumed through a complex cognitive process that mainly works with the heuristic cues in assigning believability and perceived credibility more than any other factors tested in this study.

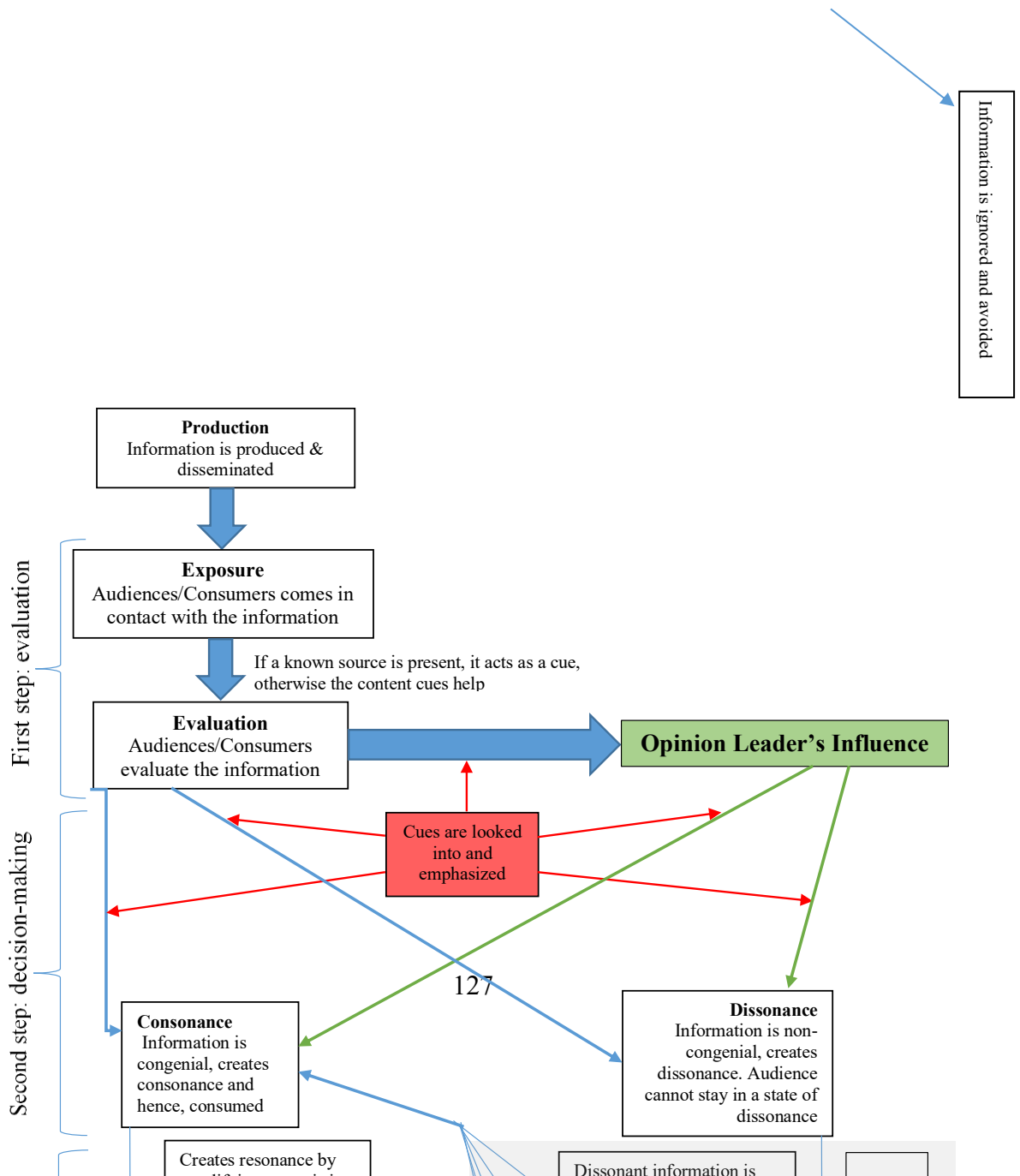
At the beginning of this chapter, the researcher wrote that the main aim of this study was to test the factors that affects mis/disinformation consumption. All the factors (ideological cues in the information, polarized opinion leader's opinion, cognitive dissonance/consonance, and news source for the treatment group) were manipulated at the same time to create a real-world effect, where these factors interact with each other constantly over the political communication cycle. While the researcher emphasizes

mis/disinformation, it is also important to understand that the audience member does not know whether an information content is true or false. They consume it just as a piece of information. The perceived credibility that they assigned is based on the familiarity of the cues present in that information and what those cues work to activate. Hence, cues become the main factor in promoting believability of an information content. In this study, of all the factors tested, ideological cues were the most effective factor.

Thus, based on the results and the thematic analysis of the responses, the researcher further deduces this two-step model of mis/disinformation (information) consumption based on ideological cues and personal ideology. See Figure 1.

**Figure 4**

*Multi-Factor Effects on Selective Evaluation of Information*



## Chapter 7: Conclusion – What Now?

This dissertation was conceptualized to answer a question – “Why do audiences believe fake news?” The main aim was to understand the cognitive processes that functions while audience consume “fake news”. Over the course of the research the author understood the detrimental effects of using the term “fake news” as a valid operational definition for mis/disinformation research. “Fake news” is a fluid concept that takes the shape of how one tries to define it. In present scenario, “fake news” has come to define anything that one does not agree with. Defining mis/disinformation as “fake news” also has another crucial implication – we take out the concept of “information” from the definition.

It is important to understand that the audience member, while being exposed to an information content, does not know whether that information is mis/disinformation. Assigning such a label to the information on audience’s part comes in the evaluation stage. As the aforementioned model (Figure 1) suggests, information consumption occurs in mainly two stages – *the evaluation stage* and the *decision-making stage*. Ideological cues in information acts as the biggest factor in promoting the political information consumption process. All these factors were tested against the personal ideology of the individual, which is omnipresent in each step of the selective evaluation, decision-making and the consumption (post-decisional) steps.

This dissertation sheds light on how in a polarized society, partisan audience member will consume mis/disinformation equally if confirming ideological cues are manipulated within the information content. This research goes beyond media bias, opinion leaders and news source to understand the media effects from the audience’s

point of view. It is a way of giving agency to the audiences and understanding the effects of polarization in mis/disinformation consumption.

Most studies on political communication are based on longitudinal attitude and behavior changes. However, in today's technologically pervasive world, where information is available at your fingertips – with a single click or a couple of taps – audiences do not have to wait to seek out confirming news. Easy access to information has enabled audience members to immediately go to the web and search for information that will be congenial to their held beliefs. Hence, to mimic such a reality, this study manipulated opinion leaders' assessment of information *instantaneously*. This dissertation contributes to a body of work in political communication that tests political information consumption based on personal ideology. By minimizing the temporal effect, this research also gives a perspective of political news consumption in a well-connected world where personal ideology acts as the main motivator in seeking out consonant information, whenever an audience member comes across a dissonant information.

However, like any other research, this study also has its limitations. This study was conducted during a global pandemic. With the spread of COVID-19, face-to-face interactions were restricted and hence the researcher couldn't conduct an experiment within a more controlled laboratory. While this may influence the results, the researcher also feels that the respondents' got more freedom and were more comfortable taking the survey from home, a place of familiarity that reflects the environment that they might be in, while consuming general political information. In a way, the online survey experiment worked well in creating an appropriate environment that suits the general information consumption cycle within political communication.

The researcher is aware of the shortcomings of an online survey, especially the ones that has been related to the disparity in income of the participants (Alavi, 2018; Couper, 2000; Gonsalez, 2002; Lehdonvirta et al., 2021; Matsuo et al., 2004) and attrition (Hox, 2008; Zhou & Fishbach, 2016). Online surveys limit the accessibility to lower income groups within the populations and hence, restricts a proper representation of the population. Gosling et al. (2004), however, said that their online survey data may not have been representative of the population in general, yet, when compared to other published findings, it yielded favorable results, especially regarding gender, socio-economic status, geographic location, race, and age. Moreover, Buhrmester, Kwang and Gosling (2011) showed that random sampling through MTurk has little to no effect on the result, when compared to the traditional random sampling. They wrote, “MTurk alphas were within two hundredths of a point of the traditional-sample alphas” (p. 5), while approving MTurk’s veracity as a capable data collection platform for behavioral research (Mason & Suri, 2012).

In this study, the researcher also found a well spread-out sample data that could be regarded as a good representation of the U.S. national demographic data. The sample comprised of 57.6% of males, 41.7% of females and 0.5% of non-binary individuals. In terms of race, 71.1% of the sample is white, 18.9% are black/African American, 5.6% are Asian, 0.7% are Hispanic, and 1.2% are South Asian. Even though we might assume that an online survey experiment is mainly accessed by younger age groups, but in this sample, age-group was also spread-out with 23-38 (49.2%), 39-54 (33.3%) and 55-73 (14.7%) forming most of the sample. Income, education, and religion were diverse in representation and the results indicated as such (See Table 24-29 in Appendix C).

The data and the results indicate that MTurk is a viable option for surveys and experiments that provides easy accessibility to a wide demographic that has the potential to be nationally representative of the population. Moreover, this gives way to further use an online platform like MTurk for conducting research in political communication, where national representative data create indicators for understanding voter behavior and hence, increases the replicability of the research.

This study comes at a crucial junction in U.S. politics where, after the Capitol riots, mis/disinformation has proved to threaten the tenets of democracy at its highest level. Even though the researcher did not concentrate on the ethics of using polarizing cues in information as it goes beyond the scope of the research, the author can suggest that this study is a good starting point on how media ethics can work, to an extent, in minimizing the use of polarizing cues in the information content. Conscious ethical decision in the newsroom can protect further polarization in the society and hence, hinder the spread of mis/disinformation. Future journalists, and today's journalism students will benefit from such an education where it is actively taught on how to avoid using cues in news stories that has the potential to divide a society. "Fake news" has already made its way into the curriculum of journalism courses, but what needs to be taught is the involvement of "fake news" and what factors work behind such consumption. Students need to learn from the perspective of the audience, not just from the media angle. If they understand how the audience cognition work and why mis/disinformation is rampant, then an ethical journalist can consciously work towards minimizing such a threat to the democracy. And they need to know that mis/disinformation spread equally from liberals and conservatives.



This research also had some limitations in terms of news source, demography and ideology. News source could be used as a better manipulator for gathering data that can test how audiences assign credibility to news sources based on available cues. The study has the potential to expand on demographic components, while diversifying the personal ideology of the audiences. Furthermore, a study like this that investigates mis/disinformation consumption could prove to be beneficial in other societies where polarization has caused a disproportionate consumption of information that are not credible and causes more harm to the democracy than good.

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## Appendix A: Stimuli

### Section I. Control Group

*Story number 1*

World | US | Politics | Economy | Sports | Entertainment | Weather   Login

## A setback for women everywhere: The case that could bring down Roe v. Wade and make abortion illegal in US

By Tara Saleni

Published on Oct 28, 2020



Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas swears in Amy Coney Barrett on Oct 27, 2020. Picture Courtesy: Leo Thurn, Getty Images.

The appointment of Amy Coney Barrett to take over the empty seat of Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, not only was a huge blow to progressive liberal outlook of the country, but [now a new case has appeared](#) that will test the conservative majority of the Supreme Court.

The Supreme Court justices will meet on Wednesday to decide whether they are going to hear the case of Dobbs v. Free Women's Right and Health Organization, which includes a 2018 Alabama law that banned all abortions after 15 weeks of pregnancy. The law bars abortion in case of medical emergencies and fetal abnormalities along with rape and incest victims. The law was only in effect for a couple of hours until Alabama's only abortion clinic, Free Women's Right and Health Organization, legally challenged it.

If the court sides with the plaintiff, then [states will have power to determine abortion rights](#) within their vicinity – an act that has yet been restricted by the landmark 1973 case, Roe v. Wade. With six conservative judges and Barrett's refusal to support women's right, human rights in the United States are in jeopardy.

*Opinion leader manipulation for story number 1*

Read this screenshot of a tweet carefully before answering the following questions:



\*\*Note: Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi is the Speaker of the United States House of Representatives.

## Unredacted FBI Document Sheds New Light on White Supremacist Infiltration of Law Enforcement

By Tom Ellis

Published on Aug 27, 2020



Former FBI agent, Nick Germane alleges that FBI have long tolerated racist employees in its ranks. File picture.

An unredacted release of [previously circulated documents](#) revealed that FBI have a history of tolerating racial biases, police abuse and infiltration of white supremacist groups within its organization.

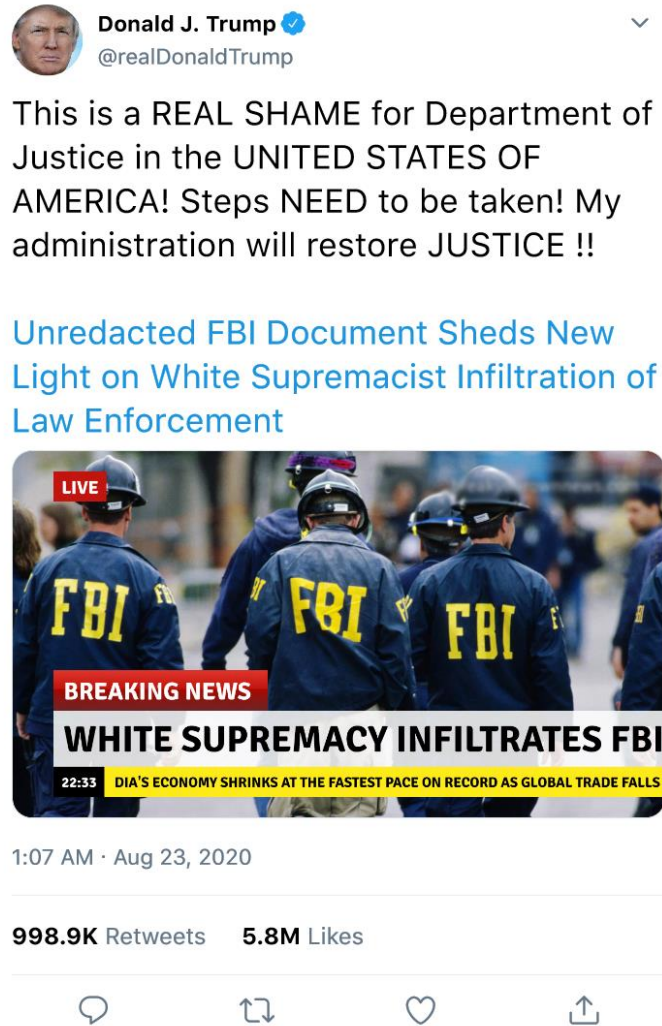
Rep. James Ruskind, chair of the Civil Rights and Civil Liberties Subcommittee, a wing of House Committee on Oversight and Reforms, released these documents ahead of a hearing about the white supremacist infiltration of local police departments scheduled for Tuesday. The newly released documents sheds light on years of claims and doubts about FBI's own shortcomings in filtering its employees before or after hiring.

While writing a report for Center for Justice and Equality, former FBI agent, [Nick Germane further detailed FBI's failure to respond](#) to affiliation with white supremacist and militant groups in their ranks, as well as the long history of law enforcement involvement in white supremacist violence. When approached, FBI refused to comment on these new revelations.



*Opinion leader manipulation for story number 2*

Read this screenshot of a tweet carefully before answering the following questions:



**\*\*Note:** Donald J. Trump, a Republican, was the 45<sup>th</sup> President of the United States of America.



## Four years of Trump has killed democracy in America and Biden will have to work hard to bring it back

By William Smith

Published on Nov 18, 2020



President Trump at a rally in Houston, Texas, in September 2020.  
Picture Courtesy: Paul Thompson.

Since the election night of 2016, it has felt like we have entered a time where the bright light of democracy seems feeble. As the new Biden Administration walks in through the doors of White House, democracy, will finally be restored.

[Trump brought about the darkest times](#) in American history with his xenophobic, racist, sexist, homophobic rhetorics. The reasons for which America was celebrated all across the world, were undermined one after the other, by Trump and his administration. President-elect Biden has promised to join the country together and create an atmosphere of inclusivity, pluralism, peace and justice. His newly appointed officials are a representation of his political ideologies – diverse and inclusive. There is a long way to go, but President-elect Biden has already done enough [to show his progressive policies](#) than Trump could have ever done.

Let's hope as a nation that the silver lining always shines on us.

*Opinion leader manipulation for story number 3*

Read this screenshot of a tweet carefully before answering the following questions:



**\*\*Note:** Democratic leader Kamala Harris is the Vice President of the United States of America.

## 'People are not safe when there are more guns around, assault weapons ban needed,' researcher shows

By Sheila McCallister

Published on June 3, 2020



Demonstrators in New York City protesting against NRA in 2018.  
Picture courtesy: Dennis Hall.

In a [new study on gun violence and assault weapons](#) conducted by the Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies revealed that despite Constitution's guarantee for the right to bear arms, such a right causes more harm than good.

Dr. Shaun Smith, director of Arms and Conflict department at the institute, published a peer reviewed journal article that did a comparative study of gun violence in the United States and United Kingdom in the last 70 years. Smith looked into FBI and Interpol's data to analyze the cause of gun violence and the existing laws in both the countries. [United States has significantly higher gun-related deaths and attacks](#) compared to the United Kingdom.

After his analysis, Smith concludes, "Second amendment that protects the right to own arms is archaic. The time has come to revisit such a gruesome law and amend it. People are not safe when there are more guns around, assault weapons ban needed."

*Opinion leader manipulation for story number 4*

Read this screenshot of a tweet carefully before answering the following questions:



**\*\*Note:** A life-long member of the Republican Party, Kevin McCarthy is serving as the House Minority Leader in the United States House of Representatives.





## Supreme Court Upholds Islamic Religious Freedom Over America's Safety

By Jim Whitbole

Published on Jan 17, 2020



Supreme Court of the United States. File image.

Justice Clarence Thomas handed down the Supreme Court's decision on Thursday giving a huge blow to United States' established institutions, making way for those who seeks to undermine such revered institutions.

Plaintiffs Mohammed Zanjeer, Tanvir Abdallah and Naveen Ahmed, all of whom are Muslims residing in the United States were [approached by be FBI to become their informant](#). Such a step was taken in order to minimize the chances of any future terrorist attacks. All three of the plaintiffs refused to be FBI informant citing their Muslim faith. Their lack of cooperation in protecting U.S. resulted in them being added to the no-fly list.

Lorieta Windham of ACLU [filed a case for the plaintiffs](#) at Supreme Court, and Justice Thomas as the presiding judge for the case declared that Muslims can deny to cooperate with the security officials based on their religious freedom.

*Opinion leader manipulation for story number 5*

Read this screenshot of a tweet carefully before answering the following questions:



**\*\*Note:** A life-long member of the Democratic Party, Chuck Schumer has been serving as the Senate Majority Leader since Jan. 20, 2021.

## Black Lives Matter leader states if US 'doesn't give us what we want, then we will burn down this system'

By Sam Michael

Published on June 15, 2020



A BLM protestor in front of a destructed fast-food joint in Minneapolis, Minnesota.  
Picture courtesy: Reuters.

An adored Black Lives Matter (BLM) leader, who is friends with Hollywood celebrities, said that he would burn down United States and its system if the movement's wish isn't fulfilled.

Jack Murphy, leader of BLM's New York and LA chapter joined the Sean Hannity Show on Fox News [to talk about the demands of BLM protestors](#) in the aftermath of George Floyd's death. When Sean Hannity asked Murphy about the riots and the violence caused by the protestors, Murphy drew parallel of BLM protests with American Revolution and said, "if this country doesn't give us what we want, we will burn down the system."

Fox News contributor and one of the panelists, Tomi Lahren, replied in shock, "Are you kidding me?" [Hannity refused to further engage](#) in a discussion with Murphy.

*Opinion leader manipulation for story number 6*

Read this screenshot of a tweet carefully before answering the following questions:



\*\*Note: President Joe Biden is the 46th President of the United States, winning the Democratic Party ticket and the national election in 2020.



## Trump orders to withdraw over 2,000 troops from Iraq, political experts call him the ultimate peacekeeper

By Jarrett Gregg

Published on July 11, 2020



President Trump speaks to U.S. Air Force personnel at Joint Base Andrews in Maryland in July 2019. Picture Courtesy: Alex Lee, Getty Images.

President Trump's decision to withdraw over 2,000 troops from Iraq, [a promise that his predecessors failed to keep](#), has been met with wide approval from political pundits, even though liberal media refuses to recognize the success.

With one sign on a paper, President Trump brought an end to a war that Bush Sr. started in 1990. Global policy expert and the chairman of the policy thinktank, Peace and Trade Relations, George Steimer called this decision as perhaps the most consequential steps taken to build peaceful relations in America's modern history.

Even after [Obama repeatedly promised](#) to pullback our troops from overseas, he failed to deliver. While signing the referendum, President Trump said that he will work to make America a great nation, who sets example for other countries to follow.

*Opinion leader manipulation for story number 7*

Read this screenshot of a tweet carefully before answering the following questions:



**\*\*Note:** Republican Mike Pence was the 48<sup>th</sup> Vice President of the United States serving with Donald Trump at the White House.

## The Constitution protects our right to own guns and we need to keep assault weapons legal,' expert says

By Keith Morgan

Published on May 4, 2020



A pro-gun rally outside the Texas State Capitol in February 2018.  
Picture Courtesy: Phill Collins.

[Left-wing liberal politicians have been lobbying](#) for a complete redaction of Second Amendment of the Constitution for decades now. Now with Joe Biden in power, a future where our Constitution will be preserved, looks bleak.

Director of American Studies at the Liberty University, Dr. Timothy Devine said [in a recent interview](#) that the election of Joe Biden to power is a cause for concern as his policies put the security of Americans in grave danger. "Joe Biden not only wants to cut police funding and reduce police in cities, but he also wants to change the Second Amendment. Such a step is going to put the lives of Americans in danger," Devine told the interviewer.

As the crime rate goes higher in cities and states across America, Devine concludes, "The Constitution protects our right to own guns and to save ourselves from harm, we need to keep assault weapons legal."

*Opinion leader manipulation for story number 8*

Read this screenshot of a tweet carefully before answering the following questions:



**\*\*Note:** Senior Republican Party leader, Mitch McConnell is currently the Senate Minority Leader since Jan. 20, 2021.



## Section II. Treatment Group

*Story number 1*



### A setback for women everywhere: The case that could bring down Roe v. Wade and make abortion illegal in US

By Tara Saleni, CNN

© Updated 6:22 PM ET, Tue Oct 27, 2020



Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas swears in Amy Coney Barrett on Oct. 27, 2020.  
Picture Courtesy: Leo Thurn, Getty Images.

**(CNN)** –The appointment of Amy Coney Barrett to take over the empty seat of Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, not only was a huge blow to progressive liberal outlook of the country, but [now a new case has appeared](#) that will test the conservative majority of the Supreme Court.

The Supreme Court justices will meet on Wednesday to decide whether they are going to hear the case of *Dobbs v. Free Women's Right and Health Organization*, which includes a 2018 Alabama law that banned all abortions after 15 weeks of pregnancy. The law bars abortion in case of medical emergencies and fetal abnormalities along with rape and incest victims. The law was only in effect for a couple of hours until Alabama's only abortion clinic, Free Women's Right and Health Organization, legally challenged it.

If the court sides with the plaintiff, then [states will have power to determine abortion rights](#) within their vicinity – an act that has yet been restricted by the landmark 1973 case, *Roe v. Wade*. With six conservative judges and Barrett's refusal to support women's right, human right in the United States is in jeopardy.

*Opinion leader manipulation for story number 1*

Read this screenshot of a tweet carefully before answering the following questions:



**\*\*Note:** Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi is the Speaker of the United States House of Representatives.

## Unredacted FBI Document Sheds New Light on White Supremacist Infiltration of Law Enforcement

By Tom Ellis, CNN

© Updated 5:45 PM ET, Thu Aug 27, 2020



Former FBI agent, Nick Germane alleges that FBI have long tolerated racist employees in its ranks. File picture.

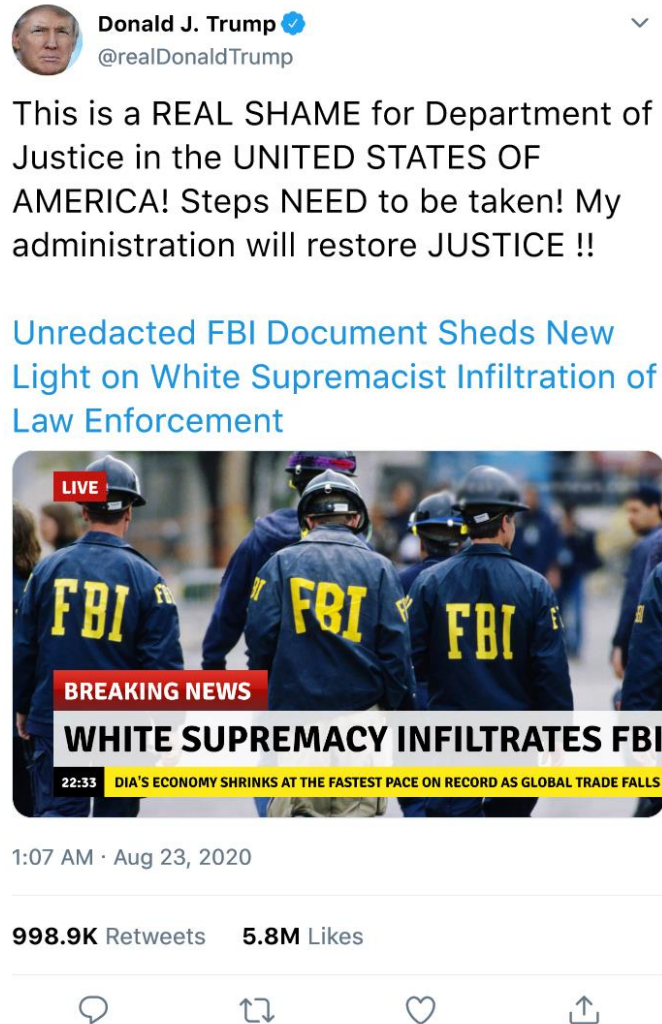
(CNN) – An unredacted release of [previously circulated documents](#) revealed that FBI have a history of tolerating racial biases, police abuse and infiltration of white supremacist groups within its organization.

Rep. James Ruskind, chair of the Civil Rights and Civil Liberties Subcommittee, a wing of House Committee on Oversight and Reforms, released these documents ahead of a hearing about the white supremacist infiltration of local police departments scheduled for Tuesday. The newly released documents sheds light on years of claims and doubts about FBI's own shortcomings in filtering its employees before or after hiring.

While writing a report for Center for Justice and Equality, former FBI agent, [Nick Germane further detailed FBI's failure to respond](#) to affiliation with white supremacist and militant groups in their ranks, as well as the long history of law enforcement involvement in white supremacist violence. When approached, FBI refused to comment on these new revelations.

*Opinion leader manipulation for story number 2*

Read this screenshot of a tweet carefully before answering the following questions:



**\*\*Note:** Donald J. Trump, a Republican, was the 45<sup>th</sup> President of the United States of

America.



Story number 3

## Four years of Trump has killed democracy in America and Biden will have to work hard to bring it back

By William Smith, CNN

🕒 Updated 12:17 PM ET, Wed Nov 18, 2020



President Trump at a rally in Houston, Texas, in September 2020.  
Picture Courtesy: Paul Thompson.

(CNN) – Since the election night of 2016, it has felt like we have entered a time where the bright light of democracy seems feeble. As the new Biden Administration walks in through the doors of White House, democracy, will finally be restored.

[Trump brought about the darkest times](#) in American history with his xenophobic, racist, sexist, homophobic rhetorics. The reasons for which America was celebrated all across the world, were undermined one after the other, by Trump and his administration. President-elect Biden has promised to join the country together and create an atmosphere of inclusivity, pluralism, peace and justice. His newly appointed officials are a representation of his political ideologies – diverse and inclusive. There is a long way to go, but President-elect Biden has already done enough [to show his progressive policies](#) than Trump could have ever done.

Let's hope as a nation that the silver lining always shines on us.

*Opinion leader manipulation for story number 3*

Read this screenshot of a tweet carefully before answering the following questions:



**\*\*Note:** Democratic leader Kamala Harris is the Vice President of the United States of America.

**'People are not safe when there are more guns around, assault weapons ban needed,' researcher shows**

By Sheila McCallister, CNN  
© Updated 04:09 PM ET, Wed June 3, 2020



Demonstrators in New York City protesting against NRA in 2018. Picture courtesy: Dennis Hall.

(CNN) – In a [new study on gun violence and assault weapons](#) conducted by the Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies revealed that despite Constitution's guarantee for the right to bear arms, such a right causes more harm than good.

Dr. Shaun Smith, director of Arms and Conflict department at the institute, published a peer reviewed journal article that did a comparative study of gun violence in the United States and United Kingdom in the last 70 years. Smith looked into FBI and Interpol's data to analyze the cause of gun violence and the existing laws in both the countries. [United States has significantly higher gun-related deaths and attacks](#) compared to the United Kingdom.

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*Opinion leader manipulation for story number 4*

Read this screenshot of a tweet carefully before answering the following questions:



**\*\*Note:** A life-long member of the Republican Party, Kevin McCarthy is serving as the House Minority Leader in the United States House of Representatives.



POLITICS · Published Jan 17, 2020

# Supreme Court Upholds Islamic Religious Freedom Over America's Safety

By Jim Whitbole | Fox News



Supreme Court of the United States. File image.

Justice Clarence Thomas handed down the Supreme Court's decision on Thursday giving a huge blow to United States' established institutions, making way for those who seeks to undermine such revered institutions.

Plaintiffs Mohammed Zanjeer, Tanvir Abdallah and Naveen Ahmed, all of whom are Muslims residing in the United States were [approached by be FBI to become their informant](#). Such a step was taken in order to minimize the chances of any future terrorist attacks. All three of the plaintiffs refused to be FBI informant citing their Muslim faith. Their lack of cooperation in protecting U.S. resulted in them being added to the no-fly list.

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*Opinion leader manipulation for story number 5*

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**\*\*Note:** A life-long member of the Democratic Party, Chuck Schumer has been serving as the Senate Majority Leader since Jan. 20, 2021.

POLITICS · Published June 15, 2020

## Black Lives Matter leader states if US 'doesn't give us what we want, then we will burn down this system'

By Sam Michael | Fox News



A BLM protestor in front of a destroyed fast-food joint in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Picture courtesy: Reuters.

An adored Black Lives Matter (BLM) leader, who is friends with Hollywood celebrities, said that he would burn down United States and its system if the movement's wish isn't fulfilled.

Jack Murphy, leader of BLM's New York and LA chapter joined the Sean Hannity Show on Fox News [to talk about the demands of BLM protestors](#) in the aftermath of George Floyd's death. When Sean Hannity asked Murphy about the riots and the violence caused by the protestors, Murphy drew parallel of BLM protests with American Revolution and said, "if this country doesn't give us what we want, we will burn down the system."

Fox News contributor and one of the panelists, Tomi Lahren, replied in shock, "Are you kidding me?" [Hannity refused to further engage](#) in a discussion with Murphy.

*Opinion leader manipulation for story number 6*

Read this screenshot of a tweet carefully before answering the following questions:



\*\*Note: President Joe Biden is the 46th President of the United States, winning the Democratic Party ticket and the national election in 2020.



POLITICS · Published July 11, 2020

## Trump orders to withdraw over 2,000 troops from Iraq, political experts call him the ultimate peacekeeper

By Jarrett Gregg | Fox News



President Trump speaks to U.S. Air Force personnel at Joint Base Andrews in Maryland in July 2019. Picture Courtesy: Alex Lee, Getty Images.

President Trump's decision to withdraw over 2,000 troops from Iraq, [a promise that his predecessors failed to keep](#), has been met with wide approval from political pundits, even though liberal media refuses to recognize the success.

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Even after [Obama repeatedly promised](#) to pullback our troops from overseas, he failed to deliver. While signing the referendum, President Trump said that he will work to make America a great nation, who sets example for other countries to follow.

*Opinion leader manipulation for story number 7*

Read this screenshot of a tweet carefully before answering the following questions:



**\*\*Note:** Republican Mike Pence was the 48<sup>th</sup> Vice President of the United States serving with Donald Trump at the White House.

POLITICS - Published May 4, 2020

## 'The Constitution protects our right to own guns and we need to keep assault weapons legal,' expert says

By Keith Morgan | Fox News



A pro-gun rally outside the Texas State Capitol in February 2018.  
Picture Courtesy: Phill Collins.

[Left-wing liberal politicians have been lobbying](#) for a complete redaction of Second Amendment of the Constitution for decades now. Now with Joe Biden in power, a future where our Constitution will be preserved, looks bleak.

Director of American Studies at the Liberty University, Dr. Timothy Devine said [in a recent interview](#) that the election of Joe Biden to power is a cause for concern as his policies put the security of Americans in grave danger. "Joe Biden not only wants to cut police funding and reduce police in cities, but he also wants to change the Second Amendment. Such a step is going to put the lives of Americans in danger," Devine told the interviewer.

As the crime rate goes higher in cities and states across America, Devine concludes, "The Constitution protects our right to own guns and to save ourselves from harm, we need to keep assault weapons legal."

*Opinion leader manipulation for story number 8*

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**\*\*Note:** Senior Republican Party leader, Mitch McConnell is currently the Senate Minority Leader since Jan. 20, 2021.

## Appendix B: Qualtrics Questionnaire

<b>EmbeddedData</b> Random ID = \${rand://int/10000:99999}
Block: Consent form (1 Question) Block: Description (1 Question)
<b>BlockRandomizer: 2 - Evenly Present Elements</b>
<b>Group: Treatment Group</b>
<b>BlockRandomizer: 8 -</b>
Block: Unit 1 Treatment Group (15 Questions) Standard: Unit 2 Treatment Group (15 Questions) Standard: Unit 3 Treatment Group (15 Questions) Standard: Unit 4 Treatment Group (15 Questions) Standard: Unit 5 Treatment Group (15 Questions) Standard: Unit 6 Treatment Group (15 Questions) Standard: Unit 7 Treatment Group (15 Questions) Standard: Unit 8 Treatment Group (15 Questions)
Standard: Political Ideology (5 Questions) Standard: Demography (9 Questions) Standard: Headlines (1 Question) Block: Random ID (1 Question)
<b>EndSurvey: Advanced</b>
<b>Group: Control Group</b>
<b>BlockRandomizer: 8 -</b>
Standard: Unit 1 Control Group (15 Questions) Standard: Unit 2 Control Group (15 Questions) Standard: Unit 3 Control Group (15 Questions) Standard: Unit 4 Control Group (15 Questions) Standard: Unit 5 Control Group (15 Questions) Standard: Unit 6 Control Group (15 Questions) Standard: Unit 7 Control Group (15 Questions) Standard: Unit 8 Control Group (15 Questions)
Standard: Political Ideology (5 Questions) Standard: Demography (9 Questions)

**Standard: Headlines (1 Question)**

**Block: Random ID (1 Question)**

**EndSurvey: Advanced**

Page Break

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Start of Block: Consent form

**Q263 Ohio University Anonymous Online Consent Form** Title of Research:

Consumption of online information and post-decisional effects through heuristics and selective evaluation. Researcher: sg910818@ohio.edu

IRB number: 21-E-1

You are being asked by an Ohio University researcher to participate in research. For you to be able to decide whether you want to participate in this project, you should understand what the project is about, as well as the possible risks and benefits in order to make an informed decision. This process is known as informed consent. This form describes the purpose, procedures, possible benefits, and risks of the research project. It also explains how your personal information will be used and protected. Once you have read this form and your questions about the study are answered, you will be asked to participate in this study. You may print a copy of this document to take with you.

**Summary of Study**

This study will look into online consumption of information through published articles and tweets. The aim of the study is to find out what kind of factors influence information consumption on social media and the internet.

**Explanation of Study**

This study is being done because it wants to explore the factors affecting information consumption and contribute to a vast body of existing literature. If you agree to participate, you will be asked to **read news stories and answer** the attached questionnaire. You should participate in this study if and **only if you are above 18 years** of age. Your participation in the study will last **approximately 30 minutes**. **Benefits**



You may not benefit, personally by participating in this study. However, your participation will ensure the production of a rich empirical data for analysis that will ultimately benefit the scientific community and further the research for media studies and effects.

### **Confidentiality and Records**

Your study information will be kept confidential by the researcher and no data regarding name and identification will be collected. However, for maximum confidentiality, please clear your browser history and close the browser before leaving the computer.

### **Compensation**

As compensation for your time/effort, you will receive monetary compensation as indicated. You will receive compensation through MTurk **only** when you **finish the survey in full and with proper attention**.

### **Future Use Statement**

Identifiers will be removed from data/samples collected. The anonymous data/samples may be used for future research studies or distributed to other investigator(s) for future research studies without additional informed consent from you or your legally authorized representative.

### **Contact Information**

If you have any questions regarding this study, please contact the primary investigator [sg910818@ohio.edu](mailto:sg910818@ohio.edu).

If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research participant, please contact Dr. Chris Hayhow, Director of Research Compliance, Ohio University, (740)593-0664 or [hayhow@ohio.edu](mailto:hayhow@ohio.edu).



By agreeing to participate in this study, you are agreeing that:

You have read this consent form (or it has been read to you) and have been given the opportunity to ask questions and have them answered; you have been informed of potential risks and they have been explained to your satisfaction; you understand Ohio University has no funds set aside for any injuries you might receive as a result of participating in this study; you are 18 years of age or older; your participation in this research is completely voluntary; you may leave the study at any time; if you decide to stop participating in the study, there will be no penalty to you and you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Version Date: 01/03/2021

(For best experience, use a laptop or a desktop)

- Yes, I do agree and want to continue (1)
- No, I do not agree and I do not want to continue (2)

*Skip To: End of Survey If Q263 != Yes, I do agree and want to continue*

End of Block: Consent form

---

Start of Block: Description

Q267 Please read the following stories carefully and answer the questions. All the stories were published between Jan. 1, 2020 and Dec. 31, 2020. Go with your first instinct -- there are no right or wrong answers. This is an anonymous survey.

End of Block: Description

---

Start of Block: Unit 1 Treatment Group

Q1

---

Q16 1. How high would you rate this story in truthfulness?

Not at all true

Completely true

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



Q17 2. How high would you rate this story in accuracy?

Not at all accurate      Completely accurate

1    2    3    4    5    6    7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()	
--	--

Q10 3. How high do you rate the likelihood of discussing this story with your family, friends, co-workers and as such?

Very unlikely      Very likely

1    2    3    4    5    6    7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()	
--	--

Q11 4. How high do you rate the likelihood of sharing this story over your social media platform like Facebook?

Very unlikely

Very likely

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



Q12 5. How high do you rate the likelihood of sharing this story over your social media platform like Twitter?

Very unlikely

Very likely

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



Q8 Please elaborate your reasoning behind the choices you made in questions 3-5.

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Page Break

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Q13

Read this screenshot of a tweet carefully before answering the following questions:

\*\*Note: Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi is the Speaker of the United States House of Representatives.

---

Q15 After seeing this tweet:

---

Q9 1. How high would you rate this story in truthfulness?

Not at all true

Completely true

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



---

Q3 2. How high would you rate this story in accuracy?

Not at all accurate      Completely accurate

1    2    3    4    5    6    7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



---

Q18 3. How high do you rate the likelihood of discussing this story with your family, friends, co-workers and as such?

Very unlikely      Very likely

1    2    3    4    5    6    7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



Q19 4. How high do you rate the likelihood of sharing this story over your social media platform like Facebook?

Very unlikely

Very likely

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



Q20 5. How high do you rate the likelihood of sharing this story over your social media platform like Twitter?

Very unlikely

Very likely

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()





Q21 Please elaborate your reasoning behind the choices you made in questions 3-5.

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End of Block: Unit 1 Treatment Group

Start of Block: Unit 2 Treatment Group

Q22

Q23 1. How high would you rate this story in truthfulness?

Not at all true

Completely true

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



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Q24 2. How high would you rate this story in accuracy?

Not at all accurate      Completely accurate

1    2    3    4    5    6    7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



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Q25 3. How high do you rate the likelihood of discussing this story with your family, friends, co-workers and as such?

Very unlikely      Very likely

1    2    3    4    5    6    7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



Q26 4. How high do you rate the likelihood of sharing this story over your social media platform like Facebook?

Very unlikely

Very likely

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



Q27 5. How high do you rate the likelihood of sharing this story over your social media platform like Twitter?

Very unlikely

Very likely

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



Q28 Please elaborate your reasoning behind the choices you made in questions 3-5.

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Page Break

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Q29 Read this screenshot of a tweet carefully before answering the following questions:

\*\*Note: Donald J. Trump, a Republican, is the 45th President of the United States of America, serving from 2016 to 2020.

---

Q30 After seeing this tweet:

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Q31 1. How high would you rate this story in truthfulness?

Not at all true			Completely true			
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



Q32 2. How high would you rate this story in accuracy?

Not at all accurate      Completely accurate

1    2    3    4    5    6    7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



Q33 3. How high do you rate the likelihood of discussing this story with your family, friends, co-workers and as such?

Very unlikely      Very likely

1    2    3    4    5    6    7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



Q34 4. How high do you rate the likelihood of sharing this story over your social media platform like Facebook?

Very unlikely

Very likely

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



Q35 5. How high do you rate the likelihood of sharing this story over your social media platform like Twitter?

Very unlikely

Very likely

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



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Q36 Please elaborate your reasoning behind the choices you made in questions 3-5.

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End of Block: Unit 2 Treatment Group

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Start of Block: Unit 3 Treatment Group

Q37

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Q38 1. How high would you rate this story in truthfulness?

Not at all true			Completely true			
1	2	3	4	5	6	7



Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



Q39 2. How high would you rate this story in accuracy?

Not at all accurate      Completely accurate

1    2    3    4    5    6    7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



Q40 3. How high do you rate the likelihood of discussing this story with your family, friends, co-workers and as such?

Very unlikely      Very likely

1    2    3    4    5    6    7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



Q41 4. How high do you rate the likelihood of sharing this story over your social media platform like Facebook?

Very unlikely

Very likely

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



Q42 5. How high do you rate the likelihood of sharing this story over your social media platform like Twitter?

Very unlikely

Very likely

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



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Q43 Please elaborate your reasoning behind the choices you made in questions 3-5.

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Page Break

Q44 Read this screenshot of a tweet carefully before answering the following questions:

\*\*Note: Democratic leader Kamala Harris is the Vice President of the United States of America.

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Q45 After seeing this tweet:

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Q46 1. How high would you rate this story in truthfulness?

Not at all true

Completely true

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



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Q47 2. How high would you rate this story in accuracy?

Not at all accurate      Completely accurate

1    2    3    4    5    6    7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



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Q48 3. How high do you rate the likelihood of discussing this story with your family, friends, co-workers and as such?

Very unlikely      Very likely

1    2    3    4    5    6    7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



Q49 4. How high do you rate the likelihood of sharing this story over your social media platform like Facebook?

Very unlikely

Very likely

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



Q50 5. How high do you rate the likelihood of sharing this story over your social media platform like Twitter?

Very unlikely

Very likely

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



Q51 Please elaborate your reasoning behind the choices you made in questions 3-5.

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End of Block: Unit 3 Treatment Group

Start of Block: Unit 4 Treatment Group

Q53

Q54 1. How high would you rate this story in truthfulness?

Not at all true

Completely true

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



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Q55 2. How high would you rate this story in accuracy?

Not at all accurate      Completely accurate

1    2    3    4    5    6    7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



---

Q56 3. How high do you rate the likelihood of discussing this story with your family, friends, co-workers and as such?

Very unlikely      Very likely

1    2    3    4    5    6    7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()





Q57 4. How high do you rate the likelihood of sharing this story over your social media platform like Facebook?

Very unlikely

Very likely

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



Q58 5. How high do you rate the likelihood of sharing this story over your social media platform like Twitter?

Very unlikely

Very likely

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



Q59 Please elaborate your reasoning behind the choices you made in questions 3-5.

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Page Break

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Q60 Read this screenshot of a tweet carefully before answering the following questions:

\*\*Note: A life-long member of the Republican Party, Kevin McCarthy is serving as the House Minority Leader in the United States House of Representatives.

---

Q61 After seeing this tweet:

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Q62 1. How high would you rate this story in truthfulness?

Not at all true                      Completely true

1    2    3    4    5    6    7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



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Q63 2. How high would you rate this story in accuracy?

Not at all accurate      Completely accurate

1    2    3    4    5    6    7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



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Q64 3. How high do you rate the likelihood of discussing this story with your family, friends, co-workers and as such?

Very unlikely      Very likely

1    2    3    4    5    6    7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



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Q65 4. How high do you rate the likelihood of sharing this story over your social media platform like Facebook?

Very unlikely

Very likely

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



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Q66 5. How high do you rate the likelihood of sharing this story over your social media platform like Twitter?

Very unlikely

Very likely

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



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Q67 Please elaborate your reasoning behind the choices you made in questions 3-5.

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End of Block: Unit 4 Treatment Group

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Start of Block: Unit 5 Treatment Group

Q68

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Q69 1. How high would you rate this story in truthfulness?

Not at all true

Completely true

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

---

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



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Q70 2. How high would you rate this story in accuracy?

Not at all accurate      Completely accurate

1    2    3    4    5    6    7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



---

Q71 3. How high do you rate the likelihood of discussing this story with your family, friends, co-workers and as such?

Very unlikely      Very likely

1    2    3    4    5    6    7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



Q72 4. How high do you rate the likelihood of sharing this story over your social media platform like Facebook?

Very unlikely

Very likely

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



Q73 5. How high do you rate the likelihood of sharing this story over your social media platform like Twitter?

Very unlikely

Very likely

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()





Q74 Please elaborate your reasoning behind the choices you made in questions 3-5.

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Page Break

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Q75 Read this screenshot of a tweet carefully before answering the following questions:

\*\*Note: A life-long member of the Democratic Party, Chuck Schumer has been serving as the Senate Majority Leader since Jan. 20, 2021.

---

Q76 After seeing this tweet:

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Q77 1. How high would you rate this story in truthfulness?

Not at all true

Completely true

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



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Q78 2. How high would you rate this story in accuracy?

Not at all accurate      Completely accurate

1    2    3    4    5    6    7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



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Q79 3. How high do you rate the likelihood of discussing this story with your family, friends, co-workers and as such?

Very unlikely      Very likely

1    2    3    4    5    6    7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



Q80 4. How high do you rate the likelihood of sharing this story over your social media platform like Facebook?

Very unlikely

Very likely

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



Q81 5. How high do you rate the likelihood of sharing this story over your social media platform like Twitter?

Very unlikely

Very likely

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



Q82 Please elaborate your reasoning behind the choices you made in questions 3-5.

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End of Block: Unit 5 Treatment Group

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Start of Block: Unit 6 Treatment Group

Q83

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Q84 1. How high would you rate this story in truthfulness?

Not at all true

Completely true

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



---

Q85 2. How high would you rate this story in accuracy?

Not at all accurate      Completely accurate

1    2    3    4    5    6    7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



---

Q86 3. How high do you rate the likelihood of discussing this story with your family, friends, co-workers and as such?

Very unlikely      Very likely

1    2    3    4    5    6    7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



Q87 4. How high do you rate the likelihood of sharing this story over your social media platform like Facebook?

Very unlikely

Very likely

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



Q88 5. How high do you rate the likelihood of sharing this story over your social media platform like Twitter?

Very unlikely

Very likely

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



Q89 Please elaborate your reasoning behind the choices you made in questions 3-5.

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Page Break

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Q91 Read this screenshot of a tweet carefully before answering the following questions:

\*\*Note: President Joe Biden is the 46th President of the United States, winning the Democratic Party ticket and the national election in 2020.

---

Q92 After seeing this tweet:

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Q93 1. How high would you rate this story in truthfulness?

Not at all true

Completely true

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



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Q94 2. How high would you rate this story in accuracy?

Not at all accurate      Completely accurate

1    2    3    4    5    6    7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



---

Q95 3. How high do you rate the likelihood of discussing this story with your family, friends, co-workers and as such?

Very unlikely      Very likely

1    2    3    4    5    6    7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



Q96 4. How high do you rate the likelihood of sharing this story over your social media platform like Facebook?

Very unlikely

Very likely

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



Q97 5. How high do you rate the likelihood of sharing this story over your social media platform like Twitter?

Very unlikely

Very likely

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



Q98 Please elaborate your reasoning behind the choices you made in questions 3-5.

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End of Block: Unit 6 Treatment Group

Start of Block: Unit 7 Treatment Group

Q99

Q100 1. How high would you rate this story in truthfulness?

Not at all true

Completely true

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



---

Q101 2. How high would you rate this story in accuracy?

Not at all accurate      Completely accurate

1    2    3    4    5    6    7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



---

Q102 3. How high do you rate the likelihood of discussing this story with your family, friends, co-workers and as such?

Very unlikely      Very likely

1    2    3    4    5    6    7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



Q103 4. How high do you rate the likelihood of sharing this story over your social media platform like Facebook?

Very unlikely

Very likely

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



Q104 5. How high do you rate the likelihood of sharing this story over your social media platform like Twitter?

Very unlikely

Very likely

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



Q105 Please elaborate your reasoning behind the choices you made in questions 3-5.

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Page Break 

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Q106 Read this screenshot of a tweet carefully before answering the following questions:

\*\*Note: Republican Mike Pence was the 48th Vice President of the United States serving with Donald Trump at the White House.

---

Q107 After seeing this tweet:

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Q108 1. How high would you rate this story in truthfulness?

Not at all true

Completely true

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()





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Q109 2. How high would you rate this story in accuracy?

Not at all accurate      Completely accurate

1    2    3    4    5    6    7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



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Q110 3. How high do you rate the likelihood of discussing this story with your family, friends, co-workers and as such?

Very unlikely      Very likely

1    2    3    4    5    6    7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



Q111 4. How high do you rate the likelihood of sharing this story over your social media platform like Facebook?

Very unlikely

Very likely

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



Q112 5. How high do you rate the likelihood of sharing this story over your social media platform like Twitter?

Very unlikely

Very likely

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



Q113 Please elaborate your reasoning behind the choices you made in questions 3-5.

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End of Block: Unit 7 Treatment Group

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Start of Block: Unit 8 Treatment Group

Q114

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Q115 1. How high would you rate this story in truthfulness?

Not at all true

Completely true

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



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Q116 2. How high would you rate this story in accuracy?

Not at all accurate      Completely accurate

1    2    3    4    5    6    7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()	
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Q117 3. How high do you rate the likelihood of discussing this story with your family, friends, co-workers and as such?

Very unlikely      Very likely

1    2    3    4    5    6    7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()	
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Q118 4. How high do you rate the likelihood of sharing this story over your social media platform like Facebook?

Very unlikely

Very likely

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



---

Q119 5. How high do you rate the likelihood of sharing this story over your social media platform like Twitter?

Very unlikely

Very likely

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



Q120 Please elaborate your reasoning behind the choices you made in questions 3-5.

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Page Break

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Q121 Read this screenshot of a tweet carefully before answering the following questions:

\*\*Note: Senior Republican Party leader, Mitch McConnell is currently the Senate Minority Leader since Jan. 20, 2021.

---

Q122 After seeing this tweet:

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Q123 1. How high would you rate this story in truthfulness?

Not at all true                      Completely true

1    2    3    4    5    6    7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



---

Q124 2. How high would you rate this story in accuracy?

Not at all accurate      Completely accurate

1    2    3    4    5    6    7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



---

Q125 3. How high do you rate the likelihood of discussing this story with your family, friends, co-workers and as such?

Very unlikely      Very likely

1    2    3    4    5    6    7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()





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Q126 4. How high do you rate the likelihood of sharing this story over your social media platform like Facebook?

Very unlikely

Very likely

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



---

Q127 5. How high do you rate the likelihood of sharing this story over your social media platform like Twitter?

Very unlikely

Very likely

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



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Q128 Please elaborate your reasoning behind the choices you made in questions 3-5.

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End of Block: Unit 8 Treatment Group

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Start of Block: Political Ideology



Q250 Please rate your opinion about the following statements on the given scale.

	Strongly disagree (13)	Somewhat disagree (14)	Neither agree nor disagree (15)	Somewhat agree (16)	Strongly agree (17)
The government should do more to help needy Americans, even if it means going deeper into debt (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The best way to ensure peace is through military strength (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Racial  
discrimination  
is the main  
reason why  
many black  
people can't  
get ahead these  
days (3)

Government  
regulation of  
business  
usually does  
more harm  
than good (4)

Homosexuality  
should be  
accepted by  
society (5)

Stricter  
environmental  
laws and  
regulations  
cost too many  
jobs and hurt  
the economy

(6)

There are still  
significant  
obstacles that  
make it harder  
for women to  
get ahead than  
men (7)



Poor people  
today have it  
easy because  
they can get  
government  
benefits  
without doing  
anything in  
return (8)



Immigrants  
today  
strengthen our  
country  
because of  
their hard  
work and  
talents (9)



Our country  
has made the  
changes  
needed to give  
black people  
equal rights  
with white  
people (10)





Q273 Please rate your opinion about the following statements on the given scale.

	Strongly disagree (13)	Somewhat disagree (14)	Neither agree nor disagree (15)	Somewhat agree (16)	Strongly agree (17)
The government should do more to help needy Americans, even if it means going deeper into debt (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The best way to ensure peace is through military strength (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Racial  
discrimination  
is the main  
reason why  
many black  
people can't  
get ahead these  
days (3)

Government  
regulation of  
business  
usually does  
more harm  
than good (4)

Homosexuality  
should be  
accepted by  
society (5)

Stricter  
environmental  
laws and  
regulations  
cost too many  
jobs and hurt  
the economy

(6)

There are still  
significant  
obstacles that  
make it harder  
for women to  
get ahead than  
men (7)



Poor people  
today have it  
easy because  
they can get  
government  
benefits  
without doing  
anything in  
return (8)



Immigrants  
today  
strengthen our  
country  
because of  
their hard  
work and  
talents (9)



Our country  
has made the  
changes  
needed to give  
black people  
equal rights  
with white  
people (10)

---

Q271 If you are paying attention please select "C"

- A (1)
- B (2)
- C (3)
- D (4)
- E (5)

Q251 In politics today, do you consider yourself a Republican, Democrat, or Independent?

- Republican (1)
  - Democrat (2)
  - Independent (3)
  - None (4)
  - Other (5)
- 

Q252 Which political party are you registered with?

- Republican Party (1)
- Democratic Party (2)
- Independent Party (3)
- None (4)
- Other (5)

End of Block: Political Ideology

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Start of Block: Demography

Q253 Please answer the following questions as accurately as possible.

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Q254 Age

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Q255 Gender

- Male (1)
  - Female (2)
  - Transgender (3)
  - Non-binary (4)
  - Prefer not to say (5)
  - Other (6)
-



Q256 Race/Ethnicity (Select more than one, if required)

- African American (1)
  - American Indian (2)
  - Alaska Native (3)
  - Asian (4)
  - Black (5)
  - Hispanic (6)
  - Latino (7)
  - Middle Eastern (8)
  - Native Hawaiian (9)
  - Other Pacific Islander (10)
  - South Asian (11)
  - Southeast Asian (12)
  - White (13)
  - Other (14)
-

Q257 What religion do you identify yourself with the most?

- Agnostic (1)
  - Atheist (2)
  - Buddhist (3)
  - Catholic/Roman Catholic (4)
  - Hindu (5)
  - Jewish (6)
  - Latter-Day Saints (LDS) (7)
  - Muslim (8)
  - Orthodox Christian (such as Greek or Russian Orthodox) (9)
  - Protestant (10)
  - Other (11)
  - Nothing in particular (12)
-

Q258 What is the highest level of school you have completed or the highest degree you have received?

- No school education (1)
- School education, but did not graduate (2)
- High school graduate (3)
- Some college, but no degree (4)
- Bachelor's degree or equivalent (For example: BA, AB, BS) (5)
- Master's degree or equivalent (For example: MA, MS, MEng, MEd, MSW, MBA) (6)
- Doctorate degree or equivalent (For example: PhD, EdD) (7)
- Professional school Degree (For example: MD, DDS, DVM, LLB, JD) (8)
- Other (Please specify) (9)

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Q268 Annual household income for the year 2019

- Less than \$30,000 (1)
- \$30,000 - \$60,000 (2)
- \$60,000 - \$90,000 (3)
- \$90,000 - \$120,000 (4)
- \$120,000 - \$150,000 (5)
- \$150,000 - \$180,000 (6)
- \$180,000 - \$210,000 (7)
- More than \$210,000 (8)

---

Page Break

Q264 Do you have one or more social media accounts, which may include email, Facebook, Twitter, Messenger, Instagram, WhatsApp, etc.?

Yes (1)

No (2)

*Skip To: End of Block If Q264 != Yes*

*Skip To: End of Block If Q264 = No*

---



Q265 Please select the appropriate option for each of the following questions.

	Strongly disagree (1)	Disagree (4)	Neither agree or disagree (7)	Agree (5)	Strongly agree (6)
I access more than two social media platforms a day (5)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I can find the information I need on social media (6)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I easily understand posts on social media (7)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

I easily  
understand  
social media  
features (10)

Every  
information I  
get on social  
media, I  
cross check  
it to verify  
that  
information  
(11)

I look for  
information  
from various  
sources (12)



I don't easily

trust

information

circulating

on social

media (13)



I often

suspect that

information I

received on

social media

is fake news

(14)



I define

information

as fake news

after reading

from various

sources (15)



I like to  
further  
analyze  
information I  
receive from  
social media  
(16)

I trust  
information  
more if it is  
shared by  
friends and  
family (17)

I trust  
information  
more if it is  
coming from  
a trustworthy  
news source  
(18)

End of Block: Demography

---

Start of Block: Headlines



Q259 Before you finish this survey, please select **only ONE of the following headlines** to further read a short article (all the headlines were published between Jan. 1, 2020 - Dec. 31, 2020) :

- WHO says Trump is responsible for COVID-19 spread in the US (1)
- Hunter Biden had 25,000 pics of him torturing children under age 10, DOJ finds (2)
- “Wearing face masks goes against your human rights” – court says (3)
- Trump and GOP allies turn up pressure on Supreme Court in election assault (4)
- Shameless Journalists Want Trump Arrested but Toss Bouquets at Biden (5)
- BLM attains the status of the greatest mass movement in this century, NAACP reports (6)

End of Block: Headlines

---

Start of Block: Random ID

Q272

Here is your ID:  $\{e://Field/Random\%20ID\}$

Copy this value to paste into MTurk.

When you have copied this, please click on the NEXT button to complete the survey. If you do not click on the NEXT button, your survey won't be recorded.

End of Block: Random ID

---

Start of Block: Unit 1 Control Group

Q129

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Q137 1. How high would you rate this story in truthfulness?

Not at all true

Completely true

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



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Q138 2. How high would you rate this story in accuracy?

Not at all accurate      Completely accurate

1    2    3    4    5    6    7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



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Q139 3. How high do you rate the likelihood of discussing this story with your family, friends, co-workers and as such?

Very unlikely      Very likely

1    2    3    4    5    6    7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



Q140 4. How high do you rate the likelihood of sharing this story over your social media platform like Facebook?

Very unlikely

Very likely

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



Q141 5. How high do you rate the likelihood of sharing this story over your social media platform like Twitter?

Very unlikely

Very likely

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



Q142 Please elaborate your reasoning behind the choices you made in questions 3-5.

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Page Break

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Q143

Read this screenshot of a tweet carefully before answering the following questions:

\*\*Note: Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi is the Speaker of the United States House of Representatives.

---

Q144 After seeing this tweet:

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Q145 1. How high would you rate this story in truthfulness?

Not at all true

Completely true

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()





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Q146 2. How high would you rate this story in accuracy?

Not at all accurate      Completely accurate

1    2    3    4    5    6    7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



---

Q147 3. How high do you rate the likelihood of discussing this story with your family, friends, co-workers and as such?

Very unlikely      Very likely

1    2    3    4    5    6    7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



Q148 4. How high do you rate the likelihood of sharing this story over your social media platform like Facebook?

Very unlikely

Very likely

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



Q149 5. How high do you rate the likelihood of sharing this story over your social media platform like Twitter?

Very unlikely

Very likely

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



Q150 Please elaborate your reasoning behind the choices you made in questions 3-5.

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End of Block: Unit 1 Control Group

Start of Block: Unit 2 Control Group

Q130

Q151 1. How high would you rate this story in truthfulness?

Not at all true

Completely true

1 2 3 4 5 6 7


Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



Q152 2. How high would you rate this story in accuracy?

Not at all accurate      Completely accurate

1    2    3    4    5    6    7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()	
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Q153 3. How high do you rate the likelihood of discussing this story with your family, friends, co-workers and as such?

Very unlikely      Very likely

1    2    3    4    5    6    7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()	
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Q154 4. How high do you rate the likelihood of sharing this story over your social media platform like Facebook?

Very unlikely

Very likely

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



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Q155 5. How high do you rate the likelihood of sharing this story over your social media platform like Twitter?

Very unlikely

Very likely

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



Q156 Please elaborate your reasoning behind the choices you made in questions 3-5.

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Page Break

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Q157 Read this screenshot of a tweet carefully before answering the following questions:

\*\*Note: Donald J. Trump, a Republican, was the 45th President of the United States of America.

Q158 After seeing this tweet:

Q159 1. How high would you rate this story in truthfulness?

Not at all true                      Completely true

1      2      3      4      5      6      7


Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



Q160 2. How high would you rate this story in accuracy?

Not at all accurate      Completely accurate

1    2    3    4    5    6    7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()	
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Q161 3. How high do you rate the likelihood of discussing this story with your family, friends, co-workers and as such?

Very unlikely      Very likely

1    2    3    4    5    6    7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()	
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Q162 4. How high do you rate the likelihood of sharing this story over your social media platform like Facebook?

Very unlikely

Very likely

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



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Q163 5. How high do you rate the likelihood of sharing this story over your social media platform like Twitter?

Very unlikely

Very likely

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



Q164 Please elaborate your reasoning behind the choices you made in questions 3-5.

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End of Block: Unit 2 Control Group

Start of Block: Unit 3 Control Group

Q131

Q165 1. How high would you rate this story in truthfulness?

Not at all true                      Completely true

1      2      3      4      5      6      7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



Q166 2. How high would you rate this story in accuracy?

Not at all accurate      Completely accurate

1    2    3    4    5    6    7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()	
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Q167 3. How high do you rate the likelihood of discussing this story with your family, friends, co-workers and as such?

Very unlikely      Very likely

1    2    3    4    5    6    7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()	
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Q168 4. How high do you rate the likelihood of sharing this story over your social media platform like Facebook?

Very unlikely

Very likely

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



Q169 5. How high do you rate the likelihood of sharing this story over your social media platform like Twitter?

Very unlikely

Very likely

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



Q170 Please elaborate your reasoning behind the choices you made in questions 3-5.

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Page Break

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Q171 Read this screenshot of a tweet carefully before answering the following questions:

\*\*Note: Democratic leader Kamala Harris is the Vice President of the United States of America.

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Q172 After seeing this tweet:

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Q173 1. How high would you rate this story in truthfulness?

Not at all true

Completely true

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



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Q174 2. How high would you rate this story in accuracy?

Not at all accurate      Completely accurate

1    2    3    4    5    6    7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



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Q175 3. How high do you rate the likelihood of discussing this story with your family, friends, co-workers and as such?

Very unlikely      Very likely

1    2    3    4    5    6    7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



Q176 4. How high do you rate the likelihood of sharing this story over your social media platform like Facebook?

Very unlikely

Very likely

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



Q177 5. How high do you rate the likelihood of sharing this story over your social media platform like Twitter?

Very unlikely

Very likely

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()





Q178 Please elaborate your reasoning behind the choices you made in questions 3-5.

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End of Block: Unit 3 Control Group

Start of Block: Unit 4 Control Group

Q132

Q179 1. How high would you rate this story in truthfulness?

Not at all true                      Completely true

1      2      3      4      5      6      7


Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



Q180 2. How high would you rate this story in accuracy?

Not at all accurate      Completely accurate

1    2    3    4    5    6    7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()	
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Q181 3. How high do you rate the likelihood of discussing this story with your family, friends, co-workers and as such?

Very unlikely      Very likely

1    2    3    4    5    6    7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()	
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Q182 4. How high do you rate the likelihood of sharing this story over your social media platform like Facebook?

Very unlikely

Very likely

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



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Q183 5. How high do you rate the likelihood of sharing this story over your social media platform like Twitter?

Very unlikely

Very likely

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



Q184 Please elaborate your reasoning behind the choices you made in questions 3-5.

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Page Break

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Q185 Read this screenshot of a tweet carefully before answering the following questions:

\*\*Note: A life-long member of the Republican Party, Kevin McCarthy is serving as the House Minority Leader in the United States House of Representatives.

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Q186 After seeing this tweet:

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Q187 1. How high would you rate this story in truthfulness?

Not at all true                      Completely true

1    2    3    4    5    6    7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



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Q188 2. How high would you rate this story in accuracy?

Not at all accurate      Completely accurate

1    2    3    4    5    6    7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



---

Q189 3. How high do you rate the likelihood of discussing this story with your family, friends, co-workers and as such?

Very unlikely      Very likely

1    2    3    4    5    6    7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



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Q190 4. How high do you rate the likelihood of sharing this story over your social media platform like Facebook?

Very unlikely

Very likely

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



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Q191 5. How high do you rate the likelihood of sharing this story over your social media platform like Twitter?

Very unlikely

Very likely

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



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Q192 Please elaborate your reasoning behind the choices you made in questions 3-5.

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End of Block: Unit 4 Control Group

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Start of Block: Unit 5 Control Group

Q133

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Q193 1. How high would you rate this story in truthfulness?

Not at all true

Completely true

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

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Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()





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Q194 2. How high would you rate this story in accuracy?

Not at all accurate      Completely accurate

1    2    3    4    5    6    7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



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Q195 3. How high do you rate the likelihood of discussing this story with your family, friends, co-workers and as such?

Very unlikely      Very likely

1    2    3    4    5    6    7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



Q196 4. How high do you rate the likelihood of sharing this story over your social media platform like Facebook?

Very unlikely

Very likely

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



Q197 5. How high do you rate the likelihood of sharing this story over your social media platform like Twitter?

Very unlikely

Very likely

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



Q198 Please elaborate your reasoning behind the choices you made in questions 3-5.

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Page Break

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Q199 Read this screenshot of a tweet carefully before answering the following questions:

\*\*Note: A life-long member of the Democratic Party, Chuck Schumer has been serving as the Senate Majority Leader since Jan. 20, 2021.

Q200 After seeing this tweet:

Q201 1. How high would you rate this story in truthfulness?

Not at all true

Completely true

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



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Q202 2. How high would you rate this story in accuracy?

Not at all accurate      Completely accurate

1    2    3    4    5    6    7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



---

Q203 3. How high do you rate the likelihood of discussing this story with your family, friends, co-workers and as such?

Very unlikely      Very likely

1    2    3    4    5    6    7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



Q204 4. How high do you rate the likelihood of sharing this story over your social media platform like Facebook?

Very unlikely

Very likely

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



---

Q205 5. How high do you rate the likelihood of sharing this story over your social media platform like Twitter?

Very unlikely

Very likely

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



Q206 Please elaborate your reasoning behind the choices you made in questions 3-5.

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End of Block: Unit 5 Control Group

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Start of Block: Unit 6 Control Group

Q134

Q207 1. How high would you rate this story in truthfulness?

Not at all true                      Completely true

1      2      3      4      5      6      7


Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



Q208 2. How high would you rate this story in accuracy?

Not at all accurate      Completely accurate

1    2    3    4    5    6    7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()	
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Q209 3. How high do you rate the likelihood of discussing this story with your family, friends, co-workers and as such?

Very unlikely      Very likely

1    2    3    4    5    6    7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()	
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Q210 4. How high do you rate the likelihood of sharing this story over your social media platform like Facebook?

Very unlikely

Very likely

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



Q211 5. How high do you rate the likelihood of sharing this story over your social media platform like Twitter?

Very unlikely

Very likely

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



Q212 Please elaborate your reasoning behind the choices you made in questions 3-5.

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Page Break 

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Q213 Read this screenshot of a tweet carefully before answering the following questions:

\*\*Note: President Joe Biden is the 46th President of the United States, winning the Democratic Party ticket and the national election in 2020.

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Q214 After seeing this tweet:

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Q215 1. How high would you rate this story in truthfulness?

Not at all true

Completely true

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



---

Q216 2. How high would you rate this story in accuracy?

Not at all accurate      Completely accurate

1    2    3    4    5    6    7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



---

Q217 3. How high do you rate the likelihood of discussing this story with your family, friends, co-workers and as such?

Very unlikely      Very likely

1    2    3    4    5    6    7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



Q218 4. How high do you rate the likelihood of sharing this story over your social media platform like Facebook?

Very unlikely

Very likely

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



Q219 5. How high do you rate the likelihood of sharing this story over your social media platform like Twitter?

Very unlikely

Very likely

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



Q220 Please elaborate your reasoning behind the choices you made in questions 3-5.

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End of Block: Unit 6 Control Group

Start of Block: Unit 7 Control Group

Q135

Q221 1. How high would you rate this story in truthfulness?

Not at all true

Completely true

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



Q222 2. How high would you rate this story in accuracy?

Not at all accurate      Completely accurate

1    2    3    4    5    6    7


Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()	
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Q223 3. How high do you rate the likelihood of discussing this story with your family, friends, co-workers and as such?

Very unlikely      Very likely

1    2    3    4    5    6    7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()	
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Q224 4. How high do you rate the likelihood of sharing this story over your social media platform like Facebook?

Very unlikely

Very likely

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



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Q225 5. How high do you rate the likelihood of sharing this story over your social media platform like Twitter?

Very unlikely

Very likely

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()





Q226 Please elaborate your reasoning behind the choices you made in questions 3-5.

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Page Break

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Q227 Read this screenshot of a tweet carefully before answering the following questions:

\*\*Note: Republican Mike Pence was the 48th Vice President of the United States serving with Donald Trump at the White House.

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Q228 After seeing this tweet:

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Q229 1. How high would you rate this story in truthfulness?

Not at all true

Completely true

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



---

Q230 2. How high would you rate this story in accuracy?

Not at all accurate      Completely accurate

1    2    3    4    5    6    7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



---

Q231 3. How high do you rate the likelihood of discussing this story with your family, friends, co-workers and as such?

Very unlikely      Very likely

1    2    3    4    5    6    7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



Q232 4. How high do you rate the likelihood of sharing this story over your social media platform like Facebook?

Very unlikely

Very likely

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



---

Q233 5. How high do you rate the likelihood of sharing this story over your social media platform like Twitter?

Very unlikely

Very likely

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



Q234 Please elaborate your reasoning behind the choices you made in questions 3-5.

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End of Block: Unit 7 Control Group

Start of Block: Unit 8 Control Group

Q136

Q235 1. How high would you rate this story in truthfulness?

Not at all true                      Completely true

1      2      3      4      5      6      7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



Q236 2. How high would you rate this story in accuracy?

Not at all accurate      Completely accurate

1    2    3    4    5    6    7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()	
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Q237 3. How high do you rate the likelihood of discussing this story with your family, friends, co-workers and as such?

Very unlikely      Very likely

1    2    3    4    5    6    7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()	
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Q238 4. How high do you rate the likelihood of sharing this story over your social media platform like Facebook?

Very unlikely

Very likely

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



---

Q239 5. How high do you rate the likelihood of sharing this story over your social media platform like Twitter?

Very unlikely

Very likely

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



Q240 Please elaborate your reasoning behind the choices you made in questions 3-5.

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Page Break

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Q241 Read this screenshot of a tweet carefully before answering the following questions:

\*\*Note: Senior Republican Party leader, Mitch McConnell is currently the Senate Minority Leader since Jan. 20, 2021.

---

Q242 After seeing this tweet:

---

Q243 1. How high would you rate this story in truthfulness?

Not at all true                      Completely true

1    2    3    4    5    6    7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



---

Q244 2. How high would you rate this story in accuracy?

Not at all accurate      Completely accurate

1    2    3    4    5    6    7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



---

Q245 3. How high do you rate the likelihood of discussing this story with your family, friends, co-workers and as such?

Very unlikely      Very likely

1    2    3    4    5    6    7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



---

Q246 4. How high do you rate the likelihood of sharing this story over your social media platform like Facebook?

Very unlikely

Very likely

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



---

Q247 5. How high do you rate the likelihood of sharing this story over your social media platform like Twitter?

Very unlikely

Very likely

1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Slide the cursor to fit your choice ()



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Q248 Please elaborate your reasoning behind the choices you made in questions 3-5.

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End of Block: Unit 8 Control Group

**Appendix C: Tables**

**Table 11**

*Group Statistics: Truth and accuracy score x political ideology of the respondent*

	Political Ideology L/C	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
All Liberal Stories Truth & Accuracy Before OL (8-56)	Conservative	192	33.0885	12.77135	.92169
	Liberals	237	38.4937	9.88220	.64192
All Conservative Stories Truth & Accuracy Before OL (8 - 56)	Conservative	192	37.4479	9.70278	.70024
	Liberals	237	30.0759	12.12342	.78750
All Liberal Stories Share/Active Consumption Before OL (8-56)	Conservative	192	30.2135	15.55235	1.12239
	Liberals	237	25.2405	15.74792	1.02294
	Conservative	192	30.8385	14.82569	1.06995

All Conservative Stories Share/Active Consumption Before OL (8-56)	Liberals	237	22.1181	15.64499	1.01625
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**Table 12**

*Independent Samples Test (Truth and accuracy x political ideology of the respondent)*

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2- tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
All Liberal Stories Truth & Accuracy Before OL (8-56)	Equal variances assumed	13.510	.000	-4.941	427	.000	-5.40513	1.09394	-7.55530	-3.25496
	Equal variances not assumed			-4.812	353.849	.000	-5.40513	1.12320	-7.61411	-3.19614
All Conservative Stories Truth & Accuracy Before OL (8 - 56)	Equal variances assumed	14.070	.000	6.836	427	.000	7.37197	1.07836	5.25241	9.49152
	Equal variances not assumed			6.996	426.943	.000	7.37197	1.05380	5.30069	9.44324

All Liberal Stories Share/Active Consumption Before OL (8-56)	Equal variances assumed	.687	.408	3.270	427	.001	4.97304	1.52060	1.98423	7.96184
	Equal variances not assumed			3.275	410.732	.001	4.97304	1.51861	1.98782	7.95825
All Conservative Stories Share/Active Consumption Before OL (8-56)	Equal variances assumed	3.096	.079	5.876	427	.000	8.72040	1.48402	5.80351	11.63729
	Equal variances not assumed			5.910	416.637	.000	8.72040	1.47566	5.81974	11.62106

**Table 13**

*UNIANOVA (political ideology x story ideology x group)<sup>1</sup>*

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	2673.888 <sup>a</sup>	7	381.984	32.720	.000	.063
Intercept	256779.839	1	256779.839	21995.502	.000	.866
PIdeology	47.845	1	47.845	4.098	.043	.001
StoryIdeology	216.142	1	216.142	18.515	.000	.005
Group	2.848	1	2.848	.244	.621	.000
PIdeology * StoryIdeology	2227.773	1	2227.773	190.829	.000	.053

PIdeology * Group	.540	1	.540	.046	.830	.000
StoryIdeology * Group	5.226	1	5.226	.448	.503	.000
PIdeology * StoryIdeology * Group	.111	1	.111	.010	.922	.000
Error	39902.408	3418	11.674			
Total	301678.000	3426				
Corrected Total	42576.297	3425				

a. R Squared = .063 (Adjusted R Squared = .061). <sup>1</sup>. Dependent Variable: Truth and Accuracy (before OL) (2-14)

**Table 14**

*Estimated Marginal Means (Political Ideology x Story Ideology x Group)\**

Political Ideology L/C	Story Ideology (Conservative or Liberal)	Group=1	Mean	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Conservative	Conservative	Control	9.404	.179	9.054	9.755
		Treatment	9.370	.171	9.035	9.705



	Liberal	Control	8.220	.178	7.871	8.569
		Treatment	8.320	.171	7.985	8.655
Liberals	Conservative	Control	7.530	.156	7.224	7.836
		Treatment	7.524	.158	7.214	7.833
	Liberal	Control	9.568	.156	9.261	9.875
		Treatment	9.741	.158	9.432	10.051

\*. Dependent Variable: Truth and Accuracy (before OL) (2-14)

**Table 15***2 x 2 x 2 x 2 Mixed Factorial ANOVA for Truth & Accuracy Scores<sup>1</sup>*

Source	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Truth_and_Accuracy	1	3.071	.628	.428	.000
Truth_and_Accuracy * PolidScale	1	16.782	3.432	.064	.001
Truth_and_Accuracy * StoryIdeology	1	222.839	45.569	.000	.013
Truth_and_Accuracy * OLIdeology	1	148.769	30.422	.000	.009
Truth_and_Accuracy * OLAgrmnt	1	.911	.186	.666	.000
Truth_and_Accuracy * Group	1	18.148	3.711	.054	.001
Truth_and_Accuracy * StoryIdeology * OLIdeology	1	36.735	7.512	.006	.002
Truth_and_Accuracy * StoryIdeology * OLAgrmnt	1	49.297	10.081	.002	.003
Truth_and_Accuracy * StoryIdeology * Group	1	.071	.015	.904	.000
Truth_and_Accuracy * OLIdeology * OLAgrmnt	1	78.884	16.131	.000	.005

Truth_and_Accuracy * OLIdeology * Group	1	1.169	.239	.625	.000
Truth_and_Accuracy * OLAgrmnt * Group	1	10.984	2.246	.134	.001
Truth_and_Accuracy * StoryIdeology * OLIdeology * OLAgrmnt	1	124.172	25.392	.000	.007
Truth_and_Accuracy * StoryIdeology * OLIdeology * Group	1	5.542	1.133	.287	.000
Truth_and_Accuracy * StoryIdeology * OLAgrmnt * Group	1	3.594	.735	.391	.000
Truth_and_Accuracy * OLIdeology * OLAgrmnt * Group	1	3.781	.773	.379	.000
Truth_and_Accuracy * StoryIdeology * OLIdeology * OLAgrmnt * Group	1	4.558	.932	.334	.000
Error(Truth_and_Accuracy)	3409	4.890			

<sup>1</sup>. Political ideology scale (10 thru 50) used as covariate

**Table 16**

*Estimated Marginal Means (Story Ideology x Opinion Leader's Ideology x Opinion Leader's Agreement with the story x Truth\_and\_Accuracy)*

Measure: TA\_score (1 = before opinion leader, 2 = after opinion leader)

Story Ideology (Conservative or Liberal)	Opinion Leader's Ideology (Conservative or Liberal)	Opinion Leader's Agreement with the story (Does Not Agree and Agrees)	Truth_and_Accurac y	Mean	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval	
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Conservative	Conservative	Does Not Agree	1	8.372 <sup>a</sup>	.170	8.040	8.705
			2	8.153 <sup>a</sup>	.174	7.812	8.494
		Agrees	1	8.610 <sup>a</sup>	.169	8.278	8.942
			2	8.207 <sup>a</sup>	.174	7.867	8.548
	Liberal	Does Not Agree	1	8.236 <sup>a</sup>	.169	7.905	8.568
			2	9.009 <sup>a</sup>	.173	8.669	9.349
		Agrees	1	8.214 <sup>a</sup>	.169	7.883	8.546
			2	8.585 <sup>a</sup>	.173	8.244	8.925
Liberal	Conservative	Does Not Agree	1	9.185 <sup>a</sup>	.169	8.853	9.517
			2	8.737 <sup>a</sup>	.173	8.397	9.077
		Agrees	1	8.956 <sup>a</sup>	.170	8.623	9.288
			2	7.925 <sup>a</sup>	.174	7.584	8.266

Liberal	Does Not Agree	1	9.436 <sup>a</sup>	.169	9.104	9.768
		2	8.316 <sup>a</sup>	.174	7.976	8.657
	Agrees	1	8.559 <sup>a</sup>	.169	8.227	8.891
		2	8.793 <sup>a</sup>	.173	8.453	9.133

a. Covariates appearing in the model are evaluated at the following values: Political Ideology Scale 10 thru 50 = 32.4492.

**Table 17***UNIANOVA (political ideology x story ideology x group)<sup>1</sup>*

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	2969.496 <sup>a</sup>	7	424.214	24.757	.000	.048
Intercept	156002.876	1	156002.876	9104.372	.000	.727
PIdeology	2462.569	1	2462.569	143.716	.000	.040
StoryIdeology	81.264	1	81.264	4.743	.029	.001
Group	73.744	1	73.744	4.304	.038	.001
PIdeology * StoryIdeology	200.062	1	200.062	11.676	.001	.003
PIdeology * Group	76.723	1	76.723	4.478	.034	.001
StoryIdeology * Group	7.123	1	7.123	.416	.519	.000
PIdeology * StoryIdeology * Group	7.305	1	7.305	.426	.514	.000
Error	58567.225	3418	17.135			
Total	215220.000	3426				
Corrected Total	61536.720	3425				

a. R Squared = .048 (Adjusted R Squared = .046). <sup>1</sup>. Dependent Variable: Active Consumption (before OL) (2-14)

**Table 18***Descriptive Statistics ((political ideology x story ideology x group)\*)*

Political Ideology L/C	Story Ideology (Conservative or Liberal)	Group	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Conservative	Conservative	Control	7.7322	4.08263	366
		Treatment	7.7275	4.08595	400
		Total	7.7298	4.08169	766
	Liberal	Control	7.5571	4.16316	368
		Treatment	7.5500	4.13039	400
		Total	7.5534	4.14342	768
	Total	Control	7.6444	4.12132	734
		Treatment	7.6387	4.10662	800
		Total	7.6415	4.11232	1534
Liberals	Conservative	Control	5.3319	3.95588	479
		Treatment	5.7436	4.25555	468
		Total	5.5354	4.10970	947
	Liberal	Control	5.9434	4.17915	477
		Treatment	6.7244	4.24200	468
		Total	6.3302	4.22625	945
	Total	Control	5.6370	4.07817	956
		Treatment	6.2340	4.27476	936
		Total	5.9323	4.18613	1892

Total	Conservative	Control	6.3716	4.18179	845
		Treatment	6.6578	4.29148	868
		Total	6.5166	4.23891	1713
	Liberal	Control	6.6462	4.24588	845
		Treatment	7.1048	4.20872	868
		Total	6.8786	4.23208	1713
	Total	Control	6.5089	4.21494	1690
		Treatment	6.8813	4.25496	1736
		Total	6.6976	4.23874	3426

\*. Dependent Variable: Active Consumption (before OL) (2-14)



**Table 19***2 x 2 x 2 x 2 Mixed Factorial ANOVA for Active Consumption/Share Scores<sup>1</sup>*

Source	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Share_score	1	4.778	2.346	.126	.001
Share_score * PolidScale	1	9.069	4.453	.035	.001
Share_score * StoryIdeology	1	32.872	16.140	.000	.005
Share_score * OLIdeology	1	26.949	13.231	.000	.004
Share_score * OLAgrmnt	1	.212	.104	.747	.000
Share_score * Group	1	2.850	1.399	.237	.000
Share_score * StoryIdeology * OLIdeology	1	.401	.197	.657	.000
Share_score * StoryIdeology * OLAgrmnt	1	.839	.412	.521	.000
Share_score * StoryIdeology * Group	1	.017	.008	.927	.000

Share_score * OLIdeology * OLAgrmnt	1	17.834	8.756	.003	.003
Share_score * OLIdeology * Group	1	.132	.065	.799	.000
Share_score * OLAgrmnt * Group	1	.570	.280	.597	.000
Share_score * StoryIdeology * OLIdeology * OLAgrmnt	1	6.042	2.967	.085	.001
Share_score * StoryIdeology * OLIdeology * Group	1	.024	.012	.914	.000
Share_score * StoryIdeology * OLAgrmnt * Group	1	.261	.128	.721	.000
Share_score * OLIdeology * OLAgrmnt * Group	1	.331	.163	.687	.000
Share_score * StoryIdeology * OLIdeology * OLAgrmnt * Group	1	.387	.190	.663	.000
Error(Share_score)	3409	2.037			

<sup>1</sup>. Political ideology scale (10 thru 50) used as covariate

**Table 20***Chi-Square Tests (Information Choice x Political Ideology)*

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	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2- sided)	Exact Sig. (2- sided)	Exact Sig. (1- sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	4.663 <sup>a</sup>	1	.031		
Continuity Correction <sup>b</sup>	4.253	1	.039		
Likelihood Ratio	4.671	1	.031		
Fisher's Exact Test				.033	.020
Linear-by-Linear Association	4.652	1	.031		
N of Valid Cases	429				

---

a. 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 94.88.

b. Computed only for a 2x2 table

**Table 21**

*Crosstabulation: Information choice L/C \* Political Ideology L/C*

		Political Ideology			
		Conservative	Liberals	Total	
Information choice	Conservative	Count	106	106	212
		% within Political Ideology L/C	55.2%	44.7%	49.4%
		% of Total	24.7%	24.7%	49.4%
	Liberal	Count	86	131	217
		% within Political Ideology L/C	44.8%	55.3%	50.6%
		% of Total	20.0%	30.5%	50.6%
Total	Count	192	237	429	
	% within Political Ideology L/C	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	
	% of Total	44.8%	55.2%	100.0%	

**Table 22**

*Independent Samples Test (Information Choice x Political Ideology Scale)*

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2- tailed)	Mean Differenc e	Std. Error Differenc e	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Political Ideology Scale 10 thru 50	Equal variances assumed	5.054	.025	-4.513	427	.000	-3.32801	.73737	-4.77734	-1.87869
	Equal variances not assumed			-4.514	426.97	.000	-3.32801	.73723	-4.77707	-1.87896
					6					

**Table 23***Group Statistics: Political Ideology scale x Information Choice*

	Information choice L/C	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Political Ideology Scale 10 thru 50	Conservative	212	30.7642	7.57403	.52019
	Liberal	217	34.0922	7.69564	.52241

**Table 24***Gender Descriptives*

	n	%
Male	247	57.6%
Female	179	41.7%
Non-binary	2	0.5%
Prefer not to say	1	0.2%

**Table 25***Race/Ethnicity Descriptives*

	N	%
African American/Black	81	18.9%
American Indian	1	0.2%
Alaska native	1	0.2%
Asian	24	5.6%
Hispanic/Latino	5	1.2%
South Asian	5	1.2%
White	305	71.1%
Prefer not to say	7	1.6%

**Table 26***Age Group Descriptives*

	N	%
less than 22	7	1.6%
23-38	211	49.2%
39-54	143	33.3%
55-73	63	14.7%
74 and above	5	1.2%

**Table 27***Annual Household Income of 2019 Descriptives*

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	N	%
Less than \$30,000	58	13.5%
\$30,000 - \$60,000	144	33.6%
\$60,000 - \$90,000	111	25.9%
\$90,000 - \$120,000	56	13.1%
\$120,000 - \$150,000	35	8.2%
\$150,000 - \$180,000	12	2.8%
\$180,000 - \$210,000	8	1.9%
More than \$210,000	4	0.9%

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**Table 28***Religion Descriptives*

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	N	%
Agnostic	43	10.0%
Atheist	28	6.5%
Buddhist	7	1.6%
Catholic/Roman	202	47.1%
Catholic		
Hindu	15	3.5%

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Jewish	12	2.8%
Latter-Day Saints (LDS)	5	1.2%
Muslim	5	1.2%
Orthodox Christian (such as Greek or Russian Orthodox)	7	1.6%
Protestant	65	15.2%
Other	20	4.7%
Nothing in particular	20	4.7%

**Table 29**

*Education Descriptives*

	N	%
High school graduate	25	5.8%
Some college, but no degree	51	11.9%
Bachelor's degree or equivalent (For example: BA, AB, BS)	216	50.3%
Master's degree or equivalent (For example: MA, MS, MEng, MEd, MSW, MBA)	112	26.1%

Doctorate degree or equivalent (For example: PhD, EdD)	6	1.4%
Professional school Degree (For example: MD, DDS, DVM, LLB, JD)	14	3.3%

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## Appendix D: Consent Form

### Ohio University Anonymous Online Consent Form

Title of Research: Consumption of online information and post-decisional effects through heuristics and selective evaluation.

Researcher: sg910818@ohio.edu

IRB number: 21-E-1

You are being asked by an Ohio University researcher to participate in research. For you to be able to decide whether you want to participate in this project, you should understand what the project is about, as well as the possible risks and benefits in order to make an informed decision. This process is known as informed consent. This form describes the purpose, procedures, possible benefits, and risks of the research project. It also explains how your personal information will be used and protected. Once you have read this form and your questions about the study are answered, you will be asked to participate in this study. You may print a copy of this document to take with you.

#### Summary of Study

This study will look into online consumption of information through published articles and tweets. The aim of the study is to find out what kind of factors influence information consumption on social media and the internet.

#### Explanation of Study

This study is being done because it wants to explore the factors affecting information consumption and contribute to a vast body of existing literature.

- If you agree to participate, you will be asked to **read news stories and answer** the attached questionnaire.
- You should participate in this study if and **only if you are above 18 years** of age.
- Your participation in the study will last **approximately 30 minutes**.

#### Benefits

You may not benefit, personally by participating in this study. However, your participation will ensure the production of a rich empirical data for analysis that will ultimately benefit the scientific community and further the research for media studies and effects.

#### Confidentiality and Records

Your study information will be kept confidential by the researcher and no data regarding name and identification will be collected. However, for maximum confidentiality, please

clear your browser history and close the browser before leaving the computer.

### **Compensation**

As compensation for your time/effort, you will receive monetary compensation as indicated. You will receive compensation through MTurk **only** when you **finish the survey in full and with proper attention**.

### **Future Use Statement**

Identifiers will be removed from data/samples collected. The anonymous data/samples may be used for future research studies or distributed to other investigator(s) for future research studies without additional informed consent from you or your legally authorized representative.

### **Contact Information**

If you have any questions regarding this study, please contact the primary investigator [sg910818@ohio.edu](mailto:sg910818@ohio.edu).

If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research participant, please contact Dr. Chris Hayhow, Director of Research Compliance, Ohio University, (740)593-0664 or [hayhow@ohio.edu](mailto:hayhow@ohio.edu).

By agreeing to participate in this study, you are agreeing that:

You have read this consent form (or it has been read to you) and have been given the opportunity to ask questions and have them answered; you have been informed of potential risks and they have been explained to your satisfaction; you understand Ohio University has no funds set aside for any injuries you might receive as a result of participating in this study; you are 18 years of age or older; your participation in this

research is completely voluntary; you may leave the study at any time; if you decide to stop participating in the study, there will be no penalty to you and you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Version Date: 01/03/2021



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