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"That's why I deleted you, Aunt Kathy": Political Tolerance, Online Selective Exposure, and Relational Closeness

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"That's why I deleted you, Aunt Kathy":

Political Tolerance, Online Selective Exposure, and Relational Closeness

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Abstract

In the present day, people have copious options for news consumption, and therefore, are presented with increased opportunity to engage in selective exposure, or the selection of media that confirm their beliefs (Stroud, 2008). Past research in the areas of political tolerance (Sullivan et al., 1979), ideology (Brandt et al., 2014), and political conversations in the context of our relationships (Mutz, 2006) highlights the negative impact of tuning out the other side. In exploring these topics, these scholars set out to determine when individuals are willing to extend tolerance toward groups or views with which they disagree and when they are not. The present research seeks to understand when individuals open themselves to opposing viewpoints and when they instead engage in selective exposure behaviors. In doing so, a survey was crafted that asked participants to respond to questions about their online social media usage and selective exposure behaviors (i.e., unfollowing, muting, reporting) on the applications of Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and Snapchat. We found that individuals are more likely to enact selective exposure when they exhibit lower levels of political tolerance or higher levels of ideological extremity. However, relational closeness, or a closer relational tie, can reduce the likelihood for an individual to enact a selective exposure behavior.

Keywords: selective exposure, social media, online, tolerance, ideological extremity

"That's why I deleted you, Aunt Kathy":

Political Tolerance, Online Selective Exposure, and Relational Closeness

In December 2017, the Knight First Amendment Institute at Columbia University filed a lawsuit against the president of the United States of America on behalf of seven Twitter users. These seven individuals had replied to tweets on President Donald J. Trump's Twitter account. In response to their criticisms, Donald Trump blocked them from his account @realDonaldTrump. The president's online behavior in these cases is a demonstration of selective exposure, the selection of information that bolsters an individual's worldview and the removal of information that does not (Stroud, 2008).

The online actions of blocking the seven individuals rendered these constituents unable to see or reply to any of the president's tweets. Because the @realDonaldTrump account is registered to Donald J. Trump, 45th President of the United States of America, and is used for official announcements of decisions and policies, the seven blocked individuals argued that their First Amendment rights had been violated (Herrman & Savage, 2018). In ruling on the case of *Knight First Amendment Institute v. Donald J. Trump*, the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of New York held that the @realDonaldTrump account qualifies as a public forum, despite being established before Trump was elected. Consequently, the judge ruled that Donald J. Trump violated the First Amendment rights of the plaintiffs and the action of blocking these plaintiffs was unconstitutional (Columbia University, n.d.).

The case of *Knight First Amendment Institute v. Donald J. Trump* is of particular interest because it highlights the emerging discussion surrounding selective exposure on new forms of social media. The example illustrates the growing ability for individuals to engage in selective exposure and prompts thought about the wide-reaching implications of these actions. In

reflecting on the decision of President Trump to block these Twitter users, the question of what motivates selective exposure arises. While we do not examine the behaviors of elites in the present study, but rather of individuals overall, we set out discover the factors that drive selective exposure. Thus, the impact of the independent variables of political tolerance, ideological extremity, and relational closeness on selective exposure are examined.

What is Selective Exposure?

Huckfeldt, Johnson, and Sprague (2004) set forth the idea that individual citizens in democratic electorates "do not go it alone in politics – they depend on one another for political information and guidance, and hence political communication and persuasion lie at the core of citizenship" (p. 1). They focus on disagreement in society and ask what affects the ability of citizens to "deal constructively" with dissenting opinions in their everyday lives, specifically in conversation with one another (Huckfeldt et al., 2004). Scholars have shown that people tend to give credence and attention to information that coincides with their worldview and avoid information that pushes against these views. Selective exposure is this "selection of information matching their beliefs" (Stroud, 2008, p. 341).

The prevalence of selective exposure has been examined with regard to a myriad of topics, ranging from personal care products (Mills, 1965) to parenting techniques (Adams, 1961). Such variance in topic may explain the different findings surrounding levels of selective exposure behavior. It is plausible that a topic like politics m
ay be more likely to produce selective exposure behaviors in individuals due to factors such as high perception of political polarization (Levendusky & Malhotra, 2016).

According to Perrin (2015), the percentage of American adults who use social media increased from 7% to 65% in the ten-year period from 2005 to 2015. Further, 20% of adults in

the U.S. report getting news from social media (Shearer, 2018). The growing popularity of social media as an outlet for news provides individuals with increased opportunity to engage in selective exposure, as individuals have the ability to shape the information they see by choosing who to follow or friend online and to block individuals or even specific words. Stroud (2008) investigated whether individuals act on the ability to select out of information that is inconsistent with previously held beliefs on media like cable news and the Internet. The results of this study indicated that people chose their cable news and Internet news sources in accordance with their political party and beliefs. This demonstrates that the Internet does not constitute an exception regarding selective exposure, or a forum where individuals necessarily open themselves up to opposing political ideas and could actually worsen the phenomenon.

What is Political Tolerance and What Impacts It?

In an effort to understand the motivating factors behind online selective exposure with regard to political posts, the impact of political tolerance must be measured. For decades, researchers have worked to discover the reasons behind political tolerance and intolerance. Two measurement approaches dominate the literature on tolerance in political science: Stouffer's measurement strategy (1955) and the reconceptualization put forth by Sullivan, Piereson, and Marcus (1979) which redefined the conversation surrounding the existence and extent of political tolerance (Gibson, 1992).

In introducing this topic, Sullivan and colleagues (1979) argue that political tolerance occurs when one holds "a political objection to a group or idea" and is willing to "apply such procedures—the right to speak, to publish, to run for office—on an equal basis to all, even to those who challenge its way of life" (Sullivan et al., 1979, p. 781). They state that tolerance is typically held to be valuable in maintaining a stable and "good" regime or society, or one in

which citizens are committed to democratic procedure and are willing to extend rights to all. Because tolerance is lauded as valuable and necessary to democratic society, scholars set out to discover the groups and issues toward which people express intolerance and to what extent they wish to silence or limit the constitutional liberties of their "least-liked" groups (Sullivan et al., 1981). They have evaluated the effect of variables such as ideological identification (Brandt, Reyna, Chambers, Crawford, & Wetherell, 2014) and gender (Golebiowska, 1999) on levels of political tolerance and targets of political intolerance. However, despite the development of various online platforms and social media, little research has been done to measure how the political tolerance of individuals impacts their behavior in online interactions.

Misconceptions Surrounding Political Tolerance

Scholars claimed to have discovered an increase in levels of political tolerance in the U.S. between the 1950s and the 1970s using Stouffer's tolerance measurement (McClosky, 1964). Stouffer's measurement (1955) used survey items that asked participants about a series of groups that were generally assumed unpopular, including communists, socialists, and atheists. For example, participants were asked to consider if a person who is against all churches and religion "wanted to make a speech in your city (town, community) against churches and religion, should he be allowed to speak, or not?" (Stouffer, 1955). The groups used in the survey were "generally on the left" (Gibson, 2002). Therefore, it was possible that this measurement would skew the data on tolerance, as left-leaning participants would appear to be more tolerant simply because they agree with the selected groups. In contrast, right-leaning participants would demonstrate more intolerance because they disagree with the selected groups (Gibson, 2002). Further, this calls into question the finding that tolerance was increasing, as it may be only that levels of

tolerance toward the specific groups were increasing, while levels of tolerance in general were not (Sullivan et al., 1981).

In addressing the misconception that levels of tolerance were increasing in America beginning in the 1950s, Sullivan and colleagues (1979) developed a content-controlled measure. Participants are not asked questions about specific groups selected by the creators of the survey. Instead, they are asked about their willingness to extend civil rights and liberties to their own "least-liked" group, or the group they "most strongly oppose" (Sullivan et al., 1981). Respondents are given a list of groups such as the Ku Klux Klan, communists, fascists, atheists, and pro- and anti-abortionists, among others, and are then asked to identify which group they like the least. They are also given the option to select a different group not included on the list. Then, they respond to a series of statements in an agree/disagree format that measure their sentiment toward hypothetical actions of the members of the least-liked group. In applying this type of measure, it is possible to see the tolerance levels of individuals without incidentally measuring their tolerance of a group with which they may actually agree.

There are several other misunderstandings surrounding political tolerance, specifically with regard to what groups are viewed as most likely to exhibit tolerance or intolerance. Brandt, Reyna, Chambers, Crawford, and Wetherell (2014) argued that a prejudice gap between liberals and conservatives has resulted from this kind of thinking. Many have come to believe that conservatives are more likely to be intolerant and that liberals are more likely to extend tolerance. However, this idea is challenged by the ideological-conflict hypothesis, which contends that conservatives and liberals show similar intolerance to groups that are dissimilar or threatening (Brandt et al., 2014). For instance, Brandt and colleagues found that conservatives show intolerance toward groups such as liberals, atheists, drug users, and people on welfare.

Liberals show intolerance of groups such as conservatives, wealthy people, Christian

fundamentalists, and anti-abortionists.

These findings suggest that there is a relationship between political intolerance and threat

or fear rather than one between intolerance and a specific ideology. This was further

demonstrated in a survey conducted by Skitka, Bauman, and Mullen (2004) in the wake of the

terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. Respondents were asked

about the degree to which they felt "angry, a desire to fight back, outrage, and hatred in response

to the terrorist attacks" (p. 747). They were also asked about the degree to which they felt

threatened in response to eight different items, ranging from flying in an airplane to large public

gatherings. Then, they were to complete a content-controlled measure of political tolerance

modelled after that of Sullivan and colleagues (1979, 1981). Participants who demonstrated

higher levels of anger, fear, and personal threat had lower levels of political tolerance four

months after the attacks (Skitka et al., 2004).

In addition to misconceptions about what groups are likely to enact tolerance, evidence

has been produced which shows that there is an abundance of false polarization in the United

States. This means that in addition to the findings that contend that people believe one political

ideology or the other is more prone to tolerance, many have inaccurate perceptions of the

opposing party as more extreme than it actually is. In other words, many perceive there to be

much more polarization than there is evidence to support and this higher perception of

dissimilarity may produce lower levels of tolerance (Levendusky & Malhotra, 2016). In this

landscape of heightened perceptions of polarization and lower levels of tolerance, individuals

may then take actions to protect their own worldviews and block out others through selective

exposure. In light of this research that demonstrates that intolerance seems to emerge from fear

or threat, rather than a specific ideology, we examine the impact of ideological extremity on the decision to engage in selective exposure.

Does Relational Closeness Matter?

Given the many factors that seem to make selective exposure more likely, including low levels of political tolerance and high levels of ideological extremity, it is important to ask what factors have the potential to decrease likelihood of selective exposure. Mutz (2006) discusses the widely agreed upon importance of "hearing the other side" in our society, or deliberating with people of opposing views. Marcus, Sullivan, Elizabeth, Theiss-Morse, and Wood (1995) argue that this is complicated by modern-day technological advances which provide people with massive amounts of information, even to the point of information overload. They set out to discover how this information factors into an individual's decision-making regarding civil liberties issues, or how people decide whether to be tolerant or intolerant of a "noxious" group (Marcus et al., 1995).

Marcus and colleagues (1995) argue that our intolerance is counteracted by the diversity present in our society which "requires us to interact with those who differ from us" in situations such as the workplace and "in doing so, we are likely to learn that differences may be superficial" (p. 1). Mutz's (2006) findings suggest that conversations about diverse viewpoints and opinions are most often shared between those who share weak relational ties or who are forced into contexts in which they must interact with individuals with different viewpoints. Although this may hold true in a face-to-face context, the present study focuses on online communication in which individuals are not "forced into daily interaction with one another" (Mutz, 2006, p. 2).

Bail and colleagues (2018) conducted an experiment which created a scenario in which individuals were forced to interact with or view online posts from leaders of the opposing political party. They hypothesized that by eliminating the possibility for selective exposure, individuals would be forced to see messages and posts that would challenge the beliefs they hold about the other political party, and that this in turn would decrease political polarization. But, without this forced interaction, the question arises as to whether individuals can overcome the inclination to dispense with information that contrasts with their original worldview. Further, this hypothesis was not supported – Democrats reportedly demonstrated more liberal attitudes after the experiment, though not significantly, and Republicans became significantly more conservative (Bail et al., 2018). Therefore, it is possible that exposure to these dissimilar viewpoints will create backlash effects, in which individuals become more polarized rather than more tolerant or understanding of these ideas.

Mutz (2006) argues that it is more difficult to have politically-charged conversations with those who are relationally close to us, such as parents, but that we overcome our political intolerance when we are forced to have conversations with others who have different viewpoints. This happens most often in settings like the workplace because we are unable to avoid working with diverse people. However, we predict that the reverse will be true in online contexts, as it is more difficult for individuals to enact online selective exposure behaviors toward those closest to them, like family members or close friends. Because individuals still want to see other posts from these significant people in their lives, they are forced to continue to subject themselves to challenging viewpoints.

Overview of Present Research

The present study was guided by three hypotheses which build upon previous research on selective exposure, political tolerance, ideology, and relational closeness by considering the impact of widely used social media, namely Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and Snapchat. The first hypothesis was that lower levels of political tolerance predict higher levels of online selective exposure. Individuals who are less tolerant of their least-liked groups will be more likely to remove challenging ideas from their social media feeds. Our second hypothesis stemmed from previous research which holds that as Republicans and Democrats view posts from the opposing side, they become more intense in their existing beliefs (Bail et al., 2018). We predicted that individuals with higher levels of ideological extremity, or more extreme political beliefs, would be more likely to engage in online selective exposure, as there is little to prevent them from doing so outside of an experiment in which they are forced to, as was done by Bail and colleagues (2018). Lastly, we predicted that higher levels of relational closeness can mitigate these affects and produce lower online selective exposure. The experiment conducted by Bail and colleagues (2018) utilized posts of leaders of the opposing party, which did not allow respondents to explain how they would react to contrasting political beliefs posted by those in their actual social network. The present study addressed this by asking participants how they would respond to a post of this nature if it came from a celebrity, acquaintance, close friend, or family member. In doing so, we aimed to understand how different relational ties impact our perception of opposing ideas.

Methods

Participants

The sample included 378 undergraduate students recruited through the political science department of a large Midwestern university in a conservative state. Data were collected using

the Political Science Experimental Participant Pool (PSEPP) and students were awarded course credit for participation. Data collection occurred during two different periods: from November 2017 until December 2017 and throughout the month of October 2018. These periods were selected to prevent any bias that might emerge from offering the survey only at the end of the semester. The responses of 350 participants were analyzed, as 20 cases were removed because participants failed to complete the survey and 8 were removed because these respondents did not use social media, and therefore, their online selective exposure behavior could not be examined. The average age of our participants was 19.89 ($SD = 6.06$). The sample contained a roughly even split of gender (46.3% male, 51.7% female, 2% prefer not to say) and ideology (42.5% liberal, 17.7% moderate, 39.7% conservative).

Procedure

Data were collected through the use of the web-based survey software (i.e., Qualtrics). Participants were informed that they would be responding to questions about their political and social attitudes and beliefs. Participants granted informed consent and then completed a survey designed to measure (a) the amount of their social media usage, (b) selective exposure behavior like unfollowing, muting, and reporting posts on social media, and (c) political tolerance. Participants then provided their ideological identification and demographic information. After the survey, participants were debriefed and granted course credit for their participation.

Measures

Social media usage. Participants were first asked if they use any social media, "including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, or Snapchat." If they responded "no" to this question, they were directed to the next block, skipping over the other usage and selective exposure behavior questions. The eight participants who responded "no" to this section were removed before

running the analyses, as stated above, because this resulted in incomplete data for a main variable, social media selective exposure. The eight individuals who selected this option could not be examined because this would not have yielded generalizable information due to the small size of this group. If a participant responded "yes," they were then asked in individual questions how often they log onto/check specific social media accounts. Response options began with 1 ("I don't have an account") and increased incrementally up to 9 ("20+ times a day"). After reporting on Facebook ($M = 4.76$, $SD = 2.06$), Twitter ($M = 4.73$, $SD = 2.72$), Instagram ($M = 5.57$, $SD = 2.40$), and Snapchat usage ($M = 7.00$, $SD = 2.36$), we asked questions about the frequency of seeing political posts on these social media feeds. Participants were asked, on a scale from 1 (Never) to 7 (Often): "In general, how often do you see people posting about politics on social media?" ($M = 5.32$, $SD = 1.58$), "In general, how often you do see political posts that you agree with on social media?" ($M = 4.43$, $SD = 1.45$) and "In general, how often do you see political posts that you disagree with on social media?" ($M = 4.66$, $SD = 1.48$).

Selective exposure. Participants were asked about their selective exposure behaviors through a set of questions that provided a scenario such as "If you encounter a close friend that posts something political you disagree with, how likely would you be to:" followed by a list of behaviors, namely "unfollow or unfriend," "comment on the post expressing your opinion," "mute or silence the person," "ignore the post (do nothing)," and "report the post." Participants were to indicate how likely they would be to carry out each action from 1 (extremely likely) to 7 (extremely unlikely). These responses were later recoded so that higher values (i.e., 7) would indicate higher likelihood of engaging in selective exposure. This scenario was repeated four times with the nature of the relationship changed in each block. The study included this measure for "a celebrity," "an acquaintance," "a close friend," and "a family member" to allow us to

determine whether the level of relational closeness impacted the tendency of the person to engage in or refrain from engaging in online selective exposure. These four blocks, totaling 12 questions, were averaged to generate a variable for online selective exposure ($M = 2.52$, $SD = 1.27$). Questions about the likelihood to comment on the post or ignore the post/do nothing were not included in this variable because these actions do not constitute selective exposure. The included questions comprising the selective exposure variable were tested and found to be reliable (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.912$).

Relational closeness. Because the questions used for selective exposure included the variations of relational closeness, four new variables were created in order to examine relational closeness separately. We combined the averages for the three selective exposure questions from each of the four relational levels. For example, we created the variable "celebrity_mean" by averaging responses to the questions: "If you encounter a celebrity that posts something political you disagree with, how likely would you be to:" followed by "unfollow or unfriend," "mute or silence the person," and "report the post" ($M = 2.92$, $SD = 1.54$, Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.725$). We repeated this process for acquaintance ($M = 2.86$, $SD = 1.58$, Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.788$), close friend ($M = 2.07$, $SD = 1.31$, Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.827$), and family member ($M = 2.21$, $SD = 1.38$, Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.806$).

Political tolerance. Political tolerance was measured using questions adapted from Sullivan et al. (1979). Participants were asked to identify the group that they liked the least from a provided list: socialists (2.9%), fascists (4.3%), communists (6%), Ku Klux Klan (55.7%), religious fundamentalists (2%), racists (17.4%), feminists (2%), atheists (2%), pro-choice on abortion issue (3.4%), pro-life on abortion issue (1.1%), Black Lives Matter (2.3%), and Occupy Wall Street (0%). Participants could also select other and write in their least-liked group (0.9%).

Then, participants were asked to respond to a series of statements while thinking about the group they selected. Participants were asked to rate on a scale from 1 (strongly agree) to 7 (strongly disagree) statements such as: "Members of this group should be banned from being President of the United States," "This group should be allowed to hold public rallies in our city," and "I would be pleased if my daughter or son dated a member of this group." Statements for which a higher score would indicate more intolerance were reverse coded, so that a higher score would always signify higher political tolerance. The averages of the responses to the nine political tolerance statements were used to create one political tolerance variable ($M = 3.08$, $SD = 1.23$). This was found to be a reliable measure (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.826$).

Ideological extremity. Participants identified their ideology in response to the item: "Labels are often misleading but in general, do you see yourself as liberal, conservative, or something in between?" on a scale from 1 (Very Liberal) to 7 (Very Conservative). Because the literature suggests it is not identification with one party or another that prompts intolerance (Brandt et al., 2014), this variable was recoded to reflect extremity. The neutral option, 4, was recoded as 0, and options 3 and 5 were changed to 1, 2 and 6 to 2, and the most extreme options, 1 Very Liberal and 7 Very Conservative were recoded as 3. The resulting 0-3 scale represents ideological extremity rather than ideology ($M = 1.43$, $SD = 0.97$).

Results

A series of statistical tests were conducted to determine the impact of several independent variables, namely, political tolerance, ideological extremity, and relational closeness, on the dependent variable, online selective exposure. Overall, we found significant relationships between political tolerance and selective exposure and ideological extremity and selective

exposure. Further, we discovered that different levels of relational closeness yield different amounts of selective exposure behavior.

First, we conducted a regression to examine the effect of political tolerance on selective exposure using the variables we created by averaging the scores from the questions about each topic, respectively (see *Table 1*). Consistent with our hypothesis, participants with higher levels of political tolerance for their least-liked group reported lower likelihood of engaging in the selective exposure behaviors of unfriending/unfollowing, muting, and reporting political posts with which they disagree (b = -0.15, SE = 0.06, t = -2.75, p = 0.006; see *Figure 1*).

A second regression was conducted to test the impact of ideological extremity on selective exposure (see *Table 2*). We found support for the hypothesis that more ideologically extreme individuals engage in more selective exposure (b = 0.26, SE = 0.07, t = 3.85, p = 0.001; see *Figure 2*).

We ran two additional regressions, testing multiple independent variables within the same statistical tests. Given that political tolerance and ideological extremity were significantly correlated (r = -0.117, p = 0.026), we examined them together in a separate model. As indicated in *Table 3*, we tested the impact of political tolerance and ideological extremity on selective exposure. When analyzed within the same model, both political tolerance (b = -0.13, SE = 0.05, t = -2.37, p = 0.019) and ideological extremity (b = 0.25, SE = 0.07, t = 3.58, p = 0.001) still had a significant effect on selective exposure. The same was true when these independent variables, in addition to the independent variable of ideology, were tested. We ran this analysis in response to previous work which speculated about whether conservatives or liberals were more likely to engage in selective exposure, or if both groups enact these behaviors toward different targets (Brandt et al., 2014). Controlling for political ideology, both political tolerance (b = -0.11, SE =

0.05, $t = -2.02$, $p = 0.044$) and ideological extremity ($b = 0.23$, $SE = 0.07$, $t = 3.38$, $p = 0.001$) still had a significant impact on selective exposure. Further, though we did not have a hypothesis surrounding ideology, we found that this added variable had a significant impact on selective exposure ($b = -0.09$, $SE = 0.04$, $t = -2.37$, $p = 0.018$; see *Table 4*). In our sample, liberals were more likely to engage in selective exposure behaviors than conservatives.

Given that participants responded to each set of relationship questions, a repeated measures ANOVA test was conducted to test the effect of relational closeness on online selective exposure ($F(3, 1014) = 90.87$, $p < 0.001$). We expected to find that farther relational distance would result in higher likelihood of engaging in selective exposure. The mean level of selective exposure for celebrity ($M = 2.89$, SD = 1.51), acquaintance ($M = 2.82$, $SD = 1.55$), close friend ($M = 2.03$, $SD = 1.25$), and family ($M = 2.20$, $SD = 1.37$) supported this hypothesis in part. The two relationships with farther relational distance, celebrity and acquaintance, were found to have higher means for selective exposure behavior than the closer relationships, close friend and family member.

Because the initial ANOVA indicated that there was an overall effect of relational closeness on selective exposure, a series of post-hoc tests were conducted to gain further insight into the effect of specific relational types on selective exposure. We found that the relational type celebrity ($M = 2.89$, $SD = 1.51$) did not differ significantly from the relational type acquaintance ($M = 2.82$, $SD = 1.55$; $F(1, 342) = 0.85$, $p = 0.36$). Then, tests were run to compare the far relational types to the close relational types. When comparing celebrity ($M = 2.89$, $SD = 1.51$) to close friend ($M = 2.03$, $SD = 1.25$), a significant difference was found ($F(1, 347) = 144.71$, $p < 0.001$). A similar effect was discovered when comparing celebrity ($M = 2.89$, $SD = 1.51$) and family member ($M = 2.20$, $SD = 1.37$; $F(1, 343) = 90.59$, $p < 0.001$). Participants were found to

demonstrate higher likelihood of engaging in selective exposure if a celebrity posts a political message that they disagree with than if a close friend or family member posts the same type of message.

Next, we tested the relationships of acquaintance ($M = 2.82$, $SD = 1.55$) and close friend ($M = 2.03$, $SD = 1.25$; $F(1, 343) = 166.49$, $p < 0.001$) and found that individuals are more likely to unfollow, mute, or block acquaintances than close friends. This also holds true for the relationships of acquaintance ($M = 2.82$, $SD = 1.55$) and family member ($M = 2.20$, $SD = 1.37$; $F(1, 1, 339) = 109.12$, $p < 0.001$). This provides support for the hypothesis that higher relational closeness reduces selective exposure behavior. However, when testing close friend ($M = 2.03$, $SD = 1.25$) and family member ($M = 2.20$, $SD = 1.37$), an unexpected result was found ($F(1, 344) = 11.70$, $p = 0.001$). Although close friend was intended to serve as a relational type that has a farther relational distance from a family member, participants were more likely to unfollow, mute, or block family members than close friends. We did not expect this would be the case when developing our hypotheses; rather, we thought there would be a linear relationship between relational closeness and selective exposure and that family member would be the closest relational tie. However, the implications of our finding suggest that people may consider friends to be closer to them than family members, and therefore less expendable via selective exposure.

Discussion

In analyzing our data, we found support for our three hypotheses and gained insight into the factors motivating and dissuading individuals from engaging in selective exposure behavior. Individuals who exhibited less tolerance for their least-liked groups were more likely to use selective exposure on social media. Participants who were more ideologically extreme were also more likely to utilize their ability to unfollow, mute, or report those with whom they disagree.

Finally, the relationship between the participant and the person posting the politically

challenging post played a role in the participant's decision to unfollow, mute, or report the post.

Individuals were more likely to unfollow, mute, or report posts from celebrities or acquaintances

than friends or family members. They were most reluctant to use selective exposure against close

friends. This is crucial information, as it provides an idea of how people are operating on social

media and what leads them to expose themselves to dissimilar ideas or to "hear the other side"

Mutz, 2006).

Individuals in a modern-day democratic society have a myriad of options for political

news consumption. In elucidating the importance of understanding news exposure, Stroud (2008)

states that an individual's "patterns of news exposure" have the potential to impact the attitudes

and impressions that they hold. While Stroud provides insight into the newspaper, political talk

radio, cables news, and political website media choices of individuals, the rise of social media as

an outlet for political discussion warrants additional research. As use of print and television news

platforms declines (Shearer, 2018), it is critical to understand how individuals are utilizing social

media and whether the usage of these apps differs from traditional news outlets. A potential

distinction lies in the differences between the intended purposes of social media and print, radio,

and cable news outlets. Though Shearer and Matsa (2018) report that 68% of Americans "at least

occasionally" consume news on social media, these forums have other uses such as connecting

with those in our social networks, sharing photos, and finding entertaining content. Because of

these additional uses, selective exposure on social media may operate differently. Further,

individuals can enact selective exposure in a number of ways including:

unfollowing/unfriending, muting/silencing, blocking, or reporting individuals and posts, unlike

television in which selective exposure behavior may include simply choosing one channel over

another. The present study responds to the growing utilization of social media as a news outlet and the extant gap in academic research on the intersection between selective exposure and politics on social media applications.

This study is important in advancing the discussion surrounding online selective exposure because its findings suggest that our close relational ties have the potential to deter us from enacting selective exposure behaviors against political posts with which we do not agree. Although individuals are more likely to block out information with which they do not agree as ideological extremity increases and political tolerance decreases, relational closeness in an online context can reduce this likelihood. In face-to-face contexts, these close relational ties make it difficult to have conversations about politics (Mutz, 2006). However, when online, these ties serve to force us into interaction with views we may disagree with, as our findings indicate that individuals are more reluctant to enact selective exposure against close friends than any other group. We speculate that this is because people want to see other content posted by individuals closest to them, and therefore cannot remove these individuals based on their political views. This is meaningful, as it provides opportunity for exposure to opposing views that may reduce our intolerance of these views (Marcus et al., 1995).

While the current study begins to explore the area of social media selective exposure, we were limited by our convenience sample of college students. This is because American adults and young adults have somewhat different media usage habits. For example, adults primarily use Facebook and YouTube and young adults report using platforms like Snapchat, Instagram, and Twitter more frequently (Smith and Anderson, 2018). Therefore, it is possible that different groups have different patterns of selective exposure. Furthermore, we were limited in our ability to analyze individuals who opt out of the usage of social media completely. Because we only had

eight cases of this and could not generalize based on such a small sample, we removed these participants from the study. However, these individuals could be motivated by a desire to block out political posts on these applications. Future studies could rectify these issues through the collection of data from a more diverse sample, or through the comparison of groups of younger participants, like those assessed in this study, and older individuals. Scholars could also seek out individuals who do not use social media at all in an effort to determine whether this decision is motivated by political attitudes.

Ultimately, our findings suggest that close relational ties create the opportunity for exposure to ideas that challenge our worldview. The present study opens the door for additional research on politics and social media, including Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and Snapchat. As these media become ubiquitous among young adults, and increasingly among older demographics, it is crucial that we understand the selective exposure behaviors being enacted by those throughout our democratic society, including the president of the United States.

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Figures and Tables

Table 1. Regression with independent variable political tolerance.

Table 1				
Variables	**B**	**Std. Error**	**t value**	**p value**
Constant	2.985	.182	16.431	.000
Political Tolerance	-.151	.055	-2.754	.006
R^2	.021			
Adjusted R^2	.019			

Figure 1. The impact of political tolerance on selective exposure.
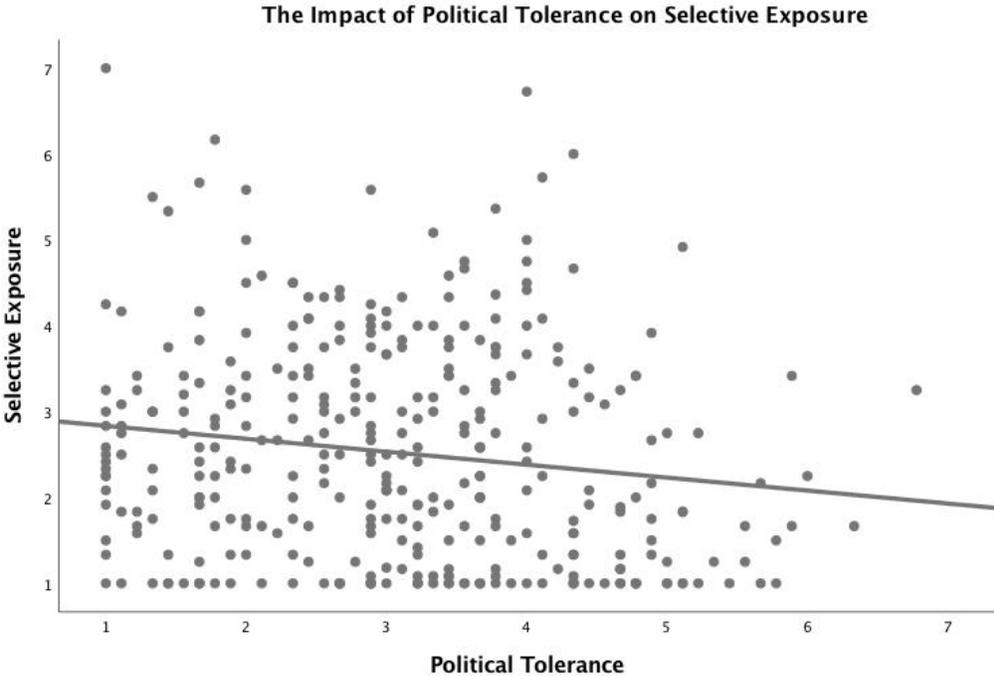
Table 2. Regression with independent variable ideological extremity.

Variables	*B*	Std. Error	*t* value	*p* value
Table 2				
Constant	2.144	.118	18.112	.000
Ideological Extremity	.264	.069	3.854	.000
R^2	.041			
Adjusted R^2	.038			

Figure 2. The impact of ideological extremity on selective exposure.

The Impact of Ideological Extremity on Selective Exposure
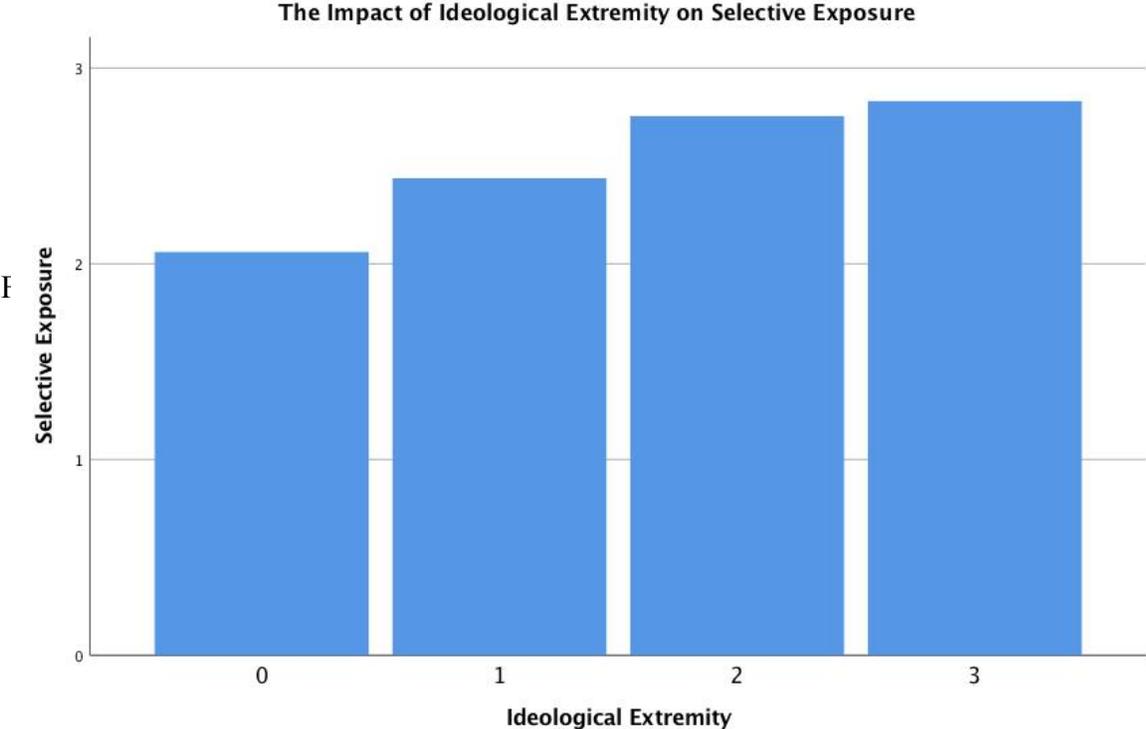
Table 3. Regression with independent variables political tolerance and ideological extremity.

Table 3				
Variables	***B***	**Std. Error**	***t* value**	***p* value**
Constant	2.566	.214	12.007	.000
Political Tolerance	-.128	.054	-2.366	.019
Ideological Extremity	.245	.069	3.579	.000
R^2		.056		
Adjusted R^2		.051		

Table 4. Regression with independent variables political tolerance, ideological extremity, and ideology.

Table 4				
Variables	**_B_**	**Std. Error**	**_t_ value**	**_p_ value**
Constant	2.885	.251	11.473	.000
Political Tolerance	-.110	.054	-2.018	.044
Ideological Extremity	.231	.068	3.384	.001
Ideology	-.092	.039	-2.370	.018
R^2	.071			
Adjusted R^2	.063			

Figure 3. The impact of relational closeness on selective exposure.