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Social Media and the Political Behavior of Young Adults in the 2016 Election

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Departmental Honors Thesis

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## Introduction

The 2016 election saw a great political divide in the American public over the two candidates running for the U.S. presidency (Enli 2017). The polarization in voters has been attributed in part to the Internet's perpetuation of "echo chambers" and "filter bubbles" that allow people of similar political views to validate and reinforce each other's ideologies, leading to stronger and more extreme political views (Sunstein 2009; Flaxman, Goel, & Rao 2016). It was also evident that social media engagement in relation to politics had increased since the 2012 election (Pew Report 2018). This shift may in part be related to how Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton actively utilized social media networks to bypass the mainstream media and directly influence their audiences (Enli 2017). As a whole, the 2016 presidential campaign and its outcome suggest that the Internet and social media have saturated the lives and political discourse of Americans, producing effects that remain of legitimate concern.

As popular as it was among the 2016 presidential candidates, social media is also becoming a popular platform from which the American people obtain their news; according to a survey conducted by Pew Research in 2016, 62% of adults get news from social media, which is up 13% from 2012 (Gottfried & Shearer 2016). Among young adults, social networking has especially become a common platform to obtain and exchange presidential election information, leading to the declining use of traditional news platforms (Kohut, 2008; Smith & Rainie, 2008; Kushin and Yamamoto 2010). In fact, Pew Research estimates that 31% of Facebook news users and 38% of Twitter news users are adults aged 18 to 29 (Gottfried & Shearer 2016). Another recent Pew study found that millennial voters comprised 25% of the voting pool in the most recent presidential election (Fry 2016), making millennials' social media use in relation to

politics even more critical to understand. Social media gives users almost complete control over what posts they see, meaning that young voters could selectively expose themselves to stories and posts to which they have partisan affinity (Iyengar & Hahn 2009). Selective exposure is the theory that people are drawn to news sources that already align with their political belief to avoid cognitive dissonance (Klapper 1960; Katz 1981). Reinforcement of preexisting political beliefs leads to a stronger connection to one's ideology (Knobloch-Westerwick & Meng 2011), so the increasing partisanship of the American public can theoretically be attributed to people selectively exposing themselves to news that aligns with their worldviews.

The purpose of this thesis is to examine young adults' social media use in relation to political news during the 2016 election. Through a survey administered to young adults ages 19 through 25, it seeks to expand understanding of the impact of social media on political ideology and, more specifically, the role of selective exposure in young adults' social media use. This is important because, as previously stated, young adults make up a large chunk of the voting population, and it's possible that this large demographic may be getting biased political news through their frequent use of social media.

### **Literature Review**

In order to provide historical context for understanding the effects of social media and selective exposure in relation to politics, this paper draws on a number of peer-reviewed, academic studies and articles. The studies all focus on the effects of media on Americans and their political ideologies.

Concerns over the increasing polarization of Americans' political beliefs have been raised by a number of researchers, one of whom attributes this divide to politicians receiving

stronger support when they put themselves on the far sides of the political spectrum (Jacobson 2005; Westwood & Messing 2012). Iyengar and Hahn (2009) conducted a study in which they examined participants' likelihood of seeking out news corresponding to their preferred news sources and avoiding news from sources widely regarded as being on the other side of the spectrum. In accordance with their hypothesis, they found that Republicans had only a 10% probability of reading a CNN or MSNBC report. While the selective exposure was stronger for Republicans, Democrats also exhibited an aversion to the conservative outlet, Fox News. Interestingly, the same news story would attract a completely different audience when labelled as a Fox or CNN report (Iyengar & Hahn 2009). In regards to selective exposure, as the 2012 election approached, one study found that Americans displayed clear differences in news preference depending on their political orientation (Wicks, Wicks, & Morimoto 2014). This suggests that selective exposure and partisan affinity also played a substantial role in the 2016 U.S. presidential election between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton.

The partisan affinity for news sources that Wicks, Wicks, and Morimoto (2014) found is interesting given that the internet provides a plethora of news sources for users to choose from. Despite the wide selection of sources, there is debate over whether or not internet users actually branch out or just stick to reading news that they will agree with (Bimber, Davis 2003; Garrett 2009). Past researchers have argued that more news choices leads to the exclusion of news sources that individuals disagree with (Mutz & Martin, 2001; Stroud, in press; Garrett 2009), meaning that the wide selection the internet provides may be perpetuating selective exposure. Furthermore, social media carries many of the same concerns the internet does over news selection. The nature of control that social media gives users also may contribute to polarization

in selection of news since users may be prone to following the same types of political opinions (Iyengar & Hahn 2009).

Bakshy, Messing, and Adamic (2015) examined the development of an “echo chamber” through Facebook where the same political ideas and information are passed back and forth between individuals of the same party. Contrary to Iyengar and Hahn, they found that liberals tended to be Facebook friends with conservatives less frequently than vice versa; 24% of the hard news stories shared by liberals were from conservative sources, while 35% of the hard news stories that conservatives shared was deemed “cross cutting.” Conservatives were also 11% more likely to click on a cross-cutting news article than liberals were. The authors proposed that selective exposure existed in social media use, especially among partisans, and that the selective exposure is associated with “amplified” collective political prejudices over time (Stroud 2008; Bakshy, Messing, and Adamic 2015). Westwood and Messing (2012), in an attempt to challenge the idea of an echo chamber, hypothesized that social media exposes users to heterogeneous views. They found that social media users cared more about “social endorsements” than source cues when deciding to view a news story. Social endorsements expose social media users to recommendations based upon their viewing history, with the assumption that viewing one news story indicates a preference for other news stories like it. Since recommendations are so important, Westwood and Messing suggested that it is one’s circle of friends that ultimately influences individuals’ exposure to news rather than the news source itself. Adding to this, researchers also point out that algorithms used in social media inadvertently create an “echo chamber” (Sunstein 2009; Flaxman, Goel, and Rao 2016). One of the critical and most unique aspects of social media is that users can hand-pick what they are exposed to (Zhang, Seltzer &

Bichard 2013), which is why selective exposure is important to examine.

However, the relationship between the theory of selective exposure and political news has its fair share of skeptics. Garrett (2009) suggests that while individuals are inclined to favor information they agree with, “they do not exhibit a systematic bias against opinion-challenging information” and at times may even seek out arguments that challenge their beliefs. Nelson and Webster (2017) argue that worries over selective exposure in relation to the 2016 election have been exacerbated by sensational journalism. They also claim that many of the findings that support the idea of selective exposure are inaccurate due to the method of study; accurate portrayals of Internet news use through self-reported data and simulated experiments are impossible to obtain because they rely on memory and limited data sets. In their 2014 study of Internet news use in real time, they found that most news sites had an audience comprised of both Democrats and Republicans and that most people labelled their political views as in the middle (Nelson & Webster 2017). One study found that preference for attitude-consistent news and aversion to counter-attitudinal news was significantly stronger in participants who frequently consumed the news (Knobloch-Westerwick & Meng 2009). This finding is consistent with the idea that infrequent news users show less preference for attitude-consistent and counter-attitudinal news (Stroud 2008; Knobloch-Westerwick & Meng 2009).

It should be noted that selective exposure has several counterparts: selective sharing and selective avoidance. Selective sharing is a component of social media use in which individuals share only information that complies with their preexisting attitudes and beliefs (Shin & Thorson 2017). Shin and Thorson (2017) conducted a study during the 2012 election on the sharing behavior of partisans on Twitter. Their study found evidence of selective sharing among

partisans on social media; about 83% of Democrats retweeted content favoring Democrats while 46% of Republicans retweeted information favoring their side.

Selective avoidance is the mirror image of selective exposure. Johnson, Zhang, and Bichard (2013) define the concept as “the degree to which people avoid information that challenges their viewpoints.” Although selective exposure and avoidance seem to be two sides to the same coin, their relationship isn’t always balanced. A variety of studies support the popularity of selective exposure over selective avoidance, and they claim that “people are more likely to seek out information that supports their point of view than to avoid information that does not” (Garrett, 2009; Graf & Aday, 2008; Johnson, Bichard, & Zhang, 2008; Knobloch-Westerwick & Meng, 2009; Johnson, Zhang, & Bichard, 2013). Selective avoidance is ineffective in decreasing cognitive dissonance, which could be why it’s less common than selective exposure (Frey 1986; Jang 2014). Also, reviewing information contrary to one’s views could possibly prove helpful in creating a counterargument (Knobloch- Westerwick & Kleinman 2012; Jang 2014).

It is no secret that the so-called millennial generation is the social media generation; as of January 2018, 88% of Americans aged 18 to 29 used “at least one social media site,” according to the most recent Pew Study (2018). As social media becomes more saturated with political posts, young adults are exposed to political news whether they are searching for it or not. The American Press Institute (2015) found that 88% of millennials using Facebook saw some form of news, but it’s important to note that less than 50% were actually actively seeking out news on Facebook (American Press Institute, 2015; Njegomir 2016). In his masters thesis, Njegomir conducted a survey of 100 millennials, meaning they were born between the years of 1982 and



2003 (Winograd & Hais 2009; Njegomir 2016), in which millennials were asked about the political messages they saw on social media in their own free time. The study found that 90% said they “see a lot of political messages on Facebook,” while only 17% said the same for Twitter. Of these percentages, less than half of the respondents said that they shared political posts (Njegomir 2016). A study conducted by Tower and Munoz (2016) found that in the 2012 presidential election, millennials paid a considerable amount of attention to social media outlets for information on the presidential election. The study asked millennials to judge themselves as paying “none,” “very little,” “some,” “quite a bit,” or “a great deal” of attention to the social media outlets Facebook, Twitter, Youtube, and Tumblr. The results showed that 21.8% of respondents for Facebook, 15.5% of respondents for Youtube, 16.3% of respondents for Twitter, and 7.5% of respondents for Tumblr paid attention to each respective outlet either “quite a bit” or “a great deal” of the time during the 2012 presidential election. Researchers labelled the young adults in the study as having an “information mix” in relation to election news; they paid significantly more attention to online sources than the generation before them, but they still relied heavily on the traditional news outlet of television (Tower & Munoz 2016). Njegomir (2016) found that while the majority of young adults were active on social media many did not take an active role in participating in the political posts they saw by paying attention to or sharing them.

As previously stated, the millennial generation outvoted baby boomers in the 2016 election. In fact, one-third of voting-age citizens fall under the millennial category (Fry 2015; Njegomir 2016). Since the number of young adult social media users continues to grow in relation to politics, concerns are raised as to what sources are providing them election-related

news and, consequently, how one-sided or polarizing their political outlooks are. This study examines the influence of social media on the political ideologies of young adults, as well as social media's power to change the political landscape due to its growing popularity as a news source. It follows that social media today is changing the current political environment as well as politicians' strategies.

This study looks at how many young people (ages 19 - 25) obtained election news through social media and, more specifically, at the role of selective exposure in this process. The concept of "obtaining election news through social media" is defined as reading a headline and/or clicking on the headline to read the actual article. The study hypothesizes that the majority of young people in the United States obtained at least some election news from social media and that they used the follow/unfollow feature on social media to select which political views they would be exposed to during the election season. One of the unique aspects of social media is that you can unfriend or unfollow other accounts, thus removing their posts from your newsfeed (Bode 2016). While selective exposure and selective avoidance focus primarily on the selection of news sources, unfriending and unfollowing are also components of selective exposure since using this feature determines the composition of content users are exposed to. It's also notable to point out that both Facebook and Twitter have a feature that essentially "mutes" an account since it hides their posts from a news feed without completely unfollowing the account; since this study is focused on removing viewpoints from one's feed, the "mute" feature will be grouped in with the unfriend/unfollow feature. While news outlets can either be chosen or ignored, using the unfriend/unfollow feature is a more proactive approach to selective exposure since the unfriended/unfollowed account is essentially erased from one's news feed (Bode 2016).

Since millennials make up the majority of voting-age citizens, it is important to investigate the way they receive their news and the extent to which they protect themselves from information and news that does not align with their political ideologies. It is also important to understand the power of social media in elections. There are still questions to be answered about how selective exposure affected voting age young adults' social media use in relation to obtaining information in relation to the 2016 election. It's possible that young adults alienated themselves from opposing political views, choosing instead to create an idyllic echo chamber within their social media feeds to avoid cognitive dissonance. Their self-reported data will show how diverse their social media feeds were during the election and if they took the time to seek out news sources from opposing sides. This data adds to the body of knowledge on the topic of social media and selective exposure by examining whether young adults selectively exposed themselves to news to which they had partisan affinity. The research questions informing this study are "Is there a correlation between ideology and the partisan composition of news feeds?" and "Are those with more polarized political ideologies more likely to unfriend/unfollow those with the opposite political views?"

### **Methodology**

To address the way selective exposure affected social media use in relation to the 2016 election, a survey of young adults ages 19 to 25 was conducted to assess this group's social media habits in relation to the 2016 election. The survey was distributed to approximately 100 students who attended the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga during March 2018. This survey was approved by UTC's Institutional Review board (IRB) as presenting minimal risk to subjects, and no incentives were provided to those who participated in the study.

The role of selective exposure was investigated by examining the variety of social media posts subjects saw as well as who they followed on social media and whether subjects unfollowed “friends” based on their political views. Because this study is a collective overview of social media use, all social media networks (Facebook, Youtube, Twitter, Instagram, etc.) were taken into account in the survey.

At the beginning of the survey, the students indicated their age, which was a qualifying question; if they were outside the designated age range, they were thanked for their participation in the survey and not asked any further questions. Those who qualified then answered a series of five-point Likert Scale-style questions on their political ideologies and social media use in relation to election news during the 2016 election season, which is specified as between March 2016 and November 2016. Strength of party affiliation was measured as “1” meaning *very liberal* and “5” meaning *very conservative*. To examine the heterogeneity of their social media feeds, subjects were asked to rank how liberal or conservative their feeds were during the election season. To examine selective exposure, subjects were asked how likely they were to seek out news that either clashed or coincided with their political opinions. Subjects were asked whether or not they unfollowed or followed someone solely because of their political posts. These questions were ranked on a scale with “1” meaning *very likely* and “5” meaning *very unlikely*. A list of the questions is listed below:

- During the 2016 election season (March 2016-November 2016), how often did you see information relating to the election on social media?
- How would you rank your own political views during the 2016 election?
- What political parties did you include in your social media feed during the 2016 election?
- What types of interest groups (ex. Gay rights groups, pro-life groups) did you include in your

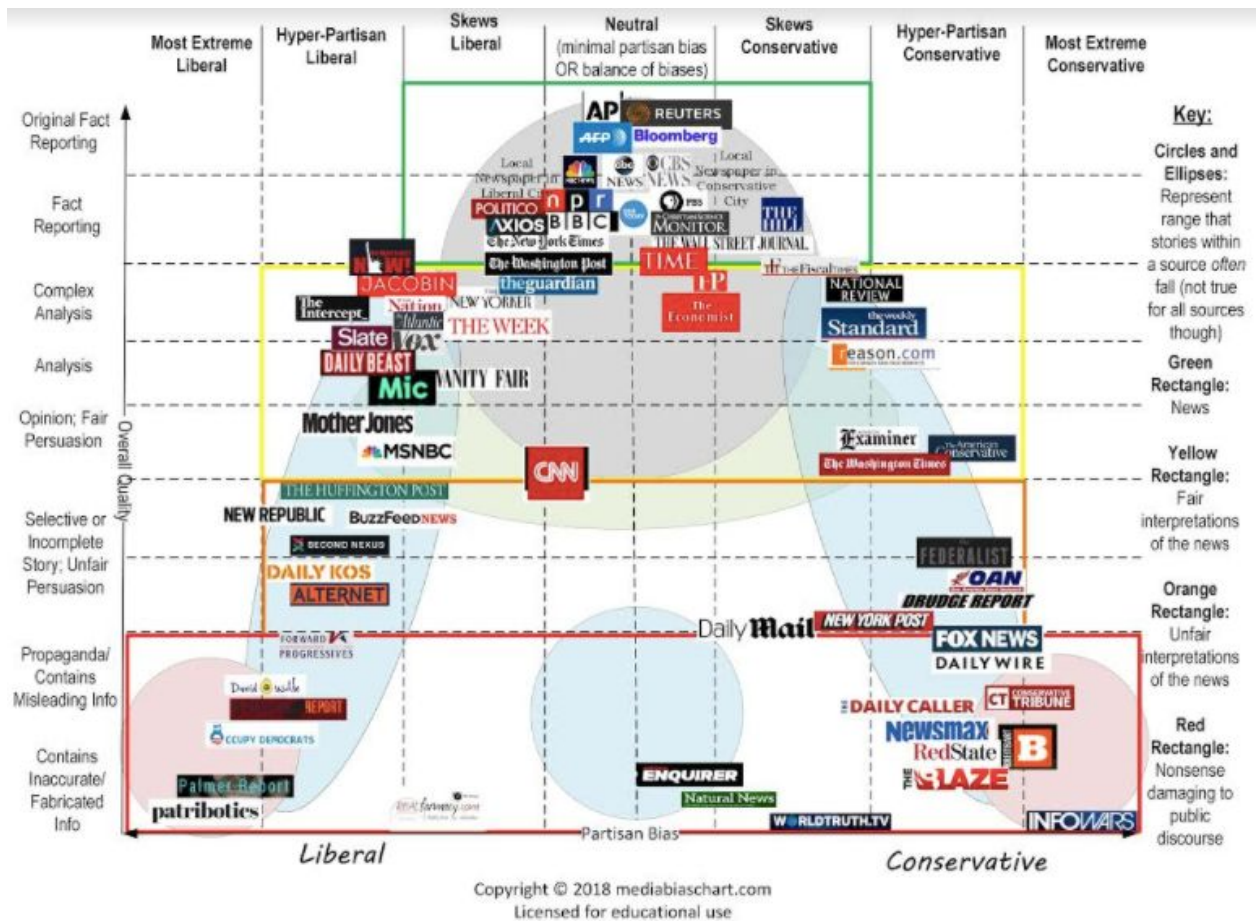
social media feed during the 2016 election?

- How likely were you to seek out news (i.e. go out of your way to search for a news article) from sources that were in opposition to your political views during the 2016 election?
- How likely were you to read an article that clashed with your political opinion during the 2016 election?
- How likely were you to read an article that stayed true to your political opinion during the 2016 election?
- How strongly, in favor or against, did you feel about Hillary Clinton's readiness for office during the 2016 election?
- How strongly, in favor or against, did you feel about Donald Trump's readiness for office during the 2016 election?
- How likely would you be to unfriend/unfollow somebody on social media whose political views were in conflict with your own during the 2016 election?
- How likely would you be to friend/follow/add somebody on social media whose political views were the same as your own during the 2016 election?

Lastly, subjects were asked to choose which sources from 20 online news outlets they were exposed to during the 2016 election on social media. The composition of the list of news outlets was an even mix of neutral, liberal, and conservative affiliations. These news sources were chosen from the Media Bias Chart (Otero 2018).

The Media Bias Chart was created by Vanessa Otero on [allgeneralizationsarefalse.com](http://allgeneralizationsarefalse.com) to rank popular news sources on their partisanship and quality of reporting. Her reasoning and methodology in the creation of the chart is centered on whether the news stories frequently contain details, the presence of analysis, and a discussion of the implications of events. The chart also takes into account whether the news sources tend to present all available facts rather than selecting ones that best fit their narrative. The word choice that the news sources use is also

important, as Otero ranks a news source as lower in quality if it contains obvious persuasive language and “clickbait” headlines. A full explanation of the Media Bias Chart’s methodology can be found on [allgeneralizationsarefalse.com](http://allgeneralizationsarefalse.com). The Media Bias Chart’s selection is also echoed in a Pew Report from 2014 where they list the trust levels in 36 news outlets among conservatives and liberals (Mitchell et al 2014). The University of Michigan also affirms the placement of the news outlets Fox News, New York Times, NPR, PBS, Washington Post, and Drudge Report on the political bias spectrum (University of Michigan 2018).



## Results

In respect to ideology, about 63% of the respondents labelled themselves as either very liberal or moderately liberal. About 16% ranked themselves as neutral on the political scale, and

17% ranked themselves as either very conservative or moderately conservative. Since the majority of respondents to the survey were liberal, the answers to the questions that followed are more likely to speak for liberal than conservative young people.

This survey showed several significant Pearson's correlations among respondents' ideologies and their social media use during the 2016 election. Young adults' ideologies were strongly correlated with the political parties and interest groups they included in their news feeds. Respondents' news feed compositions typically reflected their political views; those who were very liberal were significantly more likely to have a liberal composition in their news feeds, and conservatives were significantly more likely to maintain a conservative news feed ( $r = .69$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The homology of their news feeds is strong evidence that young adults selectively expose themselves to news that they are more likely to agree with. The positive correlation between ideology and the ideologies reflected in news feeds can be found in Figure 1.

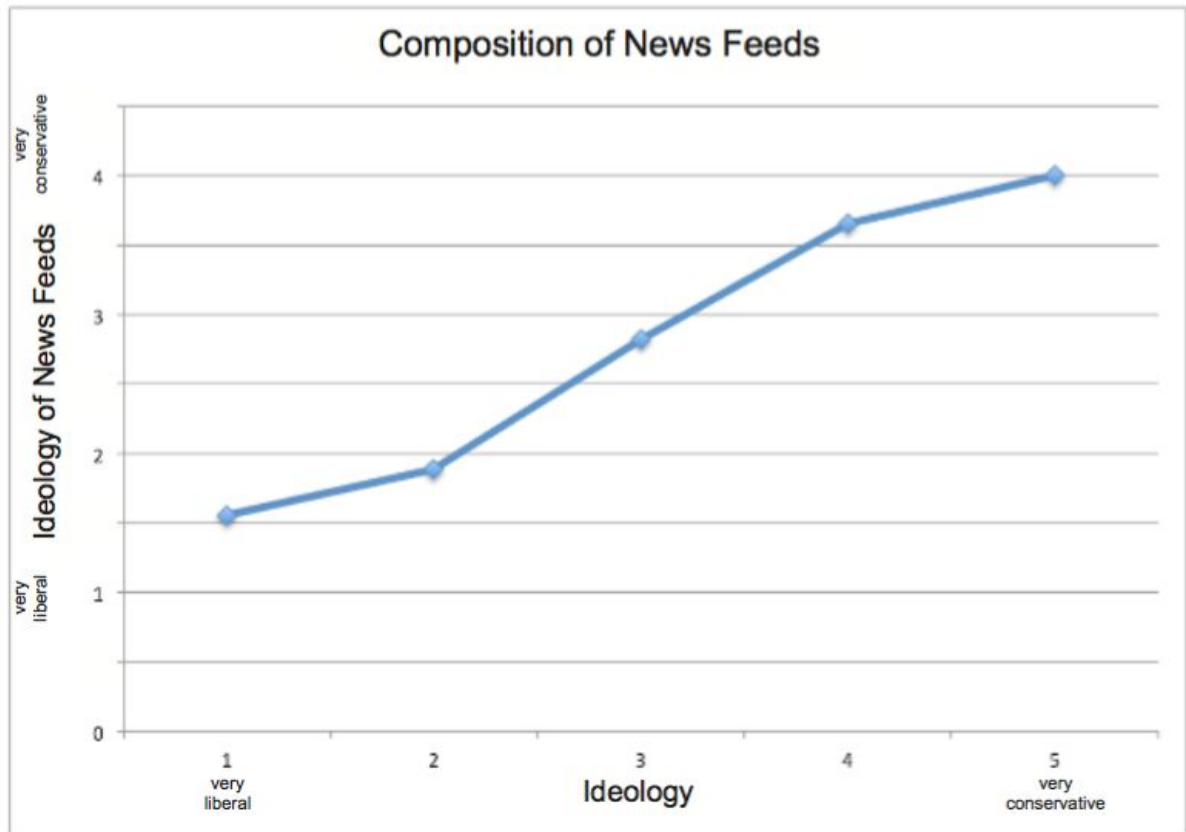


Figure 1

The second research question was answered in two questions asking whether and to what extent social media users unfriended or friended someone based on whether or not they shared political views. The results showed strong evidence of selective exposure and selective avoidance on social media, as those who had more homogenous compositions of political parties on their news feeds were more likely to unfriend someone based on their clashing political views ( $r = .55, p < .001$ ). Those same users were also more likely to friend or follow someone whose political views coincided with theirs ( $r = .23, p < .021$ ). The Pearson's Test showed an extremely high correlation between political ideology and the likelihood to unfriend/unfollow someone for having an opposing viewpoint ( $r = .53, p < .001$ ) and between political ideology and the likelihood to friend/follow someone who had the same viewpoint ( $r = .24, p < .015$ ). The



correlation between ideology and the likelihood to unfollow someone with opposing viewpoints is shown below in Figure 2.

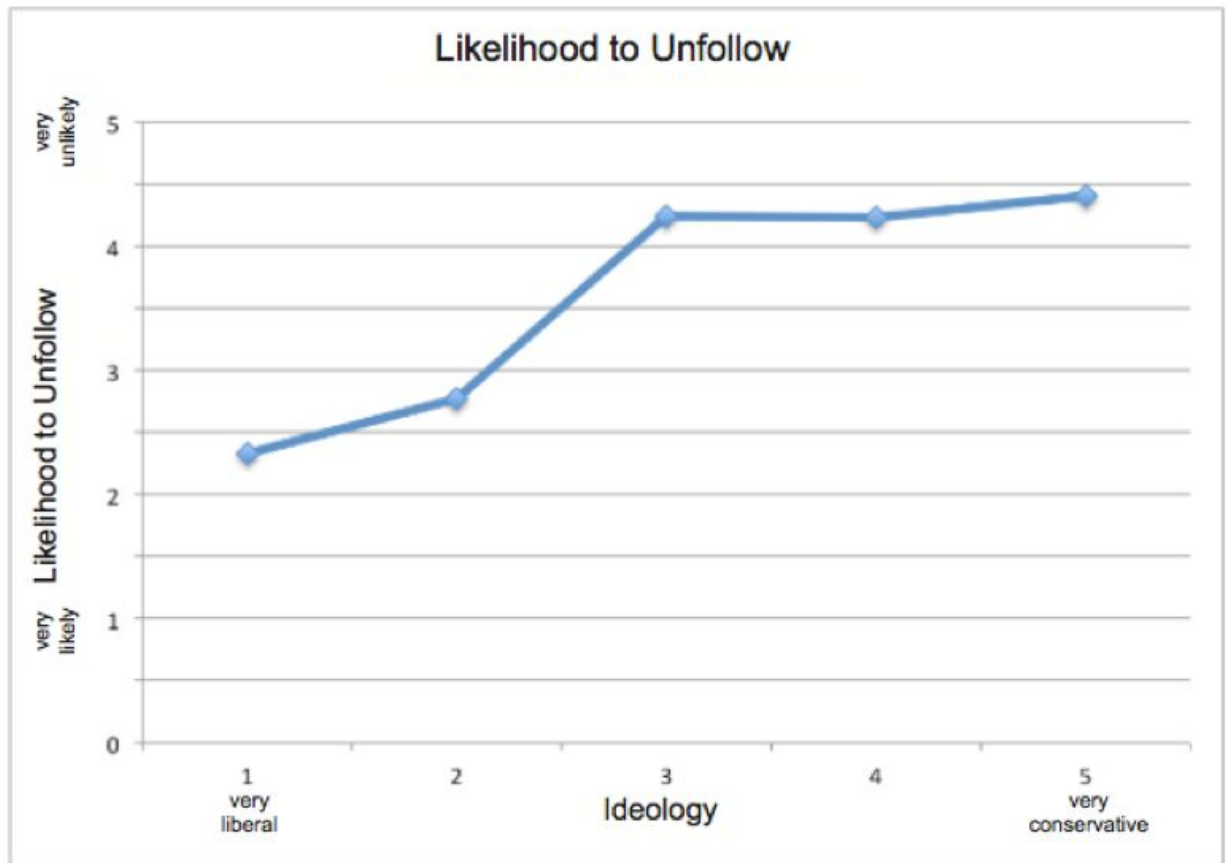


Figure 2

Interestingly, those holding liberal views were more likely to unfriend someone for having an opposing viewpoint than conservatives were. As ideology became more conservative, it became less likely that respondents would unfollow someone because of their differing political views. As for following other social media accounts, those who fell in the middle of the political spectrum said they were neither likely nor unlikely to add someone to their social media feed based on having the same opinion as them. Liberal respondents were the most likely to add someone based on sharing political views.

The study also found that those who had more one-sided news feeds in terms of parties and the interest groups they followed were more likely to utilize the unfriend/unfollow feature to unfollow those who had different views, in turn making their newsfeeds more homologous ( $r = .55, p < .001$ ) ( $r = .57, p < .001$ ).

An ANOVA chart analyzed the variance of respondents' answers. In terms of unfriending someone based on their political posts, the F value was 11.806 with a significance of  $< .001$ . Those ranked *very liberal* were statistically different than those ranked *neutral*, *moderately conservative*, and *very conservative*, adding to the evidence that those leaning more towards the left are more likely to actively, selectively avoid viewpoints different from theirs.

The final survey question asked what news outlets respondents remembered seeing on their social media feeds, and respondents chose from a list of 20 news outlets of varying degrees of partisanship. The collected answers showed that the outlets respondents recognized most were (in descending order) CNN, the New York Times, Washington Post, BuzzFeed, and Fox News. The total rankings of the popularity of the 20 news outlets can be seen in Figure 3.

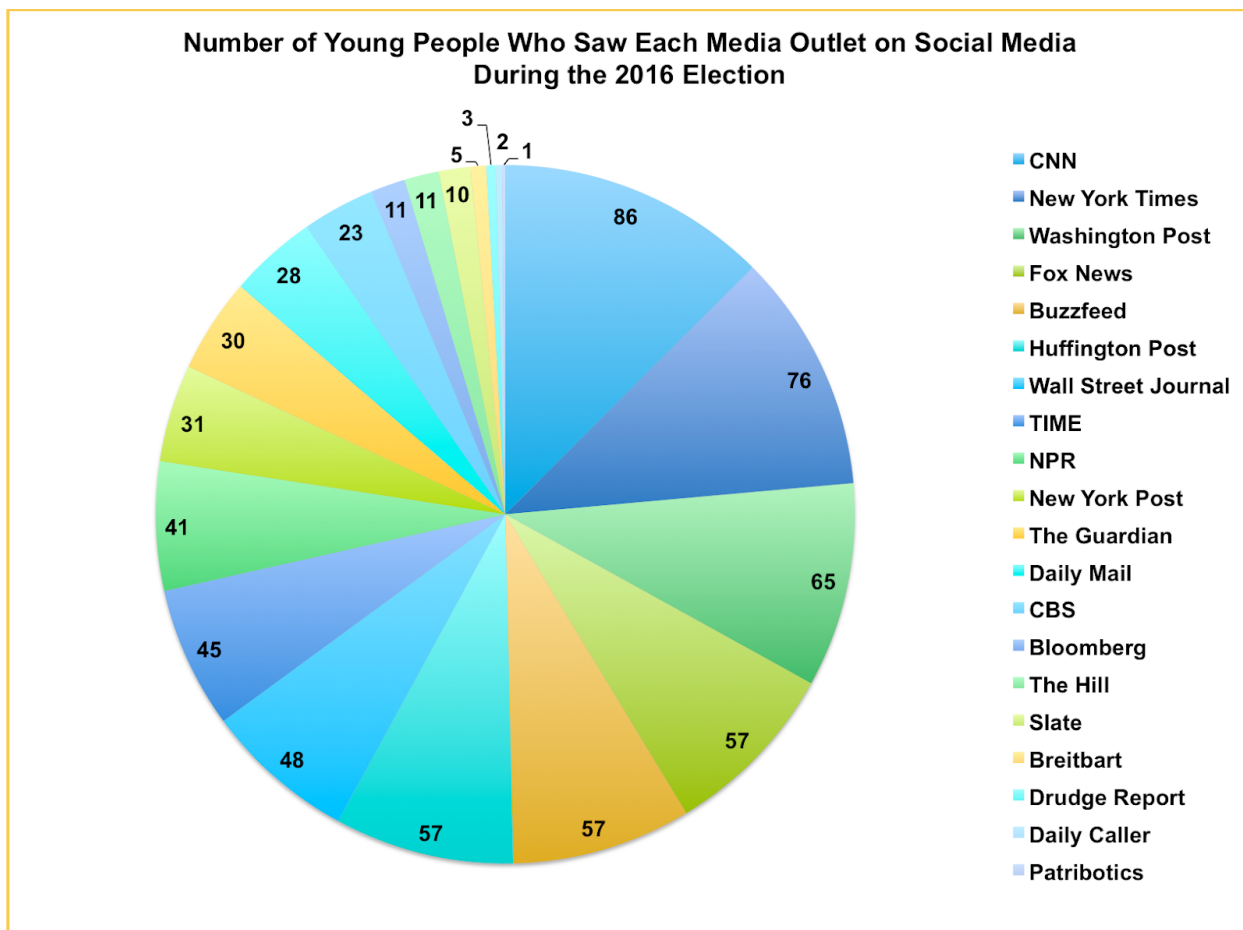


Figure 3

CNN, the New York Times, and Washington Post were all ranked as leftward-leaning but still reputable outlets. Interestingly, Fox News was ranked as “hyper-partisan conservative,” and BuzzFeed was ranked on the other end of the spectrum as “hyper-partisan liberal,” according to Vanessa Otero’s Media Bias/ Media Quality chart. Among the three most popular, CNN is ranked as a “fair interpretation of the news,” while both the New York Times and the Washington Post are ranked as higher in quality, meaning that they simply fact report without the insertion of propaganda, commentary, or opinion. BuzzFeed’s quality is ranked on the chart as selectively interpretive and using unfair persuasion. According to the Media Bias chart, Fox News’s quality is ranked the furthest down of the top five for containing misleading information

and propaganda. The fact that the three out of the top five news outlets that young adults were exposed to on social media are ranked as fair to high quality and neutral is evidence that young adults may be mindful of quality when choosing where they get their news.

Since the vast majority of respondents in this survey were liberal, the audience composition for each news outlet was skewed liberal. However, significance can be drawn from the five news outlets' popularity within each ideology. A complete percentage of the respondents who called themselves *very conservative* saw Fox News on their social media feeds, the only complete percentage of any group and news source. Fox News was seen by 84% of those who ranked themselves as *moderately conservative*, making it the most popular of the five news outlets among conservatives. Despite CNN's liberal affinity, 80% of people ranked *very conservative* and 84% of people ranked *moderately conservative* encountered CNN on their news feeds during the election. The second most popular non-conservative outlet among conservatives was the New York Times, which 40% of very conservative respondents and 69% of moderate conservatives reported seeing. It should be pointed out that these percentages are respondents reported merely seeing the news outlet, which does not mean they supported the news outlet or regarded it as an important source for election news.

As for liberals, CNN was the most viewed, as 92% of people who were ranked *very liberal* and 82% of those who were ranked *moderately liberal* reported seeing it during the 2016 election. The second most encountered news outlet was the New York Times, which was seen by 85% of *very liberal* respondents and 76% of *moderately liberal* respondents. The conservative news outlet Fox News, despite being on the other end of the political spectrum, was seen by 40% of those who ranked themselves *very liberal* and 46% of those ranked *moderately liberal*. Again,

this percentage could include those who saw Fox News shared in a negative light and should not be regarded as the percentage of respondents who actively followed or regarded Fox News as a legitimate source for election news.

For those who ranked themselves as leaning neither liberal nor conservative, CNN was dominant, seen by 88% of moderates. Interestingly, BuzzFeed News was the second most popular with neutral respondents, with 70% of them reporting having seen the news outlet on their feeds. The popularity of these two outlets over the other three with neutral respondents is particularly interesting since they are the most left-leaning of the top five news sources. This could be interpreted as respondents not knowing how biased their news sources are; they may think that CNN and BuzzFeed are neutral news sources. Another explanation could be that neutral respondents simply did not have an interest in obtaining political news during the 2016 election since they did not have much stake in it. It's possible that they did not make a strong effort to pay attention to the news sources they saw.

Understanding the way social media may be perpetuating selective exposure in young adults is crucial to understanding the political atmosphere in America, and this survey provides a lot of interesting information related to how young adults used social media during the 2016 election. The two most significant findings both support the theories of selective exposure and selective avoidance. The linear correlation between political ideology and composition of news feeds is evidence that young adults selectively expose themselves to sources to which they have partisan affinity on social media. There is evidence that liberals are more likely to selectively avoid opposing viewpoints by unfollowing accounts that clash with their political views. The significant correlations in this study shed more light on selective exposure and the homogeneity

of news feeds.

### **Discussion & Conclusion**

This study helps contribute to the body of knowledge surrounding selective exposure and social media use. This is an important topic for further research since, like Pew Research and American Press Institute have reported, social media is an extremely popular news platform among young adults. Past research has examined selective exposure in relation to news consumption, but fewer studies have examined the relationship between the unfriend/unfollow feature of social media and selective exposure. This author recommends that other research be conducted to see how people curate their news feeds.

While this study provides interesting information on young adults' social media use during the 2016 election, it also has several limitations. Due to the resources available to the researcher, the study was only sent out to UTC students. A mass email feature was utilized to send the survey to every student in several disciplines and the survey was included in a newsletter sent to UTC students. Therefore, this sample was only as random as it could be given the circumstances. A future study recommendation is to expand the sample size by surveying people from both in and outside of universities. In terms of questions and answer choices, the selection could have been clarified and expanded. The three ideologies were liberal, conservative, and neutral; neutral is a bit too broad, given that respondents who chose this answer could generally be in the middle on the political spectrum or a member of a less popular ideology like populism or libertarianism. Also, there were two questions in this study about feelings about Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton's candidacy that could have been worded more simply. Several respondents reported not understanding what the question was asking. In a future

study, survey questions should be worded in a more simple manner to accommodate those who may not be reading closely.

Still, the results of this study shed light on how young adults used their social media during the 2016 election. This study supports the theory of selective exposure given that the correlation between ideology and news feed composition was so linear. In accordance with Wicks, Wicks, & Morimoto's findings (2014), Americans displayed a clear preference for news sources depending on their ideology. Nelson and Webster (2017) argued that concerns over selective exposure were exaggerated, but this study's linear correlation between ideology and news feed composition is strong evidence for selective exposure. Another significant finding is in accordance with a 2018 Pew Study that detailed social media use during the last election; approximately 86% of respondents in the present study saw election news several times a day on social media. Since the vast majority of participants were frequently exposed to election news on social media, it is possible that the strong correlation between ideology and the homophily of news feeds is a result of their frequent exposure. This supports the suggestions of Knobloch-Westernwick & Meng (2009), who theorized that the preference for attitude-consistent news was significantly stronger in participants who frequently consumed the news.

Past research has no definitive answer about whether people with particular ideological leanings selectively expose themselves to political news more, as Iyengar and Hahn (2009) found that conservatives were more likely to selectively expose themselves to conservative news sources, and Bakshy, Messing, and Adamic (2015) found that liberals were more likely to limit their news consumption to liberal sources. The present study adds to this body of knowledge by suggesting that liberals were less tolerant of other viewpoints during the election season since

they were more likely to unfriend or unfollow other users. This is a significant piece of information since it suggests that liberals are so opposed to conservatives' viewpoints that they are willing to completely remove their conservative friends from their newsfeeds. Since young adults spend so much time on social media, using the unfriend/unfollow feature could even be equated to disassociating with that person in general. The results from this study's survey are especially interesting given that liberals have long been assumed to be the more accepting of the two political parties (Mooney 2012). Since liberals were significantly more likely to unfollow someone based on clashing political beliefs, can they be labeled as "accepting?" As previously stated, this specific election deeply divided Americans in terms of political beliefs (Enli 2017), and it is possible that respondents' behavior may have been different had the election season played out differently. Still, this study adds to general understanding of this division by providing additional evidence on the role of ideological orientations and behaviors in Americans' use of political news on social media.

A clear example of where this study's findings add to the body of research can be found in Bakshy, Messing, and Adamic's 2015 study on ideology and political news. The results of this study closely resembled the 2015 study on news use. They found conservatives were more open to reading news stories from cross-cutting sources like CNN. This study showed that a higher percentage of those identifying as conservative were exposed to CNN than those who identified as liberal were exposed to Fox News. Their concept of an echo chamber was present in the findings of this study where liberals tended to have a more liberal news feed and conservatives tended to have a more conservative news feed; by curating their news feeds to show mostly sources to which they have partisan affinity, the same viewpoints are repeated over and over,



thus creating an echo chamber. The findings of Bakshy, Messing, and Adamic (2015) on selective exposure and selective avoidance being stronger among liberals were also supported since this study showed that more liberals ranked themselves as “very likely” to unfollow someone based on political posts. While in their study liberals were less likely to read conservative news sources, the liberals in this study removed conservative voices from their news feeds. Removing conservatives from a news feed is essentially the same as avoiding conservative news outlets since it is selective exposing oneself either way. In fact, this study argues that unfriending/unfollowing someone is a more active way of selectively exposing oneself to homologous viewpoints since users are choosing to remove conflicting viewpoints from their feeds.

The tendency for liberals to selectively expose themselves by unfollowing conflicting opinions could have many contributing factors. This election was unique in that the republican candidate was so open to making racist and sexist remarks, which made him a more appealing candidate for uneducated white voters (Sides and Farrell 2016). Additionally, this election was unique in that it was the first to have a female party nominee, and for this reason, Clinton faced unique commentary and criticism. Many of Clinton’s critics drew on her physical appearance and less-than-feminine mannerisms when criticising her candidacy (Bordo 2017). One could consequently say that the rhetoric of Trump supporters was more racist and sexist than liberals were willing to tolerate, bringing them to unfriend or unfollow after seeing such remarks on their social media. An article by CNN detailed how being a Trump supporter is now a deal-breaker for many romantic relationships, stating that an opinion on Trump serves as an “instant proxy” for the other person’s values (Farrell 2017). This same logic could be applied for social media; if

liberals relate supporting Trump to having immoral values, then it is likely that they feel the need to disassociate with those viewpoints by excluding them from their feed.

This study has several important implications that extend beyond understanding the selective exposure on social media. Since social media is a channel through which many Americans obtain political news, it's important to understand that many of the sources they expose themselves to may not be providing clear and unbiased stories, like BuzzFeed News and Fox News (Otero 2018). By selectively exposing themselves to only one side of the political spectrum, young adults may be unintentionally flooding their news feeds with selectively interpreted facts, unfair persuasion, and biased information if they follow low-quality sources.

Additionally, the developing story surrounding social media sites, in particularly Facebook, and the spread of fake news give the popularity of social media as a news source a newfound impact (Hunt & Gentzkow 2017). In fact, one study found that 1 in 4 Americans encountered at least one fake news story during the 2016 election (Guess, Nyhan, & Reifler 2018), and many people who see news stories believe them (Silverman and Singer-Vine 2016; Hunt & Gentzkow 2017). Researchers have gone so far as to even suggest that Trump would not have won if it had not been for the confusion and misinformation caused by fake news (Parkinson 2016; Read 2016; Dewey 2016; Hunt & Gentzkow 2017). These facts give the issue of fake news a grave importance, especially since fake news stories are more often spread by social media than by mainstream news outlets (Hunt & Gentzkow 2017). According to Hunt and Gentzkow (2017), social media played an important role in fake news consumption during the election since no social media outlets used fact-checking tools to ensure the validity of stories, which in turn helped the stories spread. Since 86% of young adults in this study were exposed to

election news stories several times a day through their social media, the impact of fake news could possibly be larger on their demographic.

Suggestions for further research include comparing selective exposure in social media use during elections to time periods outside elections. It's possible that people felt the need to "cleanse" their news feeds to avoid the stress of cognitive dissonance during an already stressful time. Comparing social media use inside and outside election season will help clarify social media behavior of Americans. It would also be helpful to know why exactly liberals feel the need to distance themselves from conservatives on social media. This could be examined in a qualitative study through in-depth interviews. There is still much to be examined in relation to social media as a form of obtaining political news, and this study has helped shed light on the topic in terms of young adults' behavior.

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