



The Web of Lies: The Spread of Hyperpartisan News and Extreme Polarization



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Abstract

The mission that lies within this research project is to evaluate and pinpoint the effects that “fake news” places upon the information gathering activities of participants. It achieves this mission by responding to two questions in reference to the behavior over networks. The first question presented is as such: Can a user of social media detect and differentiate aspects of fake news from a sea of truth? Consequently, the second question is as follows: Would a user willingly choose a piece of fake news over news that is truthful, and if so, why? This research project will observe all of the various factors that could influence a user to favor fake news over news that is truthful, such as partisanship, topic relevance, and endorsement levels. This is an analysis and discussion of current literature alongside reviewing the lack of significant empirical studies covering the effects of fake news in the form of political knowledge gathering activities. The questions shown above will be answered by an experimental conjoint analysis survey that mirrors the social media feeds of participants. Thus, investigating the ultimate effect that fake news places upon society, an effect that is, in the study of political science, both unique and new.



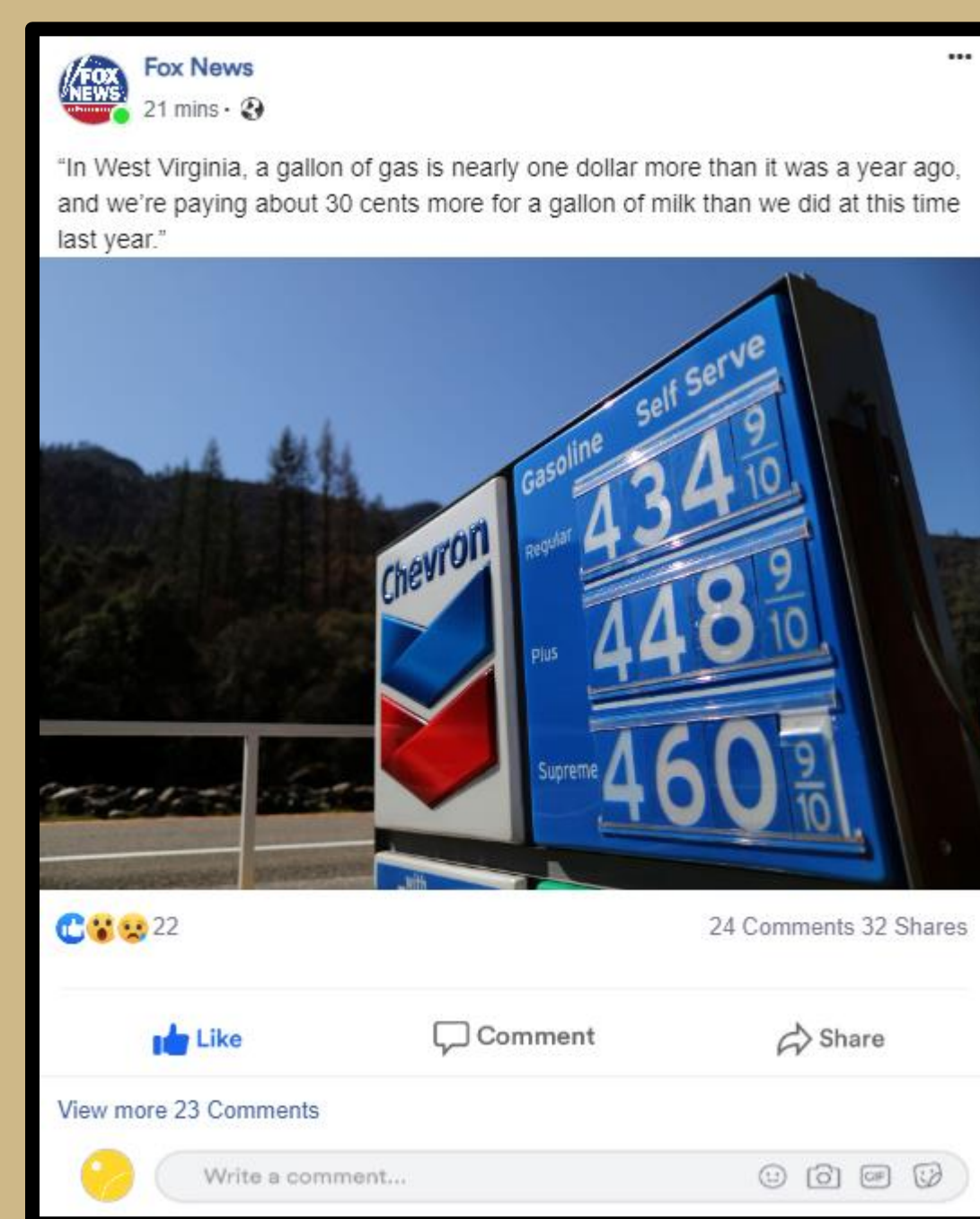
Background

Lies and misinformation have always been the dark side of the praised concept of free speech. Many attempts to combat it have arisen throughout the history of man; be it the threat of execution if one slanders the king or a ban on Twitter for posting misinformation about the Coronavirus pandemic¹. In the modern-day, misinformation takes a much more subtle disguise and is not nearly as clear as it has been in the past. The main culprit today of this new form of misinformation is fake news, articles, and reports that attempt to present partially or wholly incorrect facts and narratives as true stories. In an era of exacerbated polarization and mistrust on the other side, fake news and other forms of disinformation have the potential to worsen the situation. However, increased interaction with politics through social media may also help users gain heightened political knowledge and the ability to differentiate from fact and fable.

Methods

To study the effects of misinformation and partisan influence on one's decisions in social media networks, this study employs a conjoint experimental survey that will simulate one's social media feed by displaying crafted posts from different real-life news sources.

- This model of survey allows for the analysis of multiple variables simultaneously²
- Choice-based conjoint designs like this are superb in mimicking real-life situations³
- This design is relatively new to political science and is most popular in marketing studies
- The model includes several cues; an endorsement cue, a partisan source cue, a topic relevance cue, etc.
- Participants will be prompted to choose one of the two randomized news sources prompted to them.

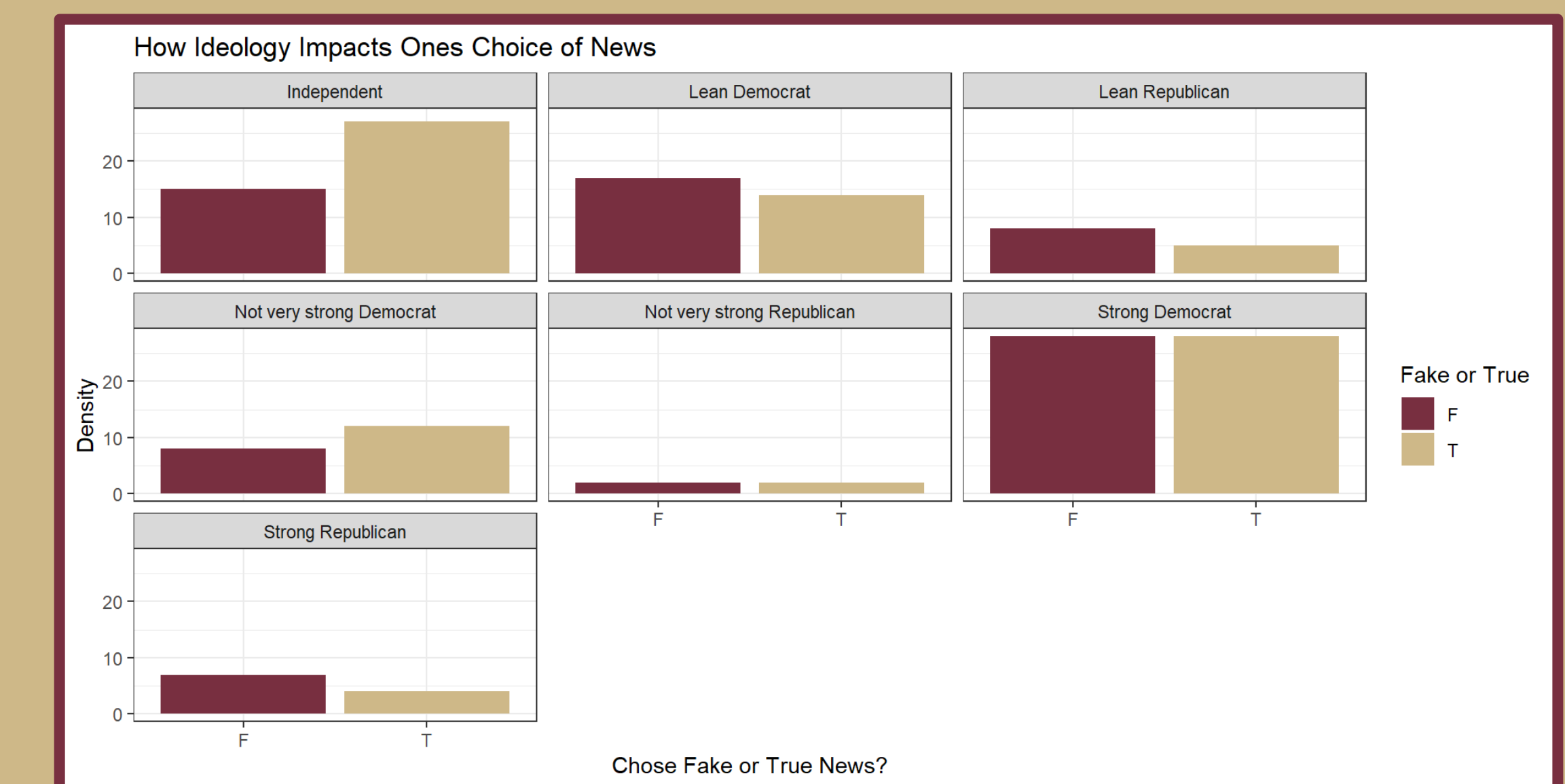
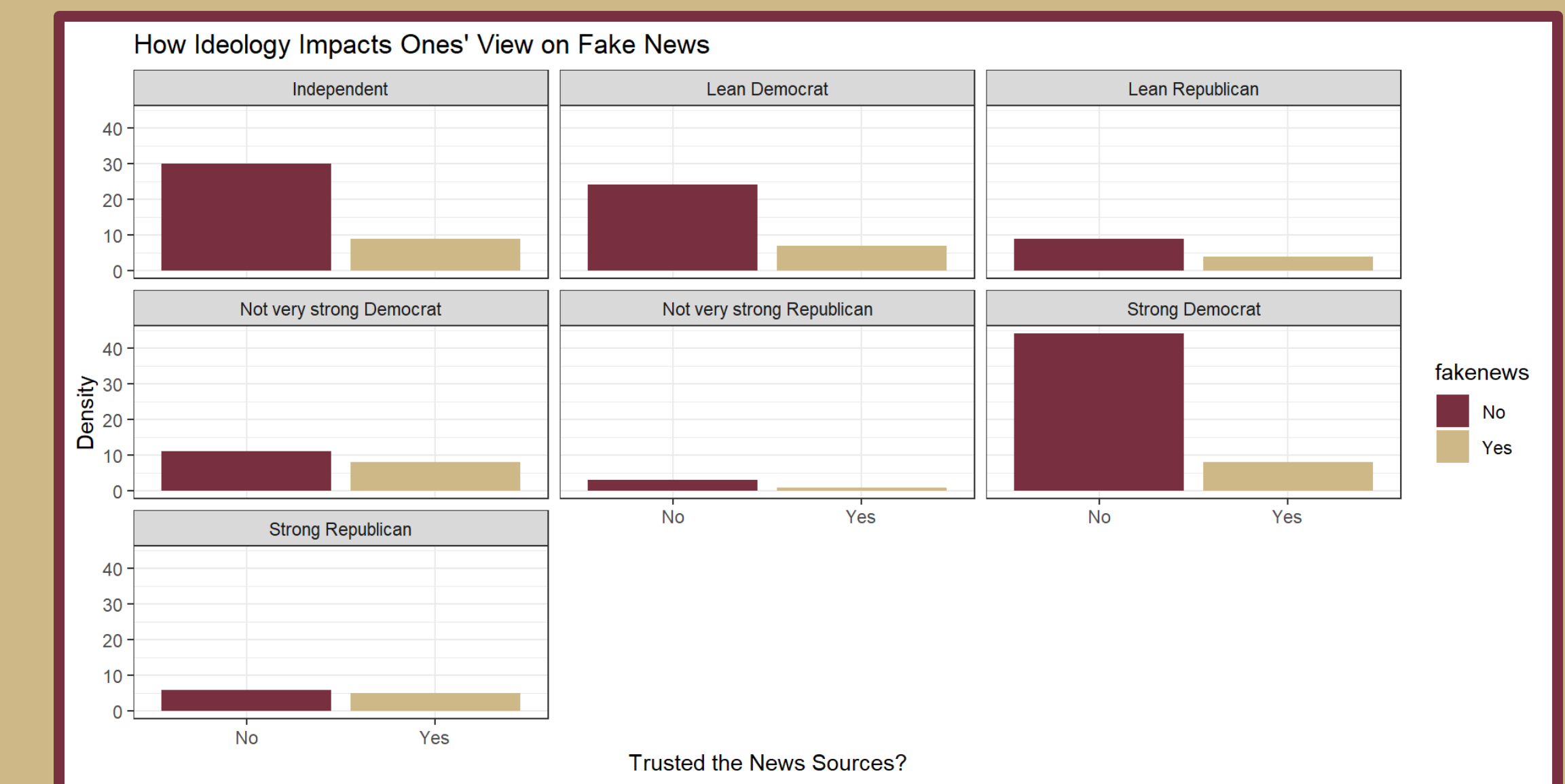


Limitations

A limitation of this project is the audience that it reaches due to the limited time and resources available:

- Audience and participants in this study are not truly diverse or representative of the U.S
- Audience that will most likely be taking this survey includes those interested in politics already, those interested in taking surveys that deal with politics or other topics, students who encountered the survey through the school, or those who received the survey through word of mouth or sharing through social media networks
- Survey will still reach a diverse population of people and if there is a high number of respondents then it will function well to analyze the effects of fake news on social media consumption.

Results



Discussion

With a better sample and more time to collect data and do analysis, I believe that this research could provide invaluable insight into the way that users interact with news on social media, and through what criteria they do so. The major takeaways from the analysis that I've done are:

- Most people can't tell the difference between fake and true news
- Independents are more likely than self-identified partisans to choose true news over fake news
- Most people do not trust the news sources that they come across

References

1. "9 Common Types of Conjoint Analysis and How to Use Them." 2021. Qualtrics. <https://www.qualtrics.com/experience-management/research/types-of-conjoint/> (September 21, 2021).
2. "COVID-19 Misleading Information Policy." Twitter Help Center. <https://help.twitter.com/en/rules-and-policies/medical-misinformation-policy> (September 29, 2021).
3. Mukerjee, Subhayan, and Tian Yang. 2020. "Choosing to Avoid? A CONJOINT Experimental Study to UNDERSTAND Selective Exposure and Avoidance on Social Media." *Political Communication* 38(3): 222-40. doi: 10.1080/10584609.2020.1763531.