Clicks vs. Facts
The Media's Role in Political Information and How Emotional and Behavioral Political Involvement is Associated with Perceived Bias
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ABSTRACT
There is a direct relationship between consumer trust in media and level of involvement with an issue (Vallone, Ross & Lepper, 1985); research shows people who are involved in a group or issue are highly knowledgeable on the topic and will therefore scrutinize information that disagrees with their opinion (Gunther, 1992). Political issues in particular evoke intense emotion and lead to this kind of close scrutinization. Intense emotion impacts a person's willingness to seek further information on an issue and/or their latitude of acceptance, rejection, and noncommitment of a particular media account. This effect is exacerbated by findings showing that political party affiliation is associated with perception of media bias, with those on the left discrediting right-leaning media and vice versa (Kaye & Johnson, 2016). Social judgment theory (Sherif & Hovland, 1961) suggests that one's beliefs impact viewpoint polarization and perception of media bias. Further, this study examines whether perceptions of media bias and credibility moderate the relationship between behavioral and emotional involvement. The survey was distributed through snowball sampling and participants were surveyed to determine whether their level of involvement with political issues is associated with information seeking and viewpoint polarization.

METHODS
Data was collected through electronic questionnaires. A snowball sampling technique was used to gather 187 complete survey responses from a 32 question survey. In addition, two news articles considered to be from liberal (New York Times) and conservative (Fox News) news sources were included in this study. Participants were unaware of the sources. 63% of respondents were between the ages of 18 and 24, 12% were 25-34, 6% of respondents were aged 35 to 44, 10% aged 45-54 and the last 10% of respondents were age 55 or older. 79% of participants identified as male, 20% of respondents identified as female and 1% identified as “other”. 51% of survey participants identified as politically liberal, 35% as conservative, and 14% as politically independent. For this study, relevant questions that focused on media credibility were found from the Gratifications Sought Scale (Paligreen, Wemmer & Rayburn, 1980). An adapted version from the Gratifications Sought Scale includes, “I follow news to help me make up my mind about the important issues of the day”.

Research Questions and Results
RQ1: Is emotional involvement in political issues associated with a) intention to seek additional information i) the correlation results are insignificant b) viewpoint polarization i) emotional involvement and viewpoint polarization are correlated, r = .24, p < .01
RQ2: Is behavioral involvement in political issues associated with a) intention to seek additional information i) the correlation results are insignificant b) viewpoint polarization i) behavioral involvement and viewpoint polarization are correlated, r = .19, p < .01
RQ3: Does perception of media bias moderate the relationship between emotional involvement in political issues and a) intention to seek additional information i) the conditions for a moderation test were not met b) viewpoint polarization i) the conditions for a moderation test were not met
RQ4: Does perception of media credibility moderate the relationship between emotional involvement in political issues and a) intention to seek additional information i) the conditions for a moderation test were not met b) viewpoint polarization i) a moderating analysis was conducted and credibility was not a moderator between the variables

ADDITIONAL FINDINGS
The study suggests there may be no correlation between party affiliation and ability to perceive bias when the source was unknown. It also suggested that headlines have little impact on perceived bias even though previous studies suggest that people from both political parties perceive news organizations that lean the opposite way of their party to be biased against them. Headlines are a primary way for news organizations to reach their target audience, yet this study suggests that headlines do not affect readership from people who identify as opposed politically on the news source. Conservative participants were just as likely to read the New York Times article without knowing the source as liberal participants were based on the title. Furthermore, analysis suggests a significant correlation between emotional involvement and viewpoint polarization (r = .24, p < .01). This may suggest that people were more likely to follow news that supported their own beliefs and showed their opinions on political issues stem from watching these news sources. The analysis also suggests a significant correlation between behavioral involvement and viewpoint polarization (r = .19, p < .01). This may suggest that people are more likely to speak about political issues with people that have the same viewpoints.

DISCUSSION
The social judgement theory explains that when an individual hears a message, they automatically judge where that message should be placed on the attitude scales of acceptance, rejection, and non-commitment (Griffin, 2006). In the current political climate, this study was important in seeking to identify why people are so polarized on political issues and why there seems to be such a deep divide across party lines. Social judgement theory also states that people’s perceptions are altered dramatically by group membership (Griffin, 2006). In other words, people who affiliate with the Democratic party will have altered perceptions of the Republican party based on the views of their own group. This alteration of perception leads to a shift in opinions not based on fact and more based on group beliefs. Additionally, the social judgement theory describes perceptual distortion that leads to polarization of ideas when a message falls into the latitude of rejection.

LIMITATIONS
The biggest limitation for this study is time: preparing the study, distributing the survey, and analyzing the data took place in a 15 week time period.

IMPLICATIONS
This study illustrates that individuals follow news sources which align with their political party affiliation. With the discovery of this information, a further study designed to understand why liberal and conservative individuals have limited tolerance to opposing views would allow for a deeper analysis. Furthermore, it is important for people to seek additional information in order to avoid getting skewed information from the sources they already agree with. A future study could include further developed “seeking additional information” questions in its survey. Overall, this study is significant because it illustrated the importance of critical thinking and why we, as individuals need to be more aware of the news source we encounter and listen to. Since people are both emotionally and behaviorally involved in political issues, this leads to polarization which only further separates our political views.

Though participants said that they think the media follows an agenda, they still found these articles to be credible. This can be problematic because it represents a decline in critical thinking among all parties. In addition to this it was found that emotional and behavioral involvement in politics can lead to polarization, which has the ability to decrease critical thinking.