Incidental Exposure to Political Disagreement on Facebook and Corrective Participation: Unraveling the Effects of Emotional Responses and Issue Relevance

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Scholarly debate persists as to whether political disagreement facilitates or inhibits involvement in political activities. This study contributes to the debate by focusing on incidental exposure—an important mechanism through which people encounter political disagreement on Facebook. Drawing on a laboratory experiment, this study finds that Facebook-based incidental exposure to counter-attitudinal information does not have a direct effect on corrective political participation (e.g., persuading others online about politics). Exposure to this type of information does, however, have an indirect positive impact on corrective participation through the mediating effects of anxiety, as suggested by affective intelligence theory and appraisal theories of emotion. A moderated mediation model indicates that the indirect effect through anxiety is particularly strong among individuals who consider the issue personally relevant. Implications are discussed in terms of how social media uses impact participatory democracy.

Keywords: emotion, incidental exposure, political disagreement, political participation

In the current media environment, people increasingly rely on social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter to obtain news about politics and public affairs (Bialik & Matsa, 2017; Mitchell, Barthel, Shearer, & Gottfried, 2015). A majority of American Facebook users (67%) report that they encounter some political content on the platform (Duggan & Smith, 2016). The growing prominence of Facebook in public life necessitates a better understanding of its impact on political participation, which is an integral component of a well-functioning democracy (Held, 2006).

Previous research has found that Facebook activities such as sharing news and expressing opinions enhance political participation (Tufekci & Wilson, 2012; Vissers & Stolle, 2014). However, despite being a salient phenomenon on Facebook and a common occurrence in real life, the role of incidental exposure to political disagreement is rarely explored in the literature. On average, more than 20% of an individual's Facebook friends hold opposite political views, and thus a substantial proportion of hard news shared by networked friends does not align with a user's preexisting opinions (Bakshy, Messing, & Adamic, 2015). Because Facebook users are likely to accidentally encounter political disagreement on the platform

(Brundidge, 2010; Lu & Lee, 2019), an examination of the causal relationship between Facebook-based incidental exposure to disagreement and political participation is warranted.

Scholarly debate exists over whether political disagreement on social media encourages (Choi, Lee, & Metzgar, 2017; Min & Wohn, 2018) or discourages (Hampton et al., 2014; Lu, Heatherly, & Lee, 2016; Mutz, 2006) subsequent involvement in political activities. These contradictory findings may be attributed to a number of factors, such as the various political activities examined in the literature (F. Lee, 2012; Lu & Myrick, 2016). This study extends the literature by focusing on corrective actions—a distinct type of political participation that is particularly relevant to the context of political disagreement on Facebook. Individuals often engage in corrective actions (e.g., expressing political opinions online; attending a political rally) to counterbalance the perceived negative influence of undesirable messages, which include the dissonant information encountered on Facebook (Lim, 2017).

Furthermore, previous studies on the relationship between political disagreement and political participation have primarily emphasized cognitive processes such as attitudinal ambivalence (Mutz, 2006), leaving the impact of emotional response underexplored. Emotions are important because they predict human behaviors by influencing people's action tendencies (Damasio, 2006). Therefore, this study incorporates the appraisal theories of emotion (Lerner & Keltner, 2001; Smith & Ellsworth, 1985) and explores the indirect effects of two discrete emotions: anger and anxiety. The discrete perspective of studying emotions offers a more nuanced understanding of the underlying mechanism of media effects because each emotion is considered qualitatively different in terms of its cognitive appraisals and action tendencies (Lerner & Keltner, 2001; Nabi, 2010). Anger and anxiety are particularly relevant to the context of this study because political disagreement on social media often involves incivility and is likely to elicit such negative emotions (Duggan & Smith, 2016; Gervais, 2015). Additionally, issue relevance is examined as a moderator in this study because appraisal theories of emotion propose that the personal relevance of an eliciting event or stimulus is critical to the induction of negative emotions (Lazarus, 1991; Smith & Ellsworth, 1987).

Drawing on a laboratory experiment, this study first examines the direct effect of Facebook-based incidental exposure to political disagreement on corrective participation. It explores the mediating role of emotional responses (i.e., anger and anxiety) and examines how issue relevance moderates the indirect effects of these negative emotions. The results not only advance theory by integrating work on emotions with incidental exposure but also provide a more nuanced understanding of the role of social media uses in participatory democracy.

Incidental Exposure to Political Disagreement and Corrective Participation

Incidental exposure refers to a situation in which individuals encounter certain information (e.g., political news) without the intention to seek it out or in the absence of instructions to search for the content (Frensch, 1998; J. Lee, 2009; Tewksbury, Weaver, & Maddex, 2001). Incidental exposure has been found to be significantly associated with political involvement among social media users (Y. Kim, Chen, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2013; Valeriani & Vaccari, 2016). Given that individuals often connect with a diversity of others on Facebook (Bakshy et al., 2015), incidental exposure is also a prevalent mechanism

underlying people's exposure to political disagreement on the platform (Brundidge, 2010). However, the impact of incidental exposure to counter-attitudinal information on political participation is rarely examined.

Scholarly debate exists over whether exposure to counter-attitudinal information mobilizes or inhibits political participation. Literature focusing on interpersonal communication suggests that political disagreement engenders attitudinal ambivalence within an individual, which in turn decreases one's confidence and willingness to take political actions (Eveland & Hively, 2009; Mutz, 2006). Additionally, people encountering disagreement tend to avoid subsequent political activities due to the motivation of maintaining interpersonal social harmony (Mutz, 2006). Furthermore, as suggested by the spiral of silence theory (Noelle-Neumann, 1974), incidental exposure to counter-attitudinal information may lead individuals to perceive their own views to be in the minority, and so they refrain from further activities due to the fear of isolation (Lu et al., 2016). Indeed, the fear of losing friends leads social media users to be less willing to engage in politics online if they think their audience will disagree with them (Chan, 2018; Duggan & Smith, 2016; Hampton et al., 2014).

Conversely, other research has suggested a positive relationship between incidental exposure to counter-attitudinal information and political participation (e.g., Kwak, Williams, Wang, & Lee, 2005; Scheufele, Hardy, Brossard, Waismel-Manor, & Nisbet, 2006). Exposure to political disagreement provides individuals with alternative perspectives and encourages them to reflect more carefully on their own opinions (Price, Cappella, & Nir, 2002; Scheufele et al., 2006). This learning and reflection process, in turn, leads to a higher level of engagement in political activities (Jung, Kim, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2011). When it comes to social media, some scholars have also found that political disagreement is positively associated with participation (Choi et al., 2017; Min & Wohn, 2018).

One of the reasons for these contradictory findings is that the research has operationalized political participation in various ways (F. Lee, 2012; Pattie & Johnston, 2009). Although some previous studies have addressed this concern by investigating how political disagreement leads to different types of political participation, the findings are imperfect. For example, F. Lee (2012) argues that exposure to counter-attitudinal information leads to attitudinal ambivalence and thus inhibits engagement in position-taking activities (e.g., signing a petition), which require participants to take a fixed position on an issue or candidate. Nevertheless, the findings of that same study indicate that political disagreement has no impact on voting, which the author claims as an example of position-taking activities. Also, Lu and Myrick (2016) categorize participation activities according to required costs and find that exposure to counter-attitudinal political information on Facebook encourages cheap participation but not costly participation. Cheap participation in Lu and Myrick (2016) is operationalized as a combined index of communicative activities (e.g., paying attention to political information; sharing news on social networking sites), which previous studies have conceptualized as antecedents of political participation (e.g., Choi, 2016; McLeod, Scheufele, & Moy, 1999).

This study extends the literature by focusing on corrective actions, or those "political behaviors that are reactive, based on perceptions of media and media effects, and seek to influence the public sphere" (Rojas, 2010, p. 347). For example, attending a political rally allows individuals to have their

voice heard in the public sphere; persuading others about a certain issue allows individuals to "correct" the perceived "wrongs" in the media. This distinct type of political participation is particularly relevant to this study because it allows individuals who come across political disagreement on Facebook to engage in corrective actions to counterbalance the perceived negative influence of undesirable messages (Lim, 2017; Rojas, 2010). More importantly, with the prevalence of emerging technologies, people are better able to take corrective actions by creating and circulating their own opinions online (Lim & Golan, 2011).

As suggested by its definition, engagement in corrective actions is primarily based on one's perception of media and media effects. When it comes to counter-attitudinal information on social media, individuals tend to perceive the source and content of the dissonant information as biased against their own viewpoints (Gunther, McLaughlin, Gotlieb, & Wise, 2017; T. Lee, Kim, & Coe, 2018; Stroud, Muddiman, & Lee, 2014). Additionally, the third-person effect suggests that individuals tend to perceive the counter-attitudinal posts on Facebook as having undesirable effects on others, especially on undecided voters (G. Chen & Ng, 2016; Davison, 1983; Perloff, 1989; Tsay-Vogel, 2016). To counterbalance the perceived negative influence of biased media and undesirable content on others, individuals are likely to engage in corrective actions, such as sharing countering opinions online and attending a political rally (Barnidge & Rojas, 2014; Hwang, Pan, & Sun, 2008; Rojas, 2010). Furthermore, as suggested by the theory of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957), incidental exposure to counter-attitudinal information causes dissonance—a state of mental discomfort and unease. As a result, individuals are motivated to reduce dissonance by, among other things, attempting to persuade others to change their opinions. Indeed, previous research has found that incidental exposure to counter-attitudinal information encourages political information sharing on social media, which aims to amplify one's political views in the public sphere (Weeks, Lane, Kim, Lee, & Kwak, 2017).

It is worth noting that the mechanisms of attitudinal ambivalence and fear of isolation underlying the negative relationship between political disagreement and political participation may remain viable in the context of corrective actions. Specifically, individuals holding ambivalent attitudes on a certain issue or candidate can hardly have the confidence to voice their opinions in the public sphere. Indeed, the literature suggests that a firm position on political issues and the confidence to express political opinions are important antecedents for corrective political participation (Lim, 2017). The need for maintaining social harmony and the fear of isolation particularly prevent individuals from participating in activities that require face-to-face confrontation (Mutz, 2006). In this case, incidental exposure to counter-attitudinal information may discourage corrective political participation, because many corrective actions (e.g., attending a political rally; persuading others on a political issue) involve tense confrontation with others.

Based on existing theories and evidence, the impact of counter-attitudinal information on corrective political participation is unclear, especially in the context of incidental exposure on Facebook. Therefore, the following research question is posed:

RQ: How does incidental exposure to counter-attitudinal political information on Facebook influence corrective political participation?

The Role of Negative Emotions

Studies on the impact of political disagreement have primarily emphasized cognitive processes such as attitudinal ambivalence (Mutz, 2006), but the role of emotional responses is underexplored. Although emotions induced by media stimuli are often short-lived, they are intense enough to influence the complex processes of media effects (Nabi, 2010). Specifically, previous research has tended to conceptualize emotional responses as mediators in the relationship between media use and subsequent behaviors (e.g., Gervais, 2015; Lecheler, Bos, & Vliegenthart, 2015). Therefore, this study examines the indirect effects of incidental exposure to dissonant information on corrective participation through two discrete emotions: anxiety and anger.

Incidental exposure to dissonant political information on Facebook is likely to elicit negative emotions, including anxiety and anger (Lu & Myrick, 2016; Wojcieszak, Bimber, Feldman, & Stroud, 2016). As suggested by the appraisal theories of emotion, these two negative emotions are induced through different mechanisms. On the one hand, anxiety is often induced as a response to threatening stimuli and is associated with a lack of personal control over one's environment (Frijda, 1986; Lazarus, 1991). When individuals come across political disagreement on Facebook, anxiety is likely to occur because they feel their beliefs are threatened by the information, and the political outcomes (e.g., policy change; election result) are under the control of biased sources (Suhay & Erisen, 2018). On the other hand, anger occurs when people are blocked from achieving their goals and believe that an injustice is committed against them (Lazarus, 1991). The motivated reasoning theory suggests that individuals have a tendency to seek out confirmatory evidence for their own opinions (Taber & Lodge, 2006). When this goal is challenged by incidental exposure to political disagreement, anger is induced. Furthermore, as the hostile media theory posits, individuals tend to believe the source of counter-attitudinal information is biased against their own party and in-group members (Stroud et al., 2014; Vallone, Ross, & Lepper, 1985). As a result, having this type of perception about the news source is likely to trigger anger (Hwang et al., 2008; H. Kim, 2016).

The negative emotions elicited by dissonant political information could, in turn, influence a person's willingness to engage in political behaviors, including corrective actions (Namkoong, Fung, & Scheufele, 2012; Wojcieszak et al., 2016). Anxiety and anger encourage political engagement via different mechanisms. Anxiety triggers the surveillance system such that anxious individuals become more attentive to the environment and prepared for making behavioral changes to prevent the threats from occurring (Lazarus, 1991; Lerner & Keltner, 2001; Marcus, Neuman, & MacKuen, 2000). With anxiety that is induced by incidental exposure to political disagreement, the threats are people's undesired political outcomes, such as unwanted policy changes. To prevent the unwanted policy changes from occurring, anxious people are likely to engage in corrective actions to counterbalance the undesired influence of counter-attitudinal information on other voters. Therefore, incidental exposure to counter-attitudinal information on Facebook elicits anxiety, which, in turn, is likely to enhance one's engagement in corrective actions.

Unlike anxiety, anger often leads individuals to engage in approach behaviors to protect their beliefs (Folkman, Lazarus, Gruen, & DeLongis, 1986; Lerner & Keltner, 2001). The appraisal that one's political preference is treated unfairly by the media arouses anger and evokes action tendencies to behave against the offender (Mackie, Devos, & Smith, 2000; Tausch et al., 2011). In the case of incidental exposure to dissonant political information, Facebook facilitates angry users to quickly protect their beliefs by sharing corrective

information and expressing opinions on the platform. Indeed, anger is found to encourage involvement in corrective actions, such as discussing politics with people one disagrees with and attending a public forum (Hwang et al., 2008; H. Kim, 2016; Valentino, Brader, Groenendyk, Gregorowicz, & Hutchings, 2011).

Previous studies have explored the indirect effects of negative emotions on the relationship between dissonant political information and political engagement (e.g., Lu & Myrick, 2016; Wojcieszak et al., 2016). This study extends the literature to the mechanism of incidental exposure and focuses on corrective political participation. Based on the literature connecting emotions to political participation, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1a: *Incidental exposure to counter-attitudinal information on Facebook has an indirect impact on corrective political participation through anger.*

H1b: *Incidental exposure to counter-attitudinal information on Facebook has an indirect impact on corrective political participation through anxiety.*

The Moderating Effects of Issue Relevance

Appraisal theories of emotion propose that the personal relevance of an eliciting event or stimulus is critical to the induction of negative emotions (Lazarus, 1991; Smith & Ellsworth, 1987). Issue relevance, which refers to "the extent to which the attitudinal issue under consideration is of personal importance" (Petty & Cacioppo, 1979, p. 1915), is a primary appraisal for emotional responses (Smith & Lazarus, 1993). In other words, if a person perceives the outcome of a political issue irrelevant to his or her well-being, he or she will have little emotional response and thus be unlikely to take subsequent actions (Murry & Dacin, 1996). However, with high involvement in a certain issue, individuals tend to learn about a diversity of perspectives to either make more informed decisions (Atkin, 1973) or check whether their political preferences are fairly treated by the media (Peralta, Wojcieszak, Lelkes, & de Vreese, 2017). In this case, when people accidentally encounter challenging posts about a personally relevant issue, they may invest more cognitive effort in processing the information (Iyengar, Hahn, Krosnick, & Walker, 2008; Krosnick, 1990). More importantly, as suggested by the hostile media effect, individuals who consider the covered issue personally relevant are particularly likely to perceive the source of the counter-attitudinal information as biased (Gunther, Christen, Liebhart, & Chia, 2001; Matthes & Beyer, 2017). As a result, anger and anxiety are elicited and lead to engagement in corrective actions. Indeed, previous studies have found that issue relevance moderates the indirect effects of dissonant political information on political participation through negative emotions (H. Chen, Gan, & Sun, 2017). Therefore, this study further posits that issue relevance moderates the indirect effects of incidental exposure to dissonant information on corrective participation through anger and anxiety. Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual model, and the following hypotheses are proposed:

H2a: *Issue relevance moderates the indirect effects of incidental exposure to counter-attitudinal information on corrective political participation through anger.*

H2b: *Issue relevance moderates the indirect effects of incidental exposure to counter-attitudinal information on corrective political participation through anxiety.*
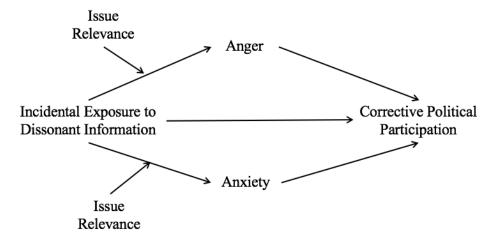
Figure 1. Conceptual model of moderated mediation for corrective participation.

Method

This study employed a laboratory experiment to answer the research question and test the hypotheses. The experiment, conducted in the spring of 2017, involved a control group and a treatment group. Ninety-one participants were recruited from undergraduate courses at a large Midwest U.S. university. Among all the participants, 75.6% were women, and the average age was 20.1 years ($SD =$ 1.10). Participants in the control group were exposed to three mock Facebook pages, each of which contained five nonpolitical posts. For the stimuli of the treatment group, one of the five posts on each mock page was substituted with a counter-attitudinal political post. Conceptually, incidental exposure often occurs during other unrelated activities when individuals unexpectedly and unintentionally encounter certain information (Frensch, 1998; Tewksbury et al., 2001). To divert participants' attention from counter-attitudinal political information, the experimenters informed the participants that the purpose of the study was to understand the layout of Facebook pages; thus, they would be asked to evaluate the layout and advertisements inserted in the mock pages. Participants were allowed to proceed to the next page whenever they wished; they were not required to browse any information on any page for any set length of time.

Design and Procedures

Participants completed an online pretest before attending the main part of the experiment in the lab. To determine what type of content would be counter-attitudinal, each participant was asked in the pretest to rate her or his position on three political issues: abortion, gun control, and government regulation of the financial industry. The responses were trichotomized into oppose, neutral, or favor. In addition, as a moderator theorized in this study, issue relevance was measured in the pretest.

During the posttest, participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions. The randomization was quite effective because there were no significant differences between the two conditions in terms of participants' age ($t = -1.37$, $df = 80$, $p = .18$) and gender ($\chi^2 = .39$, $df = 1$, $p = .54$). Forty-six participants who were randomly assigned to the control condition browsed three mock Facebook pages containing no political information (details described below). The 40 participants in the treatment group were randomly assigned to one of the three political issues and then were paired with three mock Facebook pages, each of which contained one counter-attitudinal political post (details described below). Five participants who reported a truly neutral attitude on the assigned issue were dropped from the study because no stimuli are counter-attitudinal for them. Although participants assigned to each of the three issues were combined to represent the treatment group in the subsequent analyses, the diversity of the issues provided some insurance against findings that were an artifact of the features of any particular issue.

Immediately after browsing the randomly assigned Facebook pages, the participants were asked in a posttest survey about their emotional responses and intentions of participating in corrective actions. Three versions of the posttest survey explored the three issues of abortion rights, gun control, and financial regulation. Each participant in the treatment group was given the survey corresponding to the content of her or his stimuli. For example, the abortion issue was randomly assigned to a participant in the incidental exposure group. If the participant supported the right of abortion in the pretest, then he or she was presented the Facebook pages with anti-abortion information included. Then the participant was given a posttest survey with questions about his or her intention of participating in political activities on the issue of abortion. Because participants in the control group were not exposed to any political information in the stimuli, they were randomly assigned one of the three versions of the posttest survey. After completing the questionnaire, participants were debriefed and thanked for their time. This experiment received institutional review board approval before its implementation.

Stimuli Materials

Participants in the control group browsed three mock Facebook pages, each of which contained five nonpolitical posts (see Figure 2 for an example). The five posts on each page included one nonpolitical news post from the Associated Press and four status updates with names and profile photos generated from random users. The stimuli for the treatment group (see Figure 3 for an example) substituted a counter-attitudinal news post for the nonpolitical news post in each mock Facebook page. The Associated Press was selected as the news source in this experiment because it is generally perceived as neutral and nonpartisan. The results of this study are unlikely to be affected by people's biased perceptions of partisan media (Stroud et al., 2014). To control for the impact of social endorsement (Messing & Westwood, 2014), the number of likes was kept constant across all the conditions.
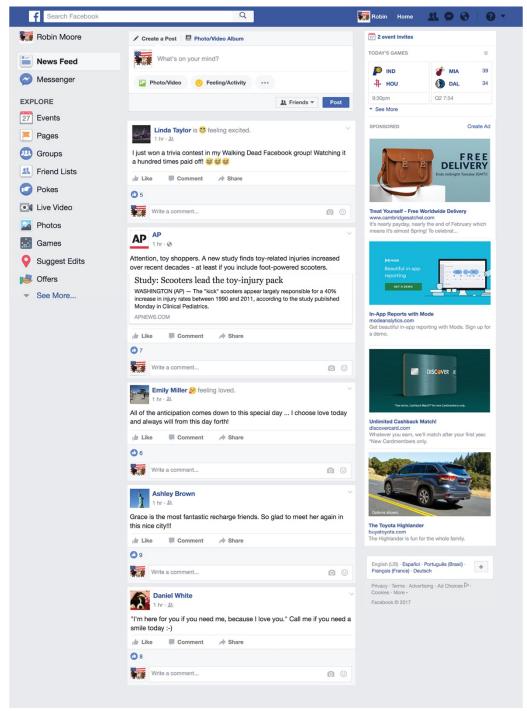
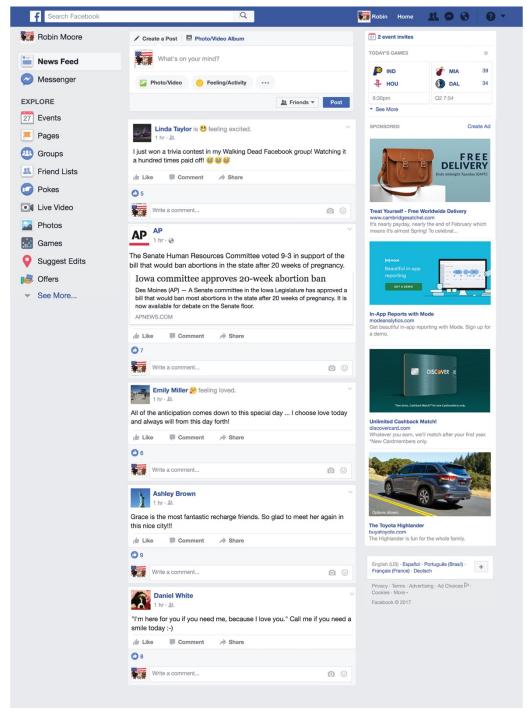*Figure 2. Example of the stimuli for the control group.*

Figure 3. Example of the stimuli for the treatment group.

Measures

Issue Relevance

Participants were asked in the pretest to rate on a 7-point scale (ranging from 0 to 6) their agreement with the following two statements (adapted from Balzarotti & Ciceri, 2014; So & Nabi, 2013): (1) I feel [political issue] is a matter that concerns me; (2) The policy on [political issue] affects my personal life. The responses on each issue were averaged to tap the perceived relevance of a certain issue (abortion: Spearman-Brown reliability = .87, M = 3.99, SD = 1.57; gun control: Spearman-Brown reliability = .80, M = 3.41, SD = 1.49; financial regulation: Spearman-Brown reliability = .86, M = 3.38, SD = 1.33).

Emotional Response

Anger and anxiety were measured with several emotion items using a 7-point scale ranging from 0 (*not at all*) to 6 (*very much*). The question stem is, "After viewing the materials from Facebook, how do you feel?" Following Dillard and Shen (2007), the items were grouped into two factors: anger (irritated, annoyed; Spearman-Brown reliability = .81, M = 1.16, SD = 1.38) and anxiety (fearful, worried, scared; Cronbach's α = .82, M = 0.65, SD = 1.02). A confirmatory factor analysis indicated that the data fit the two-factor model of emotions well: $\chi^2(df = 4)$ = 8.67, p = .07, comparative fit index = .98, standard root mean square residual = .04. However, the data did not fit the one-factor model: $\chi^2(df = 5)$ = 30.83, p < .001, comparative fit index = .87, standard root mean square residual = .07. A χ^2 difference test demonstrated that the two-factor model was a significantly better fit than the single-factor model, $\chi^2_{comparison}$ $(df_{comparison} = 1)$ = 22.16, p < .001.

Corrective Political Participation

The intention of corrective political participation was measured by asking participants: "How likely are you to take the following actions in the next 12 months?" Following Rojas (2010), five political activities were presented: engage in discussion about [political issue]; attend a political rally or demonstration on [political issue]; contact a politician or government official to express my opinions on [political issue]; engage in discussion about [political issue] on social networking sites; try to persuade others online about [political issue]. The likelihood of engaging in each of these activities was measured on a 7-point scale ranging from 0 (*not likely at all*) to 6 (*extremely likely*). Responses on these five activities were averaged to tap the participant's likelihood of engaging in corrective political actions (Cronbach's α = .84, M = 1.44, SD = 1.34).

Findings

The study relied on the experiment data to answer the research question about how incidental exposure to counter-attitudinal information on Facebook influences corrective political participation. An independent-samples *t* test was conducted to compare the intention to engage in corrective actions between the control group and the incidental exposure group. The score for the control group (M = 1.32, SD = 1.15) was not significantly different from that for the incidental exposure group (M = 1.57, SD = 1.52); t (72) = −.86, p = .39. The result suggests that incidental exposure to political disagreement on Facebook does not have a direct impact on one's willingness to participate in corrective actions.

H1a and H1b predicted that incidental exposure to counter-attitudinal political information has an indirect impact on corrective political participation through anger and anxiety. This study specified a multimediator path model by using Model 4 of the PROCESS Macro offered by Hayes (2013). This single theoretical model revealed indirect effects of incidental exposure on corrective political participation through anger and anxiety. Using the bootstrapping technique (Preacher & Hayes, 2004), with 5,000 bootstrap samples, this study analyzed the 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals (CIs) associated with the indirect effects of anger and anxiety.

As shown in Table 1, incidental exposure to counter-attitudinal political information did not have an indirect effect on corrective political participation through anger ($B = -.08$, $SE = .09$, CI [-0.4078, 0.0246]). The confidence intervals included zero, suggesting an insignificant indirect relationship. Therefore, H1a is not supported. However, as shown in Table 1, incidental exposure indirectly enhanced corrective political participation through anxiety ($B = .49$, $SE = .23$, CI [0.1123, 1.0372]). The confidence intervals did not include zero, suggesting a significant indirect relationship. Therefore, H1b is supported. Incidental exposure to counter-attitudinal information on Facebook elicited anxiety, which, in turn, led to a higher level of engagement in corrective actions. A closer look into the model indicates that, consistent with the expectation, incidental exposure to counter-attitudinal political information on Facebook elicits both anger ($B = .57$, $SE = .31$, $p < .10$) and anxiety ($B = .80$, $SE = .21$, $p < .001$). However, only anxiety triggered people's intention to engage in corrective actions ($B = .62$, $SE = .17$, $p < .001$).

Table 1. Indirect Effects of Incidental Exposure to Dissonant Political Information on Corrective Political Participation Through Anger and Anxiety.

Mediator	Corrective political participation		
	B	*SE*	Bootstrapping 95% Confidence Intervals
Anger	−.0808	.0936	[−0.4078, 0.0246]
Anxiety	.4949	.2301	[0.1123, 1.0372]

Note. Bootstrapping results are bias-corrected and accelerated; 5,000 bootstrap samples. Political interest (i.e., one's interest in information about what's going on in government and politics) is included in the model as a control variable.

H2a and H2b predicted that issue relevance moderates the indirect effects of incidental exposure to dissonant political information on corrective political participation through anger and anxiety. To test this model, this study specified a moderated mediation path model using the PROCESS Macro and the Model 7 template (Hayes, 2013). This model demonstrates how indirect relationships among variables "operate differently for different people or in different contexts or circumstances" (Hayes, 2013, p. 327). It works well to demonstrate how the indirect effects of negative emotions (i.e., anger and anxiety) in the relationship between Facebook-based incidental exposure and corrective political participation may differ based on the perceived relevance of the political issue discussed in the Facebook posts. This study used 5,000 bootstrap samples and analyzed the 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals (Preacher & Hayes, 2004).

The index of moderated mediation was not significant for anger ($B = -.06$, $SE = .07$, CI [-0.2698, 0.0241]), indicating that the indirect effect of anger on participatory intent did not differ based on the

perceived relevance of the issue mentioned in the Facebook posts. The index of moderated mediation is "a direct quantification of the linear association between the indirect effect and the putative moderator of that effect" (Hayes, 2015, p. 3). In practice, if the confidence interval of this index does not include zero, the moderated mediation effect is considered significant. Therefore, H2a is not supported. A closer look into the moderated mediation model indicates that issue relevance moderates the impact of Facebook-based incidental exposure to dissonant political information on anger (B = .45, SE = .21, p < .05). The positive effect of incidental exposure on anger is particularly stronger among those who perceive the issue as relevant to themselves. However, as mentioned above, anger does not have a significant impact on one's intention to engage in corrective actions.

The index of moderated mediation was significant for anxiety (B = .17, SE = .13, CI [0.0001, 0.5541]), indicating that the indirect effect of incidental exposure on corrective participation via anxiety differed based on the perceived relevance of the issue in the Facebook posts. Therefore, H2b is supported. As shown in Table 2, the indirect effects of Facebook-based incidental exposure to dissonant political information on corrective participation via anxiety are significant for individuals with moderate and high levels of issue relevance (moderate: B = .44, SE = .20, CI [0.1205, 0.9512]; high: B = .69, SE = .35, CI [0.1263, 1.5256]). The indirect effects are not significant among those who perceive the issue relevance as low (B = .19, SE = .20, CI [−0.0984, 0.6832]). When people incidentally encounter counter-attitudinal political information on Facebook and perceive the issue as personally relevant, they are more likely to feel anxious and subsequently intend to engage in corrective actions.

Table 2. Conditional Indirect Effects of Facebook Incidental Exposure on Corrective Political Participation Through Anxiety at Different Levels of Issue Relevance.

Mediator	Moderator (issue relevance)	Corrective political participation		
		B	*SE*	Bootstrapping 95% Confidence Intervals
	Low	.1934	.1964	[−0.0984, 0.6832]
Anxiety	Moderate	.4439	.2017	[0.1205, 0.9512]
	High	.6944	.3494	[0.1263, 1.5256]

Note. Bootstrapping results are bias corrected and accelerated; 5,000 bootstrap samples. Political interest is included in the model as a control variable.

Discussion

This study explores the behavioral consequence of incidental exposure to counter-attitudinal political information on Facebook. Abundant literature has explored the relationship between disagreement on social networking sites and political participation (e.g., Choi et al., 2017; Lu et al., 2016), but the specific mechanism of incidental exposure is underexplored. The results of the experiment reported in this article indicate that Facebook-based incidental exposure to political disagreement does not have a direct impact on corrective political participation. This result may be attributed to the nature of incidental exposure. Incidental exposure often occurs during other unrelated activities when individuals unexpectedly and

unintentionally encounter certain information (Frensch, 1998; Tewksbury et al., 2001). In such instances, we can hardly expect individuals to be extremely involved in the communicative action (Boczkowski, Mitchelstein, & Matassi, 2018; Oeldorf-Hirsch, 2018). Most people will simply discount the counter-attitudinal information encountered on Facebook, and, thus, their intention to engage in corrective actions will not be affected (Matthes & Marquart, 2015).

This explanation can be supported to some extent by the subsequent analyses of the intervening roles of negative emotions and issue relevance. The results indicate that incidental exposure to political disagreement indirectly encourages corrective political participation via anxiety, especially among those who consider the issue covered in the Facebook posts highly relevant to their own well-being. As suggested by the dual-process models (Chaiken, Liberman, & Eagly, 1989; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), perceived issue relevance leads people to invest more cognitive effort in processing media messages. Once issue relevance promotes involvement in the counter-attitudinal information, Facebook-based incidental exposure might enhance corrective participation by eliciting anxiety. On one hand, this finding implies that social media have the potential of mobilizing users to engage in political activities, especially given that incidental exposure to disagreement is not uncommon on Facebook (Lu & Lee, 2019). On the other hand, because negative emotions often lead to a higher level of incivility during online political conversations (Ziegele, Weber, Quiring, & Breiner, 2018), the corrective actions driven by anxiety may fill the public sphere with derogatory statements.

The findings of the mediating roles of negative emotions have important implications. While previous work on the relationship between political disagreement and political participation has primarily emphasized cognitive processes, this study extends the literature by exploring the indirect effects of two discrete emotions: anger and anxiety. A closer look at the mediation model indicates that incidental exposure to dissonant information elicits both anxiety and anger, but only anxiety induces the intention to engage in corrective actions. These findings are consistent with Lu and Myrick (2016), who find that political disagreement on Facebook has an indirect effect on costly participation via anxiety rather than anger. Corrective actions can be considered costly in the sense that they require participants to invest time, cognitive effort, and even interpersonal social harmony during activities such as persuading others online and joining in a political demonstration.

Theoretically, these findings echo the arguments of appraisal theories of discrete emotions (Lerner & Keltner, 2001) in the sense that anxiety and anger induce different action tendencies. On one hand, anxiety is induced when people feel that political outcomes are under the control of biased media rather than themselves. In this case, people are likely to actively engage in corrective actions to counterbalance the influence of biased media. On the other hand, anger usually triggers a quick response without extensive contemplation (Folkman et al., 1986; Lerner & Keltner, 2001). Therefore, angry people may tend to engage in immediate actions rather than planning their political activities for the next 12 months, which is the measurement of corrective participation in this study. Furthermore, in the context of incidental exposure, anger is induced by people's perception that the source of counter-attitudinal information violates the desired standard of objectivity. To tackle this cognitive appraisal, angry people will uphold the punitive tendency and support the restriction of civil liberties among the individuals or organizations perceived as biased (Lazarus, 1991; Vasilopoulos, Marcus, & Foucault, 2017). They may engage in other forms of political

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participation, such as political activities aimed at restricting and censoring the undesired information (H. Kim, 2016). Future research could empirically examine this speculation by exploring the different action tendencies of discrete emotions in the context of incidental exposure to counter-attitudinal information.

Finally, the results indicate that Facebook-based incidental exposure induces anger and anxiety among those who perceive the covered issue as personally relevant. The moderating effect of issue relevance provides empirical evidence to the appraisal theories of emotion, which propose that one's evaluation of personal relevance is a primary appraisal for inducing emotions (Folkman et al., 1986; Smith & Lazarus, 1993). Theoretically, this finding suggests the importance of considering individual differences in exploring the relationships among political disagreement, negative emotions, and political participation. While this study examines issue relevance and controls for political interest in the models, future research could account for other personality traits, such as conflict avoidance. It is possible that individuals who tend to avoid conflicts will stay away from further political actions when they feel anxious about counter-attitudinal information exposed on social media (Mutz, 2006).

Some limitations must be noted in the interpretation of the findings. First, the sample size of this experiment is relatively small and thus raises a concern that the nonsignificant effect of incidental exposure to political disagreement on corrective participation may be due to a lack of statistical power. Nevertheless, it is no surprise to find the null relationship, because a recent meta-analysis indicates that political disagreement has no direct impact on political participation (Matthes, Knoll, Valenzuela, Hopmann, & von Sikorski, 2018). An important objective of future research should be to explore the competing mechanisms underlying the effects of political disagreement.

Second, participants of this study were recruited from college students, so generalizability is limited. Nevertheless, given that Facebook is a major source of political news for young adults (Mitchell, Gottfried, & Matsa, 2015), the sample was well suited to the study aims. Also, it is worth noting that the participants' relatively high level of education may explain the nonsignificant relationship between anger and corrective actions. Better-educated people are more subject to the social pressure of behaving decently in public life and tend to be more aware that anger is a poor basis for political engagement (Berelson, 1952).

Third, the measurement of corrective participation captures one's intention to engage in certain activities rather than actual behaviors. Future research could consider more corrective actions (e.g., public commenting on social media) and carry out a design to examine the effects of incidental exposure to counter-attitudinal information on actual political behaviors. Fourth, because the participants in the control group browsed nonpolitical posts, it is possible that the effects identified in this experiment were simply a product of political information instead of incidental exposure to disagreement. Future studies could address this limitation by including more experiment groups, such as incidental exposure to political agreement.

Finally, although the materials used in the stimuli were drawn from real Facebook posts, the findings should be treated with some caution due to concern about the ecological validity of the artificial Facebook setting. Specifically, the stimuli used in the experiment were text-based news items posted by a news organization (i.e., the Associated Press). Most social media sites allow users to insert visual elements such as pictures, animations, and videos into a post. Future research should account for these affordances,

because visual elements may lead individuals to allocate more cognitive resources to process the posts that they accidentally encounter on social media (Lang, Borse, Wise, & David, 2002). Also, whether political disagreement is from a personal friend or a news organization may determine people's tendency to engage in subsequent political activities. Scholars could further explore this line of research by considering the information source as a critical variable.

Despite these limitations, this study extends the understanding of how political disagreement on social networking sites influences participation by focusing on incidental exposure and considering the effects of emotional responses and issue relevance. The results presented here provide a more nuanced picture of the impact of social media use on political engagement.

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