

University of New Hampshire

University of New Hampshire Scholars' Repository

Honors Theses and Capstones

Student Scholarship

Spring 2022

Paying Attention: The Effects of Different Social Media Posts on Consumers

Noah Lapointe

University of New Hampshire - Main Campus

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholars.unh.edu/honors>



Part of the [Public Relations and Advertising Commons](#), [Social Influence and Political Communication Commons](#), and the [Social Media Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Lapointe, Noah, "Paying Attention: The Effects of Different Social Media Posts on Consumers" (2022). *Honors Theses and Capstones*. 615.
<https://scholars.unh.edu/honors/615>

This Senior Honors Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Scholarship at University of New Hampshire Scholars' Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Theses and Capstones by an authorized administrator of University of New Hampshire Scholars' Repository. For more information, please contact Scholarly.Communication@unh.edu.

Paying Attention: The Effects of Different Social Media Posts on Consumers

Prepared by: Noah Lapointe

Advised by: Professor Justin Pomerance

May 9, 2022

Introduction

Everyday, there is fresh information and news for individuals to process in order to keep themselves up to date with current events. Many people wake up and the first thing they do is turn on their phone and begin browsing social media. Each one of these individuals has their own thoughts and feelings about what they see, and each one processes the information differently. Some of the most prevalent information that these individuals are viewing on social media is political news. In a country where political parties are becoming increasingly separated in terms of attitudes and beliefs, the news is following suit. When people see political information on social media, they either agree or disagree with it, and how strong their current feelings on each topic are plays a role in how they will react to their feed. How will the nature of the content someone sees—whether they agree or disagree with it—influence the time they spend on that post, their interaction with the post, their trust in the account, and their memory of each post?

In the ever-growing world of social media, consumers are seeking out information that appeals to them, that they trust, that holds their attention, and that entertains them. Social media has become a hot spot for political information and opinions, and serves as a resource for news for many. Given the polarized nature of social media, one critical question is how consumers respond when faced with content that opposes their existing beliefs. When a consumer sees a post that is aligned with their political beliefs, it can lead that consumer to trust what they are viewing. On the other hand, seeing this type of content may also decrease the likelihood that consumers engage with the post, or retain the information they are viewing. The viewpoint extremity of the content in a post may also have an effect on the consumer's reaction, whether it

helps boost the content's engagement or reduces it drastically. For instance, someone who strongly supports a border wall might see content that is in support of open borders for immigration. That person's reaction to the post could be anywhere from angrily explaining why the idea is incorrect to ignoring the post entirely. The effectiveness of a social media account's content may rely on a mixture of viewpoints to keep viewers engaged. By using a mixture of viewpoints in social media content, accounts could increase the amount of likes and comments on each post, be more memorable to the viewer, and increase consumer sentiment of the poster.

The results of this research may have implications with how firms might formulate their strategy when posting on social media. When an account is deciding what content to post, they should analyze the effects of content that both supports and goes against consumer beliefs, as well as varying extremities of the viewpoints discussed, and determine the impact this content may have on these factors. In this research, we seek to inform those who post on social media by determining the influence different content will have on consumers. This will shed light on the type of content accounts should post in order to maximize their social media account's effectiveness in their goals of persuasion, entertainment, and engagement.

Preliminary Review of Literature

Previous literature can provide insight into how consumers might react when faced with a post that agrees with or opposes their political beliefs. Consumers might gain trust in the social media account if the post is in line with their pre-existing beliefs, or lose trust if they feel the information is misleading due to it containing an opposing viewpoint. Individuals have natural tendencies that make them more or less likely to submit to persuasion or to comply with a

request (Cialdini 2001). Looking into previous literature, we can see what triggers these tendencies and how they might affect consumer reactions when they encounter different posts on social media (Cialdini 2001; Tormala 2016; Clark et al. 2008; Tormala and Petty 2002; Finkel et al. 2020).

Numerous factors impact an individual's likelihood to comply with a request when it is made of them (Cialdini 2001). Two factors stand out as particularly impactful to our hypotheses—authority and liking. When a person appears to have expertise on a topic or trustworthiness, individuals around them are more likely to comply with a request that that person makes. Additionally, if a person likes the person—or account—who is requesting something of them, they are more likely to comply (see Figure 1).

Related literature deals with certainty of beliefs. Although people are more likely to act on attitudes when they feel certain about them as opposed to uncertain, uncertainty about information drives individuals to think more deeply about the information (Tormala 2016). Introducing uncertainty early in a message can increase engagement with the message and in turn promote persuasion. This is due to uncertainty driving the recipient of the message to dive deeper into the message to restore their certainty of the information in the message. Thus, an optimal persuasion strategy could be to trigger uncertainty and increase processing of the message, then promote certainty to increase the recipient's likelihood to act on that message. For a social media account, this method of persuasion could be beneficial in increasing conversions on advertisements or increasing overall engagement with posts (Tormala 2016; see figure 2). However, in 2008 Clark et al. researched uncertainty of information and found slightly different results. Their research investigates the impact that a message being counterattitudinal or pro attitudinal—that is, if it aligns with or disagrees with the individual's beliefs—has on message

processing in individuals. These authors find that people experiencing ambivalence (mixed feelings or emotions) naturally try to reduce the amount of ambivalence they experience. This implies that when faced with a message that they do not agree with, much less processing will occur as opposed to if the message were pro attitudinal (Clark et al. 2008; see Figure 3).

In another experiment, students were presented with counterattitudinal information and told to make a counter argument for it, with the assumption that the students would habitually resist the information due to it being counterattitudinal. When faced with a perceived stronger message, it was found that resisting a persuasive message can increase the participants' attitude certainty on the topic, whereas when presented a weaker argument there was little to no impact on the participants' attitude certainty (Tormala and Petty 2002). This has implications in our research of the difference of reactions between those with moderate and extreme attitudes.

Lastly, when looking into the current state of political polarization, insight can be gained from Finkel et al.'s article, "Political Sectarianism in America". This article identifies a new source of polarization occurring in the United States. Rather than focusing on the positives of each individual political party, the parties are focusing on dominating the supporters of the opposing party. Othering, the act of viewing those with opposing opinions as if they are an alien to oneself - plays a major role in political sectarianism. Social media is a factor that strongly influences individuals' likelihood to become politically polarized, and a recent field experiment showed that Americans who delete their Facebook account become less politically polarized. Based on this trend, a social media account is likely to have more polarized viewers, which has implications on our research.

Based on this literature, we predict that for individuals with moderate attitudes and prior beliefs, the presence of counterattitudinal information will increase the time spent on each post,

decrease the likelihood to share each post, increase their memory of the post, and increase their trust in the poster. We predict that individuals with extreme attitudes and prior beliefs will react much differently. Based on the ambivalence literature, we predict that someone with extreme beliefs will either spend drastically more or drastically less time on a post with counterattitudinal information. We also predict that engagement on each post for those with extreme attitudes will increase as opposed to a decrease for those with moderate attitudes. We expect a similar but more drastic decrease in trust in the account posting counterattitudinal information, and a greater increase in memory of the post.

Experiment: The Effects of Pro and Counterattitudinal Information

The main goal of this study is to analyze trends in participants' trust, memory, and overall sentiments when people face information that either is aligned with their beliefs or is opposed to their beliefs. This involves allowing participants to share their feelings about political parties, trust in social media sources, and their overall political beliefs. We created a survey with a mock social media feed to test our hypotheses and analyze the effects of co- and counter- partisan information through this medium. With this study, we randomized participants into four conditions, each showing a social media feed with posts categorized as extreme democrat, moderate democrat, moderate republican, and extreme republican. By splitting participants into these conditions, we will be able to differentiate between co-partisan and counter-partisan groups. We hypothesize that when participants see co-partisan information, they will be more likely to trust the information they are viewing and have more positive sentiments after reading the posts. We additionally expect participants viewing counter-partisan information to feel the

opposite. We also hypothesize that co-partisan information will correlate to an overall positive sentiment from the participants towards the poster and fellow co-partisans. Post memory, we hypothesize, will be higher in strong co- and counter- partisans than in moderate co- and counter-partisans.

Method

In this study, we analyze the effects of varying the extremity of political social media posts on social media. We recruited 181 respondents (76 male, 88 female, mean age = 20.03, 100 Republicans, 57 Democrats) to participate in a Qualtrics survey through the University of New Hampshire research lab. These respondents viewed one of four different social media feeds, each with a different set of posts among the conditions of extreme liberal, moderate liberal, extreme conservative, and moderate conservative. These posts consisted of three highly debated political topics in the present day United States general public: abortion, climate change, and vaccination. We gathered the posts from Twitter, and edited them to create one version that was strongly conservative, one that was moderately conservative, one that was moderately liberal, and one that was strongly liberal. We included 3 different topics in order to increase the likelihood that participants have an opinion on what they are reading when going through the feed as well as to make the feed feel more realistic. Two posts were in the feed representing each topic. In the midst of political posts, we presented one advertisement for Adidas (that did not change with each condition), which we pulled directly from Twitter. The advertisement within the feed investigates if social media users are likely to have stronger feelings about the ad, whether positive or negative, based on their feelings on the condition they were placed in. To determine

the effects of feed partisanship, we recorded the amount of time respondents spent reading through the feed.

Once the respondents finished reading the social media feed, we asked them to specify where they feel the feed fell in the political spectrum. This question allows us to check whether our intended manipulation of each condition was aligned with respondents' thoughts and feelings. The following question asked respondents how trustworthy they felt the information displayed was (7-point scale, anchored at completely untrustworthy and completely trustworthy). This was one of our key dependent variables, as we hope to analyze the difference in trust between co- and counter-partisan information. We believe that these responses will likely follow a trend based on the extremity of the condition and whether the respondent is a co- or counter-partisan to the condition they were placed in, where co-partisans display more trust and counter-partisans display decreasing amounts of trust.

The following questions involved the respondents' feelings toward both Republicans and Democrats, as well as questions pertaining to the respondents' memory of what they read. We hypothesized that the emotional impact of the feed on participants will have a significant impact on their memory of the feed. For example, those with a more emotional reaction might have a much greater memory of what they read. To investigate this, we chose a social media post about climate change, and asked how the poster in the feed described it. The following questions used a feelings thermometer, which is a neutrally worded means to measure affective polarization toward a topic, specifically political parties (Iyengar et al 2019). Using this thermometer, we asked respondents to rate the Democratic and Republican parties on a 101-point scale, ranging from cold (0) to warm (100). The answers to this question using the feeling thermometer will provide further insight to how respondents might have been affected emotionally by the

condition of social media feed they were shown. Following this question, respondents also use the feeling thermometer to share how they believe each political party feels about the opposing party.

We also asked respondents about the advertisement in their feed, which was for Adidas (regardless of the condition of the survey). We asked participants about their memory of the advertisement, likelihood to click on the advertisement, and overall preference of Adidas in comparison to their biggest competitor, Nike. In the midst of the political social media feed, we hypothesized that those viewing counter-partisan information might show a stronger feeling against Adidas and be less likely to click on the ad, whereas those viewing a co-partisan feed would share those positive feelings toward Adidas.

Lastly, we asked the respondents whether they feel social media has a positive or negative effect on the country today. This question used a 1–7 scale, ranging from entirely negative (1) to entirely positive (7), with 4 indicating a neither positive nor negative effect on the country. We hypothesized that those who viewed co- versus counter- partisan information will feel social media has an overall more positive effect on the country than those who viewed counter- partisan information.

We closed the survey with demographic questions, including gender, age, political leaning, and current social media usage. In looking at gender and age, we will be able to better understand the participants and analyze trends with each gender when it comes to response to co- and counter- partisan information as related to the political party that they identify with.

Results

Manipulation Check. When we look at the results of our first question, “Overall, how would you characterize the political leanings of this feed?,” we are able to see that participants’ views of our manipulated social media feeds matched our intended political standpoints. As predicted, participants perceived the social media feeds as more liberal or more conservative, as intended (See Figure 5). In our survey, an answer of “1” indicated that the respondent believed the political feed they viewed was “Very Liberal” and an answer of “7” indicated that the respondent believed the political feed was “Very Conservative”, with an answer of “4” meaning the feed was not liberal or conservative. Respondents who viewed a strong Democratic feed answered an average of 3.95, and those who viewed a moderate Democratic feed answered an average of 3.65. Those who viewed a strong Republican feed answered an average of 6.95, and those with a moderate Republican feed answered 5.87 on average ($r = -0.57$, $t(148) = -8.55$, $p < .001$).

Effects on Trust and Willingness to Share Information. We then examined how co- and counter- partisanship influences trust and willingness to share the information viewed on social media. Looking at the results, respondents are more likely to trust co-partisan information than counter-partisan ($M = 3.00$, $SD = 1.24$, $M = 2.54$, $SD = 1.29$, $t(85.64) = 1.7$, $d = 0.36$, $p = 0.092$; See Figure 6). Participants’ ideological alignment with the content of a feed was positively related to their trust in the feed’s information ($r = -0.16$, $t(89) = -1.54$, $p = 0.126$). Strong counter-partisan information ($M = 2.42$, $SD = 1.32$) garnered the least trust from participants with a mean .26 lower than moderate counter- partisan information ($M = 2.68$, $SD = 1.25$).

While respondents, on average, put the most trust in moderate co-partisan information, they were much more likely to share strong co-partisan information ($t(77.49) = 1.44$, $d = 0.31$, p

= 0.154; See Figure 7). Likelihood to share information was also positively related to the participants' ideological alignment with the content in the feed ($r = -0.17$, $t(89) = -1.59$, $p = 0.116$). Those who viewed strong co-partisan information ($M = 2.5$, $SD = 1.71$) were the most likely to share out of all respondents, with a mean .35 higher than those who viewed moderate co-partisan information ($M = 2.15$, $SD = 1.35$). Both of these groups, similarly to the trend of trust in the information, scored higher than those who viewed counter-partisan information, with strong counter-partisan information being the least likely to be shared by respondents ($M = 1.79$, $SD = 1.28$).

Null Results. Looking at respondents' memory of the post on climate change, we did not see any significant results ($r = -0.06$, $t(89) = -0.54$, $p = 0.593$; See Figure 8). This shows that whether the respondents were viewing moderate or strong co/counter- partisan information in their social media feed, their memory of the posts they saw did not change in a statistically significant manner.

Additionally, we asked respondents about their warmth to co- and counter- partisans. These results, when we divide respondents into co- and counter- partisan groups based on their social media feed condition, were also statistically insignificant. Partisanship toward the social media feed did not have a significant effect on respondents' warmth to co- partisans ($r = 0.16$, $t(90) = 1.58$, $p = 0.118$) or counter- partisans ($r = -0.09$, $t(90) = -0.85$, $p = 0.397$). This tells us that despite what may appear in an individual's social media feed, their feelings toward co- and counter-partisans are largely unaffected (See Figure 9).

To measure the reaction of co- and counter- partisans when reading through the feed, we recorded the time spent on the feed before proceeding to the next portion of the survey. Looking at the results of the timing measurement, strong counter- partisans on average spent the most

time viewing the social media feed, but with the highest standard deviation ($M = 51.07$, $SD = 82.97$). However, overall the amount of time spent reading the feed did not have a statistically significant correlation with respondents' political alignment to the information ($r = -0.02$, $t(88) = -0.14$, $p = 0.885$) and co- partisans spent on average spent more time reading through the feed than counter- partisans ($M = 49.53$, $SD = 40.69$, $M = 41.54$, $SD = 61.98$, $t(83.58) = 0.73$, $d = 0.15$, $p = 0.465$; See Figure 10).

Lastly, we showed respondents an advertisement for Adidas in the midst of the social media feed. We asked them about their likelihood to click on the advertisement on a range of 1-7, with a higher answer indicating higher likelihood to click on the advertisement. We also asked whether respondents prefer Nike or Adidas more on a scale of 1-7, with answers below 4 indicating preference for Adidas and above 4 indicating preference for Nike. Looking at the results of likelihood to click the ad, each partisan condition had an average answer ranging from 2.92 to 3.25, with no statistically significant difference between groups ($r = 0.01$, $t(90) = 0.13$, $p = 0.893$). With preference of Adidas versus Nike, the partisan conditions had mean answers ranging from 5.32 to 5.56, with no statistically significant difference between groups ($r = -0.04$, $t(90) = -0.42$, $p = 0.678$; See Figure 11). The results from these questions show us that despite viewing a co- or counter- partisan information, regardless of extremity of that information, respondents were able to separate sentiments towards the information from sentiments towards the advertisement.

Effect on Country. We also asked respondents whether they think social media has a positive or negative effect on the country today, with answers over 4 showing a positive impact and answers under 4 showing a negative impact, with 4 meaning social media has a neither positive nor negative effect on the country. Looking at the results, they do not appear to be

statistically significant ($r = -0.01$, $t(89) = -0.13$, $p = 0.893$). However, all four partisan conditions felt that social media has an overall negative effect on the state of the country today (See Figure 12). Strong co- partisans had a mean answer of 3.5 and moderate co- partisans had a mean answer of 2.5. Strong counter- partisans had a mean answer of 3.08, with moderate counter- partisans answering 3.04. In this data, moderate co- partisans are an outlier from the results of the other conditions, answering an average much lower than the rest. We do not understand why moderate co- partisanship resulted in such variance in results, however it is noteworthy that respondents answered that way.

General Discussion

Social media and politics are playing increasingly prevalent roles in our lives. With social media being one of the most widely used platforms for political news and information, users are frequently faced with political posts from varying realms of the political spectrum. Based on prior research, several factors contribute to how individuals react when faced with new information. Individuals naturally try to eliminate attitude ambivalence, or uncertainty, when they view new information (Clark et al. 2008). While they might be more apt to act on something when they feel certain about it, individuals are also more likely to think deeply about new information when they are unsure about it (Tormala 2016). Based on this writing, we hypothesized that individuals would spend less time on the feed, trust the feed more, be more likely to share posts, and have less memory of the posts when viewing co- partisan information compared to counter- partisan information. Additionally, when faced with a perceived stronger message, resisting that message can increase an individual's attitude certainty on that topic

(Tormala and Petty 2002). This research has implications on individuals' reactions when faced with extreme information in comparison to moderate information. In this research, we sought to discover how social media users react when they are faced with information that is in line with or goes against their prior beliefs. This research delves into the influence pro and counterattitudinal information on social media influences users' trust, willingness to share information, attitudes toward co- and counter- partisans, memory of posts, attitudes toward advertisers and advertisements, and opinion on how politics on social media impact the country as a whole.

Looking at the results, we saw that participants were much more likely to trust and share co- partisan on their social media feeds. This shows that from the perspective of the poster on social media, it is best for trust and engagement to keep the information in posts aligned with the account's following. For example, an account with primarily left-wing followers will want to base posts on left-wing information and views. However, when it comes to trust in information, respondents displayed more trust in moderate co- partisan information. Being aware of the extremity of information posted will have a positive influence on trust from social media followers, and posting a mixture of extremities could prove to be an opportunity for the account. This mixture could be an opportunity due to respondents displaying a higher likelihood to share social media posts when the post has extreme co- partisan information.

The null results of our research also have implications for social media accounts when posting political information. Because there was no statistically significant impact on post memory, likelihood to click on and advertisement, or sentiment toward the advertiser, accounts might be able to post on all ends of the political spectrum with less concern of being overlooked by social media users or losing potential revenue on advertisements on the page. From an

advertiser's perspective, social media users' sentiment toward their brand is not significantly impacted based on the information surrounding their advertisement on social media.

Lastly, when we looked at how respondents feel social media is currently impacting the state of the country, we noticed that those in the moderate co-partisan condition answered, on average, that they feel social media more negatively impacts the country than those in the other conditions believed. However, as a whole, none of the participants, on average, regardless of condition, felt that social media had a positive impact on the country as a whole. This could have implications for a political social media account in understanding how their followers feel their content plays a role in the political environment of the country today.

Our research, however, had limitations that make it difficult to come to strong conclusions. We had a small sample size (<200 participants) for our survey consisting of undergraduate students of a small age range at the University of New Hampshire. This sample makes it more challenging to generalize our findings to other populations. Additionally, the social media feed was not embedded in the context of a real Twitter or social media feed, which could make it feel less genuine. With the posts we used in our feed, we chose to use general political topics and an ad that most people could see. This could have excluded topics that yielded stronger reactions and feelings from participants.

CONCLUSION

Overall, this research sought to determine how individuals react when faced with pro-versus counter-attitudinal information on their social media feed. Based on previous literature, we hypothesized that the alignment of information to an individual's prior beliefs would

influence their memory, trust, engagement, time spent reading, and sentiment towards an advertiser on social media. This research highlights the different aspects of posting on social media that accounts can take into consideration to boost the overall traction their posts receive from followers, and to minimize negative feedback. Despite limitations to our research, we conclude that there is a significant boost in trust and likelihood of sharing information on social media if the information is consistent with one's political beliefs. This could have an impact in how social media accounts plan their posts and attempt to increase their reach on social media platforms moving forward, with certain types of information potentially having a more positive impact with engagement on the platform.

Appendix

Figure 1: When someone with moderate attitudes sees counter-partisan information, we predict that they will trust the information more as it does not appear to be biased. We predict that someone with extreme attitudes likely will not feel the same, and their trust in the information they are viewing will drop dramatically. This is due to the individual's attitude certainty and likelihood to try to maintain this certainty.

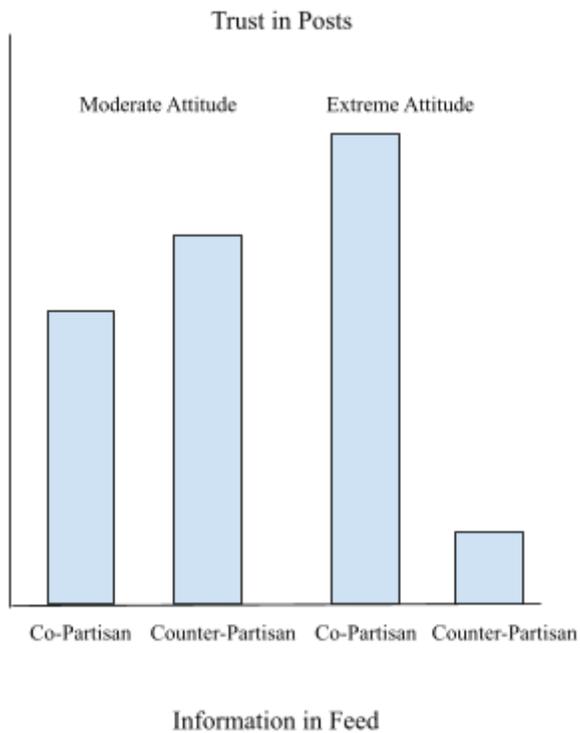


Figure 2: We predict that when an individual is shown a social media feed with counter-partisan information, they will be less likely to interact with the posts. When someone with extreme attitudes sees counter-partisan information in their feed, we predict that their likelihood to share information will be much higher than if they were to see co-partisan information.

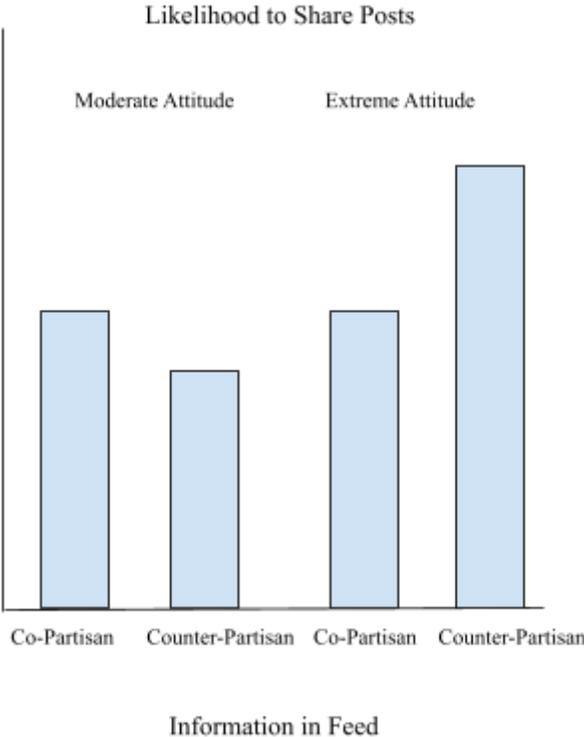


Figure 3: We predict that when someone with moderate attitudes sees counter-partisan information in their social media feed, their memory of the posts will increase slightly. On the other hand, when someone with extreme viewpoints sees counter-partisan posts on social media, we predict that their memory of the posts will increase much more drastically.

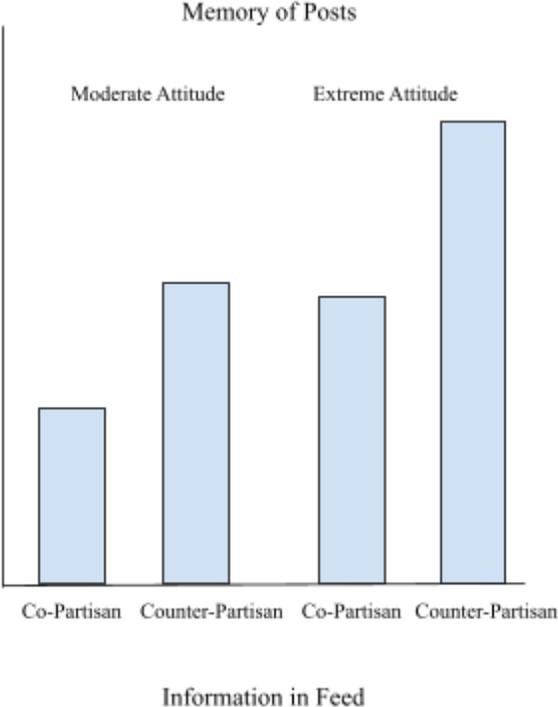


Figure 4: We predict that when an individual has a moderate attitude, the presence of counter-partisan information will cause them to spend more time reading their social media feed. When the individual has a more extreme attitude, we predict that one of two things could happen. The individual might be triggered to spend much more time reading their feed, or the time they spend could drop drastically.

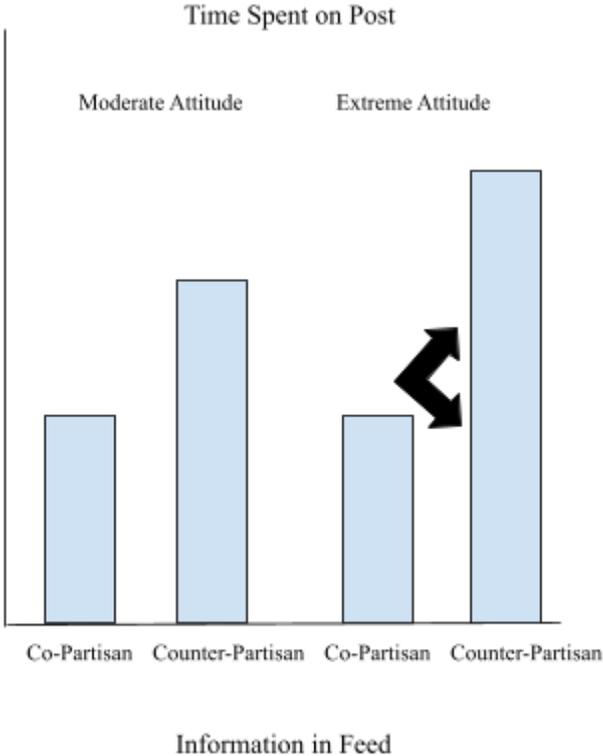


Figure 5:

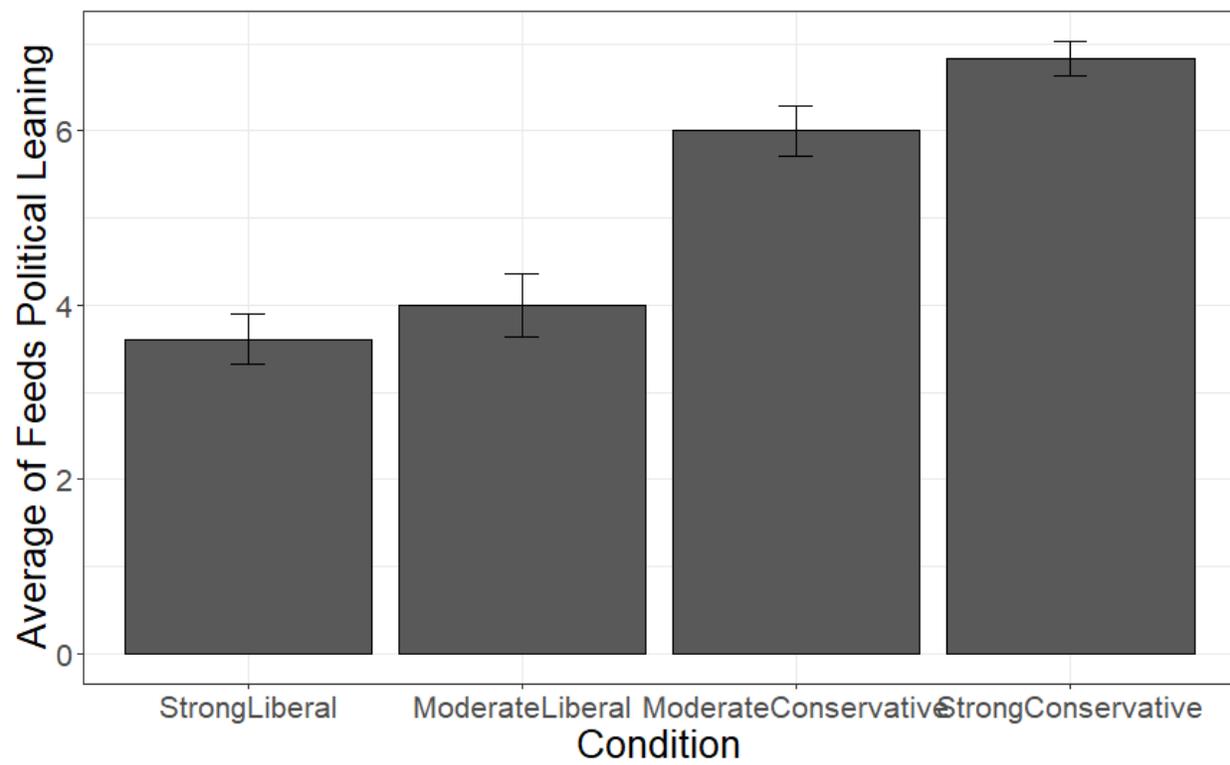


Figure 6:

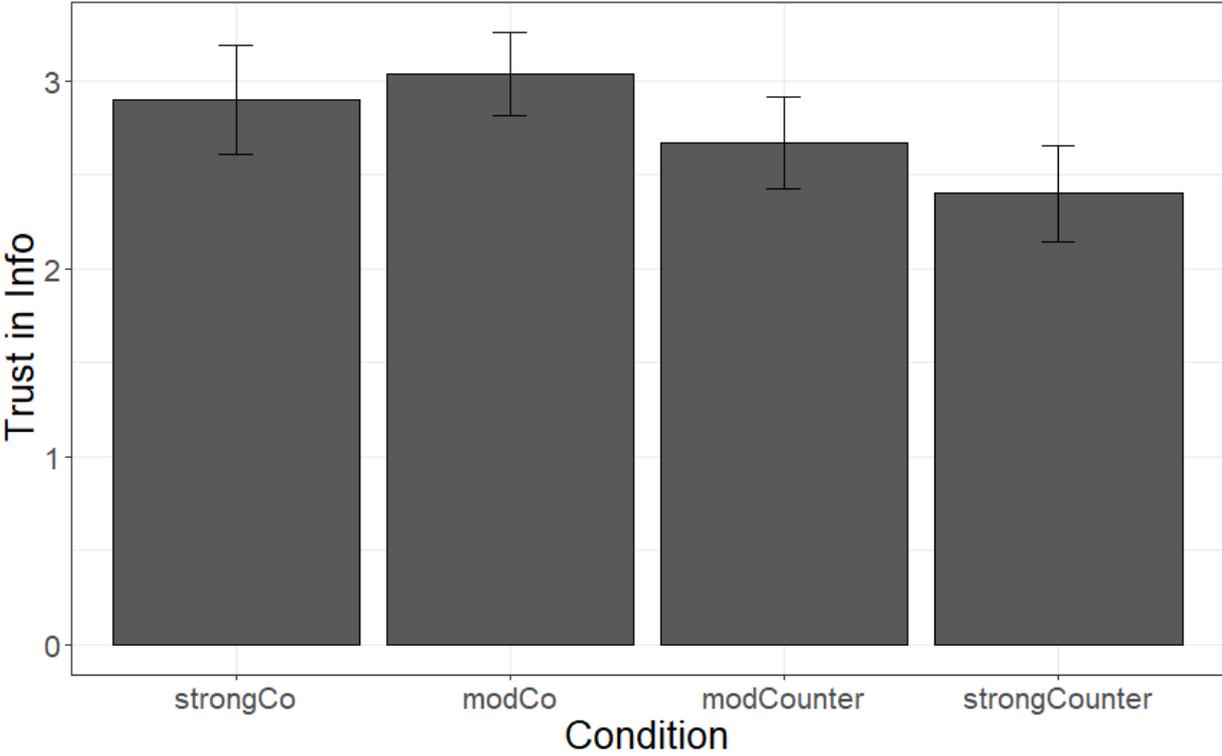


Figure 7:

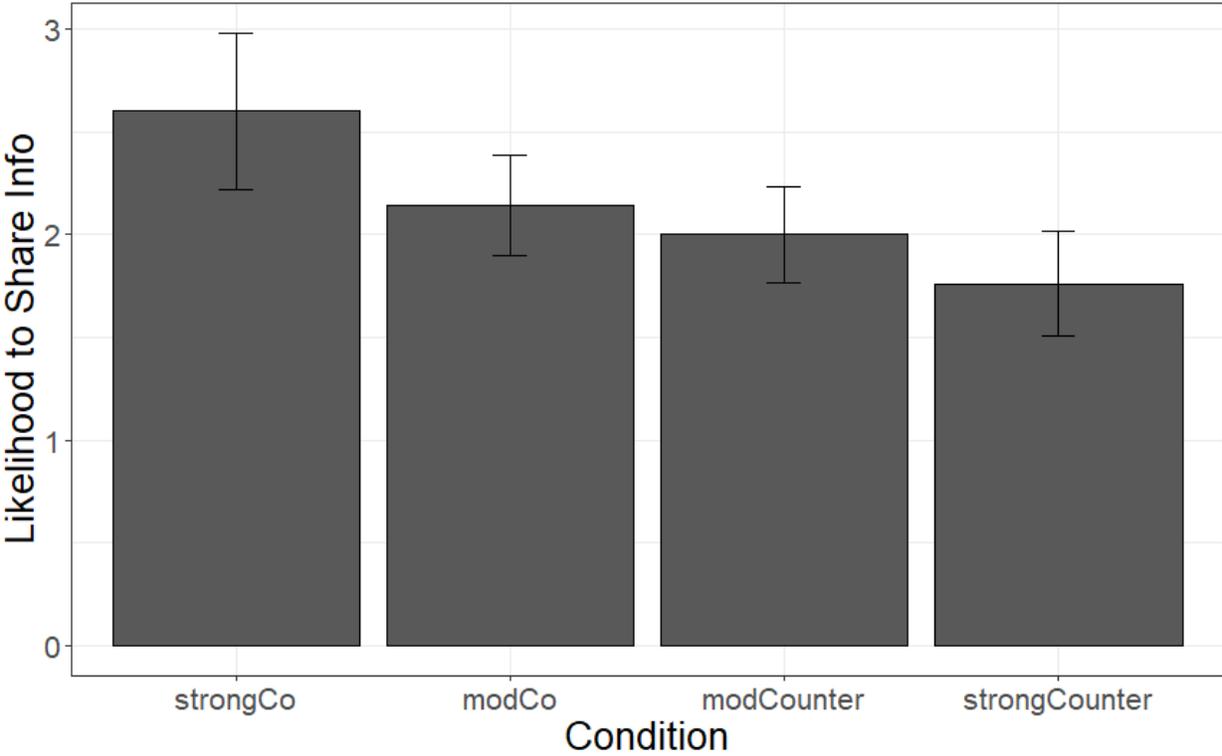


Figure 8:

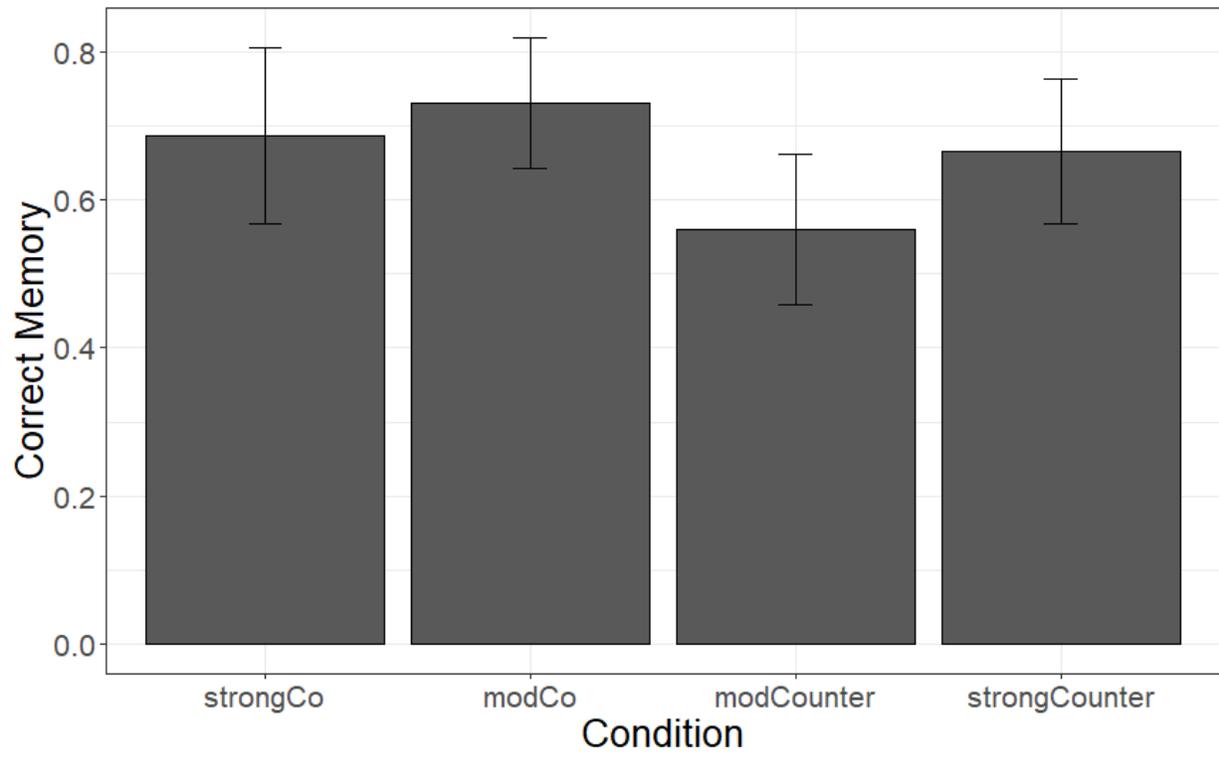


Figure 9:

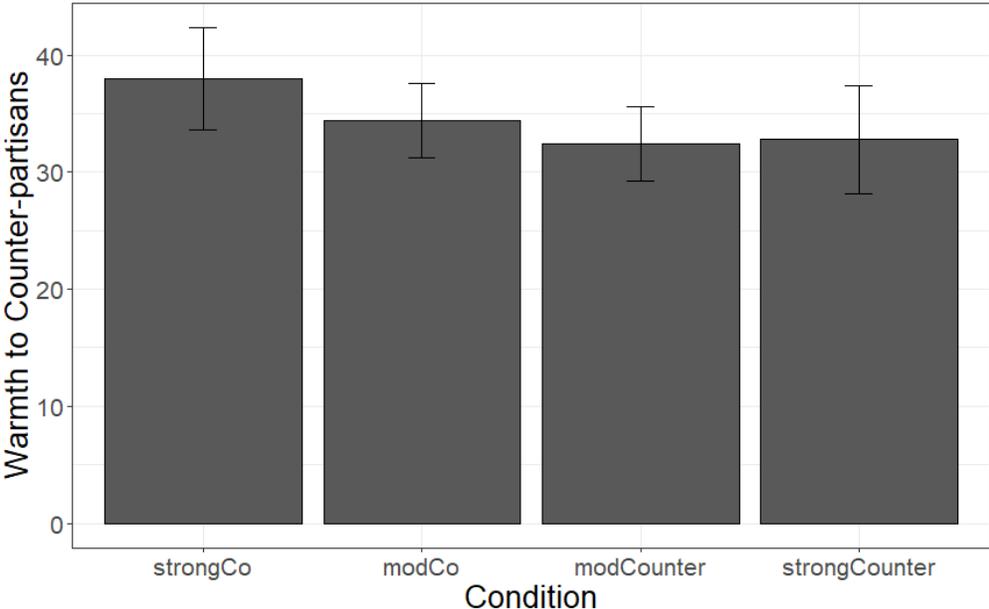
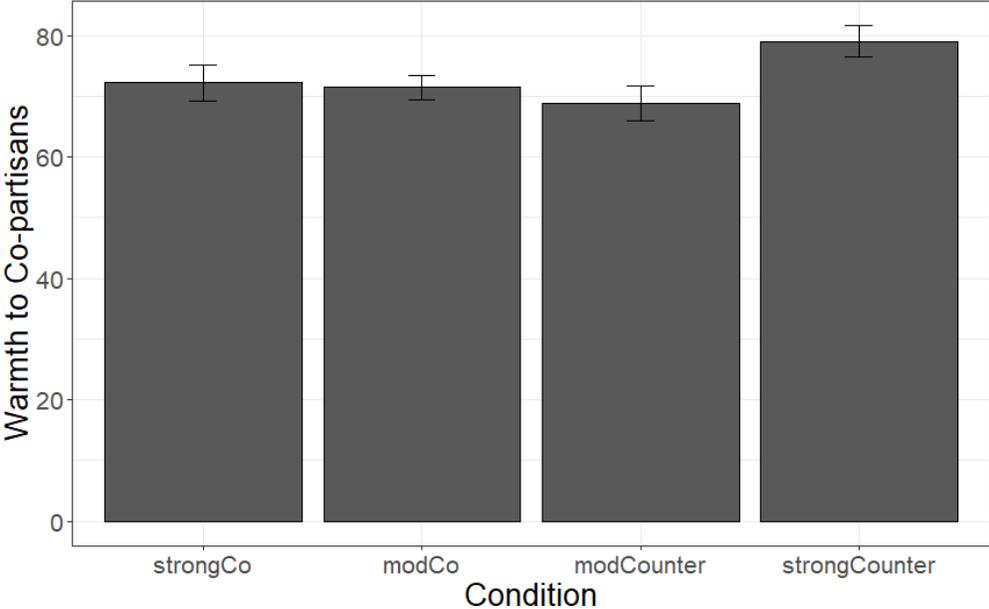


Figure 10:

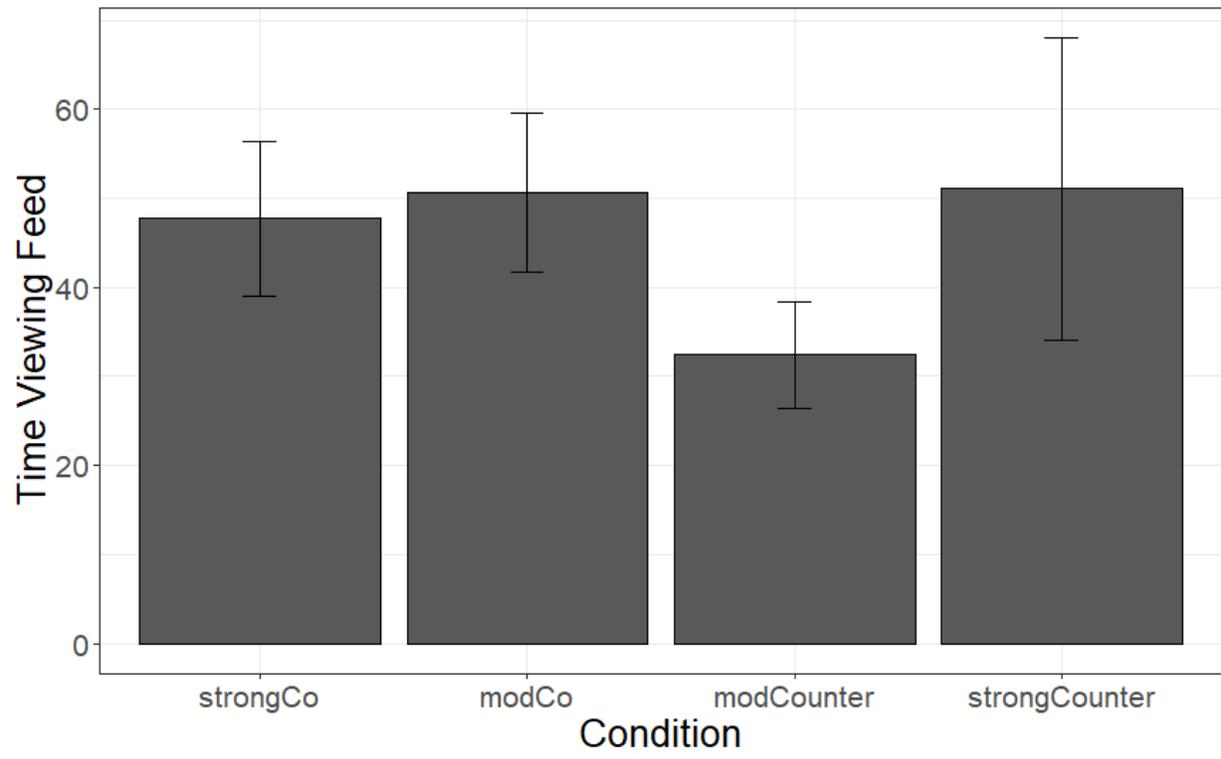


Figure 11:

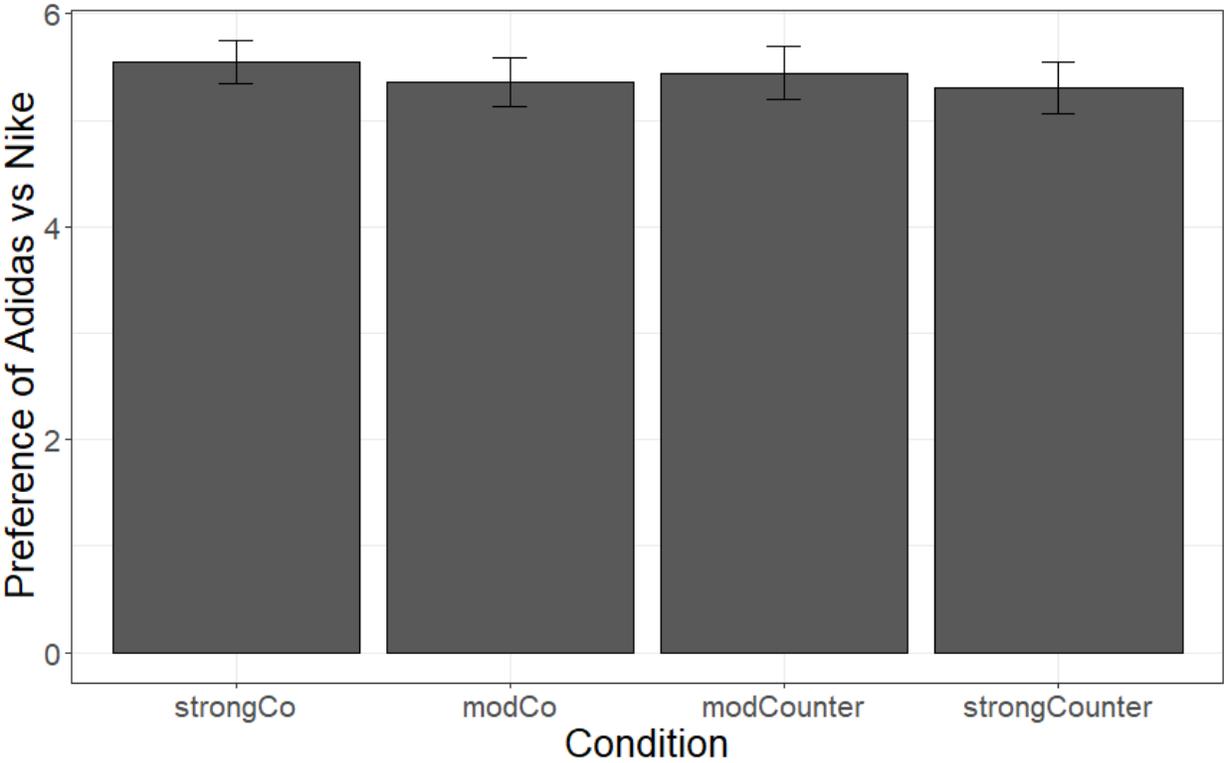
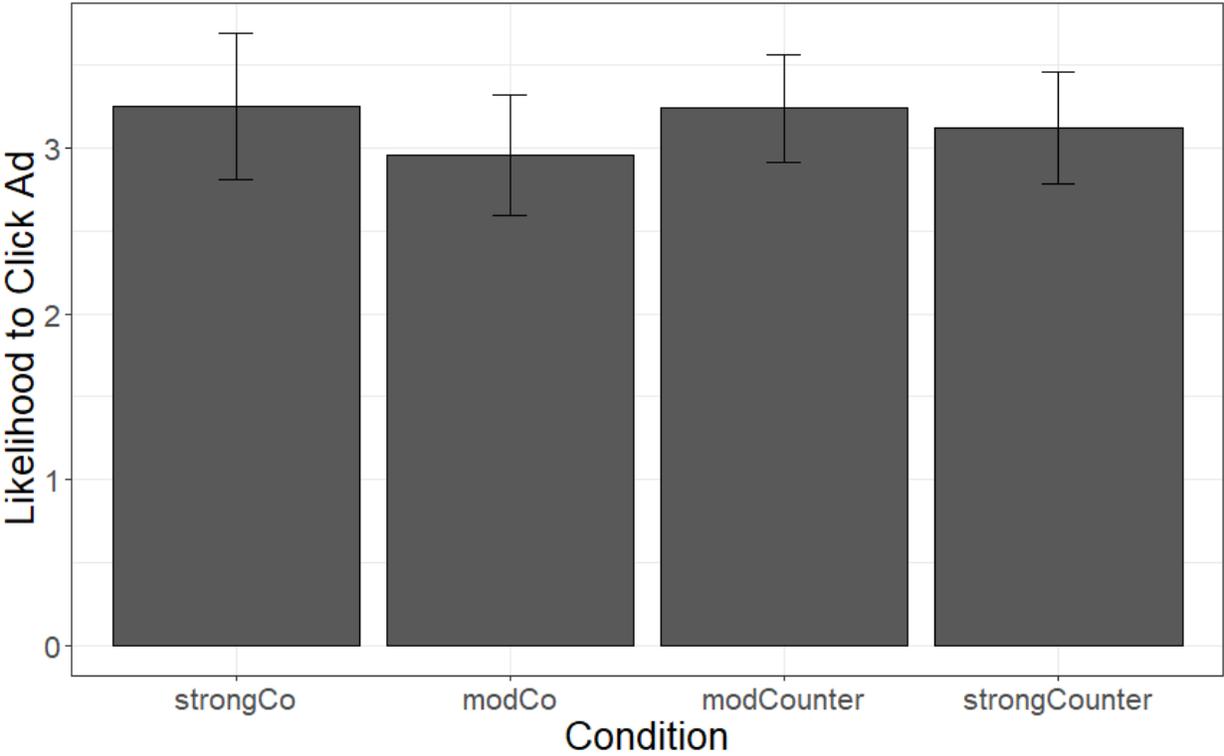
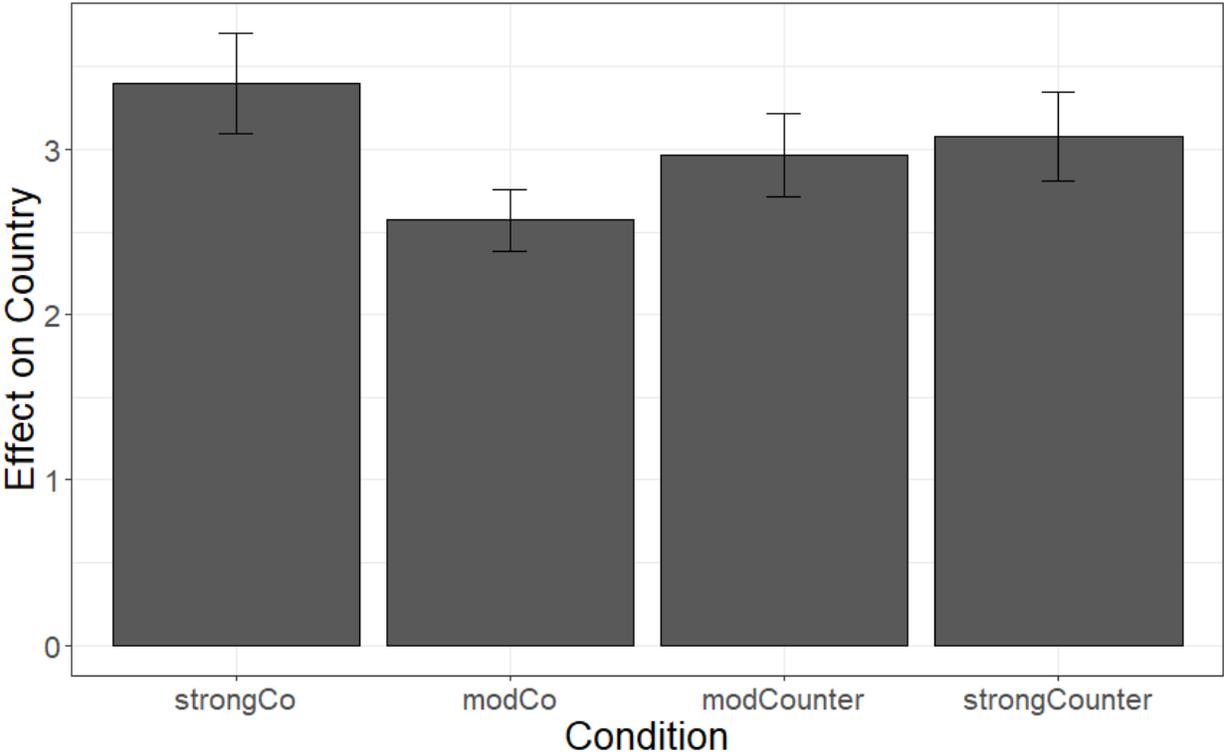


Figure 12:



References

- Cialdini, R. B. (2001). The science of persuasion. *Scientific American*, 284(2), 76-81.
- Clark, J. K., Wegener, D. T., & Fabrigar, L. R. (2008). Attitudinal ambivalence and message-based persuasion: Motivated processing of proattitudinal information and avoidance of counterattitudinal information. *Personality and social psychology bulletin*, 34(4), 565-577.
- Finkel, E. J., Bail, C. A., Cikara, M., Ditto, P. H., Iyengar, S., Klar, S., ... & Druckman, J. N. (2020). Political sectarianism in America. *Science*, 370(6516), 533-536.
- Iyengar, S., Lelkes, Y., Levendusky, M., Malhotra, N., & Westwood, S. J. (2019). The origins and consequences of affective polarization in the United States. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 22, 129-146.
- Tormala, Z. L. (2016). The role of certainty (and uncertainty) in attitudes and persuasion. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 10, 6-11.
- Tormala, Z. L., & Petty, R. E. (2002). What doesn't kill me makes me stronger: the effects of resisting persuasion on attitude certainty. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 83(6), 1298.