Does Exposure to Social Media Discourse Affect Openness to Future Political Discourse?

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Abstract

The present study sought to expand on previous research which had indicated that engaging in

political discourse through social media increases the level of comfortability people have when

discussing those topics in person. This study used screenshotted pictures of fake Facebook posts

between either authority figures (politicians) or civilians. The posts were also either between two

people or a group discussion amongst five people. Results showed that there was no significant

effect reported by including either an authority figure or a civilian or the group size involved in

the conversation. However, the analysis did report near significance in the condition which

examined question three in relation to group size. The neutral condition also reported no

significance.

Does Exposure to Social Media Discourse Affect Openness to Future Political Discourse?

In an interconnected world that is consistently affected by politics, the discussion of issues that concern the populous is of growing importance. With the expansion of social media, these outlets have become a rising resource for political information and discussion (Miller, Bobkowski, & Maliniak 2015; Sveningsson 2014). As that trend continues to increase, studies have been conducted to measure the effectiveness of this new form of discussion. Jang, Lee, and Park (2013) demonstrated that there is a relationship between social media and political discourse through the use of several surveys. However, results indicated that those who have minority opinions are less likely to engage in a conversation concerning the topics surveyed by asking, using a Likert scale, how likely they are to share their true opinions concerning several important issues. In contrast, Kushin and Kitchener (2009) have found that people are willing to express their political ideas with others even when those ideas are opposing. Additionally, other studies (Tang and Lee 2013; Vissers and Stole 2012) have found positive correlations between willingness to discuss these opinions and high social media use. Tang and Lee (2013) also found a positive correlation between Facebook connection to public political figures and political participation, suggesting that the correlation could be even stronger if there were an authority element present (Milgram, 1963). Therefore, social media has shown to be an effective outlet for expressing political ideas and could be further utilized to enrich these discussions.

As people progress toward online interactions, it has been predicted that this will also increase how frequent political conversations are discussed through social media sources. For instance, Miller, Bobkowski, and Maliniak (2015) conducted research which focused on the relationship between Facebook and political discussions. In order to examine this relationship they surveyed college students, who replied to a college email, inquiring about the amount of

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political discussion, and personal disclosure. The first part of the survey asked students how often they discuss politics publicly on Facebook (1-5 scale). Further, the survey measured how much the student was disclosing about their political views. This was measured by examining if the student liked the official campaign of a candidate in a recent election, completed the "political views" field on a profile, and posting updates about politics. Additionally they inquired who the students were disclosing this information to: they assessed how close they were with those people. This was an important measure because it illustrates if the student is comfortable exposing their political views to all people on Facebook or if they just share that information with close friends and family. Miller and colleagues found that individuals who have more connections discuss politics more frequently, but they discuss those topics in what is considered safer interactions; for example, they choose to discuss politics with friends and family more frequently instead of with a wider audience. They also found that individuals preferred to engage in discussion with people who have similar opinions on the topic. These results illustrate that Facebook is a valid arena for people to discuss their political ideas and opinions.

Sveningsson (2014) conducted research which focused mainly on the social media experience of young Swedes and how that is used for political discussion. Their research was qualitative, but found that Swedes used online media to follow the public discussion of politics because they expressed feelings that it was a more open arena for dialogue. The participants themselves stated they prefer to actually speak in person about their political ideas and opinions. However, research did find that those same participants also actively follow and retweet others. This illustrates they are willing to show their political alliance online with others, but prefer to share and expand on their ideas in person. Sveningsson's research is one step closer to demonstrating that politics can not only be discussed online, but could also create a pathway to

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different sides coming together in a free environment and exchanging differing views in order to move forward.

In order to optimize discussion it is helpful to have an idea of what elements play into the initiation of conversation. Jang, Lee, and Park (2013) conducted research to indicate different predictors of discussing politics on social media. They hypothesized that three different factors would be negatively associated with discussion on Facebook; the number of Facebook friends one has, the amount of ambivalence toward an issue, and lastly conflict avoidance behavior. Jang and colleagues measured how much time students spent on Facebook by asking how many minutes in the last week they were on the site using a Likert scale in order to account for the fact that if one is on Facebook more they may have more exposure. The students were also asked to rate how much they agreed or disagreed with statements regarding gay rights issues as well as their feelings about expressing political views on Facebook. In order to measure ambivalence toward politics and gay issues they had the participants answer a rating scale. Lastly, Jang and colleagues measured conflict avoidance, political ideology, and religiosity on a 7-point scale. The results demonstrate that those with more Facebook friends are less likely to discuss gay rights or politics online. They hypothesized this may be because with a wider audience they would feel there are too many varying opinions and not everyone would agree. Those who were found to be more religious and conservative also discussed gay issues less on Facebook. This shows that many do not want to discuss issues they feel will cause issues in their social lives in a public arena such as Facebook.

In contrast, a qualitative study by Kushin and Kitchener (2009) investigated the extent to which people with contrasting views on a political topic were willing to engage in discussion on that topic. In order to examine this, the researchers chose a public political group on Facebook

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that was comprised of members from varying backgrounds, education levels, and social classes.

A discussion between 66 of these members on the then current global issue of torture was chosen

for the qualitative analysis. Researchers found that the discussion participants were always

clearly opposed to the issue or in support of it, and that no participant changed their stance on the

issue throughout the discussion, which consisted of over 50 posts. This displays that people are

not only comfortable discussing their opinions on controversial political topics on social media,

but are using social media outlets to openly engage in such discourse. Relevant to the study at

hand, it also displays that these differing political opinions persist in group discourse on social

media outlets.

Vissers and Stolle (2012) applied the knowledge that people discussed political issues

online and sought to discover further implications by examining how both general internet

usages as well as Facebook as a medium impacts other forms of political participation. Data was

collected from two online surveys with eight months in between them. They inquired how often

students use Facebook, how many Facebook friends they have, and how often they use

Facebook. These activities were all measured using a 7-point scale. Further, political

participation on Facebook was clearly identified as "sharing or commenting political opinions on

walls of friends, liking or joining a Facebook group for a political or societal cause or creating

one (Vissers and Stolle, 2012). With a significant amount of time in between the two surveys

they were able to measure the effect of general online use, Facebook use, and offline

participation and how that changed over time. Vissers and Stolle hypothesized that there would

be a positive effect of Facebook political participation and general online political activity as

well as offline participation. Their results demonstrate that general online political activity

positively influences offline engagement. However, there is a stronger connection to Facebook

specifically as a medium for political engagement. Thus, this article indicates that Facebook is an important medium to be politically active as well as being engaged online "spills-over" into offline actions. This research gives hope that by expressing one's political opinions online it could aid in people becoming more conversant in everyday interactions with others and hopefully lead to a more open-minded environment.

Similarly, Tang and Lee (2013) surveyed 774 university students in order to further examine how factors relating to the social media outlet of Facebook related to young adult's online and offline political participation. The survey included questions such as how much time participants spent on Facebook and how often they were exposed to political information via Facebook. Following the survey, the participants were asked if they would or would not engage in six different forms of political participation. After gathering and correlating data, the researchers found that exposure to shared information and connection with public political actors both positively related to political participation. It was also found that time spent on Facebook has an indirect relationship with participation and that Facebook network structural heterogeneity and direct connection public political actors via Facebook mediate the impact of Facebook network size on political participation. All of these findings prove beneficial for the present study as they show a strong connection between Facebook usage and political participation, including in regards to public political figures who may fulfill an authority role.

The present study will seek to assess the extent to which one on one or group social media discourse affects openness to future political discourse in conversations with both civilians and authority figures. Because this study includes an authority figure factor, it is important to understand the power of authority, which can best be illustrated through the well-known Milgram study from 1963. In the study, the participant and a confederate participant both drew

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lots to find out who would be a "learner" and who would be a "teacher" in the experiment. The draw was fixed so that the participant was asked to fulfil the teacher role, which consisted of the participant reading a series of word pairs to the learner. The teacher would then name one of the words and the learner was required to recite back that word's pair. If the learner recited back the wrong pair, the teacher was told to administer an electric shock to the learner. Each time the learner made a mistake, the voltage amount was increased. Being in another room, the confederate learner was able to act as if they were indeed receiving the electric shocks from the participant teacher. As voltage increased the participants often wished to stop, believing that they were indeed injuring their fellow participant, but were prompted to continue by the researchers, who served as the authority figure to the participant in this situation. Results found that two thirds of participants continued to shock the learner all the way to the highest voltage level of 450 volts, even when the learner noted heart conditions, pleaded for the experiment to end, or became silent. Thus one can see that people are greatly influenced by authority figures, even those which they have never before had interactions with. Additionally, this influence holds true even when the ordinary person views what the authority figure says as unethical or even against their personal views. For the present study, this means that the discourse including an authority figure could have more influence on the participant's political discourse and participation when compared to the influence that the ordinary civilians may have.

The aforementioned studies conclude that social media is an effective medium for communicating one's ideas and thoughts on political issues. Thus, the current study would like to extend this further by examining if exposure instead of actual personal engagement is as powerful to the participant. Further, if this exposure will influence the participant to then take these ideas and be comfortable discussing them in the future.

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Method

Participants

There were 175 students who participated in this experiment, all from a small liberal arts college, between the ages of 18 to 23 who volunteered to participate. Volunteers, who are enrolled in the general psychology course, received extra credit for their participation and all participants were treated in accordance with the "Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct" (American Psychological Association, 2002).

Materials

Data was collected by testing two general psychology courses as well as other students from a small liberal arts school. Materials used for this experiment included fake Facebook looking posts which were screenshotted in order to create a stimulus for the participants. The purpose of the accounts was to measure the effect that viewing a discussion of a political topic on social media would have on the reader. For the group which did not have the independent variable of authority, common civilian names were used for both conversations between two and five people (see Appendix A). However, for the condition in which authority was implemented discussion occurred between fake accounts that were said to be governmental officials commenting on the topic as well as one big oil company director, who served as a neutral (see Appendix B). For the condition between two people who are civilians only one view from each side was presented (Appendix C) and lastly Appendix D illustrates the condition concerning two authority figures. The control condition was merely shown a fact sheet of the same information (Appendix E). Finally, a Likert scale was used to measure the comfortability that the participant has with the topic after viewing the Facebook conversations (see Appendix F).

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Design and Procedure

The design was a completely between group design with two independent variables: 2 (use of an authority figure or a civilian) X 2 (group conversation versus a one on one discussion). Participants were given a consent form to complete before starting the experiment. The willing participants were randomly assigned to one of the five conditions. Those in the control condition were given a general unbiased fact sheet about the topic of drilling for oil in the United States. However, in the four remaining conditions each participant was given a screenshot of a Facebook conversation either between either two people or a group of five people discussing the political topic of drilling for oil. The Facebook screenshot either includes names of everyday civilians or contained authority or expert opinions on the subject; for instance, a senator or other political figure. All of the Facebook screenshots have exactly the same words, but if the condition had two people instead of five their post was larger. After viewing the screenshot or fact sheet each participant was asked to complete a Likert scale containing questions about how comfortable they would feel about discussing this topic further. In the appendix there is a copy of the Likert scale the participants were given, the fact sheet that the control condition is given, and the screenshotted conversations the experimental groups viewed.

<div align="center">

Results

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In this study, participants were asked to complete six different questions to measure their comfortability with a political topic after viewing a stimulus which discussed drilling for oil in the United States. The participants rated each question on a 7-point Likert Scale to establish their comfortability. For each question a two factor analysis of variance was analyzed as well as the total score from the six questions was also analyzed. The total score reported no significance in relation to group size, $F (1, 136) = .324$, $p = .570$, $\eta_p^2 = .002$, with a power of .087. The same total

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score also found no significance in relation to authority, F (1, 136) = 2.306, p= .131, η_p^2 = .017, with a power of .326. Further, when examining just the individual questions none were found to be significant. Our hypothesis predicted that question three would be found to be the most significant and it was also did not show significance. When examining the significance of question three in relation to group size, the analysis found near significance, F (1, 136) =.021, p=.886, η_p^2 = .000, with a power of .052. Additionally, examining the same question as it relates to authority there was no significance reported, F (1, 136) = 3.154, p=.078, η_p^2 = .023, with a power of .422. Therefore, there is no significant main effect between authority and group size in relation to the participants measurement of comfortability with a political topic.

Discussion

In this study it was hypothesized that social media would be an effective medium for political discourse and would be powerful enough to prompt comfortability with social engagement on the political topic discussed. Data collected from participants showed results that were not in favor of this hypothesis.

Previous studies have found correlational evidence that would have suggested that the data would support our hypothesis. For example, Miller, Bobkowski, and Maliniak (2015) and Sveningsson (2014) found that individuals felt that social media was a valid and safe arena for discussing political topics. This suggested that those with the social media prompts would feel more comfortable discussing politics. Perhaps the study at hand should have asked questions that were more focused on general comfortability of topics rather than comfortability engaging or acting on a topic. Other past research (Jane, Lee, and Park 2013; Kushin and Kitchener 2009) both found relationships between social media and political discourse and though their findings were contrasting, the findings display that there was some sort of correlation between the

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subjects. Closest to the present study, additional research found correlations between political activity online and offline political engagement (Tang and Lee 2013; Vissers and Stolle 2012). In culmination, these studies would suggest a connection between political engagement and social media discourse on the topic, but none of the studies had tested whether or not that correlation could be induced. Thus, the present study is important because it begins to take hypotheses and findings from a growing research topic and apply them to a lab setting.

Near significance was found for both questions three and the total score of comfortability for each participant. The total score was found by calculating the sum of all six comfortability measures. Because this score was nearly significant, it shows that the correlational research was headed in the right direction and that more experimental research should be conducted on this topic. Question three was the most direct measure of comfortability. The question asked the participant to rank how comfortable they would be starting a conversation about this topic in person. Therefore, it was predicted in the hypothesis to induce the strongest feeling of comfortability from participants as there have been similar findings in previous research (Sveningsson, 2014).

Being the first experimental study for an area that has previously been solely correlational, there are flaws to the study. First, the number of participants needed for the study was not reached. The calculation for participants needed came out to 45 per condition but the present study was only able to run 35 per condition due to a small participant pool. Of the participants run, many were done in group settings, which could have been distracting. The varying environments in which the participants took the study also could have caused minor confounds. For some participants, knowledge or interest in the topic appeared to play a role in how they answered questions. Those who liked politics may have already had some prior

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knowledge or at least more of an interest in the topic than those who did not. For example, some

participants were confused by the discussion, though it was short, while others simply enjoyed

talking about any political topics.

For future studies, it would be wise to confront the limitations discussed above, if

possible. The easiest of these to fix would be to simply reach the participant minimum and

control environment more. To combat the issue of prior knowledge or interest, future research

my test a better known topic. This study chose a more obscure topic of oil drilling so that a

controversial topic would not serve as a confound to the study. For example, the researchers

thought that a social political topic may be affected by religious background.

Further, it may be wise to have participants look at a conversation on a computer screen,

as that may feel more real than the screen shot print out of a conversation. For the group size

factor, different numbers of participants could be played with. The researchers of the current

study had not found previous research on what an effective group size would be to be influential,

so it is possible that the group factor may need to be higher than five. For the authority

condition, it may have been unclear to participants not in tune to politics that the people used for

the authority condition were authority figures. To strengthen that understanding, a future study

could first have the participant read a short bio of the authority figure before reading the social

media conversation. Though no significance was found in this study, it provides a foundation

from which other studies can build upon and there are ample opportunities and ways to do so.

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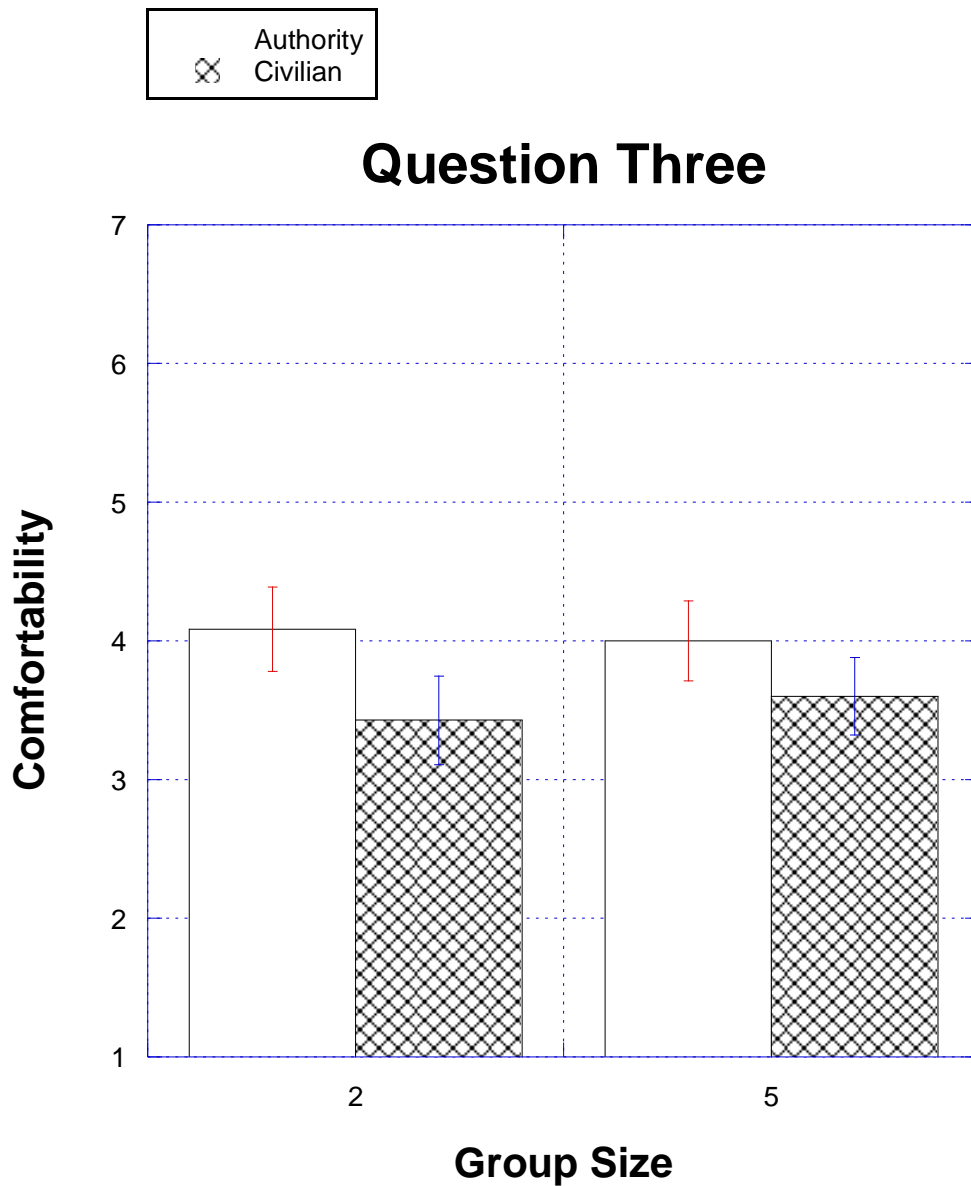*Figure 1.* This figure shows the mean scores for Authority and Group Size in relation to question three of the Likert Scale. Error bars describe *±1 SEM*

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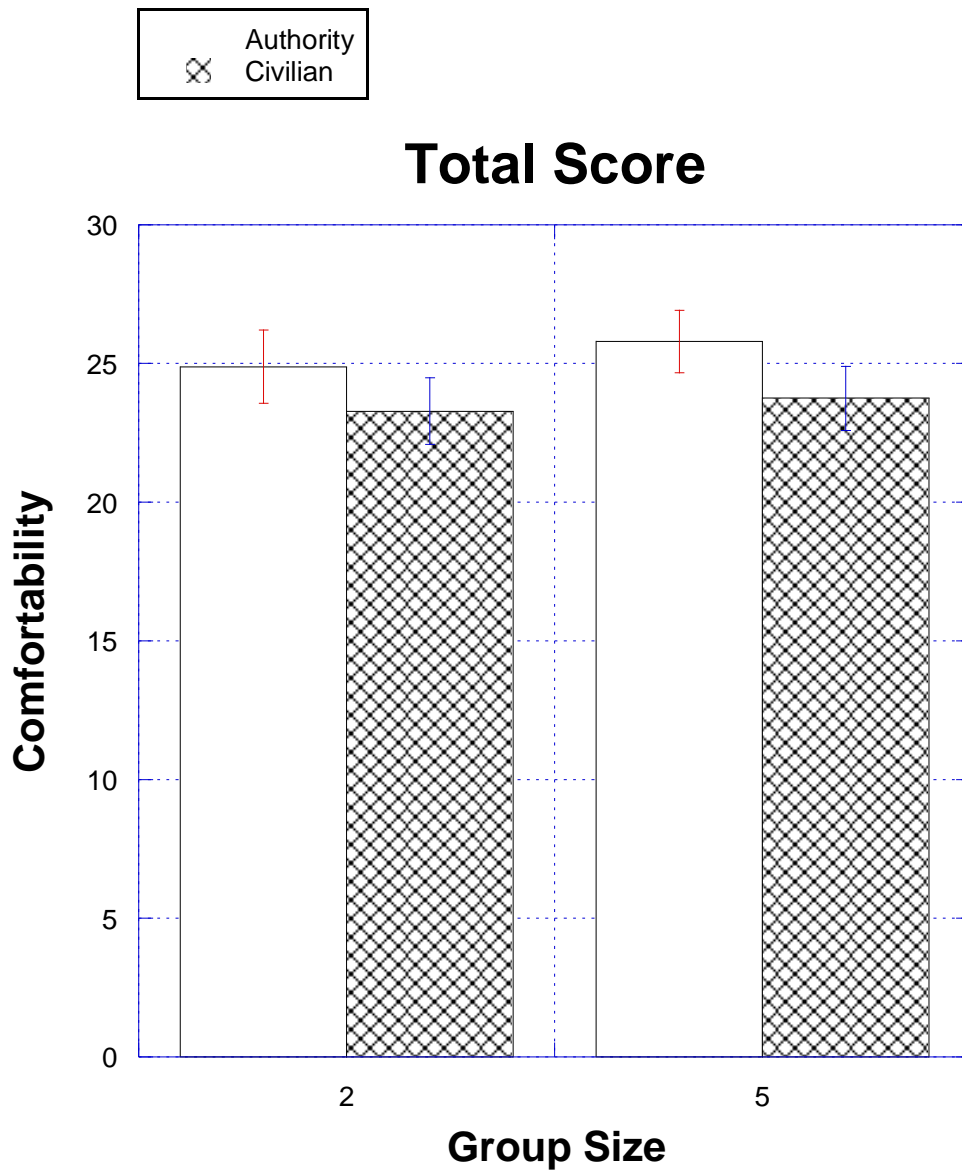POLITICAL DISCOURSE?

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Figure 2. This figure shows the mean scores for Authority and Group Size in relation to the total
score of the participants' the Likert Scale. Error bars describe ± *1 SEM*

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Tests of Between-Subjects Effects

Dependent Variable: QTotal

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared	Noncent. Parameter	Observed Power[b]
Authority	117.029	1	117.029	2.306	.131	.017	2.306	.326
GroupSize	16.457	1	16.457	.324	.570	.002	.324	.087
Authority * GroupSize	1.829	1	1.829	.036	.850	.000	.036	.054
Error	6900.971	136	50.742					
Total	90582.000	140						
Corrected Total	7036.286	139						

a. R Squared = .019 (Adjusted R Squared = -.002)

b. Computed using alpha = .05

Figure 3. This figure shows the analysis of variance (ANOVA) output describing the total score of the participants' Likert Scale.

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Table 1

	Question 3	Total Score
Mean	3.779	24.429
Standard Error	.149	.602

Figure 4. This figure shows the mean scores and standard error scores from the ANOVA output for Authority and Group Size in relation to Question three and to the Total Score of the participants' Likert Scale.

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Appendix A

Social Media Discourse of Political Topics

Mark Gaedtke

Interesting to see the house pass a bill on oil drilling in the US after Shell's director of Upstream operations for the Americas, spoke on the immense benefits of drilling as well as the negative environmental impacts.

Like · Comment · November 3 at 10:13am

👍 307 people like this.

Ryan Jankowski It would be unfortunate if the President vetoed the current bill. The USA needs to drill domestically so that they can lessen their dependence on US foreign supplies.
November 3 at 10:47am · Like · 👍 56

Kristen Smith I disagree, the current bill does away will 40 years of critical energy protections for national security, our economy, consumers, and the environment.
November 3 at 12:04pm · Like · 👍 47

John Abram This bill would not only improving our standing in the world, but the energy boom created by it has the potential to reset our economic foundation.
November 3 at 12:22pm · Like · 👍 16

Cecilia Brown There simply isn't a need to drill anymore and we should place bans on drilling off our beautiful coasts. Environmental concerns are changing consumer behavior quickly.
November 3 at 1:56pm · Like · 👍 25

Write a comment...

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Appendix B

<u>Social Media Discourse of Political Topics</u>

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Appendix C

Social Media Discourse of Political Topics

Ryan Jankowski
It would be unfortunate if the President vetoed the current bill. The USA needs to drill domestically so that they can lessen their dependence on US foreign supplies. This bill would not only improving our standing in the world, but the energy boom created by it has the potential to reset our economic foundation.
Like · Comment · November 3 at 10:47am

👍 278 people like this.

Kristen Smith I disagree, the current bill does away will 40 years of critical energy protections for national security, our economy, consumers, and the environment. There simply isn't a need to drill anymore and we should place bans on drilling off our beautiful coasts. Environmental concerns are changing consumer behavior quickly.
November 3 at 12:22pm · Like · 👍 172

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Appendix D
<u>Social Media Discourse of Political Topics</u>

Senator Ron Johnson

It would be unfortunate if the President vetoed the current bill. The USA needs to drill domestically so that they can lessen their dependence on US foreign supplies. This bill would not only improving our standing in the world, but the energy boom created by it has the potential to reset our economic foundation.

Like · Comment · November 3 at 10:47am

👍 278 people like this.

Representative Kathy Castor I disagree, the current bill does away will 40 years of critical energy protections for national security, our economy, consumers, and the environment. There simply isn't a need to drill anymore and we should place bans on drilling off our beautiful coasts. Environmental concerns are changing consumer behavior quickly

November 3 at 12:22pm · Like · 👍 172

Write a comment...

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Appendix E

Social Media Discourse of Political Topics

The United States House of Representative has passed a bill regarding oil drilling in the United States. There are both benefits of drilling and negative environmental impacts. The bill could have the following effects:

- Cause some energy protections that have been passed within the past 40 years to be retracted
- Lessen USA dependence on foreign oil
- Improve the USA standing within the world
- Cause an energy boom with the potential to reset the USA's economic foundation
- Alter beautiful coasts of the USA
- Slow current behavior trends of increased environmentalism.

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Appendix F

Social Media Discourse of Political Topics

Please fill out your demographic information:
    Age:
    Gender:
    Major(s):

Please answer the following questions using a Likert scale from 1-7.

1. I would feel comfortable informing others about the information concerning this topic.

        1   2   3   4   5   6   7
     (Disagree)   (Neutral)   (Agree)

2. I would feel comfortable starting a conversation on this topic on social media.

        1   2   3   4   5   6   7
     (Disagree)   (Neutral)   (Agree)

3. I would feel comfortable starting a conversation on this topic in person.

        1   2   3   4   5   6   7
     (Disagree)   (Neutral)   (Agree)

4. I would openly listen to more information concerning this topic.

        1   2   3   4   5   6   7
     (Disagree)   (Neutral)   (Agree)

5. I would seek out further information on this topic. For instance, I would watch a Ted Talk to
    gather more information.

        1   2   3   4   5   6   7
     (Disagree)   (Neutral)   (Agree)

6. I am now curious to learn more about different political topics.

        1   2   3   4   5   6   7
     (Disagree)   (Neutral)   (Agree)