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Selective Exposure and Its Relationship to Certain Variables among State Employees

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ABSTRACT

Selective exposure is a cognitive process whereby individuals who already hold prior ideas about a certain subject or issue tend to seek information consistent with their current beliefs. In other words, people often accept messages that align with their pre-existing opinions more readily than those that contradict them. Selective exposure to information is a primary human motive driven by the desire for consistency between one's beliefs and the information received. This mechanism influences how individuals process information and generates a form of avoidance of contradictory input, which may be either active or passive. Individuals may avoid information in order to make decisions, maintain optimism, preserve belief stability, safeguard self-efficacy, adapt to circumstances, and avoid feelings of fear, threat, or anxiety. Since human life involves a continuous chain of decision-making, such avoidance can weaken individuals' decision-making processes. Avoidance occurs when people anticipate that acquiring certain information might negatively affect their emotions, challenge their beliefs and perceptions, or threaten their behavior, optimism, and self-image. The present study aimed to measure the level of selective exposure among a sample of state employees and to identify differences according to gender (male–female), educational attainment (Ph.D.–M.A.–Institute–B.A.–Secondary), and age (20–59 years). The research sample consisted of 400 male and female employees, selected using a stratified random sampling method with equal distribution. After data collection and statistical analysis, the findings were as follows: 1. A high level of selective exposure was observed among state employees, with a mean score of 10.23, indicating a tendency to avoid information inconsistent with their choices. 2. There were no statistically significant differences in selective exposure by gender. 3. Significant differences were found according to educational attainment and age.

Keywords: Selective exposure, defensive information avoidance, knowledge rejection.

INTRODUCTION

Selective exposure is considered a defensive mechanism that prevents individuals from acquiring additional information. Research has shown that selective exposure functions as a defensive reaction occurring when people anticipate that information may lead to undesirable emotions, challenge prior perceptions, or threaten the person's currently chosen behavior (Howell, 2015, p. 13).

Individuals often expose themselves selectively to information that confirms their attitudes and beliefs. For instance, most people maintain friendships with those who share similar political views, prefer reading newspapers and magazines that reinforce their personal opinions, and tend to watch television programs that support their existing beliefs. Consequently, they often live in environments biased toward viewpoints already aligned with their own. In the social-cognitive literature, this phenomenon has been described as **confirmation bias** or **consistency**

bias, which refers to the tendency to seek, notice, and prefer information consistent with one's attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. The most common explanation for this bias is that exposure to contradictory information creates cognitive dissonance, which in turn produces unpleasant feelings of discomfort. By exposing themselves only to consistent information, individuals can avoid such negative emotions while simultaneously reinforcing their previous attitudes, choices, and behaviors (Frey, 1986, pp. 14–16).

Selective exposure to information thus represents a central human motive, driven by the desire for harmony between one's beliefs and the information received. One study on selective exposure found that individuals consistently preferred reading articles aligned with their political views while avoiding those that opposed them (Al Marrar et al., 2022, p. 4).

Selective exposure also shares similarities with several other cognitive biases, such as:

- Confirmation bias
- Defensive information avoidance
- Consistency bias
- Availability heuristic bias
- Narrative fallacy bias
- Status quo bias

Based on this framework, the current research seeks to answer the following questions:

1. How can the selective exposure scale be assessed?
2. What are the differences in selective exposure according to gender, educational level, and age?

Research Objectives

1. To measure the level of selective exposure among state employees.
2. To identify the significance of differences in selective exposure among state employees according to the variables of:
    - Gender (male–female).
    - Educational attainment (Ph.D.–M.A.–Institute–B.A.–Secondary).
    - Age (20–29, 30–39, 40–49, 50–59, 60–65).

Research Hypotheses

1. There is no statistically significant difference at the level of (0.05) between the arithmetic mean and the hypothetical mean on the selective exposure scale among state employees.
2. There is no statistically significant difference at the level of (0.05) in selective exposure among state employees according to gender.
3. There is no statistically significant difference at the level of (0.05) in selective exposure among state employees according to educational attainment.
4. There is no statistically significant difference at the level of (0.05) in selective exposure among state employees according to age.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The methodology of the present study can be briefly summarized as follows:

- The **descriptive method** was applied to describe selective exposure among the sample individuals and to determine the significance of differences among them.
- The sample consisted of **400 male and female state employees**, selected using a stratified random sampling method.
- The researcher developed a **Selective Exposure Scale** based on the psychological and social foundations of **Sweeny et al. (2010)**, consisting of **20 items**.

Selective exposure was defined as the behavior leading to the prevention or delay of access to available information that is expected to be inconsistent or undesirable. Avoidance may be **active** or **passive**: individuals may avoid information to facilitate decision-making, maintain optimism and belief stability, preserve self-efficacy and adaptation, and avoid feelings of fear, threat, or anxiety (Sweeny et al., 2010, p. 341).

Theories Explaining Selective Exposure

Kate Sweeny's Theory (2010)

The concept of selective exposure was introduced by **Sweeny et al. (2010)**, who defined it as behavior that may involve asking someone not to disclose information, leaving a situation to avoid learning certain information, or simply failing to take the necessary steps to uncover it.

Sweeny's model of information avoidance focuses on **immediate decisions** regarding information (i.e., whether to seek or avoid information now). She categorized information avoidance into two types:

- ***Active Information Avoidance***: people deliberately avoid unwanted information through verbal or physical actions, such as looking away, turning off the television or radio, or asking someone not to disclose certain information.
- ***Passive Information Avoidance****:* people fail to exert effort to access information, thereby avoiding it through inaction. For instance, individuals may refuse to expose themselves to undesired viewpoints or opinions (Sweeny et al., 2010, p. 341).

Sweeny also emphasized that selective exposure is not limited to self-related information. For example, in one study, more than half of participants reported that they did not wish to know whether their partner was genetically predisposed to certain conditions. Another study of prostate cancer patients revealed that their wives often avoided seeking any information about the disease (Emanuel et al., 2015).

Furthermore, people may avoid information because it could force them to abandon cherished beliefs or adjust them in unwanted ways. Individuals tend to prefer information that confirms their attitudes, beliefs, and decisions while avoiding information that undermines them. Sweeny identified three categories of beliefs that people are most likely to protect by avoiding information (Sweeny et al., 2012, p. 185):

1. Beliefs about the self.
2. Beliefs about others.
3. Beliefs about the personal world.

Motivated Cognition Theory – Knobloch-Westerwick (2015)

Knobloch-Westerwick's **SESAM model (2015)** presents a dynamic picture of the reciprocal influence between aspects of the self and selective exposure, with adjustments in the working self-concept that influence further choices. These models are interactive and dynamic, providing explanatory and inferential strength. However, as noted, they often include too many factors to be reliably tested within a single framework.

Social and motivational variables, such as **social identity**, appear interchangeable in their influence on selective exposure. Factor analysis is therefore recommended as a continuous tool to better measure predictive variables.

At the same time, **RSM** highlights an important point: selective exposure cannot continue indefinitely. It may lead either to extreme polarization or eventually return to some balance. Social identity threats—such as economic crises, cultural conflicts, or environmental degradation—may drive audiences toward more extreme views or, alternatively, encourage moderation (Hofmann & Wilson, 2010, p. 198).

Another important process discussed in the **MRS model** is **gatekeeping** by journalists and content producers, who make selective choices about which messages to report and which to exclude. What we usually describe as audience selective exposure is thus already constrained by content providers. A third layer involves online users, who may amplify earlier selective choices by sharing them. This model therefore provides a nearly complete picture of how messages are filtered from production to reception.

Additionally, censorship by governments, content providers, or self-censorship—especially in contexts with limited freedom of expression—further contributes to this cycle. Although censorship is not directly equivalent to selective exposure, it can intensify the tendency to seek alternative sources (Petty et al., 2006, p. 67).

Research Instrument

To achieve the research objectives, the researcher developed a **Selective Exposure Scale** grounded in **Sweeny's (2010) theory**, widely used in studies on selective exposure.

- The scale initially consisted of **20 items**, which were reviewed for validity.
- A panel of **21 psychology experts** evaluated the items, and all 20 were approved without modification.
- The scale was then administered to the study sample.
- For statistical analysis, the **internal consistency method** was used by examining the correlation between each item and the total scale score.

All items were statistically significant, as their correlations exceeded the tabulated Pearson correlation value of **0.098** at the (0.05) significance level and (398) degrees of freedom. This confirmed the discriminative validity of all items.

Item Analysis

The purpose of conducting item analysis is to determine the discriminatory power of the items, retaining the distinctive ones and eliminating the non-discriminative ones in the scale. Here, it refers to the extent to which an item can distinguish between levels of selective exposure among employees. Item discrimination is an important aspect of statistical analysis, as it ensures the efficiency of psychological scale items. It demonstrates the ability of

items to clarify individual differences among respondents, thus helping retain the discriminative items while excluding the non-discriminative ones. This is carried out through:

The Extremist Groups Method

The extreme groups method, item–total consistency (internal consistency), and the correlation of item scores with the total test score are considered appropriate procedures in the process of item analysis. Therefore, the researcher employed both methods in analyzing the items of the Selective Exposure Scale, as well as confirmatory factor validity. To determine the discriminatory power of the scale items, the following steps were followed:

- The researcher administered the Selective Exposure Scale to a random sample of (400) male and female state employees.
- Each form was scored, and the total score for each respondent was calculated.

The scores obtained by the employees on the Selective Exposure Scale were arranged in descending order (from highest to lowest). The cut-off point was set at the top and bottom (27%) of the scores, as selecting this percentage allows obtaining two groups of the largest possible size and the maximum possible variance between them. The percentages used as criteria for determining these two extreme groups vary. Kelly (Kelly, 1939) suggested that the number of individuals in each extreme group should represent 27% of the total sample when calculating the discriminatory power of items.

Based on this criterion, the number of forms in each extreme group was (108), totaling (216) forms subjected to discrimination testing. The researcher then applied the independent samples *t*-test to extract the discriminatory power of the scale items. The results showed that all items were discriminative when compared with the tabulated *t*-value (1.96) at the significance level (0.05) and degrees of freedom (214). Table (1) illustrates these results.

Table (1) Discriminatory Power of the Selective Exposure Scale Using the Extreme Groups Method

Item No.	Group	Mean	SD	Computed *t*	Sig.
1	High	3.22	0.98	12.21	Sig.
	Low	1.77	0.76		
2	High	3.33	0.72	12.24	Sig.
	Low	2.12	0.73		
3	High	3.43	0.86	13.31	Sig.
	Low	1.92	0.81		
4	High	3.43	0.78	7.21	Sig.
	Low	2.59	0.92		
5	High	3.23	0.87	14.52	Sig.
	Low	1.59	0.79		
6	High	3.07	0.86	13.69	Sig.
	Low	1.63	0.68		
7	High	3.61	0.62	7.67	Sig.
	Low	2.84	0.83		
8	High	2.81	1.03	9.74	Sig.
	Low	1.62	0.75		
9	High	3.08	0.93	13.00	Sig.
	Low	1.60	0.74		
10	High	2.84	1.02	9.81	Sig.
	Low	1.66	0.73		
11	High	3.44	0.79	18.44	Sig.
	Low	1.62	0.65		
12	High	3.40	0.70	10.45	Sig.
	Low	2.27	0.88		
13	High	3.46	0.73	9.41	Sig.
	Low	2.39	0.94		
14	High	3.41	0.80	4.95	Sig.
	Low	2.88	0.77		
15	High	3.67	0.63	2.45	Sig.
	Low	3.42	0.86		
16	High	2.93	1.06	10.39	Sig.
	Low	1.61	0.78		
17	High	3.44	0.73	10.31	Sig.
	Low	2.36	0.81		
18	High	3.43	0.78	13.97	Sig.
	Low	1.90	0.83		

19	High	3.73	0.57	14.45	Sig.
	Low	2.27	0.88		
20	High	3.76	0.59	5.07	Sig.
	Low	3.26	0.84		

Construct Validity

- One of the indicators of construct validity is the ability of the items to discriminate among individuals, especially when the extreme group comparison method is employed. In other words, it refers to the extent to which it can be determined that the scale measures a specific trait or characteristic. This type of validity is established through several indicators. Construct validity is achieved when a hypothesis derived from the theoretical framework is confirmed. In the present scale, construct validity indicators were obtained through the extreme groups method and internal consistency, both of which serve as indicators of construct validity, as explained below:

Item–Total Correlation (Internal Consistency Methods)

The correlation of each item with the total scale score is considered an indicator of the validity and homogeneity of items in measuring the behavioral phenomenon. This method indicates the extent to which the test items measure in the same direction or dimension. It also reflects the interrelationship among the items of the scale, meaning that the correlation coefficient is calculated between the performance on each item and the total performance on the entire scale.

The total score reflects what the scale actually measures. In this regard, Anastasi (1976) pointed out that the total score of the scale is the best internal criterion in cases where no external criterion is available. To achieve this, the same dataset used in the extreme groups method was analyzed through Pearson's correlation coefficient to determine the relationship between the score of each item and the total score for all items in each questionnaire.

Using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), the results showed that all correlation coefficients were statistically significant, as they exceeded the tabulated critical value. The critical value of Pearson's *r* at the significance level (0.05) with (398) degrees of freedom is (0.098). Accordingly, the researcher employed Pearson's correlation coefficient to determine the item–total correlation for the Selective Exposure Scale applied to (400) forms, i.e., the entire sample. When comparing the obtained correlation coefficients with the critical Pearson's *r* value (0.098) at (0.05) significance level and (398) degrees of freedom, all items showed statistical significance, as illustrated in Table (2).

Table (2) Validity of the Selective Exposure Scale Items Using Item–Total Correlation Method

Item	*r*	Sig.	Item	*r*	Sig.	Item	*r*	Sig.	Item	*r*	Sig.
1	0.54	Sig.	6	0.58	Sig.	11	0.65	Sig.	16	0.47	Sig.
2	0.57	Sig.	7	0.39	Sig.	12	0.49	Sig.	17	0.49	Sig.
3	0.59	Sig.	8	0.46	Sig.	13	0.47	Sig.	18	0.59	Sig.
4	0.35	Sig.	9	0.57	Sig.	14	0.28	Sig.	19	0.60	Sig.
5	0.59	Sig.	10	0.52	Sig.	15	0.18	Sig.	20	0.31	Sig.

Reliability Coefficient

The reliability of the Selective Exposure Scale was calculated using two methods: Cronbach's Alpha and the test–retest method. The results are shown in Table (3).

Table (3) Reliability Coefficients of the Selective Exposure Scale Using Test–Retest and Cronbach's Alpha

No.	Method	Reliability Coefficient
1	Test–Retest	0.86
2	Cronbach's Alpha	0.84

RESEARCH RESULTS

Objective (1): Measuring the Level of Selective Exposure Among State Employees

Hypothesis (1): There is no statistically significant difference at the (0.05) significance level between the arithmetic mean and the hypothetical mean on the Selective Exposure Scale among state employees.

To achieve this objective, the Selective Exposure Scale was administered to a sample of (400) male and female employees. The results showed that their mean score on the scale was (54.84) with a standard deviation of (9.46). When this mean was compared with the hypothetical mean of the scale (50), using the one-sample *t*-test, the

difference was found to be statistically significant in favor of the arithmetic mean. The calculated *t*-value was greater than the tabulated *t*-value (1.96) at (399) degrees of freedom and a significance level of (0.05).

This indicates that state employees in the sample exhibited a high level of selective exposure (10.23%). Selective exposure is described as a behavior that involves preventing or postponing access to available information that may be undesirable. It reflects individuals' tendency to avoid exposure to information that contradicts their choices, thoughts, beliefs, or previous decisions—especially in matters concerning health, finance, religion, relationships, decision-making, and crisis management—because such information may cause anxiety. The lack of attention to such information may result from fear or because it is perceived as undesirable.

The researcher attributes the increased prevalence of selective exposure among employees to the broader social context in Iraq, where undesired information is often rejected. Iraqi society, including the study population in particular, is currently dominated by ideological, traditional, and inward-looking perspectives that tend to avoid social and political pressures. In such contexts, individuals are more inclined to distance themselves from confronting daily information. It is cognitively difficult to process such information, as it often relates to religious beliefs, political tendencies, or personal philosophies.

Objective (2): Identifying the Significance of Differences in Selective Exposure Among State Employees According to Gender, Educational Attainment, and Age

a. Gender Differences

Hypothesis (2): There is no statistically significant difference at the (0.05) level in selective exposure among state employees according to gender.

To test this hypothesis, the independent samples *t*-test was used to examine differences in selective exposure based on gender. The results showed no statistically significant differences, as the calculated *t*-value was less than the tabulated value (1.96) at the (0.05) level with (398) degrees of freedom.

The researcher interprets this result by noting that selective exposure is not linked to physical or gender-based characteristics, but rather to thoughts and information, which are experienced similarly by both genders in the workplace. Furthermore, the factors that drive individuals toward selective exposure are nearly identical in their influence on both men and women.

b. Educational Attainment Differences

Hypothesis (3): There is no statistically significant difference at the (0.05) level in selective exposure among state employees according to educational attainment.

To test this hypothesis, one-way ANOVA was used. The results revealed statistically significant differences in selective exposure according to educational attainment, with the calculated *F*-value (5.81) exceeding the tabulated *F*-value (2.37) at the (0.05) level with (4, 395) degrees of freedom.

The researcher interprets this by suggesting that workplace interactions are more dynamic than academic activities. Other related factors, such as personality traits or the subject matter employees think about or engage with, may also play a role.

c. Age Differences

Hypothesis (4): There is no statistically significant difference at the (0.05) level in selective exposure among state employees according to age.

To test this hypothesis, one-way ANOVA was used. The results indicated statistically significant differences in selective exposure according to age, with the calculated *F*-value (6.47) exceeding the tabulated *F*-value (2.60) at the (0.05) level with (3, 396) degrees of freedom.

The researcher concludes that selective exposure, particularly when perceived as a threat, is not limited by age within the workplace. However, advancing age may influence the degree of threat an individual perceives, thereby shaping their tendency toward selective exposure.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Encouraging employees to give greater attention to the issue of selective exposure before and during their work.
- Activating guidance and counseling committees through training courses for employees suffering from selective exposure.
- Cautioning against making evaluations based on accumulated information (overall information), as excessive information may cause confusion in evaluations or decision-making.

- Utilizing the Selective Exposure Scale in professional and counseling fields after proper standardization.

SUGGESTIONS

- Exploring selective exposure in workplace environments such as companies, meetings, and interviews to help employees express their opinions.
- Developing a counseling program to address selective exposure in both public and private sector institutions.
- Conducting correlational studies to examine the relationship between selective exposure and other variables such as stereotype bias, spotlight effect, misunderstanding, self-awareness, self-esteem, and social perception.

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