Research Article

Selective exposure in the digital age: A systematic review of the mechanisms, contexts, and sociopsychology implications for media ecosystems(2013-2023)

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ABSTRACT

Selective exposure is a complex phenomenon, and this study takes a systematic approach to reviewing its manifestations in the changing environment of new media. Following the PRISMA guidelines, a systematic review process was carried out across various databases and found 20 scholarly articles from Google Scholar, ProQuest, CNKI and Scopus for detailed analysis. This analysis, in turn, investigates the contextual evolution, motivational underpinnings, and consequences of selective exposure on both individual and societal behavior.

The findings capture important transitions from conventional online spaces to algorithmically-modulated social media settings, extending the focus from politics to a wider range of public topics including health and environmental communication. Consequently, the framework suggests the interaction of cognitive dissonance, group dynamics, and technology as motivational drivers of selective exposure, highlighting the conclusion that selective exposure is the result of influences by the individual as an agent, their group affiliations, and structures. Take selective exposure as both an independent and dependent variable for inclusion within conceptual frameworks is identified, and its role as a mediating and moderating variable is identified reflecting both theoretical suitability and empirical importance. In addition to solidifying similar narratives through action and interaction, findings also suggest modes of engagement with alternate information sources—reflecting both negative consequences for agreement but potential for constructive debate—highlighting complex impacts of selective exposure across both media consumption and a more polarized society.

This study shows the relevance of selective exposure research for the understanding of media behaviors, cognitive processes, and sociopolitical dynamics for future research as well its implications as sensitive to media literacy programs and policy interventions. Further, future research would benefit from interdisci-plinary approaches and adaptive methodologies to grapple with the challenges of selective exposure in polarized, technology-driven media ecosystems. This review also aim to advance theory, inform policy, and create a more egalitarian and equitable digital information ecosystem.

Keywords: PRISMA; selective exposure; social media; cognitive dissonance

1. Introduction

The fast pace of development in the digital technology and emergence of new media platforms, have shaped how people can reach, send and interact with the information[1,2]. Through the democratization of media production and personalization of content delivery, these platforms enable users to create information environments that cater to their interests and preferences[3,4]. This personalization increases user engagement, improving convenience, but it raises new problems making the very definition of public communication shift, especially selective exposure.

Originating from early research by Joseph T. Klapper, selective exposure theory suggests that media does not have a direct and powerful impact on beliefs. Instead, it reinforces pre-existing attitudes, with individuals interpreting and remembering information in a way that supports their views. Nowadays, in high-choice media environments the increase in information leads to selective engagement among citizens, reinforcing echo chambers that lead citizens to only interact with information that are aligned with their beliefs[5]. These dynamics increase ideological polarization, reduce the diversity of public discourse, and erode democratic deliberation[6]. This selective exposure behavior creates an additional barrier to constructive discourse, compromising the quality of collective decisions, and undermining the social fabric[7,8].

Information exposure is the starting point and outcomes for attitude formation and behavioral, as a critical mechanism of information processing, selective exposure influences attitude formation and behavioral outcomes[5,8]. Although individuals often read news content that further strengthens their beliefs, research shows that users also actively seek and engage with content that presents opposing viewpoints, whether out of curiosity or the desire to challenge their views[9]. The nuanced behavior is a result of psychological predispositions and structural factors such as algorithmic curation and platform design[10,11]. Furthermore, selective exposure has been observed in health communication, environmental communication, and cultural engagement contexts, indicating the sheer importance of its relevance in the present world we live in[12,13].

Selective exposure has implications beyond individual behaviors to collective phenomena including political polarization, social fragmentation, and public trust[6]. In non-political contexts, entities like official media also drive user interactions in unique waysand can convolute the functions even more[14,15]. The complex interaction of personal incentives, changing platform architectures, and social dynamics suggests a detail-oriented perspective on selective exposure in high-choice media environments.

This systematic literature review critically integrates existing research to assess how selective exposure is constructed, motivated, and displayed in contemporary media contexts. A critical review of the development, motivations and societal effects of the construct is presented and potential gaps and advances in the literature are identified. Also, this research encourages selective exposure researchers to expand their work into non-political spheres, such as health and environmental communication. The review adds to both academic debate and practical guidance to help develop a more balanced and inclusive media ecosystem in an increasingly fragmented and algorithmically mediated world.

2. Method

This article employs the research methodology of Systematic Literature Review (SLR) as review framework and performed searches using Google Scholar, Scopus, CNKI and ProQuest as databases. The framework of the methodology organized four general aspects: publication criteria, selected sources, systematic review process, and the data analysis method[16].

2.1. PRISMA

This review adhered to PRISMA guidelines, which are the standard for systematic reviews in social science[16]. PRISMA has main advantages according to Sierra-Correa & Kintz[17]: (a) it clarifies the research questions, (b) it establishes precise screening criteria (standards for inclusion and exclusion), and (c) it allows time-bound searches across relevant databases. Besides, this procedure is suitable for describing evolutionary processes as well[18]. Based on these advantages, we can carefully explore the existing scientific research and the coded information on social media consumption among young people in China. The retrieval process is illustrated in **Figure 1**.

2.2. Resources

There are four major databases in the literature, included in this study: Google Scholar, Scopus, CNKI and ProQuest, ensuring wide coverage of the literature in the field.

Google Scholar is a popular free and open-access search engine that indexes the full text and metadata of content within publishing formats and disciplines. It covers academic journals, books, conference papers, abstracts, technical reports, preprints, etc., with about 318 million documents from around the globe. It also integrates with several reference management systems such as RefWorks, RefMan, and EndNote, as well as BibTeX to make it a convenient tool for literature searches.

Globally, Scopus, available by institutional subscription, indexed 36,377 journals and 11,678 publishers. Users are trained on resources such as book series, academic journals, and conference papers in subject areas that include, but are not limited to, social sciences, life sciences, health sciences, environmental sciences, and agriculture. Scopus features even allow researchers to perform systematic literature reviews with sophisticated visual tools enabling users to analyze large datasets efficiently.

CNKI, an important resource developed by the People's Republic of China, allows you to search for the China Integrated Knowledge Resources Database. This platform includes journals, theses, conference proceedings, yearbooks, statistical datasets, books, patents, standards and more. It runs 10 network service centers across Beijing, North America, Japan and South Korea, providing services to global universities, research institutions, government think tanks, enterprises and public libraries.

Another useful resource for this study, ProQuest, provides access to multidisciplinary content, such as dissertations and theses, journals, historical newspapers, and proprietary datasets. It covers the humanities, social sciences, business, education, and health sciences, and more. ProQuest's powerful search functionality and vast collections of archival material provide a valuable resource for researchers looking for thorough, comprehensive sources of literature.

The analysis of these diverse databases allowed for a scientifically sound basis for the systematic literature review as each database contributed specific benefits to the overall knowledge base. The literature search was designed to maximize coverage across disciplines, publication types, and geographical contexts to ensure that results were both comprehensive and reliable.

2.3. Systematic review process

This study employed a systematic review process consisting of four phases: identification, screening, eligibility, and final include. This prism operated at each stage of a process finely crafted through the frameworks identified to ensure a comprehensive, diligent and substantial selection of contributing literature aligned directly with the remit of this review.

2.4. Identification

Relevant keywords were used to guide the information search in the first stage of the review process. This stage was performed in September 2024 and was based on previous studies, thesauruses, dictionaries, and keyword synonyms proposed by the databases. For example, we developed a thorough list of terms associated with selective exposure, social media, and behavioral phenomena related to the social media (**Table 1**). Preliminary results showed that searches for records in each database of interest produced 29 items from Google Scholar, 952 from Scopus, 32 from CNKI, and 539 from ProQuest. The remaining 1520 valid items after eliminating irrelevant documents and duplicates (shown in **Figure 1**).

Table 1. Keywords and information search strategy (eg: Scopus database).

Database	Key words
Scopus	TITLE-ABS-KEY(["selective exposure"] AND ["social media" OR "new media" OR "digital media")

2.5. Screening

The identification literature retrieved were screened according to (inclusion and exclusion) criteria (**Table 2**). The parameters were that studies published between 2013 to 2023 were included in the timeline. Only peer-reviewed journal articles were included, whereas nonpeer-reviewed articles, notes, preprints, conference record, review paper, book chapter and thesis were excluded. In order to ensure linguistic consistency and avoid translation distortion, publications in other languages were excluded from the study, resulting in only publications in English and Chinese. Additionally, due to the emphasis on selective exposure within the study and new media environments, only those articles that explicitly engaged with relevant concepts and embraced quantitative or mixed methodologies were included. This step yielded a total of 506 valid items.

Table 2. Inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
Publication timeline	January 2013–December 2023	2012 and before
Language	English and Chinese	Other languages
Document type	Journal (research articles)	Non-peer-reviewed articles Notes Articles used in initial draft Conference record Review Paper Book chapter Thesis

2.6. Eligibility

Eligibility stage was done by manually reviewing the full text of the remaining articles to identify if they met the research objectives and were in line with criteria used. Studies then underwent exclusion based on review of titles, abstracts, and full texts to identify irrelevant studies or studies that did not meet the criteria in their entirety. After performing this process 486 items were excluded, resulting in 20 articles relevant for qualitative synthesis. The articles represented a wide variety of methodologies and theoretical lenses to view selective exposure through a new media context.

This systematic review process (**Figure 1**) ensured that only the most relevant, rigorous, and high-quality studies were included in providing a solid basis on the basis of which the selective exposure are analyzed in the new media environment.
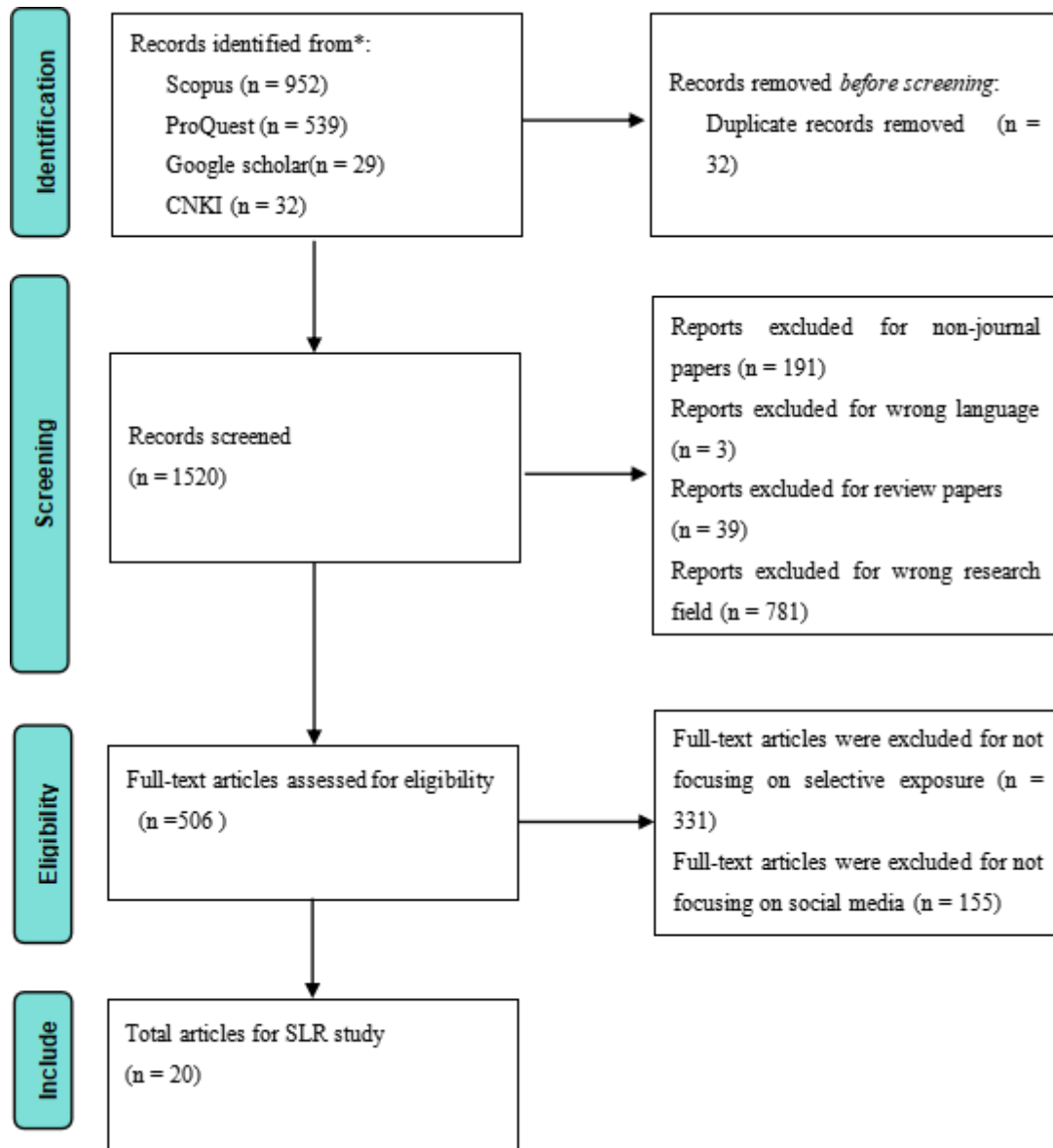
Figure 1. PRISMA Steps for SLR studies (Adapted from Page et al., 2020).

2.7. Data analytic strategy

The 20 articles of focus were evaluated and examined in relation to present research inquiries. The procedure for extracting data involved a sequential three-step process started by (a) reviewing the article's title, (b) reading the abstract and (c) evaluating the entire article to check its relevance and content. The aspect of the review corresponding to this phase involves ensuring that the data extracted correspond to the research objectives, as well as working towards a consistent analysis.

Besides, systematic reviews of literature can include a variety of research designs, including qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-method studies[19]. For this study, a qualitative approach is employed, using content analysis which recognizes, describes systematically and identifies theoretical themes, theoretical frameworks, variables, and research methodologies. This type of analytical approach enabled the developing of a cause-effective framework to scrutinize the theories, models, and conceptual frameworks applied in the studies included in our review[20]. This allowed the analysis to establish a framework to comprehend how the mechanisms and relationships, as captured in the literature, worked together.

3. Results

By analyzing the studies, selective exposure in new media appeared as the general core theme, while creating diversity amongst research methodologies, research theories and research attention. In total, the methodology analysis demonstrated a clear preference for quantitative methods, with 18 studies adopting survey, experimental, or content analysis methods. Of these, 11 employed surveys (e.g., 4, 6, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16), five experimental methods (e.g., 1, 5, 8, 18, 20), and two content analyses (e.g., 2, 19). One study was qualitative (17) and one was mixed (3) which indicates a lack of qualitative and mixed-method designs.

The studies include a diverse set of theoretical approaches to selective exposure including cognitive and psychological theories, media and communication theories, and sociopolitical theories. The theory of cognitive dissonance illustrates the concept of psychological discomfort as people try to avoid information that challenges their beliefs(1, 5), whereas the studies used self-affirmation theory to explain how to lessen the defensive response toward opposition arguments through a bolstered sense of self(4), as such, providing a pathway for the reduction of polarization. The importance of content salience and story frictions that structure selective exposure to information has been the focus of media theories of framing (7) and binary opposition (13), both of which highlight how people negotiate between mainstream and alternative media. Agenda-setting theory has also connected selective exposure to the focus on ideologically congruent attributes that can guide audience attention(3). To our knowledge, sociopolitical frameworks such as social identity theory and partisan identity theory have described how group memberships and political identifiers lead to selective exposure in polarized environments, amplifying polarization(17, 10). However, these theories can also complement each other, forming a more nuanced approach that encompasses personal motives, media arrangements and societal macrocontext to explain selective exposure as a multifaceted process.

The studies reviewed show an evolution of the research contexts of selective exposure, especially in terms of the mediums studied, geographical cut and scope of information explored. Initially focused on online news sites and websites, recent work has increasingly turned attention to algorithmically driven social media spaces: an emphasis echoed in some studies(6, 20). These sites allow for both intentional and incidental exposure, unlike earlier sites where users drove their own content selection. Geographically, the scope has expanded from not only democratic nations such as the U.S. (10, 13) but also authoritarian regimes like for example Iran and socialist countries like China (19, 13), highlighting cultural and political contexts as significant factors impacting the media preferences. Information has also diversified from topics with a primarily political relevance to include health (4) and environmental issues (8), which highlights the more general relevance of selective exposure to other domains of public life.

Through the lens of motivated reasoning. Individual-level motivations, group-level dynamics, and information environment characteristics drive selective exposure behaviors. At the individual level, cognitive dissonance (1, 5, 19) and social biases (18) pull users toward ideologically aligned content. NFO, exaggerates these(3, 5). Selective exposure is also influenced by group-level dynamics like partisan (7) and regime identities (9), underscoring the importance of collective ties in determining media consumption. Information environments are also critical, with studies showing how algorithmic tailorization and platforms' own designs heighten selective exposure by amplifying users' preferences(2, 6).

In terms of affect, selective exposure has complex effects on behaviors and intentions. The legacy of selective and incidental exposure also manifests through behavioral changes, such as increased sharing of ideologically agreeable content (4), and grounds for cross-cutting discussion participation (14), painting a

picture of how selective and incidental exposure interplay to influence digital engagement. Effects that are intentional, emphasize the significance of selective exposure to duplicate political tendencies and electoral choices(12, 15). However, there is other study which highlights its contribution to affective polarization, deepening ideological divides while reducing engagement with opposing viewpoints(20). In contrast to deliberate exposure, incidental exposure lends itself to conditions for broader engagement and thus has a dualistic potential for concerning polarization depending on its context of application.

Thus, these findings highlight the evolving nature of selective exposure in light of changing media contexts, varying motivations, and complicated consequences. The implications of selective and incidental exposure underscore the need for further research to understand how these patterns affect the media landscape and how, through understanding these different types of exposure, the media environment can be more inclusive and balanced.

Final finding concerns the conceptual framework and variables. The studies examined highlight the different roles selective exposure plays through conceptual frameworks, and in that respect, they highlight how selective exposure is inherently multiple in media settings. It is variously treated as IV, DV, MV, and moderator, each telling us something about what we can learn from its use and placement within the project.

Selective exposure operates as an independent variable affecting important outcomes like user behaviors, political attitudes, and polarization. Selective exposure encourages sharing of co-aligned content and participation in cross-cutting discussions (4, 14). Interestingly enough, another study reveals that selective exposure reinforces pre-existing political inclinations, amplifying ideological alignment(15). Specific platform features shape users' trust in these ecosystems and their own participation in them, as explored in 16, which connects role with media trust and engagement. Moreover, a separate study highlights its effects on affective polarization — the intensifying of ideological rifts and the diminishing openness to opposing political perspectives(20).

Selective exposure, when conceptualized as a dependent variable, acts as an outcome influenced by individual motivations, group processes, and technological factors. These two studies, along with many others, emphasize the importance that cognitive dissonance and Need for Orientation (NFO) play in predicting information processing, where users actively search for consistent information that helps them achieve psychological equilibrium(1, 5). Affiliation with social groups also explains how regimes connect with citizens: Another researcher illustrates that regime identity in authoritarian regimes motivates selective exposure to state-aligned media(9). Meanwhile, one study analyzes how algorithmic curation coupled with specific platform designs — e.g., Facebook and Google — compound selective engagement(11).

In this capacity, selective exposure links antecedents (e.g. motivations or group identities) to outcomes (e.g. polarization or agenda-setting effects). For example, one study shows that selective exposure mediates NFO and agenda-setting effects(3), and by this mediating process, selective exposure increases salience for ideology consistent issues. The one similarly shows how selective exposure relates to social identity with polarized attitudes and bolters group alignment and ideological rifts(10).

Selective exposure also could work as the moderator, affecting the strength and direction of relationships between other variables. It increases voting confidence in paper, moderating the effect of political engagement, which is known to magnify electoral behaviors among users with high selective exposure tendencies(12). Likewise, the study examines selective exposure that can moderate the effect of platform preference (personalized vs. state-affiliated) on media trust, shedding light on its impact on the dynamics of engagement and trust in different situations(13).

The multiple definitions of selective exposure point to its centrality for understanding media behaviors. Its functions as independent, dependent, mediating, and moderating variable reflects both its theoretical versatility and empirical importance. These findings highlight the need to further investigate the bidirectional nature of selective exposure as both an antecedent and a consequence of media consumption behaviors, and how it frames our understanding of these behaviors in increasingly complex and partisan media environments.

4. Discussion

The discussion section synthesizes the findings from the systematic review and categorizes the findings into 4 themes and a total of 16 sub-themes (**Figure 2**). These themes explore the complexity of measuring selective exposure, the theoretical applications and interdisciplinary implications of the phenomenon, its core motivations and contextual dynamics, and its multifaceted roles within conceptual frameworks as a variable. Through analysis of these key themes, the discussion not only brings the complexities of selective exposure to life, as it plays out in contemporary media environments, but also draws out the implications, noting not only the challenges but the opportunities for growing the academic conversation, as well as more inclusive communication approaches.

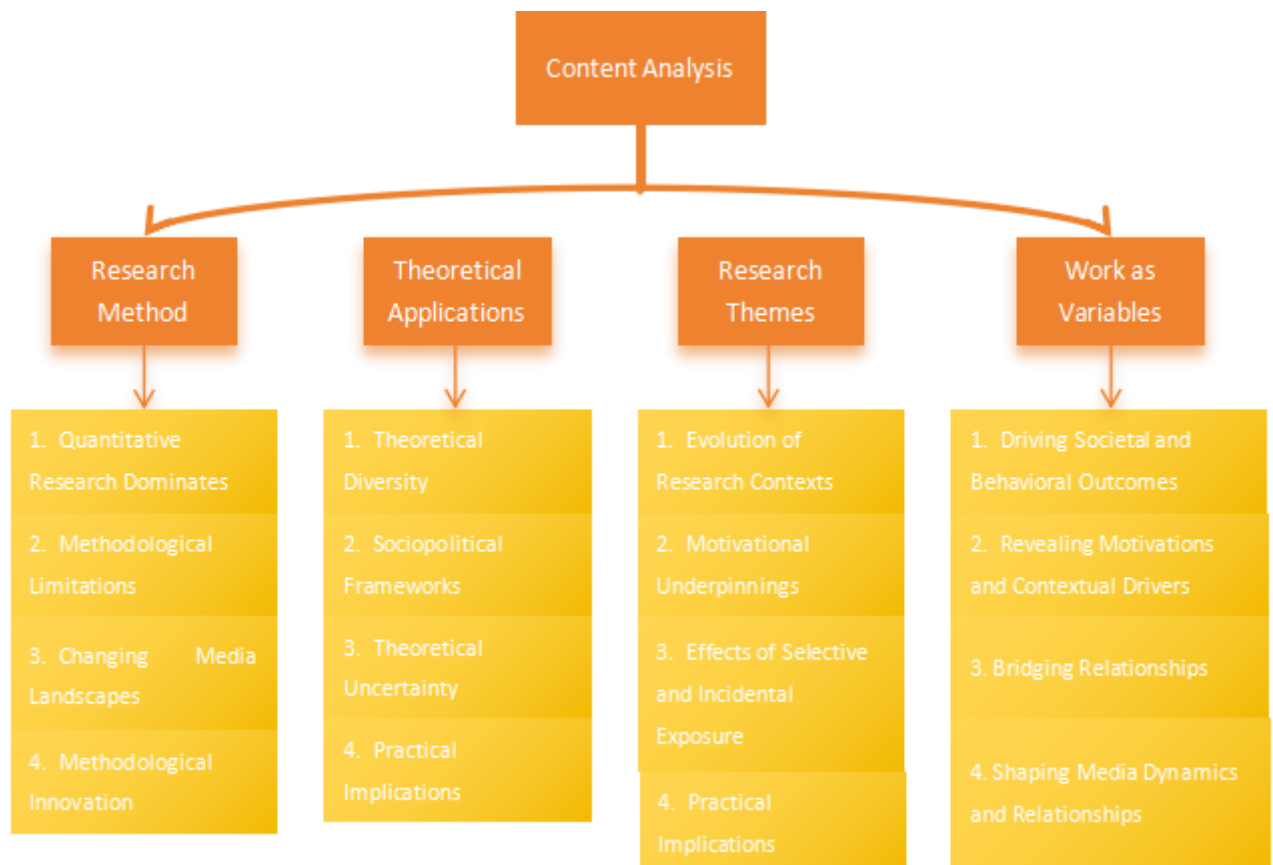**Figure 2.** Content analysis.

4.1. Understanding research method with complexity

It is like piecing together the pieces of a moving puzzle. What this literature review reveals are the multifarious dimensions of this phenomenon, and people should also appreciate how difficult it is for researchers to disentangle the nuances. Researchers make efforts to delimiting behaviors across contexts,

which shows that these are not just theoretical conundrums, they are real barriers to understanding behaviors that arise from the complex interrelationship between cognitive, emotional and technological forces.

4.1.1. Quantitative research dominates and practical implications

Survey-based studies, which are the most common type to date with 11 out of the 20 papers reviewed, dominate the literature and offer useful broad-strokes observations of selective exposure patterns. But this over-reliance on standardised tools so easily leads to a narrow focus, to a focus on intentional interactions with ideologically aligned content that ignores the more complex and fluid processes of subconscious and incidental exposure. For example, work by Wang and Cai[21] shows a more complex picture: while people preferred and avoided what they already liked and disliked, exposure by chance broke those habits, resulting in more balanced engagement. This highlights an urgent need for research tools that can capture this gradient between deliberate and incidental exposure, particularly in today's complex media ecosystems.

Although experimental methods have the strength of causal inference, they have their limitations too. One of the studies cleverly manipulated news exposure to reveal the part that selective exposure played in propelling affective polarization(20). But the sanitized, artificial nature of its environment raises questions about whether these findings apply to the algorithm-driven realities of platforms like Facebook or TikTok.

4.1.2. Methodological limitations

Traditional methods including self-reported survey and laboratory experiment tend to miss the unconscious drivers of selective exposure. Biases such as social desirability or an inability to self-reflect on implicit attitudes can distort results. An innovatory outlier by Liu and Liao[22], that used Implicit Association Tests (IATs) to go deeper. The results were surprising: participants, it turned out, often unconsciously gravitated toward ideologically congruent content, even as they made an explicit claim that they prefer content that is ideologically contradicting. It points towards dark hidden areas of selective exposure, demonstrating that the need to blend quantitative rigor with qualitative depth for richer, context-sensitive insights.

4.1.3. Adaptive methods for changing media landscapes

The rapid speed of change found on digital platforms introduces another dimension of complexity. Algorithmic curation and platform-specific designs have transformed the way users experience information(11,13). Some researchers found that curated platforms such as Google and Facebook amplify selective exposure far more than traditional navigation methods, creating echo chambers that reinforce pre-existing beliefs(11). Meanwhile, Yan Q. H.[23]explored how users in non-democratic settings balance their exposure between personalized and state-affiliated media, revealing stark differences in selective behaviors shaped by the media landscape. Together, these findings emphasize the need for adaptive methodologies capable of capturing the dynamic interplay between user agency and algorithmic control.

4.1.4. Need of methodological innovation

Tackling these challenges requires a daring rethinking of research strategies. Future research should consider combining different methods (e.g., integrating quantitative, qualitative, and digital trace data) to gain insight not only into macro-level trends but also the micro-level behaviors that underpin them. Longitudinal designs will be essential to understanding the changing dynamics of selective exposure, and new techniques such as machine learning and digital analytics can provide insights into users' behaviors in their quotidian environments and the new dimensions opened up by algorithmically curated environments. This will allow researchers to push methodological boundaries, better understand the nuances of selective exposure and its consequential impact on the contemporary media ecology.

5. Theoretical Applications and Disciplinary Implications

This diversity of theoretical frameworks reflects the importance of selective exposure not only from a psychological viewpoint, but also from the vantage points of media and sociopolitical theory. But this theoretical pluralism also reveals gaps in integration and underlines questions about the broader consequences of these frameworks.

5.1. Theoretical diversity

Work in selective exposure has also relied heavily on cognitive and psychological theories to propose internal mechanisms to account for individual motivations, biases, and emotional needs. For example, cognitive dissonance theory explains why people shy away from information that contradicts their beliefs in order to preserve psychological comfort(1, 5) . Self-affirmation theory, applied to the situation outlined in the study from Week et al.[24], shows that enhancing self-worth attenuates defensiveness when confronting contrary beliefs, providing concrete steps to ameliorate ideological polarization. These cognitive realizations not only expand upon selective exposure knowledge, but also have practical implications like improving media literacy for broader engagement.

Media and communication theories can broaden the context for the investigation of selective exposure by embedding it into media systems and structures of content, including framing theory and binary opposition theory (7, 13). The former research demonstrated that frames such as economic or moral narratives shape audience preferences, revealing the importance of content salience for exposure(7). In a similar line of argument, Yan, Q. H.[23] investigates the dualities that audiences encounter when crossing between mainstream and alternative media, positing selective exposure as a malleable process that is highly context-sensitive. Collectively these theories highlight the systemic dynamics that underlie selective exposure, suggesting that more is needed than individual-level approaches; structural-level interventions are also warranted.

5.2. Sociopolitical frameworks and implication

Sociopolitical frameworks shed light on the collective aspects of selective exposure, placing it in the context of wider social and political forces. Social identity theory shows the power of group identifications behind media preferences when media sources are polarized (17). Partisan identity theory expands on this idea, and demonstrates how political loyalties exaggerate preferences for ideologically congruent content and lead to heightened polarization(10). These studies show that selective exposure is not only an individual behavior but also a collective one that is influenced by societal forces, thus the solutions must include an individual and a society perspective.

5.3. Addressing theoretical uncertainty

But while these frameworks provide deep insights, they come with major uncertainties. While cognitive dissonance theory explains people's tendency to avoid dissonant information, it cannot account for how incidental exposure disrupts selective tendencies. While traditional media theories such as framing and agenda-setting can provide powerful insights into how selective exposure shapes public perceptions and priorities, they rarely address how those aspects affect media systems in the first place — the bidirectional feedback between media systems and audience behavior. Understanding these gaps requires more integrative models combining psychological and structural approaches and taking into consideration the interaction between the people and the environments of media, as well as social processes.

5.4. Disciplinary and practical implications

The pluralistic theoretical approaches in selective exposure research indicate the relevance of selective exposure for multiple disciplines, such as psychology, communication and political science. Problem-driven debates oriented across sectors can be a rich source of justified theoretical innovation, and this same diversity needs to be supplemented by cross-disciplinary work to close gaps in the conceptual hierarchy. Furthermore, future research ought to explore hybrid models that combine cognitive and structural components providing a holistic understanding of selective exposure. We must also pursue practical applications, like designing media literacy programs or platform algorithms that promote exposure to diverse viewpoints, to combat the societal challenges created by selective exposure.

6. Core themes and their implications

The study of selective exposure has evolved considerably, paralleling shifts in research contexts, motivational bases, and reflexivity about its consequences. This subsection identifies three essential and interdependent themes—changing research contexts; selective exposure motivations; and an emerging, evolving relationship between selective and incidental exposure.

6.1. Evolution of research contexts

Since its inception, research on selective exposure has changed a lot — also in terms of its mainstream channels, its geographical focus, and the topics being studied. Such shifts demonstrate the field's attentiveness to changing media landscapes and sociopolitical contexts, expanding our understanding of how selective exposure functions in varied settings.

6.1.1. Shifting platforms

Early studies primarily focused on traditional online news sites and major websites, consistent with the early years of widespread digital media use. Attention has since turned to social media platforms, which are now the primary source of information consumption. This shift is demonstrated in studies of the role of algorithmically driven platforms such as Facebook and Twitter in shaping selective exposure tendencies(6, 20). As an illustration of this change of perspective, Wang and Cai[21] described how social media facilitates not only intentional, active exposure to content that resonates, but also incidental exposure to an array of opinions, marking a change from previous research that focused mostly on selective exposure.

6.1.2. Geographical expansion

The geographical scope of selective exposure research has expanded significantly, from the USA context to research in socialism, and across the world. For example, Velasquez, Montgomery and Hall[25]explored the 'partisan identity' that motivates selective media participation in the U.S. and fuels partisanship polarization. Meanwhile, studies examined selective exposure in China and Iran, showing distinct patterns shaped by media systems with limited plurality(13, 19). Meanwhile, in China Yan, Q. H.[23] showed that users switch between personalized media and state-affiliated platforms, reflecting a complex interplay of individual choice and systemic influence. This finding calls for considering different political systems in the study of selective exposure.

6.1.3. Broadening topics

Early research in this area focused mostly on the dissemination of political information; however, more recent studies are increasingly broadening our understanding of the issue across other societal topics, including health communication and environmental marketing. For example, Weeks et al. [24]investigated the implications of selective exposure for health communication, finding that individuals' ideological

predispositions have a notable impact on their cognitive processing of health-related information. In another related study, Aruguete and Calvo[26]examined selective exposure in climate change communication, showing how moral, economic, and environmental frames lead to different levels of engagement. These studies demonstrate that selective exposure is not limited to political content, but rather can shape attitudes and behaviours in a variety of different areas.

In other words, the selective exposure debate has evolved with research contexts on selective exposure because of the dynamism of media ecosystems and the variety of sociopolitical contexts. None of these transformations — moving from a classic online context to an algorithmically-orientated social media context; from multi-party states to socialist or authoritarian contexts; and from political selective exposure to public health and environmental issues — individually, but particularly all three together, dramatically increases our understanding of selective exposure as a complex and multifaceted phenomenon.

6.2. Motivational underpinnings

Paralleling other areas of Interpersonal Communication research, such as computer-mediated communication and relationship development, motives driving selective exposure behaviors are influenced by a cocktail of perceived source credibility and psychological predispositions. Such interplay emphasizes that not only internal preferences but also external shocks shape media engagement patterns.

6.2.1. Credibility of information sources

Selective exposure is largely a function of perceived trustworthiness of information sources and tends to favor sources that are in agreement with users' attitudes. When sources confirm users' beliefs, their credibility is augmented, reinforcing tendencies of selective exposure. For example, in some contexts, regime-affiliated media are less limited precisely because they are perceived by ideologically aligned audience members as more credible, reinforcing selective consumption behavior(19). On the other hand, when sources challenge users' beliefs, their credibility tends to erode and skepticism rises. Other study show that exposure to opposing party news leads to an increase in affects polarisation since when such content is present a less trustworthy information has to be processed, and willingness to interact to others with opposed viewpoints decreases(20).

6.2.2. High-choice media environments and technological advances

With the rise of high-choice media environment, the users are empowered by the technological advances, which helps them to be free in their content filtering leading to echo chambers that helps them strengthen their ideas[21]. Similarly, some researchers found that more curated platforms, such as Facebook, tend to lead to higher levels of selective exposure in comparison to less curated, more honest environments, thereby demonstrating the effects of technology on content selection behaviors(11).

6.2.3. Psychological tendencies

Selective exposure is further driven by psychological factors like a need for cognitive consistency and frequent media consumption. Users tend to seek ideologically similar content that does not create cognitive dissonance, allowing them to remain psychologically comfortable[9,27]. Zhu et al.[28] identified heavy news consumers as being particularly susceptible to selective exposure because of their stronger motivations for ideologically congruent information. Both individual psychology and media consumption habits contribute to these tendencies that drive selective exposure.

6.3. Effects of selective and incidental exposure

Many researchers add incidental contact when talking about selective contact. This is due to the fact that the interaction of selective and incidental exposure indeed points to a dynamic and multifaceted relationship, having profound consequences to individual behaviors and social phenomena.

6.3.1. The dynamic relationship

Though distant from one another, selective and incidental exposure interact complementarily and conflictually. For example, some researchers suggest that selective exposure locks users into their tendency to share ideologically similar content, while incidental exposure leads to reflection and openness to opposing views(4). Other researchers, however, prove that these two forms of exposure are not mutually exclusive but, rather, can jointly affect online engagement in cross-cutting discussions(14).

6.3.2. Impacts on polarization and diversity

To date, there is still no clear conclusion on the impact of selective exposure and incidental exposure on polarization. Some scholars believe that the combined effect of the two will further promote ideological adherence, which will lead to further polarization(20). Other scholars believe that incidental exposure could offset the polarization effect of selective exposure through individual reflection and self-regulation. For example, incidental exposure has the potential to encourage cross-domain political discussions, which can reduce ideological differences (14). This double-edged sword nature highlights the impact of selective exposure on polarization and diversity, which depends on the balance between intentional and unintentional participation.

These insights into motivations and effects work together to underscore the nuanced nature of selective exposure. From the credibility of source information to underlying psychological motivators to the complex interaction and balance of selective and incidental exposure, these combined forces influence both individual behaviors and societal outcomes. The field's versatility in content or scope—from capitalist democracies to socialist states, and from political questions to nonpolitical matters—forms a strong framework for future analysis. Understanding these nuances is crucial for tackling the challenges of selective exposure in an algorithmically driven, rapidly changing media environment.

7. Work as variables

A key concept in media and communication studies, selective exposure plays different roles depending on the conceptual framework. It plays the roles of an independent variable, and dependent, mediating, and moderating variable, thereby illustrating its theoretical role as well as practical importance. This multifactorial dimension illustrates selective exposure's potential as a source of complexity—it can influence, be influenced and mediate the dialectical interplay between diverse factors, rendering it a keystone for conceptualizing media in ever-evolving and algorithmic ecosystems.

7.1. Work as IV: Fuel for social and behavioral outcomes

When studied as an independent variable, selective exposure powerfully predicts outcomes such as political polarization in social media, media engagement, and user trust. Some researchers investigated its role in promoting affective polarization, which exacerbates ideological rifts and curtails receptivity to opposing ideas(20). The others demonstrated that the same phenomenon occurs in terms of media trust, whereby users repeatedly engaging with ideologically congruent content tend to become increasingly suspicious of alternative information outlets(16). Such evidence for selective exposure—as an IV shaping

individual behaviors which leads to societal consequences—begs the question whether selective exposure mainly drives polarization or whether it is simply part of a system of reinforcing feedback loops.

7.2. Work as DV: Uncovering motivations and environmental influences

As a dependent variable, selective exposure provides an understanding of the psychological, social, and technological factors encouraging individuals to consume congruent information. Cognition dissonance and group identity in some studies emerge as prominent influencers, illustrating not just individual preferences, but rather media behavior influenced by how people act in groups (1, 9). Technological factors (e.g., algorithmic curation) make this picture even more complex, some people show that selective exposure is platform-divergent(11). As a DV it allows for an investigation of the external forces that impact selective engagement, and it can measure part of the structural and part of the psychological perspective.

7.3. Work as a mediator towards antecedent-outcome relationships

Selective exposure is typically understood as a mediating variable, linking underlying motivations or identities to broader downstream effects on political polarization or agenda-setting effects. One study illustrates its mediation of the relationship between Need for Orientation (NFO) and issue salience, wherein it amplifies the perceived importance of consistent content(3). Others similarly explore the alignment of group identities and ideological engagement—but focused on the role of social identity in bridging polarized attitudes(10). Such a role underlines the integrative capacity of selective exposure, connecting motivations at an individual level with more systemic outcomes, and showing that we have room for much more nuanced models contingent on feedback loops and disruptions.

7.4. Work as a moderating variable (ModV): The media dynamics and relationships

Selective exposure, acting as a moderating variable, affects the nature or intensity of relationships between other variables, showcasing its ability to change the dynamics of media engagement. For example, some scholars explain it by showing how it magnifies the link between political engagement and voting assurance(12); other scholars outline its influence on the relationship between trust in personalized and state-affiliated media(13). Thus, selective exposure as a ModV also demonstrates how this process can be one that reinforces or detracts from media interactions, instilling its importance in complex media landscapes.

Clearly, selective exposure's potential to play many roles illustrates both its theoretical richness and its practical significance. From IVs that shape behaviors, DVs that reflect motivations, MVs that connect relationships, to ModVs that influence interactions, selective exposure is just as relevant in controlling what people see and hear, and its implications on society, today. An increasingly multifaceted role for news has evolved in this regard, suggesting integrated research approaches that capture the complex and ongoing influence of news in media environments.

From the four themes, we conclude that selective exposure is a multifaceted and dynamic process that interacts with the media environment and human behavior in ways that are evolving. The methodological challenges presented highlight the need to be innovative, no longer limiting ourselves to familiar survey-based and experimental approaches, but building adaptive methods to capture subconscious influences and algorithmic complexities. Selective exposure is multifaceted, and as such, requires measurements and frameworks that capture its complexities; with a particular focus on how intentional and incidental exposures interact with each other and with all of the other exposures that comprise a diverse media diet.

Theory recognizes that selective exposure operates at multiple levels and can be understood through multiple perspectives on the human condition that transcend the psychology of individual cognition, hence the interdisciplinary breadth of selective exposure research is known. These theories range from cognitive

dissonance to framing theory and inform the systemic and individual-level drivers of selective exposure. Integrating this information is crucial for designing strategies that can reduce-how selective exposure can amplify polarization and increases engagement with diverse perspectives.

Core themes relative to the changing nature of research contexts and the complex relationship between motivations and impacts exemplify the adaptability of selective exposure. The expansion from traditional platforms to algorithmically curated social media, the geographic spread from western party-oriented countries to eastern socialist countries and the widening focus from political topics to public health and environmental issues all reflect the field's responsiveness to changing contexts. Layered on top of this, motivational foundations grounded in the source credibility perspective and psychological principles help explain the tension between personal agency and structural influence, as well as how selective exposure versus incidental exposure creates the opportunity to reduce polarization with wider exposure.

The multidimensional nature of selective exposure as an independent, dependent, mediating, and moderating variable, highlights its salient role in media and communication research. It expliquees salient societal outcomes such as polarization and trust in the media, connects individual motivations to system-wide forces, and modulates the processes of media interaction. Such multifaceted capacity, which is changing and developing over time, necessitates integrated research approaches that allow scholars to unpack its theoretical richness and practical relevance.

Longitudinal designs, hybrid theoretical frameworks and novel approaches must remain at the forefront of future research to better enfold the fluid yet enduring consequences of selective exposure. To bridge individual actions with larger social consequence, we must understand its double-edged potential to widen the rift of polarization or support a more inclusive cross-section of society. While media landscapes evolve and continuously become more fragmented and algorithmically curated, selective exposure remains a central concept, necessary to navigating today's complexities in media consumption and to providing diverse pathways for analyzing the media consumption landscape.

8. Limitations

Research on selective exposure has made significant contributions to our understanding of media behavior. Some limitations, however, remain, which may inhibit its breadth and generalizability. These challenges are especially prevalent in the methodological, contextual, and conceptual realms of the field, highlighting the need for innovation and expansion in future studies.

One major challenge has to do with the methods used to study selective exposure. From this review, the field is heavily dominated by quantitative methods, especially survey based research that tends to operationalize selective exposure as a binary, reducing engagement with congruent or incongruent content. However, this reductionist approach from Wang and Cai[21] fails to capture the delicately balanced interaction between intentional and incidental exposure, that can result in more balanced consumption of information. Experimental methods offer causal insights, but the artificial setup in which those insights are derived is brittle when theorizing about our socioeconomic worlds grounded in algorithmic choice environments. Rabb, Cowen and de Ruiter[29] show the impact of selective exposure in exacerbating affective polarization but leave us to ponder about the relevance of such findings about static media to the case of dynamic media. In addition, the scarce use of qualitative and mixed-methods approaches acts as a barrier to explore deeper subconscious influences and systemic patterns.

Additional contextual limitations reduce the generalizability of selective exposure research, as well. An excessive critique of Western democracies, and especially the United States, ignores the different norms in

media systems, and in other cultures. For example, Velasquez, Montgomery and Hall[25] stress partisan divides in the U.S. context but early research on non-Western contexts, including Iran (Hasanuddin, Akbar and Farid[30]) and China (Yan Q. H.[23]), suggests different dynamics driven by controlled media environments. Moreover, the topical domains examined through selective exposure research are often politically constrained, while other social domains, such as health (Week et al.[24]) or environments communication (Aruguete and Calvo[28]) have perceived limited theorizing. These gaps limit the relevance of the field to broader societal issues and public discourse.

Lastly, other limitations include the short time period (2013–2023) of interest in this review and the choice of databases (Scopus, Google Scholar, ProQuest, CNKI, etc.) to search for articles. Therefore, future studies might widen the database and be more contextualised in terms of media—for example, targeting especially selective exposure in social media to allow for a more nuanced and accurate review.

Tackling the different methodological, contextual, and conceptual limitations is a requisite for future advances in the field. To achieve this, selective exposure research should include innovative research tools, greater diversity of context, and sharpened conceptual clarity; such additions would help provide a fuller understanding of media behaviors and mechanisms to promote more balanced and inclusive media environments.

9. Future

To move the field and avoid the current problems with selective exposure research, future studies must consider methodological improvement, contextual broadening and conceptual fine-tuning.

From a methodological perspective, researchers could integrate the different approaches. Although quantitative methods provide initial insights on selective exposure, these are not sufficient alone; qualitative and mixed-method designs can better measure the subconscious and contextual measures driving selective exposure. For example, Implicit Association Tests (IATs) can uncover biases that standard surveys might miss, and longitudinal studies can demonstrate how selective exposure changes with changing media ecosystems. Also, making use of digital trace data and machine learning tools allows for an accurate analysis of how users behave in these algorithmically curated worlds in real-time.

Expanding the contextual scope of the literature beyond Western democracies and political information, which remain its dominant focus. At the same time, social media is also becoming another tool for the regime to control information, which also reduces the possibility of selective exposure by limiting the availability of information — This makes Chinese users encounter fewer alternative views in their daily browsing on the internet. Future studies can focus more on non-Western contexts using Chinese data, for example, and the alternative structure they presented is also a kind of selective exposure with regard to Chinese social media users, and contacts in Iran can also enhance media faithfulness in a single information resource. Examining questions in public health, environmental discourse, and education, in addition to political topics, would also provide better insight into the mechanisms and effects of selective exposure. More work can be done to investigate official media in cases that are not explicitly political to better understand how institutional credibility shapes media practices in a variety of settings.

Another significant strand of research is the study of individual differences in selective exposure behaviours. Mental, emotional, and social qualities strongly influence inclinations toward dogmatic alignment or random exposure. Understanding these variants could help in designing specific interventions that encourage media diversity and reduce polarization.

This future research, if guided by a commitment to methodological, contextual, and conceptual diversity, can advance understanding of selective exposure while yielding realistic strategies to develop a diverse and inclusive media environment.

10. Conclusions

This systematic review aggregates research on selective exposure, demonstrating its salience in the contemporary media landscape. This review demonstrates the selective exposure process to be a composite, multifaceted construct, influenced both by individual agency and technological and sociopolitical structures through examining methodological approaches, theoretical frameworks, contextual evolution, and conceptual roles.

The methodological critique also reveals a penchant for quantitative methods, like surveys and experiments, which, while dominant, often reduce the complexity underlying selective exposure. Such reductionism is in danger of neglecting the intricate nuances at play in terms of subconscious and collateral exposure. In order to be able to study the changing behaviors within algorithmically mediated media ecosystems, it will also be important to expand the use of qualitative and mixed-methods designs, longitudinal studies, and real-world digital trace data.

Applications of multiple theories indicate selective exposure's potential interest across disciplines, uniting cognitive, media, and sociopolitical approaches. The piecemeal and insular application of frameworks such as cognitive dissonance and framing theory, however, limits their explanatory potential. Future research should incorporate these perspectives as well as represent feedback analogically in models of selective exposure, building a comprehensive model that reflects the iterated and adaptive nature of selective exposure.

A review of such research notes reveals an important fact: research is largely context-dependent, suggesting that it is necessary to expand the scope of selective exposure research beyond Western capitalist countries to socialist and authoritarian states. To be sure, these studies reveal how different structures of media systems produce behaviors, offering contrasts to results in capitalist democracies. Meanwhile, the study of selective exposure, undertaken in non-political areas like health and environmental communication, illustrates its wider importance to society. But geographic and topical imbalances in the discipline suggest that more inclusivity in research settings and themes is needed.

Selectivity offers such breadth of coverage, as an independent, a dependent, a mediating, and a moderating variable, and the concept's theoretical richness points to depth. But most studies treat it as a static phenomenon. Exploring these mechanism is important for understanding the evolution of selective exposure and how it interacts with broader sociopolitical and technological trends.

As a building block concept in media and communication scholarship, the selective exposure is leading the ideological divide but also driving trust, engagement and the public discourse in a increasingly polarized social media-algorythmic ecosystems. Thus, this research explore the past research. The results conclude the diversity of methods, integration of theory, and breadth of context, which could help future work to understand the complexities of selective exposure and to inform solutions to its challenges. These attempts are crucial in creating more inclusive, balanced and diverse media spaces that allow societies to engage with and address the challenges posed by personalization, disinformation and public discourse in the context of our increasingly digital lives.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Appexi A: All articles for review.

No.	Year	Author(s)	Title
1	2013	Silvia Knobloch-Westerwick, Benjamin K. Johnson, & Axel Westerwick	To Your Health: Self-Regulation of Health Behavior Through Selective Exposure to Online Health Messages
2	2015	Ivan B. Dylko	How Technology Encourages Political Selective Exposure
3	2014	Lindita Camaj	Need for Orientation, Selective Exposure, and Attribute Agenda-Setting Effects
4	2017	Brian E. Weeks Daniel S. Lane Dam Hee Kim Slgi S. Lee Nojin Kwak	Incidental Exposure, Selective Exposure, and Political Information Sharing: Integrating Online Exposure Patterns and Expression on Social Media
5	2017	Stephanie Jean Tsang	Cognitive Discrepancy, Dissonance, and Selective Exposure
6	2018	Hongyu Wang, Tianji Cai	Media exposure and Chinese college students' attitudes toward China's maritime claims and disputes in the South and East China Seas
7	2018	Lauren Feldman& P. Sol Hart	Broadening Exposure to Climate Change News? How Framing and Political Orientation Interact to Influence Selective Exposure
8	2018	Natalia Aruguete & Ernesto Calvo	Time to #Protest: Selective Exposure, Cascading Activation, and Framing in Social Media
9	2018	Magdalena Wojcieszak, Erik C. Nisbet, Lea Kremer, Golnoosh Behrouzian, and Carroll Glynn	What Drives Media Use in Authoritarian Regimes? Extending Selective Exposure Theory to Iran
10	2019	Alcides Velasquez, Gretchen Montgomery, and Jeffrey A. Hall	Ethnic Minorities' Social Media Political Use: How Ingroup Identification, Selective Exposure, and Collective Efficacy Shape Social Media Political Expression
11	2019	Ana S. Cardenal, Carlos Aguilar-Paredes, Carol Galais, and Mario Perez-Montoro	Digital Technologies and Selective Exposure: How Choice and Filter Bubbles Shape News Media Exposure
12	2019	THOMAS J. JOHNSON, MAGDALENA SALDANA, BARBARA K. KAYE	Think the Vote: Information Processing, Selective Exposure to Social Media, and Support for Trump and Clinton
13	2020	Yan, Qihong	Duality and Interconstruction: The Influence of Selective Exposure on Youth Online Political Expression [Duality interconstruction: Youth online political opinion expression under the influence of selective contact].
14	2020	Nojin Kwak, Daniel S. Lane, Brian E. Weeks, Dam Hee Kim, and Slgi S. Lee	Now We're Talking? Understanding the Interplay Between Online Selective and Incidental Exposure and Their Influence on Online Cross-Cutting Political Discussion
15	2021	Qinfeng Zhu, Brian E Weeks, Nojin Kwak	Implications of online incidental and selective exposure for political emotions: Affective polarization during elections
16	2021	Desiree Steppat, Laia Castro Herrero, Frank Esser	Selective exposure in different political information environments – How media fragmentation and polarization shape congruent news use
17	2022	Liu, Yanjun & Liao, Zihao	How Do People Choose Political Information? A Study of Selective Exposure Theory from the Perspective of Political Communication [How do people select political information? ——Selective contact theory from the perspective of political communication]
18	2022	Anne C. Kroon, Toni G. L. A van der Meer, & Thomas Pronk	Does Information about Bias Attenuate Selective Exposure? The Effects of Implicit Bias Feedback on the Selection of Outgroup-Rich News
19	2023	Fadlih Awwal Hasanuddin, Muh. Akbar, Muhammad Farid	Analysis of Selective Exposure Cluster in the Covid-19 Vaccine Information Network on Twitter
20	2023	Nicholas Rabb, Lenore Cowen, Jan P. de Ruiter	Investigating the effect of selective exposure, audience fragmentation, and echo-chambers on polarization in dynamic media ecosystems