

# Selective exposure during uprisings: A comparative study of news uses in Chile, Hong Kong, Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon

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**Abstract**

In periods of political unrest, media habits change significantly, allowing for new patterns of selectivity. This study's main contribution lies in its application of selective exposure theory and its comparison of people's media uses in five Global South polities that witnessed widespread protests in 2019: Chile, Hong Kong, Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon. It examines the relationship between people's trust in the media and selective exposure at a global comparative level and within the contexts of political upheavals and hyperconnected media systems. The study also assesses the relationship between issue publics and participation in protests. Using cross-sectional surveys in each of the five countries/regions, it compares participants' support for the protests and their exposure to legacy and social media. The findings reveal that media trust and issue publics play a significant role in determining the level of preference for pro-attitudinal news content. Trusting pro-attitudinal TV channels relates to following pro-attitudinal TV channels, and trusting counter-attitudinal TV channels relates to following counter-attitudinal TV channels. In addition, the strong issue publics group was more likely than the weak and moderate issue publics groups to participate in street protests.

**Keywords**

Selective exposure, issue publics, political unrest, news consumption, social media, media and protests

**Introduction**

The shift from a low-choice to a high-choice media environment has revived concerns about people's media choices and how their selective exposure to news reinforces their political and ideological leanings, particularly during important historical junctures. Selective exposure is defined by how audiences select their news and what biases affect their selections (Sears and Freedman, 1967). Extant research shows that the more choices audiences have, the more selective they become, which leads to an increase in the importance and role their preferences play in guiding selectivity (Dahlgren et al., 2019). This may ultimately lead to an increase in polarization among citizens, especially when political circumstances are conducive (Cardenal et al., 2019; Rasmussen, 2014).

In periods of political and economic turmoil, people's media consumption and production habits change, allowing for new patterns of selectivity (Comninos, 2013; Kozman and Melki, 2022; Melki and Kozman, 2021b; Schoemaker and Stremlau, 2014). In 2019, the world witnessed a series of uprisings, including in Chile, Hong Kong, Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon. Building on the theory of selective exposure, this study compares media uses and trust during periods of unrest in these five states. It first examines the relationship between selective exposure and people's trust in traditional and social media platforms, and the importance and strength of people's media preferences in guiding

selectivity. Then, it examines the relationship between issue publics and participation in protests.

The five countries/regions examined to offer a wide spectrum of political and economic systems: from autocratic theocracies to parliamentary democracies, and from tightly controlled to liberal market economies. Although they have their unique post-colonial legacies, their uprisings share overlapping contexts, including calls for political reforms and basic freedoms, and the eradication of inequalities and corruption. In June 2019, protests erupted in Hong Kong after the government issued a bill allowing extradition to mainland China (Gondwe, 2020). In October 2019, protests also exploded in Chile—triggered by an increase in subway fees (Human Rights Watch, 2019a); in Lebanon—in response to a proposed tax on WhatsApp calls (Human Rights Watch, 2019c); and in Iraq—due to tough economic conditions and the use of violence by security forces (Human Rights Watch, 2020). A month later, Iranians took to the streets after an increase in gasoline prices (Shahi and Abdoh-Tabrizi, 2020). In all five countries/regions, what started as limited protests due to dissatisfaction with a specific issue quickly transformed into popular uprisings that targeted the ruling elites.

Despite the increased importance of comparative research due to globalization and the information revolution, comparative studies on selective exposure remain scarce, particularly in the Global South and during political crises (Stier et al., 2020). Therefore, the significance of this study lies in its examination of selective exposure theory within a comparative global approach during a common period of unrest. Because it was necessary to use different sampling techniques in each country, the value of our comparison lies in its focus on the common uprising situations and the different social contexts, political and media systems, and issues being protested.

### *Selective exposure*

Despite the rich media landscape, most people still tend to select the information that supports their pre-held attitudes (Dahlgren et al., 2019; Dorison et al., 2019). Selective exposure is defined as audiences' biases in selecting media and following attitude-consistent news (Metzger et al., 2020). This process "is partly driven by faulty affective forecasts," where partisan individuals exaggerate and misjudge the negative influence of exposure to opposing information and, thus, avoid it (Dorison et al., 2019: 1). Selective exposure can be guided by partisanship, which leads to the emergence of partisan selective exposure or confirmation bias, a mechanism that motivates people to follow news that reconfirms their opinions and thereby increases polarization (Dubois and Blank, 2018; Feldman and Hart, 2018; Stroud, 2008; Taber and Lodge, 2006; Williams et al., 2016).

The influence of selective exposure in increasing partisanship varies depending on several factors. First, the influence of selectivity is guided by topic and medium. Politics and people's political predispositions increased selective exposure during the 2004 U.S. elections (Stroud, 2008). Individuals avoided media that opposed their political beliefs and followed those consistent with their predispositions. Second, the level of familiarity with a topic affects the level of selectivity (Sawicki et al., 2011). Fewer people are familiar with a topic and the more they have uncertain attitudes toward it, the more

likely they are to follow attitude-consistent news, and vice versa (Sawicki et al., 2011). Third, news framing can influence selectivity but to a limited extent, depending on political leanings and the media content available. For example, when participants' choices were limited to climate change stories, individuals overall were more likely to selectively follow climate change news stories with a public health frame followed by a conflict frame, compared to stories with environmental, security, economic, and morality frames (Feldman and Hart, 2018). This pattern held for Liberal-Democrats and Conservative-Republicans but not for Moderate-Independents, whose attention was attracted by environmental frames (and public health frames) more than conflict frames. When the same study additionally exposed participants to non-climate change stories, the trend shifted even further: conflict frames dropped in importance for Liberal-Democrats and Moderate-Independents but became the most attractive to Conservative-Republicans (Feldman and Hart, 2018).

With the rise of social media, some scholars questioned the notion that people are more likely to be exposed to politically consistent and attitude-confirming news (Dahlgren et al., 2019; Kim, 2011; Lee et al., 2014). Several studies confirmed the likelihood of incidental exposure and that social media users are more likely than non-users to come across ideas with which they disagree (Fletcher and Nielsen, 2018). However, selective exposure must not be defined by a decrease in exposure to attitude-inconsistent information (which describes the concept of selective avoidance) but rather by the increase in seeking attitude-consistent information (Garrett, 2009). Although seeking attitude-consistent information does not result in decreasing people's exposure to attitude-inconsistent information, some studies conflated the act of following attitude-consistent information due to selective exposure with the act of following attitude-consistent information due to other reasons irrelevant to attitudes, including ideology, religion, education, race, and other demographic factors (Sears and Freedman, 1967). They refer to this confusion as *de facto* selective exposure. Mutz and Young (2011) distinguished between active and passive selective exposure, which surfaces in situations where people do not have many choices. As such, availability guides selection. Active selective exposure is facilitated by an increase in partisan choices and is influenced by beliefs, motivations and attitudes (Mutz and Young, 2011).

### *Selective exposure, attitude strength, and issue publics*

Research on selective exposure has established that the more people become selective, the more their personal beliefs and opinions play a role in determining what media choices they make (Iyengar and Hahn, 2009; Kim, 2009). Studies also revealed that selective exposure is largely influenced by issue publics (Converse, 1964; Kim, 2009) and attitude strength (Knobloch-Westerwick and Meng, 2009). Attitude strength is defined as the level of stability a person's attitude reaches, its level of endurance against change, and its influence on behavior (Miller and Peterson, 2004). Petty and Krosnick (1995) defined four features of strong attitudes: "persistence, resistance, impact on information processing and judgments, and guiding behavior" (p. 4). People with strong attitudes are more likely to refuse to expose themselves to opposing

information and become polarized, while those with weak attitudes are more open to information that is inconsistent with their pre-held beliefs (Leeper, 2014).

Research on the importance of attitude strength gained momentum after Converse (1964) introduced the concept of issue publics (Miller and Peterson, 2004). Issue publics are groups of individuals who are guided by strong beliefs and attitudes toward issues in which they are interested and strongly knowledgeable about (Kim, 2009). Most issue publics are focused on one or a few issues that are strongly tied to their values, self-interests and social identification (Krosnick, 1990), and they are less likely to be neutral about such issues, particularly in the realm of international politics (Krosnick and Telhami, 1995). They may not necessarily be knowledgeable about a wide spectrum of issues and may not closely follow general news, yet they expose themselves extensively to news about the few issues they consider to be personally relevant and that affect their lives (Bolsen and Leeper, 2013). They attribute high levels of importance to such issues that relate to their identities, values, and interests and that often guide their political choices (Kim, 2009).

While attitude strength often identifies issue publics, some scholars have argued that high attitude extremity—in reference to individuals who hold politically extreme ideologies that are resistant to change—is a better predictor (Wojcieszak, 2014). Issue publics with high attitude extremity are even more stable in their convictions and tend to be resistant to change and drivers of partisanship (Wojcieszak, 2014). However, conceptualizing attitude extremity outside the typical Western political paradigm does not neatly fit many non-Western societies, particularly the countries in this study.

For issue publics, news selection is not only controlled by pre-held conceptions and beliefs, but also by two motivations: defense and accuracy (Peralta et al., 2017). Defense refers to the motivation of defending one's position and "induces a confirmation bias," while accuracy refers to the motivation of correcting one's information and "induces a balanced or even self-critical information search" (Jonas et al., 2005: 978). The strength of people's defense and accuracy motivations is influenced by different variables that moderate people's bias for attitude-consistent information (Hart et al., 2009). The variables *commitment*, *confidence*, and *support* relate to defense motivation and increase selection of attitude-consistent news, while *information utility* relates to accuracy motivation and could either increase or decrease exposure to attitude-consistent information, depending on the level of utility of the information. When the information is slightly at odds with an individual's prior beliefs but is useful, interesting, and novel, the person is more likely to expose themselves to such information (McGuire, 1985). In addition, the importance and nature of the issue and its relevance to the individual's life play an important role in issue publics, especially when there are information gaps to be filled (Henderson, 2014). Therefore, issue publics are more likely to expose themselves to attitude-challenging news when there is something relevant and practical to be learned, which may contribute to both defense and accuracy motivations.

Hart et al. (2009: 579) noted, "the occasionally opposing influences of defense and accuracy motivation create a balance between defending prior views and obtaining realistic views of an object or issue." However, Peralta et al. (2017) revealed that although both issue publics and non-issue publics might choose balanced news on some occasions and

reach a common ground between attitude-consistent information and realistic views, the motive behind this choice could be a defensive attempt to strengthen one's understanding of opposing views to better counter them. Therefore, some researchers referred to defense motivation as partisan goals and considered them determinants to the intensity of people's prejudices or biases (Taber and Lodge, 2006). In other words, issue publics may expose themselves to attitude-inconsistent information to strengthen their knowledge about opposing opinions with the ultimate goal of better defending their long-standing convictions.

Despite extensive research on issue publics, the literature that examines the relationship between these groups and protest engagement remains scarce (Becker et al., 2010). The few available studies showed that holding strong views on a particular issue increased a person's engagement in political events and was necessary for political activity (Chen, 2013). In contrast, exposure to attitude-inconsistent news decreased participation (Dilliplane, 2011). Issue publics, thus, contribute to engaging in events or actions that are issue related, but only for pro-attitudinal views, and not for counter-attitudinal views (Chen, 2013). In addition, during protests, issues publics, and trust were associated with following pro-attitudinal media and negatively associated with following counter-attitudinal media, regardless of party affiliation, allegiance to country, and interest in knowing about the protests (Melki and Kozman, 2021b). However, the findings indicated some differences in gender, education, and interest in local politics. Within the context of issue publics, women and the more educated were more likely than men and the less educated, respectively, to follow pro-attitudinal media. In contrast, those who were more interested in local politics were less likely to follow pro-attitudinal media (Melki and Kozman, 2021b). Furthermore, Chan (2020) found that during the Hong Kong Umbrella Protests, partisans from both sides of the political spectrum were more likely to follow pro-attitudinal media. Therefore, we propose the following:

**H1:** Issue publics are (a) more likely to follow pro-attitudinal news and (b) less likely to follow counter-attitudinal news than non-issue publics.

**RQ1:** Are issue publics more likely than others to participate in street protests?

### *Selective exposure and media trust*

Trust affects the relationship of audiences with news and is determined by different factors including people's ideologies, political engagement, and trust in the state (Fletcher and Park, 2017; Lee, 2010). The diversity of media choices has increased researchers' interest in media trust and how it affects media uses (Strömbäck et al., 2020), although people's trust in media has been declining globally due to increased public polarization and media partisanship (Newman et al. 2018; Strömbäck et al., 2020).

Scholars studied three types of media trust: Trust in the news content, trust in the news sources, and trust in news outlets (Williams, 2012). So far, no single scale for measuring media trust exists, and the use of different measures have yielded different results (Kohring and Matthes, 2007). On one hand, Tsifti and Cappella (2005) showed

the relationship between media trust and selective exposure was moderated by peoples' need for cognition, or the extent to which people feel they need to understand the world and make sense of their surroundings. The higher the need for cognition, the more likely people chose to follow and use media, regardless of trust. However, the lower the need for cognition, the more likely people were influenced by their trust in media (Tsfati and Cappella, 2005). On the other hand, studies that examined selective exposure and media trust using source credibility found a stronger relationship. According to Stroud and Lee (2013), a person's perception of a source's credibility moderated selective exposure. For example, the perception of a blog as credible encouraged people to follow news that was both attitude-consistent and attitude-inconsistent (Johnson and Kaye, 2013). Additionally, trusting news sources increased people's practice of following these sources (Melki and Kozman, 2021a). During Syria's civil war, trusting television stations was positively related to following these stations. Similarly, during Lebanon's 2019 uprising, trusting pro-protest news channels was positively related to following pro-protest channels, while trusting anti-protest news channels was related to following anti-protests channels (Melki and Kozman, 2021b).

Research also revealed that individuals view neutral and attitude-consistent sources as more credible than attitude-inconsistent sources (Metzger et al., 2020). In general, people had a higher preference for attitude-consistent news and highly credible news sources (Knobloch-Westerwick et al., 2015). Exposure to these messages strengthened attitudes, while exposure to attitude-inconsistent messages resulted in the opposite and was not affected by source credibility (Knobloch-Westerwick et al., 2015).

Additionally, some studies suggested that the more people consume news, the more their trust in news and media systems (Schranz et al., 2018). However, different factors moderated this relationship, including the media platform and the level of people's political involvement (Tsfati and Ariely, 2014). For example, during Lebanon's 2019 uprising, people trusted television stations the most, in comparison to radio, online outlets, and newspapers (Kozman and Melki, 2022). Sang et al. (2020) also revealed that while both trust and distrust predict engagement with online news, the mode of engagement could not be predicted by trust. However, strongly politicized media decreased people's trust (Schranz et al., 2018). Therefore, we propose the following:

**H2a:** Trusting pro-attitudinal TV channels is positively related to following pro-attitudinal TV channels.

**H2b:** Trusting counter-attitudinal TV channels is positively related to following counter-attitudinal TV channels.

Because we are not sure whether Issue Publics or Media Trust are stronger predictors of selective exposure, we also propose:

**RQ2:** Which is a stronger predictor of selective exposure: issue publics or media trust?

### *Selective exposure and media systems*

A state's regulations and political system, particularly regarding press freedom and media diversity, play a major role in the trajectories of protests (Soengas-Pérez, 2013). The ongoing changes in media systems have increased researchers' interest in understanding how these evolutions promote selective exposure (Humanes, 2019). According to Goldman and Mutz (2011), people are more likely to be exposed to attitude-consistent information on legacy media if they live in a country in which media align with ruling groups. In authoritarian countries, attitudes toward governing groups and religious identity could drive selectivity, particularly regarding independent versus state-run media (Wojcieszak et al., 2019). Therefore, understanding each country's media system may shed light on the effects of selective exposure during uprisings.

**Hong Kong.** Ever since Hong Kong became part of China, its media system has witnessed a decline in press freedoms related to the re-establishment of media power structures, changes in ownerships, and the increase in Chinese media spending (So, 2017). In response to the increasing pressures exerted by Mainland China on Hong Kong's press, some outlets have shifted to alternative platforms (Frisch et al., 2018). During the 2019 protests, press freedoms were further curtailed and self-censorship increased (Yu, 2021).

**Chile.** The Chilean media scene is highly concentrated, commercial, privatized, and tied to major corporations (Mellado et al., 2021). Although it is relatively free, it follows political parties' neoliberal ideologies, which reduces its diversity and pluralism (Mellado and Scherman, 2021). During the 2019 Chilean protests, activists targeted legacy media, accusing them of biased reporting that showed the protests in a negative light and of publishing fake news that supports the government (Van der Spek, 2019).

**Iran.** Iran's government applies tight control over its media (Chehabi, 2001). Most newspapers and all broadcast media are owned or controlled by religious or governmental institutions (Bruno, 2009). Reformists own some online media but face censorship and are usually blocked if they publish anti-government content (Bruno, 2009). The government silenced the press during the 2019 protests by imposing strict guidelines, and some journalists faced threats and prosecution (Center for Human Rights in Iran, 2019). The authorities imposed a country-wide internet shutdown between November 16 and 23 (Human Rights Watch, 2019b).

**Iraq.** After the 2003 war, Iraqi media witnessed a rapid expansion and enjoyed increased freedoms (Ricchiardi, 2011). However, the U.S. occupation resulted in the division of the media along ethno-sectarian lines, which reinforced sectarian divides and partisan media coverage (Al-Rawi, 2013). After protests erupted, the Iraqi government curtailed press freedoms, shut down 12 broadcast outlets, and intimidated others to discourage them from covering the demonstrations (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2019).

**Lebanon.** Media outlets in Lebanon are relatively free, compared to others in the region. However, like Iraq, the media scene reflects local sectarian divisions and regional political alliances. Major political groups control most prominent media outlets in the country (Kozman and Melki, 2022). The coverage of the 2019 protests in Lebanon was largely biased and sharply divided between those supporting and those opposing the protests, especially Television news (Melki and Kozman, 2021b).

Although we used the same method and instrument in each of the compared countries, our comparative approach is not focused on statistical comparisons of congruent national samples, mainly because it was impossible to apply an identical sampling technique across all countries, especially in Iran and Iraq. Therefore, our comparison of selective exposure across the five countries focused on the common uprising/protests context that each audience faced and took into consideration the media and political systems studied and the issues under protest. Thus, we ask:

**RQ3:** Do selective exposure trends differ across countries, media systems, and issues protested?

## Methodology

The study is based on cross-sectional surveys of adults living in the five countries under study. Data collection took place in Chile (18 December 2019–10 March 2020), Hong Kong (6 May–16 June 2020), Iran (6 December 2019–21 March 2020), Iraq (6 December 2019–22 December 2019), and Lebanon (5–12 December 2019).

### *Sampling and procedure*

*Hong Kong.* Participants were randomly selected from the Hong Kong People Representative Panel and the Hong Kong People Volunteer Panel. Established by the Hong Kong Public Opinion Research Institute, both panels are free and open for anyone to join. Researchers sent emails with a link to the questionnaire to 7466 from the former panel and 63,806 from the latter. A total of 4355 responses were received, of which incomplete questionnaires were discarded, leaving the total sample at 3599. Researchers examined the collected data to make sure that the sample reflected the population. The political inclination of participants was not largely representative of the population and mostly represented liberals (54%). This was inevitable because online surveys attract more youth who tend to be more liberal.

*Lebanon.* A sample size of 1000 individuals was calculated based on a population of 6 million (95%CI:  $\pm 3.1\%$ ). Thirty percent of the questionnaires were distributed in protest areas, where researchers used a systematic random sample to select respondents (selecting every third person from small- or medium-sized protests and every fifth person from large protests). The remaining questionnaires (70%) were distributed proportionally in governorates across the country based on the latest voter records and using a multistage probability sampling technique.

*Chile.* A sample of 2889 individuals was selected through convenience sampling. To ensure diversity, questionnaires were distributed through the social media platforms—Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook accounts—of more than 20 organizations from the civil society, specific people who live in different areas in the country, and who have different political leaning and cultural ideologies.

*Iraq.* Questionnaires were shared on different Facebook groups of Iraqi governorates (south, west, and central Iraq). An overall sample size of 1000 individuals completed the questionnaire. Some surveys were also administered to activists who are members of closed Facebook groups, which are usually used to share information about protests.*Iran.* An overall sample of 614 participants was selected through a snowball sampling technique. Questionnaires were sent to personal contacts of the researchers in Iran, who in turn, shared the questionnaire with other personal contacts. Questionnaires were either administered through Google Forms or in printed format. The response rate was 32%. Snowballing was the only viable option given the risks of conducting research about this sensitive issue in Iran.

Table 1 shows the sample demographic distribution.

### *Instrument and measurement*

The questionnaire comprised 24 close-ended questions, required approximately 10 minutes to complete, and generated 84 variables. All media uses variables followed a 4-point ordered scale measured at the interval level.

*Attitudes and behavior.* Attitudes were defined as a person's perception of the protests, and behavior was defined as a performed action connected to the event (Hart et al., 2009), particularly participation in street protests. Building on previous research, *attitude strength* was measured by asking participants whether they opposed or supported the protests (1 = strongly oppose, 4 = strongly support), *attitude importance* was measured by asking participants how important they considered the protests (1 = not at all, 4 = very important) (Knobloch-Westerwick and Meng, 2009; Peralta et al., 2017; Westerwick et al., 2013; Wojcieszak, 2021). For participation in protests, respondents were asked how often they joined the protests in person (1 = never, 4 = often).

*Issue publics.* We conceptualized issue publics as the group to which the issue mattered. Previous studies have combined attitude strength and importance as a measure

**Table 1.** Demographics (gender, age, and education) from each country.

		Lebanon	Iraq	Iran	Chile	Hong Kong
Gender	Female	48.6%	35.1%	46.7%	43.7%	50.0%
	Male	51.4%	64.9%	53.3%	54.6%	48.8%
	Other	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	1.7%	1.2%
Age	18–22	18.1%	23.8%	25.0%	12.3%	12.6%
	23–30	26.5%	37.7%	31.8%	22.5%	29.0%
	31–45	26.7%	26.8%	24.1%	36.3%	27.8%
	46–65	24.3%	10.7%	15.7%	25.7%	28.4%
	>65	4.4%	0.9%	3.4%	3.2%	2.2%
Education	Elementary school or less	7.7%	1.0%	1.0%	1.3%	0.1%
	Middle to high school	74%	35.0%	38.2%	22.9%	23.2%
	Bachelor or higher	18.3%	64.0%	60.8%	75.8%	76.7%

of issue publics (Melki and Kozman, 2021b; Peralta et al., 2017). To this, we added another measure, where issue publics corresponded to people who held strong attitudes about the protests, those who deemed the protests important to them, and those who were interested in knowing about the protests. All three variables were measured on a 4-point scale (0 = not at all, 4 = very). We computed the construct by averaging the three variables ( $M = 3.59$ ,  $SD = 0.77$ , Cronbach’s alpha = 0.9).

**Selective exposure and Trust.** We operationalized selective exposure as people’s following of pro-attitudinal and counter-attitudinal news. Selective exposure was measured by asking participants how often they followed pro-protest and anti-protest local television stations on a 4-point scale (1 = never, 4 = often). Similarly, trust was measured by examining how much people reported they trust pro-protest and anti-protest local television stations (1 = never trust, 4 = often trust). We then computed scales for each construct by averaging answers for pro-protest channels and another for anti-protest channels (Table 2).

**Results**

H1 hypothesized that issue publics are (a) more likely than non-issue publics to follow pro-attitudinal news and (b) less likely to follow counter-attitudinal news. H2 predicted that (a) trusting pro-attitudinal TV channels is positively related to following pro-attitudinal TV channels and (b) trusting counter-attitudinal TV channels is positively related to following counter-attitudinal TV channels. To test H1 and H2, and to account for RQ2, which asked whether issue publics or media trust is a stronger predictor of selective exposure, we included the predictor variables for both hypotheses in the same regression models.

To test H1a and H2a, we ran a multiple regression to predict exposure to pro-attitudinal news content based on six independent variables, entered in three steps: in the first block, gender, age, education, and political interest; in the second block, the extent to which participants trusted news about the protests on pro-protest TV channels; and in the last block, the independent variable, issue publics. The overall model was significant,  $F(6, 7025) = 844.13$ ,  $p < .001$ , and accounted for 41.8% of the variance, thus H1a was supported. The results

**Table 2.** Following and trusting pro-protests and anti-protests television stations in the five countries under study.

	Following						Trusting					
	Pro			Anti			Pro			Anti		
	M	SD	Alpha	M	SD	Alpha	M	SD	Alpha	M	SD	Alpha
Lebanon	2.59	0.88	0.72	1.63	0.76	0.75	2.41	0.85	0.72	1.62	0.79	0.78
Chile	2.37	0.95	0.74	1.87	0.81	0.83	1.99	0.84	0.78	1.47	0.66	0.9
Iran	2.98	0.66	0.67	3.32	0.79	-	2.70	0.64	0.78	2.83	1.02	-
Iraq	2.57	0.76	0.75	1.67	0.74	0.84	2.40	0.76	0.79	1.62	0.73	0.88
Hong Kong	3.07	0.74	0.59	1.88	0.95	-	3.55	0.53	0.75	1.35	0.63	-

indicated all variables were significant (Table 3). While gender, education, and political interest were associated with a decrease in the preference for pro-attitudinal news, age, trusting pro-attitudinal TV channels and issue publics were related to an increase in the dependent variable. However, the strongest predictor was media trust (unstandardized  $\beta = 0.576$ , S.E. = 0.009,  $p < .001$ ), accounting for 41.7% of the variance, supporting H2a. Simultaneously, the main effect variable *issue publics* was associated with only a slight increase in preference for pro-attitudinal news ( $B = 0.056$ , S.E. = 0.013,  $p < .001$ ), which confirms that media trust is a stronger predictor. When examining countries/regions separately, the model was only significant for Chile, Iran, and Hong Kong.

For H1b and H2b, following the same procedure as H1a/H2a, the variables were entered into three blocks, where the second block included trusting news about the protests on anti-protest TV channels as the independent variable. The overall model was significant,  $F(6,6915) = 809.71$ ,  $p < .001$ , and accounted for 41.2% of the variance. The results indicated all variables, except age, were significant (Table 4) and positively related to preference for counter-attitudinal news. Like H1a/H2a, the regression revealed trusting counter-attitudinal news was the strongest predictor ( $B = 0.804$ , S.E. = 0.012,  $p < .001$ ), supporting H2b, whereas the main effect variable *issue publics* was positively associated with a slight increase in preference for counter-attitudinal news, going in the

**Table 3.** Multiple regression of issue publics (iv) on following pro-protest tv (dv), with gender, age, education, political interest, and trusting pro-protest tv as predictors.

		All Countries			
		B	S.E.	t	p
<i>Model 1</i>	Gender	0.006	0.020	0.285	.776
	Age	0.078	0.020	3.808	.000
	Education	0.054	0.011	5.023	.000
	Political interest	0.269	0.033	8.118	.000
	Adjusted $R^2 = 0.017$ ; $F(4,7027) = 32.03$ , $p < .001$				
<i>Model 2</i>	Gender	-0.061	0.016	-3.899	.000
	Age	0.055	0.016	3.516	.000
	Education	-0.018	0.008	-2.094	.036
	Political interest	-0.021	0.026	-0.825	.410
	Trust pro-protest TV	0.586	0.008	69.39	.000
Adjusted $R^2 = 0.417$ ; $F(5,7026) = 1006.41$ , $p < .001$					
<i>Model 3</i>	Gender	-0.057	0.016	-3.669	.000
	Age	0.060	0.016	3.836	.000
	Education	-0.023	0.008	-2.736	.006
	Political Interest	-0.058	0.027	-2.127	.033
	Trust pro-protest TV	0.576	0.009	65.81	.000
	Issue publics	0.056	0.013	4.42	.000
Adjusted $R^2 = 0.417$ ; $F(6,7025) = 844.13$ , $p < .001$					

Note. The B values are unstandardized beta weights.

opposite direction of the hypothesis. When examining countries/regions separately, the model was only significant for Hong Kong [ $F(6, 3365) = 255.42, p < .001$ ].

Although issue publics was a positive predictor of preference for both pro-attitudinal news and counter-attitudinal news, its predictability was much lower than media trust, indicating support for both the selective exposure hypothesis (for pro-attitude news) and its opposite direction (for counter-attitude news). We were thus motivated to further test its ability to predict both types of content at the same time, without control variables. To test this relationship, a multivariate analysis of variance was conducted where issue publics was recoded as weak (8.2%), moderate (11.1%), and strong (80.7%). The overall model was significant [Pillai's trace  $F(4,17324) = 282.07, p < .001$ ], as were both tests on the two dependent variables: pro-attitudinal content [Pillai's trace  $F(2,8662) = 340.24, p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = 0.073$ ] and counter-attitudinal content [Pillai's trace  $F(2,8662) = 117.66, p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = 0.026$ ] (Table 5). The effects were of moderate size.

The three tests support the selective exposure hypothesis, where stronger issue publics were related to stronger preference for pro-attitudinal news content and weaker publics were associated with preference for counter-attitudinal news content. However, we should interpret these findings carefully, as the presence of media trust was a stronger

**Table 4.** Multiple regression of issue publics (iv) on following anti-protest tv (dv), with gender, age, education, political interest, and trusting anti-protest tv as predictors.

		All countries			
		B	S.E.	t	p
Model 1	Gender	0.030	0.022	1.372	.170
	Age	0.029	0.022	1.304	.192
	Education	0.038	0.012	3.247	.001
	Political interest	0.006	0.037	0.159	.874
		Adjusted $R^2 = 0.002$ ; $F(6,7025) = 3.791, p < .004$			
Model 2	Gender	0.050	0.017	2.925	.003
	Age	-0.006	0.017	-0.334	.739
	Education	0.064	0.009	7.072	.000
	Political interest	0.121	0.028	4.255	.000
	Trust anti-protest TV	0.787	0.011	69.33	
		Adjusted $R^2 = 0.411$ ; $F(6,7025) = 966.424, p < .000$			
Model 3	Gender	0.052	0.017	3.097	.002
	Age	-0.002	0.017	-0.123	.902
	Education	0.058	0.009	6.309	.000
	Political interest	0.078	0.030	2.565	.010
	Trust anti-protest TV	0.804	0.012	66.47	.000
	Issue publics	0.057	0.014	3.97	.000
		Adjusted $R^2 = 0.412$ ; $F(6,7025) = 809.705, p < .000$			

Note. The B values are unstandardized beta weights.

predictor, which answers RQ2. In addition, both H2a and H2b were significant for all five countries/regions.

RQ1 asked whether issue publics are more likely than others to participate in street protests. We tested this question through a multinomial logistic regression, using the same recoded issue publics variable (weak, moderate, strong). The model, which included gender, age, education, and political interest as covariates, was significant,  $\chi^2(18) = 2812.03$ ,  $p < .001$ , Nagelkerke  $R^2 = 34.8$ . However, it produced 27% of cells with zero frequencies and 13 subgroups with a single value. Due to this violation, we opted to perform a binary logistic regression (Table 6), recoding the dependent variable as *joined* (73.7%) or *not joined* (26.3%) the protests. The model was significant,  $\chi^2(6) = 2624.01$ ,  $p < .001$ , Nagelkerke  $R^2 = 44.4$ , beyond all covariates. Gender was the only variable that was not significant. Except for age, all variables were positively associated with participation, where an increase in the independent variable was related to higher likelihood of participation. Compared to the strong issue publics group, those belonging to the weak and moderate groups were less likely to participate. All country tests were also significant.

**Table 5.** Multivariate analysis of variance of issue publics (recoded) and following pro-protest tv channels and anti-protest tv channels.

	Issue Publics	Mean	SD	N
Following pro-protest TV channels	Weak	1.9774	0.88403	696
	Moderate	2.46	0.87832	884
	Strong	2.8149	0.85881	7085
	Total	2.7114	0.89601	8665
Following anti-protest TV channels	Weak	2.065	0.93374	696
	Moderate	2.1954	1.03411	884
	Strong	1.7721	0.84513	7085
	Total	1.8388	0.88524	8665

**Table 6.** Binary logistic regression of issue publics (iv) on participation in street protests (dv), with gender, age, education, and political interest (cv).

	B	S.E.	Wald	df	p	Exp(B)
Gender	0.103	0.068	2.293	1	.130	0.902
Age	-0.176	0.053	10.976	1	.001	<b>0.839</b>
Education	0.204	0.035	33.372	1	.000	<b>1.227</b>
Political interest	1.632	0.098	279.516	1	.000	<b>5.112</b>
Issue publics (weak)	-3.865	0.184	443.352	1	.000	<b>0.021</b>
Issue publics (medium)	-2.641	0.090	869.628	1	.000	<b>0.071</b>
Issue publics (strong)			1210.013	2	.000	

Note. The reference category for the dependent variable was strong issue publics. The B values are unstandardized beta weights.

## Discussion

This study examined selective exposure in five countries/regions experiencing popular uprisings. The cross-sectional survey tested the media choices (following pro-attitudinal versus counter-attitudinal media) of issue publics in comparison to non-issue publics and the relationship between trusting and following attitude-consistent and attitude-discrepant news sources. It also examined the tendency of strong issue publics to participate in street protests.

*Issue publics and media trust.* The findings reveal that issue publics overall are more likely than non-issue publics to prefer pro-attitudinal news sources. Weak and moderate issue publics are related to a decrease in preference for pro-attitudinal sources. This finding is consistent with the literature and can be explained by partisan goals—a mechanism of confirmation bias that motivates people to follow news that reconfirms their opinions and thereby increases polarization (Converse, 1964; Dubois and Blank, 2018; Feldman and Hart, 2018; Kim, 2009; Knobloch-Westerwick and Meng, 2009; Stroud, 2008; Taber and Lodge, 2006; Williams et al., 2016). However, our study found that issue publics are not necessarily less likely than non-issue publics to prefer counter-attitudinal news. In fact, our data showed a small preference by issue publics for counter-attitudinal media sources, as well. Although this is not consistent with the literature, it may be explained by defense and accuracy goals (Peralta et al., 2017), defensive motives that strengthen one's understanding of opposing views with the aim of better countering them. The intensity, uncertainty and fluidity of the political situation and the high stakes for people experiencing such momentous national crises may have incentivized them to follow both attitude-consistent and attitude-discrepant news sources (Melki and Kozman, 2021a)—but only when presented to them separately and not as a choice between the two—with the goal of better countering the other side and understanding their message strategies and arguments. In other words, when issue publics can follow both counter-attitudinal and pro-attitudinal media, they are more likely to follow both compared to non-issue publics, but when they are provided only one choice—either pro- or counter-attitudinal, issue publics will more likely follow pro-attitudinal media sources. In today's rich media context, of course, the simultaneous and easy access to various media sources is the reality.

*Media trust.* Our study also found that media trust plays a strong role in selective exposure. Trusting pro-attitudinal news channels relates to an increase in preference for these channels and vice versa, which is also consistent with the literature (Johnson and Kaye, 2013; Knobloch-Westerwick et al., 2015; Melki and Kozman, 2021b; Stroud and Lee, 2013). Perhaps more importantly, we found that media trust is a stronger predictor of selective exposure than issue publics, which is particularly meaningful in the crisis context of our study, as uncertainty tends to bring audiences back to the media sources they trust (Newman, 2021). Specifically, trust plays a stronger role when individuals are politically involved (Tsfati and Ariely, 2014), which is the case during major protests. This finding adds to previous literature that did not account for the role of media trust in determining selective exposure when assessing issue publics.

Furthermore, when it comes to engaging in physical protests, our study found that strong issue publics are more likely than weak issue publics and moderate issue publics to join street protests. This supports previous findings that the more people become selective, the more their personal beliefs and opinions play a role in determining behaviors (Iyengar and Hahn, 2009).

*Age and demographics.* Our study pointed to some discrepancies when it comes to age. While political interest and education predictably contribute to a decrease in the preference for pro-attitudinal news, age relates to an increase in preference for pro-attitudinal content. This may be because older populations are already set in their beliefs and have little interest in changing their attitudes and perhaps are more cynical about exploring other views, while younger populations are still building their worldviews and exploring alternatives. Further research that explores the effect of age on selective exposure could help better understand this phenomenon.

*Media systems.* Another discrepancy appears to differentiate between two groups of countries: when it comes to issue publics and selective exposure, the findings are significant for Hong Kong, Chile, and Iran but not significant for Lebanon and Iraq. This difference may be due to the level of media diversity and partisanship in these two groups of countries/regions. While Lebanon and Iraq feature hyper-partisan, sectarian, and deeply divided media ecosystems, Chile, Hong Kong, and Iran exhibit relatively controlled and/or homogenous media systems—to varying degrees. This may lead us to believe that selective exposure in partisan media contexts prompts audiences to follow various media sources to get the big picture, as strongly politicized media decrease people's trust (Schranz et al., 2018). However, this also contradicts evidence that an increase in partisan choices facilitates active selective exposure (Knobloch-Westerwick et al., 2019; Mutz and Young, 2011).

Another plausible explanation is the shift in tone that some media displayed during the protests, particularly in Lebanon where some media not only adopted the protestors' cause but also attacked certain politicians and parties they previously supported (Kozman and Melki, 2022). This shift may have shaken the bond of trust between some partisan audiences and the media they had previously trusted. Furthermore, a shift in the audience sentiment could have also contributed to this explanation. In both countries, diverse individuals joined the protests in the first period, but many partisans slowly withdrew as their traditional political parties called on them to leave the streets, while other traditional parties tried to co-opt the movement, thereby turning more people against it (Dodge and Mansour, 2020; Melki and Kozman, 2021b). This fluid situation, both in media coverage and public sentiment toward the uprisings, may have contributed to atypical audience behaviors and shifts away from the normal selective exposure behavior researchers observe. Furthermore, the sectarian nature of both Lebanese and Iraqi societies, governments and media systems most likely played a mediating role. Given that both protest movements started with calls for abolishing the corrupt sectarian system and included diverse supporters from all religious groups, an emerging issue public in each country may have opted for following pro- or anti-protest media regardless of these media's previous sectarian identities and regardless of how much they trusted or distrusted them in the past (Dodge and Mansour, 2020). Therefore, a

combination of shifting media coverage, changing public sentiment, and hyper diverse media coverage contributed to disrupting the usual selective exposure behavior during the initial period of the protests.

The one unique finding for Hong Kong, that issue publics are less likely to prefer counter-attitudinal news than non-issue publics and that trusting counter-attitudinal TV channels positively related to following counter-attitudinal TV channels, may be explained by the unique nature of the protests in Hong Kong, compared to the other four countries. In Chile, Lebanon, Iraq and Iran, the protests were mainly about corruption, the political system, and economic situation, but none of them faced a major shift in sovereignty and threat to national identity (Yuen and Chung, 2018). Hong Kong's protests were at the core in opposition to growing incursions from the central government in Mainland China, a loss of autonomy, and weakening sovereignty of the Hong Kong government (Chiu and Siu, 2022). Perhaps this existential threat to Hong Kong's autonomy played a stronger role in radicalizing issue publics and solidifying their rejection of any counter-attitudinal media. If this is the case, the argument that news selection for issue publics is influenced by defense and accuracy motivations (Jonas et al., 2005; Peralta et al., 2017) may not hold, given the stark polarization of the public and the strong convictions of either side. Issue publics in Hong Kong facing such a momentous existential crisis and loss of autonomy have little to no motivation to correct their information (accuracy motivation), and they have little incentive for defense motivations, given their high conviction and rejection of a perceived external threat. Therefore, during such existential crises where polarization is at extreme levels, we suspect that issue publics on either side have little or no defense or accuracy motivation (Hart et al., 2009). Additional research in countries that face similar existential crises, such as Ukraine and Palestine, could shed a light on this issue. Furthermore, future research that examines the nature of each protest or conflict could develop a taxonomy of conflict circumstances and attributes that may influence selective exposure behavior.

On the other hand, the fact that issue publics were more likely to join street protests in all five countries, despite the aforementioned differences in audiences, social makeup, government systems, media landscapes, and nature of the protests points to the strength and stability of this construct in predicting polarization and political action (Kim, 2009; Krosnick and Telhami, 1995), particularly when the issues are powerfully connected with their values, social identification, and affect their lives (Bolsen and Leeper, 2013; Krosnick, 1990).

*Implications for journalism, governance, and activism.* Our findings have implications for journalism, governance, and activism, particularly in countries undergoing uprisings and protests. First, our findings confirm the continued value and supremacy of objective, balanced and accurate news that strives to cover various sides and perspectives. Such news will not only attract audiences by building credibility and trust with nonpartisan audiences that seek the complex broad picture, but it will also attract partisans who are interested in both information consistent with their beliefs and counter-attitudinal content, for various reasons. Second, consistently, governments experiencing uprisings should be aware that higher selective exposure may lead to higher polarization among citizens, particularly in such political circumstances (Cardenal et al., 2019; Rasmussen,

2014). Therefore, promoting objective and balanced news compared to partisan journalism would better promote social cohesion and reduce polarization and extremism, at least in some countries with similar social settings. Accurate news that is relevant to peoples' lives and reflects their concerns engages audiences and builds trust, even during extreme situations of war and conflict (Kozman and Melki, 2018). This will require tolerance to critical coverage and voices that may go against the perceived interests of those in power. Even in the most restrictive contexts, this is not an unattainable goal. For example, contrary to the policy adopted since the Islamic Revolution in 1979, several local Iranian political figures have emphasized the need for objectivity in news coverage by local Iranian media—albeit partly as a response to Iranians' increasing inclination to obtain reliable information from non-official sources. Third, activists interested in attracting supporters who are willing to go beyond virtual activism and engage in participatory activities, including street protests, should focus on building over time strong issue publics, rather than rely on spur-of-the-moment populist rhetoric and fleeting public anger. In addition, activists should continue to include legacy media, especially television, in their media strategy and not solely rely on social media.

## **Conclusion**

Overall, our findings reinforce previous research that despite the increase in choices, people select information that supports their pre-held attitudes (Dorison et al., 2019). However, this study did not account for the differences in selectivity when the topic and/or medium changed, although previous research has revealed that these two can influence selectivity (Stroud, 2008). Additionally, while the study tested the relationship between supporting protests and social media sharing, it did not measure or reveal the influence of social media following on selective exposure. Future research should attempt to account for the role of topics and media platforms in guiding selectivity among issue publics. Given the different political environments in each country, researchers had to administer questionnaires differently. The inconsistencies in the sampling technique generated differences among the five samples. Some countries administered questionnaires randomly, allowing for generalization, while others administered questionnaires non-randomly and thus, limited the generalizability of the study. This is necessary for many countries of the Global South, especially in states where the political system (e.g., Iran) or the security situation (e.g., Iraq) preclude proper randomized sampling. Additionally, this study used a survey method and relied on self-reporting to understand people's prior behaviors. While this method provides an opportunity to understand real-life political events, the reliance on self-reporting allows for incorrect reports of prior behaviors and self-presentation issues (Clay et al., 2013). It is important to include other countries with different media systems and explore the extent to which these results can be generalized. Moreover, this study could have benefited from structural equation modeling, but we opted to focus on the comparative aspect. Future national studies can attempt this approach, addressing how issue publics are able to moderate or mediate the impact of media trust. Finally, we relied on our research team's expertise to observe the media coverage of the protests and confirm our division of the media into

two groups (pro/anti-protests), since our authors come from all the countries studied. After close monitoring, each researcher confirmed the partisan media coverage in their country. Future content analysis of this coverage is underway, and preliminary findings support our binary division.

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