

**Mitigating the Consequences of Negative News:
How Constructive Journalism Enhances Self-Efficacy and News Credibility**

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Abstract

An informed electorate is vital for a well-functioning democracy. Yet many citizens intentionally avoid the news because it evokes negative feelings of disempowerment and distrust. This study ($n = 270$) investigated how social media exposure to a new journalistic approach, constructive journalism, influences news consumers. The results showed that constructive social media posts, as compared to negative posts, led to higher levels of positive affect, self-efficacy, and perceived news credibility. In line with the broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions, the effects on self-efficacy and news credibility were mediated by positive affect. A similar mediating role was found for negative affect, counter to the theoretical expectations. These findings shed new light on the broaden-and-build theory, suggesting parts of it generalize to the context of news exposure on social media. The findings also suggest that constructive journalism may be an effective way to mitigate some of the main drivers of news avoidance in the twenty-first century.

KEYWORDS: *broaden-and-build theory, constructive journalism, news credibility, self-efficacy, social media*

Modern news media give more weight to negative than positive information (Soroka, 2014). This may not only harm news consumers (Baden et al., 2019; Szabo and Hopkinson, 2007) but also limit the news media's potential to inform the public. In a recent large-scale survey about a third of the respondents said they actively avoid the news, primarily because it evokes negative feelings (Newman et al., 2019). A new journalistic approach, constructive journalism, attempts to mitigate the effects of the news industry's negative propensity by making news content more positive and solutions-oriented. Proponents of this approach argue that constructive journalism may enhance news consumers' positive emotions, self-efficacy, news engagement, and trust in the news media (e.g., Haagerup, 2017; McIntyre and Gyldensted, 2018).

As constructive journalism gains traction around the world (Aitamurto and Varma, 2018; Meier, 2018), investigating whether the approach meets these expectations becomes increasingly important. In the past decade, researchers have begun conducting experiments to examine how constructive journalism influences news consumers. This work has been informed by the broaden-and-build theory (Fredrickson, 2001). According to this theory, positive emotions tend to widen people's focus, for example increasing their curiosity, playfulness, and openness to information and behavioral options. Building on this theory, research has found that constructive journalism can not only lead news consumers feel to more positive but also improve news-related and political outcomes (Kleemans et al., 2017; McIntyre, 2015; Overgaard, 2021). The current research adds to these efforts by examining constructive journalism's impact in the context of news exposure on social media, an increasingly common avenue for news exposure in contemporary media environments (Newman et al., 2019; Pew Research Center, 2019a).

The findings show that constructive social media posts, as compared with negative ones, can enhance news consumers' positive affect, sense of self-efficacy, and perceived news

credibility. This is striking in light of recent evidence that many people avoid the news because it makes them feel negative and powerless, and because they do not find it credible (Newman et al., 2019). This study reveals that, in line with the broaden-and-build theory, the effects on self-efficacy and news credibility are mediated by positive affect. Contrary to theoretical expectations, however, negative affect has a similar mediating influence as positive affect. These findings indicate that the broaden-and-build theory partly generalizes to online settings such as news exposure on social media. Taken together, the current findings suggest that constructive journalism might alleviate some of the main drivers of news avoidance.

Literature Review

The Negative Nature of Modern News

Modern news media prioritize negative information over positive information, and this tendency has become more predominant in recent decades (Soroka, 2014; Soroka and McAdams, 2015; Van der Meer et al., 2019). This is tied to the news media's role as society's watchdog (Graber, 2003), which obliges journalists to cover problematic issues that are not given due attention. Although these goals are important, the industry's negative inclination may adversely affect news consumers. People generally pay more attention to, and are more deeply impacted by, negative than positive information (Baumeister et al., 2001; Soroka, 2014). As Shoemaker (1996) noted, this is rooted in evolutionary psychology. Humans who paid attention to threats were more likely to survive and pass on their genes. Hunter-gatherers, therefore, evolved to pay careful attention to negatives cues in their environment—a tendency that is still with our species today.

Less understood are the ramifications of the negative nature of modern news. Recent advances suggest that the pervasive negativity of the news media leads many people to avoid the news altogether, thereby undermining the media's ability to keep the public informed. In a recent survey, covering more than thirty-eight countries, 32% reported actively avoiding the news "often" or "sometimes," mainly because the news makes them feel negative or disempowered, or because they do not trust the news media (Newman et al., 2019). Further, the negativity may lower people's willingness to put resources into solving societal problems (Baden et al., 2019).

Constructive Journalism: Mitigating the Consequences of Negative News

Due to concerns over the news industry's negative propensity, and its potential impact on news consumers and society at large, some newsrooms have turned to a new journalistic approach known as constructive journalism (Aitamurto and Varma, 2018; Bro, 2019; Haagerup, 2017). This approach "involves applying positive psychology techniques to news processes and production in an effort to create productive and engaging coverage while holding true to journalism's core functions" (McIntyre and Gyldensted, 2017: 23). As Skovsgaard and Andersen (2020) have pointed out, constructive journalism can be implemented either by focusing on what information is included in news stories or how the information is presented. Even though the selection of information has been integral to how many practitioners have approached constructive journalism (Aitamurto and Varma, 2018; Bro, 2019; Haagerup, 2017), experimental investigations have focused almost exclusively on the presentation of information (for exceptions see: Kleemans et al., 2017; Overgaard, 2021). The current study, therefore, focuses on the selection of information.

Constructive journalism has emerged in tandem with a related approach, solutions journalism, which focuses on reporting not only on societal problems but also on what is being

done or can be done to alleviate them (Solutions Journalism Network, 2021). Some practitioners believe this approach can increase the accuracy of news reporting and prompt positive societal change (McIntyre and Lough, 2021). Reporting on solutions is a specific way of implementing constructive journalism (Baden et al., 2019; Kleemans et al., 2017), and solutions journalism is thus a form of constructive journalism (McIntyre and Gyldensted, 2017). All solutions journalism is constructive journalism but not all constructive journalism is solutions journalism. If, for example, a news story uses language designed to evoke positive emotions, that might be constructive journalism, but not necessarily solutions journalism. Such distinctions can be useful for ensuring theoretical nuance.

Constructive journalism has not been free of criticism. Some journalists and editors have expressed concern that its positive focus could undermine newsrooms' ability to depict unpleasant current events realistically (see From & Kristensen, 2018). In a recent metadiscourse analysis, Aitamurto and Varma (2018) found that many proponents of constructive journalism are aware of this criticism and often emphasize that constructiveness does not imply being soft or uncritical. Yet Aitamurto and Varma argued that constructive journalism's efforts to actively improve on society casts it in a normative role, which is in tension with Anglo-Saxon journalistic norms like detachment and objectivity.

Encountering Constructive Journalism on Social Media

Little is known about the effects of social media exposure to constructive journalism, even though these platforms are widely influential in contemporary media environments. People increasingly find their news on social media (Newman et al., 2019; Pew Research Center, 2019a), which may change both their news diets and reactions to the news. As Thorson and Wells (2016) have argued, several factors— including algorithms and past online behavior from

social media users and those in their networks—interact with traditional gatekeepers to curate the news content social media users find in their feeds. For example, if a social media user *likes* a post from a news organization, the algorithm will be inclined to present the user, and others in their network, with similar content in the future. This could mean more posts from that particular news organization, more news stories with a similar political slant, or more news content in general. Further, social media users are more inclined to consume content that others have endorsed (Messing and Westwood, 2014). If constructive journalism makes people more inclined to *like* news content (Hermans and Prins, 2020; McIntyre, 2015; Overgaard, 2021), it may, therefore, increase the proportion of news social media users find in their feeds as well as their tendency to click on it.

Social media might also augment constructive journalism's ability to mitigate issues like news avoidance. Skovsgaard and Andersen (2020) distinguished between intentional and unintentional news avoidance and argued that constructive journalism is particularly useful for mitigating intentional news avoidance. However, if people have already tuned out, how will constructive news content reach them? An important way might be incidental news exposure on social media. Fletcher and Nielsen (2018) found, across four Western democracies, that incidental news exposure is relatively common on social media platforms and that users who encounter news unintentionally tend to use more news sources than people who never use social media. This difference is especially pronounced among those least inclined to pay attention to the news. Incidental exposure to news on social media could also be a way for constructive journalism to reach intentional news avoiders. This will not necessarily lead them to click on such news stories to read or watch them in full. Even so, if people encounter constructive news stories in passing, in their social media feeds, it might dampen their perceptions of the news as

something that makes them feel negative (Newman et al., 2019). Further, even if social media users do not click on such posts to consume the shared news content, the mere act of skimming through them might have some of the same benefits as consuming full news stories. This possibility is investigated in the current experiment.

Theoretical Framework: The Broaden-and-Build Theory of Positive Emotions

According to Fredrickson's (2001) broaden-and-build theory, positive and negative emotions serve distinct purposes and lead to different psychological and behavioral outcomes. Negative emotions tend to narrow people's thought-action repertoires, limiting the variety of actions people are likely to take in a given situation. This can increase their survival chances in life-threatening situations, which often call for fast decisions rather than exploring possibilities. Positive emotions tend to broaden people's focus, making them more creative, flexible, and open to information (Fredrickson, 2001; Garland et al., 2010). This, according to the theory, aids people in building resources, like skills and relationships, that enhance their long-term chances of survival.

The broaden-and-build theory provides a useful framework for understanding constructive journalism's influence on news consumers. As the literature reviewed below indicates, constructive news content evokes more positive emotions among news consumers than negative news content. The broaden-and-build theory implies that this may have implications for news-related outcomes. Yet only a few studies have employed methods that can untangle whether the observed effects are driven by changes in affect, as the theory predicts, and the few studies that have examined this causal mechanism have reported mixed results (Baden et al., 2019; Kleemans et al., 2017). Further, these studies have not examined whether positive and negative affect mediates the impact of constructive journalism on news consumers' sense of self-

efficacy and perceived news credibility. The current study breaks new ground by investigating these pathways.

Psychological Effects of Constructive Journalism: Affect and Self-Efficacy

According to practitioners as well as scholars, constructive journalism may evoke positive affect in news consumers and enhance their sense of self-efficacy (Baden et al., 2019; Haagerup, 2017). These outcomes are crucial to newsrooms because they are at the heart of why many people avoid the news (Newman et al., 2019). Affect refers to “consciously accessible feelings” (Fredrickson, 2001: 218). Studies show that constructive journalism can enhance positive affect among children (Kleemans et al., 2017), millennials (Hermans and Prins, 2020), and adults (Baden et al., 2019; McIntyre, 2015, 2019) alike. Besides being central to the broaden-and-build theory, positive and negative affect are important in their own right, given their close tie to news avoidance (Newman et al., 2019) and warrant attention beyond their mediation of other outcomes. I expect that, in the context of news exposure on social media, constructive posts will induce greater positivity than negative posts.

H1: Subjects reading constructive posts will experience a) higher levels of positive affect and b) lower levels of negative affect than those reading negative posts.

Self-efficacy refers to people’s self-assessed capabilities to “execute courses of action required to deal with prospective situations” (Bandura, 1982: 122). A lack of self-efficacy can lead people to shy away from the news (Newman et al., 2019), thereby undermining the news media’s ability to inform the electorate. Further, if people believe they are unable to affect positive change, it may stop them from trying. Experimental research has found mixed results

concerning constructive journalism's impact on news consumers' self-efficacy, in some cases finding no effects (Dahmen et al., 2019; McIntyre, 2015) and in other cases finding a positive effect (Curry and Hammonds, 2014). In a recent focus group study, participants said solutions journalism made them consider how they could help solve issues in their community (Wenzel et al., 2018).

From the perspective of the broaden-and-build theory, positive emotions have broadening effects on people's thought-action repertoires, whereas negative emotions have narrowing effects. Although the original formulation of the theory (Fredrickson, 2001) did not mention self-efficacy, subsequent research suggests that positive affect can enhance it. Villavicencio and Bernado (2016) found that college students' levels of positive affect predicted their sense of self-efficacy, although these findings did not speak to the potential causal nature of the relationship. This causal pathway was, however, demonstrated in a study where a positive psychology intervention increased people's levels of positive affect, which, in turn, increased their self-efficacy (Schutte, 2014). The potential effect of constructive journalism on news consumers' sense of self-efficacy might similarly be indirect through changes in affect, although this pathway was not tested in the aforementioned investigations of constructive journalism's effect on self-efficacy. In the context of news exposure on social media, I expect constructive social media posts, as compared to negative ones, will lead to higher levels of self-efficacy. Further, I expect this effect to be mediated differently by changes in positive and negative affect.

H2: Subjects reading constructive posts will exhibit higher levels of self-efficacy than those reading negative posts.

H3: The effect of the posts on self-efficacy will be indirect through positive and negative affect; positive affect will increase self-efficacy whereas negative affect will decrease it.

News-Related Outcomes: News Engagement and Credibility

Constructive journalism may also influence news-related outcomes like news engagement and perceived news credibility. News engagement refers to news consumers' intentions to engage with news stories by expressing their opinions, sharing content, or seeking more information about the issues being reported on (Dahmen et al., 2019; McIntyre, 2015). Research on the impact of constructive journalism on news engagement has yielded inconsistent results. Some previous work found no effects (McIntyre, 2015, study 2), whereas other work found positive effects on people's willingness to like articles on social media but did not influence other measures of news engagement (Hermans and Prins, 2020; McIntyre, 2015, study 1). Yet other experiments have found that constructive journalism can enhance news consumers' interest in the issue being covered (Curry and Hammonds, 2014) and their willingness to share news articles and seek more information, although only for some topics (Dahmen et al., 2019). Given these inconsistent results, I pose the following research question:

RQ1: As compared with negative posts, how do constructive posts affect the subjects' intentions to a) like the posts, b) share the posts, c) discuss the posts, and d) seek more information about the issues covered in the posts?

Constructive journalism may also influence how credible the public perceives the news media to be. Metzger and Flanagin (2015: 446) defined credibility as the "believability of information." As they noted, this concept is closely related to trust; however, credibility also takes into account

the perceived expertise and fallibility of the source. Low credibility poses a serious threat to the news industry. The notion of a “credibility crisis” has been discussed for a long time (Gaziano, 1988). What is new is the intensity of the crisis. The American public's trust in the news media has declined since the turn of the millennium (Gallup, 2018) and most Americans think that the news media “intentionally ignores stories that are important to the public” (Pew Research Center, 2019b). This undermines the news media’s ability to inform the public, as people might not believe the news to be true or might avoid news coverage altogether (Newman et al., 2019).

Given its significance, news credibility has received relatively little attention in the literature on constructive journalism. So far, the evidence is mixed. In a recent experiment, subjects exposed to a solutions-based news story perceived it as more credible than those exposed to a similar but problem-based version (Thier et al., 2019). Another experiment, however, found that subjects who read a constructive news story were more inclined to feel that it contained hidden advertising than those who read a non-constructive version of the story (Meier, 2018).

The sparse attention given to news credibility is surprising in light of advances on the broaden-and-build theory revealing that increases in positive affect can increase interpersonal trust. Burns et al. (2008) tracked a group of students' levels of positive affect and interpersonal trust over two months and found that their levels of positive affect at the beginning of the period predicted their levels of trust at the end of the period, suggesting that positive affect might enhance trust over time. Experimental evidence also shows that positive affect can enhance people's levels of interpersonal trust. Dunn and Schweitzer (2005) randomly assigned participants to conditions that increased either positive or negative affect. Those induced with

positive affect were more trusting in colleagues or acquaintances afterward, as compared to those induced with negative affect.

Interpersonal trust is, of course, different from news credibility. Interpersonal trust concerns people's impressions of those around them; news credibility concerns people's impressions of news organizations. Yet both concepts fundamentally capture the extent to which people believe that certain social actors convey the truth. Notably, the positive feelings measured by Burns et al. (2008) and Dunn and Schweitzer (2005) were general affective states (i.e., emotions experienced by the participants) and not associated with any specific people (i.e., how positive they felt toward specific interpersonal contacts). Yet the state of feeling more positive led them to perceive those around them as more trustworthy. These effects need not be limited to specific interpersonal relationships; positive feelings might also make people perceive other actors or entities (such as newsrooms) as more credible. Although the two aforementioned studies that examined the influence of constructive journalism on news credibility did not examine the mediating role of affect, it may have driven some of the observed effects. In the context of news consumption on social media, I expect that constructive journalism, as compared to a more negative journalistic approach, will lead to higher levels of perceived news credibility. Furthermore, I expect that this effect will be mediated differently by positive and negative affect.

H4: Subjects reading constructive posts will perceive the news organization sharing them as more credible than those reading negative posts.

H5: The effects of the posts on perceived credibility will be indirect through positive and negative affect; positive affect will increase credibility whereas negative affect will decrease it.

Method

Participants

Three hundred U.S. residents, recruited via Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk), participated in the study. The recruitment was done through CloudResearch (2020), a platform that specializes in collecting high-quality MTurk responses. MTurk samples better represent the U.S. population than other types of convenience samples (Berinsky et al., 2012) and replication studies show that MTurk samples tend to yield results similar to high-quality national samples (Coppock, 2019). Participation took an average of 4.92 minutes and each subject was paid \$1.50. Some subjects were removed because they completed the study in less than two minutes ($n = 23$), took longer than 25 minutes ($n = 3$), or failed an attention check ($n = 4$). As a robustness check, the analyses reported below were replicated with the full sample, showing no changes in terms of the direction and significance of the results. The final sample ($n = 270$) was predominantly male (65.8%) and white (65.9%), with ages ranging from 20 to 69 years ($M = 36.5$ years, $SD = 10.8$ years).

Procedures and Experimental Design

Approval for this study was granted from the institutional review board at the author's university. The study was conducted in February 2020 via the Qualtrics platform. Subjects first agreed to a consent form. Then they were randomly assigned to view a series of constructive, or a series of negative, simulated social media posts, before finally answering a questionnaire. Each post consisted of a news headline and a featured photograph. Subjects in the constructive condition saw seven constructive posts about societal issues (e.g., "In Ecuador, one woman has given shelter to over 8,500 Venezuelans"), from the fictitious news organization *VCB News*.

Subjects in the negative condition saw seven posts about the same issues and from the same news organization, but with a negative focus (e.g., “Venezuelans stranded as Ecuador imposes new visa rules”). The full stimuli materials are provided in the online supplemental materials.

This design addresses a concern regarding the ecological validity of previous work, most of which have asked participants to read full articles about pre-selected topics. As McIntyre (2019) noted, that procedure differs from everyday news consumption, as news consumers normally select which articles to read in full. By using the context of scrolling through a series of social media posts about different topics, the current experiment’s ecological validity is improved, because it more closely mirrors actual news consumption.

Stimuli

To keep the stimuli as realistic as possible, real posts from mainstream news organizations were used. The seven constructive news headlines and featured photos came from the Facebook page of the Solutions Journalism Network, an organization dedicated to spreading “the practice of solutions journalism” (Solutions Journalism Network, 2021, para. 1). Negative posts about each of the same seven topics were found by going through the feeds of other news organizations’ Facebook pages. A pre-test asked 49 respondentsⁱ to rate each of the seven constructive or negative posts from (1) negative to (7) positive. The constructive posts were perceived as being more positive ($M = 5.42$, $SE = 0.22$) than the negative posts ($M = 1.90$, $SE = 0.25$), and t-tests confirmed that each constructive post was perceived as significantly more positive than each negative post, at $p < .001$. As a manipulation check, a similar question was included at the end of the main study, focusing on the subjects’ overall impression of the posts. An analysis of variance confirmed that the constructive posts had been perceived as more positive ($M = 6.03$, $SE = 0.13$) than the negative posts ($M = 2.72$, $SE = 0.13$), $F(1, 268) = 328.65$, $\eta^2 = .55$, $p < .001$.

Measures

The variables were measured using seven-point scales. Affect was measured, following Thompson (2007), by asking subjects the extent to which they felt alert, inspired, determined, attentive, and active (combined into *positive affect*, $M = 4.68$, $SD = 1.34$, Cronbach's alpha = 0.80) as well as upset, hostile, ashamed, nervous, and afraid (combined into *negative affect*, $M = 2.46$, $SD = 1.78$, Cronbach's alpha = 0.94). Four items were adapted from McIntyre (2019) to measure engagement intentions. Subjects were asked how likely they would have been to *like* ($M = 4.13$, $SD = 2.30$), *share* ($M = 3.87$, $SD = 2.27$), *discuss*, ($M = 4.49$, $SD = 1.94$), or *seek more information* about the content of ($M = 4.96$, $SD = 1.85$) one or more of the posts. Following Curry and Hammonds (2014), *self-efficacy* was measured by asking subjects if they thought they were able to contribute to solving the main issues faced by society today ($M = 4.54$, $SD = 1.66$). *Credibility* was measured by asking subjects the degree to which they found the news organization sharing the posts to be believable, fair, accurate, and possessing deep information (Johnson and Kaye, 2004). These four items were combined, $M = 5.02$, $SD = 1.33$, Cronbach's alpha = 0.89.

Results

The hypotheses were tested using analyses of variance. The results are summarized in Table 1. H1 predicted that subjects reading constructive social media posts from a news organization would experience a) more positive affect, and b) less negative affect than those reading negative posts. H1a was supported, $F(1, 268) = 7.52$, $\eta^2 = .03$, $p = .01$. Those exposed to constructive posts experienced higher levels of positive affect ($M = 4.89$, $SE = 0.11$) than those exposed to negative posts ($M = 4.45$, $SE = 0.12$). Likewise, in support of H1b, subjects exposed to

constructive posts experienced lower levels of negative affect ($M = 1.89$, $SE = 0.14$) than those exposed to negative posts ($M = 3.05$, $SE = 0.15$), $F(1, 268) = 32.15$, $\eta^2 = .11$, $p < .001$.

[INSERT TABLE 1 approximately here]

As predicted by H2, subjects exposed to constructive posts exhibited higher levels of self-efficacy ($M = 4.80$, $SE = 0.14$) than those exposed to negative posts ($M = 4.26$, $SE = 0.14$), $F(1, 267) = 7.43$, $\eta^2 = .03$, $p = .01$. H3 predicted that the effects of the posts on self-efficacy would be mediated by affect; specifically, I expected positive affect to increase self-efficacy and negative affect to reduce self-efficacy. This was tested with macro model 4 from SPSS PROCESS (Hayes, 2017), using bootstrapping procedures with 10,000 bootstrapped samples. As hypothesized, the results showed a significant indirect effect of the posts through positive affect on self-efficacy (0.25 , $SE = 0.09$, 95% CI [0.08, 0.43]). There was also a significant indirect effect of negative affect on self-efficacy (-0.37 , $SE = 0.10$, 95% CI [-0.59, -0.21]). Notably, negative affect was linked to greater self-efficacy, whereas I had hypothesized the opposite. H3 is thus partially supported. The indirect pathways are shown in Figure 1.

RQ1 asked whether constructive posts would affect engagement intentions (liking, sharing, discussing, and information seeking) differently than negative posts. For liking, there was a significant main effect, $F(1, 267) = 20.63$, $\eta^2 = 0.07$, $p < .001$. Subjects exposed to constructive posts expressed significantly greater intentions of liking one or more of the posts ($M = 4.73$, $SE = 0.19$) than those exposed to negative posts ($M = 3.50$, $SE = 0.19$). For the three other types of engagement intentions there were no significant main effects. For sharing, those who read constructive posts did not differ significantly ($M = 4.10$, $SE = 0.19$) from those reading negative posts ($M = 3.63$, $SE = 0.20$), $F(1, 267) = 2.98$, $\eta^2 = .01$, $p = .09$. Regarding the subjects' intentions to discuss the issues covered in the posts, there were no significant difference between

the constructive posts ($M = 4.70$, $SE = 0.17$) and the negative posts ($M = 4.27$, $SE = 0.17$), $F(1, 267) = 3.41$, $\eta^2 = .01$, $p = .07$. For information seeking, those who read constructive posts ($M = 4.98$, $SE = 0.16$) did not differ significantly from those who read negative posts ($M = 4.93$, $SE = 0.16$), $F(1, 267) = 0.04$, $\eta^2 = .00$, $p = .84$.

H4 predicted that constructive posts would lead to higher levels of perceived news credibility than negative posts. This hypothesis was supported, $F(1, 168) = 5.58$, $\eta^2 = .02$, $p = .02$. Subjects reading constructive posts perceived the news organization to be significantly more credible ($M = 5.21$, $SE = 0.11$) than those who read negative posts ($M = 4.83$, $SE = 0.12$).

H5 predicted that the social media posts would have indirect effects on credibility through positive and negative affect. Specifically, I expected positive affect to be linked to higher perceived credibility and negative affect to be linked to lower credibility. The same procedure was used as for H3. The analysis showed a significant indirect effect through positive affect on the perceived credibility of the news organization sharing the posts (0.17 , $SE = 0.06$, 95% CI [0.05, 0.29]). There was also a significant indirect effect of negative affect on the perceived credibility (-0.17 , $SE = 0.06$, 95% CI [-0.31, -0.06]), although the direction was the opposite than expected. H5 is partially supported. Figure 1 summarizes the mediation analyses for H3 and H5.

[INSERT FIGURE 1 approximately here]

Discussion

This study examined how social media exposure to constructive journalism influences news consumers. The findings reveal that constructive social media news content, as compared with negative content, can enhance positive affect, self-efficacy, and perceived news credibility.

Following Fredrickson's (2001) broaden-and-build theory, positive affect mediated the effects of

constructive journalism on self-efficacy and perceived news credibility. These findings have several theoretical and practical implications.

These findings advance the broaden-and-build theory, revealing that one of its core propositions—that positive affect expands people’s thought-action repertoires—generalizes to online settings such as news exposure on social media. This study suggests that, in this context, positive affect can bolster people’s self-efficacy and perceived news credibility. The findings also shed new light on the workings of the broaden-and-build theory in the context of journalism; whereas previous research has found mixed results regarding the mediating influence of positive affect on news-related outcomes (Baden et al., 2019; Kleemans et al., 2017), the current study finds the influence of positive affect to positively mediate both self-efficacy and news credibility.

Surprisingly, negative affect was also associated with a greater sense of self-efficacy and news credibility. This runs counter to the broaden-and-build theory, which holds that positive and negative affect influence people’s thought-action repertoires (in this study, their sense of self-efficacy and perceived news credibility) differently. Positive affect, according to the theory, should broaden people's thought-action repertoires, whereas negative affect should narrow them. In this study, however, both types of affect had a broadening effect. It seems that, in the context studied here, the intensity of affective responses—not their valance—was the main driver of the observed effects on self-efficacy and perceived news credibility. One possibility is that the psychological impact of negative affect works differently in the context of online news exposure than in interpersonal contexts. Another possibility is that the mediating influence of negative affect depends on which issues are being covered. Future research could investigate this possibility by including issue as an experimental factor.

Regardless of its underlying cause, this complication highlights the importance of measuring positive and negative affect as distinct concepts as opposed to combining them, as some studies have done. If the current analysis had averaged positive and negative affect together into one variable, these nuances would have been lost. Future research on constructive journalism could go one step further, distinguishing not only between positive and negative affect but also between different discrete emotions, which might allow for greater theoretical nuance (Nabi, 2010). Some research, for example, distinguishes between the emotions of anger and anxiety, finding that they can lead to different political outcomes (MacKuen et al., 2010). Future research on constructive journalism can benefit from making similar distinctions, especially given the unexpected finding concerning negative affect in the current study.

Besides advancing the broaden-and-build theory, the findings concerning self-efficacy and perceived news credibility shed new light on how constructive journalism might affect news consumers. Previous work has found conflicting results regarding the effect of constructive journalism on news consumers' self-efficacy (Curry and Hammonds, 2014; Dahmen et al., 2019; McIntyre, 2015). The current results suggest that constructive journalism can enhance it. Future studies should further investigate the effect of constructive journalism on self-efficacy, and investigate whether self-efficacy mediates the influence of constructive journalism on people's news avoidance and sense of civic engagement.

The finding that constructive news, as compared to negative news, increased credibility, suggests that the news industry's credibility crisis (Gallup, 2018) may be exacerbated by the news media's negative predisposition and that constructive journalism may provide a means for newsrooms to restore their credibility. This finding adds to the literature on constructive journalism, which has found conflicting results regarding its impact on credibility (Meier, 2018;

Thier et al., 2019). Besides showing that constructive journalism can bolster credibility, the current study provides a causal explanation, suggesting the process is driven by positive affect. Given the importance of news credibility, future research should further investigate if, how, and under which circumstances, constructive journalism can increase the news media's credibility.

The current research bridges the literature on constructive journalism with work on news exposure on social media. As these platforms gain traction as vehicles for news exposure (Newman et al., 2019; Pew Research Center, 2019a), it becomes increasingly important to understand how they affect news consumers' relationship to the news. Incidental news exposure on social media, which is common in Western democracies (Fletcher and Nielsen, 2018), offers a potential way for constructive news to reach intentional news avoiders, who may especially benefit from a more constructive news diet (Skovsgaard and Andersen, 2020). Such news exposure will be influenced by past social media engagement, both by individuals and their social networks. If social media users like, share, or click on news content, the computer algorithms that curate content on these platforms will be more likely to show similar content to users and their networks (Thorson and Wells, 2016). In the current study, subjects expressed greater intentions to like the constructive than the negative posts, which is consistent with prior research (Herman and Prins, 2020; McIntyre, 2015; Overgaard, 2021). If this holds up for actual social media behavior, constructive journalism might be a way for newsrooms to garner more attention on social media, regardless of whether the approach directly influences metrics such as sharing and clicking.

The current study also contributes by prioritizing ecological validity. Previous constructive journalism experiments have mostly focused on the effects of reading full news articles about pre-determined topics. As McIntyre (2019) has pointed out, this is different from

everyday life where people select which news content to consume. The current study used the context of skimming through a series of social media posts, which more closely resembles news consumption in today's media landscape, where many people encounter news content by looking through their social media feeds (Newman et al., 2019; Pew Research Center, 2019a).

Ecological validity was also enhanced by using actual news content as stimuli. To keep the stimuli as realistic as possible, actual headlines and featured images from mainstream news organizations were used without modifications. This strengthens ecological validity because it increases the likelihood that participants react like they would if encountering the news content in the real world. This prioritization of ecological validity complements previous studies that have placed greater weight on internal validity. Yet this approach has some limitations. Because headlines, as well as featured images, differed across conditions, it is not clear which component produced the observed results. Future research should employ designs that allow for this distinction to be made, for example by including headlines and images as distinct experimental factors, although this will involve trade-offs regarding ecological validity, as content modifications will be unavoidable. Further, this study is limited by not having a control condition; future research should include a control that can be compared to the treatment conditions.

Another limitation is that, because this study focused specifically on exposure to brief social media posts, there is no way of knowing whether the results would hold up if participants had been given more information besides what was available solely from the headlines and images. This study suggests that repeated exposure to brief constructive social media posts can influence news consumers' emotions in similar ways to exposure to more comprehensive

constructive news stories. Future research should examine whether the causal pathways observed in the current study hold up when people consume more comprehensive reporting.

There are several additional ways for future research to build on the current study. Researchers could conduct field experiments or natural experiments, for example by partnering with newsrooms or social media companies. Previous work has mostly focused on short-term effects in highly controlled settings (although see Lough and McIntyre, 2021; McIntyre, 2020). Investigating constructive journalism's effects over longer periods and in more naturalistic settings is important to ensure that the findings in the literature generalize to actual news consumption. Future studies should also take into account how social endorsements (Messing and Westwood, 2014), for example, the number of likes or shares, moderate the effects of exposure to constructive journalism on social media.

Yet another possibility for future research concerns the proportion of constructive news stories needed to curb the adverse effects of a negative media landscape. Encountering only constructive or negative news content, as subjects have done in previous experiments, is hardly realistic; future studies could use experimental designs that mix constructive and negative news content in different proportions, to test the impact of including constructive news in a predominantly negative news diet. Finally, future research should test the influence of constructive journalism on news avoidance, and whether such an effect is brought forth by increases in news consumers' levels of positive affect, self-efficacy, and perceived news credibility.

Taken together, the current findings make several contributions. The findings advance the broaden-and-build theory by suggesting that one of its core propositions, concerning the broadening impact of positive affect, generalizes to online settings such as news exposure on

social media. The study also contributes to the constructive journalism literature, showing that this approach, as compared to a more negative approach, can bolster news consumers' positive feelings, sense of self-efficacy, and perceived news credibility. These results are striking in light of two recent large-scale surveys showing that many citizens in countries around the world shy away from the news because the news makes them feel negative and powerless, and because they do not perceive the news media as credible (Newman et al., 2017, 2019). In the current study, constructive journalism effectively mitigated these three concerns.

First, as compared to negative content, which pervades the current news media landscape (Soroka, 2014; Soroka and McAdams, 2015), constructive content enhanced positive feelings and dampened negative ones. Second, constructive content led to higher levels of self-efficacy, thereby mitigating people's feelings of inability to do something about the issues being covered in the news. Third, the constructive approach led the news organization sharing the posts to be perceived as more credible. These results suggest constructive journalism may be an effective way to mitigate some of the most common causes of intentional news avoidance in the twenty-first century. In an age of declining news audiences, falling trust in the news media, and increasing fear of what the future holds, constructive journalism constitutes a hopeful way forward for news organizations and news consumers alike, and a fruitful avenue for future research.

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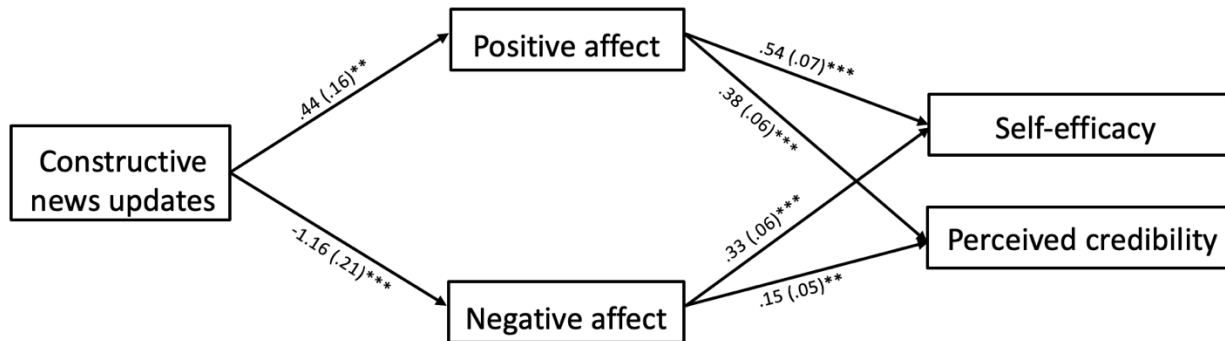
Table 1*Summary of Main Effects.*

	Constructive <i>M (SE)</i>	Negative <i>M (SE)</i>	<i>F</i>	F-test		
				<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	η^2
Psychological Effects						
Positive affect	4.89 (.11)	4.45 (.12)	7.52	268	.01	.03
Negative affect	1.89 (.14)	3.05 (.15)	32.15	268	< .001	.11
Self-efficacy	4.80 (.14)	4.26 (.14)	7.43	267	.01	.03
Engagement and Credibility Effects						
Liking	4.73 (.19)	3.50 (.19)	20.63	267	< .001	.07
Sharing	4.10 (.19)	3.63 (.20)	2.98	267	.09	.01
Discussing	4.70 (.17)	4.27 (.17)	3.41	267	.07	.01
Information seeking	4.98 (.16)	4.93 (.16)	0.04	267	.84	.00
Perceived news credibility	5.21 (.11)	4.83 (.12)	5.58	268	.02	.02

Note. Results are based on one-way ANOVAs. *M* = mean; *SE* = standard error; η^2 = eta squared.

Figure 1

Indirect Effects on Efficacy and News Credibility Through Positive and Negative Affect.



Notes. Standard errors in parentheses, $***p < .001$, $**p < .01$. The model is based on separate mediation analyses. When positive affect was entered as the mediator, there were no significant direct effects. When negative affect was entered as the mediator, there were significant direct effects on both self-efficacy (.92, SE = 0.20, $p < .001$) and perceived credibility (.55, SE = 0.17, $p = .001$).

Endnotes

ⁱ Fifty subjects completed the pretest; one was removed for failing an attention check.