

## Research Article

# The Role of News Post Consumption on Facebook in Shaping Youth Perceptions of Safety and Civil Liberties during COVID-19 in the U.S., Spain, and Egypt

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News media coverage, regardless of the platform being used, can shape people's opinions, perceptions, behaviors, and preferences about policy, security, and civil liberties in times of crisis. This study examines the possible cultivation impact of news post exposure on Facebook on shaping threat perception. Furthermore, it aims at exploring the correlation between Facebook news exposure, preferring high security levels, and curbing some civil liberties during the COVID-19 pandemic. For this, we used the survey method ( $N = 1309$ ) with youths aged 18-35 in the U.S., Spain, and Egypt. Our results showed that heavy news exposure on Facebook cultivated fear and terror perceptions during the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, it shaped people's preference for a tightened security environment and willingness to trade off some civil liberties. In other words, despite the different media and political systems, heavy news post consumption on Facebook can increase the tendency to give up civil liberty rights and prefer a more stringent security environment.

## 1. Introduction

During the COVID-19 pandemic, social media played a vital role in the information process, where people turned to social media seeking news and information [1, 2]. In this, COVID-19 is different than any other historical health crisis as it spreads among people who are well-connected worldwide through social media sites [3]. In this respect, Facebook is one of the most used social media sites that had a significant role during the outbreak of COVID-19 in terms of exposing people to constant news and information about the pandemic [1–3]. Hermann et al. [4] stressed that Facebook has a more cultivation effect on shaping perceptions and attitudes in different areas than TV. It can contribute to cultivating attitude change processes directly and indirectly via social reality perception. They concluded that Facebook use might boost certain perceptions and change the attitude among socially distant or close-environment

users. In sum, news media coverage, regardless of the platform being used, can shape people's opinions, perceptions, behaviors, and preferences about policy, ideology, security, and civil liberties, through simple wording or framing [5].

It is worth noting that the cultivation theory was first coined by George Gerbner in the late 1960s to examine the effects of the television phenomenon [6]. The theory generally posits that television misrepresents reality; therefore, heavy viewers tend to perceive their social reality as being a mirror to the television reality, which is different than the real world, thus leading to misconceptions and unreal perceptions [7, 8]. Thus, "heavy viewers will be more likely to perceive the real world in ways that reflect the most stable and recurrent patterns of portrayals in the television world" [9]. The cultivation theory has divided TV viewers into three segments (light, medium, and heavy viewers) in terms of television exposure as an independent variable. Light TV viewers are defined as those who consume less than 2.5 hr/

day, medium viewers watch about 2.5 to less than 3.5 hr/day, while heavy viewers watch TV more than or equal to 3.5 hr/day [8].

Scholars listed some of the cultivation effects: fear of victimization, unwillingness to help others, desensitization, cultural identity, stereotypes, social learning, and modeling [10–13]. Gerbner and several scholars added that the “mean world syndrome” is essentially a manifestation of the cultivation effect, entailing that heavy TV viewers tend to perceive the world as a more violent, dangerous, and mean place than it is [8]. Bushman and Craig [14] explained that fear of victimization is connected to the mean world syndrome; heavy viewers tend to perceive the world as an unsafe place full of crime. They explained that they are more likely to develop a sense of fear of real-life crime and being victimized by exaggerated violent media content. The fear of being victimized makes heavy viewers more prudent, skeptical, paranoid, and cautious when helping strangers.

In this regard, there has been a shortage of examining how news exposure on Facebook may breed the cultivation impact of threat perceptions during the COVID-19 pandemic and how such perceptions can shape youths’ preference for curbing security and civil liberties. Hence, this study explores the impact of news posts on Facebook in cultivating threat perception. Moreover, it examines the possible correlation between Facebook news consumption, preferring high security levels, and trading off some civil liberties during times of threat. Having evidence about the incidence of Facebook on the political preferences of young people is highly relevant to discover the reasons that lead to the spread of authoritarian options through digital media. Determining this can help implement plans to combat the reduction of civil liberties and to strengthen democracy in our society.

## 2. Literature Review

*2.1. News Consumption on Facebook.* Facebook is one of the most used, foremost, leading, and visited social network sites in terms of time spent and the number of viewed pages [15]. As of the fourth quarter of 2022, Facebook reported 2.96 billion monthly active users and 2 billion daily active users [15]. These latest figures highlight that 37.0% of the people around the world are Facebook users, with about 239 million active Facebook users in the USA, 56.2 million in Egypt, and 21.7 million in Spain [15]. In depth, the largest Facebook audience base in Egypt, the USA, and Spain is found between those aged 18-35 with about 30% [16–19]. In sum, Facebook’s largest audience base is found between those aged 25-34 years accounting for 30% of global users. Moreover, those aged 18-24 years represent the second largest base with 22% [18].

Within this framework, millions of people worldwide use Facebook to get and share news and information [20, 21]. Sveningsson [22] highlighted that people rely on Facebook and Twitter as the primary news source about public affairs. Furthermore, they get most of their news and information from their network on these sites [21]. Thus, Facebook is an essential platform for news production,

distribution, and consumption [23]. Gritckova [24] illustrated that social media sites regularly develop new ways to make news consumption more accessible and convenient for readers. More than half of young people (53%) in 27 countries unintentionally find news online as a constant way of staying informed [1, 25], in addition to the highly receptive algorithms that control which information is included or excluded in each social network site (SNS) user’s feed [26–28].

Many research findings indicated that young people turned to social media sites (SMS) to get updated news about politics and public affairs [21]. About 70% of users on these digital platforms are active news consumers in terms of checking headlines without following the link of news [23]. For instance, Johnson et al. [29] highlight that the primary motivation for visiting Facebook (47%) is getting information and staying updated with current affairs. Over and above, people consume news more frequently during times of threat, uncertainty, and pandemics [30]. Thus, the pandemic of COVID-19 and its precautionary measures endorsed by world countries led to the rise of news media even more into people’s daily life routines [2]. Limaye et al. [3] confirmed that people unsurprisingly turned to SMS for information and guidance about this new virus.

Within this framework, Newman et al. [1] argued that 43% got their news about the COVID-19 pandemic from traditional news sources on social media, particularly Facebook. Moreover, most young adults are exposed to news on Facebook incidentally rather than intentionally [27, 31, 32]. Some scholars explained that Facebook incidental news exposure could occur while checking news feeds on the user’s profile wall [20, 27, 31]. Consequently, Facebook is more than a communication tool as it is being used for news dissemination and consumption [21, 24, 33–35].

*2.2. Cultivating Fear and Terror Perception on Facebook.* Accordingly, Facebook became the window that reflects the world for its users [24]. There are contradicting research findings on the positive and negative effects of Facebook similar to the overall impact of social network sites, where some argue that Facebook can have a negative effect on staying updated, gaining knowledge, and shaping reality as well as perception, while others claim the opposite. In this regard, Newman et al. [1] said that more than half of the global citizens consider Facebook the leading source for spreading fake information almost everywhere. Likewise, Ahmad and Murad [36] added that Facebook had a significant role in spreading fake and inaccurate information during the outbreak of COVID-19, upsurging panic, fear, and anxiety levels among users, who mainly relied on such a platform for obtaining information and news.

Furthermore, Narayanan et al. [37] asserted that Facebook incorporates countless links to extremists, sensational and conspiratorial news sites, and content. Thus, frequent exposure to this type of news can cultivate higher degrees of fear, worry, and threat perception among people [38, 39]. In this respect, Dietrich and Hausbecker [40] showed that Facebook offers a never-ending news stream that might lead to the cultivation effect. They found a relationship

between the time spent on the platform, the level of perceived threat, and the mean worldview. Similarly, Hermann et al. [4] stressed that Facebook usage affects perceptions and attitudes by cultivating ethnic diversity perceptions and related attitudes.

Consequently, different news exposures can lead to the same cultivation impact regardless of the platform. No matter what media platform people use, the content and intentions behind their consumption are similar and consistent over time and via different media channels [41]. Morgan et al. [42] explained that the cultivation impact can occur whether people view stories online or offline as the essential aspects of media content are still the same despite the dramatic changes that occurred in the reception and consumption of different media content.

Shoshani and Slone [43] highlighted that threats in news depictions influence the audience's attitude and emotional responses. Over and above, the constant news coverage of pandemics, terrorism, and violent images in the form of threats affects people's perception of the crisis and increases the fear of victimization, anxiety, anger, readiness to settle with the enemy to end threats, avoidance of public areas, pain, and stereotypical image of other groups. Other scholars added that threats in news media could affect the aspects of one's personality by showing certain traits. For instance, one can exhibit an amplified loyalty to the in-group and hostility to other groups [44, 45].

*2.3. Shaping Preferences of Security and Civil Liberty Rights.* Frequent news exposure of terrorism, economic crises, and health pandemics can lead to fear and willingness to sacrifice some liberty to maintain security, in addition to adopting safety measures at the expense of freedom [44–46]. Likewise, Ridout et al. [47] added that the effect of external and internal threat perception extends to shape the public's local and foreign policies. Feelings of threat and danger can induce different behaviors depending on the degree of threat, whether it is existential meaning threatening one's existence or partially existential which is having an urge for a better existence. Thoroughly, more threats can drive people to prefer security, give up civil liberties, rationalize the status quo, and become more politically conservative [44, 46, 48].

Christian [49] explained that as the level of threat increases, so does the preference for high security measures and the willingness to trade off some civil liberties. Yet some demographic groups highly value security compared to others, such as females, the less educated, seniors, and low-income groups [49, 50]. The assumption of preferring curbing freedoms for security is supported psychologically by Maslow's hierarchy of needs. It is one of the human motivation theories which classify human needs into five categories, listed as follows: physiological needs, safety, love and belonging, esteem, and self-actualization. Those needs are hierarchically ordered, which means that an individual must meet the basic ones before achieving others. According to this model, safety comes before love and belonging needs. Therefore, people will prioritize being safe and secure before achieving a sense of belonging [49, 51].

To conclude, people's views, perceptions, behaviors, attitudes, and preferences are shaped by their news consumption. Nowadays, news media coverage on digital platforms has a strong impact on constructing threat perceptions that reinforce security over other needs to maintain survival [48]. Accordingly, we drafted our hypothesis to fill the knowledge gap, as using the cultivation theory in the context of Facebook has generated scarce research. Moreover, very few research studies linked Facebook news consumption to shaping high security preferences and trading off civil liberties [52]. The importance of this interdisciplinary research study is its ability to connect three core areas of political communication, psychology, and national security through exploring four main variables: news consumption, fear perception, security, and civil liberties. Within this framework, we focused on studying the cultivation effect of news exposure on Facebook pages during the pandemic by examining the following hypotheses:

H1. Heavy news consumption on Facebook correlates with fear and terror perception during the COVID-19 pandemic.

H2. Reading Facebook news posts briefly correlates with fear perception.

H3. Reading Facebook news posts in detail correlates with fear perception.

H4. Frequent exposure to news posts on Facebook correlates with high security preferences.

H5. Frequent exposure to news posts on Facebook correlates with trading off some civil liberties.

### 3. Methodology

*3.1. Data.* We used the survey method of disseminating an online questionnaire through the market research service of Qualtrics from August 2021 until September 2021. We employed a nonprobability quota sample ( $N = 1309$ ) of young adults (18–35 years) residing in the U.S., Spain, and Egypt. The main reason for selecting these countries is that each has a different political and media system. According to the Reporters Without Borders Press Freedom index [53], each stated country represents a distinct rank. For instance, Egypt is labeled as a nonfree country (166/180), the U.S. is somehow free (45/180), and Spain (29/180) came among the top countries that have press freedom. Moreover, the Democracy Index 2022 [53] revealed that Spain has a full democracy (8.07/10), the U.S. has a flawed democracy (7.85/10), and Egypt has an authoritarian regime (2.93/10), while the Corruption Perception Index 2022 [54] showed that the U.S. has a score of 69/100, Spain 60/100, and Egypt has the least score 30/100. Accordingly, we selected these countries to compare people living in different media and political systems. Further, to examine how their perceptions, values, and ideologies may significantly vary based on their news consumption, we targeted an equal sample size from each country with the following: the U.S. ( $N = 436$ ), Spain ( $N = 437$ ), and Egypt ( $N = 436$ ). Moreover, there is an almost equal sample size across the sexes. We categorized the sample into four age groups (Table 1).

TABLE 1: Age.

Age	Spain		Country Egypt		U.S.		Total	
	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%
18-24 years	113	25.9%	143	32.8%	65	14.9%	321	24.5%
25-29 years	119	27.2%	161	36.9%	155	35.6%	435	33.2%
30-34 years	155	35.5%	112	25.7%	173	39.7%	440	33.6%
35 years	50	11.4%	20	4.6%	43	9.9%	113	8.6%
Total	437	100.0%	436	100.0%	436	100.0%	1309	100.0%

3.2. *Variables.* We designed a questionnaire to measure five variables: news consumption on Facebook, news readership, fear perception, security preference, and trading off civil liberties. To do this, we self-designed the scales that measure news consumption on Facebook, fear perception, and civil liberties. Items measuring security preference were derived from the portrait value questionnaire (PVQ) that is based on Schwartz’s theory of values highlighting ten essential individual values that affect human actions at any point including security preference [55]. The scale includes short verbal portraits of different people that capture the person’s values without explicitly identifying values as the topic of investigation [55]. Thus, we inferred the respondents’ values from their self-reported similarity to those described in terms of values.

It is worth noting that we used the demographics of age, sex, education, and political ideology as control variables. To measure political ideology, we asked participants to place themselves on the political continuum (1=far left or 5=far right). We later recoded the participants’ responses into a 3-point Likert scale to divide them into the left, center, and right wings.

3.2.1. *News Consumption on Facebook.* We drafted a scale of four items to measure news consumption on Facebook by asking participants to select their level of exposure (1=never or 5=always) on the following: (1) frequency of encountering news posts while skipping the newsfeed on Facebook; (2) frequency of encountering news posts on Facebook coming from the shared posts of family, relatives, friends, or other people you follow; (3) frequency of briefly reading news posts that you encounter on your Facebook newsfeed; and (4) frequency of reading the details of news posts that you encounter on your Facebook newsfeed.

We used principal factor analysis to test the validity of the news consumption items as a scale. For this, we used several well-recognized criteria for the factorability of a correlation. First, we noticed that all the items correlated together with at least 0.4, suggesting reasonable factorability. Also, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin of sampling adequacy is 0.769; thus, above the commonly recommended value of 0.6, Bartlett’s sphericity test was significant ( $X^2(6) = 1555.990, P \leq 0.001$ ). Finally, the commonalities were above 0.4, confirming that each item shared some common variance with other items. Given these overall indicators, factor analysis was suitable for all four items. Principal components analysis yielded one component/construct—which we named news con-

sumption on Facebook, with an eigenvalue of 2.457, and accounts for 61.424 of variance. Again, the four items loaded in a meaningful way on the component, item1 = 0.770, item2 = 0.838, item3 = 0.836, and item4 = 0.680. The four items showed a good internal consistency ( $\alpha = 0.788$ ) with a moderate interitem correlation  $r = 0.5$ . Hence, we created a composite score of the four items which we recoded into a 3-point Likert scale to divide the participants into light, medium, and heavy news consumers based on the cultivation theory classification ( $M = 1.85; SD = 0.807$ ).

3.2.2. *Fear Perception.* We designed a scale of six items portraying sources of danger that are highly present in the circulated news and that people might fear to encounter in real life. Participants were asked to state their level of agreement (1=strongly disagree or 5 = strongly agree) on the following: (1) I fear bombs and explosives that I may encounter at any time. (2) I feel threatened by the economic performance of the country. (3) I am afraid about my family’s general safety. (4) I feel threatened by the lack of free speech and democratic rights. (5) I think the spread of diseases is an imminent threat. (6) I think the COVID-19 pandemic threatens my life.

All the items correlated together with at least 0.35, suggesting reasonable factorability. Second, Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin’s measure of sampling adequacy is 0.783, and Bartlett’s test of sphericity is significant ( $X^2(15) = 2599.049, P \leq 0.001$ ). These results give us confidence that our variables are significantly correlated altogether. Finally, the commonalities were all above 0.5, confirming that each item shared some common variance with other items. Given these overall indicators, factor analysis is suitable for all 6 items. Principal component analysis yielded one component/construct—which we named fear perception, with an eigenvalue of 2.547. The 6 items showed an extremely high internal consistency ( $\alpha = 0.809$ ). Therefore, we created a composite score of the sum of these items. We recoded the responses into a 3-point Likert scale to divide the participants into low, moderate, and high fear perception levels ( $M = 1.92; SD = 0.808$ ).

3.2.3. *Security Preference.* According to the PVQ, security preference is measured by asking participants to express how much each description of the following two items is like him/her (1=not like me at all or 5=very much like me): (1) it is important for him to live in secure surroundings. He avoids anything that might endanger his safety. (2) It is



TABLE 2: Composite variable news consumption on Facebook.

Item	Response	Spain		Country Egypt		U.S.		Total	
		N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Composite variable—news exposure on Facebook	Light	148	33.9%	176	40.4%	218	50.0%	542	41.4%
	Medium	173	39.6%	138	31.7%	116	26.6%	427	32.6%
	Heavy	116	26.5%	122	28.0%	102	23.4%	340	26.0%
Total		437	100.0%	436	100.0%	436	100.0%	1309	100.0%

essential to him that his country be safe from threats within and without. He is concerned that social order is protected. These items showed good internal consistency ( $\alpha = 0.724$ ). Moreover, Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin's measure of sampling adequacy is 0.700, and Bartlett's test of sphericity is significant ( $X^2(1) = 511.661, P \leq 0.001$ ). Hence, we created a composite score of the sum of these questions and recoded the responses into a 3-point Likert scale to label the participants into low, moderate, and high security levels ( $M = 2.56$ ;  $SD = 0.725$ ).

**3.2.4. Civil Liberties.** We started the questionnaire with our operational definition of civil liberties which is "the basic concepts of rights and freedoms that are guaranteed by law and include, but are not limited to, the right to free speech, privacy, and the right to vote," to make sure that our participants understand what we mean by civil liberty, thus providing precise answers. For this, we designed two items to measure civil liberty rights that align with our operational definition. We asked participants to express how much the following description is like him/her (1=not like me at all or 5=very much like me): (1) it is acceptable for him to give up some civil liberties to maintain national security ( $M = 2.02$ ;  $SD = 0.847$ ). (2) I feel threatened by the lack of free speech and democratic rights. It is worth noting that we used this item to measure whether the absence of these rights represents a source of threat to participants or not.

## 4. Results and Analysis

**4.1. Exposure and Consumption of News Posts on Facebook Newsfeed.** Our data analysis revealed that more than 59% are frequently exposed to news posts while skipping their newsfeed on Facebook, with more females (62%) than their male counterparts (56%). These figures were consistent across the American (54%), Spanish (68%), and Egyptian youths (54%), with the majority often exposed to news posts while scrolling through newsfeeds. Even though most age groups are constantly exposed to news posts, we noticed that 30-35 years achieved the highest score compared to other age groups in the three investigated countries.

Over 60% of our respondents read the news posts they encountered on Facebook at least briefly, with the highest among the Spanish (68%) and Egyptian youths (66%) compared to the Americans (46%). Likewise, there are more females (67%) than males (53%) in the three investigated countries. Further analysis revealed that doctoral degree holders (86%), master's degrees (69%), and bachelor's

(64%) are the most read news posts briefly. Similarly, right-wing participants (73%) are more likely to read news briefly than the left (57%) and center wings (54%). However, the center wing achieved a higher score than the left in the U.S. and Egypt compared to their counterparts in Spain, where the left read the news posts briefly more than the center.

In the same context, the majority (48%) always read the details of the news posts they encountered on their Facebook newsfeed, with Egyptian youths (54%) scoring the highest, followed by the Spanish (48%) and American youths (42%). Consistent with the previous item, we found more females (51%) than males (44%). It is worth noting that the right wing (67%) had a very high score compared to the left (43%) and center wings (40%). Moreover, more than half of the sample constantly encounter news posts with their newsfeed coming from the shares of friends, family, relatives, and other people they follow, with more Spanish (57%) than American (51%) and Egyptian youths (48%). Moreover, females outweighed males by 8%. Similarly, the right (70.6%) outweighed the left (48%) and center (45%).

The composite score of news consumption on Facebook showed (41.4%) light, (33%) medium, and (26%) heavy news consumers. Further analysis revealed that most of the Spanish (40%) are media news consumers compared to the majority of Egyptian (40%) and American youths (50%) who are light news consumers. However, there are more Egyptians (28%) than Spanish (27%) and American respondents (23%) who are heavy consumers (Table 2). Moreover, females (31%) overtopped males (21%) in being heavy news consumers on Facebook.

Even though most age groups are light news consumers, those aged 25-29 and 30-34 years achieved the highest score being heavy news consumers. Our data analysis showed that most Egyptians aged 30-34 years (37%) are medium news consumers, while 35 years varied between light (35%) and heavy news consumers (35%). Other age groups in Egypt, the U.S., and Spain are light news consumers.

In conjunction with the abovementioned, most right wing (44%) are heavy new consumers, while the left (43%) and center wings (50%) are light. These figures varied in Spain, with the majority of the left-wing participants (46%) being media news consumers, the majority of the center (44%) being light, while the right wing varied between medium (36.3%) and heavy news consumers (36.3%).

Moreover, most doctoral degree holders (62%) are heavy consumers, while the majority of bachelor's (37%) and master's degree holders (35.7%) are medium news consumers.

TABLE 3: List of threat items.

Item	Response	Spain		Country Egypt		U.S.		Total	
		N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
I fear from bombs and explosives that I may encounter any time.	Disagree	187	42.8%	259	59.4%	243	55.7%	689	52.6%
	Neutral	79	18.1%	56	12.8%	74	17.0%	209	16.0%
	Agree	171	39.1%	121	27.8%	119	27.3%	411	31.4%
Total		437	100.0%	436	100.0%	436	100.0%	1309	100.0%
I feel threatened by the economic performance of the country.	Disagree	108	24.7%	173	39.7%	133	30.5%	414	31.6%
	Neutral	102	23.3%	101	23.2%	116	26.6%	319	24.4%
	Agree	227	51.9%	162	37.2%	187	42.9%	576	44.0%
Total		437	100.0%	436	100.0%	436	100.0%	1309	100.0%
I am afraid about my family’s general safety.	Disagree	175	40.0%	200	45.9%	183	42.0%	558	42.6%
	Neutral	100	22.9%	81	18.6%	105	24.1%	286	21.8%
	Agree	162	37.1%	155	35.6%	148	33.9%	465	35.5%
Total		437	100.0%	436	100.0%	436	100.0%	1309	100.0%
I feel threatened by the lack of free speech and democratic rights.	Disagree	195	44.6%	196	45.0%	181	41.5%	572	43.7%
	Neutral	125	28.6%	72	16.5%	87	20.0%	284	21.7%
	Agree	117	26.8%	168	38.5%	168	38.5%	453	34.6%
Total		437	100.0%	436	100.0%	436	100.0%	1309	100.0%
I think the spread of diseases is an imminent threat.	Disagree	85	19.5%	135	31.0%	118	27.1%	338	25.8%
	Neutral	108	24.7%	79	18.1%	94	21.6%	281	21.5%
	Agree	244	55.8%	222	50.9%	224	51.4%	690	52.7%
Total		437	100.0%	436	100.0%	436	100.0%	1309	100.0%
I think COVID-19 pandemic threatens my life.	Disagree	146	33.4%	159	36.5%	157	36.0%	462	35.3%
	Neutral	125	28.6%	100	22.9%	88	20.2%	313	23.9%
	Agree	166	38.0%	177	40.6%	191	43.8%	534	40.8%
Total		437	100.0%	436	100.0%	436	100.0%	1309	100.0%

Other education groups are light news consumers. However, we noticed that just the majority of those who hold master’s and doctoral degrees in Egypt and the U.S. are either medium or heavy news consumers, while in Spain, only those who hold bachelor’s (45%) are media, and doctoral degree holders (42.9%) are heavy news consumers.

4.2. *Cultivation of Fear and Terror Perception.* The primary source of threat is the spread of diseases (53%), with the Spanish respondents achieving the highest (56%), followed by the American (51%) and Egyptian youths (51%). The second source is economic performance (44%). However, most Egyptians do not perceive it as a source of threat, whereas many Spanish (52%) and American youths (43%) consider it a threat. Moreover, more than 40% of the sample believe that COVID-19 is a threat to their lives, with more Americans (44%) than Egyptian (41%) and Spanish youths (38%).

On the other side, the less perceived threat is the fear of bombs and explosives (53%), yet Spanish youths obtained a higher score (39%) than Egyptians (28%) and Americans (27%) in considering it as a source of threat. Furthermore, most of the sample are not worried about their families’ safety (43%), with more Egyptians (46%) than American (42%) and Spanish youths (40%). Moreover, about 45% do not fear the lack of free

speech and democratic rights, with more Egyptians (46%) than Spanish (45%) and American youths (42%) (Table 3).

Further analysis demonstrated that most females are worried about the spread of disease (56%), economic performance (49%), the COVID-19 pandemic (44%), and their family’s general safety (43%). As for males, the sources of threat are the spread of diseases (49%), economic performance (39%), and the COVID-19 pandemic (38%). It is worth noting that females scored higher than their counterparts in almost all sources of threat. We also found that many females (42%) are worried about their family’s general safety, unlike their male counterparts who are not (48%).

The composite variables of these items exhibited (36%) low, (34%) moderate, and (29%) high fear perception levels. Even though most youths in Spain, the U.S., and Egypt have low perceptions. We found that Spain achieved the highest score (33%) compared to Egypt (28%) and the U.S. (27%) in having high fear levels. Likewise, there are more Spanish (35%) than Egyptian (34%) and American youths (34%) at a moderate level. Moreover, most females (37%) have a high fear level unlike their male counterparts (41%) who have a low perception. In more depth, the majority of Spanish females (34%) have a moderate level, yet most Egyptian (38%) and American females (40%) have a high threat level.

TABLE 4: Security items.

Item	Response	Spain		Country Egypt		U.S.		Total	
		N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
It is important for him to live in secure surroundings. He avoids anything that might endanger his safety	Not like me	49	11.2%	41	9.4%	108	24.8%	198	15.1%
	Somehow like me	116	26.5%	64	14.7%	110	25.2%	290	22.2%
	Like me	272	62.2%	331	75.9%	218	50.0%	821	62.7%
Total		437	100.0%	436	100.0%	436	100.0%	1309	100.0%
It is very important to him that his country be safe from threats within and without. He is concerned that social order should be protected.	Not like me	35	8.0%	35	8.0%	80	18.3%	150	11.5%
	Somehow like me	98	22.4%	52	11.9%	116	26.6%	266	20.3%
	Like me	304	69.6%	349	80.0%	240	55.0%	893	68.2%
Total		437	100.0%	436	100.0%	436	100.0%	1309	100.0%
Composite variable—security preference	Low	47	10.8%	39	8.9%	97	22.2%	183	14.0%
	Moderate	74	16.9%	40	9.2%	90	20.6%	204	15.6%
	High	316	72.3%	357	81.9%	249	57.1%	922	70.4%
Total		437	100.0%	436	100.0%	436	100.0%	1309	100.0%

In addition, about 40% of participants aged 25-29 years have a high perception, and 30-34 years have a moderate perception (39%). Moreover, there are 46% of Spanish participants aged 35 years that have a high level. In Egypt, most 30-34 years (38%) and 35 years (60%) have low levels. Furthermore, 25-29 years (35%) and 35 years (44%) have a low fear perception. It is worth noting that the only similarity we detected across 18-24 years is a low level in the three investigated countries. Over and above, the most uneducated (54%), elemental studies (41%), high school degree holders (42%), associate degree holders (57%), and vocational degree holders (67%) have low fear perception levels. Many undergraduate university students (38%) and master's degree holders (39%) have moderate perception levels. On the other hand, around 70% of doctoral degree holders have high fear perception levels.

Likewise, right-wing participants (44%) have high levels, with the left (24%) and center wings (24%) achieving low scores. However, most of the left (38%) have a moderate level, whereas the majority of the center (42%) have low fear levels. We did not notice significant differences across countries except that most left participants in Egypt (38%) and the U.S. (44.4%) have a low perception level.

The nonparametric Spearman test for correlation showed a minimum positive correlation between the consumption of Facebook news posts and threat perception,  $\rho = 0.288$ ,  $P \leq 0.001$ . This result means the more exposure to news posts on the Facebook newsfeed, the more the fear and terror perception will be. In more depth, there is a minimum correlation in Spain  $\rho = 0.144$ ,  $P \leq 0.003$  and Egypt  $\rho = 0.251$ ,  $P \leq 0.001$  compared to the U.S.  $\rho = 0.441$ ,  $P \leq 0.001$ . In this sense, we reject the null hypothesis of no association and accept H1. Taking this into account, heavy consumption and exposure to news posts on Facebook correlate with fear and terror perception during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Our statistical analysis also revealed a minimum correlation between fear perception level and reading the news posts, briefly  $\rho = 0.221$ ,  $P \leq 0.001$  and in detail  $\rho = 0.271$ ,  $P \leq 0.001$ . The analysis highlighted a minimum positive relationship between fear perception and reading news posts briefly in Spain,  $\rho = 0.112$ ,  $P < 0.019$ , and Egypt,  $\rho = 0.126$ ,  $P \leq 0.009$ . Similarly, we found a minimum positive correlation with reading the news posts in detail, in Spain,  $\rho = 0.152$ ,  $P \leq 0.001$ , and Egypt  $\rho = 0.246$ ,  $P \leq 0.001$ . However, we detected a stronger correlation in the U.S. in reading news posts, briefly  $\rho = 0.385$ ,  $P \leq 0.001$  and in detail  $\rho = 0.405$ ,  $P \leq 0.001$ . Accordingly, we reject the null hypothesis of no association and accept H2 and H3. These findings imply that the more people read the news posts they encounter on their Facebook newsfeed briefly and in full, the higher their fear and terror perception will be.

**4.3. Security Preferences.** More than 60% said it is important for them to live in secure surroundings. They avoid anything that might endanger their safety. We noticed more Egyptians (76%) than Spanish (62%) and American youths (50%). Moreover, the majority of the sample (68%) believe it is essential that their country be safe from threats within and without. They are concerned that social order is protected. There are more Egyptians (80%) than Spanish (70%) and American youths (55%). The total sum of these items showed that more than 70% have a high security level (70%), with Egyptians (82%) outweighing Spanish (72%) and American youths (57%) (Table 4).

Similarly, most females (74%) and males (67%) have high security preferences in the examined countries. However, we observed more males (74%) than females (71%) in Spain.

Moreover, all political wings have a high security preference in the three countries, with the right (80%) outranked

TABLE 5: Trading off civil liberties.

Item	Response	Country							
		Spain		Egypt		U.S.		Total	
		N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
It is acceptable for him to give up some civil liberties to maintain national security	Disagree	165	37.8%	119	27.3%	175	40.1%	459	35.1%
	Neutral	149	34.1%	105	24.1%	116	26.6%	370	28.3%
	Agree	123	28.1%	212	48.6%	145	33.3%	480	36.7%
Total		437	100.0%	436	100.0%	436	100.0%	1309	100.0%

by the center (67%) and left wings (66%). Our data also revealed that only the majority of the noneducated participants (47%) have low security preferences compared to the more educated groups, which have high levels. Likewise, most age groups have a high level, with those aged 25-29 years in Spain (82%) and the U.S. (62%) excelling over other age groups. In Egypt, those aged 30-34 (88%) scored higher than other groups. It is worth mentioning that most news consumers with different exposure levels have a high security preference.

The nonparametric Spearman test for correlation revealed a minimum relationship between frequent exposure to news posts on Facebook and high security preference,  $\rho = 0.258$ ,  $P \leq 0.001$ . The U.S. had the strongest correlation,  $\rho = 0.370$ ,  $P \leq 0.001$ , compared to Spain  $\rho = 0.161$ ,  $P \leq 0.001$  and Egypt  $\rho = 0.171$ ,  $P \leq 0.001$ . In this sense, we accept and support research H4. This assumption implies that the more people are exposed to news posts on Facebook, the higher their security preference will be.

**4.4. Civil Liberties.** There are more than 36% of the sample that said it is acceptable to give up some civil liberties to maintain national security, with (28%) neutral and (35%) disagreed. It is worth mentioning that the majority in Spain (38%) and the U.S. (40%) are not willing to trade off their liberties. At the same time, we noticed a relatively high percentage of Spanish (34%) and American youths (27%) who are uncertain. On the other side, about half of the Egyptians are ready to give up their liberty for security (Table 5). Further analysis demonstrated that most females (38%) are willing to trade off compared to the majority of males (37%) who are not. On the contrary, most Spanish and American males and females are unwilling.

Likewise, the majority of right-wing participants (56%) agreed to curb their rights for national security in comparison to the left (42%) and center wings (37%) who are not. It is worth noting that the three political wings in Egypt agree with this statement, unlike the left and center wings in Spain and the U.S., who disagree. Additionally, most participants with different educational levels are not willing to give up their liberty except the majority of those who hold bachelor's (42%), master's (40%), and doctoral degrees (74%) who agree. Over and above, most Spanish aged 30-34 years (36%) and 35 years (34%) and Americans aged 25-29 years are neutral compared to other age segments who disagreed. In the other respect, most heavy (54%) and media news consumers on Facebook (37%) agreed to restrain their civil rights for security, compared to light consumers (43%) who are not.

Statistical data showed that frequent exposure to news posts on Facebook correlates with trading off civil liberties for security,  $\rho = 0.216$ ,  $P \leq 0.001$ . This finding means that the more people are exposed to news posts on Facebook, the more they are willing to trade off their civil liberties to maintain national security during COVID-19. We noticed that the U.S. has a weak positive correlation,  $\rho = 0.340$ ,  $P \leq 0.001$ , yet stronger than Spain  $\rho = 0.104$ ,  $P \leq 0.001$  and Egypt  $\rho = 0.198$ ,  $P \leq 0.001$ . Taking this into account, we can assume that heavy exposure to news posts on Facebook correlates with giving up some civil liberties. Thus, we reject the null hypothesis and accept the assumption of association as stated in H5.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusion

Our results make several relevant and new contributions to previous findings on news exposure on Facebook. More than 60% of this study's participants consistently encounter news posts while skipping their newsfeeds on Facebook. These figures did not vary much among the Spanish (68%), Egyptian (54%), and American youth (54%). Such an outcome reinforces the argument of some scholars that the widespread news on social media and other online platforms led to the emergence of incidental news exposure [25, 28, 34, 52]. Moreover, people are accidentally exposed to news and information on different matters while browsing their newsfeeds [27, 28]. Aligning with this premise, we noticed that more than half of the Spanish, Egyptian, and American respondents accidentally encounter news posts through the shares of their network.

Even though most of the sample encounter news posts accidentally, the data showed more than 60% of youths read the news posts they encounter on Facebook at least briefly, and around 50% always read the news posts in full detail. The outcome was almost the same across the three investigated countries, with the majority always reading the news posts they encounter. For instance, we found more Spanish read the news posts in brief followed by the Egyptians and Americans, whereas more Egyptians read the full details than Spanish and American youths. This sheds light on past work stressing some elements that could attenuate the probability of incidental news exposure and reinforce the purposeful as well as active consumption of news. Such factors include the presence and degree of local, national, or international conflict, the country's political system, threats due to natural disasters, terrorism, and health pandemics [32]. On this matter, the results revealed that incidental news



exposure on Facebook during the COVID-19 pandemic reinforced the active consumption of news on Facebook through either reading the headlines or full details. This inference emphasizes the importance of Facebook as a news platform that connects users and provides billions of people unlimited access to information and news during the pandemic. In conjunction with previous research findings, Facebook acts as a pathway to learning about current affairs and news, consequently shaping the world's perception and reality [24, 33–35].

Significantly, these results were consistent among Spanish, American, and Egyptian youths, with the majority reading the news posts on Facebook briefly and in detail, considering that each of these countries has different democracy, corruption perception, and press freedom ranks [53, 54, 56]. For instance, Spain has full democracy, the U.S. has flawed democracy, and Egypt is authoritarian. Also, Egypt has the least press freedom index followed by the U.S. and Spain. This novelty indicates that regardless of different media systems and political environments, the pandemic (i.e., COVID-19) can lead to a high degree of active news consumption and readership among youths on Facebook. Thus, the presence and degree of threats due to natural disasters, terrorism, and health pandemics can lead to purposive news consumption [2, 32]. In general, despite most of the sample being light news consumers on Facebook, around 60% are medium and heavy consumers. This significant finding underlines the crucial role of Facebook in news production, distribution, and consumption among users.

Within this framework, many scholars claimed that heavy TV news consumption affects how people perceive the world and lead them to alter their perspectives and knowledge of several issues due to the cultivation effect [7, 8]. In this respect, most participants in the U.S., Spain, and Egypt perceive the spread of diseases and COVID-19 as imminent threats to their lives. Additionally, about 60% across the three investigated countries have moderate to high levels of fear perceptions. Also, our statistical data analysis revealed a positive correlation between news consumption on Facebook and fear perception, supporting research H1. This result demonstrates that no matter what the level of democracy, corruption perception, and press freedom index is, the more youth are exposed to news posts on Facebook, the higher their threat perception will be. These findings support the main notion of the cultivation theory suggesting that heavy TV viewers perceive the world as a mean place and have higher fear levels compared to medium and light viewers.

Accordingly, hype news post exposure on Facebook can have the same cultivation impact on shaping perceptions as TV. Furthermore, the cultivation theory has a strong impact nowadays, on digital media and social network sites. This could be due to the personalized nature of social network sites which expose people to the exact or similar content they consume. Hence, the more people read news from a certain source, the more frequently they encounter news from the same and/or similar sources. Thus, a person with higher fear perception might be more likely to be exposed to more news on social media that could augment and reinforce their existing fear perception level.

Another relevant finding of this study highlights a significant relationship between Facebook news posts' readership and perception of threat, thus confirming research H2 and H3. These new outcomes imply that the more people in the examined countries read the news posts they encounter on their Facebook profile (either briefly or in detail), the higher their perception of the threat will be. One possible explanation for this result could be due to the widespread fake news on social media sites during the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, causing what was labeled as infodemic [57]. This infodemic had negative repercussions worse than the pandemic. It led to trauma, unrest, fear, worry, panic, uncertainty, and threat among people [58]. In this respect, the more people actively consumed news posts on Facebook, the higher their threat perception was during COVID-19. Thus, we infer that even active news consumption on Facebook can act as a negative stimulus provoking fear, terror, and threat during times of crisis.

The statistical analysis also revealed that those who are more exposed to news posts on Facebook have higher threat levels, unlike other segments that consume less regardless of their demographic variables. For this, some of our results were rejected, and others correlated with previous studies. In connection with the literature review [50], we found that most women and right-wing participants have high threat levels than other groups. While contrary to many research studies claiming that those with more education have less fear and threat perception [49], our data showed that the majority of participants who hold high education degrees (undergraduate university students, master's, and doctoral degrees) exhibited higher fear levels than the less educated (uneducated, elemental studies, high school, associate, and vocational degrees). Building on this, we deduce that as the level of education increases, so does the level of news consumption and consequently the cultivation effect.

This research has concretized that frequent exposure to news posts on Facebook newsfeeds not only cultivates threat perception but also shapes people's security and freedom preferences. Even though Egypt has an authoritarian regime, the U.S. has flawed democracy, and Spain has full democracy [56]; we found 45% of the Egyptian, American, and Spanish youths are not threatened by the lack of free speech and democratic rights. Additionally, the data showed a statistically significant correlation between news exposure on Facebook, the level of security preference, and willingness to give up some civil liberties to maintain national security, supporting research H4 and H5. These findings suggest that frequent news exposure on Facebook during a crisis (i.e., pandemics) connects with our beliefs about security and freedom and therefore can affect democracy regardless of the different political and media systems. For instance, we obtained similar findings across youth living in the U.S., Spain, and Egypt; given that Egypt has a low press freedom index (166/180), the U.S. was somehow free (45/180), and Spain (29/180) came among the top countries that have a press freedom index [53].

Thoroughly, active news consumption on Facebook aligns with an elevated tendency to prefer a more tightened security environment at the expense of civil liberty rights and freedom during times of uncertainty and crisis. This premise is

supported by the psychological perspective in Maslow's hierarchy of needs, whereas the assumption of curbing freedoms to maintain national security was well defined and explained. Based on this model, humans prioritize safety/security over other needs [49, 51]. Thus, under threat, people will be more willing to give up their freedom to survive and achieve the primary goal of human needs, which is safety.

Overall, frequent news exposure on Facebook during the pandemic had a very intense cultivation effect on the perceptions and preferences of people. For example, it shaped people's security preferences, with more than 70% of young people having high security levels. The statistical analysis showed a significant correlation between news consumption and security level, with the U.S. having the strongest correlation compared to Egypt and Spain. This finding points out that during times of threat (i.e., COVID-19), news consumption on Facebook can shape people's tendency for a tightened security environment regardless of the political and media systems. Over and above, it can even upsurge security preferences among people holding distinct political ideologies. Our data revealed that not only the majority of right-wing participants have high security levels but also many of the left and center. Therefore, this research presumes that when people are repeatedly exposed to a strong stimulus (i.e., news posts on Facebook), despite their political ideology, they will adopt the most conservative approach of preferring security over their freedom and democratic rights, in times of uncertainty.

In sum, the cultivation impact of Facebook news consumption during COVID-19 correlates with high security preferences and willingness to give up some civil liberties to be safe and secure. Building on this novel finding, we conclude that despite the platform, news consumption can shape people's perceptions and preferences of policy, ideology, security, and civil liberties, through simple wording or framing [5]. Finally, the findings of this study highlight how news consumption on Facebook during the pandemic has a far-reaching negative impact on youths beyond the threat of the virus itself.

One of the main drawbacks of this research paper is the scarcity of previous studies connecting these interdisciplinary concepts. Thus, we had to develop a new research typology to examine our variables. Also, we could not add further items related to measuring civil liberty rights due to the questionnaire's limited length and examining many interdisciplinary concepts. Another limitation is related to reporting moderate correlation values. These values limited not only our ability to use tests of regressions as well as causalities but also to make causal interpretations of the findings. However, this shortcoming can be due to having a nonlinear relation rather than a linear one, which yields smaller values than expected correlation coefficients. Regardless of having some moderate values, our data can be a starting point for future studies that go deeper with new analyses that examine causality and that expand the countries of investigation.

## Data Availability

Data is available upon request to the corresponding authors.

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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