SELECTIVE AVOIDANCE ON SOCIAL MEDIA AMIDST THE GLOBAL PANDEMIC OF COVID-19

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DEDICATION

To my fiancé, family, and friends who have continuously supported and rooted for my success.

ABSTRACT

Given the turmoil associated with COVID-19 and the increasing prevalence of social media users, it is important to understand how people react to and handle information about the pandemic on social media networking sites. In the context of crisis situations, previous research has suggested that individuals tend to avoid information about the crisis that does not adhere to their beliefs and even see them as a threat. The present study will be researching selective avoidance through unfollowing/unfriending, blocking, and muting/'taking a break' behaviours on social media amidst COVID-19. To extend this research further, the study will identify if people experience a perceived threat when they consume information that does not agree with their beliefs.

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RST	Reinforcement Sensitivity Theory
CDT	Cognitive Dissonance Theory
BAS	Behavioural Approach System
FFFS	Fight-Flight-Freeze System
BIS	Behavioural Inhibition System
COVID-19	Coronavirus Pandemic

CHAPTER 1: Introduction

As of November 2021, the public health crisis of coronavirus (COVID-19), a respiratory pathogen, has spread to 253.3 million people across the world, resulting in 5.1 million deaths (BBC News, 2021). The world is in an international state of emergency (Koushik, 2020). People across the globe are dealing with loss, uncertainty about the future, and panic. This pandemic has drastically impacted the mental health of millions. With the overwhelming sense of anxiety and uncertainty, combined with the accessibility and ease of communication, social media has become a space for people to connect. Although social media has facilitated communication from all over the world, it has also become the largest source for misinformation on COVID-19, a phenomenon now termed an 'infodemic' (Cinelli et al., 2020; Islam et al., 2020). Individuals are constantly consuming rumours, conspiracy theories, and stigmatizing information on social media, greatly affecting people's behaviours, as well as undermining credible and factual information (Cinelli et al., 2020). Research suggests that misinformation encourages individuals to avoid incongruent information (Kim et al., 2020). This phenomenon is called 'selective avoidance': the propensity of an individual to shield themselves from incongruent information (Zhu et al., 2016). The ability to isolate oneself from dissenting information has become as easy as the click of a button (Zhu et al., 2016). Specifically, social media facilitates selective avoidance behaviours of unfollowing/unfriending, blocking, and muting/'taking a break' from other users.

On top of avoiding attitude-discrepant information, individuals who share similar views tend to categorize themselves into groups, where they are a part of an ingroup and others are members of an out-group (Knobloch-Westerwick et al., 2017). Not only do individuals express favoritism towards their group to increase their self-esteem and validate their views, but they

also may experience a desire to inflict harm or discriminate members of an out-group (Greenaway & Cruwys, 2018; Knobloch-Westerwick et al., 2017; University of Texas, n.d.). Moreover, selective avoidance and polarization between in-groups and out-groups may be intensified.

There is a significant dearth of research investigating selective avoidance behaviours on social media amidst the global pandemic of COVID-19. Alas, there has been an absence of literature regarding these behaviours during any health crisis; most research has focused on political movements (Gui et al., 2017). In particular, Zhu et al., (2016) investigated selective avoidance behaviours of removing unwanted content or dissolving social ties on Facebook during the Hong Kong Umbrella Movement in 2014. As a result, they found that 15.6% of Facebook users removed content or unfriended people due to the political movement (Zhu et al., 2016). In a recent study, Kim et al. (2020) explored misinformation on COVID-19 and identified that misinformation encourages individuals to seek attitude-consistent information; thus, contributing to homogenous groups. With the absence of literature on global health crises, this study aims to investigate the intersection of the coronavirus pandemic and online behaviours.

Given the turmoil and infodemic associated with COVID-19 and the increasing prevalence of social media users, it is important to understand how people react to and handle information about the pandemic on social media networking sites. The present study will be investigating the engagements of blocking, unfollowing, and muting content on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter regarding COVID-19 related issues. COVID-19 related issues on social media are defined as the exposure and engagement with COVID-19 information on social media platforms. As well, it will explore perceived out-group threat and its relationship between selective avoidance and COVID-19 social media use. Thus, this study holds **two research**

questions: (1) How has COVID-19-related social media use impacted selective avoidance? (2) Does perceived out-group threat affect selective avoidance and COVID-19 social media use? I predict COVID-19 related social media use is positively associated with selective avoidance and this relationship is strengthened through perceived outgroup threat.

CHAPTER 2: Literature Review

Reinforcement Sensitivity Theory

Before trying to comprehend the relationships between selective avoidance behaviours and the global pandemic of COVID-19, it is important to first understand what motivates and influences selective avoidance behaviours. More specifically, selective avoidance is a response to particular stimuli. Thus, it is necessary to explore the processes involved when developing a reaction to information. Reactions reflect the emotions and motivations to approach or avoid certain stimuli (Smillie, 2008). Approach and avoidance systems are activated by reinforcing stimuli in one's environment. Specifically, people react in particular ways to rewards, punishments, threats, and incentives (Smillie, 2008). Thus, behavioural responses are influenced through human emotion, motivation, and learning (Corr, 2013). The work of Gray (1975) explains how people react to different stimuli (Corr, 2013). Gray developed the reinforcement sensitivity theory (RST) that postulates three systems: behavioural approach system (BAS), fight-flight-freeze system (FFFS), and the behavioural inhibition system (BIS) (Corr, 2013). In the BAS, individuals are motivated to attain appetitive stimuli, such as food or water. Thus, the BAS generates positive affect such as pleasure and hope, and motivates approach behaviour (Corr & Perkins, 2006; Smillie, 2008). The FFFS is activated via aversive stimuli, such as perceived threats. It is responsible for avoidance and escape behaviours and elicits emotions of fear (Corr & Perkins, 2006; Smillie, 2008). Lastly, the BIS is triggered through conflicting

stimuli, such as the simultaneous motivation to avoid and approach stimuli (Corr, 2013). Further, it aims to resolve conflict and is associated with worry, anxiousness, or rumination (Corr & Perkins, 2006; Smillie, 2008). Gray's theory posits that emotions are activated through particular stimuli which have reinforcing or punishing effects (Corr, 2013). When behaviours are reinforced, it elicits hope or relief; conversely, punishment elicits fear or frustration. Through reinforcement, people are motivated to approach stimuli, whereas punishment motivates avoidant behaviour (Gray, 1975). It is evident that the co-activation of the BAS (approach) and FFFS (avoidance) create dissonance within an individual. The dissonance is generated from an individual experiencing two or more different motivations (Corr, 2013). This dissonance can become extremely overwhelming for an individual, and typically creates discomfort (Jeong et al., 2019). For example, if an individual is experiencing a perceived threat, but needs to approach it to diffuse the situation, that individual may experience a sense of uneasiness and great discomfort. Thus, understanding the neurobiological roots of behavioural systems is integral in understanding how people respond to certain stimuli.

Cognitive Dissonance Theory

The reinforcement sensitivity theory (RST) provides the foundation for cognitive dissonance theory (CDT). RST explains the fundamental, neurobiological reasonings behind activation systems and how people react to certain stimuli. As described by Gray, individuals who experience conflict with their motivations have an activated behavioural inhibition system (BIS) (Corr, 2013). Typically, this conflict is due to the FFFS (avoidance) and BAS (approach) cooccurring (Corr, 2013). When individuals hold two opposing motivations, they may experience discomfort (Jeong et al., 2019). These uncomfortable sensations create dissonance within the individual which is explained by the cognitive dissonance theory (CDT). In 1957,

Festinger developed the CDT which explains that decision making arouses dissonance, especially when making difficult choices, such as to approach or avoid particular stimuli (Harmon-Jones & Mills, 2019). Due to the increase in dissonance after a making a decision, people are motivated to reduce that dissonance. Decision making is explained here to illustrate how the exposure of two or more stimuli may create tension within an individual. CDT suggests that individuals cope with dissonance by either changing a behavioural cognitive element, changing an environmental cognitive element, or adding new cognitive elements (Jeong et al., 2019). To change a behavioural cognitive element, people may change their attitudes, behaviour, or beliefs. Although, people typically do not change their beliefs to adhere to the dissonant information; they often wait or seek beliefs that are congruent with their own (Harmon-Jones & Mills, 2019). For changing an environmental cognitive element, individuals typically avoid digesting heterogenous information (Jeong et al., 2019). Avoidance behaviours allow the individual to remove such opposing views from their life entirely (Harmon-Jones & Mills, 2019). Lastly, adding cognitive elements could be demonstrated by encouraging others to accept their beliefs (Jeong et al., 2019). If dissonance is not reduced, it can often lead to misinterpretation or misunderstanding. As demonstrated, there are several methods to reduce cognitive dissonance. Although, it is particularly important to investigate how people reduce their cognitive dissonance and discomfort by changing an environmental cognitive element. Changing environmental cognitive elements involves intentional avoidance which can often lead the individual to indulge in seclusion and isolation from heterogenous information.

Selective Avoidance

As described by both the reinforcement sensitivity theory (RST) and the cognitive dissonance theory (CDT), people are motivated to actively avoid conflicting motivations and

beliefs. These theories have alluded to the concept of 'selective avoidance'. Selective avoidance is inversely related to the phenomenon of 'selective exposure' where individuals gravitate toward information that is sympathetic and congruent to their existing beliefs to reduce cognitive dissonance (Skoric et al., 2018). On the other hand, selective avoidance is the propensity of an individual to shield oneself from dissenting views to avoid attitude-discrepant information (Zhu et al., 2016). Intentionally avoiding information that does not agree with one's beliefs is the process of changing an environmental cognitive element as discussed by the cognitive dissonance theory. Further, the terms selective avoidance and selective exposure are consistent with the acts of avoiding attitude-discrepant information and approaching attitude-consistent perspectives, respectively (Garrett et al., 2013; Song, 2017). It is important to distinguish attitude-discrepant and attitude-consistent information as they are not equivalent. Attitude-discrepant information elicits cognitive dissonance and exposes incongruities in one's beliefs (Garrett et al., 2013). Individuals search for ways to remove themselves from the dissenting information or ignore it. If the individual can successfully avoid the incongruence, they will experience relief and pleasure, thus activating their BAS system. Conversely, attitude-consistent information is passively accepted and increases one's cognitions of their original beliefs. They further experience a sense of validation and correctness in their views (Garrett et al., 2013). In all, people are motivated to reduce dissonance by seeking attitude-consistent information and avoiding attitude-discrepant information (Jang, 2014). Although both are important concepts to understand, there is a lack of research investigating individuals' behaviours to avoid attitude-discrepant information. Thus, the present study will focus on individuals' experiences with attitude-discrepant views, specifically on social media platforms.

Mass Communication and Social Media

It is obvious to say that mass communication technology has drastically changed over the past several years (Mutz & Young, 2011). Mass communication has evolved from radios, television, video, internet, and now social media (Harris & Sanbron, 2014). To illustrate mass communication clearly, it is a heterogenous, organizational media outlet that attracts large audiences (Harris & Sanbron, 2014). For example, social media has become a powerful communication medium that has had an incredible influence on businesses, advertising, and on the education sector (University of Canada West, n.d.). The power of social media has been perfectly demonstrated by the Amazon Rainforest fires. All it took to gain billions of people's attention about this catastrophe was one post, and soon enough, the news spread to countless social media platforms (University of Canada West, n.d.). Not only is social media used to facilitate connections and communication, but it is a way to stay informed and become educated on certain events. Social media is further used to communicate advertisements, movements, political elections, news, and even the global pandemic of the coronavirus.

Social media platforms facilitate the networking of connections and allows others to communicate in a convenient system (Jeong et al., 2019). Social media is seen to be more interactive than traditional networking methods as people have greater accessibility and freedom to share their own ideas. Moreover, it allows the creation and exchange of content (Bright et al., 2015). There are several reasons why people engage with social media, for some, it is the wish to consume entertainment, and for others, it is a way to stay informed about current events and social groups (Islam et al., 2020). In all, social media has now become an integral part of many lives and is always readily accessible (Jeong et al., 2019). Reportedly, in 2005, only five percent of adults in the United States used social media; this number has increased to 70 percent in 2019 and is only increasing (Allen, 2019; Pew Research Center, 2019). Most social media users are

represented by young adults; however, in recent years, older adults have increased their social media usage, even to those above 65 years old (Pew Research Center, 2019). Among these individuals in the United States, women are seen to use social media 13% more than men, and 73% of individuals who use social media are White; yet both Hispanic and Black individuals follow close behind with 70% and 69%, respectively. Based on education level, college graduates used social media the most in 2019 and those who completed some college work came in close second. Lastly, 76% of individuals who live in urban centres used social media compared to suburban (72%) and rural communities (66%) (Pew Research Center, 2019). Moreover, social media's influence and increase in usage over time has warranted further research.

Social media consists of platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, YouTube, Tik Tok, and others. These networking sites offer several ways for people to interact such as messaging, video calling, and sharing photos and news (Islam et al, 2020). It is easy for individuals to freely share their experiences, views, values, or beliefs. Social media permits the dissemination of heterogeneous information that can be posted to the public at wide. The mass production of heterogenous views can often create a social divide and polarization among social groups (Islam et al., 2020). Through social media, people have the liberty to decide what content they consume. For example, an individual who advocates for free education, may experience discomfort when they see information about paid private schools; thus, they may decide to unfollow, block, or mute this user. The liberty of content personalization and social relationships have become a leading concern as people may shield themselves from views dissimilar to their own and create homogenous, reinforcing environments of their personal beliefs (Jang, 2014). Excluding heterogenous opinions will accelerate polarization and fragmentation in society (Jang,

2014). Further, the access to copious amount of content and polarizations on social media can cause fatigue (Bright et al., 2015). It is important to discuss fatigue as it could contribute to selective avoidance on social media.

Social Media Fatigue

Although many individuals interact with social media, it appears that some platforms have reached their peak (Bright et al., 2015). For example, it has been observed that social media sites, such as Facebook, are being used less because of the overload of information. This phenomenon has been termed 'social media fatigue' (Bright et al., 2015). This fatigue is characterized by a loss of interest, burnout, boredom, and tiredness (Dai et al., 2020). Social media fatigue has been traced back to behavioural stress reactions, such as the overstimulation of the FFFS or BIS systems (Dhir et al., 2018). A common and supported explanation for social media fatigue is that people are experiencing an information overload. There are now numerous social media platforms, such as Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, YouTube, and Tik Tok to name a few. Thus, it is understandable that people become tired with consuming information all day over numerous platforms. According to the limited capacity model, people can only digest or consume a limited amount of information until they experience feelings of fatigue or burnout (Bright et al., 2015). In this case, individuals have a limited capacity in consuming social media content until they experience exhaustion. This can also result from the constant need to communicate with others through social media (Dhir et al., 2018). To cope with information overload, people may avoid particular information that is causing them to feel fatigued (Dai et al., 2020). During crisis situations, the amount of information being disseminated is unfathomable. People are constantly expressing their views and sharing information, regardless of it being factual. In the context of crises, people who feel overwhelmed with the amount of

information they are exposed to on social media may reduce their exposure by avoiding this information. Research studies have determined that Twitter users reduce their number of friends on this platform to deal with information overload (Dai et al., 2020). This is an act of selective avoidance where individuals are particular about who they follow, and with the overwhelming amount of information being consumed, they decide to limit this exposure through unfollowing/unfriending, blocking, and 'take a break'/muting (Dai et al., 2020; Zhu et al., 2016).

Selective Avoidance on Social Media

Cognitive dissonance theory (CDT) forms the foundation for selective avoidance behaviours and these reactions are seen across numerous social media platforms. Selective avoidance on social media involves actively removing unwanted content in the moment to reduce exposure in the future (Zhu et al., 2016). Before exploring the direct association between social media and selective avoidance, it is important to first understand how the contributing factors act alone. Social media platforms allow people to personalize and curate their feed which can contribute to homophily, echo-chambered environments (Skoric et al., 2018). Through filtering and content curation, people avoid dissenting information that does not adhere to their established beliefs. Once individuals personalize their social media feeds, they slowly immerse themselves into a social group that will agree and confirm their beliefs. Lastly, it is essential to discuss how polarized groups contribute to an out-group threat phenomenon.

Content Curation

There are many ways people can curate their content and it is as easy as the click of a button. If individuals disagree or experience incongruence with information they see online, they have the liberty to unfollow/unfriend that person, block them, or mute/hide their content. Cognitive dissonance theory has been extended to online communication platforms and explains

that when people were exposed to dissonant information on social media, they experienced negative emotions (Jeong et al., 2019). As a result, these individuals either sought information congruent with their beliefs or removed themselves from the situation. In another study, selective exposure increased when individuals were shown negative political information online (Jeong et al., 2019) This indicates that these individuals actively attended to information that was congruent with their beliefs to minimize their negative emotions (Jeong et al., 2019). The exposure to dissenting information can motivate selective avoidant behaviours and increase the tendency to control the exposure of unpleasant online content (Malinen et al., 2018).

Unfollowing/Blocking/Muting. People have the freedom on social media to personalize their content via unfollowing or unfriending, blocking, or muting and 'taking a break' from other users (Zhu et al., 2016). This behaviour reinforces the action of avoiding attitude-discrepant information. As described by Zhu et al. (2016), they classified two non-algorithmic methods that aid in selective avoidance: removal of content (hiding/muting content) and dissolution of social ties (unfriending/unfollowing) (Zhu et al., 2016). The removal of content is explained through hiding content via muting; dissolution of social ties is characterized by unfriending or unfollowing someone from social media. The present study includes the investigation of both methods but includes a third: blocking. Blocking is considered a more restrictive and preventative method of both dissolving social ties and removing unwanted content. It is more difficult to reverse the effects of blocking. For example, on Facebook, once you block and unblock someone, you are not automatically 'friends' again; the individual will have to send a friend or follow request. In addition, blocking is more intense than muting as one can go unnoticed if they mute another user; whereas for blocking, the other user is made aware that they have been blocked.

The increased filtering capacity on social media has made it incredibly easy to shield oneself from challenging information through the click of a button (Zhu et al., 2016). The Pew Research Center reported that 18% of social media users block, unfriend, or mute someone's posts for political reasons (Zhu et al., 2016). Of this 18%, 9% explained that they blocked, unfriended, or muted other's content because they disagreed with their political posts. Based on political conflict, people unfriended other users on Facebook who posted information that was incongruent with their own beliefs (John & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015). Typically, people who are politically engaged or ideologically extreme are the ones who unfriend or unfollow people for their dissenting views (Skoric et al., 2018; Zhu et al., 2016). Although these examples refer to politics, they effectively demonstrate how conflict is handled on social media. Many individuals who gather information from social media, may not want to consume information that challenges their beliefs. When individuals feel challenged, they may take actions to reduce this dissonance or conflict, such as unfollowing, blocking, or muting. Further, individuals who are strongly and frequently involved in social media, especially on controversial topics, are the ones who experience an accelerated rate of cognitive dissonance (Jeong et al., 2019). Thus, these individuals would be highly motivated to reduce these negative emotions by either removing the content or dissolving social ties. In addition, most people on Facebook have casual friends which are considered weak ties. Having weak ties creates an environment where unfriending and unfollowing is relatively easy and as a result, are disconnected at a higher rate (John & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015; Zhu et al., 2016). Research has demonstrated that weak ties are most susceptible to dissolution on Facebook (John & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015).

Weak Ties. Social media has the ability to reach individuals across the world, thus it is incredibly easy to befriend or follow thousands of people. For example, Instagram allows users

to follow up to 7,500 accounts (Instagram, n.d.). Due to the minimal likelihood that individuals share close interpersonal relationships with everyone they follow, it is inevitable there are more causal relationships than strong ones. For example, 95% of people's connections on Facebook are casual friends (Zhu et al., 2016). Thus, most of the information people consume are from these weak ties (Hristova, et al., 2014). If individuals have more weak social ties, they are more likely to be exposed to heterogenous information and diversity (Hristova, et al., 2014). Research has shown that weak ties are prone to dissolution on Facebook (Zhu et al., 2016). Since most social media connections come from weak ties, it is easy for individuals to remove content or dissolve the "following" or "friendship". Weak ties aid and often enhance the selective avoidance phenomenon leading individuals to avoid unwanted content. Not only are individuals responsible for avoiding dissenting information, but social media platforms also contribute to selective avoidance. These platforms have recommendation and algorithm systems that automatically filter a user's content (Skoric et al., 2018).

Recommendation Systems. Social media platforms have algorithms or recommendation systems that curate an individuals' content (Skoric et al., 2018). Algorithms only recommend information that is consistent with one's views so people will like or agree with the content (Skoric et al., 2018). To increase social media engagement for the purpose of online businesses, advertising, and engagement, algorithms will only suggest information that the individual may prefer. Among Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, these platforms have a slightly different approach to social engagement and thus their predictive algorithm systems differ. In all, algorithms facilitate an individual's content by examining previous online interactions and producing suggestive content (Cinelli et al., 2020). These algorithms accumulate small interactional data into mathematical databases that evaluate one's likes, comments, views, and

shares (Cohen, 2018). In addition, these databases identify how long one spends watching a video, whether they choose to 'swipe up' on someone's link, whether they have interacted with certain content, and more (Bakshy et al., 2015; Cohen, 2018). Thus, the data that is collected will trigger recommendation systems and suggest information that the user is likely to choose or interact with (Cohen, 2018). In these systems, they will recommend other users to follow or befriend based on similar interests, mutual friends, and interactions with content. Moreover, these recommendation systems examine every social interaction, from miniscule to significant, and will produce content that is likely to adhere with one's beliefs. These algorithms produce a reinforcing pattern of attitude-consistent ecosystems that bring other like-minded individuals together. Due to algorithms producing content that is consistent with one's beliefs, it can easily create polarization between other social groups (Cinelli et al., 2020; Skoric et al., 2018).

Polarization

It is evident that people try to avoid information that does not adhere to their personal conceptions. Now, with social media, the ability to curate what you see and are exposed to is readily accessible. Through the influence of content personalization and recommendation systems, social polarization is created among the public. With the evolution in technology, polarizations have magnified and are now evident on all social media platforms. Social polarization occurs when individuals only hold preferred beliefs and shield themselves from inconsistent or opposing views (Park et al., 2018). Not only is polarization due to selective avoidance, but the filtering algorithm in all platforms intensify this fragmentation. Polarization among social groups can be visualized in terms of social cohesion where shared communication consists of congruent and agreeable views (Park et al., 2018).

Polarization encompasses several terms that illustrate secluded viewpoints: ‘homophily’, ‘echo-chambers’, and ‘daily me’. Homophily refers to the tendency to surround oneself with people who confirm their perspectives (Gillani et al., 2018; Park et al., 2018). In homophily groups, echo-chambers are the outcome of sharing only supportive and validating information relevant to the group’s beliefs (John & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015; Park et al., 2018). This can be simply illustrated through an echo; if one outwardly voices their belief, they will hear this same belief being repeated back to them. This repetition leads to a reinforcing behaviour of seeking confirmation and attitude-consistent information. Lastly, ‘daily me’ exacerbates homophily groups and echo-chambers by personalizing social media content (Park et al., 2018). When individuals unfollow, block, or mute someone, they are surging the echo-chamber and homophily effect. Thus, they are contributing to selective avoidance and are actively sheltering themselves from opposing views. Homophily, echo-chambers, and daily me are interrelated terms that enhance social polarization, especially on social media platforms. Another concept that plays a vital role in polarization on social media is confirmation bias (Del Vicario et al., 2017).

Confirmation Bias. Confirmation bias is another phenomenon that enhances social fragmentation and polarization (Del Vicario et al., 2017). Confirmation bias is the process of acquiring information that validates one’s existing beliefs and avoids dissenting information (Del Vicario et al., 2017). This bias is highly related to Festinger’s cognitive dissonance theory where people prefer information congruent to their conceptions over information that challenges them (Knobloch-Westerwick et al., 2017). Research indicates that the increasing use of social media results in individuals seeking information that aligns with their beliefs. From a social identity perspective, individuals who isolate themselves with certain information are likely to perceive

themselves as part of an ingroup (Knobloch-Westerwick et al., 2017). These ingroups tend to hold strong biases of their own values and despise information posed by anyone in an out-group. These conceptions of group identity contribute to social polarization and may result in perceived threats; people of an ingroup may perceive a threat from those in an out-group.

Out-Group Threat

When individuals avoid attitude-discrepant information, they actively create polarization between themselves and those who take on the opposing view. This polarization creates distinct homophily groups consisting of people who share similar perspectives (Gillani et al., 2018; Park et al., 2018). Individuals who share similar beliefs tend to categorize themselves into groups, where they are a part of an in-group and others are in an out-group (Knobloch-Westerwick et al., 2017). In-groups consist of individuals who identify with each other based on a variety of factors (University of Texas, n.d.). For example, people that are of the same gender, race, or religion are a part of an in-group. Conversely, people of an out-group will have different beliefs or values. The tendency to distinguish oneself from an in-group or out-group has significant moral implications. Not only do individuals express favouritism towards their group to increase their self-esteem, but they also may experience a desire to inflict harm on members in an out-group (Knobloch-Westerwick et al., 2017; University of Texas, n.d.). The phenomenon of an in-group and out-group threat is rooted from the realistic group conflict theory (Riek et al., 2006). This theory explains that a competition of scarce resources, conflict in values, and a deterioration of physical and economic well-being is significantly related to in-group and out-group hostility (Riek et al., 2006). This explains that in the case of a crisis, people's in-group and out-group tendencies are intensified and will create greater polarizations between the groups.

During enhanced levels of conflict and threat for survival, an individual's fight-flight-freeze system (FFFS) activates, which is explained through the reinforcement sensitivity theory (Corr, 2013). Perceived out-group threats are responded to in similar ways; individuals of the in-group feel their views are threatened and that they must protect themselves from inconsistent information. This protective behaviour could lead individuals to flee from the information and further encourage selective avoidance behaviours. Zhu et al. (2016) explains that people who have a high level of threat sensitivity are likely to perceive dissonant or attitude-discrepant information as a threat to their established beliefs. Thus, they are more likely to avoid challenging information to maintain strong self-esteem and integrity within their group.

As discussed, social media has become an integral component of many lives. The ease and accessibility of communication has made social media become a 'psychological necessity' for emotional expression and decompression (Singh et al., 2020). Through this, polarization is created between groups which contribute to selective avoidance behaviours such as unfollowing, blocking, or muting others. Although these behaviours are concerning on their own, this concern rapidly increases in the context of global health crises. The global health crisis this study is particularly concerned about is the coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19). Through this pandemic thus far, there have been two distinct groups: those who identify and believe the information released by the government and health officials, and those who do not. For example, there have been polarizing opinions of mask wearing, vaccinations, and if COVID-19 is real and a health concern. Some individuals abide by the regulations and mandates of mask-wearing, whereas some individuals refuse to wear a mask and claim it is prohibiting their freedom and that it is a form of abuse (Kornik, 2020). These opinions have extended beyond social media and have even participated with street protests (Kornik, 2020).

In the light of content curation, unfollowing/blocking/muting behaviours, weak ties, confirmation bias, and out-group threat in the context of the global pandemic of COVID-19, I suspect that COVID-19 related social media use will be positively associated with selective avoidance. Again, COVID-19 related social media use is defined as the exposure and engagement with information about COVID-19 on social media platforms. Further, perceived out-group threat may strengthen the positive relationship between COVID-19-related social media use and selective avoidance.

For a visual illustration of these predicted relationships, please refer to Figure 1.

Coronavirus Pandemic

The public health crisis of coronavirus (COVID-19), a respiratory pathogen, first originated in Wuhan, China in December of 2019 (WHO, 2020). In January of 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the coronavirus an international public health emergency (Koushik, 2020). As of November 2021, the coronavirus pandemic has spread to 253.3 million people across the world resulting in 5.1 million deaths (BBC News, 2020). This has caused a worldwide crisis where countries were forced to lock-down and quarantine to minimize the spread. As of yet, this pandemic has now dominated the world for nearly two years and the panic has not settled. Every day, there are government regulations being announced and updated; new protocols, new restrictions, new mandates. Needless to say, this pandemic has caused mental health issues to rise as people have lost their jobs, businesses, opportunities, loved ones, and more. Not only are people grieving with loss, but they are dealing with unprecedented demands and uncertainty about the future. Cities, provinces, states, and countries have and are declaring states of emergencies. Panic and uncertainty are filling the air. People were instructed to stay home, maintain social distancing of 6-feet, and were mandated to wear masks in certain regions.

This crisis pandemic has caused immense stress and anxiety around the world. With overwhelming uncertainty and panic, it is essential individuals adopt coping strategies. Although, the question is, how are people coping?

Coping

During any crisis situation, people adopt coping strategies. Coping may look different for everyone; some may engage in self-care, others may rely on substances, such as alcohol. Although, with the increased accessibility of communication, social media has become a main source for emotional expression (Singh et al., 2020). With social distancing protocols in place, people have been resorting to social media platforms to connect with others. Social media has now become a 'psychological necessity' where people can engage in human interaction and decompress with others (Singh et al., 2020). Social media platforms have provided individuals with opportunities to disseminate their views and has helped normalized distress through COVID-19. Not only has social media served as a support system for individuals through COVID-19, but it has also been an educational source of information regarding COVID-19 news and issues (Taylor et al., 2020). From the perspective of cognitive-behavioural models, fear about COVID-19 leads to information checking on related issues which can intensify perceived threats and exposure to unwanted information (Taylor et al., 2020). The coronavirus pandemic is not the only health crisis that has used social media; other health crises such as the Haiyan Typhoon and the Zika virus have also resorted to social media for support and information checking (Gui et al., 2017; Tandoc & Takahashi, 2017).

Previous Crisis Situations. In the case of Typhoon Haiyan in 2013, one of the strongest storms ever recorded devastated the Philippines (Tandoc & Takahashi, 2017). Over 1.1 million homes were destroyed, and 6,200 people lost their lives. Evidently, it was through Facebook

where survivors found support; this became a main coping strategy where people could share their story (Tandoc & Takahashi, 2017). Although the coronavirus pandemic was not the cause of a natural disaster, it shares resemblance to this Typhoon as they are both categorized as crises that have caused physical and mental harm. The coping strategy identified in the case of the Typhoon demonstrates the dependence on social media as a coping mechanism. People find comfort in receiving online social support, especially if other venues are inaccessible (Tandoc & Takahashi, 2017).

The Zika virus, although less threatening than the coronavirus, is still a health threat where individuals find support and updated information on social media platforms. The Zika virus particularly concerns pregnant woman as the virus can be passed through to a woman's fetus and cause birth defects (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, n.d.). In 2016, it was reported that Zika had infected 36,512 individuals in the US Territories alone (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, n.d.). The research investigating the relationship of social media on Zika have identified that individuals turned to social media for information and coping. In particular, these individuals sought out Zika-related information on social media that eventually guided their decision-making processes (Gui et al., 2017). In all, social media platforms have become a means of community and connection among global health crises (Gui et al., 2017).

Infodemic

Although social media facilitates connection and communication, it has resulted in a significant source of misinformation on COVID-19, a phenomenon now termed an 'infodemic' (Cinelli et al., 2020; Islam et al., 2020). To understand this phenomenon, it is important to distinguish between misinformation, disinformation, and information. Misinformation is defined as false, inaccurate information without intention to mislead, whereas disinformation is the

deliberate spread of false information with the intention to mislead and deceive. (Tudjman & Mikelic, 2003). Conversely, information is termed as factual and valid (Tudjman & Mikelic, 2003). There is a common concern that social media is a dumping ground for both factual and non-factual information. There is an overwhelming amount of information being disseminated on social media sites, and it can be difficult for the public to differentiate what is true or not. Unfortunately, polarization easily proliferates non-factual information and is suspected to spread faster than evidence-based information (John & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015). This is of particular concern as just in the United States, 72% of adults use social media and are susceptible to misinformation (Clement, 2020; Pew Research Center, 2019). This becomes significantly important in health crises where misinformation is plentiful and the confidence in credible information is scarce.

An 'infodemic' has been termed to represent the perils of misinformation during crisis situations (Cinelli et al., 2020; Islam et al., 2020). This term was coined to illustrate the phenomenon of misinformation during pandemics (Cinelli et al., 2020). Social media amplifies the spread of misinformation (Islam et al., 2020). Specifically, misinformation and conspiracy theories are easily and rapidly proliferated on Facebook and Twitter (Goreis & Kothgassner, 2020). It has been reported that 42% of people who share content have admitted they have shared misinformation before (Islam et al., 2020). The abundance of vague information circling around COVID-19 has led to an increase in anxiety and misinformation sharing (Islam et al., 2020). The surplus of misinformation has become a serious issue among the coronavirus pandemic; social media platforms provide access to an overwhelming amount of information that may surge the spread of rumours or alternative theories (Cinelli et al., 2020). Rumours, stigma, and conspiracy theories about the origin of COVID-19, its threat, and mortality have been a result of this

infodemic. Especially during uncertain times and in the midst of vague information, individuals are likely to believe in conspiracy theories (Goreis & Kothgassner, 2020). For example, rumours about eating garlic, avoiding spicy foods, and even drinking bleach or spraying chlorine were among the highest reported rumours to prevent infection of COVID-19 (Islam et al., 2020). Rumours can undermine the confidence and trust in government health agencies who produce evidence-based, factual information (Islam et al., 2020). Stigma has been another result of misinformation. Asians and Asian Americans have experienced racists attacks and discrimination from the coronavirus (Lee & Waters, 2020). From the United States alone, there were nearly 1,900 racial attacks toward Asian Americans between March 19 and May 13, 2020 (Lee & Waters, 2020). This discrimination was only intensified when the ex-president of the United States, Donald Trump, called the virus the "Chinese virus"; this fed the perception that the physical health of Americans was threatened by individuals who were Asian (Lee & Waters, 2020). This stigmatization extended further to inflict physical racial attacks and harassment towards Asians and Asian Americans (Islam et al., 2020). Conspiracy theories were also circulating through the misinformation. Some people believed that COVID-19 was a bioweapon and was created by the government. Another theory was that the ex-president of the United States, Donald Trump, targeted the city with coronavirus to damage culture (Islam et al., 2020). Through this, it is clear that misinformation has tragic effects on human wellbeing and can lead to intensified, polarized views.

Misinformation greatly affects people's reactions and alters the effectiveness of credible information (Cinelli et al., 2020). An 'infodemic' is amplified through social media; social media provides endless opportunities to share information, whether that is real or fake (Islam et al., 2020). Understanding how social media is connected to the spread of misinformation may give

insight into how people behave and respond to world health crises. The overabundance of vague information has exacerbated people's anxiety and will greatly affect people's behaviour, both on social media and in their daily lives (Islam et al., 2020). 'Infodemic' is not a new term; it has been used to describe the abundance of misinformation among other public health crises, such as the Ebola and SARS outbreak. Misinformation during the Ebola outbreak in the Democratic Republic of Congo was associated with violence, targeted attacks on healthcare workers, mistrust and social disturbances (Islam et al., 2020). Specifically, during the SARS outbreak in China, the infodemic led people to stigmatize Asians. It is clear that misinformation is a significant concern that can result in long-lasting consequences. An infodemic is a powerful, yet detrimental consequence on public health crises that can persist for long periods of time (Kim et al., 2020). With the overwhelming amount of misinformation on COVID-19, it is inevitable that some individuals will or have disagreed with information presented.

Avoiding COVID-19

Early in the pandemic, Kim et al. (2020) explored the phenomenon of misinformation on COVID-19. This research explains that misinformation can encourage individuals to seek attitude-consistent information on concerns that are suspected to be false. These individuals will consult with their homophily group and continue to search until they receive validation. Further, once individuals experience an echo-chamber with their existing beliefs about COVID-19, it can become even more difficult to rectify the misinformation. In another health context, Kim et al. (2020) explains that misinformation about AIDS/HIV was positively associated with selective avoidance behaviours. This indicates that from a previous health crisis, people were selective with the information they consumed and intentionally avoided information that was not consistent with their established beliefs. As discussed, another concern with misinformation and

COVID-19 is social media fatigue. Social media fatigue is characterized by the overload of information on social media causing exhaustion and burnout (Bright et al., 2015). Individuals all over the world were flooded with information regarding COVID-19. It became a place for people to stay informed and updated with the new regulations and mandates. Over time, it can be suspected that people may become overwhelmed with the constant overflow of information and misinformation about COVID-19. In addition, this fatigue may encourage the engagements of selective avoidance behaviours, such that they are tired of being exposed to COVID-19 related posts.

On top of avoiding attitude-discrepant beliefs, people who are insular about certain beliefs are more likely to be a member of an in-group who dismisses information posed by anyone in an out-group. Greenaway & Cruwys (2018) explain that although intergroup threats increase trust and cooperation within the group, they tend to undermine out-group threats. Thus, people who identify themselves in an in-group may turn away from COVID-19 related information that does not adhere with their views. Further, these individuals may believe that those who possess opposing views to their own, should be punished or dismissed (Greenaway & Cruwys, 2018). During COVID-19, there is a particular group-based affect where individuals have a positive sentiment for their own group and a negative sentiment for those identifying in an out-group (Zhu et al., 2016). With COVID-19 related issues, there has been particular conflict in ideas about mask-wearing, the origin of COVID-19, and the associated threat level; these concerns are facilitated on social media.

There is a significant gap in this literature as most research of this kind has focused on selective avoidance behaviours during political movements, not during global health crises. In addition, most research has solely focused on Facebook as their main social media platform. To

bridge this gap, the present study will explore the engagements of selective avoidance on multiple social media platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter regarding information related to the coronavirus pandemic. As well, the present study will investigate perceived out-group threat on the relationship between selective avoidance and COVID-19-related social media use.

Purpose

The present study extends the results of Zhu et al. (2016) who investigated selective avoidance on social media during the political protests of the Hong Kong Umbrella Movement in 2014. In this study, Zhu et al. (2016) found that 15.6% of their participants removed content or unfriended someone on Facebook during the protests. Further, they found that perceived out-group threat strengthened the positive relationship between selective avoidance and protest-related social media use. Like Zhu et al. (2016), most researchers have investigated this phenomenon in political contexts. There is a significant dearth of research on selective avoidance in crisis contexts, specifically during the global health crisis of COVID-19. In light of all of this information, it is important to understand the relatively new concept of selective avoidance and its role on social media amidst the global pandemic of COVID-19. Specifically, this study aims to explore how COVID-19 impacts selective avoidance behaviours on social media and if perceived out-group threat impacts the relationship between selective avoidance and COVID-19-related social media use. In particular, I will be investigating selective avoidance behaviours of unfollowing/unfriending, blocking, and 'taking a break'/muting content on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter regarding information about COVID-19. I predict that COVID-19-related social media use is positively associated with selective avoidance and that perceived out-group threat

strengthens this positive relationship. Thus, the present study poses two major research questions:

- (RQ1) How has COVID-19-related social media use impacted selective avoidance?
- (RQ2) Does perceived out-group threat affect selective avoidance and COVID-19 social media use?

CHAPTER 3: Method

The present study is a cross-sectional, non-parametric, quantitative study that investigates selective avoidance and perceived out-group threat on social media during the global pandemic of COVID-19. This study was conducted in an online format to effectively reach the representative and appropriate audience. In addition, due to the coronavirus pandemic surging in cases and remaining a serious health concern, it was necessary to avoid face-to-face contact at this time. An online format for this research study allowed the researcher to obtain secure data in a timely manner and allowed the targeted population to complete the survey from anywhere in the world with an internet connection.

Participants

For the present study, participants were recruited using a nonprobability, convenience sampling technique. Convenience sampling allowed the researcher to select a sample that was suitable and fit the purpose of the study. The sample was acquired from the University of Lethbridge's SONA system and through the online social media platforms of Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. In particular, the survey link was posted to the University of Lethbridge student page, MacEwan University Student Experience page, University of Calgary student page, University of Alberta student page, and the Facebook pages of the New York Times, Daily Mail,

CBC News, and Fox News. My request to post this survey on the MacEwan University Study Experience page was accepted. The survey was also be posted in the comments sections of these university and news pages. Since Instagram does not allow posts from outside users, the researcher posted the survey link on her personal page by attaching it to her bio and posting to her Instagram stories. In addition, the survey was posted on the primary researchers' Twitter and Facebook account and communicated through word of mouth. The survey link directed participants to complete the online survey through a survey software company called Qualtrics. Participants recruited through SONA received a 1% credit for their participation. The credit was granted once participation was indicated on SONA. The purpose for selecting these social media pages as well as word of mouth was to reach a broad audience. This undoubtedly reached more student populations because the survey was posted on the University of Lethbridge's SONA system and the primary researcher had studied at several of the selected universities. Although, the study aimed to collect data from both students and non-students.

For the purpose of ethical considerations and legal guidelines, all participants recruited through SONA were 17 years or older, and anyone recruited outside of SONA (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Word of Mouth), were 18 years or older. All gender identifications were considered. To obtain a large sample size, the study aimed to collect 200 participants. Although the goal was to recruit 200 participants, the survey did not have a maximum threshold or capacity. Thus, the number of participants for this study surpassed 200 and more were encouraged.

Measures

The cross-sectional, non-parametric, quantitative study was disseminated online. The 74-item survey was created and disseminated through the online survey software program,

Qualtrics. The survey is a novel questionnaire that was created by the researcher to appropriately assess the relevant elements of selective avoidance and perceived out-group threat. The present survey was created as there is a significant gap in the literature regarding selective avoidance on social media during the coronavirus pandemic. There is an absence of existing scales or surveys regarding this research topic. During the literature review, the researcher was inspired by certain elements from previous studies investigating selective avoidance during political movements. The researcher considered these elements and transformed them to suit the purpose of the present study. On top of that, the researcher added their own questions that were deemed necessary.

Demographics. The first section of the study consists of eight demographical questions that address age, gender identification, ethnicity, working status, education level, and area of residence. The participants were asked to identity their age group from the following options: 17-25, 26-33, 34-41, 42-49, 50-57, 58-65, 66+. They were then asked to identify what gender they identify with from the options of man, woman, transgender, non-binary, other, or prefer not to say. Following, participants indicated which ethnicity they identify with from the options of Indigenous, Asian, Black, Hispanic or Latino, Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, Caucasian, or Mixed ethnicity. Following, they were asked to indicate their working status from fully employed, part-time employed, unemployed, student, to prefer not to say. The next question asked participants to select what level of education they have acquired from the options of elementary school level or less, high-school diploma, college diploma, undergraduate degree, master's degree, or doctoral degree. Further, participants were asked to indicate if they are currently in school and if so, at which level (i.e., high school, college, university, masters, doctoral, not currently in school, other). Next, participants were asked to indicate their current area of residence via open textbox. Lastly, participants were asked to indicate if they live in

urban or rural environments ranging between a large urban city of over 100,000 people, medium sized city between 30,000 to 99,999 people, small town with the population between 1,000 to 29,999, or a rural town of less than 1,000 people. These demographic questions gave insight into which populations are more likely to engage in selective avoidance behaviours and experience out-group threat on social media during the coronavirus pandemic.

Out-Group Threat. The second section of this quantitative measure explored perceived outgroup threat of COVID-19. Individuals who perceive themselves in the in-group are expected to show strong opinions against views that conflict their in-group beliefs. During COVID-19, there has been a significant group-effect. There are individuals who believe the government and health ministers (e.g., mask wearing reduces the spread, the virus originated in Wuhan, China from a wet market, the virus is a serious health concern, the vaccine will reduce the spread), and there are individuals who go against this information (e.g., masks are a form of abuse and take away individual freedom, the virus was created by the government, the virus is not a serious health concern). Thus, the survey asked 12 questions that gave insight into people's opinions about COVID-19. First, the participants were asked to indicate their level of agreeableness from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 5 (s*trongly disagree*) on the following statements: COVID-19 is believed to have originated in Wuhan, China from a wet market (i.e., seafood, meat, poultry, and live animal market) and interactions with bats, wearing masks help limit the spread of COVID-19, the COVID-19 is a serious societal and public health concern, and the vaccine for COVID-19 will reduce the spread of the virus. These four questions set the stage and gave the researcher insight into the participants group identity, being either in-group or out-group threat. The following four questions explored the participants level of agreeableness from 1 (*strongly* agree) to 5 (*strongly* disagree) with the following statements: People who do not wear masks are a threat to society

and public health; People who believe COVID-19 is not a serious health concern are a threat to society and public health; People who believe COVID-19 came from something else other than a wet market are a threat to society and public health (e.g., the government created the virus, the virus was created as a weapon, etc. (e.g., the government created the virus, the virus was created as a weapon, etc.); People who believe the COVID-19 vaccine will not be effective are a threat to society and public health. These questions categorized individuals into one group. On the other hand, the next four questions explore opinions from the other stance: People who wear masks are a threat to society and public health; People who believe COVID-19 is a serious health concern are a threat to society and public health; People who believe COVID-19 came from a wet market (i.e., seafood, meat, poultry, and live animal market) in Wuhan, China are a threat to society and public health; People who believe the COVID-19 vaccine will be effective are a threat to society and public health. Including questions from both sides of people's opinions will reduce biased questioning and give more evidence if people experience a threat toward out-group views. Moreover, these series of questions will distinctly separate participants into two groups: those who believe credible information and will follow mandates (e.g., mask wearing, believing health ministers), and those who do not. Through these groups, it provided insight into whether people experience a group effect and perceive a threat towards their personal beliefs. Further, these questions, combined with the remaining study informed the researcher if out-group threat strengthens the relationship between selective avoidance and COVID-19-related social media use.

Frequency of Social Media Use. The next section of the study consists of 19 questions that explored how often participants use the social media platforms of Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Participants were first asked to indicate all of the social media platforms they have

currently signed into at least once every 6 months from Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, or Other (e.g., TikTok, Snapchat, VSCO, Reddit, etc.). Following, they were asked to indicate which social media platform out of Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, or Other (e.g., TikTok, Snapchat, etc.) they use most, or if they use the platforms more or less equally. Following there are four questions that individually ask how frequently they use Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, or Other from 1 (*more than once per day*) to 5 (*never*), or 6 (*N/A*). Further, participants were asked a series of nine questions that address social media engagement regarding COVID-19-related issues. For example, participants were asked to indicate how often they receive information about COVID-19, post information about COVID-19, how often they share/re-tweet/repost friend's and/or news agencies' posts about COVID-19, and how often they comment, express views, or engage in debates about COVID-19 across Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Participants were able to respond on a 5-item Likert type scale ranging from 1 (*more than once per day*) to 5 (*never*), or 6 (*N/A*). The last question in this section evaluates social media fatigue. It asked participants to indicate 1 (*yes*), 2 (*maybe*), or 3 (*no*) if they have experienced burnout, exhaustion, or tiredness from seeing COVID-19 information on social media. This question specifically evaluates whether people have experienced social media fatigue during the COVID-19 pandemic. In all, these questions provide the basis in understanding the participants level and frequency of social media use. Further, it also allowed the researcher to gauge how often participants engage in social media activity regarding COVID-19 issues. For an exhaustive list of the questions included in this survey, please refer to Appendix A.

Selective Avoidance & Weak Ties. The following section of the study consists of 27 questions that investigated engagements of unfollowing/unfriending, blocking, and muting/taking a break from content on social media. Additionally, this section evaluated weak

ties by exploring the strength of relationships between the individuals they unfollowed/unfriended, blocked, or muted/took a break. These questions will give insight into how people are responding to information about COVID-19 on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter.

Next, there are three individual subsections that consist of eight multiple-choice answers and one open-ended response, divided by unfollowing/unfriending, blocking, and muting/taking a break. The first question asked participants, before COVID-19, how often would they unfriend or unfollow someone on Facebook, Instagram, or Twitter. Next, they were asked, how often they have unfriended/unfollowed someone on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter because of COVID-19-related issues. Participants replied with 1 (*more than once a day*) to 7 (*never*). All questions were individually separated by social media platform (e.g., one question regarding Facebook, one with Instagram, and one with Twitter). Further, participants were asked to describe the reason why they unfriended or unfollowed someone on social media due to COVID-19 issues, if they did. This question remains open-ended to gather rich, descriptive information about the reasoning for unfollowing and unfriending behaviour. Participants were then asked to indicate the strength of the relationship between themselves and the person they unfollowed or unfriended from 1 (*very strong*) to 5 (*very* weak). Lastly, participants were asked to indicate if they feel they are unfollowing/unfriending people on social media more during COVID-19 from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 5 (*strongly disagree*). The second and third subsections follow the same format of eight multiple choice questions and one open-ended question. However, the second subsection asked about how often the participant would block someone before COVID-19 and how often they would block someone because of COVID-19-related issues. The open-ended response provides space for the participant to explain why they blocked someone because of

COVID-19 issues. Again, participants were asked to indicate the strength of the relationship they had with the person they blocked and indicate if they feel they are blocking people on social media more during COVID-19. The third subsection asked how often the participant would mute or take a break from someone's content before COVID-19 and because of COVID-19-related issues. Participants were asked to further expand on why they muted or took a break from someone's content due to COVID-19-related issues, indicate the strength of the relationship between them and the person they muted/took a break from, and if they feel they are muting/taking a break from people more during COVID-19. These questions explored how often individuals engage in selective avoidance behaviours on the various social media platforms: Facebook, Instagram, Twitter. Further, these questions indicated whether the individuals they selectively avoid are weak or strong ties and explore the reasons for unfollowing, blocking, and muting behaviours. Identifying the reasons for selective avoidance behaviours may contribute to future research.

Strength of Beliefs. This next section of the online-based survey evaluated the strength of people's beliefs and opinions through seven multiple choice questions. The first question in this series asked participants to select from the list provided, what they would do if they disagreed with someone's COVID-19-related posts on social media. They had the option to select more than one answer: unfollow/unfriend, block, mute or take a break, do nothing, or other, allowing them to expand on their answer. Next, participants were asked if they were to unfollow/unfriend, block, or mute/take a break from someone on one social media platform (e.g., Facebook), would they do the same to their other platforms (e.g., Instagram, Twitter). Further, another question asked participants to indicate how often they see content about COVID-19 on social media ranging from 1 (*always*) to 4 (*never*). The next three questions cover the

strengthening of opinions on social media. One question asked participants if they have ever found themselves in an argument about COVID-19 issues with another social media user from 1 (*definitely yes*) to 5 (*definitely not*). In addition, another question asked the participant to indicate if they have strong opinions about COVID-19 content they see on social media from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 5 (*strongly disagree*). Further, they were asked if they were to see content that is consistent with their beliefs, would it strengthen their views, ranging from 1 (*yes*), 2 (*maybe*), and 3 (*no*). Lastly, participants were asked how often they see content on social media that is similar to each other. Participants answered between 1 (*never – my social media is constantly showing me different content*) to 4 (*always – my social media always shows me similar content*). For a clear illustration of these questions, please refer to Appendix A.

Procedure

The Qualtrics survey link was distributed to the identified online pages for participants recruitment, such as Facebook news and university pages, and on the primary researcher's personal Facebook, Instagram stories and Twitter feed. Once participants were recruited, they were directed to the online consent form that described the essential details of the study and confidentiality. Once the participant agreed to partake in the online study, they were guided to complete the 74-item survey that took approximately 15-20 minutes. Once the participants completed the online survey, they were debriefed and informed about the true purpose of the study. Once the survey had obtained data saturation, over approximately four weeks, the survey became inactive and thus terminated any further participation. The data was then exported from Qualtrics into SPSS for further statistical analysis. In SPSS, the data was reviewed to ensure that any participant data that was deemed incomplete, was discarded. For example, if a participant only completed half of the study, their data was removed as it was not coherent or representative

of the greater population who completed the full or at least 70% of the study. Since the study was anonymous, no identifying information was collected and was not used for dissemination purposes. Additionally, only aggregate data was reported (i.e., tallies and open-ended response themes). Once the initial review and removal of inadequate data was completed, the researcher analyzed the data.

CHAPTER 4: Analysis

Analytic Plan

Since the present study is quantitative and did not meet the assumptions of normality, non-parametric analyses were used to analyze the data. There are two main assumptions of normality: (1) the means of the sample group must be normally distributed, and (2) assumption of equal variance indicating that variances of the sample and the population are equal (Nahm, 2016). To test for normality and assess the assumptions, it was evident that the distribution of the sample was skewed, indicating a non-normal distribution. Since the assumptions of normality were not met, parametric techniques could not be used thereby leaving non-parametric techniques to analyze the data (Nahm, 2016). It is important to note that since this study was cross-sectional, it captured a single snapshot in time, meaning the population is representative at the specific time the survey was deployed. In analyzing the data, only those questions regarding selective avoidance behaviours (e.g., unfollowing, blocking, muting), perceived threat, and posting and sharing information were selected for analysis and reported in this document. In particular, the researcher used descriptive statistics and correlational analyses. For descriptive statistics, the researcher produced the mean and standard deviations from the demographic information to determine the most common age range, gender, ethnicity, working status, education completed, current level of school, area of residence, and urban or rural environment

that has tendencies to engage in selective avoidance behaviours on social media. Further, descriptive statistics were used to examine the measures of out-group threat, frequency of social media use, selective avoidance and weak ties, and strength of beliefs.

Spearman correlational analyses were used to investigate selective avoidance and perceived out-group threat on social media during COVID-19. Specifically, correlations were produced to assess the relationship between selective avoidance and COVID-19 social media use and whether perceived out-group threat affected this relationship. To explore predictive relationships among core themes of discussion, Somers' Delta (Somers' D), was used. Somers' D was computed to identify explanatory relationships between the survey questions of burnout on social media, unfriending/unfollowing, 'taking a break' behaviours, perceived threat, and posting COVID-19 information on social media. Lastly, categorical themes were created using frequency counts for open-ended responses to evaluate the reasons for unfollowing/unfriending, blocking, and muting others on social media. These analyses allowed the researcher to evaluate their hypotheses and predictions.

Data Cleaning. Prior to data analysis, fifty-two participants were excluded as they did not complete more than 70% of the survey.

Bivariate Correlations. To assess correlations between selective avoidance and COVID-19 social media use, and out-group threat on the relationship, Spearman's rank correlation coefficients were computed (Spearman, 1910). Spearman's correlation is a non-parametric measure that assesses the strength and direction between two variables (Statistics Laerd, 2021). Spearman correlations can be measured on original, interval, or ratio scales, rather than on raw data; ordinal variables include Likert-type scales (e.g., 5-point scale ranging from "strongly agree" to "strong disagree"). Unlike Pearson correlations assessing a linear relationship,

Spearman correlations assess the monotonic relationship. A monotonic relationship can hold correlation coefficient values ranging between +1 and -1. A perfect monotone relationship is illustrated by +1 where one variable increases, the other variable increases. Conversely, -1 indicates a fully opposed observation where one variable increases, the other decreases (Statistics Laerd, 2021).

For the current study, a one-tailed test and standard significance of $p = .05$ were used to determine the significance of Spearman Rho's correlations. The hypothesis for these correlations were that selective avoidance and COVID-19 social media use would demonstrate strong correlations, and that out-group threat would correlate with the relationship of selective avoidance and COVID-19 social media use.

Somers' D. To assess explanatory relationships between selective avoidance and COVID-19 social media use, and out-group threat on the relationship, Somers' D was computed. Somers' D is a nonparametric measure that assesses the strength and direction between a dependent and independent variable (Statistics Laerd, 2021). There are two assumptions that must be met before utilizing Somers' D: (1) have ordinal dependent and independent variables, typically expressed through Likert type scales, (2) have a monotonic relationship between the variables (Statistics Laerd, 2021).

For the present study, several survey questions were selected to analyze predictive properties. Two individual tests were run with two different dependent variables:

(1) "Have you experienced any burnout, exhaustion, or tiredness from seeing COVID-19 information on social media?"

(2) "People who believe COVID-19 is not a serious health concern are a threat to society and public health".

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Demographics. Demographic information (i.e., age, gender, ethnicity, working status, education completed, current level of school, area of residence, and urban or rural environment) was calculated and reported in Table 1. Out of 306 participants, 247 identified as women with majority of the sample falling below the age of 33, and the largest age range between 17 and 25 years of age (n = 226). Most individuals identify as Caucasian (n = 237), are students (n = 145), have completed a high school diploma (n = 169), and are currently pursuing undergraduate studies at a university (n = 194). The study survey was conducted virtually across the globe, with 84% (n = 257) residing in Alberta, and most participants living in a large urban city (n = 130).

Table 1

Demographics

	Participants (N = 306)
Age	
17-25	226
26-33	31
34-41	14
42-49	10
50-57	20
58-65	4
66+	1
Gender	
Man	52
Woman	247
Non-Binary	4
Prefer not to say	2
Ethnicity	
Indigenous	8
Asian	25
Black	20
Hispanic or Latino	5
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	1
Caucasian	237
Mixed ethnicity	10

Working Status	
Employed full-time	66
Employed part-time	78
Unemployed	15
Student	145
Prefer not to say	2
Education Completed	
Elementary school level or less	1
High school diploma	169
College diploma	55
Undergraduate degree	69
Master's degree	11
Doctorate degree	1
Current Level of School	
High School	2
College	10
University – Undergraduate	194
Graduate School – Masters	17
Graduate School – Doctoral	3
I am not currently in school	77
Other	1
Area of Residence (province)	
Alberta	257
British Columbia	8
Saskatchewan	2
Manitoba	2
Ontario	1
Nova Scotia	1
Newfoundland and Labrador	1
Ohio	1
Missouri	1
Minnesota	1
Illinois	1
Jamaica	1
Nigeria	2
Hong Kong	1
Ghana	1
Urban or Rural Environment	
Large Urban city (population greater than 100,000	130
Medium sized city (Population between 30,000 and 99,999)	85
Small town (population between 1,000 and 29,999)	82
Rural town (population less than 1,000)	9

Out-Group Threat. The means and standard deviations for the 12 out-group threat survey questions are represented in Table 2. Out-group threat occurs when individuals begin to categorize themselves into groups based on shared beliefs or values (Knobloch-Westerwick et al., 2017). Those who share similar beliefs are members of an in-group, whereas those who hold different beliefs are members of an out-group (Knobloch-Westerwick et al., 2017). During the COVID-19 crisis, individuals' tendencies to belong to a particular group who share similar beliefs is enhanced and may create divergence between the groups (Riek et al., 2006). Several COVID-19 beliefs, separated into in-groups and out-groups were assessed (e.g., wearing masks helps limit the spread of COVID-19, COVID-19 is a serious societal and public health concern).

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics for Out-Group Threat

Out-Group Threat Survey Questions	*M*	(*SD*)
COVID-19 is believed to have originated in Wuhan, China from a wet market (i.e., seafood, meat, poultry, and live animal market) and interactions with bats.	2.16	(0.89)
Wearing masks helps limit the spread of COVID-19.	1.69	(0.99)
COVID-19 is a serious societal and public health concern.	1.67	(1.02)
The vaccine for COVID-19 will reduce the spread of the virus.	1.81	(0.95)
People who do not wear masks are a threat to society and public health.	2.17	(1.14)
People who believe COVID-19 is not a serious health concern are a threat to society and public health.	2.12	(1.20)
People who believe COVID-19 came from something else other than a wet market are a threat to society and public health (e.g., the government created the virus, the virus was created as a weapon, etc).	2.87	(1.19)
People who believe the COVID-19 vaccine will not be effective are a threat to society and public health.	2.62	(1.15)
People who wear masks are a threat to society and public health.	4.56	(0.72)
People who believe COVID-19 is a serious health concern are a threat to society and public health.	4.45	(0.80)
People who believe COVID-19 came from a wet market (i.e., seafood, meat, poultry, and live animal market) in Wuhan, China are a threat to society and public health.	4.18	(0.78)
People who believe the COVID-19 vaccine will be effective are a threat to society and public health.	4.47	(0.74)

Note. Means and standard deviations (in parentheses) presented.

Frequency of Social Media Use. The means and standard deviations for the 18 frequency of social media use survey questions were computed (e.g., please indicate how frequently you use Facebook, please indicate how frequently you use Instagram, please indicate how frequently you use Twitter). Qualitative survey questions were omitted in calculating descriptive statistics.

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics for Frequency of Social Media Use

Frequency of Social Media Use Survey Questions	*M*	(*SD*)
Please indicate all of the social media platforms you currently sign into a least once every 6 months.		
Facebook	1.00	(0.00)
Instagram	1.00	(0.00)
Twitter	1.00	(0.00)
Other (TikTok, Snapchat, VSCO, Reddit, etc.)	1.00	(0.00)
What social media platform do you use most?		
Facebook	1.00	(0.00)
Instagram	1.00	(0.00)
Twitter	1.00	(0.00)
Other (TikTok, Snapchat, VSCO, Reddit, etc.)	1.00	(0.00)
Please indicate how frequently you use Facebook.	2.56	(1.48)
Please indicate how frequently you use Instagram.	1.97	(1.38)
Please indicate how frequently you use Twitter.	4.11	(1.55)
Please indicate how frequently you use Other social media platforms (e.g., TikTok, Snapchat, VSCO, Reddit, etc.)	2.24	(1.50)
How often do you receive information about COVID-19 on your Facebook feed (e.g., on home page, tagged in posts or comments, etc.)?	3.11	(1.65)
How often do you post information about COVID-19 on your Facebook page (e.g., sharing, making comments, posting your own content)?	4.81	(0.80)
How often do you receive information about COVID-19 on your Instagram page (e.g., on home page, direct messages, tagged in posts or comments, on stories, in captions, etc.)?	3.46	(1.42)
How often do you post information about COVID-19 on your Instagram page (e.g., stories, comments, pictures, captions, etc.)?	4.80	(0.73)
How often do you receive information about COVID-19 on your Twitter feed (e.g., tweets, retweets, tagged in replies, messages, etc.)?	4.62	(1.66)
How often do you post information about COVID-19 on your Twitter page (e.g., tweets, retweets, replies, send messages, etc.)?	5.28	(0.87)
How often do you share friends' and/or news agencies' posts about COVID-19 on Facebook?	4.75	(0.81)

How often do you repost information about COVID-19 from the accounts you follow on Instagram (e.g., on your own page or stories)?	4.78	(0.69)
How often do you tweet or retweet information about COVID-19 from the accounts you follow on Twitter?	5.26	(0.85)
How often do you comment, express views, or engage in debates about COVID-19 on Facebook?	4.91	(0.64)
How often do you comment, express views, or engage in debates about COVID-19 on Instagram?	4.91	(0.58)
How often do you comment, express views, or engage in debates about COVID-19 on Twitter?	5.31	(0.71)

Note. Means and standard deviations (in parentheses) presented.

Selective Avoidance and Weak Ties. The means and standard deviations for the 25 selective avoidance and weak tie survey questions were computed (e.g., before COVID-19, how often would you unfollow someone on Twitter, how often have you unfriended someone on Facebook because of COVID-19-related issues). Qualitative survey questions were omitted in calculating descriptive statistics.

Table 4

Descriptive Statistics for Selective Avoidance and Weak Ties

Selective Avoidance and Weak Ties Survey Questions	*M*	(*SD*)
Have you experienced any burnout, exhaustion, or tiredness from seeing COVID-19 information on social media?	1.43	(0.72)
Before COVID-19, how often would you unfriend someone on Facebook?	6.63	(0.88)
Before COVID-19, how often would you unfollow someone on Instagram?	6.23	(1.04)
Before COVID-19, how often would you unfollow someone on Twitter?	7.32	(0.93)
How often have you unfriended someone on Facebook because of COVID-19-related issues?	6.51	(1.10)
How often have you unfollowed someone on Instagram because of COVID-19-related issues?	6.45	(1.13)
How often have you unfollowed someone on Twitter because of COVID-19-related issues?	7.30	(1.03)
Typically, what is the strength of the relationship between you and the people you unfollow/unfriend?	3.94	(0.98)
I feel I am unfollowing/unfriending people on social media more during COVID-19.	3.03	(1.23)
Before COVID-19, how often would you block someone on Facebook?	6.92	(0.64)
Before COVID-19, how often would you block someone on Instagram?	6.78	(0.77)

Before COVID-19, how often would you block someone on Twitter?	7.39	(0.71)
How often have you blocked someone on Facebook because of COVID-19-related issues?	6.91	(0.73)
How often have you blocked someone on Instagram because of COVID-19-related issues?	6.88	(0.82)
How often have you blocked someone on Twitter because of COVID-19-related issues?	7.32	(0.91)
Typically, what is the strength of the relationship between you and the people you block?	4.02	(1.01)
I feel I am blocking people on social media more during COVID-19.	3.57	(1.13)
Before COVID-19, how often would you 'take a break' from someone on Facebook?	6.53	(1.12)
Before COVID-19, how often would you mute someone on Instagram?	6.57	(1.09)
Before COVID-19, how often would you mute someone on Twitter?	7.35	(0.98)
How often have you 'took a break' from someone on Facebook because of COVID-19-related issues?	6.49	(1.26)
How often have you muted someone on Instagram because of COVID-19-related issues?	6.65	(1.11)
How often have you muted someone on Twitter because of COVID-19-related issues?	7.35	(0.93)
If you have muted or 'took a break' from someone on social media due to COVID-19 issues, please describe why.	3.59	(1.00)
I feel I am muting and/or 'taking a break' from people on social media more during COVID-19.	3.08	(1.21)

Note. Means and standard deviations (in parentheses) presented.

Strength of Beliefs. The means and standard deviations for the 7 strength of beliefs survey questions were computed (e.g., how often do you see content about COVID-19 on social media, I have had an argument about COVID-19 issues with another social media user, I have strong opinions about COVID-19 content I see on social media).

Table 5

Descriptive Statistics for Strength of Beliefs

Strength of Beliefs Survey Questions	*M*	(*SD*)
If I disagree with someone's COVID-19-related posts on social media, I would:		
Unfollow/Unfriend	1.00	(0.00)
Block	1.00	(0.00)
Mute or ‘take a break’	1.00	(0.00)
I would do nothing	1.00	(0.00)
Other	1.00	(0.00)

If you unfollowed, unfriended, muted, 'took a break', or blocked someone on one social media platform (i.e., Facebook), would you do the same on your other platforms (i.e., Instagram and/or Twitter)?	1.85	(0.68)
How often do you see content about COVID-19 on social media?	1.90	(0.82)
I have had an argument about COVID-19 issues with another social media user.	3.90	(1.36)
I have strong opinions about COVID-19 content I see on social media.	2.48	(0.99)
If you see content that is consistent with your beliefs, does it strengthen your view?	1.68	(0.69)
How often do you see content on social media that is similar to each other?	2.66	(0.66)

Note. Means and standard deviations (in parentheses) presented.

The Correlational Patterns of Selective Avoidance and COVID-19 Social Media Use

Bivariate correlations were computed using a Spearman's Correlation Coefficient (ρ) to assess the correlation patterns of COVID-19 social media use, selective avoidance, and out-group threat. Specifically, spearman correlations were used to examine the two research questions: (1) How has COVID-19-related social media use impacted selective avoidance? (2) Does perceived out-group threat affect selective avoidance and COVID-19 social media use? Bivariate correlations between measures of COVID-19 social media use and selective avoidance were conducted and the results are displayed in Table 6. Bivariate correlations between measures of perceived out-group threat among the relationship of selective avoidance and COVID-19 social media use were conducted and the results are displayed in Table 7. Generally, most bivariate correlations computed a spearman's correlation coefficient that is significant at the 0.001 level (1-tailed).

Table 6 displays the correlational relationships between COVID-19 social media use and selective avoidance. Specifically, bivariate correlations for selective avoidance and COVID-19 social media use express significant results. As predicted, those who have unfriended someone on Facebook because of COVID-19 issues are significantly correlated to those who unfollow others on Instagram ($r_s = .524$, $p < .001$), and feel they are unfollowing/unfriending people on

social media more during COVID-19 ($r_s = .502$, $p < .001$). Further, those who have blocked someone on Facebook because of COVID-19 issues are significantly correlated to those who take a break from others on Facebook because of COVID-19 related issues ($r_s = .543$, $p < .001$). Participants who have muted someone on Twitter because of COVID-19 related issues are significantly correlated to those who unfollow and block people on Twitter because of COVID-19 issues ($r_s = .806$, $p < .001$; $r_s = .803$, $p < .001$). Those who have unfriended others on Facebook because of COVID-19 social media issues are significantly correlated to those who have had an argument about COVID-19 issues with another social media user ($r_s = .243$, $p < .001$).

Table 6

Spearman Rho Correlation Matrix for Research Question One

Survey Questions	How often have you unfriended someone on Facebook because of COVID-19 related issues?	How often have you unfollowed someone on Instagram because of COVID-19 related issues?	How often have you unfollowed someone on Twitter because of COVID-19 related issues?	I feel I am unfollowing/unfriending people on social media more during COVID-19.	How often have you blocked someone on Facebook because of COVID-19-related issues?	How often have you blocked someone on Instagram because of COVID-19-related issues?	How often have you blocked someone on Twitter because of COVID-19-related issues?	I feel I am blocking people on social media more during COVID-19.	How often have you 'took a break' from someone on Facebook because of COVID-19-related issues?	How often have you muted someone on Instagram because of COVID-19-related issues?	How often have you muted someone on Twitter because of COVID-19-related issues?	I feel I am muting and/or 'taking a break' from people on social media more during COVID-19.	I have had an argument about COVID-19 issues with another social media user.
How often have you unfriended someone on Facebook because of COVID-19 related issues?	--												
How often have you unfollowed someone on Instagram because of COVID-19 related issues?	.524***	--											
How often have you unfollowed someone on Twitter because of COVID-19 related issues?	.146**	.112*	--										
I feel I am unfollowing/unfriending people on social media more during COVID-19.	.502***	.451***	.039	--									

How often have you blocked someone on Facebook because of COVID-19-related issues?	.557***	.236***	.205***	.218***	--								
How often have you blocked someone on Instagram because of COVID-19-related issues?	.255***	.561***	.234***	.197***	.363***	--							
How often have you blocked someone on Twitter because of COVID-19-related issues?	.115*	.085	.840***	.030	.198***	.258***	--						
I feel I am blocking people on social media more during COVID-19.	.316***	.271***	.081	.620***	.306***	.282****	.051	--					
How often have you 'took a break' from someone on Facebook because of COVID-19-related issues?	.502***	.257***	.065	.265***	.543***	.213**	.023	.212***	--				
How often have you muted someone on Instagram because of COVID-19-related issues?	.260***	.546***	.143**	.237***	.180***	.535***	.120*	.178***	.397***	--			
How often have you muted someone on Twitter because of COVID-19-related issues?	.095*	.043	.806***	.001	.189***	.168***	.803***	.048	.091	.119*	--		
I feel I am muting and/or 'taking a break' from people on social media more during COVID-19.	.292***	.310***	-.061	.603***	.132*	.189**	-.077	.547***	405***	.341***	-.114*	--	
I have had an argument about COVID-19 issues with another social media user.	.243***	.227***	-.016	.235***	.189***	.181***	.024	.186***	.122*	.071	-.031	.110*	--

*$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.001$.

Bivariate correlations measuring out-group threat and the relationship of selective avoidance and COVID-19 social media use resulted in significant correlations. More specifically, people who believe COVID-19 is not a serious health concern are a threat to society and public health are significantly correlated to those who believe that people who do not wear masks are a threat to society and public health ($r_s = .739$, $p < .001$). As predicted, participants who believe that people who wear masks are a threat to society and public health are

significantly correlated with people who believe that others who think the vaccine will be effective are a threat to society and public health ($r_s = .637$, $p < .001$). Conversely, people who wear masks are a threat to society and public health has a significant negative correlation with people who believe COVID-19 is not a serious health concern are a threat to society and public health ($r_s = -.467$, $p < .001$).

Further, the researcher examined if out-group threat had an impact on the relationship between selective avoidance and COVID-19 social media use. As a result, individuals who believe that COVID-19 is not a serious health concern are a threat to society and public health is significantly correlated to individuals unfriending on Facebook, and unfollowing on Instagram because of COVID-19 related issues ($r_s = .106$, $p < .05$; $r_s = .110$, $p < .05$). In addition, people who believe the COVID-19 vaccine will not be effective are a threat to society and public health is significantly associated to unfriending others on Facebook because of COVID-19 related issues ($r_s = .109$, $p < .05$). Lastly, there was a significant and interesting association between people who believe that those who wear masks are a threat to society and public health and blocking others on Facebook because of COVID-19 issues ($r_s = .138$, $p < .01$).

Table 7

Spearman Rho Correlation Matrix for Research Question Two

Out-Group Threat Survey Questions	People who do not wear masks are a threat to society and public health.	People who believe COVID-19 is not a serious health concern are a threat to society and public health.	People who believe COVID-19 came from something else other than a wet market are a threat to society and public health (e.g., the government created the virus, the virus was created as a weapon, etc).	People who believe the COVID-19 vaccine will not be effective are a threat to society and public health.	People who wear masks are a threat to society and public health.	People who believe COVID-19 is a serious health concern are a threat to society and public health.	People who believe COVID-19 came from a wet market (i.e., seafood, meat, poultry, and live animal market) in Wuhan, China are a threat to society and public health.	People who believe the COVID-19 vaccine will be effective are a threat to society and public health.	How often have you unfriended someone on Facebook because of COVID-19 related issues?	How often have you unfollowed someone on Instagram because of COVID-19 related issues?	How often have you blocked someone on Facebook because of COVID-19 related issues?	How often have you blocked someone on Instagram because of COVID-19 related issues?	How often have you 'took a break' from someone on Facebook because of COVID-19 related issues?	How often have you muted someone on Instagram because of COVID-19 related issues?
People who do not wear masks are a threat to society and public health	--													
People who believe COVID-19 is not a serious health concern are a threat to society and public health.	.739***	--												

People who believe COVID-19 came from something else other than a wet market are a threat to society and public health (e.g., the government created the virus, the virus was created as a weapon, etc).	.484***	.542***	--										
People who believe the COVID-19 vaccine will not be effective are a threat to society and public health.	.577***	.609***	.537***	--									
People who wear masks are a threat to society and public health.	-.468***	-.467***	-.289***	-.369***	--								
People who believe COVID-19 is a serious health concern are a threat to society and public health	-.534***	-.568***	-.314***	-.374***	.678***	--							
People who believe COVID-19 came from a wet market (i.e., seafood, meat, poultry, and live animal market) in Wuhan, China are a threat to society and public health.	-.182***	-.191***	-.163**	-.182***	.337***	.422***	--						
People who believe the COVID-19 vaccine will be effective are a threat to society and public health.	-.462***	-.474***	-.311*	-.458***	.637***	.666***	.449***	--					
How often have you unfriended someone on Facebook because of COVID-19 related issues?	.057	.106*	.132**	.109*	-.055	-.046	.014	-.046	--				
How often have you unfollowed someone on Instagram because of COVID-19 related issues?	.065	.110*	.104*	.093	-0.67	-.111*	-.012	-.048	.524**	--			
How often have you blocked someone on Facebook because of COVID-19 related issues?	-.064	-.063	.081	.057	.138**	.110*	.090	.101*	.557**	.236**	--		
How often have you blocked someone on Instagram because of COVID-19 related issues?	.040	.017	.108	.075	.052	.001	-.008	.057	.255**	.561**	.363**	--	
How often have you 'took a break' from someone on Facebook because of COVID-19 related issues?	-.046	-.038	.093	.072	.067	.050	.044	.057	.502**	.257**	.543**	.213**	--
How often have you muted someone on Instagram because of COVID-19 related issues?	.014	.022	.044	.013	-.018	-.055	.005	.059	.260**	.546**	.180**	.535**	.397**

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Explanatory Properties from Somers' D

A few survey questions were selected to assess the relationship strength and direction between dependent and independent variables. I chose the questions below to discuss as they met a significant threshold of $p < .001$ or lower and represent the two most prominent social media

platforms used with this survey population, Facebook and Instagram. It was found that Twitter was not used to the same degree as Facebook and Instagram. The remainder of the results are displayed in Table 8 and Table 9.

The researcher was curious as to whether burnout on social media due to COVID-19 is statistically significant with unfollowing/unfriending, and 'taking a break' behaviours across Facebook and Instagram. Particularly, question 40, "have you experienced any burnout, exhaustion, or tiredness from seeing COVID-19 information on social media?", was selected as the dependent variable. For independent variables, question 44 (how often have you unfriended someone on Facebook because of COVID-19 related issues?), question 45 (how often have you unfollowed someone on Instagram because of COVID-19 related issues?), and question 62 (How often have you 'took a break' from someone on Facebook because of COVID-19-related issues?) were selected. It was noted that individuals who have experienced burnout, exhaustion, or tiredness from seeing COVID-19 information on social media is significantly associated to unfriending people on Facebook because of COVID-19 related issues. (*Somers' D* = . 192; $p <$ .001). Further, burnout, exhaustion, and tiredness from COVID-19 is significantly related to individuals unfollowing others on Instagram because of COVID-19 related issues (*Somers' D* = .235; $p < .001$). Lastly, social media burnout due to COVID-19 is also significantly associated with individuals 'taking a break' on Facebook because of COVID-19 issues (*Somers' D* = .137; $p < .001$). The remainder of the results are displayed in Table 8.

Another area worth examining was the predictive relationship between perceived threat and social media behaviours. Specifically, the survey question "people who believe COVID-19 is not a serious health concern are a threat to society and public health" was selected as the dependent variable. As independent variables, question 31 (How often do you post information

about COVID-19 on your Instagram page (e.g., stories, comments, pictures, captions, etc.)?), and question 49 (I feel I am unfollowing/unfriending people on social media more during COVID-19) were chosen. Results express that people who believe COVID-19 is not a serious health concern are a threat to society and public health is significantly related to posting information about COVID-19 on one's Instagram page (*Somers' D* = .174; *p* = .004). Further, those who believe COVID-19 is not a serious health concern are a threat to society and public health is significantly related to unfollowing/unfriending people more on social media during COVID-19 (*Somers' D* = .124; *p* = .005). The remainder of the results are displayed in Table 9.

Table 8

Somers' D: "Have you experienced any burnout, exhaustion, or tiredness from seeing COVID-19 information on social media?"

	Have you experienced any burnout, exhaustion, or tiredness from seeing COVID-19 information on social media?
Selective Avoidance Behaviours	Somers' D value
How often have you unfriended someone on Facebook because of COVID-19-related issues?	.192***
How often have you unfollowed someone on Instagram because of COVID-19-related issues?	.164***
How often have you unfollowed someone on Twitter because of COVID-19-related issues?	-
I feel I am unfollowing/unfriending people on social media more during COVID-19	.129***
How often have you blocked someone on Facebook because of COVID-19-related issues?	.122*
How often have you blocked someone on Instagram because of COVID-19-related issues?	.121*
How often have you blocked someone on Twitter because of COVID-19-related issues?	-
I feel I am blocking people on social media more during COVID-19	-
How often have you 'took a break' from someone on Facebook because of COVID-19-related issues?	.137***
How often have you muted someone on Instagram because of COVID-19-related issues?	.139**

How often have you muted someone on Twitter because of COVID-19 -related issues?	-.111*
I feel I am muting and/or 'taking a break' from people on social media more during COVID-19	.187***

*$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.001$

Table 9

Somers' D: "People who believe COVID-19 is not a serious health concern are a threat to society and public health."

	People who believe COVID-19 is not a serious health concern are a threat to society and public health.
Social Media Behaviours	Somers' D value
I feel I am unfollowing/unfriending people on social media more during COVID-19	.124**
I feel I am blocking people on social media more during COVID-19	--
I feel I am muting and/or 'taking a break' from people on social media more during COVID-19	--
I have had an argument about COVID-19 issues with another social media user.	.146**
If you see content that is consistent with your beliefs, does it strengthen your view?	.165**
I have strong opinions about COVID-19 content I see on social media	.171***

*$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.001$

Table 10

Somers' D: "COVID-19 is a serious societal and public health concern."

	COVID-19 is a serious societal and public health concern.
Social Media Behaviours	Somers' D value
People who do not wear masks are a threat to society and public health.	.563***
People who believe the COVID-19 vaccine will not be effective are a threat to society and public health.	.403***
People who believe COVID-19 is not a serious health concern are a threat to society and public health.	.593***

*$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.001$

Reasons for Unfollowing, Blocking, Muting

To target a deeper understanding of why people engage in selective avoidance behaviours on social media during COVID-19, three qualitative survey questions have been evaluated: (1) If you have unfriended and/or unfollowed someone on social media due to COVID-19 issues, please describe why, (2) If you have blocked someone on social media due to COVID-19 issues, please describe why, (3) If you have muted or 'took a break' from someone on social media due to COVID-19 issues, please describe why. From all participant responses, the researcher identified several emerging themes and calculated the frequency of each theme. Notably, the most frequent theme for reasons of unfriending/unfollowing others on social media due to COVID-19 issues, displayed in Table 11, was the spreading of unscientific misinformation (Frequency = 43; 19.8%). Two other prominent themes for unfriending/unfollowing were seeing conspiracy theories about COVID-19 (Frequency = 21; 9.67%), and denying scientific facts about the virus, masks, and vaccine (Frequency = 26; 11.98%).

Table 11

Reasons for Unfriending/Unfollowing

Question #47 - If you have unfriended and/or unfollowed someone on social media due to COVID-19 issues, please describe why.		
Themes	Frequency	%

Tired of seeing covid misinformation on a regular basis	16	7.37
Spreading unscientific misinformation	43	19.80
Remove weak ties who post covid-19 misinformation	8	3.68
Spreading discriminatory and offensive information/stereotypes about COVID-19	7	3.22
Seeing conspiracy theories about COVID-19	21	9.67
Others are entitled to their own opinion about covid-19	5	2.30
Denying scientific facts about the virus, masks, and vaccine	26	11.98
Others being rude and ignorant to frontline workers	7	3.22
Seeing others fail to follow government restrictions/health guidelines	12	5.53
Expressing political beliefs about covid-19 (anti-mask etc.)	7	3.22
Seeing others preach about covid being real/dangerous/etc.	4	1.84
Tired of people complaining about the restrictions	2	0.92
Seeing others attack and harass others with different beliefs	12	5.53
Seeing anti-maskers/vaxers be closed-minded	14	6.45
Tired of seeing posts that don't agree with their beliefs	19	8.75
Saw people participate in freedom rallies	2	0.92
Exhausted seeing negative opinions about covid-19	12	5.53

Prominent themes for blocking others on social media due to COVID-19 issues are displayed in Table 12. It is worthy to note that there were fewer participant responses in this question (n = 48) compared to other qualitative survey questions, (n = 217; n = 105). The most prevalent theme for blocking was seeing others be disrespectful and harass those with different beliefs (Frequency = 10; 20.83%). Two other themes that were common were seeing conspiracy theories about COVID-19 (Frequency = 7; 14.58%) and spreading unscientific misinformation with a lack of education (Frequency = 6; 12.50%). The final survey question evaluated why participants muted or 'took a break' from someone on social media due to COVID-19 issues, displayed in Table 13. The most prominent theme was participants feeling tired of seeing COVID-19 misinformation on a regular basis (Frequency = 35; 33.33%). Two other prevalent themes were spreading unscientific misinformation with a lack of education (Frequency = 14; 13.33%), and seeing others fail to follow government restrictions/health guidelines (Frequency = 11; 10.47%).

Table 12

Reasons for Blocking

Question #56 - If you have blocked someone on social media due to COVID-19 issues, please describe why.		
Themes	Frequency	%
Tired of seeing covid misinformation on a regular basis	4	8.33
Remove weak ties who post covid-19 misinformation	1	2.08
Denying scientific facts about the virus, masks, and vaccine	4	8.33
Spreading discriminatory and offensive information/stereotypes about COVID-19	4	8.33
Seeing conspiracy theories about COVID-19	7	14.58
Seeing others fail to follow government restrictions/health guidelines	3	6.25
Spreading unscientific misinformation with a lack of education	6	12.5
Seeing others be disrespectful and harass others with different beliefs	10	20.83
Seeing others preach their beliefs	2	4.17
Being unfollowed for celebrating their vaccination	1	2.08
Tired of seeing posts that don't agree with their beliefs	2	4.17
Tired of others complaining about restrictions	1	2.08
Exhausted seeing negative opinions about covid-19	2	4.17
Relentless rants concerning government control	1	2.08

Table 13

Reasons for Muting/Taking a Break

Question #65 - If you have muted or 'took a break' from someone on social media due to COVID-19 issues, please describe why.		
Themes	Frequency	%
Tired of seeing covid misinformation on a regular basis	35	33.33
Spreading unscientific misinformation with a lack of education/evidence	14	13.33
Spreading discriminatory and offensive information/stereotypes about COVID-19	5	4.76
Taking a break from those with stronger relationships but don't agree with beliefs	5	4.76
Denying scientific facts about the virus, masks, and vaccine	10	9.52
Seeing conspiracy theories about COVID-19	3	2.86
Others being rude and ignorant to frontline workers	1	0.95
People being more concerned about the economy than other's wellbeing	2	1.90
Seeing others be disrespectful and harass others with different beliefs	3	2.86
	3	2.86

Seeing others fail to follow government restrictions/health guidelines	11	10.47
Tired of seeing posts that don't agree with their beliefs	2	1.90
Tired of others complaining about restrictions	1	0.95
Expressing political beliefs about covid-19 (anti-mask etc.)	10	9.52
Exhausted seeing negative opinions about covid-19		

CHAPTER 5: Discussion

In the present study, the researcher deployed a quantitative survey to examine the effects of COVID-19 social media use on selective avoidance behaviour and perceived out-group threat. The research questions were: (1) How has COVID-19 related social media use impacted selective avoidance? (2) Does perceived out-group threat affect selective avoidance and COVID-19 social media use? This chapter includes a discussion of findings from both research questions, interpretations of predictive relationships, and an examination of categorical themes. Following, this chapter will address clinical implications, strengths, limitations, future directions, and summarize with a general conclusion of the results.

Research Question One

The first objective of this study was to assess how COVID-19 social media use has impacted selective avoidance behaviours. This was investigated using Spearman Rho correlations between survey questions that measure unfollowing, blocking, and muting behaviours because of COVID-19 issues. In line with the hypothesis, selective avoidance behaviours were significantly correlated with COVID-19 social media use. Consistent with previous research, specifically Zhu et al. (2016), individuals tended to selectively avoid through unfollowing, blocking, and muting on social media when they were exposed to attitude-discrepant information. As previously discussed, there are multiple factors that support this outcome: cognitive dissonance theory, social media fatigue, ease of content curation, and more.

With the combination of these factors, it is supported that people feel they are unfollowing, blocking, and muting individuals at a higher rate during COVID-19. Further, in the context of crises, individuals are more often exposed to a surplus of information that does not adhere to their beliefs, thus increasing the frequency of selective avoidance behaviours on social media (Cinelli et al., 2020). It is evident that many survey questions assessing research question one are significantly correlated to one another. Specifically, it is worthy to discuss that those who feel they are blocking people on social media more during COVID-19 have unfriended someone on Facebook because of COVID-19 related issues. Collectively, the results from Spearman Rho correlations communicate that survey participants are unfollowing, blocking, and muting others on social media because of COVID-19 issues and are experiencing a higher rate of selective avoidance.

Interestingly, individuals who have reported that they have had an argument about COVID-19 issues with another social media user are unfriending others on Facebook, unfollowing on Instagram, blocking on Facebook and Instagram, and have taken a break from others on Facebook. This outcome is consistent with research conducted by Jeong et al. (2019) who discussed that those who are highly engaged on social media, especially on controversial topics, are the ones who experience strong levels of cognitive dissonance. Enhanced rates of cognitive dissonance can make an individual feel discomfort and have greater motivation to reduce their dissonance, likely through avoidance (Jang, 2014). Taken together, it is appropriate to state that individuals who have arguments about COVID-19 with other social media users are unfollowing, blocking, and muting others who share attitude-discrepant information.

Research Question Two

The second objective of this study was to evaluate how perceived out-group threat affects the relationship between selective avoidance and COVID-19 social media use. This relationship was analyzed using Spearman Rho correlations. In line with the hypothesis, perceived out-group threat is associated with the relationship between selective avoidance and COVID-19 social media use. According to the realistic group conflict theory, when individuals experience a competition of scarce resources, conflict of values, and poor physical and economic wellbeing, in-group and out-group tendencies are accelerated and hold greater hostility (Riek et al., 2006). These factors describe the COVID-19 pandemic: the world has experienced a lack of resources (e.g., toilet paper, cleaning supplies, masks), an influx of sharing misinformation creates value conflict, and people have certainly experienced physical in ailment and economic failure. Zhu et al. (2016) explained that those who hold high levels of threat sensitivity often perceive attitude-discrepant information as a threat. Consistent with this research, there were significant findings regarding individuals perceiving a threat against a member of an out-group.

Further, in examining the relationship between out-group threat and selective avoidance during COVID-19, it is evident that many individuals who perceive a threat engage in unfollowing and blocking behaviours on Facebook and Instagram. Twitter was not selected for analysis nor discussion in examining out-group threat as Twitter was not used to the same degree as Facebook and Instagram for the survey population. Supported with previous research, individuals who experience a threat towards their beliefs often initiate their flight-flight-freeze system, explained through RST (Corr, 2013). A protective action is to flee from the information, thereby encouraging selective avoidance behaviours. However, there were several associations that were not significant, especially with muting or ‘taking a break’ behaviours. Taken together,

Spearman Rho correlations have concluded a significant association between out-group threat and the relationship between selective avoidance and COVID-19 social media use.

Predictive Relationships

To further examine relationships among COVID-19 social media use and selective avoidance, the researcher conducted Somers' D regressions. Somers' D allowed the researcher to evaluate predictive or explanatory properties of the relationships. The most revealing outcomes using this statistical technique were from the questions "have you experienced any burnout, exhaustion, or tiredness from seeing COVID-19 information on social media?", "people who believe COVID-19 is not a serious health concern are a threat to society and public health", and "COVID-19 is a serious societal and public health concern". These questions were analyzed against specific survey questions to evaluate predictive relationships.

First, the survey question "have you experienced any burnout, exhaustion, or tiredness from seeing COVID-19 information on social media?" was selected to determine if there are predictive relationships among social media fatigue and unfollowing, blocking, and muting behaviour. As previously discussed, exhaustion and tiredness are characteristic of social media fatigue (Bright et al., 2015). Social media fatigue is a result of overstimulation of information on social media, causing exhaustion and fatigue (Bright et al., 2015). As expected, participants who experience burnout, exhaustion, or tiredness from seeing COVID-19 information on social media is significantly predictive of unfollowing/unfriending, blocking, and muting behaviours on Facebook and Instagram. In addition, participants are reporting that due to burnout and exhaustion, they feel like they are unfollowing and muting/'taking a break' more during COVID-19. Interestingly, selective avoidance behaviours on Twitter did not result in significant associations with social media fatigue. It can be assumed that this result is partly due to a small

number of participants who use Twitter, and therefore answer the Twitter-related questions from the survey. Taken together, Somers' D regressions suggest that social media fatigue through COVID-19 has led to a significant association in unfollowing/unfriending, blocking, and muting/'taking a break' behaviours across Facebook and Instagram.

Second, the survey question "people who believe COVID-19 is not a serious health concern are a threat to society and public health" was selected to evaluate predictive relationships of perceived out-group threat with selective avoidance behaviours during COVID-19. As previous research has discussed, people have a greater tendency to form in-group and out-groups in the contexts of crises (Riek et al., 2006). The development of group behaviour can create strong polarizations between the groups, often leading to perceived threats (Zhu et al., 2016). Zhu et al. (2016) explains that those who experience a perceived threat toward their personal beliefs are more likely to avoid attitude-discrepant information, thus encouraging selective avoidance. As expected, people who experience a threat from others that believe COVID-19 is not a serious health concern are significantly predictive of unfollowing people more on social media. However, contrary to expectations, participants who believe COVID-19 is not a serious health concern are a threat to society and public health is not significantly predictive with participants feeling like they are blocking and muting others more on social media during COVID-19. Further, experiencing a threat is highly explanatory with participants having an argument about COVID-19 with another social media user, holding strong opinions about COVID-19, and strengthening one's view by seeing consistent information with their beliefs.

Lastly, the survey question "COVID-19 is a serious societal and public health concern" was selected to evaluate the strength and direction of the in-group/out-group phenomenon during

a global crisis. Consistent with the hypotheses and previous research, participants who believe COVID-19 is a serious societal and public health concern are significantly predictive of experiencing a threat from individuals who believe differently. This result confirms that those who share beliefs tend to experience a threat from members of an out-group (e.g., people who do not believe COVID-19 is a serious health concern) during a global health crisis. Taken together, the results from Somers' D regressions confirm the hypotheses that perceived out-group threat strengthens the relationship of unfollowing behaviour during COVID-19 on social media.

Qualitative Reasons for Unfollowing, Blocking, Muting

To deepen the understanding about what motivates people to unfollow, block, and mute others, the researcher analyzed categorical themes from open-ended responses. As predicted, most participants unfollow other social media users because they are tired of seeing others spread unscientific misinformation, COVID-19 conspiracy theories, and seeing others deny scientific facts about the virus, masks, and vaccine. Similar to unfollowing, many individuals explained they block others on social media because they see others be disrespectful and harass those with different beliefs, seeing conspiracy theories about COVID-19, and seeing others spread unscientific misinformation with a lack of education. Lastly, the main reasons people mute or 'take a break' from others on social media are being tired of seeing COVID-19 misinformation on a regular basis, seeing others spread unscientific misinformation with a lack of education/evidence, and tired of seeing posts that don't agree with their beliefs. It is worthy to note that there was a significant discrepancy in the amount of participant responses for unfollowing behaviour ($n = 217$) compared to blocking and muting behaviours ($n = 48$; $n = 105$).

Consistent across the open-ended survey questions, a prominent theme of unfollowing, blocking, and muting others was seeing others share information that goes against their beliefs.

As previously discussed in the literature, people are motivated to actively avoid information that is inconsistent with their existing beliefs, as supported by the RST and CDT (Corr, 2013; Jeong et al., 2019). The presence of attitude-discrepant information can cause discomfort, thereby motivating people to change an environmental cognitive element to reduce this discomfort (Jeong et al., 2019). Apparent from the results, individuals are actively changing an environmental cognitive element, such as who they follow, to avoid COVID-19 information that does not align with their beliefs.

Another note-worthy result of this finding is that individuals are feeling fatigued about seeing COVID-19 information daily. Many individuals reported that social media was a positive escape for them prior to COVID-19, and now, they feel exhausted by the negativity. This result is consistent with previous research on social media fatigue (Bright et al., 2015). To reiterate, social media fatigue is a behavioural stress response to the overstimulation of information on social media. As mentioned by Dai et al. (2020), to cope with an overload of information, people tend to avoid the information that is causing them fatigue. Therefore, consistent with the research regarding this phenomenon, many participants tend to unfollow, block, and mute others because they feel exhausted with the amount of COVID-19 information they are exposed to.

An interesting result was found with social ties. In the survey question regarding muting and/or 'taking a break' behaviours, several participants explained that they are muting others who are of stronger social ties, instead of unfollowing or blocking the other user entirely. As suggested in previous research, unfriending and unfollowing is relatively easily on social media as most relationships are casual rather than strong (John & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015; Zhu et al., 2016). Since most online connections come from weak ties, it would be much easier to unfollow or remove content if it does not agree with your personal beliefs. Conversely, many participants

stated that they chose to mute or ‘take a break’ from family members or close friends as it is not as severe, nor permanent compared to unfollowing or blocking.

Clinical Implications

Within a clinical setting, the implications of this research may help guide counsellors, social workers, psychologists, and other mental health practitioners to understand how people respond to global health crises. It could inform mental health workers of reasons why people engage in avoidance behaviours during COVID-19, which could further influence the counselling techniques the practitioner may utilize. Many individuals have been directly impacted from COVID-19; there have been a loss of jobs, opportunities, death, and more. These impacts have not been easy on the world, and many individuals would benefit from counselling to process these changes.

Another implication of this study could be the understanding of diverse opinions and the root of avoidant behaviours, especially when people experience a threat towards their beliefs. In the counselling field, there is a constant chatter about how to support individuals through the COVID-19 pandemic. Understanding the reasons why people avoid attitude discrepant information on social media is a great step in addressing core issues and identifying adaptive coping strategies when individuals perceive a threat.

Strengths, Limitations, and Future Directions

A particular strength of this study was the sample size. The quantitative survey had accumulated a total of 306 participants across several domains: SONA, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and word-of-mouth. With a strong sample size, the results can generalize at a greater capacity. A second strength of this survey was the inclusion of three open-ended survey questions that spoke to reasons why people are selectively avoiding other social media users

during COVID-19. The results from these questions generated in-depth responses, and gave insight into the main reasons behind unfollowing, blocking, and muting behaviours during COVID-19.

An important limitation to discuss is the inconsistency of participant responses. Although 306 participants agreed to partake in the survey, not every participant answered each question. As a result, the researcher created a threshold of 70% completion to be included in the data set. Given this threshold, many participants chose not to complete the open-ended response survey questions. For example, out of 306 participants, 217 responded for why they unfollow other social media users during COVID-19, 48 for blocking behaviour, and 105 for muting behaviour. However, many participants claimed that their answer for why they unfollow other social media users were the same for blocking and muting behaviours. This explains the lack of responses for why individuals block and mute other social media users. Further, there were fewer participants who reported to use Twitter as a social media platform, thus the results regarding Twitter did not yield significant associations, compared to Facebook and Instagram.

Lastly, another limitation was the population and cross-sectional nature of the study. Although this study was accessible to thousands of individuals from various backgrounds, most of the survey population were Caucasian (n = 237), students (n = 145), from Alberta (n = 257), women (n = 237), and aged between 17-25 (n = 237). In addition, this cross-sectional study only captured data and populations representative from the specific time the study was conducted. Due to this demographic and cross-sectional nature, the results should be generalized to other backgrounds and populations with caution. Future considerations should include a sample of various backgrounds, geographical locations, and possibly as a longitudinal study.

There are several areas for potential future research. This study was created in the early months of COVID-19, and as time has progressed, so has the research. There are now many areas of research being conducted and disseminated regarding COVID-19. One direction for future research concerns the outward participation of protests. Many individuals hold strong polarizing opinions which amplify out-group threats. Some individuals act on social media, and some project their beliefs on the streets. Protests have been a regular occurrence throughout the pandemic of COVID-19. Investigating how out-group threats have manifested into protests about COVID-19 issues would be an interesting and revealing area of research.

Another avenue for research could investigate the reactions to attitude-consistent information during COVID-19. Typically, when individuals are exposed to attitude-consistent information, their beliefs are validated (Garrett et al., 2013). This study aimed to evaluate attitude-discrepant, avoidant behaviours; future researchers could expand the scope of the study to examine how people interact with attitude-consistent information on social media.

Conclusion

Previous research on selective avoidance has been focused primarily during political movements, such as the Hong Kong Umbrella Movement in 2014 (Zhu et al. 2016). The current study contributed to the growing body of literature regarding selective avoidance, COVID-19, social media, and out-group threat. In line with the hypotheses and predictions, the results indicated that selective avoidance behaviours have been significantly impacted during the COVID-19 pandemic and perceived out-group threat significantly influenced the relationship between selective avoidance and COVID-19 social media behaviours. There is ample work still needed to fully understand the impact of COVID-19, even beyond selective avoidance on social

media. Research regarding COVID-19 is valuable and should be approached with concern and immediacy as the pandemic broadcasts new changes each day.

TABLES

Table 14

Examples of Emerging Themes for Unfollowing

Q47. If you have unfriended and/or unfollowed someone on social media due to COVID-19 issues, please describe why.
• Spreading conspiracies led by initiating harsh arguments, rather than being open to discussion. • Spreading harmful information, racist dialogue with regard to COVID-19 • Because they were denying scientific facts, being rude to others for following COVID-19 protocols and harassing others in comments. I have unfollowed/unfriended many for not following restrictions and deliberately or rather ignorantly posting about not following restrictions (getting together in large groups, partying, etc. Instead of social distancing) - I have unfriended people for expressing political beliefs that align with people such as Donald Trump and agreeing with him for downplaying the impact and seriousness of COVID-19. • I'm not interested in being friends with people who are wreck-less or careless during these dire times. • Not a strong relationship to begin with so with the excessive posting and commenting and voicing their strong opinions about covid I decided to unfriend. • Misinformation/hoax theories

Table 15

Examples of Emerging Themes for Blocking

Q56. If you have blocked someone on social media due to COVID-19 issues, please describe why
• Constantly seeing their posts shared on my feed, which were all false claims about covid, masks, vaccines • They were stating opinion & trying to make it a fact. They disregarded medical professionals & scientists. They were anti-vax & anti-mask. • They were rude and very disrespectful to the people engaging in a discussion. I felt they were more interested in creating agitation within the discussion group. • It gets tiring seeing covid posts • Sick of the negativity. Sick of the arguing. Sick of the strong opinions going each way. Not what I want to see on social media. I go to social media to keep in touch with family and friends that I cannot see often.

• People who are super conspiracy theorists about covid, or are abusive towards me over my beliefs

Table 16

Examples of Emerging Themes for Muting and/or 'taking a break'

Q65. If you have muted or 'took a break' from someone on social media due to COVID-19 issues, please describe why
• Just tired of seeing COVID on Instagram, I use it to catch up on people lives not to engage in politics
• Separate myself from viewing these toxic perspectives daily
• I just couldn't handle seeing ignorant and ungrateful posts about healthcare workers and people being more concerned about the economy than people literally dying
• Didn't agree with their views, discriminatory, not following Covid health orders
• The two people I have taken a break from on Facebook both live in the USA and were/are strong Trump supporters. They both would promote an anti- vaccination and anti- masking stance and cited Trump as an example of strong leadership with this mindset.
• People I still am connected to (some who I share the same political views with) but they just post way too much pertaining to COVID. It affects my burnout rate.

FIGURES

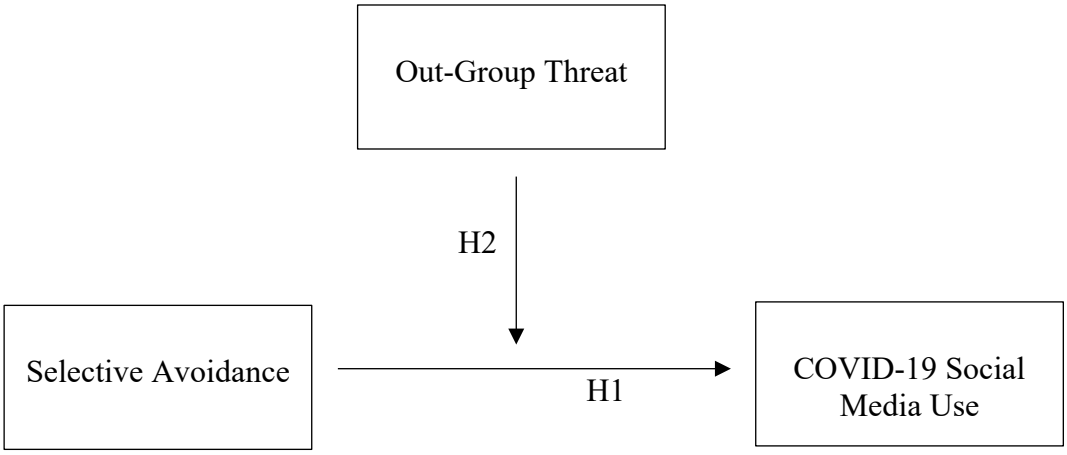

Figure 1. A conceptual diagram of the proposed relationships between selective avoidance, COVID-19 social media use, and out-group threat. The relationship between selective avoidance and COVID-19 social media use is a direct effect; the relationship of out-group threat on the selective avoidance and COVID-19 social media use is a conditional, indirect effect.

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APPENDIX

SELECTIVE AVOIDANCE BEHAVIOURS ON SOCIAL MEDIA AMIDST COVID-19 INFORMED CONSENT

Start of Block: Informed Consent

Q1 SELECTIVE AVOIDANCE BEHAVIOURS ON SOCIAL MEDIA AMIDST COVID-19 INFORMED CONSENT
Please read the following letter of information carefully before beginning the survey.

INFORMED CONSENT
SELECTIVE AVOIDANCE AMIDST COVID-19 SURVEY
You are invited to participate in a research project conducted by Kristen Brown, a Masters' of Education, Counselling Psychology Student at the University of Lethbridge. In this study, we are interested in examining selective avoidance behaviours and perceived out-group threats on social media during the global pandemic of COVID-19. Through your participation, I hope to better understand how people interact and cope with COVID-19 issues on social media.

RESPONSES WILL BE KEPT CONFIDENTIAL, WITH ALL DATA BEING AGGREGATED

About the Survey. This survey should take approximately 15 to 20 minutes to complete. Please only complete the survey once. There are no potential risks or harms associated with participation in this study. There is a minimal possibility of discomfort as COVID-19 will be the focus of the study. To minimize these possibilities, we remind you that you are free to leave a question blank if you prefer not to answer and you have the right to withdraw from the study at any time. As a benefit of participating in this study, you may gain insight into your own behaviours on social media during COVID-19. The scientific community may also benefit from the proposed study from the anticipated increase in knowledge on this topic, as the research is innovative, relevant, and novel.

The survey will remain open until data saturation is reached.

ALL RESPONSES WILL BE CONFIDENTIAL

Research Survey Participation. Your participation in this study is completely voluntary; you have the right to decline, withdraw, or skip questions without any penalty. Your responses will be completely confidential and anonymous. Once submitted, your data will be impossible to identify, retrieve, and remove. Additionally, only aggregate data will be reported (i.e., tallies and open-ended response themes).

Privacy Protection
Please note that confidentiality of data cannot be entirely guaranteed while in transit over the Internet. The privacy policy for Qualtrics is available at https://www.qualtrics.com/privacy-statement/.

The collected data will be stored on a password-protected computer in a locked office where only authorized persons, Kristen Brown and thesis supervisor Dr. Kerry Bernes in the Faculty of Education at the University of Lethbridge, will have access. The responses to the survey will be deleted two years after data collection has been completed. The results of this research will appear in a written thesis document for thesis defense and it may also be presented at conferences and published in peer-reviewed journals. If you have questions regarding participation or require clarification about this study, you may contact the primary researcher Kristen Brown (Email: kd.brown@uleth.ca, University of Lethbridge). This project has been reviewed and approved by the University of Lethbridge Human Participant Research Committee. If you feel you have not been treated per the descriptions in this form, or your rights as a participant in research have been violated during this project, you may contact the Office of Research Ethics, University of Lethbridge (Phone: 403-329-2747 or Email: research.services@uleth.ca). You can print a copy of the online consent form for your records. You must be 17 years or older to participate in this survey if recruited through SONA, and 18 years or older if recruited elsewhere (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Word of Mouth).

If you wish to participate in the survey, please check "I agree to participate in this study and have my data used" and then proceed to the questions.

Thank you in advance for your participation.

Q1

- ○ I agree to participate in this study and have my data used (1)
- ○ I do not agree to participate in this study or have my data used (2)

End of Block: Informed Consent

Start of Block: Survey

Q2 Please indicate your age.

- ○ 17-25 (1)
- ○ 26-33 (2)
- ○ 34-41 (3)
- ○ 42-49 (4)
- ○ 50-57 (5)
- ○ 58-65 (6)
- ○ 66+ (7)

X→

Q3 Please indicate which gender you most identify with.

- ○ Man (1)
- ○ Woman (2)
- ○ Transgender (3)
- ○ Non-Binary (4)
- ○ Other (5)
- ○ Prefer not to say (6)

X→

Q4 Please indicate your ethnicity.

- ○ Indigenous (1)
- ○ Asian (2)
- ○ Black (3)
- ○ Hispanic or Latino (4)
- ○ Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander (5)
- ○ Caucasian (6)
- ○ Mixed ethnicity (7)

Q5 Please indicate your working status.

- ○ Employed full-time (1)
- ○ Employed part-time (2)
- ○ Unemployed (3)
- ○ Student (4)
- ○ Prefer not to say (5)

Q6 Please indicate the level of education you have completed so far.

- ○ Elementary school level or less (1)
- ○ High school diploma (2)
- ○ College diploma (3)
- ○ Undergraduate degree (4)
- ○ Master's degree (5)
- ○ Doctorate degree (6)

Q7 Are you currently in school? If so, at which level?

- ○ High School (1)
- ○ College (2)
- ○ University - Undergraduate (3)
- ○ Graduate School - Masters (4)
- ○ Graduate School - Doctoral (5)
- ○ I am not currently in school (6)
- ○ Other (7)

Q8 Please indicate your current area of residence (i.e., Country and Province/State)

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Q9 Please indicate if you live in an urban or rural environment.

- Large Urban city (population greater than 100,000) (1)
- Medium sized city (population between 30,000 and 99,999) (2)
- Small town (population between 1,000 and 29,999) (3)
- Rural town (population less than 1,000) (4)

Q10 COVID-19 is believed to have originated in Wuhan, China from a wet market (i.e., seafood, meat, poultry, and live animal market) and interactions with bats.

- Strongly agree (1)
- Agree (2)
- Neither agree nor disagree (3)
- Disagree (4)
- Strongly disagree (5)

Q11 Wearing masks helps limit the spread of COVID-19.

- ○ Strongly agree (1)
- ○ Agree (2)
- ○ Neither agree nor disagree (3)
- ○ Disagree (4)
- ○ Strongly disagree (5)

X→

Q12 COVID-19 is a serious societal and public health concern.

- ○ Strongly agree (1)
- ○ Agree (2)
- ○ Neither agree nor disagree (3)
- ○ Disagree (4)
- ○ Strongly disagree (5)

Q13 The vaccine for COVID-19 will reduce the spread of the virus.

- ○ Strongly agree (1)
- ○ Agree (2)
- ○ Neither agree nor disagree (3)
- ○ Disagree (4)
- ○ Strongly disagree (5)

Q14 People who do not wear masks are a threat to society and public health.

- Strongly agree (1)
- Agree (2)
- Neither agree nor disagree (3)
- Disagree (4)
- Strongly disagree (5)

Q15 People who believe COVID-19 is not a serious health concern are a threat to society and public health.

- Strongly agree (1)
- Agree (2)
- Neither agree nor disagree (3)
- Disagree (4)
- Strongly disagree (5)

Q16 People who believe COVID-19 came from something else other than a wet market are a threat to society and public health (e.g., the government created the virus, the virus was created as a weapon, etc).

- ○ Strongly agree (1)
- ○ Agree (2)
- ○ Neither agree nor disagree (3)
- ○ Disagree (4)
- ○ Strongly disagree (5)

Q17 People who believe the COVID-19 vaccine will not be effective are a threat to society and public health.

- ○ Strongly agree (1)
- ○ Agree (2)
- ○ Neither agree nor disagree (3)
- ○ Disagree (4)
- ○ Strongly disagree (5)

Q18 People who wear masks are a threat to society and public health.

- Strongly agree (1)
- Agree (2)
- Neither agree nor disagree (3)
- Disagree (4)
- Strongly disagree (5)

Q19 People who believe COVID-19 is a serious health concern are a threat to society and public health.

- Strongly agree (1)
- Agree (2)
- Neither agree nor disagree (3)
- Disagree (4)
- Strongly disagree (5)

Q20 People who believe COVID-19 came from a wet market (i.e., seafood, meat, poultry, and live animal market) in Wuhan, China are a threat to society and public health.

- ○ Strongly agree (1)
- ○ Agree (2)
- ○ Neither agree nor disagree (3)
- ○ Disagree (4)
- ○ Strongly disagree (5)

Q21 People who believe the COVID-19 vaccine will be effective are a threat to society and public health.

- ○ Strongly agree (1)
- ○ Agree (2)
- ○ Neither agree nor disagree (3)
- ○ Disagree (4)
- ○ Strongly disagree (5)

Q22 Please indicate all of the social media platforms you currently sign into a least once every 6 months:

- [ ] Facebook (1)
- [ ] Instagram (2)
- [ ] Twitter (3)
- [ ] Other (e.g., TikTok, Snapchat, VSCO, Reddit, etc.) (4) _____

Q23 What social media platform do you use most?

- [ ] Facebook (1)
- [ ] Instagram (2)
- [ ] Twitter (3)
- [ ] Other (TikTok, Snapchat, VSCO, Reddit, etc.) (4)
- [ ] I use these platforms more or less equally (5)

Q24 Please indicate how frequently you use Facebook.

- ○ More than once per day (1)
- ○ Daily (2)
- ○ More than once a week but less than daily (3)
- ○ Less than once a week (4)
- ○ Never (5)
- ○ N/A (6)

X→

Q25 Please indicate how frequently you use Instagram.

- ○ More than once per day (1)
- ○ Daily (2)
- ○ More than once a week but less than daily (3)
- ○ Less than once a week (4)
- ○ Never (5)
- ○ N/A (6)

X→

Q26 Please indicate how frequently you use Twitter.

- More than once per day (1)
- Daily (2)
- More than once a week but less than daily (3)
- Less than once a week (4)
- Never (5)
- N/A (6)

Q27 Please indicate how frequently you use Other social media platforms (e.g., TikTok, Snapchat, VSCO, Reddit, etc.)

- More than once per day (1)
- Daily (2)
- More than once a week but less than daily (3)
- Less than once a week (4)
- Never (5)
- N/A (6)

Q28 How often do you receive information about COVID-19 on your Facebook feed (e.g., on home page, tagged in posts or comments, etc.)?

- More than once per day (1)
- Daily (2)
- More than once a week but less than daily (3)
- Less than once a week (4)
- Never (5)
- N/A (6)

Q29 How often do you post information about COVID-19 on your Facebook page (e.g., sharing, making comments, posting your own content)?

- More than once per day (1)
- Daily (2)
- More than once a week but less than daily (3)
- Less than once a week (4)
- Never (5)
- N/A (6)

Q30 How often do you receive information about COVID-19 on your Instagram page (e.g., on home page, direct messages, tagged in posts or comments, on stories, in captions, etc.)?

- More than once per day (1)
- Daily (2)
- More than once a week but less than daily (3)
- Less than once a week (4)
- Never (5)
- N/A (6)

Q31 How often do you post information about COVID-19 on your Instagram page (e.g., stories, comments, pictures, captions, etc.)?

- More than once per day (1)
- Daily (2)
- More than once a week but less than daily (3)
- Less than once a week (4)
- Never (5)
- N/A (6)

Q32 How often do you receive information about COVID-19 on your Twitter feed (e.g., tweets, retweets, tagged in replies, messages, etc.)?

- ○ More than once per day (1)
- ○ Daily (2)
- ○ More than once a week but less than daily (3)
- ○ Less than once a week (4)
- ○ Never (5)
- ○ N/A (6)

Q33 How often do you post information about COVID-19 on your Twitter page (e.g., tweets, retweets, replies, send messages, etc.)?

- ○ More than once per day (1)
- ○ Daily (2)
- ○ More than once a week but less than daily (3)
- ○ Less than once a week (4)
- ○ Never (5)
- ○ N/A (6)

Q34 How often do you share friends' and/or news agencies' posts about COVID-19 on Facebook?

- ○ More than once per day (1)
- ○ Daily (2)
- ○ More than once a week but less than daily (3)
- ○ Less than once a week (4)
- ○ Never (5)
- ○ N/A (6)

Q35 How often do you repost information about COVID-19 from the accounts you follow on Instagram (e.g., on your own page or stories)?

- ○ More than once per day (1)
- ○ Daily (2)
- ○ More than once a week but less than daily (3)
- ○ Less than once a week (4)
- ○ Never (5)
- ○ N/A (6)

Q36 How often do you tweet or retweet information about COVID-19 from the accounts you follow on Twitter?

- More than once per day (1)
- Daily (2)
- More than once a week but less than daily (3)
- Less than once a week (4)
- Never (5)
- N/A (6)

Q37 How often do you comment, express views, or engage in debates about COVID-19 on Facebook?

- More than once per day (1)
- Daily (2)
- More than once a week but less than daily (3)
- Less than once a week (4)
- Never (5)
- N/A (6)

Q38 How often do you comment, express views, or engage in debates about COVID-19 on Instagram?

- ○ More than once per day (1)
- ○ Daily (2)
- ○ More than once a week but less than daily (3)
- ○ Less than once a week (4)
- ○ Never (5)
- ○ N/A (6)

X→

Q39 How often do you comment, express views, or engage in debates about COVID-19 on Twitter?

- ○ More than once per day (1)
- ○ Daily (2)
- ○ More than once a week but less than daily (3)
- ○ Less than once a week (4)
- ○ Never (5)
- ○ N/A (6)

X→

Q40 Have you experienced any burnout, exhaustion, or tiredness from seeing COVID-19 information on social media?

- Yes (1)
- Maybe (2)
- No (3)

Q41 Before COVID-19, how often would you unfriend someone on Facebook?

- More than once a day (1)
- Once a day (2)
- Multiple times a week (3)
- Once a week (4)
- More than once a month (5)
- Once a month (6)
- Never (7)
- N/A (8)

Q42 Before COVID-19, how often would you unfollow someone on Instagram?

- More than once a day (1)
- Once a day (2)
- Multiple times a week (3)
- Once a week (4)
- More than once a month (5)
- Once a month (6)
- Never (7)
- N/A (8)

X→

Q43 Before COVID-19, how often would you unfollow someone on Twitter?

- More than once a day (1)
- Once a day (2)
- Multiple times a week (3)
- Once a week (4)
- More than once a month (5)
- Once a month (6)
- Never (7)
- N/A (8)

X→

Q44 How often have you unfriended someone on Facebook because of COVID-19-related issues?

- ○ More than once a day (1)
- ○ Once a day (2)
- ○ Multiple times a week (3)
- ○ Once a week (4)
- ○ More than once a month (5)
- ○ Once a month (6)
- ○ Never (7)
- ○ N/A (8)

X→

Q45 How often have you unfollowed someone on Instagram because of COVID-19-related issues?

- ○ More than once a day (1)
- ○ Once a day (2)
- ○ Multiple times a week (3)
- ○ Once a week (4)
- ○ More than once a month (5)
- ○ Once a month (6)
- ○ Never (7)
- ○ N/A (8)

X→

Q46 How often have you unfollowed someone on Twitter because of COVID-19-related issues?

- ○ More than once a day (1)
- ○ Once a day (2)
- ○ Multiple times a week (3)
- ○ Once a week (4)
- ○ More than once a month (5)
- ○ Once a month (6)
- ○ Never (7)
- ○ N/A (8)

Q47 If you have unfriended and/or unfollowed someone on social media due to COVID-19 issues, please describe why.

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

X→

Q48 Typically, what is the strength of the relationship between you and the people you unfollow/unfriend?

- ○ Very strong (1)
- ○ Somewhat strong (2)
- ○ Neither strong nor weak (3)
- ○ Weak (4)
- ○ Very weak (5)

Q49 I feel I am unfollowing/unfriending people on social media more during COVID-19.

- ○ Strongly agree (1)
- ○ Agree (2)
- ○ Neither agree nor disagree (3)
- ○ Disagree (4)
- ○ Strongly disagree (5)

Q50 Before COVID-19, how often would you block someone on Facebook?

- More than once a day (1)
- Once a day (2)
- Multiple times a week (3)
- Once a week (4)
- More than once a month (5)
- Once a month (6)
- Never (7)
- N/A (8)

Q51 Before COVID-19, how often would you block someone on Instagram?

- More than once a day (1)
- Once a day (2)
- Multiple times a week (3)
- Once a week (4)
- More than once a month (5)
- Once a month (6)
- Never (7)
- N/A (8)

Q52 Before COVID-19, how often would you block someone on Twitter?

- More than once a day (1)
- Once a day (2)
- Multiple times a week (3)
- Once a week (4)
- More than once a month (5)
- Once a month (6)
- Never (7)
- N/A (8)

Q53 How often have you blocked someone on Facebook because of COVID-19-related issues?

- More than once a day (1)
- Once a day (2)
- Multiple times a week (3)
- Once a week (4)
- More than once a month (5)
- Once a month (6)
- Never (7)
- N/A (8)

Q54 How often have you blocked someone on Instagram because of COVID-19-related issues?

- More than once a day (1)
- Once a day (2)
- Multiple times a week (3)
- Once a week (4)
- More than once a month (5)
- Once a month (6)
- Never (7)
- N/A (8)

X→

Q55 How often have you blocked someone on Twitter because of COVID-19-related issues?

- More than once a day (1)
- Once a day (2)
- Multiple times a week (3)
- Once a week (4)
- More than once a month (5)
- Once a month (6)
- Never (7)
- N/A (8)

Q56 If you have blocked someone on social media due to COVID-19 issues, please describe why.

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Q57 Typically, what is the strength of the relationship between you and the people you block?

- Very strong (1)
- Somewhat strong (2)
- Neither strong nor weak (3)
- Weak (4)
- Very weak (5)

Q58 I feel I am blocking people on social media more during COVID-19.

- Strongly agree (1)
- Agree (2)
- Neither agree nor disagree (3)
- Disagree (4)
- Strongly disagree (5)

Q59 Before COVID-19, how often would you 'take a break' from someone on Facebook?

- More than once a day (1)
- Once a day (2)
- Multiple times a week (3)
- Once a week (4)
- More than once a month (5)
- Once a month (6)
- Never (7)
- N/A (8)

Q60 Before COVID-19, how often would you mute someone on Instagram?

- More than once a day (1)
- Once a day (2)
- Multiple times a week (3)
- Once a week (4)
- More than once a month (5)
- Once a month (6)
- Never (7)
- N/A (8)

Q61 Before COVID-19, how often would you mute someone on Twitter?

- More than once a day (1)
- Once a day (2)
- Multiple times a week (3)
- Once a week (4)
- More than once a month (5)
- Once a month (6)
- Never (7)
- N/A (8)

Q62 How often have you 'took a break' from someone on Facebook because of COVID-19-related issues?

- More than once a day (1)
- Once a day (2)
- Multiple times a week (3)
- Once a week (4)
- More than once a month (5)
- Once a month (6)
- Never (7)
- N/A (8)

Q63 How often have you muted someone on Instagram because of COVID-19-related issues?

- More than once a day (1)
- Once a day (2)
- Multiple times a week (3)
- Once a week (4)
- More than once a month (5)
- Once a month (6)
- Never (7)
- N/A (8)

Q64 How often have you muted someone on Twitter because of COVID-19-related issues?

- More than once a day (1)
- Once a day (2)
- Multiple times a week (3)
- Once a week (4)
- More than once a month (5)
- Once a month (6)
- Never (7)
- N/A (8)

Q65 If you have muted or 'took a break' from someone on social media due to COVID-19 issues, please describe why.

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Q66 Typically, what is the strength of the relationship between you and the people you mute or 'take a break' from?

- Very strong (1)
- Somewhat strong (2)
- Neither strong nor weak (3)
- Weak (4)
- Very weak (5)

Q67 I feel I am muting and/or 'taking a break' from people on social media more during COVID-19.

- ○ Strongly agree (1)
- ○ Agree (2)
- ○ Neither agree nor disagree (3)
- ○ Disagree (4)
- ○ Strongly disagree (5)

X→

Q68 If I disagree with someone's COVID-19-related posts on social media, I would:

- ☐ Unfollow/Unfriend (1)
- ☐ Block (2)
- ☐ Mute or 'take a break' (3)
- ☐ I would do nothing (5)
- ☐ Other (6) _____

X→

Q69 If you unfollowed, unfriended, muted, 'took a break', or blocked someone on one social media platform (i.e., Facebook), would you do the same on your other platforms (i.e., Instagram and/or Twitter)?

- ○ Yes (1)
- ○ Maybe (2)
- ○ No (3)

Q70 How often do you see content about COVID-19 on social media?

- Always (1)
- Most of the time (2)
- Sometimes (3)
- Never (4)

Q71 I have had an argument about COVID-19 issues with another social media user.

- Definitely yes (1)
- Probably yes (2)
- Might or might not (3)
- Probably not (4)
- Definitely not (5)

Q72 I have strong opinions about COVID-19 content I see on social media.

- Strongly agree (1)
- Agree (2)
- Neither agree nor disagree (3)
- Disagree (4)
- Strongly disagree (5)

X→

Q73 If you see content that is consistent with your beliefs, does it strengthen your view?

- Yes (1)
- Maybe (2)
- No (3)

X→

Q74 How often do you see content on social media that is similar to each other?

- Never - my social media is constantly showing me different content (1)
- Sometimes - my social media usually shows me a variety of content (2)
- Most of the time - my social media usually shows me similar content (3)
- Always - my social media always shows me similar content (4)

End of Block: Survey

Start of Block: Debrief

Q75 DEBRIEFING
UNIVERSITY OF LETHBRIDGE, FACULTY OF EDUCATION
PROJECT SUMMARY (Protocol#)
Selective Avoidance Behaviours on Social Media Amidst the Global Pandemic of COVID-19
Student Researcher: Kristen Brown (Master's Student)
Supervisor: Dr. Kerry Bernes

Thank you for participating in our study! We hope that you found your experience informative and enjoyable. At the beginning of the study, we told you that more information about our research would be provided to you at the end of the session. Please take the time to read the information in this form to find out more about our goals and objectives.

Please print this form or save a copy of it for your reference.
In general, this study aimed to look at how people interact with information that does not agree with their beliefs on social media regarding COVID-19 related issues. Specifically, if people tend to engage in selective avoidance behaviours such as unfollowing, blocking, or hiding information. In addition, this study looked at whether people experienced a perceived out-group threat regarding their views on COVID-19 related issues. We predict that COVID-19 related social media use is positively associated with selective avoidance and that perceived out-group threat will strengthen this positive relationship. Given the surge of social media users and misinformation circling platforms, it is valuable to understand how individuals are interacting with this information and their corresponding reactions to them.

There is a significant gap in this literature as most research investigating selective avoidance and out-group threat are in political contexts. In fact, there is an absence of this research looking at any health crisis, especially COVID-19. This gap must be filled as the coronavirus pandemic has become the world's harsh reality and it is essential to evaluate how society is reacting to information on social media. Further, this research could impact future pandemic outbreaks and the use of social media, for better or for worse.

There were also no foreseeable risks involved in participating in this study. This study has a small potential in provoking discomfort due to the topic of COVID-19. Although, this study should not elicit feelings of distress, inconvenience, fatigue, or physical safety issues. If for any reason you feel distressed or in need of counselling services during or after the completion of this study, please feel free to call the 24-hour mental health support line at 1-800-668-6868, or text 'HOME' to the Crisis Text Line at 686868 for support in another mode if you are not comfortable with a phone call.

This project has been reviewed and approved by the University of Lethbridge Human Participant Research Committee (Protocol #). If you feel you have not been treated per the descriptions in the consent form, or your rights as a participant in research have been violated during this project, you may contact the Office of Research Ethics, University of Lethbridge (Phone: 403-329-2747 or Email: research.services@uleth.ca).

If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures (or you experience adverse effects because of participating in this study), you may contact the primary researcher Kristen Brown, email kd.brown@uleth.ca.

Thank you again for participating in our study! We ask that you please not share the details of this study with your peers until the end of the study and after the feedback has been released, as they may be future participants.

End of Block: Debrief