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Group Biases and Motivated Reasoning in Media Consumption: Evidence for Intergroup Polarization

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Abstract

Group-based identification provides motivation for displaying ingroup favoritism across one's cognitive faculties. Social identity theory purports that individuals are driven to construe positive self-esteem from ingroup membership, predisposing one to positively differentiate themselves from other relevant social groups (outgroups). In this context, social narratives help sustain, propagate and rationalize the existing intergroup differences, and polarized news outlets become a common carrier of such biased narratives. In the current study, across three experimental studies using the minimal group paradigm, we investigated how individuals are predisposed to preferentially process, believe and enact on intergroup news headlines. Experiment 1 revealed faster processing of positive ingroup news headlines compared to those of positive outgroup news. Experiment 2 introduced news sources varying in reliability (low and high) and found asymmetric believability for the positive and negative intergroup news headlines, favoring ingroup irrespective of source reliability. Finally, in Experiment 3, simulating a sharing and voting task, participants again showed preferential sharing of positive ingroup headlines while withholding more negative ingroup news, and displayed clear voting preference for their minimal ingroup candidates. The study demonstrates how easily individuals are susceptible to biased intergroup news consumption, highlighting the urgency for media literacy in the increasingly polarizing information age.

Keywords: ingroup favoritism; minimal group paradigm; social identity theory; media consumption

Introduction

The fabric of human existence is woven through our need to connect, belong, and relate. From forming small tribal communities to constructing vast nation-states, the ability to function as part of groups has been central to human survival and social organization (Kaplan et al., 2009; Windzio, 2024). Accompanying this deep-seated social drive, however, is a strong inclination to divide the social world into “us” and “them,” or more formally, into ingroups and outgroups (Tajfel et al., 1979; Wilder, 1986). Social psychological research has consistently demonstrated that group membership is not merely a social convenience but a psychologically meaningful basis for self-definition and evaluation (Allport, 1954; Sumner, 2007).

A central theoretical framework explaining this tendency is Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 2004), which posits that individuals derive part of their self-concept, and thus strive for positive self-esteem, from the social groups to which they belong. According to this account, people are motivated to view their ingroups positively relative to relevant outgroups, giving rise to systematic ingroup favoritism in perception, evaluation, and interactions with other social agents. Such group-based motivations have been shown to shape moral judgments, trust, empathy, and cooperative behavior, even in the absence of direct competition or material conflict (Brewer, 1999; Cikara et al., 2011; Hogg, 2016).

Importantly, the predictions of Social Identity Theory have found robust empirical support in research using the minimal group paradigm (Tajfel, 1970; Tajfel et al., 1971) demonstrating that even arbitrary and socially meaningless group distinctions are sufficient to elicit ingroup favoritism. This suggests that such biases can emerge from the mere act of categorization rather than from prior histories, instrumental interests, or real-world conflicts (Dunham, 2018). These findings underscore the automatic and motivated nature of intergroup cognition, revealing how social identity and group-membership can operate even in highly stripped-down contexts.

At a societal level, such group-based cognitive processes may contribute to *intergroup polarization*, a longstanding social phenomenon often shaped and sustained by varying social narratives. More recently, the rapid growth of news & social media channels has expanded access to these narratives and have embedded them within the increasingly integrated communicative spaces. Paradoxically, while these media environments may facilitate wider social integration, at times they may also intensify social divisions by amplifying group-based interpretations of individuals' actions and other events in the social world.

Indeed, media theories such as agenda-setting suggest that news outlets can shape public discourse by determining which issues receive attention and which do not (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Additionally, framing processes influence how these issues may be interpreted through selective emphasis and omission (Entman, 1993) by these media narrations. Interestingly, the impact of such media cues is not

uniform; rather, it interacts with cognitive tendencies such as confirmation bias, whereby individuals preferentially attend to, interpret, and endorse information that aligns with their group identities and preexisting beliefs. Together, these processes make news media a critical context in which motivated intergroup information processing can emerge, particularly when individuals encounter evaluative content about ingroups and outgroups.

Also, notably, media does not solely function as a force for intergroup division. Representations across journalism, film, and television can also introduce counter-narratives that challenge stereotypes and promote inclusivity. Prior research demonstrates that exposure to counter-stereotypical portrayals and narratives emphasizing shared human experiences can reduce prejudice, foster empathy, and enhance intergroup understanding (Paluck & Green, 2009; Oliver et al., 2012; Spencer et al., 2016). Together, these findings highlight the dual role of media as both a potential amplifier of intergroup bias and a vehicle for social integration, contingent on how group-related information is presented and interpreted.

Despite this growing body of work, comparatively little is known about the psychological mechanisms through which individuals perceive, evaluate, and respond to intergroup narratives in media contexts. Much existing research has focused on real-world groups and naturalistic media environments, where preexisting attitudes, ideological commitments, and contextual factors make it difficult to isolate the role of group membership itself (Spears, 2021). As a result, the extent to which motivated intergroup responses to media emerge from basic social identity processes, rather than from entrenched social or political divisions, remains underexplored.

To address this gap, the current study draws on Social Identity Theory (SIT) and employs the minimal group paradigm (MGP) to experimentally isolate the influence of group membership on news media consumption. By creating arbitrary group distinctions independent of prior histories or ideological commitments, this approach allows for a controlled examination of motivated intergroup processing as it unfolds during the perception, evaluation, and enactment of news-related decisions.

More specifically, the present study examines motivated intergroup favoritism across three successive stages of news consumption: processing, belief formation, and behavioral enactment. In Experiment 1, we tested whether ingroup favoritism manifests at the level of early information processing by asking participants to detect the valence (positive vs. negative) of intergroup news headlines, irrespective of group membership. Consistent with SIT and prior evidence of ingroup processing advantages, we hypothesized that the valence of ingroup-related headlines would be detected faster than that of outgroup-related headlines.

Extending beyond processing speed, Experiment 2 examined motivated belief formation by asking participants to judge the believability of positive and negative intergroup

news headlines presented as originating from sources varying in reliability (high vs. low). Drawing on motivated reasoning accounts, we hypothesized that positive ingroup news would be judged as more believable than positive outgroup news, whereas negative outgroup news would be judged as more believable than negative ingroup news, irrespective of source reliability.

Finally, Experiment 3 investigated whether motivated intergroup biases may extend to behavioral enactment. Participants completed a news-sharing task involving valenced intergroup headlines and a subsequent voting task involving minimal ingroup and outgroup candidates. We hypothesized that participants would preferentially share positive news about the ingroup and negative news about the outgroup, and that even within a minimal and contextually impoverished setting, participants would exhibit a preference for ingroup over outgroup candidates in the voting task.

Together, these experiments provide experimental evidence of motivated intergroup news consumption, demonstrating how group membership can shape responses to media content even in the absence of real-world group histories or ideological commitments. By isolating the influence of group membership across multiple stages of engagement, the present research contributes to a more mechanistic understanding of how intergroup biases emerge and persist within contemporary media environments.

Experiment 1

Experiment 1 examined whether ingroup favoritism emerges at the level of early information processing in the context of intergroup news perception. Participants were first assigned to one of two minimal groups using the Minimal Group Paradigm (Tajfel et al., 1971) in an adapted replication of Baba et al. (2025). Group membership was established using two fictional and semantically meaningless group labels—*JAWAAI* and *RUPRAA*—Hindi non-words, matched for length and unfamiliar to participants, ensuring the absence of prior associations. Following this categorization phase, participants completed a valence judgment task in which they identified whether intergroup news headlines were positive or negative as quickly as possible, irrespective of the group referenced in the headline. The task design allowed for any ingroup processing advantages to be inferred from faster response times rather than explicit evaluative judgments. Building on evidence that ingroup-related information is processed more efficiently than outgroup-related information (Lazarus et al., 2016), Experiment 1 provides a controlled test of early-stage intergroup processing biases in the domain of news media within a minimal group context.

Methods

Participants The required sample size for detecting a moderate effect size of 0.49 (pilot study, $n = 12$) with a power of 0.80 and an alpha level of 0.05 was calculated to be 33 using G*Power 3.1 software (Faul et al., 2009). Following that, a total of 33 participants were recruited from the institute (13 female, mean age = 23.54 ± 3.59 , all right-handed). A

written consent form approved by the Institute Ethics Committee was completed by all participants prior to running the experiment. All participants were duly compensated for taking part in the experiment.

Stimuli and task Prior to the experiment, 270 news headlines (150 positive, 120 negative) were collected from online sources and adapted to include the minimal group labels *JAWAAI* and *RUPRAA*. These headlines were rated for valence on a 7-point scale by 30 independent participants. From this pool, 144 headlines were selected, 72 most positive ($M = 6.16$, $SD = 1.96$) and 72 most negative ($M = 2.23$, $SD = 1.97$), with an equal number of ingroup and outgroup items (36 positive and 36 negative items per group). Headlines were presented in a newspaper-style format during the valence judgment task (see Figure 2).

The experiment comprised two phases. In Phase 1, participants were assigned to either the *JAWAAI* or *RUPRAA* group and completed an adapted perceptual matching task (Sui et al., 2012). Group membership was indicated using multiple formats of the labels “my group” and “other group” (uppercase, lowercase, capitalized), serving as ingroup and outgroup markers to reinforce conceptual group identification rather than reliance on specific label forms. On each trial, the group-identifying marker appeared above a central white fixation cross ($0.8 \times 0.8^\circ$) on a black background, with the corresponding group name displayed below the fixation cross at a distance of approximately 3.7° (Figure 1). The experiment was programmed in PsychoPy (version 2023.1.3) and run on a 24-inch monitor (1920×1080 resolution, 60 Hz refresh rate), with participants seated approximately 60 cm from the screen.

Following the association phase, participants completed a mandatory 2-minute break before beginning Phase 2. In this phase, they performed a valence judgment task in which news headlines were presented for durations scaled to headline length ($200 \text{ ms} \times \text{number of words}$; range: 1–5.2 s). Responses were permitted only after stimulus offset, during a 1500-ms blank response window. Participants were instructed to respond as quickly as possible, and failure to respond within the allotted time prompted a speed reminder. The task sequence is illustrated in Figure 2.

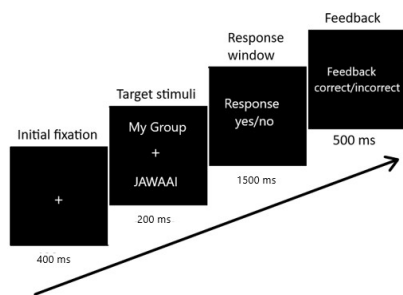


Figure 1: Experiment flow of the association phase. The same design was used for Phase 1 of Exp 1 and 3.

Statistical Analyses For all experiments, data were analyzed in Python and JASP (JASP Team, 2024, JASP Version

0.16.4). For the Phase 1 association task, only matched trials were analyzed, consistent with standard procedures for assessing ingroup benefits (Enock et al., 2020). Participants who exceeded 60% accuracy in the practice block but failed to meet this criterion in the main task were excluded. Response time (RT) analyses included only correct trials, with RTs exceeding 2.5 standard deviations from each participant’s condition-specific mean removed as outliers. For the Phase 2 valence detection task, RTs were log-transformed prior to analysis. These exclusion criteria resulted in the removal of fewer than 5% of trials, and all analyses were performed on the remaining data.

Results

Phase 1 Association Task Reaction times and accuracy were compared between ingroup and outgroup marker-label pairs using paired t-tests on matched trials. Participants responded faster to ingroup pairs ($M = 585 \text{ ms}$, $SD = 74$) than to outgroup pairs ($M = 629 \text{ ms}$, $SD = 76$), $t(32) = 2.865$, $p = .007$, $d = 0.499$. Accuracy was also higher for ingroup pairs ($M = 89.4\%$, $SD = 10.1\%$) than outgroup pairs ($M = 78.9\%$, $SD = 13.9\%$), $t(32) = 3.139$, $p = .004$, $d = 0.546$. These results indicate a robust ingroup association advantage, consistent across participants and interpreted as evidence of successful minimal group identification, which informed subsequent analyses in Phase 2.

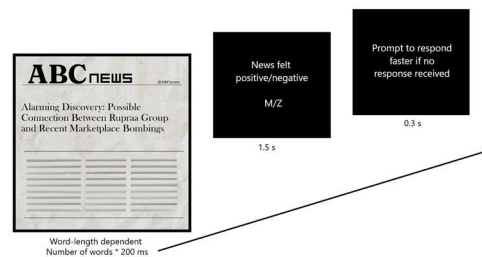


Figure 2: Experiment flow of the Valence Judgment Task of Exp 1

Phase 2 Valence Judgment Task Log-transformed RTs were analyzed using a 2×2 repeated-measures ANOVA with group type (ingroup, outgroup) and valence (positive, negative) as within-subject factors, revealing a marginal main effect of group type, $F(1,32) = 3.672$, $p = .064$, a significant main effect of valence, $F(1,32) = 51.567$, $p < .001$, and a significant interaction, $F(1,32) = 4.337$, $p = .045$. Overall, ingroup headlines were detected faster ($M = 498 \text{ ms}$, $SD = 113$) than outgroup headlines ($M = 519 \text{ ms}$, $SD = 115$), and positive headlines were detected faster ($M = 483 \text{ ms}$, $SD = 109$) than negative headlines ($M = 542 \text{ ms}$, $SD = 139$).

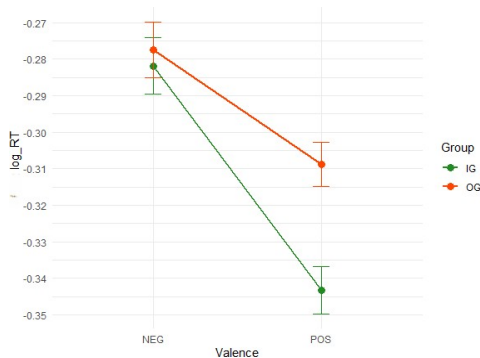
Holm–Bonferroni–corrected post hoc tests showed that the interaction was driven by positive news, with ingroup-positive headlines processed significantly faster ($M = 465 \text{ ms}$, $SD = 110$) than outgroup-positive headlines ($M = 502 \text{ ms}$, $SD = 106$), $t(32) = 2.768$, adjusted $p = .023$, whereas no group differences emerged for negative headlines (ingroup: $M = 538 \text{ ms}$, $SD = 135$; outgroup: $M = 545 \text{ ms}$, $SD = 145$), $t(32) = 0.357$, adjusted $p = .722$ (see Table 1 and Figure 3).

Table 1: ANOVA results for log-transformed RT data.

Source	Sum of Squares	F	p	η^2
Group	0.012	3.672	0.064	0.042
Valence	0.071	51.567	< 0.001	0.238
Group * Valence	0.007	4.337	0.045	0.025

Discussion

Following minimal group categorization, participants showed faster responses to ingroup than outgroup content in the valence judgment task, indicating an early-stage ingroup processing bias independent of task demands. Although the main effect of group membership was marginal, a reliable processing advantage emerged for positive ingroup news relative to positive outgroup news, consistent with social identity–based accounts suggesting facilitated processing of self-relevant, positively valenced ingroup information (Perdue et al., 1990; Chen & Hogg, 2024).

**Figure 3:** Interaction plot for the valence judgment task.

Further, no corresponding group differences were observed for negative news headlines. This absence may reflect competing theoretical predictions regarding the processing of negative intergroup information, whereby ingroup information is prioritized under perceived threat (Mackie et al., 2000, 2004), whereas non-threatening negative content may bias attention toward outgroups (Branscombe & Doosje, 2004; Yzerbyt et al., 2003). Because threat was not experimentally manipulated, the present findings leave open the role of threat in moderating negative-valence processing, highlighting an important direction for future research (Hewstone et al., 2002; Molenberghs, 2013).

Experiment 2

Experiment 2 examined whether motivated ingroup favoritism extends beyond early processing to belief formation in intergroup news evaluation, and whether such bias persists in the presence of source reliability cues. Building on Social Identity Theory and motivated reasoning accounts, this experiment tested whether individuals

selectively endorse intergroup news in ways that favor the ingroup, even when news sources vary in credibility. To this end, participants first learned the reliability of two news sources and then judged the believability of positive and negative intergroup news headlines attributed to these sources. We hypothesized that participants would judge positive ingroup news as more believable than positive outgroup news and vice-versa for negative news.

Methods

Participants Following the sample size calculation in Experiment 1, forty-one participants were recruited from the institute community. Four participants were excluded for failing to learn the reliability of the news sources, leaving a final sample of 37 participants (9 females; mean age = 24 ± 3.08 years; all right-handed with normal or corrected-to-normal vision). All participants provided written informed consent approved by the Institute Ethics Committee and were compensated for their participation.

Stimuli and Task The experiment consisted of two phases. Phase 1 served as a news-source familiarization task, in which participants learned the reliability of two fictitious news sources, *ABC News* and *XYZ News*, counterbalanced as high reliability (75% correct news) and low reliability (25% correct news). Ninety-six news headlines (48 correct, 48 incorrect), adapted from general knowledge articles, were used in this phase.

Phase 2 involved minimal group categorization and an intergroup news believability task. Participants were assigned to one of two minimal groups (*JAWAAI* or *RUPRAA*) and evaluated 72 valenced intergroup news headlines (36 positive, 36 negative) selected from a previously validated pool of 270 headlines. Headlines were balanced for ingroup and outgroup membership and attributed to either the high- or low-reliability news source learned in Phase 1.

The experiment was programmed in PsychoPy (version 2023.1.2) and presented on a 24-inch monitor (1920×1080 resolution; 100 Hz refresh rate).

Procedure In Phase 1, participants judged each news headline as TRUE or FALSE. The task comprised a learning block (64 headlines) with trial-by-trial feedback and a subsequent test block (32 headlines) without feedback. Following this phase, participants identified the more reliable news source in a two-alternative forced-choice task and rated the perceived reliability of both sources on a 0–100% scale.

Phase 2 began with minimal group categorization, after which participants judged the believability of positive and negative intergroup news headlines attributed to the previously learned news sources. News presentation was randomized across two blocks of 36 trials. The headlines were presented in a randomized, time-constrained format: each headline was displayed for 6 seconds, followed by a 2-second window during which participants indicated whether they believed the news to be TRUE or FALSE. Reminder

screens displaying group membership and source reliability appeared at the beginning of the task and between blocks.

Statistical Analyses Data from participants who failed to correctly learn source reliability were excluded, resulting in the removal of fewer than 2% of trials. Believability judgments were analyzed using a $2 \times 2 \times 2$ repeated-measures ANOVA with source reliability (high, low), news valence (positive, negative), and group membership (ingroup, outgroup) as within-subject factors. The primary focus was the valence $\times$ group interaction, with post hoc comparisons conducted using Tukey's HSD test.

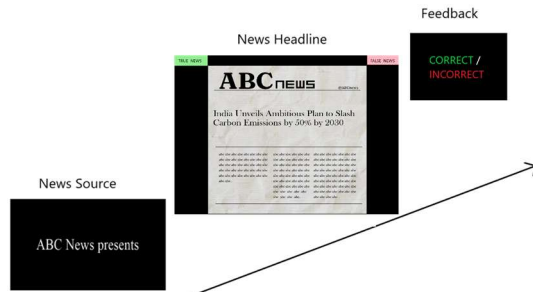


Figure 4: Example task in Exp 2, Phase 1. The trial started with an on-screen display of news source, followed by the news headline. Feedback was provided in learning block of phase 1, but not in testing block. Phase 2 had same task structure (without feedback).

Results

A three-way ANOVA yielded the main effects of news source reliability ($F(1,288) = 76.999$, $p < 0.001$) and news valence ($F(1,288) = 52.379$, $p < 0.001$). A strong interaction effect of news valence and group membership was also obtained ($F(1,288) = 36.855$, $p < 0.001$).

Table 2: Post-hoc comparison for Valence $\times$ Group interaction for Experiment 2

Comparison across	mean difference	p_adjusted
POS:IG - NEG:IG	0.3382	<0.00001
NEG:OG - NEG:IG	0.1124	0.0000053
POS:OG - NEG:IG	0.2381	0.0000001
NEG:OG - POS:IG	-0.2258	0.0000950
POS:OG - POS:IG	-0.10009	0.0024221
POS:OG - NEG:OG	0.1257	0.8426922

A Tukey's HSD test to further elucidate the VAL $\times$ GRP interaction showed that participants significantly favored ingroup news (see Table 2 for post-hoc comparisons) with lower percentage of believability for negative ingroup news compared to negative outgroup news ($p_{\text{adjusted}} = 0.0000053$) and higher percentage of believability for positive ingroup news compared to positive outgroup news ($p_{\text{adjusted}} = 0.0024221$). Figure 5 reports bar plots of all possible VAL $\times$ GRP comparisons.

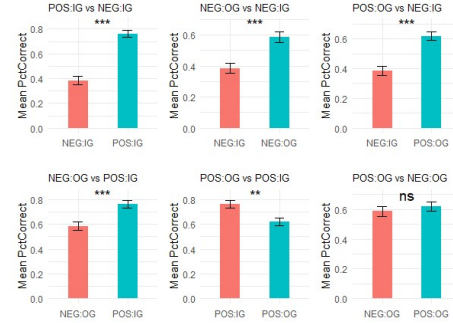


Figure 5: Experiment 2 results. Error bars represent standard errors of the mean.

Discussion

Experiment 2 shows that motivated ingroup favoritism extends from early processing to belief formation in intergroup news evaluation. Participants selectively endorsed news in identity-congruent ways, judging positive ingroup headlines as more believable than positive outgroup headlines and negative outgroup headlines as more believable than negative ingroup headlines, despite explicit cues about source reliability. This pattern aligns with Social Identity Theory and motivated reasoning accounts (Kunda, 1990), indicating that group membership systematically biases evaluative judgments even when credibility information is available. The presence of strong valence- and group-based effects alongside a robust main effect of source reliability indicates that individuals do not disregard credibility cues but rather integrate them selectively in ways that protect ingroup identity. These findings highlight social identity as a powerful filter in belief formation, demonstrating how intergroup biases in news evaluation persist even under minimal group conditions and reduced informational uncertainty.

Experiment 3

Across Experiments 1 and 2, we showed that ingroup favoritism shapes early processing and belief formation in intergroup media contexts. To examine whether these biases extend to behavioral enactment, Exp 3 investigated selective news sharing and voting preferences. The experiment comprised two phases. In Phase 1, participants were assigned to a minimal ingroup (*JAWAAI* or *RUPRAA*) and completed the same association task used in Experiment 1. In Phase 2, participants completed a news-sharing and voting task.

Methods

Sample size was determined via power analysis (target $d = 0.72$), providing adequate sensitivity for both ANOVA and Wilcoxon tests and consequently, twenty-one participants were recruited (5 female; mean age = 21.76 ± 3.19). The associative task was identical to Phase 1 of Experiment 1. For Phase 2, participants viewed 144 intergroup news headlines (72 positive, 72 negative) drawn from the validated stimulus set and balanced by group membership. For each headline, participants decided whether to share it, followed by a voting

decision between an ingroup and an outgroup candidate across 12 constituencies. Headlines were displayed for word-length-scaled durations (250 ms $\times$ number of words), followed by a 1500-ms response window.

Data were analyzed in R. Phase 1 analyses included only matched trials, with standard accuracy and RT exclusions applied. For Phase 2, sharing behavior was analyzed using a 2×2 ANOVA with group membership and news valence as factors, and voting preferences were examined using Wilcoxon signed-rank tests.

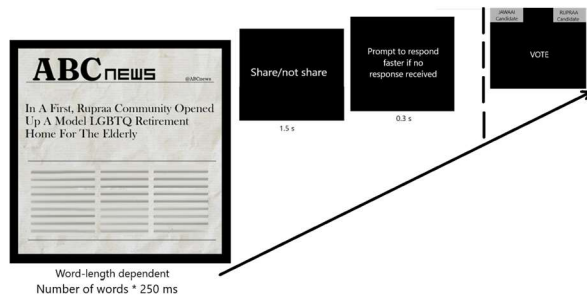


Figure 6: Experiment flow for Experiment 3. The broken line represents the voting page coming after sharing/not-sharing of 12 intergroup news headlines.

Results

Phase 1 Association Task. Replicating Experiment 1, participants showed faster and more accurate responses for ingroup than outgroup pairs, confirming successful minimal ingroup identification following the association phase.

Table 3: ANOVA results for valenced intergroup news sharing.

Source	Sum of Squares	F	p
Group	0.002	0.036	0.849
Valence	0.942	15.488	< 0.001
Group $\times$ Valence	1.099	18.068	< 0.001

Phase 2 Sharing Task. A 2×2 repeated-measures ANOVA revealed a significant main effect of valence, $F(1,20) = 15.488$, $p < .001$, and a significant group $\times$ valence interaction, $F(1,20) = 18.068$, $p < .001$, but no main effect of group membership, $F(1,20) = 0.036$, $p = .849$. Tukey's HSD tests showed greater sharing of positive ingroup than positive outgroup news ($p = .012$) and greater sharing of negative outgroup than negative ingroup news ($p = .026$). Participants also shared positive ingroup news more than negative ingroup news ($p < .001$), with no valence-based differences for outgroup news ($p = .996$). (See Figure 7)

Phase 2 Voting Task. Participants showed a clear ingroup voting preference, with median ingroup votes exceeding outgroup votes, Wilcoxon signed-rank test $V = 152.5$, $p = .003$.

Discussion

Experiment 3 demonstrates that ingroup bias extends from media evaluation to behavioral enactment, shaping both selective news sharing and voting preferences. Consistent with Social Identity Theory, participants preferentially shared positive ingroup news while withholding negative ingroup information, suggesting strategic information management aimed at protecting collective esteem. Conversely, negative outgroup news was more readily shared, reinforcing intergroup distinctions. This pattern aligns with motivated reasoning and confirmation bias accounts, indicating a tendency to disseminate identity-congruent information while avoiding content that threatens ingroup image. Importantly, the voting task revealed a robust preference for ingroup candidates despite minimal group distinctions and balanced information exposure, underscoring how basic social categorization alone can drive affective polarization and biased decision-making in media and political contexts.

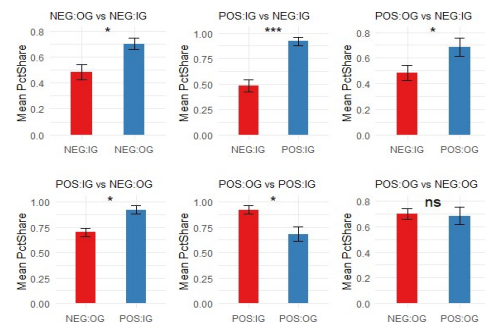


Figure 7: VAL $\times$ GRP posthoc comparisons for Exp 3.

Conclusion

Across three experiments using minimal group categorizations, the current study demonstrates how social identity and group membership systematically shape consumption of intergroup news across successive cognitive and behavioral stages: from early processing to belief formation, to information sharing and political choice. Even in the absence of meaningful group histories or ideological commitments, participants showed robust ingroup favoritism, selectively processing, endorsing, and disseminating identity-congruent news while favoring ingroup candidates in collective decisions. By integrating Social Identity Theory with media cognition and motivated reasoning frameworks, this work provides an experimental account of how intergroup biases emerge and persist within contemporary media environments. Importantly, the findings reveal that credibility cues and informational structure alone are insufficient to override identity-based motivations, highlighting social identity as a foundational filter through which media information is interpreted and acted upon. In an increasingly polarized information landscape, these results underscore the need to address identity-driven motivations when designing interventions aimed at reducing biased media consumption and its downstream societal consequences.

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