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To cite this article: Michelle R. Nelson, Chang Dae Ham, Eric Haley & Un Chae Chung (2021) How Political Interest and Gender Influence Persuasion Knowledge, Political Information Seeking, and Support for Regulation of Political Advertising in Social Media, *Journal of Interactive Advertising*, 21:3, 225-242, DOI: [10.1080/15252019.2021.1978352](https://doi.org/10.1080/15252019.2021.1978352)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/15252019.2021.1978352>



Published online: 02 Nov 2021.



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How Political Interest and Gender Influence Persuasion Knowledge, Political Information Seeking, and Support for Regulation of Political Advertising in Social Media

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ABSTRACT

Political advertising in the United States is regulated differently from commercial advertising, and regulations vary by media. The relative lack of regulations on social media has led to the dissemination of false information, often without source disclosure, which is harmful to democracy. In response, in a self-regulatory capacity, Twitter stopped accepting political advertising in 2019, launching a debate over political advertising regulation. We explore voters' support for regulation of political advertising on social media (as a social or societal outcome of persuasion knowledge), with a focus on how persuasion knowledge of political advertising is related to such support. Our quota sample survey of 208 U.S. voters revealed that political interest in the topic serves as a key moderator in understanding how political information seeking and persuasion knowledge relate to support for regulations. Gender differences in political interest, information seeking, and persuasion knowledge were also found. Men were more likely than women to score higher on these constructs. Considering the role of interest in and information seeking on the topic (i.e., politics) is important for understanding how persuasion knowledge operates.

KEYWORDS

Advertising regulation; gender; persuasion knowledge; political advertising; political information seeking; political interest; social media

On October 30, 2019, Jack Dorsey, Twitter's chief executive officer, announced on Twitter that the platform would no longer accept political advertising. In subsequent tweets, he laid out the reasoning, in part to distinguish the role of political advertising in digital environments: "Internet political ads present entirely new challenges to civic discourse: machine learning-based optimization of messaging and micro-targeting, unchecked misleading information, and deep fakes. All at increasing velocity, sophistication, and overwhelming scale." This was a significant move for a technology company whose revenue relied in part on political advertising, and the action set off a series of decisions from other social media companies for regulating paid political advertising. While some companies also banned paid political advertising (e.g., TikTok) or instilled fact-checking (e.g., Snapchat), some platforms remained open for paid political advertising (e.g., Facebook). YouTube announced it

would do some limited fact-checking but would not allow microtargeting of ads (Tushnet and Goldman 2020).

The move by Twitter was significant in that a tech company, by issuing a ban, was defining political advertising and acting in a self-regulatory capacity. Government regulation of paid political advertising operates differently from commercial advertising because political advertising is considered to be protected speech under the First Amendment in the United States (e.g., Laczniak and Caywood 1987); as such, the regulations for false or misleading advertising dictated by the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) for commercial ads are not often applied to political ads in the spirit of not limiting information (Fowler, Franz, and Ridout 2016). Governmental regulations for digital and mass media political advertising also differ in multiple ways, including source disclosure in social media (Kim et al. 2018). Studies have found

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that people do not know about such regulatory differences between commercial and political advertising (Haley 2020; Lang and Krueger 1993); therefore, they may not invoke critical thinking about political messages. The concern about misinformation from undisclosed sources has brought the issue of social media political advertising into the forefront of public debate. Whereas only 14 public comments were received with respect to a notice of potential rulemaking on Internet ad disclaimers before the 2016 election, the same announcement in October 2017 received input from 149,772 commenters (Haenschen and Wolf 2019).

In a Pew Research survey, 54% of those surveyed believed that social media platforms should not allow political advertising (Auxier 2020). Yet there is not much research on regulation of political advertising (van Steenburg 2015) or understanding of which factors lead people to support such regulation.

Given the unique aspects of digital political advertising, including the lack of regulatory focus, and within the context of social media technology companies taking on self-regulatory actions, we were interested in knowing how U.S. voters feel about regulations of political advertising on social media. Several of the comments on Twitter after Dorsey's announcement reflected divided opinions. Some people applauded the effort: "That's an honourable decision. I've deleted my Facebook account due to the subversive political advertising. Thanks, Jack you're a good man." Others questioned the move: "Do you really think that we the people are that stupid to not know that political ads are bought? That they are made to influence people? We don't need you to protect us from political advertising." Persuasion knowledge (i.e., consumer recognition and understanding about persuasion; Friestad and Wright 1994) is implied in this tweet with its focus on knowledge of political advertising and influence. Such self-regulatory action is considered an unnecessary protection. The implication is that knowledge about a persuasion tactic is protective.

Persuasion knowledge about a persuasion practice has been shown to be positively related to support for regulation (Nelson, Wood, and Paek 2009). Such support might be considered a "social" or societal coping mechanism or protective outcome as a result of persuasion knowledge (Ham, Nelson, and Das 2016). People with knowledge about a potential persuasion tactic that may be harmful to audiences may support regulatory efforts to protect others in society (as opposed to protecting themselves in a given

persuasion episode). Given the importance of political advertising in our democracy, the understanding of persuasion knowledge about political advertising and regulatory support during this time of discussion about social media influence is crucial. Therefore, we investigate the relationship between persuasion knowledge of political advertising and support for regulation. Because there has not been much research in this area, we were interested in reviewing the contemporary regulatory landscape and exploring which factors relate to persuasion knowledge and support for regulation.

Political interest is considered a key democratic norm and value that predicts many aspects of political engagement (Carpini 2004). Research has found that those who are more involved in or show an interest in politics tend to seek out news and information about politics (Lecheler and de Vreese 2017; Strömbäck, Djerf-Pierre, and Shehata 2013). In turn, interest and political information seeking can relate to political knowledge, including knowledge about political advertising. Therefore, we explore how political interest (i.e., levels of interest in politics and national government; Thorson et al. 2021) and information seeking—here, actively looking for information about politics—might contribute to persuasion knowledge of political advertising and support for regulation of social media political advertising. Finally, given that research has shown fairly consistent gendered effects finding that women tend to have lower political interest and knowledge scores than men (e.g., Dassonneville and McAllister 2018), we explore the extent to which gender plays a role in political interest, knowledge, and support for regulation.

Background Context: Political Advertising and Regulation in the United States

Paid political advertising includes advertising about political candidates, issues, or policies, and has been characterized, historically, by "control of the message and use of mass communication channels for distribution" (Kaid 1999, p. 423). Increasingly, however, political messages are being distributed via personalized channels in digital media (Fulgoni et al. 2016). In 2008, \$22.25 million was spent on online political ads (Nott 2020). Estimates of online spending for the U.S. 2019–2020 election cycle were more than \$1.34 billion, which represents 19.5% of the total political advertising spend (He 2020). Facebook dominates the digital media environment with a 59.4% share, bringing in \$796.8 million from political advertising

(eMarketer 2020). Political spending in online environments is effective. A study tracked self-reported political advertising awareness in relation to levels of probable political advertising exposure over time (Thorson et al. 2019). Significant correlations were found between actual political advertising spending and frequency of advertisements and U.S. citizens' self-reported awareness of political advertising, with high awareness for television and social media. The effectiveness of political advertising on social media may be problematic given its lack of government regulation and people's lack of knowledge about regulation of political advertising (Lang and Krueger 1993).

The U.S. Supreme Court has classified advertising for commercial products or services as commercial speech, which refers to "business advertising that does no more than solicit a commercial transaction or state information relevant thereto" (Jackson and Jeffries 1979, p. 1). Commercial advertisements must be "lawful and not be misleading" (Kozinski and Banner 1990, p. 630), and the FTC is responsible for regulation of false and misleading advertising claims. Political advertising is not typically addressed by the FTC because political advertising is given greater protection under the First Amendment (Goldman 2008). Digital and mass media political advertising are also regulated differently (see the Federal Elections Commission [FEC], which administers federal election law, including campaign ads; <https://www.FEC.gov>). The FEC requires a source identification disclaimer on political advertisements, in other words, "a statement that must appear on certain communications to identify who paid for it and, where applicable, whether the communication was authorized by a candidate 52 U.S.C. 30120(a); 11 CFR 110.11" (Tushnet and Goldman 2020, p. 820). The importance of source is underscored in the requirements for how the source should be disclosed: "This disclaimer must be presented in a clear and conspicuous manner, to give the reader, observer, or listener adequate notice of the identity" of the communication's sponsor (p. 821). Despite these clear rules for source disclosure, and with additional specifications for printed and broadcast media, there is "nothing more specific for Internet ads yet" (p. 821). Even with millions of dollars spent on online advertising and numerous questions "about when, if ever, Internet ads meet these standards . . . the FEC has not yet provided a broad answer" (p. 821).

In the 2010 U.S. Supreme Court case, *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*, the majority of

justices ruled that restrictions on corporations or unions using funds for advertising was unconstitutional under the First Amendment. Because of this ruling, a new source of funding for political ads arose: the super political action committee (PAC), which can raise funds and advocate for candidates. If a super PAC is created as a nonprofit organization, under the 501(c) tax identifier, it is allowed to collect *unlimited* funds and does not need to disclose the identity of individual donors. As a result, this *Citizens United* decision "significantly empowered interest groups, allowing them to raise and spend unlimited amounts" (Fowler et al. 2016, p. 25). Certain source information must be disclosed in political ads, such as the organization that funds the political ad. However, since 2010, more outside groups (noncandidates, non-political parties) are now able to create, fund, and distribute political advertising, and many of the messages are "untraceable," so citizens do not know the source or actual individual funders of the messages beyond the name of the PAC (Wood 2018). This is an enormous change in the political advertising landscape. Even political-savvy citizens may not be able to understand the source of political advertisements sponsored by these groups (Haley 2020).

In general, it appears that the regulatory environment has not kept pace with the spending and unique uses of online and social media advertising, including the potential for microtargeting or exposure to messages without source disclosure. For example, Kim et al. (2018) show that several groups who were not registered with the FEC, including those from foreign sources, were able to run divisive issue political advertisements in the 2016 campaign. Without fact-checking or clear and conspicuous source disclosure on the platform, citizens were not able to know the veracity or source of those advertisements. The potential for harm is enormous. An analysis of 1.3 million advertisements with political content from Facebook's political advertising database of messages using Facebook, Google and Twitter revealed that ads with political content in the archives generated between 8.67 billion and 33.8 billion impressions (Edelson et al. 2019). This analysis also showed that there was a significant amount of advertising generated by "quasi for-profit media companies," which were specifically created to send mostly divisive political messages on Facebook; many did not actually exist as for-profit companies. As Edelson et al. (2019) suggest, "Advertising by such groups is a relatively recent phenomenon, and appears to be thriving on online platforms due to the lower regulatory requirements compared to traditional

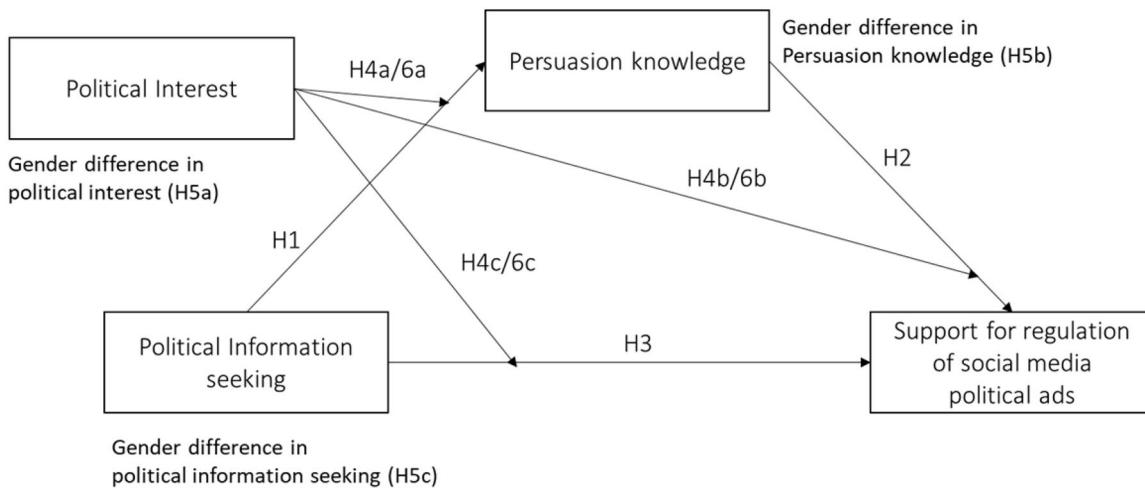


Figure 1. Predictors of support of regulation of political advertising in social media.

advertising platforms.” Sponsor attribution was found to be generally lacking on Facebook, especially for these new kinds of groups. Social media has exacerbated the regulatory situation in that anyone can contribute content from anywhere (e.g., Kim et al. 2018). Over the years, there have been debates and calls for regulation of political advertising (e.g., Caywood and Preston 1989; Richman 1998; White 2009). However, it was a move of self-regulation by a corporate entity, Twitter, that served as a catalyst for wider debate about regulation.

Which Factors Lead to Support for Regulation of Social Media Political Advertising?

The persuasion knowledge model (PKM) is a conceptual model that outlines how persuasion targets and agents (e.g., advertisers) operate in a persuasion episode, with a focus on how their knowledge of persuasion may lead to coping mechanisms and outcomes (Friestad and Wright 1994). We explore the role of persuasion knowledge about political advertising. We also explore which factors are related to this kind of persuasion knowledge and how they relate to support for regulations. Specifically, Figure 1 overviews the hypotheses of the present study. The rationale for each hypothesized link in the model is explained here.

In the body of scholarship on persuasion knowledge, few studies have examined how or why people acquire knowledge about the topic or persuasion context (Ham, Nelson, and Das 2019), despite the important role that “expertise” or knowledge plays in persuasion (e.g., Jacoby et al. 1986). Consumer knowledge has two major components: familiarity and expertise (Jacoby et al. 1986). Such knowledge may affect the extent to which consumers process available

information. Experts tend to have better topic knowledge than novices (Campbell and Kirmani 2008), which provides a greater range of inferences, implications, and ideas that interact with the other forms of persuasion knowledge to result in different coping mechanisms and outcomes. For example, in their study of game players, Lorenzon and Russell (2012) showed that people with topic, agent, and persuasion knowledge displayed more complex thinking and expressed ambivalence about in-game advertising. In a series of focus groups assessing meaning and interpretations of advocacy advertisements with members of a coal mining community, Miller and Sinclair (2009) revealed that knowledge about the industry and persuasion knowledge helped community members to understand and perceive a certain level of industry accountability. Knowledge in these studies was gained through interest or experience in playing games or living or working in the coal mining community. Political knowledge may operate differently with knowledge acquired through active or passive information seeking (Gil de Zúñiga and Diehl 2019).

No previous studies in the field that we found have examined how interest or involvement or seeking information about the topic may impact outcomes of PKM. We explore the roles of political interest and political information seeking on the part of the citizen to obtain topic knowledge about politics and on support for regulation. It has long been argued that an informed citizenry is essential to democracy to understand, analyze, and debate the current issues of the day (e.g., Valentino et al. 2008). However, generally, searching for, attending to, and analyzing information about politics takes a lot of “time, energy and effort” (Valentino et al. 2004). Citizens are thought to be “cognitive misers” who look for heuristics rather than

seeking out complex political information (Simon 1979). Yet *not* seeking out information—instead letting news and information find you through your social media network—is negatively related to political knowledge and political interest (Gil de Zúñiga and Diehl 2019).

Information seeking about politics could include activities such as subscribing to or registering on political websites, searching for information about politics, or reading about or watching video clips about politics (Ekstrom and Shehata 2018). In general, there is a positive impact of media use on political knowledge (Carpini 2004). In an innovative study, Bernhard and Freeder (2020) examined the first stage of information search for unknown candidates. In a series of three experiments, they found that people tended to search for policy information—both specific and general—as well as political party information and information about a candidate's personality and personal life. Information search varied, however, by candidate type (i.e., local officials, national offices) and by level of political knowledge. Those people with less political knowledge were more likely to seek out personal information. Overall, people tended to be using their search in efficient information seeking: Searches appeared to be looking for heuristics that would eliminate a candidate (i.e., deal-breaker). A study among teens found that attention to news, campaign discussions, and campaign interest led to more political knowledge (Meirick and Wackman 2004).

There are also links between information on politics in general and information and knowledge about political advertising. As reported by Thorson et al. (2019), knowledge about politics has been found to be related to the attention citizens pay to political advertising (Eveland and Hively 2009; Chaffee, Zhao, and Leshner 1994). And political advertising has been considered a form of information about candidates (e.g., Kaid 1999). Further, information about political advertising, its strategy, and its veracity has achieved national-level political discussion in the news (e.g., *Washington Post's Fact Checker* column; FactCheck.org; Frantzich 2002; Glowaki et al. 2004; Graves, Nyhan, and Reifler 2016). Therefore, although not all information or news about politics is related to advertising, a substantial amount of political information and news does relate to and provide information about advertising and its strategy and tactics. It is believed, therefore, that seeking information about politics will include exposure to information about political advertising, including social media advertising. We predict the following relationship:

H1: Information seeking about politics (i.e., seeking information about the topic) will be positively related to persuasion knowledge of political advertising.

Outcomes of gaining persuasion knowledge relate to individual or personal ways for coping with persuasion messages, such as counterarguing, refuting, or accepting the persuasion as a result of assessing the match of one's persuasion goals and the appropriateness of the persuasion attempt with one's goals (e.g., Friestad and Wright 1994). Most persuasion knowledge studies have examined the outcome with respect to acquisition of persuasion knowledge in a particular persuasion attempt with the prediction that persuasion knowledge results in reduced persuasion (e.g., Ham, Nelson, and Das 2015). In one of the few studies to examine persuasion knowledge and political advertising, Boerman and Kruikemeier (2016) showed that people in the Netherlands were more likely to recognize that a promoted tweet was an advertisement when it was from a political party. This activated persuasion knowledge then resulted in personal coping behaviors, such as increased skepticism and reduced persuasion. Another experimental study of online political microtargeting and persuasion knowledge in the Netherlands (Kruikemeier et al. 2016) reported that only for those people who recalled seeing a labeled political advertisement Facebook post was their persuasion knowledge activated. Although the persuasion knowledge in this study did not influence perceptions of the message source (i.e., political party), it did diminish the propensity of the voters to share the message in their social networks, thus highlighting another possible coping mechanism or outcome from persuasion knowledge.

Other outcomes not discussed in the original PKM could be considered social or societal outcomes (Ham, Nelson, and Das 2016) where individuals consider other actions as a result of acquisition of persuasion knowledge that may be related to the role of the persuasion tactic in society, such as public policy initiatives or support for regulation. Research has found that support for media censorship or regulation of socially undesirable media content may be based on the desire to protect others from harmful messages (Chia, Lu, and McLeod 2004; McLeod, Detenber, and Eveland 2001). A few studies have examined the relationship between acquiring persuasion knowledge about a tactic and support for regulation. In an experimental study, participants who gained persuasion knowledge about video news releases (VNRs) by reading about the tactic and/or seeing a VNR labeled in a newscast were more likely than control

participants to support governmental regulation of VNRs (Nelson, Wood, and Paek 2009). A focus-group study of those who had topic and persuasion knowledge about coal mining practices in their community (Miller and Sinclair 2009) also found evidence of an “accountability framework” where participants, presumably due to their persuasion knowledge, acknowledged a lack of governmental regulation in the coal industry and indicated they would support such regulation. However, other studies have shown mixed results. Although direct effects were not predicted, there was no correlation between subjective persuasion knowledge about online behavioral advertising (OBA) and regulation for OBA (Ham, Nelson, and Das 2016). In a different persuasion context, Evans (2014) showed parents of children ages seven to 11 an advergame and then assessed their situational persuasion knowledge (related to the game), their “trait” (or subjective persuasion knowledge), their attitudes toward advergames, and support for regulating advergames. Contrary to predictions, Evans (2014) reported that only negative perceptions (but not persuasion knowledge) related to support for regulation of advergames.

In our study of political advertising, we argue that those who are actively seeking information about politics and have persuasion knowledge about political advertising are likely to be those who are more highly involved with the topic of politics and show political interest. Political interest has been shown to relate to many behaviors, including information seeking, news use, political engagement, and active civic customization (Thorson, Xu, and Edgerly 2018).

Those who are involved, interested, and knowledgeable about politics are thought to have better developed cognitive structures and would be better able to process information (Faber 1992). In line with PKM (Friestad and Wright 1994), we expect that people with more developed forms of knowledge about political advertising will have more beliefs and information about political advertising, including tactics, effects, and ability to judge appropriateness of tactics. Research in political science suggests that people with more knowledge and interest tend to participate more in the democratic process, including voting and mobilizing others (Carpini and Keeter 1996). The search for information and integration with existing knowledge allows citizens to recognize issues and problems.

Therefore, we propose that political information seeking (i.e., seeking information about the topic) and persuasion knowledge about political advertising will allow people to better recognize potential issues and

problems with social media and political advertising, which will lead them to support regulation. In addition, people who believe they are knowledgeable may also believe they are better at coping with persuasion tactics than others who may be less knowledgeable. (Huh and Langteau 2007). As pointed out by Eisend (2015, p. 55), “[K]nowledgeable consumers see other consumers as more vulnerable than themselves and as more likely to be persuaded by advertising. If persuasive attempts of marketers are perceived to be weakened by effective regulation, the perceived impact on other consumers is reduced.” These scholars suggest it is the perception of people’s own knowledge that leads them to support regulation of “harmful” advertising (e.g., Eisend 2015; Huh and Langteau 2007; Ham, Nelson, and Das 2016). Thus, we suggest that those with knowledge about politics from information seeking and those who believe they have knowledge about political advertising (persuasion knowledge) would both support government regulation.

H2: Persuasion knowledge will be positively related to support for regulation of political social media ads.

H3: Political information seeking will be related to support for regulation of political social media ads.

Finally, given the key role that motivation and interest play in political behaviors, we predict that political interest will play a moderating role in our study. Specifically, we predict the following:

H4(a): Political interest will moderate the relationship between political information seeking and persuasion knowledge. Specifically, the more people are interested in politics, the more likely their political information seeking will be related to persuasion knowledge of political advertising.

H4(b): Political interest will moderate the relationship between persuasion knowledge and support for regulation of political social media ads. Specifically, the more people are interested in politics, the more their persuasion knowledge will be related to support for regulation of political social media ads.

H4(c): Political interest will moderate the relationship between political information seeking and support for regulation of political social media ads. Specifically, the more people are interested in politics, the more their political information seeking will relate to support for social media regulation.

The Role of Gender in Politics and Support for Regulation

Scholars in political science have examined relationships between demographics and politics with research

identifying gender differences. Men tend to score higher than women in political interest (Bennett and Bennett 1989; Wolak 2020) or “paying attention to politics” (Verba, Burns, and Lehman Scholzman 1997), in information seeking and attention to news about politics (e.g., Conway 2000), and in political participation (e.g., Burns, Lehman Schlozman, and Verba 2001). In a recent study, Ihme and Tausendpfund (2018, pp. 39–40) suggest that “one of the best-known empirical findings is the gender difference in political knowledge” citing research that shows women and girls tend to score lower on political knowledge measures than men and boys (e.g., Carpin and Keeter 1996; Mondak and Anderson 2004; Simon 2017), with similar findings around the world (Abendschön and Tausendpfund 2017; van Deth et al. 2011). Some of the explanations for such differences relate to socialization differences or stereotype threat when the stereotypes (i.e., about women and politics) may result in less confidence in women’s responses or diminished performance on knowledge measures about politics. Indeed, men have been shown to indicate greater confidence in their “political competence” (Burns et al. 2001). Schneider and Bos (2019) also report on this gender knowledge gap by highlighting findings from the American National Election Studies (ANES) data. Women have consistently scored lower than men on the five-question political knowledge scale (Carpini and Keeter 1996; McGlone, Aronson, and Kobrynowicz 2006). Yet, at the same time, women and men agree on the relative importance of personality and issues in evaluating candidates (e.g., Newman and Sheth 1984), and women are more likely than men to be registered to vote in the United States and tend to vote in higher rates than male voters (Center for American Women and Politics 2017). However, no research we found has shown gender differences with respect to support for regulation of political advertising. Given that the most prevalent findings in political science suggest gendered differences in political interest, information seeking, and knowledge (and perceptions of competence), we predict the following:

H5(a): Men will indicate a higher interest in politics than women will.

H5(b): Men will indicate they are more likely to engage in information seeking about politics than women will.

H5(c): Men will indicate a higher persuasion knowledge than women will.

Further, given these presumed differences in political interest, political information seeking, and

persuasion knowledge between men and women, we also propose that the propensity to use these factors in their decision making about support for regulation of social media political messages will vary. That is, for men who are predicted to have greater interest (involvement) and persuasion knowledge, we expect that they will use this full range of information and inferences to predict their support for regulation. However, for women who may not have as high levels of political interest or persuasion knowledge, we propose that these factors will not relate to how they feel about regulation.

In line with the elaboration likelihood model (ELM) of processing (Petty and Cacioppo 1986), those who are highly involved and knowledgeable about a topic are more likely to process information elaboratively, using all available information cues to make a decision, whereas those with less interest, involvement, and knowledge are more likely to process information heuristically. If people who are interested and involved in politics are also experts, then their “political schema” is likely to include many concepts and linkages among concepts (Fiske, Kinder, and Larter 1983). In our study, we suggest that interest in the topic and allocation of effort in political information seeking about the topic are key variables to understanding the development of persuasion knowledge and whether these variables relate to support for regulation of political advertising on social media. Given the presumed higher interest, information seeking, and persuasion knowledge among men, we predict that the relationships in our model, in other words, the moderation effects predicted in hypotheses 4(a) through 4(c), will be significant for men only.

H6(a): The moderation effect of political interest on the relationship between political information seeking and persuasion knowledge will be significant for men but not for women.

H6(b): The moderation effect of political interest on the relationship between subjective persuasion knowledge and support for regulation will be significant for men but not for women.

H6(c): The moderation effect of political interest on the relationship between political information seeking and support for regulation will be significant for men but not for women.

Method

Sampling, Participants, and Procedure

The variables in this article are part of a broader study of political advertising. We conducted a survey with

Table 1. Demographic profiles: Comparison of our quota sample to the U.S. Census.

Profile	N	%	Census* (%)	Profile	N	%	Census* (%)
Age ^a				Employment			
20–24 years	27	12.9	9.1	Labor force, employed	116	55.8	59.6
25–34 years	35	16.9	18.6	Labor force, unemployed	15	7.2	3.4
35–44 years	36	17.2	16.9	Armed forces	2	1.0	0.4
45–54 years	38	18.2	17.3	Not in labor force	75	36.1	36.6
55–64 years	34	16.3	17.2	Total	208	100	100
65 years and over	38	18.5	20.9				
Total	208	100	100				
Gender				Income			
Female	106	51.0	50.8	Less than \$25,000	32	15.4	19.2
Male	102	49.0	49.2	\$25,000–\$34,999	26	12.5	8.9
Total	208	100	100	\$35,000–\$49,999	27	13.0	12.4
Ethnicity				\$50,000–\$74,999	44	21.2	17.2
White	169	81.3	60.7	\$75,000–\$99,999	24	11.5	12.7
African American	14	6.7	12.3	\$100,000–\$149,999	31	14.9	15.1
Asian American	6	2.9	5.5	\$150,000 or more	24	11.5	14.5
American Indian	1	0.5	0.7	Total	208	100	100
Pacific Islander	2	1.0	0.2				
Hispanic or Latino	12	5.8	18.0	Living area ^c			
Two + races	4	1.9	2.6	Urban area	168	80.8	79.0
Total	208	100	100	Rural area	40	19.2	21.0
Education				Total	208	100	100
Less than high	3	1.4	12.0	States ^d			
High school graduate	43	20.7	27.0	Northwest	38	18.3	17.1
College, no degree	40	19.2	20.4	Midwest	42	20.2	20.8
Associate's (two years)	29	13.9	8.5	South	72	34.6	38.3
Bachelor's (four years)	46	22.1	19.8	West	55	26.4	23.9
Graduate	47	22.7	12.4	Others	1	0.5	
Total	208	100	100	Total	208	100	100
Political Affiliate ^b				Religion ^e			
Independent	46	22.1	38.0	Christian	150	72.1	76.0
Democrat	79	38.0	34.0	Judaism	6	2.9	1.2
Republican	83	39.9	28.0	Islam	3	1.4	0.6
Total	208	100	100	Buddhism	1	0.5	0.5
				Other religions	3	1.5	3.4
				Nonreligious	45	21.6	18.3
				Total	208	100	100

Note. Total $N = 208$; *2018 Census data; ^aAge was combined into six groups for convenience; ^bPew Research data 2016; ^cData from 2010 U.S. Census; ^dCombined to four regions following U.S. Census standard; ^eData from 2008 U.S. Census.

registered U.S. voters ($n = 208$) recruited through the Qualtrics sample pool using quota sampling. Quota sampling is a nonprobability sampling method wherein the collected sample has the same proportions to the entire population with respect to known characteristics (Lavrakas 2008). Using U.S. Census data, this study attempts to match our sample profile to the basic demographic proportion of the U.S. population. Our sample was slightly older and less racially diverse when compared with the U.S. Census (see Table 1).

The study was approved by the university research ethics board. Qualtrics recruited registered U.S. voters from their sample pool and screened to match the planned quota (gender: female 51%; male: 49%; ages 18–24: 13%; 25–34: 18%; 35–44: 17%; 45–54: 18%; 55–64: 16%; 65+: 19%; region: Midwest: 21%; Northwest: 18%; South: 37%; West: 23%). Participants were invited to the questionnaire on Qualtrics.com and answered a screening question (checking if they were registered U.S. voters). Those who satisfied the screening question completed the survey. Respondents received a small monetary contribution for participation.

Measures

Persuasion knowledge of political advertising was assessed using the persuasion knowledge scale (Bearden, Hardesty, and Rose 2001) adjusted to the context of political advertising (six items; e.g., “I know when the offer in political advertising is too good to be true”; $M = 5.79$; $SD = 1.06$). Reliability was satisfied (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .913$).

Political information seeking was gauged with the following four items in which participants responded about the frequency of their behavior with the prompt “I have …”: “Subscribed/registered on political websites”; “Searched for information about politics or societal issues”; “Read about politics on blogs/websites/media”; and “Watched videos or clips about societal issues or politics” on a 7-point scale (1 = *Not at all frequently*; 7 = *Very frequently*; $M = 3.96$; $SD = 1.89$; Ekstrom and Shehata 2018). Reliability was satisfied (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .893$).

Political interest was measured by asking participants to respond to three statements (“I am interested in politics in general”; “I am interested in the coming presidential election”; “Politics are important to me”) using a scale anchored with 1 = *Strongly disagree* and

Table 2. Results of hierarchical regression analyses: Tests of hypotheses 1, 2, 3, 4(a), 4(b), and 4(c).

Model	DV: PK			DV: Reg			DV: Reg	
	Hypotheses 1 and 4(a)			Hypotheses 2 and 4(b)			Hypotheses 3 and 4(c)	
		β	<i>t</i>		β	<i>t</i>		β
1	Pinfo	0.24	3.52**	PK	0.35	5.36***	Pinfo	0.21
	<i>R</i> ²	0.06		<i>R</i> ²	0.12		<i>R</i> ²	0.04
	<i>F</i>	12.36**		<i>F</i>	28.69***		<i>F</i>	9.40**
2	Pint	0.45	5.86***	Pint	-0.01	-0.08	Pint	0.04
	<i>R</i> ²	0.19		<i>R</i> ²	0.12		<i>R</i> ²	0.05
	<i>F</i>	24.32***		<i>F</i>	14.28***		<i>F</i>	4.79**
3	Pinfo × Pint	0.17	2.58*	PK × Pint	0.13	1.90 ^a	Pinfo × Pint	0.19
	<i>R</i> ²	0.22		<i>R</i> ²	0.14		<i>R</i> ²	0.08
	<i>F</i>	18.88***		<i>F</i>	10.84***		<i>F</i>	5.86***

Note. DV = dependent variable; pinfo = political information seeking; pint = political interest; PK = persuasion knowledge; reg = support for regulation; bold = results of hypotheses tests.

*** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$; ^a $p < .1$.

7 = *Strongly agree* ($M = 5.24$; $SD = 1.51$), modified from Thorson et al. (2016). Reliability was acceptable (Cronbach's $\alpha = .901$).

Support for regulation of social media political advertising was measured by asking the following questions using a scale anchored with 1 = *Strongly disagree* and 7 = *Strongly agree*: "It would be better if there were no political advertising on social media"; "I think political advertising on social media should be banned;" and "I would support that government should regulate political advertising on social media" ($M = 5.33$; $SD = 1.51$). Reliability was satisfied (Cronbach's $\alpha = .865$).

Results

To test the proposed hypotheses, first, we ran a series of hierarchical regression analyses. The interaction terms were based on the standardized scores of the independent variables. The first hierarchical regression was run to examine the relationship between political information seeking and persuasion knowledge in hypothesis 1 and the moderation effect of political interest in hypothesis 4(a) on this relationship; see Table 2, hypotheses 1 and 4(a) column. The second regression was conducted to examine the relationship between persuasion knowledge and support for regulation in hypothesis 2 and the moderation effect of political interest in hypothesis 4(b) on this relationship; see Table 2, hypotheses 2 and 4(b) column. The third regression was run to test the proposed relationship between political information seeking and support for regulation in hypothesis 3 and the moderation effect of political interest in hypothesis 4(c) on this relationship; see Table 2, hypotheses 3 and 4(c) column. Second, we ran a series of analyses of variance (ANOVAs) to test the group difference between men and women in hypotheses 5(a) through

5(d) on the three variables. Third, we ran another set of hierarchical regression analyses to examine whether the moderation effect of political interest works on the proposed relationships in different gender groups in hypotheses 6(a) through 6(c) (see Tables 3 through 5).

Hypothesis 1 posits that political information seeking will be positively related to persuasion knowledge of political advertising. The result of the first hierarchical regression analysis revealed that political information seeking was significantly related to persuasion knowledge of political advertising [Model 1: $F(1, 206) = 12.36$; $p < .001$; political information seeking: $\beta = .24$; 95% CI (LB = .06; UB = .21); $t = 3.52$ $p < .01$; see Table 2, Model 1 in hypotheses 1 and 4(a) column]. Thus, hypothesis 1 was supported.

Hypothesis 2 predicts that persuasion knowledge will be positively related to support for regulation of political advertising. The result of the second hierarchical regression analysis showed that persuasion knowledge was significantly related to support for regulation [Model 1: $F(1, 206) = 28.69$; $p < .001$; persuasion knowledge: $\beta = .35$; 95% CI (LB = .32; UB = .68); $t = 5.36$ $p < .001$; see Table 2, Model 1 in hypotheses 2 and 4(b) column]. Thus, hypothesis 2 was supported.

Hypothesis 3 postulates that political information seeking will be positively related to support for regulation of political advertising. The result of the third hierarchical regression analysis demonstrated that political information seeking was significantly related to support for regulation [Model 1: $F(1, 206) = 9.40$; $p < .01$; political information seeking: $\beta = .21$; 95% CI (LB = .06; UB = .28); $t = 3.07$; $p < .01$; see Table 2, Model 1 in hypotheses 3 and 4(c) column]. Thus, hypothesis 3 was supported.

Hypotheses 4(a), 4(b), and 4(c), respectively, postulate that political interest will moderate the

relationships between information seeking and persuasion knowledge; between persuasion knowledge and regulation support; and between political information seeking and regulation support. The result of the hierarchical regression analysis—see [Table 2](#), Model 3 in hypotheses 1 and 4(a) column—revealed that political interest successfully moderated the relationship between political information seeking and persuasion knowledge [Model 3: $F(3, 204) = 18.88; p < .001; \beta = .17; 95\% \text{ CI (LB} = .04; \text{UB} = .32\text{)}; t = 2.58; p < .05$] such that the more people were interested in politics, the more they sought out information and acquired persuasion knowledge of political advertising than when they were less interested in politics. Thus, hypothesis 4(a) was supported.

The result of the second hierarchical regression analysis—see [Table 2](#), Model 3 in hypotheses 2 and 4(b) column—revealed that political interest marginally but significantly moderated the relationship between persuasion knowledge and regulation support [Model 3: $F(3, 204) = 10.84; p < .001; \beta = .13; 95\% \text{ CI (LB} = -.01; \text{UB} = .41\text{)}; t = 1.90; p = .056$], which demonstrated that the more people were interested in politics, the more they acquired persuasion knowledge of political advertising and supported regulation of political ads on social media. Thus, hypothesis 4(b) was supported.

The result of the third hierarchical regression analysis—see [Table 2](#), Model 3 in hypotheses 3 and 4(c) column—showed that political interest significantly moderated the relationship between political information seeking and regulation support [Model 3: $F(3, 204) = 5.86; p < .001; \beta = .19; 95\% \text{ CI (LB} = .09; \text{UB} = .51\text{)}; t = 2.77; p < .001$]. The more people were interested in politics, the more the more they sought out information and supported regulation of political ads on social media. Thus, hypothesis 4(c) was supported.

Hypotheses 5(a), 5(b), and 5(c), respectively, posit that men will indicate higher political interest, higher political information seeking, and higher persuasion knowledge of political advertising than women. The result of the first ANOVA showed that the hypothesis was supported [$F(1, 206) = 12.30; p < .001; \eta_p^2 = .06$], demonstrating that men showed significantly higher political interest ($M = 5.61; SD = 1.38$) than women ($M = 4.89; SD = 1.55$). Thus, hypothesis 5(a) was supported. The result of the next ANOVA revealed that men indicated significantly higher political information seeking ($M = 4.59; SD = 1.76$) than women ($M = 3.36; SD = 1.82; F(1, 206) = 24.78; p < .001; \eta_p^2 = .11$). Thus, hypothesis 5(b) was supported.

The result of the third ANOVA revealed that men showed significantly higher persuasion knowledge ($M = 6.01; SD = .86$) than women ($M = 5.57; SD = 1.19; F(1, 206) = 9.21; p < .01; \eta_p^2 = .04$). Thus, hypothesis 5(c) was supported.

Hypotheses 6(a), 6(b), and 6(c), respectively, posit that the moderation effect of political interest will be significant for men, but not for women, on the relationship between political information seeking and persuasion knowledge; between persuasion knowledge and support for regulation; and between political information seeking and support for regulation. We ran a series of hierarchical regression analyses to examine the same moderation effect for men and women separately. The results of the first hierarchical regression analyses revealed that the three-way interaction between gender, political information seeking, and political interest on persuasion knowledge was not significant after controlling all the main and two-way interaction effects [Model 3: $F(7, 200) = 8.87; p < .001; \beta = .17; 95\% \text{ CI (LB} = -.18; \text{UB} = .43\text{)}; t = .82; p > .05$; see [Table 3](#), Total column]. Thus, hypothesis 6(a) was not supported.

Given the strong support for gender differences in political interest and knowledge in past research and identified in our sample—per hypotheses 5(a), 5(b), and 5(c)—we conducted stratified hierarchical regression analyses to see the role of gender in the given relationship. The result revealed that the moderation effect of political interest on the relationship between political information seeking and persuasion knowledge was statistically significant for men [Model 3: $F(3, 98) = 14.4; p < .001; \beta = .26; 95\% \text{ CI (LB} = .09; \text{UB} = .46\text{)}; t = 2.94; p < .01$; see [Table 3](#), Men column] but not significant for women [Model 3: $F(3, 102) = 6.02; p < .001; \beta = .15; 95\% \text{ CI (LB} = -.06; \text{UB} = .37\text{)}; t = 1.39; p > .05$; see [Table 3](#), Women column].

The results of the next hierarchical regression analyses showed that the three-way interaction between gender, persuasion knowledge and political interest on the regulation support was not statistically significant [Model 3: $F(7, 200) = 4.96; p < .001; \beta = .20; 95\% \text{ CI (LB} = -.49; \text{UB} = .45\text{)}; t = .08; p > .05$; see [Table 4](#), Total column]. Different from our hypothesis, the moderation effect of political interest on the relationship between persuasion knowledge and regulation support was not significantly different across men and women. Thus, hypothesis 6(b) was not supported.

Due to the strong support for gender differences in past research and in our sample, we ran subsequent stratified hierarchical regression analyses to see if the

Table 3. Results of hierarchical regression analyses: Test of hypothesis 6(a).

Model	DV: PK			DV: PK			DV: PK	
	Total (n = 208)			Men (n = 102)			Women (n = 106)	
	β	t		β	t		β	t
1	Gd	0.12	1.84 ^a	Pinfo	0.19	1.91 ^a	Pinfo	0.19
	Pinfo	0.06	0.80					
	Pint	0.45	5.77***					
	R^2	0.02		R^2	0.04		R^2	0.03
	F	17.54***		F	3.65 ^a		F	3.68 ^a
2	Gd × Pint	0.04	0.10	Pint	0.56	5.24***	Pint	0.38
	Gd × Pinfo	0.33	0.98					
	Pinfo × Pint	0.16	2.68**					
	R^2	0.23		R^2	0.25		R^2	0.13
	F	10.25***		F	16.04***		F	8.00***
3	Gd × Pint × Pinfo	0.17	0.82	Pinfo × Pint	0.26	2.94**	Pinfo × Pint	0.15
	R^2	0.24		R^2	0.31		R^2	0.15
	F	8.87***		F	14.40***		F	6.02***

Note. DV = dependent variable; pinfo = political information seeking; pint = political interest; PK = persuasion knowledge; reg = support for regulation; Gd = gender.

***p < .001; **p < .01; *p < .05; ^ap < .1.

Table 4. Results of hierarchical regression analyses: Test of hypothesis 6(b).

Model	DV: Reg			DV: Reg			DV: Reg	
	Total (n = 208)			Men (n = 102)			Women (n = 106)	
	β	t		β	t		β	t
1	Gd	0.03	0.50	PK	0.41	4.54***	PK	0.29
	Pint	0.01	0.16					
	PK	0.35	4.74***					
	R^2	0.12		R^2	0.17		R^2	0.09
	F	9.57***		F	20.65***		F	9.66**
2	Gd × Pint	0.20	0.50	Pint	-0.05	-0.49	Pint	-0.01
	Gd × PK	0.79	1.48					
	Pinfo × PK	0.12	1.64					
	R^2	0.15		R^2	0.17		R^2	0.09
	F	5.81***		F	10.36***		F	4.79*
3	Gd × Pint × PK	0.20	0.08	PK × Pint	0.08	0.85	PK	0.14
	R^2	0.15		R^2	0.18		R^2	1
	F	4.96***		F	7.13***		F	3.85*

Note. DV = dependent variable; pinfo = political information seeking; pint = political interest; PK = persuasion knowledge; reg = support for regulation; Gd = gender.

***p < .001; **p < .01; *p < .05; ^ap < .1.

moderation effect of political interest existed for men and women. The result showed that the moderation effect of political interest on the relationship between political information seeking and persuasion knowledge was statistically significant neither for men [Model 3: $F(3, 98) = 7.13$; $p < .001$; $\beta = .08$; $t = .85$; $p > .05$; see Table 3, Men column] nor for women [Model 3: $F(3, 102) = 3.85$; $p > .05$; $\beta = .15$; $t = 1.37$; $p > .05$; see Table 3, Women column]. Thus, hypothesis 6(c) was not supported.

Finally, we ran subsequent stratified hierarchical regression analyses to see if the moderation effect of political interest differs across men and women. The results demonstrated that the moderation effect of political interest on the relationship between political information seeking and regulation support was statistically significant for men [Model

3: $F(3, 98) = 4.82$; $p < .05$; $\beta = .25$; 95% CI (LB = .09; UB = .46); $t = 2.51$; $p < .05$; see Table 5, Men column] but not for women [Model 3: $F(3, 102) = 1.16$; $p > .1$; $\beta = .16$; 95% CI (LB = -.06; UB = .51); $t = 1.41$; $p > .05$; see Table 5, Women column].

Discussion

Our exploratory study adds to the limited research on political advertising in our field by reviewing the regulatory landscape and by showing how interest in politics plays a key moderating role in predicting information seeking about politics and persuasion knowledge about political advertising and support for regulation of political advertising on social media. We also show how individual differences (i.e., gender) in interest, information seeking, and persuasion

knowledge about a topic (i.e., politics) matter for the social outcome of support for political advertising regulation. As such, our review of the contemporary regulatory landscape for political advertising, including social media political advertising, and our study of the factors that relate to U.S. voters' support for regulation of political advertising in social media offer a contribution to literature in digital advertising. We also broaden understanding of persuasion knowledge: (1) we show how interest in and information seeking about the topic/context relates to persuasion knowledge; and (2) we show how persuasion knowledge relates to a societal outcome in the support for regulation in a new persuasion context. Given that we are one of the first studies in our field to discuss regulation of political advertising in the contemporary media landscape, we reiterate and expand on our findings in the context of other research and current regulations.

Need for Regulation of Social Media

Our review shows that there has not been much regulation of political advertising in general since the rise of digital and social media. There are media-specific rules for printed materials and for television and radio from the FEC, but there are no such rules for digital or social media political advertising. Technology companies have filled this gap in regulations by banning or fact-checking political advertising on their social media channels. Our study, like the 2020 Pew Research survey, shows some support for regulation in general. The support appears to be driven by several factors, including persuasion knowledge of this persuasion tactic.

Our study builds on the theoretical development of persuasion knowledge in several ways. First, we are exploring how increased persuasion knowledge can result in a social or societal outcome of support for regulation in the political advertising context. This extends the notion of "persuasion knowledge as power" and "persuasion knowledge as protection" (e.g., Friestad and Wright 1994; Ham, Nelson, and Das 2019) to protect *other* people. In our study it was the knowledge of the tactic that related to support for regulation for the full sample. Friestad and Wright (1994) suggest that "an individual with more well-developed persuasion knowledge may have beliefs about how target audiences with different characteristics are more or less affected by ads" (p. 17). Persuasion knowledge was related to the support for regulation. We add to a handful of other studies that

looked at social incomes, such as support for regulation within the persuasion knowledge framework (e.g., subjective persuasion knowledge: Evans 2014; subjective and objective persuasion knowledge: Ham, Nelson, and Das 2016; Nelson, Wood, and Paek 2009).

Second, we explore the role of interest in and information seeking about a topic (i.e., politics or political knowledge seeking) and show how these variables of "involvement" relate to persuasion knowledge. Topic knowledge relates to beliefs and knowledge about the topic of the message such as a product, service, social cause, or candidate (Friestad and Wright 1994). Despite its prominence in the original conception of the PKM (as one of three forms knowledge: persuasion knowledge, agent knowledge, and topic knowledge), there has been little study of the antecedents to these forms of knowledge or the ways that the knowledge forms may interact.

We propose that research using PKM might consider the role of involvement and knowledge about the topic in assessing individual and social coping mechanisms and outcomes. Our findings also suggest interest in the topic leads to different engagement in and use of information and inferences in decision making. In our research, those who had higher interest in politics (men) also showed greater information-seeking behavior and higher persuasion knowledge of political advertising. The findings of our study suggest that persuasion models such as ELM of persuasion (Petty and Cacioppo 1986) may be useful for understanding how involvement relates to constructs in PKM. Indeed, in their seminal article Friestad and Wright (1994) argue for integration of persuasion knowledge into existing persuasion theories, including ELM.

Third, we show demographic differences (gender) in persuasion knowledge that appear to be the result of differences in interest and information seeking about the topic. Thus far, research investigating persuasion knowledge has focused only on age differences (e.g., Nelson et al. 2020). Future research might consider whether or how additional factors may contribute to higher or lower persuasion knowledge. This is especially important for developing media literacy interventions and education.

Implications, Issues, and Ideas

Our study results suggest that the more people are interested in and engage in information seeking about politics (i.e., topic knowledge), the more they feel they have knowledge of political advertising (i.e.,

Table 5. Results of hierarchical regression analyses: Test of hypothesis 6(c).

Model	DV: Reg			DV: Reg			DV: Reg		
	Total (n = 208)			Men (n = 102)			Women (n = 106)		
		β	t		β	t		β	t
1	Gd	0.04	0.51	Pinfo	0.27	.28**	Pinfo	0.11	1.14
	Pinfo	0.04	0.43						
	Pint	0.18	2.02*						
	R^2	0.05		R^2	0.07		R^2	0.01	
	F	3.27*		F	7.83**		F	1.3	
2	Gd × Pint	0.33	0.76	Pint	0.01	0.04	Pint	0.06	0.51
	Gd × Pinfo	0.30	0.82						
	Pinfo × Pint	0.20	2.62**						
	R^2	0.08		R^2	0.07		R^2	0.02	
	F	3.07**		F	3.88*		F	0.77	
3	Gd × Pint × Pinfo	0.23	1.04	Pinfo × Pint	0.25	2.51*	Pinfo × Pint	0.16	1.41
	R^2	0.09		R^2	0.13		R^2	0.03	
	F	2.78**		F	4.82*		F	1.18	

Note. DV = dependent variable; Pinfo = political information seeking; Pint = political interest; PK = persuasion knowledge; reg = support for regulation; Gd = gender.

*** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$; ^a $p < .1$.

persuasion knowledge); therefore, they see a need for regulation of the practice in social media. Conversely, if people do not seek out information about politics and have low confidence in their political advertising persuasion knowledge, they do not realize a need for regulation probably because they do not know enough about the topic or persuasion tactic to see a need for regulation. The knowledge gained from information seeking and paying attention to political advertising related to support for its regulation. As argued by Caywood and Preston (1989, p. 216), “self-regulatory efforts also rise out of a public and private concern for the controversial nature of political advertising.”

These observations make sense intuitively. Yet the extent to which people actively seek out information versus allowing the news to find them through social media (Gil de Zúñiga, and Diehl 2019) has changed substantially in the past decade given the digital and social media landscape. This is problematic, especially when platform algorithms dictate which news sources and information purveyors “find” audiences members (Thorson et al. 2021). Encouraging people to look beyond their social media feed and seek out information is important in understanding politics and regulatory issues. Given that U.S. voters appear to have relatively low knowledge about digital political advertising (Nelson, Ham, and Haley 2021), there is room for education and information about political advertising and how it operates on social media.

Thus, the practical implication of these findings is that if we want to create more critical consumers of political information, such as those who can see potential problems with political information sources, we have to increase individuals’ political interest and motivations to seek out political knowledge in general.

Given that our study found women had less political interest and motivation to seek out political information than men, special efforts need to address how to increase women’s political interest and information seeking, especially because more women than men are registered to vote in the United States. Understanding how women engage with political messaging on social media is an area for future study for academics and political strategists. Some research suggests that women and men are similarly involved in political messaging, although women may be less likely to engage in overt political commenting on social media (Bode 2017).

An informed citizenry is essential to the successful functioning of a democracy. This study shows that increased political interest, information seeking, and confidence in personal political knowledge can lead people to see potential issues with political information sources such as online political advertising as reflected in the result that those with higher levels of these three variables perceived a greater need for regulation. This ability to see potential problems with political information content and tactics is essential for individuals to be critical consumers of such information and how that information is used to choose leaders or evaluate political issues and actions.

While our study did not distinguish between self-regulation and governmental regulation, regulation of political advertising in social media is a complex topic. It is interesting that the ban by Twitter is an effort of self-regulation, which could be seen as taking a moral stance by “protecting” citizens against misleading political advertisements. However, self-regulation can also serve to “maintain or even increase the freedom of political advertising by reducing the perceived need

for governmental regulation" (Caywood and Preston 1989, p. 217).

Regulation of social media political advertising has been discussed widely as a human rights issue (e.g., Nott 2020) in part due to microtargeting and the inability of citizens to distinguish the source and veracity of claims. Ellen L. Weintraub (2019), chair of the FEC, pointed out this issue: "It is easy to single out susceptible groups and direct political misinformation to them with little accountability, because the public at large never sees the ad. As a result, falsehoods in microtargeted political ads may go unchecked—and these falsehoods can have a significant impact on elections." Microtargeting means that the general public will not see these same potentially misleading ads, thus limiting the ads' transparency and accountability and the ability to "flush out" disinformation in a larger public forum. Caywood and Preston (1989) also warned that any movement from no regulation to self-regulation might have the effect of moving political advertising into the "regulation realm," which may have a "chilling effect" on speech. Thus, limiting paid political advertising on social media networks may be limiting free speech and the opportunity for discussion and learning from those advertisements. Research has shown that discussion on social media "can greatly expand our pool of potential discussion participants, offer an alternative means to consume news, learn about politics, and blur the boundaries between private social interactions" (Yoo and Gil de Zúñiga 2014). With respect to political advertising on social media, there is currently a laissez faire approach with very little or no regulation. It appears from our exploratory study that people who are most involved in and think they know about political advertising are supportive of regulation.

However, even if the general public supports self-regulation or governmental regulation, there may be difficulty in implementing such regulations. First, there is ambiguity about definitions of advertising in general (e.g., Dahlen and Rosengren 2016) and lack of explicit inclusion or definition of social media political advertising in the current FEC definition of public communication (Edelson et al. 2019). Is an entertaining TikTok video a political ad? What if the creator was paid? Given the rise of political influencer marketing, even on platforms such as TikTok, which do not officially accept political advertising (Sloane 2017), there is ambiguity and need for attention to the definition and regulation of political messages in social media.

There are technical difficulties specific to self-regulation and disclosure practices on social media that require knowledge on the part of the regulators that may currently be lacking (Kim et al. 2018). Edelson et al. (2019) show how the way that sponsors are revealed on Facebook often does not disclose the true source; the sponsor of political ads could be the company, the candidate, or even the third-party advertising agency that made the ad. The authors suggest there is a need for more precise discussion about how to implement and enforce sponsorship disclosure roles in a way that makes it "practical to deploy at scale and more difficult to circumvent." There are also other barriers within the technology sector for restricting or eliminating political advertising. Kreiss and McGregor's (2019) interviews and e-mail exchanges with staff at Facebook reveal a "fundamental tension at play between Facebook's desire to be an arbiter of political attention and avoid being an arbiter of political truth" (p. 515) and point to the revenue garnered from political advertising. Finally, even if the tech companies could help define political advertising and police disclosures, this may not solve all issues. One person's Twitter response to Dorsey suggested: "Banning political adverts is like banning prostitution, it continues just the same but harder to regulate and track. The money will be spent with influencers and more subtle 'behind the scenes' ways. Much harder to regulate and more subversive. @Jack#dontbanadverts." The danger here is that more subtle forms of political persuasion may evolve that are outside of the boundaries of regulation.

Limitations and Future Research

This study used quota sampling, but it appeared to have oversampled among older, White, and more educated participants as compared with the overall population. Future research should seek to fill in those gaps.

Overall, there is relatively low explanatory power of our antecedents (demonstrated by the R^2 values in the regression models) presumably because there are many other factors besides information seeking and political interest that might explain how people form persuasion knowledge in this context and regulation support. In fact, human perceptions and behaviors are not easy to predict, and the correct R^2 value varies by research area (Frost 2021).

We argue that the findings here are still meaningful given that our study is the first to propose the role of such antecedents in the PKM and political advertising

context. We urge scholars to consider additional factors in future research.

Further, we found a direct relationship between persuasion knowledge and support for regulation; however, in exploring these relationships between persuasion knowledge and social outcomes more thoroughly, scholars could ask people about their perceptions of the effects of political advertising, for example, on self or others (i.e., first- or third-person perception; Davison 1983). Past research has shown that people do not feel they are personally affected by advertising but that others are affected (i.e., third-person perception; Eisend 2017), and this third-person perception may be related to support for regulation (e.g., online gambling and violent games; Wan and Youn 2004) or to persuasion knowledge. In a study of OBA, subjective persuasion knowledge was positively related to this third-person perception of OBA (Ham, Nelson, and Das 2016).

We found that information seeking about the topic was positively related to persuasion knowledge. To what extent information seeking leads to actual political knowledge (topic knowledge) and better coping mechanisms or personal outcomes for persuasion could be investigated. In addition, information seeking may be hampered or enhanced with algorithms and news gathering on social media (Thorson et al. 2021); reviewing how information and advertising is targeted and received among voters is a key issue for future investigation. We used self-reported gender identity in our research, but future work should also consider broader ideas about gender, including social roles and intersectional identity (e.g., race/ethnicity, social class) beyond binary measures of male and female (Schneider and Bos 2019) and might investigate nuances in political interest and knowledge across issues and local versus national races (e.g., Coffé 2013).

Despite these limitations, we hope our study spurs on research in political advertising. The study and implications of public understanding of persuasion knowledge of political advertising, particularly on social networks, and the ways that public policy, reform, and regulation may be enacted present an area ripe for future research.

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