

**Polarization and selective media exposure: a look into the
online news outlets consumption habits of Catalans during the
Catalan Referendum**

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ABSTRACT

On October 1st, 2017 the autonomous government of Catalonia decided to set a unilateral self-determination referendum with the continuous opposition of the Spanish government. This political conflict was extensively covered by all the Spanish media and attracted worldwide attention through the coverage of international media institutions in many different countries. This thesis aims to explore the online media consumption habits of Catalan citizens during that period by focusing on to what extent selective media exposure relate to polarized attitudes. Adopting a quantitative approach, it was distributed a cross-sectional online survey through different Facebook and WhatsApp groups, of different political leanings that helped for the configuration of a non-random sample of 237 Catalans. The results of this research show that there is a relationship between having a higher polarized attitude and having a higher level of selective media exposure to political concordant online media. The nature of this relationship demonstrates that individuals with a higher polarized attitude are trusting more the media organizations following like-minded political stance while they show untrustworthiness towards politically dissimilar media organizations. Moreover, according to the research results, the stance of pro-independence supporters displayed a higher selective media exposure towards Catalan-based online news outlets than pro-unitarism supporters towards Spanish-based online news outlets. This entailed that pro-independence supporters showed a higher level of trust in Catalan-based online media than pro-unitarism supporters towards Spanish-based online media. However, the polarization of attitudes did not create animosity between individuals of different political stances since it was not found a significant level of affective polarization towards out-group individuals. In the case of affective polarization to contrary political elites there was a relation between having an unfavorable opinion towards pro-referendum or against-referendum politicians and being a pro-unitarism or pro-independence supporter. Overall, is relevant to highlight the toleration towards discrepant opinions among the Catalan society but continuing studying these media phenomena before it becomes a bigger issue for democratic politics.

KEYWORDS: Polarization, Selective media exposure, Catalan Referendum, Online news outlets, Spanish media

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1. Introduction

This research will explore the phenomena of polarization and selective media exposure using as a case study the Catalan referendum of 2017. The Spanish strongly partisan media tradition, as well as the substantial political event that the referendum turned out to be, with heavy ideological charges, might have produced a unique media landscape that the author considered relevant for media scholars to analyze and research, using a quantitative approach.

The claim of Catalan people to self-determination is not something that arose sporadically in recent years. The first time that Catalonia demanded the right to self-determination was after the elections of April 1931, where the Republican party 'Esquerra Republicana' emerged as the irrefutable winner of those elections (Medrano, 1994). After that, the Second Republic was established in Spain and it brought to the approval of a Statute of Autonomy for Catalonia in 1932 that conceded some economical, juridical and cultural improves as well as more power of decision to the Catalan region.

As history shows, the Second Republic collapse with the mutiny of the Spanish army leaded by Francisco Franco and with the support of fascist European leaders, that turned into a civil war among two differentiate blocs: 'Republicanos' (defenders of a federalist multicultural political project) and 'Franquistas' (supporters of a Spain with only one cultural identity). The civil war lasted 3 years (1936-1939) and was followed by a thirty-six-year Dictatorship that suppressed and prohibited any traces of Catalan language, culture and republican ideology. Democracy was reestablished after Franco's death in 1978. The Constitution of 1978 even if it was progressive by its time and circumstances, it was made under a lot of pressure and caution to not reanimate remaining fascists leaders and forces thus it was written in behalf to "laid the basis for a degree of cooperation and toleration between the Catalan autonomist project and the Spanish centralized project" (Miller & Miller, 1996, p.116), which it meant the inclusion of decrees vaguely written and open to one's interpretation. This is one of the main juridical problematics that the country is facing nowadays and in what the conflict of the Catalan referendum is mainly based on due to it is not implicit in the Constitution that a region cannot organize a self-determination referendum, it relies on the constitutional interpretation of a judge, court or state (Levrat, Antunes, Tusseau & Williams, 2017). The Catalan government had been trying since 2003 to acquire more institutional power through a series of political procedures that were never granted by the Spanish government, in order to gain more autonomy to legislate in education, economy or matters of social services. The continuous negative of the central government increased the number of Catalans that started to support pro-independence parties, that finally won with a majority of votes the elections to the

‘Generalitat de Catalunya’ in 2015. Once the pro-independence parties formed the new government, they decided to organize a referendum of self-determination - as it was the main promise of the electoral campaigns of these parties - the 1st of October of 2017, where all the Catalan citizens would be called to vote, whether they wanted Catalonia to become an independent state in form of Republic or not.

Once the date of the referendum was set, the Catalan government started to make juridical and administrative arrangements in order to grant that the 1st of October all the Catalans citizens could vote normally. In parallel, the Spanish government kept assuring that the referendum would never take place and that extraordinary measurements will be taken to prevent this to happen. Consequently, thousands of police officers were sent to Catalonia to guarantee that the court order from the Constitutional, banning the referendum, was going to be followed by Catalan authorities and citizens (ABC, 2017). Many Catalans got mobilized after the arrival of the police to the region with volunteers spending the night in the school ballots in order to block the entrance of the police authorities and to assure that the schools could open the 1st of October. Because of the exceptional characteristics of the political event, an extensive media coverage was displaced during that day, with hundreds of authorized media journalists from all over the world to document what would happen minute by minute in the school ballots and in the Catalan and Spanish governments. Therefore, the different national and international media covering the referendum, become crucial actors since they end up being the guarantors of explaining to the world what happened that day, depicting whether the referendum could be legitimize or not and if there was excessive violence from the policies authorities or from the citizens. Furthermore, even if some citizens experienced the referendum firsthand, it was a very followed event in the media, in where people may had chosen partisan news outlets to gather information thus creating different beliefs and perceptions among the Catalan citizenship of what happened that day.

Several media scholars have already examined the relationship between media and politics, which is crucial for the process of constructing narratives, spreading messages to a mass audience and framing and shaping opinions, ideologies and events (Weber & Koehler, 2017). This research will focus specifically on the partisan selective exposure and polarization in the daily media consumption that, such a mediatized political event like the referendum, entangled in the Catalan society. Thereby, this thesis aims to fulfil answer the next question:

RQ: To what extent does selective media exposure relate to polarized attitudes in Catalan society regarding the Catalan referendum?

The social relevance of this topic comes precisely with the impact that had over the Spanish political and democratic structure, the public debate opened after its celebration and the measures taken by the Spanish government and the courts over the elective Catalan politicians, 9 being imprisoned and 7 managing to exile to other European countries (among them the former President of 'la Generalitat' Carles Puigdemont). The referendum concern is so remarkable that keeps eclipsing the agenda of the news outlets, not only in Spain but as well in Europe, every time the case advances. It was also possible to notice how polarization increased among citizens during that period, with people demonstrating against the political actions that the Spanish government was taken, and in the other stance by organizing marches for the unity of Spain, cheering the decisions of the Spanish government. Polarization was also present in the media being visible in the way that the news outlets framed the events related to the referendum, by either describing it as an unconstitutional rebellion or as a democratic and peaceful movement of civilian disobedience. This thesis wants to research if the Catalan society was polarized and the choices of online news outlets made by the Catalans citizens were subject to a partisan selective exposure to likeminded media, dismissing other points of view or balanced media, that could go against one's beliefs.

The scientific relevance of the research comes with the lack of literature around the media context that surrounded the referendum and the days after its celebration, in which different media sources were giving large coverages, monopolizing all the mediatic space of the Spanish media with the last-minute information and developed events. Therefore, the Spanish society was highly exposed to this political event, by either consuming it in the media or encounter it in their daily life activities, in form of discussions or debates with others, being difficult not to develop a clear and strong opinion about it. The research will contribute filling the gap that exists in scientific literature due to its a relatively new political conflict that other scholars have not yet analyzed using media theories and concepts, adding also, new literature to the concepts of polarization and selective media exposure. These media phenomena have been extensively studied in a United States political context by many authors (Stroud, 2010; Faris, Roberts, Etling, Bourassa, Zuckerman & Benkler, 2017; Prior, 2013) that focused primarily on polarization and selective exposure of citizens during election periods. It is possible to see a lack of literature when it comes to polarization and selective exposure of citizens during a political event such as a referendum of self-determination. It would be simplistic to expected that citizens behave the same way when facing ordinary elections in a country than in a referendum, thus the need to research it separately and in a broaden way.

Accordingly, the research question surrounds the Catalan referendum of the 1st of October 2017 and will be linked to prior media studies, in order to examine which sources of online news outlets were used by the Catalan population during that day and the subsequent days, on the follow-up political events. Hence, the research will look at the relationship between the online news outlets choose by the Catalan citizens to gather information and opinions and one's political position upon the celebration of an independence referendum for Catalonia.

The thesis was divided in three main sections. A first chapter of discussion of previous studies regarding the concepts of polarization and selective exposure as well as a contextualization of the Spanish media landscape and its particularities. A second section describing the methodology and steps followed to conduct the research and a results chapter in where the findings will be presented, and the hypotheses will be accepted or rejected. In the final conclusion chapter, it will be given and overall discussion of the findings answering the research question and it will be explained the limitations of the research and future lines of investigation.

2. Theory and previous research

This chapter will analyze and review the concepts and studies of other political-media scholars that will set the theoretical ground of the present research and provide a reasonable argumentation for the hypotheses. The concepts presented in this chapter will mainly focus on the potential media influence of increasing polarization and affective polarization attitudes among Catalan individuals during the period of the self-determination referendum of 2017. Possible causes for polarization will be explored, such as selective media exposure to like-minded partisan outlets and the hostile media effect towards neutral information.

2.1 Characteristics of the Catalan media system

As a starting point, it is relevant to evaluate the Catalan media landscape that is composed by both Spanish and Catalan media (from public and private broadcasters) and its singularities when it comes to news outlets and editorial lines behind the media conglomerates.

As Hallin and Mancini (2004) argue, the press in Southern Europe if compared to the Northern European countries, has historically had a lower amount of readers, commercial profits and press circulation, and entangles a situation where the press must be often subsidized by political actors. This situation has generated discussions around the ethical implications of the media in these countries, especially when it comes to their “degree of political parallelism and of journalistic professionalism” (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, p.22). The media history of the Mediterranean region, which is marked by several political conflicts, can explain the strong tradition that exists in those countries where media systems are thought of as means of ideological expression and political mobilization, contrasting with the characteristics of western or northern media systems (Papathanassopoulos, 2007). One may argue that the media landscape could have changed and that the Spanish media system could have been modernized since Hallin and Mancini wrote their renowned and popular academia article in 2004. To assess this claim, the authors offered an updating version of their three media models 12 years later. However, the Spanish media system is still portrayed with the same high level of political parallelism from twelve years ago, thus remaining in the classification of being a ‘polarized pluralistic’ media model characterized by low newspaper circulation, weaker journalistic professionalism and high levels of state intervention in the form of press subsidies (Hallin & Mancini, 2016).

Analyzing more in-depth the aforementioned characteristics that make countries media model considered as a ‘polarized pluralistic’ system, the concept of political parallelism describes the extent to which media content reflects distinct political orientations in news

coverages and the existence of organizational connections between media and political parties. Media in Spain is considered to be instrumentalized by political actors and elites since “it is increasingly dominated, not by industrialists with their primary interests outside the media but, by two broad multimedia conglomerates which, however, do have strong political alliances (Prisa with the socialist party PSOE and Telefónica with the conservative party PP)” (Papathanassopoulos, 2007, p.194). Political parallelism can also be manifested through the “partisanship of media audiences”, with readers/viewers consuming different types of media depending on their political affiliations (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, p.22). Another important characteristic to be considered a polarized pluralistic media model is the low mass circulation of newspapers (in the case of Spain) and the fact that in those societies’ citizens tend to rely more on online outlets and television as sources of political information than in the printed-press. This approach also applies to the Catalan media landscape, since the last barometer made in November 2018 by the Catalan Institute of Opinion showed that television and Internet are the most accessed types of media in Catalonia by citizens that seek politically related news (Centre d’Estudis d’Opinió, 2018, p.65). Reinforcing this line of argumentation, Spain “has one of the most diverse homegrown, digital-born sectors in Europe” (Newman, Fletcher, Kalogeropoulos, Levy & Kleis Nielsen, 2018, p.102). Two-thirds of the Spanish population access news daily through online sources (Newman et al., 2018). However, the most consulted online websites for political news related are paradoxically online versions of printed newspapers (e.g. *El País*, *La Vanguardia*, *El Mundo*, *Ara*) or television websites (*TV3*, *Telecinco*) (Centre d’Estudis d’Opinió, 2018, p.68). It is also important to consider exclusively online press sites such as *El Diario*, *Vilaweb*, *Ara* and *Nacional*, which are among the top 10 most visited sites for political online news outlets by Catalan citizens (Centre d’Estudis d’Opinió, 2018, p.68). The terms online news outlets and online media will be used in this thesis to refer to both online versions of other media as well as exclusively online sites.

The Catalan media landscape is composed by Catalan and Spanish public media as well as private media conglomerates, but both types of media present clear signs of political parallelism and interventionism from the state. The governing board of the public media in Spain and Catalonia used to be chosen by the government in power, evincing organizational connections between the public media and political parties. RTVE (the Spanish public broadcaster) and CCMA (the Catalan public broadcaster) were both regularly criticized for pro-governmental bias in its news coverage and a lack of balance in its use of sources and commentators, which brought about a change in the law in September 2018, that established open and public competition and the need for a two-thirds (rather than simple) majority in

Parliament for appointing its governing board and presidency (Newman et al., 2018). Even with this change in the law of public competition, it could still be argued that political parallelism and pro-governmental bias exists in the public media in Spain and Catalonia, due to ruling parties are still electing the governing board of the public media conglomerates by creating alliances with related parties to get the two-thirds necessary. On the other hand, the Spanish and Catalan private media conglomerates also highly rely on public subsidies via indirect contributions that are made by buying advertisement spots as 'institutional publicity' (Generalitat de Catalunya, 2011), which makes certain media greatly subject to political parties in order to gain public monetary revenues. This situation does not significantly apply to Tv channels due to their earnings are safer with multiple advertisers, rather it is the traditional press who is the most affected, due to facing a major crisis in the print-business model. Traditional press revenues are falling as a result of the downturn of advertisements and the decline in readership, which is throwing the newspapers to adopt a digital strategy in order to survive and make more profits (Prado, 2014). This crisis made the main press names in Spain highly dependent on such mentioned public subsidies of governments in order to secure their continuity and their strategic business model, which can bring about the question of whether or not editorial freedom has been compromised to obtain these monetary revenues. The outcome of all these aspects and singularities of the Spanish media structure is that half of the citizens do not trust media outlets and their neutrality thus being associated with certain ideological tendencies weakening journalists' professionalism and work (Newman et al., 2018). The possible mistrust of the Spanish society towards news outlets because of their connections with the respective Catalan and Spanish governments, makes this thesis research focus on investigating at a deeper level, the citizen's consumption patterns of online media when it comes to political news events, taking as a case of study the referendum of the 1st of October of 2017 drive by the Catalan government. This research will analyze if the patterns of online media consumption vary in function of one's political view toward the aforementioned referendum, focusing not only in the concept of political parallelism already discussed, but also in the media effects of polarization and partisan selective exposure that will be discussed in the following sections.

2.2 Polarization of attitudes and partisan leaning in media

Since a framework has already been given to better understand and conceptualize the media landscape in Catalonia and Spain, the author will move forward to argue whether the Catalan media can be considered polarized and taking partisan discourses when reporting political news as well as possibly polarizing readers attitudes. Polarization can be a complex

phenomenon involving a range of dynamics that play out differently in different contexts. In this case, this paper will pay more attention to the polarization of mass audience rather than of elites, focusing on the concept of polarization as the state where people's attitudes have diverged to ideological extremes (DiMaggio, Evans & Bryson, 1996). Attitudinal polarization in citizens can imply that these move to the poles and harden their beliefs, becoming more challenging to find consensus solutions in a society where compromise becomes more difficult and elusive (Levendunsky, 2013).

As scholars have already discussed in the past (Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Newman et al., 2018), because of the intrinsic characteristics of the Spanish media system, it has always been recognized some sort of partisan coverage within the Spanish and Catalan media in politically related news. Simultaneously, the development of cable television and the explosion of media outlets on the Internet have created a more fragmented information environment in which cable news, talk radio, and 24-hour news outlets compete for attention. Given this dramatic increase in the number of available news outlets, it is not surprising that media choices increasingly reflect partisan considerations, thus individuals are able to seek out and find news outlets that enhance their consistent beliefs (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009). Baumgartner and Chaqués (2015) conduct a quantitative content data analysis research upon those that are considered the two leading, most-rigorous and distinguished newspapers of Spain, *El Mundo* and *El País*. The results revealed biases on political news especially when it came to cover the rival party of each newspaper. The findings exposed that *El Mundo* (considered as a conservative newspaper) tend to always be more critical with the political performance of the left-wing party 'PSOE' and *El País* (considered as a liberal newspaper) with its corresponding political opponent, the right-wing party 'PP'. The results of the research of Baumgartner and Chaqués (2015) show the existence of "partisan differences in news coverages, downplaying the actions of allies and focusing on heaping bad news of rivals" (p.269).

Nevertheless, is not possible to consider the prior traditional partisan news coverages with the Catalan independence conflict, it has to be studied as a particular and extraordinary case because it has altered the traditional press editorial lines when reporting outlets related to the referendum. It can be argued that the differences in the performance of partisan coverages in referendums news outlets do not reside anymore in the traditional dichotomy of having a more liberal press or conservative press approach, rather it is about either having pro-independence discourses or pro-unitarism discourses in most of the news outlets relating Catalan politics. In other words, if *El Mundo* and *El País* were typically characterized as having different political coverages depending if the main left or wing party was involved, now both

are considered to have the same editorial line when it comes to the news coverages of Catalan politics. This can be explained by the fact that PSOE and PP hold almost the same posture upon the referendum of independence, being both against it, although in different intensities. This entailed that pro-unitarism discourses are being related and spread by the four Madrid-based newspapers (*El País*, *El Mundo*, *La Razón* and *ABC*) and the two respective main titles in Catalonia (*La Vanguardia* and *El Periódico*), all of them “joining the main Spanish political parties in defending the legal status quo” (Newman et al., 2018, p.102). This involved that the considered ‘rigorous and leading press’ of Spain and Catalonia for the mass audience, are now found to have similar coverages and editorial lines with, for example, typically partisan right-wing press such as *La Razón* and *ABC* (Baumgartner & Chaqués, 2015). This situation has raised questions of lack of balance or contrasted coverages among the traditional press and main conglomerates when talking about the Catalan independence topic that could have lead to polarized attitudes among citizens. It could be discussed whether the Spanish media landscape is becoming less plural when the main media conglomerates follow predominantly the Spanish political parties discourses against the referendum and its celebration. With this landscape, the discourse of pro-independence regional parties that happen to be a minority in the Spanish Parliament, have fewer media coverage at the national level, obviating this way the ‘rival’ political actors discourses of the conflict.

If we look at the Catalan regional level, the pro-independence parties have the majority of representatives in the Catalan Parliament, and is possible to find media spreading more pro-independence discourses, such as *TV3*, the Tv channel with higher audience in the region and the online news portal *324* that is one of the most visited for political news outlets (Centre d’Estudis & d’Opinió, 2018), both belonging to the public Catalan media conglomerate ‘Corporació catalana de mitjans audiovisuals’ (CCMA). Both mediums have been questioned for focusing overly on pro-independence discourses or approaches on its news outlets and with some programs, neglecting pro-unitarism discourses (Newman et al., 2018). Concurrently the pro-independence discourse has been openly discussed by different exclusively partisan online press sites, such as *Ara*, *Vilaweb*, *Nacional* or *Nació Digital* that happen to be some of the most-read online news outlets by the Catalan citizens when searching for political news (Centre d’Estudis d’Opinió, 2018, p.68). Even if it would be possible to argue that the Catalan media is more monopolized by pro-independence discourses, it is important to remark that Catalan citizens have access to the Madrid’s discourses but not the other way around. Is possible to find Catalan media names like the beforementioned leading newspapers *La Vanguardia* and *El Periódico* with predominantly more Spanish parties’ discourses. It is

important to remark that all the media discussed above mentioned only reports in the Catalan language and even if they are available online to a Spanish audience, it is not really possible to be read by a non-Catalan speaking citizen. This aspect is especially important because it can imply that there might be two different realities portrayed among the Catalan-based and Madrid-based media. Catalan speakers are also native in the Spanish language, because of the dual-mandatory educational system in Catalonia, but a Spanish citizen does not speak Catalan natively. Since the research is only focusing on Catalan citizens online media consumption patterns, this aspect will not affect the plurality of online sources that can be used and accessed by the Catalans due to the fact that anyone in Catalonia is capable in reading either Spanish and Catalan written news outlets, but it is not the same the other way around. The author considered that it was important to mention this aspect to better understand the singularities of the political conflict when it comes to media coverage and why the Spanish society is sometimes portrayed in the media as highly 'polarized' and even by some people 'indoctrinated' depending if you are Catalan or Spanish (Gil, 2017).

Therefore, it would be possible to argue that the Spanish and Catalan media landscape has become strongly polarized and mostly taken a partisan approach, depending on the nature and scope of the online media, and around the divisive issue of the Catalan referendum, which might have led individuals to take polarized attitudes. However, it is important to not fall into too deterministic lines of argument. The relationship between media and politics is undeniable, with several scholars highlighting that they become crucial during the process of constructing narratives, spreading messages to a mass audience and framing and shaping opinions, ideologies and events (Weber & Koehler, 2017). However, media and journalists, also translate the reality of the politic spheres and the political climate in their news reports. Continuing with this line of argumentation, Prior (2013) states that the rise of polarization in the media can be the result of previous polarized discourses among the political elites in a heated political climate. In the case of Catalonia, it was possible to acknowledge how pro-independence politicians' and pro-unitarism politicians' discourses scaled its intensity in 2015, when the determination to carry out a referendum of independence by the Catalan government was becoming plausible due to the pro-independence parties, achieved for the first time, the majority in the Catalan Parliament (BBC Mundo, 2015). After that time, the political stances became more polarized, being especially reflected on the types of accusations and threats that both sides of politicians would throw to each other (BBC Mundo, 2015). This heated polarized climate got portrayed by and translated into the media, with the polarization and more radical partisanship of news outlets when reporting about Catalan political news.

Previous scholars' arguments and findings present a polarized media system in Catalonia with strong organizational connections among governmental actors and the existence of partisan media coverages, where the treatment of political affairs differs with each news outlet's political position and government-backing. Prior (2013) found evidence in his research "concerning the causal impact of a more partisan media environment on mass polarization" (p.102). This was also researched by Levendusky and Maholtra (2015) in the United States political context, where they were able to find a connection between citizens reading news about polarized politics and thinking that the mass public is therefore more polarized. They conducted a study where North-American news outlets of different time periods were analyzed using a quantitative content data analysis method, searching for the usage of the word 'polarization' in political-related news. They found that the word had become extremely present in the media after 2008 and that the increased usage of the word in news articles may have affected the general public's notions of living in a polarized North-American society. As it was discussed, the Spanish political elites increased their tone when talking about the possible independence of Catalonia and the referendums celebration, a fact that was portrayed by the media and that readers might interpret to happen also in the societal/citizenship level. Accordingly, it is difficult to point out to a single reason that might enable polarization in a society. Is it cause of politicians, media discourses and/or the self-interpretation of citizens that the society is polarized? This research will not focus on finding the underlying polarization effect in a society, but rather in investigating through the online media consumption patterns of Catalans, which types of online news outlets were read during the days of the referendum and if it is possible to establish connections between reading certain news outlets and having a stronger/more polarized attitude towards the political conflict. Further, polarized attitudes will also be contemplated using the affective polarization phenomenon, which will be explained and discussed in a separate later section.

2.3 Partisan selective media exposure

Following the theorization of Hallin and Mancini (2004) in where they portrayed the Spanish and Catalan media as having political parallelism with political elites, as well of the line of argumentation of the possible polarization of media and individuals in Catalonia is important to now focus on studying another media effect especially related to the beforementioned effects and mainly studied and researched by Stroud (2010) in political communication science, the selective media exposure of individuals. This concept narrows down the possible media effects of polarization, through engaging it more with the perspective of the citizen's news outlet choices and their habits of media consumption. It is not possible to

talk about the effects of polarization without taking into account selective exposure. Partisan selective exposure can be defined as the predisposition of reading and seeking for news outlets that reinforce and agree with one's self-preconceived political beliefs or opinions (Stroud, 2010). All other things being equal, this phenomenon entails that people are more likely to consume (news) content that is aligned with their interests and/or political views. Several scholars have shown that selective exposure develops in individuals because of assorted reasonings. An individual may want to defend and reinforce their political position because they have a commitment with a certain belief (Schwarz, Frey, & Kumpf, 1980 as cited in Kastenmüller, Greitemeyer, Jonas, Fischer & Frey, 2010), they want to defend their own world view (Jonas, Greenberg & Frey, 2003 as cited in Kastenmüller et al, 2010), they want to reduce cognitive dissonance; that is the undesirable feeling that can arise when one has contradictory cognitions (Festinger, 1957) or they want to maintain a positive self-image as 'good deciders' (Frey, 1986; Kunda, 1990 as cited in Kastenmüller et al, 2010). These are some of the explanations that authors argue can lead to an individual to purposely expose themselves to congenial messages in tune with their political beliefs, but there is still not enough evidence that proves which one best accounts for its occurrence. The best answer that we have so far is that "several of these mechanisms may operate in concert or different explanations may account for selective exposure in different circumstances" (Stroud, 2018, p.3).

Selective exposure can also occur in different forms. Stroud (2018) in the *Oxford Handbook of Political Communication* compiles four different types: the selection of (1) news or entertainment, (2) messages about different issues, (3) a certain medium (e.g., the Internet), and (4) like-minded messages. This thesis will be exploring mainly the last type of selective exposure, the like-minded messages, due to its aim to research selective exposure regarding a mass-media covered political event that dominated the media agenda of all types of media for consecutive days before and after the referendum celebration. The third type of selective exposure, even if it distinguishes between the Internet and more mainstream outlets, will not be taken into account due to its emphasis on the selection of the medium but not regarding the content itself, which is not what this thesis aims to research. Consequently, selective exposure will be studied as "the degree to which citizens choose like-minded political information" (Stroud, 2018, p.5) acknowledging that news outlets can have a partisan tendency.

Furthermore, it is also relevant to discuss and consider which democratic consequences can entail the partisan selective exposure of citizens in society. Stroud (2011) acknowledges three different ones:

1) It can energize participation in politics and civic engagement with them, making citizens more aware of their government's actions. Partisan media can call for civilian mobilization and provide information about a political event but, on the other side, they may not provide equitable participation, energizing overrepresented groups. For example, wealthy and educated people tend to consume more political related news than other demographics.

2) It may affect what citizens know about politics. Citizens should reach informed political decisions after carefully weighing arguments, but this is not always the case and partisan selective exposure can negatively contribute to making biased and unbalanced decisions. This can lead an individual to reject oppositional arguments even if they may have logical arguments and contrasted sources.

3) May influence citizens' political attitudes and beliefs. Citizens using likeminded media may develop more polarized political attitudes and more fragmented political interests. The legitimacy of public figures not sharing a certain political perspective might be even put into question.

Overall, the partisan selective exposure behavior "has the potential to affect how citizens reason about, react to, and act in the political world" (Stroud, 2011, p.10), that is why it is important to study it in relation with democratic politics. Relating this to the Catalan conflict, the 1st of October referendum only mobilized those who were supporters of the Catalan independence due to those supporting pro-unitarism views did not legitimize such referendum and did not go to vote (Pi, 2017). Hence, the results of the referendum turned to be homogenous: the 90.18% of the people who went voting said yes to Catalonia becoming an independent republican state but if we look at the participation levels, only the 43.03% of the electorate participated (Pi, 2017). This can be one of the signals indicating that indeed a partisan selective exposure was being displayed if we only focus on the citizen's mobilization conducts but, this is not a reliable measurement or evidence enough to make such a statement. Accordingly, this research will try to investigate consequences 2 and 3 mentioned by Stroud (2011), in order to be able to confirm if it is possible to talk about partisan selective exposure of the Catalan citizens before, during and after the referendum celebration.

Selective exposure is based on the logic that if people are mainly exposed to news outlets that do not challenge their beliefs, it will be difficult to dispute these assumptions in

the future, leaving little space for moderate beliefs and the construction of well-informed citizens (Stroud, 2010). This can be a threat to democratic politics and structures due to if citizens are exposed to a high partisan media coverage, they can become easier to manipulate with fake news or biased discourses because the information will not be contrasted later on with other media sources. This is crucial, especially in those countries where the media landscape is proved to have political parallelism with the ruling government and main political parties, as the Spanish media conglomerates are. A good example to illustrate this phenomenon is the case of the last presidential U.S. elections and how the polarization of media and the partisan selective exposure of a part of the North-American population might have helped Trump to win the presidency, due to only 70.000 votes which determined the final victory (Faris, Roberts, Etling, Bourassa, Zuckerman & Benkler, 2017). On the research publication of Faris et al. (2017) the authors argue that “the differences in party candidates grow over time and centrist voters were left with more extreme options that did not reflect their moderate views, which made moderate voters less likely to be engaged in politics (and less interested in voting the party options)” (p.41). Many factors coincided in the presidential elections of 2016 thus it is difficult to point out to a single reason for Trump’s Presidential victory. Although, it can be argued that vote abstention and the lack of moderate views became, at the end of the race, decisive factors that marked the electoral campaign. The last US Presidential elections showed an exceptional increase of political polarization among the candidates, especially present in news outlets with partisan coverages and in social media with posts and comments of online users using negative campaigning tactics against the counter-party (Faris et al., 2017). The key question would be if the same electoral results could have been achieved if the media and the individuals had not adopted such strained positions based on discrediting the rival’s beliefs. This question brought up to consider if a similar situation might have happened with the Catalan referendum. This research aims to bring answers of whether polarization and lack of moderate voices became real during this heated political event.

Scholars do not seem to agree whether polarized media encourages citizens to adopt more radical and polarized opinions, consequently exposing themselves to partisan selective media that reinforce one's beliefs or the other way around (Arceneaux & Martin, 2013; Levendusky, 2013; Prior, 2013). What is clear is that both phenomena (polarization and selective exposure) are related and that one implies the other. The polarization of the media and its audiences in heated political moments tends to reinforce the differences and create stronger sides among a population, leading to misinformed citizens and erasing moderate

positions (Feldman, 2018). Polarization and partisan media exposure are key concepts to understand the strain political situation in Catalonia after the regional elections of 2015 (BBC Mundo, 2015).

Selective exposure and polarization will be assessed by assigning a priori partisan categorizations to media outlets (Catalan-based or Madrid-based) and then measuring participants' reported use of these outlets for political information during the Catalan referendum (Stroud, 2008). Therefore, hypotheses 1 and 2 assume that because of the singularities of the media in Catalonia and because of the heated and polarized political climate displayed, the Catalan citizens during the referendum of the 1st of October tended to read partisan news outlets that reinforced one's political stances on the matter, taking the online Spanish media and the online Catalan media into consideration.

H1: Pro-unitarism supporters read more Madrid-based online news outlets than pro-independence citizens.

H2: Pro-independence supporters read more Catalan-based online news outlets than pro-unitarism citizens.

The author states in these directional hypotheses that the online news outlets were thought and perceived as polarized by the population around the 1st of October, thus attributing them to a partisan coverage of the event. The results can help to identify if there was an online media selective exposure among pro-independence and pro-unitarism supporters helping to increase the gap difference between the two main stances in the Catalan society, or if on the contrary, the citizens had not been carried away by the polarization and held moderate, plural or contrasted views even if they advocate for pro-unitarism or pro-independence of Catalonia.

2.4 Hostile media effect

The Catalan referendum conflict, among many things, has helped to enhance polarization and has created two clear stances within the topic; either a citizen is considered to be a pro-independence or a pro-unitarism supporter. Consequently, it has toned down most of the grey/neutral position in the media, forcing individuals and outlets to take a clear stance in the political conflict. This thesis will use its findings to see if it is possible to make such claims by studying the Catalans attitudes towards counter-party messages and individuals and by looking at the online news outlets consumption. It is important to acknowledge that there is a section of the Catalan and Spanish population that neither believes in a complete rupture with Spain or with remaining with the actual centralist government, rather some citizens advocate

for a middle stand solution, such as the North-American federalist state system. This discourse is only materialized in the political spectrum by the party Podemos, a recent left-wing political formation with representation in the Spanish Parliament but being only the fourth biggest political force. At the same time, there is not a clear-leading representative voice in the telecommunication field that advocates for such middle point in where is acknowledged that the actual 'Autonomías' system is deficient and a new ruling model should be theorized ("Clasificación Mundial 2018 de la Libertad de Prensa", 2018). According to *the Digital News Report* of Newman et al. (2017), *La Vanguardia* is the only leading newspaper and online news outlets that is considered to have a moderate paper in Catalonia and Spain, calling for dialogue in face of a devastating situation. Therefore, it is relevant to study the perception of Catalan citizens towards this news outlet, since if its perceived as biased among the population, it can result in the existence of another media phenomenon called hostile media effect. The hostile media effect can complement and more categorically endorse the claims of a polarized Catalan society due to if citizens are perceiving as biased a moderate and neutral outlet it can mean that the society is acquiring more political polarized attitudes, only trusting the media that supports one's beliefs.

When someone is searching for information, an important criterion that comes to play is the owns perception of quality in a publication/journalist. The hostile media effect explains the individual judgment of what is considered quality press or not and its subjectivity, related to one's own beliefs and how much a publication is favorable to those (Stroud, 2011). Thus, "the hostile media effect occurs when opposing partisans perceive identical news coverage of a controversial issue as biased against their own side" (Feldman, 2018, p.2). As a result, balanced media content is often perceived as biased, for both political sides that end up discrediting neutral media outlets (Reid, 2012). Although is important to clarify that the hostile media effect does not relate to an effect of the media per se but rather a response to media content potentially influencing attitudinal and behavioral outcomes (Feldman, 2018). The more involved and partisan an individual is, the more likely it is that this individual perceives as hostile a higher number of news outlets.

The term hostile media phenomenon was first coined and described by Vallone, Rosse and Lepper (1985) using the context of broadcast news stories about the Mideast conflict. Their study demonstrated the perceptual bias among participants with different opinions about the subject. Since then, several studies (Perloff, 1989; Giner-Sorolla & Chaiken, 1994) have continued studying this robust phenomenon and demonstrated its existence regarding controversial topics and mass-media coverage that ultimately have consequences for

democratic societies. The hostile media effect contradicts another well-studied phenomenon, the assimilation bias, that is the predisposition to interpret information so that it appears to conform to one's preexisting attitudes and maintain one's initial beliefs (Gunther & Schmitt, 2004). But as the authors argue, what differentiates both phenomena is the low-reach or high-reach condition; "a low-reach (or no-reach) condition, such as when thinking only about influence on one's own opinion, would generate an assimilation response whereas the high-reach condition, thinking about influence on a broad audience, would result in a contrast effect" (Gunther & Schmitt, 2004, p.58). Therefore, this research will focus on the hostile media effect since online news outlets are a high-reach source of information it's more expected in the context of the study that a hostile media effect is being produced. In the end, as Stroud argues (2011), the outcome of the hostile media effect is that "nonneutral news are seen as more accurate, fairer, and more relevant to likeminded partisans compared to those with different views" (p.21). This effect illustrates that even if exists balanced or neutral media, in heated political situations, citizens take a partisan approach and tend to not rely on those sources, even if there is a rigorous journalistic job done or strong evidence in a matter. In this research, the concept will be taken in consideration in order to analyze if during the Catalan referendum event the patterns of media consumption of the Catalan society were subject to a 'hostile media effect' that made consume only certain online news outlets to the two main political sides: pro-independence and pro-unitarism.

La Vanguardia is considered to be the only traditional press title that holds a moderate perspective as it is argued in the Digital News Reports (Newman et al, 2018, p.102). The exclusively online media *El Diario* and *El Confidencial* are also considerate independent and journalistically motivated organisations but, they do not possess as many readers as *La Vanguardia* (Newman et al, 2018, p.102). The online version of *La Vanguardia* is the most daily consulted online site in Catalonia when people are looking for political news outlets (Centre d'Estudis d'Opinió, 2018, p.68). Being the most popular online media site among Catalans one would expect that part of the Catalan population can be exposed to plural news reports but, if a hostile media effect is taken into consideration, then the media effects of the newspaper gets limited. Hypotheses 3 and 4 are aimed to analyze whether *La Vanguardia* was actually perceived as a moderate/neutral media by both ideological stances or if on the contrary it was challenged, tackling the concept of hostile media effect.

H3: The online news outlet La Vanguardia is considered by pro-independence supporters to be biased upon the news treatment of the Catalan referendum.

H4: The online news outlet La Vanguardia is considered by pro-unitarism supporters to be biased upon the news treatment of the Catalan referendum.

2.5 Affective polarization

During heated political events the attitudinal polarization within a society can lead to an affective polarization of individuals, developing hostile attitudes towards counterparties discourses that challenge and argues one's political stances, increasing the animosity among citizens.

The first to study and distinguish affective polarization from other forms of political polarization were Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes (2012) in the United States political context where there are two leading political parties and tendencies: Democrats and Republicans. They define the effect as an emotional reaction to party identification in where individuals display hostility attitudes towards the members of opposing political parties. Put in it in other words, it could be defined as the tendency of supporters from two different political parties' slants, ideologies or stances to dislike and distrust one another. Affective polarization seems to be grounded in in-group and out-group distinctions, in where individuals identify themselves as being part of a political collectivity or with a political party and display simultaneously in-group favouritism and out-group hostility (Turner, Brown & Tajfel, 1979). This identification gives rise to in-group bias, identifying the opposing views negatively and the co-partisan positively (Iyengar & Westwood, 2014). As Mason argues (2016) "because a highly aligned set of social identities increases an individual's perceived differences between groups, the emotions that result from group conflict are likely to be heightened among well-sorted partisans" (p.352). It can be argued that in heated and polarized political events individuals can display more emotional instead of rational political choices and behaviours. As Crigler and Hevron (2017) discussed in the *Oxford Handbook of Political Communication*, "emotions function as critical factors of political choice by explaining how people communicate about politics, how they seek information and learn, how they make judgments and form preferences, and how they participate" (p.3). Emotional appeals are particularly influential on individuals' appraisals made based on group identity. Researchers have seized upon emotion as an important trigger of attitudes toward policies dealing with in- and out-groups, which can lead to erroneous issue judgments (Brader, Valentino & Suhay, 2008). Although, is important to acknowledge that not all the individuals are engaged at the same level with politics and group identities. The degree of which an individual gets identify with a particular political group or party its very relevant to assess affective polarization, due to those who do not feel closely associated with a party feel less angry, because their esteem is less closely tied to the status of the group (Mason, 2016).

Therefore, “the effect of identity on emotion is significant because it generates less emotion at the low end of the spectrum, and more emotion among the highly identified” (Mason, 2016, p.4).

The consequences of affective polarization can be harmful to a country’s society due it can increase the animosity of citizens’ interactions, becoming less deliberative and more partisan (Garrett et al., 2014). Aversive reactions can promote political cynicism, incivility, and intolerance among a population and making citizens less likely to seek diverse perspectives on controversial topics (Garrett et al., 2014).

Garrett et al. (2014) conducted a study using survey data collected immediately following national elections in the United States and Israel revealing that “the more extensively individuals rely on partisan sources affirming their political viewpoint, the more polarized their attitudes toward other partisans” (p. 324). This implies that as partisan news becomes more popular, affective polarization is likely to increase because sympathetic media tend to be used more often than the alternative. Using the previous theoretical ground on the subject, the author will affirm that in the Catalan conflict, an affective polarization effect could have been encountered on both ideological groups (pro-independence and pro-unitarism supporters) displaying hostility to counter-argumentations and the respective out-group. The hypotheses imply that emotional factors influenced and reinforced animosity among both political stances towards the referendum. Hypotheses 5 and 6 will analyze both main ideological leanings upon the referendum.

H5: Most supporters of the independence of Catalonia are hostile towards pro-unitarism supporters.

H6: Most supporters of the pro-unitarism of Catalonia are hostile towards pro-independence supporters.

Further, it is possible to argue that the increase of affective polarization among citizens in recent years is a response or is fostered by polarized political elites (Banda & Cluverius, 2018). Higher polarization of political elites makes parties more differentiated among each other and that can consequently increase mass polarization in the citizenship level (Banda & Cluverius, 2018). Therefore, hypotheses 7 and 8 will study affective polarization using the same parallelism among both ideological groups but towards polarized political elites. The aim is to study and compare if affective polarization is only produced (or not) towards out-group peers or is more likely to be promoted toward counter-political elites rather than common citizens or voters that support counter-parties. This way, the results can show which type and

in which degree affective polarization was displayed (or not) during the referendum, rather towards individuals, political elites or both.

H7: There is a relationship between a supporter's political leaning and being hostile towards the out-group political elites.

Lastly, the author considers it relevant to examine if affective polarization and selective exposure are related phenomena in the political context of the Catalan referendum to properly answer the research question and relate the different media phenomena studied throughout the thesis. In other words, if a relationship existed between the online news outlets consumption readership of individuals and these becoming more affective polarized. Is it possible that the regular exposure to partisan and polarized online media outlets can also enhance affective polarization towards counter-party supporters? Can the media help increase divergent ideologically slants and incivility among citizens with their way of framing and portraying a specific political event? Some authors already strongly suggest that there is a connection between these two media phenomena, arguing that when citizens are exposed to media coverage depicting mass polarization, they start displaying more hostile attitudes and behaviours towards individuals supporting divergent slants to theirs (Levendunsky & Maholtra, 2015; Garrett et al., 2014). Therefore, hypotheses 9 and 10 will study if there is a relationship between reading certain news outlets and an individual becoming less tolerant towards the out-group individuals. The results can help the author to discuss if the partisan selective media exposure of Catalan citizens could also have led to creating/increasing hostility and animosity among the population during that period of time.

H8: Most readers of Catalan-based online news outlets are hostile towards pro-unitarism supporters.

H9: Most readers of Madrid-based online news outlets are hostile towards pro-independence supporters.

2.6 Summary

As discussed in the prior sections, this research will study the possible media effects of consuming mainly partisan online news outlets using as a case of study the Catalan referendum held the 1st of October of 2017 that can be considered as a controversial and heated political event for the Catalan society.

Overall, the research will try to conclude if a “partisan selective exposure relates to more polarized attitudes among audiences” (Stroud, 2010, p.571) focusing on the specific

period of time surrounding the Catalan referendum and its political consequences among the Catalan population. Even if the main political communication theories will be the polarization of attitudes and the selective exposure to slanted news outlets, other media and attitudinal effects will be also studied in order to have better insights of what media effects were displayed by the citizens and in which degree. Therefore, the research will also pay attention to the hostile media effect and to affective polarization to analyze in more depth the behavioural patterns of media consumption of Catalans during the referendum and the possible attitudinal consequences towards out-group stances. These phenomena might have contributed to polarizing the Catalan society creating hostility among citizens that sustain one of the two main leading ideological postures in the conflict, being these, either supporting the independence or the unitarism of Catalonia. The outcome results might challenge (or not) the theory of a polarized and partisan selective exposure media landscape and citizens, as well as showing, whether a hostile media effect and affective polarization were being displaced by individuals during the time when the referendum was held.

Polarization, selective exposure, hostile media effect and affective polarization can imply serious consequences in a democratic society with a 'polarized pluralistic' media model where media is not as independent, with strong connections between media conglomerates and political elites that might stand up for their own political interests. Ultimately, studying this media phenomena and its consequences can bring answers of the media limitations and effects in fracturing social harmony, decreasing an individual's tolerance towards discrepant ideological views and erasing plurality, thus the relevance of the topic.

3. Methodology

This chapter will explain and argue the methodology used to conduct the research and to test the hypotheses. It will justify in detail the quantitative method selected, the sampling process, the steps conducted to design the survey, the operationalization of the variables, as well as the process to achieve validity and reliability within the results.

3.1 Choice of method

A quantitative research approach was adopted in order to adequately answer the proposed research question. The quantitative measurement logic was taken into consideration at an early stage of the research since the goal of the thesis was to capture details of the empirical world and express the findings in numbers (Neuman, 2014). It also used theory-driven or top-down research strategies, in which the hypotheses were stated using previous literature, academical articles and social science researchers before the data gathering or analyzed processes had started (De Leeuw, Hox & Dillman, 2008). It was crucial to use a research method through which it was possible to achieve standardized and uniformed numerical data that could represent the abstract concepts of 'polarization', 'selective exposure', 'hostile media effect' and 'affective polarization'. Surveys are the method that most accurately followed this logic, enabling the design of regulated questions/answers that can be distributed to a large number of individuals achieving, in the end, standardized and uniformed results (Neuman, 2014).

The aim of the research is to gather self-reported behaviour about the online news outlets media consumption of the Catalan society and their political beliefs upon the referendum to study and analyze if the beforementioned media phenomena were being displayed by the Catalan population during the 1st of October of 2017. This is the main reason why a cross-sectional survey was selected as the most convenient research method for this thesis, due to it allows the data collection to make inferences about a population of interest at one point in time thus creating a snapshot of the Catalan society during a specific time period (Hall, 2011). The type of cross-sectional survey that was selected as a mode for data collection is the self-reported online survey seeing that it guaranteed the access through online platforms, to the sampling population that is in a different country than the researcher (Hall, 2011). This quantitative method grants - through a series of questions and set of variables - to "gather descriptive information and test multiple hypotheses in a single survey" (Neuman, 2014, p.317). Also, it allows the collection of large amounts of factual data about the opinions, ideas, attitudes or experiences of the participants upon the topic of the research (Matthews &

Ross, 2010). Later this data can be analyzed using quantitative data analysis programs that will outcome in percentages and numerical results.

It is common and validated among scholars to use a survey design in order to measure media phenomena such as selective exposure and polarization; “the self-report retrospective strategy seems to be the most widely used in the extant research on selective exposure, in particular when it comes to surveying research” (e.g., Daniller, Silver, & Moehler, 2013; Dvir-Gvirsman, 2014; Garrett et al., 2014; J. Kim, 2015; Lawrence, Sides, & Farrell, 2010; Tsfati, Stroud, & Chotiner, 2014 as cited in Tsfati, 2016, p. 201).

Therefore, using a questionnaire is considered to be a validated tool to analyze if the phenomena of selective media exposure and polarization took place among the Catalan population regarding the referendum. Through a series of key questions and statements, the results of the survey reflected whether this media approach has arisen or not among the Catalan citizens during that specific period of time. However, it is important to acknowledge the method limitations when it comes to asking participants about an opinion and media behaviour in the past, as is the case of this research, going back to the events of one year and a half ago. As Neuman (2014) points out “the issue of respondent recall does not mean that we cannot ask about past events; rather, we must write survey questions specifically for that purpose and interpret results with caution” (p. 327).

The survey was designed using Qualtrics, an online survey platform that was provided by the Erasmus University of Rotterdam. This online software allowed the researcher to build an online survey with a clear and neat interface and enabled respondents to participate using their computers and even more conveniently, using their phones. Qualtrics guaranteed an easy and effortless access to the survey, which was one of the most relevant criteria when deciding to use this specific survey platform due to people being typically reluctant to answer questionnaires and more so when it implies sensitive matters such as ideologies or political manifestations. Thus, an easy, clear and quick access to the survey was crucial to obtain the appropriate number of respondents.

3.2 Sampling population

The target population is Catalan citizens due to them being the largest group of individuals that experienced the referendum firsthand and that can better understand the nuances of the both, Catalan-based and Madrid-based, online news outlets, contrasting for example, with Spanish citizens. Although, not all Catalan citizens have the right characteristics to become eligible for the sampling frame of this research. The researcher intended to achieve

a sample with heterogenic participants of different ages, gender and from different geographical areas of Catalonia. Another characteristic to take into consideration was the fact that the research was focusing on online news outlets consumption and not all individuals use this technology to gather political information. Therefore, to be considered part of the sample, participants had to meet the following criteria: (1) be Catalan residents (meaning that it was not required to be born in Catalonia, but they had to reside in a Catalan region during the political event), (2) be older than 18 years old and (3) readers of online news outlets.

Continuing with the sampling design, the sample size was decided based on what the Methodological guidelines of the Erasmus University determined as a specification for the MA thesis. In the survey it was suggested that the minimum number of respondents for the method of surveys had to be between 150 and 250 respondents. Another relevant specification was that in order to have a sample large enough to represent the population, both ideological stances reflected on the hypotheses, had to have a minimum of 30 respondents supporting one of the two possible political sides within the sample (either pro-independence or pro-unitarism ideological leaning) in order to confirm the hypotheses that related to that specific target group of the sample (Salkind, 2017).

The type of sampling that was used in this thesis was a mix of non-probabilistic or non-random sampling methods. These subjective methods were adopted to decide which elements should be included in the sample (Sarstedt, Bengart, Shaltoni & Lehmann, 2017). A probabilistic or random sampling method would have implied that each element in the population had a known nonzero chance of being selected through the use of a random selection procedure, but in this thesis, it was not possible to have access to a probabilistic-representative method (Sarstedt, Bengart, Shaltoni & Lehmann, 2017). Therefore, the sampling method used to gather participants was a mix of convenience, purposive and self-selection. The convenience method meant that some participants were selected because of the ease as a primary selection criterion, in the sense of locating elements of the population and from selected elements (Battaglia, 2011). Purposive sampling differed from convenience only because in that method expert judgment was used to select a representative sample of elements (Battaglia, 2011). The self-selection method implied that the inclusion of sampling units was determined by whether the units themselves agreed to participate voluntarily in the sample or not (Sterba & Foster, 2011). These three methods were used simultaneously as sampling methods due to there being some minimum of 30 respondents' in each quota that was necessary to achieve in some variables (age, gender, political leaning) in order to accomplish the most possible heterogenic population that could imitate, in a small-scale, the

characteristics of the Catalan society and was representative of the different political sensibilities of the Catalan citizens. Even if it was not possible to have an equal number of participants for each quota it aimed to achieved a minimum number of 30 participants for each category of the demographic variables (gender, age) and among the variable of political leaning, avoiding coverage errors and aiming to include all the different social stratum within the Catalan population (Neuman, 2014).

The Qualtrics survey was shared simultaneously, using the form of an anonymous link, through different online channels and platforms. The survey aimed to have all the participants answers around the same period of time, to avoid errors produced by collecting the data in different time periods for the same sample (Neuman, 2014). Moreover, this thesis used cross-sectional survey data, which implied that the data had to be collected at only one point of time. The researcher distributed the online survey through Facebook groups and WhatsApp groups, with members/participants that shared or had different political views upon the Catalan referendum held the 1st of October 2017 in order to find plural political stances among the sample. This way, the survey link was posted in groups such as “Catalanes que no quieren la independència” or “Catalans a favor de la independència”.

The data collection took place between the 6th and the 17th of May 2019. This fact is relevant because it was important to collect the data before the trials of the Catalan politicians ended and before the European and municipal elections took place at the end of May, due to depending on both circumstances maybe some individuals could radicalize or change their opinions/views.

A total of 371 responses were recorded, although, it was not possible to determine how many people encountered the anonymous link of the survey without clicking on it. From those, 134 partially filled out the survey or took less than 3 minutes to answer the whole survey, thus they are not considered to be part of the sample due to were there being doubts about the legitimacy of the answers and the likelihood that it was random. As Lynn argues, “for web surveys, levels of break-off are typically higher than with other survey modes. This is where a respondent gets a certain way through the questionnaire and then decides not to continue” (Lynn, 2012, p.41). In the case of the survey of this thesis there might be also other reasons for the high rate of non-response, such as the fact that the topic of the survey was a controversial political subject that some people are typically reluctant to give their opinion on and even if the length was adjusted, nine minutes is still a high amount of time that a respondent needs to invest selflessly. Although, as Lynn (2012) also argues even the most well-

designed survey suffers from non-response rates so it should not illegitimate the results or findings.

After the data cleaning, the final sample includes 237 respondents, 63.9% response rate, which was considered as a desired number of participants. From those 69 are pro-unitarism supporters, 30.5% of the sample, which denotes that the pro-unitarism hypotheses can be validated and 156 pro-independence supporters, the 69%. 1 respondent did not state an answer.

From the 237 respondents, 83.1% decided to answer the survey in Catalan and 16.9% in Spanish. 61.2% were female and 38.4% male. 88.6% were born in Catalonia, 11% reside in Catalonia and 0.4% did not respond to the question. 87.3% of respondents resided in Barcelona, 4.2% in Girona, 3.4% in Lleida and 4.6% in Tarragona. The average age was 46 years ($M = 46.20$, $SD = 13.77$). 8% of the participants were between 18 and 24 years old, 12.9% between 25 and 34 years old, 35.3% between 35 and 49 years old, 36.3% between 50 and 64 years old and 7.6% 64 and older. 79.7% of the respondents read every day or almost every day online news outlets, 8.9% two or three times per week, 3.8% once per week, 3.4% two or three times per month and 4.2% never, which implies that they finished the questionnaire after that answer and were not taken into consideration in the analysis. Regarding the multiple-choice question about which online news outlets respondents accessed recently, 19.9% selected *TV3*, 15.9% *La Vanguardia* and *Vilaweb*, 14.9% *Ara*, 13.5% others and 8.3% *El País*.

When comparing the demographics of the sample with the demographics that the official statistical organization in Catalonia used in their research about political opinion of the citizens, it is possible to see how some of the demographics are more representative than others of the Catalan population in the thesis. In the 'Baròmetre d'Opinió Política', 74.7% of respondents resided in the province of Barcelona, 9.7% in Girona, 5.3% in Lleida and 10.3% in Tarragona, having a similar weighting of percentages in the thesis sample (Centre d'Estudis d'Opinió, 2018, p.55). The percentages of gender, age categories and language preference of the respondents cannot be considered representative, if they are compared to the aforementioned Barometer due to the quota numbers are differently distributed in the thesis.

3.3 Survey design

The survey was designed so it could gather information about one's political views and online news outlets media consumption, upon what it could be considered a sensitive and highly debated topic in Catalonia: whether if someone was in favour or against the self-determination referendum celebration. For this reason, how the survey is built and what type

of questions and statements are included, is a crucial step, in order to obtain valid and reliable means without leading the participant's choices and setting a favourable tone for all types of feedback.

The survey methodology requires diligence, if one does not want to end up having misleading or biased results (Neuman, 2014), thus it is also important to investigate whether specification errors can occur, while building the survey, to assure validity within the results (De Leeuw, Hox & Dillman, 2008). Pallant (2016) argues that before distributing a survey is important to first run a pilot-test to ensure that the instructions, questions, and scale items are clear and to select as participants the same type of people that would be used in the main study. That is the reason why a pre-test was made before configuring the final questionnaire in order to test first, with 5 real participants, if the survey fulfils all the requirements (De Leeuw, Hox & Dillman, 2008).

The pre-test questionnaire included 92 questions (46 for the Spanish respondents and 46 for the Catalan ones). Once the pre-test survey was completed by the five participants, these were asked to reply via email to a series of questions regarding the length of the survey, the understandability of the questions and language used through the entire survey, the mutually exclusiveness and exhaustiveness of the answer categories and a final open question about further comments or observations (Neuman, 2014). The feedback of the participants showed that almost all of them agreed in the fact that the survey was too long, taking an average time of 15 minutes to be answered. Therefore, some questions of the survey were eliminated based on the fact that it may be perceived as repetitive or not as relevant for the research. For example, the multiple-choice questions regarding consumption and trust of different online news outlets, the list of answer categories were shortened, from 12 to 10 categories including only the main and most well-recognized online newspaper titles but including an open answer category as the last option where people could still list an online news outlet in case it was not there as an answer category. The last part of the survey, where five different fragments of real online news outlets articles talking about the referendum were presented, was also shortened, including in the final survey only three, one that represented the pro-unitarism discourse, one the neutral discourse and one the pro-independence discourse.

With all these changes the final survey was composed by 62 questions, combining both languages options, but respondents only had to answer 31 of those in the language preference that they choose at the beginning of the survey. Individuals took an average time of

9 minutes to reply to the whole survey. Also, the results of the pre-test showed that two of the questions of the survey were not being correctly interpreted. This could be understood as an observational error in the survey, that was made visible during the pre-test data collection process and made the researcher to adapt the questions and answer categories in order to make them more clear, intelligible and exhaustive (Kish, 1965).

The final questionnaire was carefully built implementing the beforementioned results of the pre-test and by paying attention to certain aspects that could be especially relevant for the sample. One of the first things acknowledged while creating the survey was the broadness of the sample, with participants of different demographic traits and backgrounds. For this reason, the survey should not include confusing words in any of the questions/statements/answer categories. Common words were used throughout the questionnaire avoiding the prestige bias, meaning that academical terms or words that might lead to confusion and misunderstandings were not used in the questionnaire (Neuman, 2014). Furthermore, Lozar Manfreda and Vehovar (2012) argue in their chapter about characteristics of Internet surveys, that while designing a questionnaire “the question/answer texts should be kept short, concise, and clearly presented because Internet users seldom read the text carefully, but rather scan it” (p.276).

Another relevant factor concerning the sample of the thesis was the possible language preference that a respondent could have, thus including in the questionnaire a preliminary statement in where all the respondents could choose between doing the survey in Spanish or in Catalan. This feature of the questionnaire was strategically thought beforehand, and it was especially relevant for this type of research, since language is a sensitive topic among Catalans. Even if almost everyone understands and speaks both languages, it is frequent that individuals feel more comfortable with one of the languages. If the option of doing the questionnaire in one of the languages would not have been included, the researcher could have been risking the response rate and the neutrality of the questionnaire, since some people could have been reluctant to answer the survey because of this factor or/and excluded because of not having a good command of the language imposed. Also, some people give political meaning to the fact of using either Spanish or Catalan, being the Spanish language more frequently used among pro-unitarism supporters and Catalan among pro-independence supporters. The researcher aimed to build a neutral questionnaire in where all respondents felt open to give their opinion and where it was used a tone equally clear for all the respondents. The language factor also implied, the duplication and literal translation of the questionnaire in order to have the same anonymous link for all the participants.

The first question the respondents encountered by accessing the survey was the language preference. After that, the survey showed a brief text in where it was stated the topic of the survey, the anonymity of the participants that Qualtrics secures, the length of the survey and a button of clear consent from the participant. Consecutively, the demographic and filter questions, that predetermined whether the participants were eligible to be part of the sample. The survey ended if the participant replied that they had never read online news outlets. The criterion of age was evaluated manually by looking at the year of birth and the residency factor was exposed and explained at the introduction of the survey. After those first blocks, the survey flow showed 25 questions that respondents had to answer for enabling the researcher to validate or reject the hypotheses and answer the research question.

Continuing with other considerations while building the survey, it was considered that each question or statement had to be related to one concept, topic or factor of the research, although certain questions were used to test different hypotheses, which will be further explained in more detail. All response choices were written to be equally eligible and legitimate (and had the same order and options in both Catalan and Spanish surveys). The answer categories were mutually exclusive and followed criteria of exhaustiveness. In the multiple-choice questions it was always included, and in the end, a last open answer category. Questions and answer categories were written following balance criteria, being cautious with the words used when duplicating the questions and answer categories in one of the languages, so both surveys would be equally mutually exclusive and exhaustive. (Neuman, 2014).

Control questions and statements were added to achieve consistency within the answers and to avoid the social desirability bias, that can happen when the respondents do not answer honestly but rather follow what they think is acceptable for society standards to be answered (Neuman, 2014). The respondent recall was also taken into consideration, thus the questionnaire was built in a way that was easy for the participants to answer questions about past behaviors and thoughts. For example, graphics of real articles headings and fragments were included to enable participants to see how the different online news outlets were relating what happened on the 1st of October of 2017.

3.4 Operationalization

The operationalization of the variables implies deducing conceptualized variables into measurable units to include in the survey. The operational definition of this thesis was through the survey questionnaire that linked conceptual definitions to a set of measurement techniques (Neuman, 2014).

In total, six different variables are used including categorical and continuous variables: *supporters leaning towards the independence of Catalonia, the readership of online news outlets based on their provenience, perception of online news outlets discourse, social distance towards out-group individuals, affective polarization towards out-group individuals and hostility towards out-group of political elites*. Consecutively, it is explained how it was operationalized in the survey each variable and which measuring instruments were used.

Supporters leaning towards the independence of Catalonia. This is a categorical (nominal) and independent variable with two categories, pro-unitarism supporter and pro-independence supporter. It was measured using a single answer question that asked for the type of relationship that Spain and Catalonia should have according to the respondent beliefs. The possible answer categories were: 1 a region of Spain, 2 an autonomous community (the current political relationship), 3 a state inside a federal Spain or 4 an independent state. It was not included an answer category of 'no position or no opinion' upon the subject since the four answer categories reflected all the possible political positions and due to it was necessary that all respondents had a political stance about the relationship of Spain and Catalonia in order to measure the main concepts of this thesis. The first three categories, even if they implied different types of relationships between Catalonia and Spain (from more centralized to more decentralized) they all considered Catalonia as being part of Spain thus attributing them the category of being pro-unitarism. The remaining answer category was attributed as being a pro-independence supporter because it explicitly mentioned the fact of Catalonia being a separate and independent state from the rest of the country. The questions and answer categories were adopted from the question 30 of the 'Baròmetre d'Opinió Política' 3rd wave of 2018 from the Catalan opinion center 'Centre d'Estudis d'Opinió' and adapted to the research (Centre d'Estudis d'Opinió, 2018, p.74). This variable was used to measure the political leaning of each respondent in order to test several of the hypotheses since it predetermines the stance of each respondent upon the referendum of the 1st of October 2017.

Readership of online news outlets based on their provenience. This is a categorical (nominal) variable with two categories: readers of Catalan-based online news outlets and readers of Madrid-based online news outlets. The categories were assigned to each respondent using the answers given to a multiple-choice type of answer in where the respondent had to select which of the news outlets he/she used to gather information during the 1st of October. The answer categories were *El País, El Mundo, ABC, La Razón, La Vanguardia, El Diario, TV3, Ara, Vilaweb* and an open answer category at the end. Depending on the online news outlets that the respondent clicked and the nature of them (either they

reported in Catalan or in Spanish) it was assigned one of the categories to each respondent as mainly being Catalan or Madrid-based readers. The measurement used to calculate whether a respondent was a Catalan-based or Madrid-based reader it was by giving a score to each online news outlet. -0,16 for each Madrid-based online news outlets that a respondent clicked (due to there are 6 options in the answer categories) and 0.33 for each Catalan-based online news outlets (due to there are 3 options in the answer categories). After that, if the overall score was higher than 0 the respondent was considered a Catalan-based reader and if the score was lower than 0 a Madrid-based reader. The question and answer categories were adapted from the report 'Standard Eurobarometer 80' of media use made by the European Commission in Autumn 2013.

It was used as a dependent variable to test selective exposure in hypotheses 1 and 2. It was used as an independent variable to measure selective exposure in relation to affective polarization of individuals in hypotheses 9 and 10.

Perception of the online news outlets discourse. This categorical (ordinal) and dependent variable measures hostile media effect in hypotheses 3 and 4. The variable has three categories: 1 for pro-independence discourse, 2 for neutral discourse and 3 for pro-unitarism discourse. To measure this variable, it was used in the survey a Matrix-Scale with four columns (pro-independence discourse, neutral discourse, pro-unitarism discourse or I don't have an opinion) and 9 rows with the list of online news outlets (*El País, El Mundo, ABC, La Razón, La Vanguardia, El Diario, TV3, Ara, Vilaweb*). The question stated: "Do you think that the following online news outlets reported news during the 1st October of 2017 with pro-independence, pro-unitarism or neutral discourses? Please, indicate your perception for each of the online news outlets". The question and answer categories are again adapted from the report 'Standard Eurobarometer 80' of media use made by the European Commission in Autumn 2013. From this variable it was created nine different variables measuring the perception of each online news outlet. For testing the hostile media effect, it will be used specifically, the variable of perception of *La Vanguardia* discourse. The rest of variables will be used to complement results.

Social distance towards out-group individuals. This continuous and dependent variable measures affective polarization towards individuals with a different political leaning than the respondent. It was operationalized in the survey design using a Likert-Scale asking about how comfortable a respondent would feel having a close friend that supports the contrary belief of the respondent (1 being very uncomfortable and 4 being very comfortable). Depending on

what the respondent had clicked as their leaning the survey flow would show this question with the contrary stance. The variable applied the measurement of the research appendix of Levendusky & Maholtra (2015) article 'Does Media Coverage of Partisan Polarization Affect Political Attitudes?'

Affective polarization towards out-group individuals. It was decided to measure affective polarization using another question of the survey. In this case the variable is nominal (dichotomous) and dependent. It was operationalize using a single-answer that asked for why the respondent support one of the stances. The possible answer categories were: because of what the unitarism/independence movement represents or because I hate unitarism/independence supporters. The variable applied the measurement of the research appendix of Levendusky & Maholtra (2015) article 'Does Media Coverage of Partisan Polarization Affect Political Attitudes?'

Hostility towards the out-group of political elites. This continuous and dependent variable measured affective polarization towards political elites depending on their political stances upon the referendum. It was operationalized in the questionnaire using the question that asked for the opinion of the seven main political leaders during the referendum (Xavier García Albiol, Carles Puigdemont, Oriol Junqueras, Anna Gabriel, Inés Arrimadas, Miquel Iceta, Xavier Doménech). Each politician was the leader of one of the main parties in Catalonia with clear stances upon the referendum. Xavier García Albiol, Inés Arrimadas, Miquel Iceta and Xavier Doménech, even in different degrees, their parties support the unitarism and Carles Puigdemont, Oriol Junqueras and Anna Gabriel parties the independence of Catalonia. Favorability ratings utilized an 11-point feeling thermometer. Respondents were told "we would like to know your feelings toward some political figures on a scale from 0 to 10" (0 = exceptionally unfavorable to 10 = exceptionally favorable". The respondent had to rate this 11-Point Likert-Scale each political leader performance, from their point of view, during the referendum. The measurements and the question were applied to this thesis from the research of Garrett, Gvirsman, Johnson, Tsfati, Neo and Dal (2014, p. 317).

3.4.1 Operationalization of exploratory variables

The survey questionnaire included some questions that do not measure directly the variables of the hypotheses but contribute to better answer the research question and hypotheses, broaden the results and discussion and bringing more nuances to the interpretation of the same.

Trust upon online news outlets. This variable measures the level of trust of the participants towards online news outlets during the 1st of October of 2017 using a 5-Point Likert scale (1 = being completely distrust and 5 = completely trust) upon 9 items, *El País*, *El Mundo*, *ABC*, *La Razón*, *La Vanguardia*, *El Diario*, *TV3*, *Vilaweb* and *Ara*. After conducting a factor analysis and reliability test, explained in more detail in the reliability section, this variable was computed as two new variables that would differentiate between trust upon Catalan online news outlets (*TV3*, *Vilaweb* and *Ara*) and trust upon Spanish online news outlets (*El Mundo*, *La Razón*, *ABC*). The question and scale are again adopted from the report 'Standard Eurobarometer 80' of media use made by the European Commission in Autumn 2013 and adapted to the topic of the research.

Selective exposure. This continuous and independent variable measured the degree of selective exposure that an individual might be exposed to. It was operationalized by using the Tendency Toward Congruent Selective Exposure (TECSE) scale of Tsfati (2016). As the author argued "the newly proposed measure contains five indicators. The items in the TECSE include (1) "I try to avoid exposure to media outlets expressing irritating opinions"; (2) "I try to expose myself only to media outlets and news messages that are in line with my own attitudes"; (3) "I try to expose myself to all the opinions heard in the media equally" (reverse coded); (4) "If I need to select between two op-ed pieces, I'll choose the one that is closer to my opinions"; and (5) "It is important for me to read not just articles supporting my views, but also articles opposing my views" (reverse coded)" (Tsfati, 2016, p.205). The items were measured using a 5-point Likert-scale being 1 strongly disagree and 5 strongly agree. The items of the scale were translated to Spanish and Catalan but other than that the scale was used as the original author proposed.

The last blocks of the survey included three images with real headings from the 1st of October of 2017 from online articles that belong to three different online news outlets (the first to *El País*, the second to *La Vanguardia* and the third to *TV3*). In every case, the same three questions followed each image asking to the respondents about their opinion upon the trustworthiness of the news message, the discomfort caused by the news message and if the participant could indicate to which news outlet he/she thinks it belongs to. The question about the trustworthiness of the news message state "According to you, indicate if the article reports in a trustworthy way the events develop during the 1st of October". The answers were measured using a 4-Point Likert-Scale 1 being not at all and 4 being extremely. The question about the discomfort caused by the news message asked if the respondent could indicate if they felt annoyed by the way on which the article reported about the 1st of October. The

answers were measured using a 4-Point Likert-Scale 1 being Not at all annoyed and 4 being Extremely annoyed. Both Likert-Scale were adapted from the Levendunsky & Maholtra (2015) research 'Does Media Coverage of Partisan Polarization Affect Political Attitudes?'. The last question regarding the identification of the articles, was a single-answer question that state "To which online news outlet do you think it belong?". The possible answer categories were: 1 *La Razón*, 2 *La Vanguardia*, 3 *El País*, 4 *Vilaweb*, 5 *TV3* and 6 none of the previous ones.

Therefore, nine variables were created to measure the respondents answers and interpret the results:

Trustworthiness of the news message El País. Scale variable

Discomfort caused by the news message El País. Scale variable

News outlet identification El País. Nominal variable

Trustworthiness of the news message La Vanguardia. Scale variable

Discomfort caused by the news message La Vanguardia. Scale variable

News outlet identification La Vanguardia. Nominal variable

Trustworthiness of the news message TV3. Scale variable

Discomfort caused by the news message TV3. Scale variable

News outlet identification TV3. Nominal variable

3.4.2 Control Variables

There are 4 questions that were included in the survey but weren't used to measure directly the variables beforementioned or to test the hypotheses made, but rather, to complement the results of the thesis. Control variables are defined by Taylor (2012) as variables that "are known to or expected to influence the dependent variable and might also affect the explanatory or independent variable in an analysis but is not the focus of interest for the researcher" (p. 234). Therefore, the control variables were used to test the influence of potentially cofounding factors with the other main variables (Taylor, 2012). Thereupon, it will be explained which variables have been included as control variables and how were operationalize in the survey questionnaire.

Age. This continuous and independent variable was used to explore if there existed a relationship between a respondent's answers and their age using five different categories: 1

for 18 to 24 years old, 2 for 25 to 34 years old, 3 for 35 to 49 years old, 4 for 50 to 64 years old and 5 for 65 and older.

Gender. This categorical and independent variable was used to explore if there was a difference between the groups 'male' and 'female'.

Language. This categorical and independent variable relates to the language preference of the respondent when making the questionnaire. The options were either Catalan or Spanish and those were used too as categories for this variable.

Political party. This categorical and independent variable relates to the political party affiliation that each respondent marked as having more sympathy to. It was operationalized with the question "Could you indicate to which political party do you have more sympathy for?" and with the following answer categories: 1 for Partido Popular, 2 for Esquerra Republicana, 3 for Partit Socialista de Catalunya, 4 for Ciutadans, 5 for CUP, 6 for PdeCat, 7 for Catalunya en Comú Podem, 8 for Other parties and 9 for None.

3.5 Analysis

The research gathered and processed large amounts of quantitative data, therefore, it is needed the support of a software program to adequately analyze all the inputs received and trace clear and reliable results of the investigation. The program SPSS is an optimal tool to process and analyze the data among different types of variables. With this program, it can be achieved standardized and uniformed numerical data results that will allow the use of different statistical measurements to either accept or reject the hypotheses and answer the research question properly.

To test hypotheses 1 and 2 the researcher looked at the variables *Supporters leaning towards the independence of Catalonia*, and *Readership of online news outlets based on their provenience* and run a test of independence Chi-square (with two dimensions) to explore if they were related with a type of association Phi coefficient since both variables are nominal (Salkind, 2017). It was decided to run two complementary independent samples t-test between the variable *Supporters leaning* and the variables *Trust upon Catalan online news outlets* and *Trust upon Spanish online news outlets* in order to analyze if the level of trust that respondents give to the news outlets change depending on the provenience of the outlets (Salkind, 2017). The second test ran was a t-test between *Supporters leaning* and *Selective exposure*, to enrich the findings and explore if pro-independence or pro-unitarism political leaning influences individuals to have selective exposure towards likeminded media.

Testing for hypotheses 3 and 4 it was used the same test of independence Chi-square but with a Gamma coefficient of correlation, since *Supporters leaning towards the independence of Catalonia* is a dichotomous variable and *Perception of La Vanguardia discourse* is ordinal.

Hypotheses 5 and 6 aimed to find out whether there is a difference in the average scores of the dependent and continuous variable *Social distance towards out-group of individuals* between two groups, pro-unitarism and pro-independence supporters. Since the hypotheses are compound by a continuous dependent variable and a nominal independent variable with two categories the most suitable test to run is two one-sample t-tests. In order to complement the results, it was run a Chi-square goodness of fit test using a 50% proportion between the nominal variables *Affective polarization towards out-group individuals* and *Supporters leaning towards the independence of Catalonia*, both with two categories.

Testing hypothesis 7 included two t-tests for independent means among the continuous dependent variable *Hostility towards out-group of political elites* (that is divided in two different variables *Political opinion of against-referendum politicians* and *Political opinion of pro-referendum politicians*) and the nominal independent variable *Supporters leaning towards the independence of Catalonia* with two categories.

Hypotheses 8 and 9 used the same statistical measurement, the independent samples t-test but among the nominal and independent variable of *Supporters leaning towards the independence of Catalonia* and the continuous and dependent variable *Social distance towards out-group of individuals*. In order to complement the results of the t-test a test of independence Chi-square was also run with a type of correlation Phi coefficient between the nominal variables *Affective polarization out-group individuals* and *Supporters leaning towards the independence of Catalonia*, both dichotomous.

Control variables were tested by *Gender*, *Language* and *Political party*, running two tests of independence Chi-square between the beforementioned control variables and *Supporters leaning towards the independence of Catalonia* and *Readers of online news outlets based on their provenience*. For the control variable *Age*, it will be run a t-test between this one and *Supporters leaning*.

3.6 Validity and reliability

This section will explain how the researcher intended to achieve validity and reliability, within the measurements selected, to operationalize the variables and construct a valid and reliable tool to test adequately the concepts and hypotheses that shaped the research.

Reliability and validity are central concerns for any researcher, although it is almost impossible to have perfect validity and reliability in a research, the goal is to be as accurate as possible and to have indicators that help to establish the credibility of findings (Neuman, 2014).

3.6.1 Validity

Validity was addressed in the research by using, whenever it was possible, valid indicators and measurements of other researchers, while building the survey and by taking into consideration the singularities of the sample population. As it was mentioned in the operationalization section, almost all the questions, statements, answer categories and scales used in the questionnaire were adopted either from standard questions used in governmental barometers reports, such as the Eurobarometer of the European Commission or the Catalan Barometer of the Catalan Opinion Studies Center, or from previously validated researchers studying similar media phenomena or concepts as this thesis. This way, the concurrent validity, that it implies that the “measurement validity relies on a preexisting and already accepted measure to verify the indicator of a construct” and face validity that is the “judgment by the scientific community that the indicator really measures the construct” (Neuman, 2014, p.217) could be achieved. In some cases, the questions, statements, answer categories and scales had to be adapted and translated to the context of the Catalan referendum and the Catalan media landscape, making small linguistic changes or changing the options of the answer categories, but always maintaining and preserving the original sense of the measurements.

To achieve the most rigorous level of validity, the researcher had to take into account other issues due to the singularities that constituted the sample if one did not want to end up having biased findings. As it was mentioned in the sample design section, the survey questionnaire had to be designed in the Catalan and Spanish language, so the survey would not have explicit political leaning and to give the option to the respondents of choosing the language in which they felt more comfortable. Diligence and accuracy were used when translating the questions from English to Spanish and Catalan to by all means, achieve the same questions meaning in both surveys flow. The same order of questions/statements and the same answer categories and scales were used in both questionnaires. A neutral tone was used when writing the questionnaire, so the respondent would not feel biased or that their opinion was being repressed or underrepresented. As well, several errors or biases that were taken into consideration throughout the whole process of designing the questionnaire and were reported in the survey design section.

The main concepts of the research, polarization and selective exposure were measured “using multiple indicators based on the idea that indicators of one construct will act alike or

converge” (Neuman, 2014, p.217). Therefore, it was asked in different ways and using different questions the same concept, attitude and behavior to achieve convergent validity.

3.6.2. Reliability

To assess reliability a factor analysis and a reliability analysis were run on the continuous variables to see if it was possible to correlate the items in different dimensions.

Opinion of politicians’ scale. The scale is normally distributed. A principal component analysis (PCA) indicated that the 7 items which were 10-point Likert-scale form a one-dimension scale: using Principal Components extraction with Varimax rotation based on Eigenvalues (>1.00 , $KMO = .88$, $\chi^2 (N = 237, 21) = 1281.70$, $p < .001$). The resultant model explained 62.5% of the variance in *Opinion of the politicians*. However, to answer hypothesis 7 it was needed to classify the items in two different dimensions, distinguishing the politicians between those that openly supported the celebration of the referendum and those who were against. The reliability analysis shows that items Xavier García Albiol, Inés Arrimadas, Miquel Iceta and Xavier Doménech have a good reliability, Cronbach’s $\alpha .85$ which is considered adequate (Field, 2005), but it was found that the original α of the item Xavier Doménech was higher than the Cronbach’s α thus the item was excluded, and the level of internal consistency, consequently, increased to a Cronbach’s $\alpha .94$. The three items were put together in the category *Rating of against referendum politicians* since all expressed to be contrary to the celebration of the referendum and did not promote the mobilization of the citizenship. The reliability analysis shows that items Anna Gabriel, Carles Puigdemont, Oriol Junqueras and Xavier Doménech have a Cronbach’s $\alpha .76$ which can be considered as a moderate reliable scale. All the original α were lower thus creating the category *Rating of pro-referendum politicians*, that even if the politicians belong to different parties with different involvement regarding the celebration of the referendum, all of them openly were in favor of the right to vote for the self-determination of Catalonia.

Trust upon online news outlets scale. The scale is normally distributed. PCA indicated that the 9 items which were 5-point Likert-scale based form three-dimensional scale. They were entered into factor analysis using Principal Components extraction with Varimax rotation based on Eigenvalues (> 1.00), $KMO = .76$, $\chi^2 (N = 178, 36) = 708.84$, $p < .001$. The resulting model explained 72.9% of the variance in Trust in online news outlets. The factors found were:

Spanish online news outlets: The first factor included three items, *El Mundo*, *ABC* and *La Razón* all characterized for reporting in Spanish and having a conservative political leaning.

Catalan online news outlets: The second factor included three items all related to Catalan-based online news outlets and reporting in Catalan. This included *TV3, Ara* and *Vilaweb*.

Neutral online news outlets. The third found included *La Vanguardia, El Diario* and *El País* which are considered as Spanish online news outlets but more balanced and neutral.

The scale has good reliability, the Cronbach's α for *Spanish online news outlets* is .82. and for *Catalan online news outlets* Cronbach's α is .90. *Neutral online news outlets* Cronbach's α is .51 therefore this variable scale will not be included in the analysis because the Cronbach's α is lower than .70. If the item *El Diario* would have been excluded the reliability of the scale would have improved to a Cronbach's α .65 but it would have been still considered not reliable enough.

Table 1. Factor analysis and reliability for scale trust upon news outlets (N=178)

| Item | Spanish online news outlets | Catalan online news outlets | Neutral online news outlets |
|---------------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Trust upon <i>ABC</i> | .87 | | |
| Trust upon <i>La Razón</i> | .85 | | |
| Trust upon <i>El Mundo</i> | .77 | | |
| Trust upon <i>Ara</i> | | .89 | |
| Trust upon <i>TV3</i> | | .87 | |
| Trust upon <i>Vilaweb</i> | | .85 | |
| Trust upon <i>La Vanguardia</i> | | | .75 |
| Trust upon <i>El Diario</i> | | | .74 |
| Trust upon <i>El País</i> | | | .58 |
| R^2 | .28 | .26 | .17 |
| Cronbach's α | .82 | .90 | .51 |
| $r (p < .001)$ | | | |
| Eigenvalue | 3.59 | 1.83 | 1.11 |

Note: Rotated with Varimax, factor loadings below 0.30 excluded

Tendency Toward Congruent Selective Exposure (TECSE) scale (Tsfati, 2016). The scale is normally distributed. PCA indicates that the 5 items which were 5-point Likert-scale bases, together form a two-dimensional scale. The items were entered into factor analysis using Principal Components extraction with Varimax rotation based on Eigenvalues (> 1.00), $KMO = .68$, $\chi^2 (N = 234, 10) = 258.63$, $p < .001$. The resultant model explained 68% of the variance in tendency toward congruent selective exposure. The factors found were:

Selective exposure. This factor included four (1,2,3 and 5) items, all related to whether someone exposes them self to like-minded news. Item number 4 was found in another factor but it was decided upon to not use it. The scale is moderately reliable, Cronbach's α for selective exposure is .75.

4. Results

This section presents the descriptive statistics of all the main variables involved in the results and findings of the research. Subsequently, the output of the tests used to answer the hypotheses are stated along with other complementary tests that help enhance and enrich the interpretation of the results obtained. Lastly, it is possible to find that the results are related to the control variables.

4.1 Descriptive Statistics

4.1.1 Dependent variables

Readership of online news outlets based on their provenience. The descriptive statistics show that the sample ($N = 226$), checked more Catalan-based online news outlets (79.2%) during the 1st of October of 2017 to gather political news about what was happening that day than Madrid-based (20.8%) online news outlets.

Perception of online news outlets discourse.

Table 2. Frequencies of the overall Perception of online news outlets discourse ($N = 226$)

| | Responses N | Responses Percent |
|----------------------------|-------------|-------------------|
| Pro-independence discourse | 459 | 22.6% |
| Neutral discourse | 349 | 17.2% |
| Pro-unitarism discourse | 833 | 41.0% |
| No opinion | 393 | 19.3% |
| Total | 2034 | 100% |

Table 3. Frequencies of Perception of online news outlets per item ($N = 237$)

| | Pro-independence discourse | Neutral discourse | Pro-unitarism discourse | No opinion |
|----------------------|----------------------------|-------------------|-------------------------|------------|
| <i>El País</i> | 2.2% | 8.4% | 68.1% | 21.2% |
| <i>El Mundo</i> | 1.3% | 4.0% | 76.1% | 18.6% |
| <i>ABC</i> | 0.4% | 3.5% | 78.8% | 17.3% |
| <i>La Razón</i> | 0.4% | 2.2% | 78.8% | 18.6% |
| <i>La Vanguardia</i> | 5.3% | 34.1% | 40.7% | 19.9% |

| | | | | |
|------------------|--------------|-------|-------|--------------|
| <i>El Diario</i> | 4.4% | 31.0% | 24.3% | 40.3% |
| <i>TV3</i> | 58.0% | 37.6% | 0.4% | 4.0% |
| <i>Vilaweb</i> | 65.9% | 12.4% | 0.0% | 21.7% |
| <i>Ara</i> | 65.0% | 21.2% | 1.3% | 12.4% |

The overall discourse perception that has a higher percentage is pro-unitarism, since 41% of the sample considers that from the total number of online news outlets there is a higher amount that are perceived as having a pro-unitarism discourse in comparison with the other possible options. Looking in more detail at the frequencies per item, it is possible to observe how the online news outlets *La Razón* and *ABC* both have a higher perception of reporting news that favor the pro-unitarism discourse during the referendum followed by *El Mundo* and *El País*. The most neutral perceived online news outlet for the respondents is *TV3* with 37.6%, although this outlet has a higher score in pro-independence discourse. *Vilaweb* and *Ara* are the outlets with a higher perception of having a pro-independence discourse. *La Vanguardia*, which is the only online news outlet that was argued to be the most balanced among the options, is perceived as having a pro-unitarism discourse (40.7%) among the sample. *El Diario* is the only item where the higher score is no opinion, but this can be due to it being a recent online news outlet and not having a printed version, therefore it could be considered to be the lesser known item among the options.

Social distance towards out-group of individuals. The frequency of respondents' feeling of having a close friend that supports a contrary political stance is that 2.7% would not feel comfortable at all, 11.6% not too comfortable, 23.6 % somewhat comfortable, and 61.3% very comfortable. Thus, the most common answer among the sample is that respondents would feel comfortable having a close friend with contrary political views than theirs regarding the referendum. These results will then be contrasted with other variables in the hypotheses results, but overall it is possible to say that most of the sample does not show animosity towards out-group individuals.

Affective polarization out-group individuals. 85.8% of respondents state that their support of one of the political positions on the referendum is because of what that stance defends, and 11.6% say it is because they are contrary to the other political stance. Again, this will later be contrasted among supporters' groups and other variables, but overall, most of the sample does not show hostility and affective polarization for out-group individuals.

Hostility towards out-group of political elites. The descriptive statistic of respondents' rating each of the main political leaders in Catalonia based shows that the mean for pro-referendum politicians is higher ($M = 7.09$) than the one for politicians against-referendum ($M = 2.34$). The politicians with the highest rating of exceptionally unfavorable are Xavier García Albiol with 79.4% of responses, followed by Inés Arrimadas (73.8%). Both politicians are from the category against-referendum. The politicians with the higher ratings of favorability are Carles Puigdemont with 22.9% of exceptionally favorable and Oriol Junqueras with 19.6%, both of whom are pro-referendum politicians. Thus, most of the sample has a higher favorable opinion of politicians that agreed to do the self-determination referendum and an unfavorable opinion of those who were against.

4.1.2 Independent variable

Supporters leaning towards independence of Catalonia. The frequency of respondents' political leaning on the relationship that they considered should exist between Spain and Catalonia is that 69.3% of the sample say that Catalonia should be an independent state (pro-independence supporters) and 30.7% say it should remain inside of Spain (pro-unitarism supporters). Therefore, most of the sample would prefer that Catalonia became an independent country from Spain. Looking in more detail at frequencies within the stance of pro-unitarism supporters; 2.7% wants Catalonia to become a region of Spain which is a more centralized and restrictive political system than the current one; 9.7% want an autonomous community of Spain, the current political system; and 18.1% wants Catalonia to become a state inside a federal Spain. It is important to denote that most of pro-unitarism supporters in the sample, even if they want to remain inside of Spain, aim for a new territorial political system which is more decentralized than the current one.

4.1.3 Exploratory variables

Selective exposure. The descriptive statistics show a mean of 2.20 and a standard deviation of 0.88 ($N=226$). These results indicate that most respondents affirm not having behaviors of selective media exposure when gathering information. Although, this will be contrasted later with other statistical measurements to analyze if there are other bound to selective exposure of likeminded media reinforcing one's beliefs.

Trust upon online news outlets.

Table 4. Descriptive statistics of Trust upon online news outlets per item (N = 189)

| | N | Minimum | Maximum | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|-----------------------|-----|---------|---------|------|----------------|
| <i>El País</i> | 226 | 1.00 | 5.00 | 2.50 | 1.10 |
| <i>El Mundo</i> | 226 | 1.00 | 5.00 | 1.87 | 1.02 |
| <i>ABC</i> | 226 | 1.00 | 5.00 | 1.57 | 0.95 |
| <i>La Razón</i> | 190 | 1.00 | 5.00 | 1.26 | 0.59 |
| <i>La Vanguardia</i> | 226 | 1.00 | 5.00 | 2.91 | 0.99 |
| <i>El Diario</i> | 194 | 1.00 | 5.00 | 2.78 | 1.18 |
| <i>TV3</i> | 226 | 1.00 | 5.00 | 3.94 | 1.13 |
| <i>Vilaweb</i> | 226 | 1.00 | 5.00 | 3.70 | 1.14 |
| <i>Ara</i> | 226 | 1.00 | 5.00 | 3.69 | 1.12 |
| Valid N (listwise) | 189 | | | | |

Looking at Table 4, it is possible to argue that a majority of respondents completely distrust *La Razón*, since it is the online news outlet with the lowest mean. *ABC* also has quite a low mean close to the scale category of complete distrust followed by *El Mundo*, all of them being Spanish-based online news outlets, thus indicating that the sample tends to completely distrust Spanish-based online news outlets. *La Vanguardia*, *El Diario* and *El País* have similar means, all in between the scale's categories of partial distrust and neither trust or distrust, which can mean that respondents have given scattered ratings, depending on their perception. *TV3*, *Vilaweb* and *Ara* have the highest means close to the scale category of partial trust, all belonging to the group of Catalan-based outlets. The descriptive statistics of this variable reinforces the assumption that the respondents of this thesis tend to trust Catalan-based ($M = 3.78$, $SD = 1.03$) online news outlets more than Spanish-based ones ($M = 1.86$, $SD = 0.86$). These results will be complemented later with other statistical measurements that will enrich the analysis by adding more variables that might influence an individual's trust upon an online news outlet.

4.1.4 Control Variables

Political Party. The frequency of respondents' shows that 34.1% of participants sympathize with the party of Esquerra Republicana, 19.5% with CUP, 15.9% with PdeCat, 9.7% with Catalunya en Comú Podem, 4.9% with Partit Socialista, 4% with other parties, 3.5% with

Ciutadans, 1.3% with Partido Popular, and 6.6% with none. The parties with higher levels of sympathy are the ones that openly supported the stance of having a referendum and favored the vote for the independence of Catalonia. The parties with inferior ratings of sympathy are the ones that were against having a referendum (PSC, Ciutadans and Partido Popular). The party with the highest sympathy rate among the pro-unitarism parties is Catalunya en Comú Podem, the only party that openly supported the referendum but encouraged civilians to vote for remaining in Spain.

4.2 Hypotheses Tests

I begin by testing hypotheses 1 and 2, positing that *pro-unitarism supporters read more Madrid-based online news outlets than pro-independence citizens* and *pro-independence supporters read more Catalan-based online news outlets than pro-unitarism citizens*.

A Chi-square test and a Phi association coefficient were conducted. The Chi-square test revealed that *Supporters leaning towards the independence of Catalonia* is related to the *Readership of online news outlets based on their provenience*:

$\chi^2 (N = 225, 1) = 43.70, p < .001$.

Based on the Phi coefficient there is a moderate positive association between *Supporters leaning* and *Readership of online news outlets based on their provenience*, $\phi = .44$, $p < .001$. Crosstabulation indicates that 49.3% of pro-unitarism supporters read more Madrid-based online news outlets and 50.7% read more Catalan-based online news outlets. In the case of pro-independence supporters 8.8% read more Madrid-based online news outlets and 91.2% read more Catalan-based online news outlets. Therefore, it is possible to partially reject hypotheses 1, which says that *pro-unitarism supporters read more Madrid-based online news outlets than pro-independence citizens*, and accept hypotheses 2, which says *pro-independence supporters read more Catalan-based online news outlets than pro-unitarism citizens*.

To complement these results, the researcher explored if there could be a relation between a supporter's leanings and the level of trust based on the provenience of the online news outlet, since that is a more valuable indicator than just the quantity of online news outlets that a respondent reads.

A *t*-test showed that pro-independence supporters have significantly higher trust on Catalan online news outlets ($M = 4.20, SD = 0.67$) than pro-unitarism supporters ($M = 2.83, SD = 1.10$), $t(90.944) = -9.54, p < .001$.

A *t*-test showed that pro-unitarism supporters have significantly higher trust on Spanish online news outlets ($M = 2.60, SD = 0.88$) than pro-independence supporters ($M = 1.89, SD = 0.65$), $t(94.708) = 5.98, p < .001$.

These results show that even if pro-unitarism supporters read more Catalan-based online news outlets they give higher trust to the Madrid-based online news outlets in contrast with pro-independence supporters, which could be a sign that some degree of selective media exposure exists amongst this group of supporters too. The findings on pro-independence supporters verify the previous assumptions of having a more explicit and higher degree selective media exposure to Catalan-based online news outlets.

To enrich the results, it was important to explore if there is a relationship between the degree of selective exposure of an individual and their political leaning on the self-determination referendum. Thus, the variable *Supporters leaning towards the independence of Catalonia* was compared with the scale variable that measures the selective media exposure of each respondent.

A *t*-test showed that pro-independence supporters have a slightly higher significant selective exposure ($M = 2.30, SD = 0.87$) than pro-unitarism supporters ($M = 1.96, SD = 0.87$), $t(223) = -2.74, p = .007$.

The findings of the *t*-test were complemented with two additional *t*-tests due to selective media exposure being a complex phenomenon, and the results of the previous test show low means of selective media exposure among both groups of supporters. Thus, it was explored if there is a relation between the variables *Trustworthiness of the news message of El País* (Madrid-based online news outlet) and *TV3* (Catalan-based online news outlet). What distinguishes these variables from the variable *Selective exposure*, is that in this case, respondents were not asked directly for the phenomenon of selective media exposure but instead they had to state if they trust the headlines of both outlets without knowing the source, which added new insights that help interpret whether supporters displayed selective media exposure behaviours.

The *t*-test shows that pro-unitarism supporters have a significant higher trustworthiness of the news message of *El País*, without knowing the source ($M = 2.29, SD = 1.15$) than pro-independence supporters ($M = 1.35, SD = 0.70$), $t(90.954) = 6.225, p < .001$.

When we look at the other online news outlet, the *t*-test shows that pro-independence supporters have a higher significant trustworthiness of the news message of *TV3* without knowing the source ($M = 3.70, SD = 0.52$) than pro-unitarism supporters ($M = 2.83, SD = 1.15$), $t(81.009) = -6.046, p < .001$.

Therefore, after analyzing all the different findings, it would be possible to conclude that both political stances display selective media exposure and polarized opinions on what media is trustworthy media for them. It is possible to see a relationship between being a pro-

independence or pro-unitarism supporter and choosing and trusting certain online media outlets (Stroud, 2010). It is possible to interpret that individuals of both stances are more predisposed to seek news and trust like-minded online news outlets that reinforce and agree with their own self-preconceived political opinions (Stroud, 2010). Although, it is possible to argue that pro-independence supporters are more attached to Catalan-based online news outlets displaying some sort of higher selective media exposure than pro-unitarism supporters, thus partially rejecting hypothesis 1 and accepting hypothesis 2.

The next hypotheses that were tested are 3 and 4, positing *La Vanguardia* is considered by pro-independence supporters to be biased upon the news treatment of the Catalan referendum, and *La Vanguardia* is considered by pro-unitarism supporters to be biased upon the news treatment of the Catalan referendum.

A Chi-square test revealed that *Supporters leaning towards the independence of Catalonia* is related to *Perception of La Vanguardia discourse*:
 $\chi^2 (N = 180, 2) = 20.09, p < .001$.

Based on the gamma coefficient results $G = .59, p < .001$, there is a moderate positive relationship between *Supporters leaning* and *Perception of La Vanguardia discourse*.

Table 5. Crosstabulation of Supporters leaning and Perception of La Vanguardia discourse (N = 180)

| | Pro-unitarism supporters | Pro-independence | Total |
|----------------------------|--------------------------|------------------|-------|
| Pro-independence discourse | 15.7% | 3.1% | 6.7% |
| Neutral discourse | 56.9% | 36.4% | 42.2% |
| Pro-unitarism discourse | 27.5% | 60.5% | 51.1% |
| Total | 100.0% | 100% | 100% |

Crosstabs shows that 60.5% of pro-independence supporters perceive *La Vanguardia* as having a more pro-unitarism discourse therefore, it is possible to accept the hypothesis that says that *La Vanguardia* is considered by pro-independence supporters to be biased upon the news treatment of the Catalan referendum, since a majority of pro-independence supporters do not perceive *La Vanguardia* as having a neutral discourse. Continuing with the crosstabulation results, 56.9% of pro-unitarism supporters perceive *La Vanguardia* discourse

as being neutral, in contrast with 27.5% of supporters that perceive it as being more pro-unitarism. Therefore, hypotheses 4 that states that *La Vanguardia is considered by pro-unitarism supporters to be biased upon the news treatment of the Catalan referendum* gets partially rejected since most pro-unitarism supporters perceived *La Vanguardia* as having a neutral discourse when relating about the referendum political events.

To complement these findings, it was relevant to include *Trustworthiness of the news message La Vanguardia* in the analysis since that variable represents supporters trust based on an undisclosed article's headline, which provides stronger results of the degree of hostile media effect among stances. The *t*-test shows that pro-independence supporters have a higher significant trustworthiness of the news message of *La Vanguardia* ($M = 3.50, SD = 0.59$) than pro-unitarism supporters ($M = 3.15, SD = 0.85$), $t(99.134) = -3.01, p = .003$.

Looking at if the headline of *La Vanguardia* caused discomfort, a *t*-test showed that pro-unitarism supporters have a higher discomfort caused by the news message of *La Vanguardia* ($M = 1.77, SD = 0.96$) than pro-independence supporters ($M = 1.61, SD = 0.79$), but this relation between discomfort caused by the news message of *La Vanguardia* and supporters leaning was found to be not significant $t(221) = 1.28, p = .200$.

Therefore, it is possible to interpret that even if pro-independence supporters perceived *La Vanguardia* as having a more pro-unitarism discourse, when they see an undisclosed headline of the outlet, they tend to trust it more than pro-unitarism supporters. These results bolster the argument that pro-independence supporters show a clearer hostile media effect, perceiving *La Vanguardia* as biased when the outlet is identified but trusting the message when the outlet is undisclosed (Reid, 2012). The contrary could be said about pro-unitarism supporters who perceive *La Vanguardia* as neutral when it is identified (maybe because of the historical prestige of the newspaper) but do not trust the news message when the outlet is undisclosed. It can be argued that this denotes some sort of undercover hostile media effect from part of unitarism supporters perceiving balanced content as biased when it is not labelled. It is possible to state the previous argument, but not that pro-unitarism supporters had a discomfort feeling towards the undisclosed headline of *La Vanguardia* since the *t*-test was not significant. Overall, the hypothesis *La Vanguardia is considered by pro-unitarism supporters to be biased upon the news treatment of the Catalan referendum* is still considered partially rejected since there is not enough clear evidence of the hostile media effect among pro-unitarism upon this online news outlet and the relationship between *Supporters leaning* and *Discomfort caused by the news message of La Vanguardia* was found not significant. However, it is relevant to point out that pro-unitarism supporters trust the online news outlet less when it is undisclosed.

In order to test hostile media effect at a deeper level, the researcher asked the respondents to identify three undisclosed headlines. The three headlines belonged to *El País*, *La Vanguardia* and *TV3*, but two answer categories with a more partisan leaning were added in order to test hostile media effect among *La Vanguardia* headline and polarization of attitudes with *El País* and *TV3*. Thus, the 6 possible answer categories were: *La Razón* (Madrid-based online news outlet and very conservative), *El País* (Madrid-based online news outlet), *La Vanguardia* (Madrid-based online news outlet and with prestige of balanced press), *TV3* (Catalan-based online news outlets) and *Vilaweb* (Catalan-based online news outlets and considered partisan towards pro-independence discourses). The only significant Chi-square test found, was the one that asked for the identification of the headline of *El País* and not from *La Vanguardia* or *TV3*. Hostile media effect only applies to online news outlets that are supposed to be considered as balanced and moderate, and in this thesis, the only outlet included in that category was *La Vanguardia* (Newman et. al, 2018). However, the next results added new insights on polarization of attitudes and partisan media leaning regarding *El País*.

A Chi-square test revealed that the variable *News outlet identification of El País*, without being identified the source, is related to *Supporters leaning towards the independence of Catalonia*:

$$\chi^2 (N = 225, 6) = 23.677, p = .001.$$

Table 6. Crosstabulation of Supporters leaning and Identification of the headline *El País* (N = 223)

| | Pro-unitarism supporters | Pro-independence | Total |
|---------------------------------|--------------------------|------------------|-------|
| <i>La Razón</i> | 51.5% | 58.7% | 56.5% |
| <i>La Vanguardia</i> | 16.2% | 2.6% | 6.7% |
| <i>El País</i> (correct answer) | 25.0% | 36.8% | 33.2% |
| <i>Vilaweb</i> | 0.0% | 0.6% | 0.4% |
| <i>TV3</i> | 4.4% | 0.0% | 1.3% |
| None of the previous ones | 2.9% | 1.3% | 1.8% |
| Total | 100% | 100% | 100% |

If we compare, the previous results with what the respondents select as their perception upon the discourse of *El País*, a Chi-square test revealed that *Perception El País discourse* is related to *Supporters leaning towards the independence of Catalonia*: $\chi^2 (N = 177, 2) = 36.66, p < .001$.

Table 7. Crosstabulation of Supporters leaning and Perception of *El País* discourse (N = 117)

| | Pro-unitarism supporters | Pro-independence | Total |
|----------------------------|--------------------------|------------------|-------|
| Pro-independence discourse | 6.0% | 1.6% | 2.8% |
| Neutral discourse | 32.2% | 2.4% | 10.7% |
| Pro-unitarism discourse | 25.0% | 96.1% | 86.4% |
| Total | 100% | 100% | 100% |

The first Chi-square test results show that neither a majority of pro-unitarism nor pro-independence supporters identify the headline as being from *El País* correctly. Instead a majority of supporters identify it as being from *La Razón*, which was the most conservative online news outlet among the possible options. This reinforces the argument of polarized opinions among pro-independence supporters if we relate this answer with the ones given to their perception of *El País* discourse, being greatly perceived as having a pro-unitarism discourse in contrast with what pro-unitarism supporters stated. In their case, pro-unitarism supporters seem to perceive *El País* as a balanced and neutral press but when they see the undisclosed headline, they state in a majority that it belongs to *La Razón*. This can imply a polarization and radicalization of beliefs, since most of them did not feel discomfort with the headline thus agreeing with it and identify it consciously as being from a very partisan conservative online news outlet (Prior, 2013). These results can also entail that pro-unitarism supporters can clearly identify which are the like-minded online news outlets that follow pro-unitarism discourses, such as *La Razón* and *El País*, but are not able to differentiate the different editorial lines among them, since maybe, both report in a similar way about the referendum. Therefore, the theoretical argument of the press reporting in a more partisan and polarized degree about the referendum gets reinforced since most of the respondents in both stances did not identify the headline as belonging to *El País* (Prior, 2013).

If we look at the overall results regarding the perception in the discourses of the rest of online news outlets included in the thesis, it is possible to see how both stances of supporters, in a majority of cases, perceive the discourse of the online news outlets with the same leaning. Madrid-based online news outlets are largely perceived as having pro-unitarism discourses and Catalan-based online news outlets as having pro-independences discourses (see Table 1B *Crosstabulation of Supporters leaning towards the independence of Catalonia and Perception online news outlets discourse* in Appendix B).

A Chi-square test revealed that *Perception of the discourse El País* is related to supporters leaning:

$$\chi^2 (N = 177, 2) = 36.66, p < .001.$$

A Chi-square test revealed that *Perception of the discourse El Mundo* is related to supporters leaning:

$$\chi^2 (N = 183, 2) = 14.33, p = .001.$$

A Chi-square test revealed that *Perception of the discourse ABC* is related to supporters leaning:

$$\chi^2 (N = 186, 2) = 11.93, p = .003.$$

A Chi-square test revealed that *Perception of the discourse La Razón* is related to supporters leaning:

$$\chi^2 (N = 183, 2) = 15.22, p < .001.$$

A Chi-square test revealed that *Perception of the discourse El Diario* is not related to supporters leaning:

$$\chi^2 (N = 134, 2) = 5.28, p = .071.$$

A Chi-square test revealed that *Perception of the discourse TV3* is related to supporters leaning:

$$\chi^2 (N = 216, 2) = 25.22, p < .001.$$

A Chi-square test revealed that *Perception of the discourse El Vilaweb* is not related to supporters leaning:

$$\chi^2 (N = 176, 1) = 1.44, p = .231.$$

A Chi-square test revealed that *Perception of the discourse TV3* is related to supporters leaning:

$$\chi^2 (N = 197, 2) = 10.12, p = .006.$$

The overall results of the Chi-square tests show that there are significant relationships between *Supporters leaning towards the independence of Catalonia* and the *Perception of online news outlets discourse* with all the items except for *El Diario* and *Vilaweb*. Again, it is possible to state that the selective media exposure phenomenon is clearer and seen in a

higher degree among pro-independence supporters that perceive *TV3* as having a neutral discourse, but when portrayed by the *Digital News Report* it is seen as focusing too much in the pro-independence process (Neuman, 2018). As it was argued by Feldman (2018), the polarization of the media and its audiences tends to create stronger sides among a population, leading to misinformed citizens and erasing moderate positions, as is seen in the case of pro-independence supporters with their distorted perceptions about the media discourses of *La Vanguardia* and *TV3*.

To test hypotheses 5 and 6, positing *most supporters of the independence of Catalonia are hostile towards pro-unitarism supporters* and *most supporters of the pro-unitarism of Catalonia are hostile towards pro-independence supporters*, two one-sample t-tests were run, one for each supporters leanings, selecting first only the pro-independence supporters and relate it to *Social distance towards out-group of individuals* and in second place, selecting only the pro-unitarism supporters and testing the relationship between the same variable.

A t-test with a test value of 2.5 showed a significant relationship between pro-unitarism supporters and *Social distance towards out-group of individuals*, ($M = 3.48$, $SD = 0.87$), $t(67) = 9.314$, $p < .001$.

A t-test with a test value of 2.5 showed a significant relationship between pro-independence supporters and *Social distance towards out-group of individuals*, ($M = 3.43$, $SD = 0.77$), $t(154) = 15.013$, $p < .001$.

The test value of 2.5 indicates the minimum rating that a respondent had to give in order to not be considered hostile towards the out-group of individuals, since the scale categories were 1 not being comfortable at all with having a close friend supporting a contrary stance to mine, 2 not too comfortable, 3 somewhat comfortable and 4 very comfortable, thus considering that above 2.5 one is not hostile. The results show that among both political leanings, a majority of respondents do not show animosity in having a close friend supporting a contrary stance to theirs, hence rejecting both hypotheses that were stating that they would display hostility towards the contrary stance of individuals.

For complementing the results, two Chi-square goodness of fit test using a 50% proportion were performed between the variable *Affective polarization towards out-group individuals* and pro-unitarism and pro-independence supporters. A Chi-square test revealed that the proportion of pro-unitarism supporters that defend their position because they are against the other side is significantly different from 50%:

$\chi^2 (N = 63, 1) = 17.29$, $p < .001$.

A Chi-square test revealed that the proportion of pro-independence supporters that defend their position because they are against the other side is significantly different from 50%:

$$\chi^2 (N = 156, 1) = 115.10, p < .001.$$

The frequencies of pro-unitarism supporters show how 48 respondents state being pro-unitarism because of what that stance defends, in contrast to 15 respondents that state because they are contrary to the other stance. The expected N was 31.5. In the case of pro-independence supporters' frequencies 145 individuals state defending the independence of Catalonia because of what that stance defends in contrast to 11 respondents that say doing it because they are contrary to the other stance. In this case the expected N was 78.0.

Table 8. Crosstabulation of Supporters leaning and Affective polarization towards out-group individuals (N = 219)

| | Pro-unitarism supporters | Pro-independence supporters | Total |
|--|--------------------------|-----------------------------|-------|
| For what my stance defends | 76.2% | 92.9% | 88.8% |
| Because I'm contrary to the other stance | 23.8% | 7.1% | 12.0% |
| Total | 100% | 100% | 100% |

These results reinforce the rejection of hypotheses 5 and 6, since a majority of respondents, on both stances, defend that they are not hostile towards the opposite stance and not show animosity against individuals that think contrary to them (Garrett et al., 2014). Nevertheless, when comparing both groups of supporters in Table 8, is noticeable that almost one quarter of the pro-unitarism supporters state supporting that stance because they are against pro-independence supporters which implies that there is a higher effect of affective polarization among the group of pro-unitarism supporters than among pro-independence supporters, although not in a sufficient degree to accept the hypothesis.

To test hypothesis 7, positing *there is a relationship between a supporter's political leaning towards the independence of Catalonia and being hostile towards the out-group of political elites*, two t-tests for independent means were run, one for each out-group of politicians.

A t-test showed that pro-independence supporters have a higher significant favorable opinion towards pro-referendum politicians ($M = 8.19, SD = 1.39$) than pro-unitarism supporters ($M = 4.65, SD = 2.57$), $t(83.837) = - 10.579, p < .001$.

The other *t*-test showed that pro-unitarism supporters have a significantly higher favorable opinion towards against-referendum politicians ($M = 3.50, SD = 2.20$) than pro-independence supporters ($M = 0.94, SD = 8.55$), $t(79.754) = 6.153, p < .001$.

Therefore, it is possible to accept hypotheses 7, since it is possible to see a relationship between being a pro-unitarism supporter and having a much higher favorable opinion towards against-referendum politicians and a very unfavorable opinion towards the group of politicians that are contrary to that belief, in this case pro-referendum politicians (Banda & Cluverius, 2018). This relationship also happens with the contrary stance. Pro-independence supporters have a much higher favorable opinion towards pro-referendum politicians than pro-unitarism supporters, also rating with unfavorable values against-referendum politicians. This denotes again the polarization of opinions among Catalan citizens and the increasing hostility attitude towards out-group political elites. As it was argued in the theoretical framework, affective polarization can produce severe consequences in a democratic society. This affective polarization towards pro-referendum political elites, that moreover are ruling in coalition in the Catalan Parliament, can fragment the society and increase mass polarization in the citizenship level, since some are very favorable with the politicians ruling (pro-independence supporters) and others are very unfavorable (Banda & Cluverius, 2018). The same could be said with the unfavorable opinion towards against-referendum politicians that even if they do not have the majority in the Catalan Parliament, they still have a big representation of parliaments. If we look at the national level, against-referendum parties have a wider majority in the Spanish Parliament, which can explain the difficult relationship between pro-referendum and against-referendum political elites.

To test hypotheses 8 and 9, positing *most readers of Catalan-based online news outlets are hostile towards pro-unitarism supporters* and *most readers of Madrid-based online news outlets are hostile towards pro-independence supporters*, a *t*-test for independent means was run between the variables *Readership of online news outlets based on their provenience* and *Social distance towards out-group individuals*.

The *t*-test shows that readers of Madrid-based online news outlet ($M = 3.13, SD = 1.00$) have a slightly higher significant level of social distance towards out-group individuals than readers of Catalan-based online news outlets ($M = 3.53, SD = 0.72$), $t(57.732) = -3.07, p = .002$. For complementing these results, a Chi-square test and a Phi association coefficient were performed between *Readership of online news outlets based on their provenience* and *Affective polarization towards out-group of individuals*. A Chi-square test revealed that readers

of online news outlets based on their provenience is related to hostility towards out-group of individuals:

$$\chi^2 (N = 219, 1) = 15.67, p < .001.$$

Based on the Phi coefficient there is a negative association between readers of online news outlets based on their provenience and hostility towards out-group of individuals, $\phi = -.27, p < .001$.

Table 9. Crosstabulation of Readership of online news outlets based on their provenience and Affective polarization towards out-group individuals (N = 219)

| | Readers of Madrid-based online news outlets | Readers of Catalan-based online news outlets | Total |
|--|---|--|-------|
| For what my stance defends | 71.1% | 92.5% | 88.1% |
| Because I'm contrary to the other stance | 28.9% | 7.5% | 11.9% |
| Total | 100% | 100% | 100% |

The results show that hypotheses 8 and 9 can be rejected since neither Madrid-based or Catalan-based readers show animosity towards individuals of the contrary stance. Since hypotheses 5 and 6 also got rejected it is possible to conclude that neither pro-unitarism/pro-independence supporters or Madrid-based/Catalan-based readers are hostile towards individuals of the out-group. However, it is possible to see again, how in this case readers of Madrid-based online news outlets display a higher level of affective polarization toward out-group individuals than readers of Catalan-based online news outlets.

Lastly, it was important to explore if there is a connection between having a certain political leaning and expressing discomfort towards the way of reporting about the referendum among one Madrid-based online news outlet (*El País*) and one Catalan-based online news outlet (*TV3*). To explore this line of argumentation, respondents were asked to rank their level of discomfort to real headlines from the 1st of October of 2017 without them knowing the source of the outlet.

The *t*-test showed that pro-independence supporters have a significant higher discomfort caused by the news message of *El País*, without knowing the source ($M = 3.50, SD = 0.75$) than pro-unitarism supporters ($M = 2.69, SD = 1.11$), $t(96.161) = -5.513, p < .001$. And if we look at the Catalan-based online news outlet, the *t*-test shows that pro-unitarism

supporters have a higher significant discomfort caused by the news message of *TV3*, without knowing the source ($M = 2.10, SD = 1.06$) than pro-independence supporters ($M = 1.38, SD = 0.72$), $t(97.624) = 5.122, p < .001$.

It is not possible to claim that the selective exposure to likeminded media causes supporters of both stances to become more hostile towards dissimilar media, but there is certainly a connection between both variables, since respondents, without knowing the source of the online news outlets continue supporting the like-minded media to their stances and expressing discomfort to the dissimilar media. Hence, pro-unitarism supporters had less discomfort with the news message of *El País* when reporting about the referendum because it is a Madrid-based online news supposedly “joining the main Spanish political parties in defending the legal status quo” as pointed out by Newman et al. (2018, p.102) in the *Digital News Report 2018*. On the contrary pro-independence supporters show a higher mean of discomfort by the news message of *El País*, between the range of it annoys me a little bit (3) and extremely annoys me (4). Looking at the level of discomfort caused by *TV3* then is possible to see that pro-independence supporters are in a greater way not annoyed at all with the news message of *TV3* (a Catalan-based online news outlet), even without knowing the source of the news, because again, it is supposedly spreading a more pro-independence discourse in their way of reporting about the referendum. In the case of pro-unitarism supporters they express less discomfort with the news messages of *TV3* if we compared the means with the ones of *El País* and pro-independence supporters.

These last results add to the previous ones, the fact that pro-independence supporters express higher discomfort to online media with pro-unitarism discourses than pro-unitarism supporters to online media with pro-independence discourses. However, is important to highlight that this discomfort showed in media with dissimilar discourses does not seem to be translated to hostility or animosity towards individuals of contrary stances but does towards political elites.

4.3 Control variables tests

4.3.1 Language

A Chi-square test revealed that language is related to supporters leaning:

$\chi^2 (N = 225, 1) = 55.74, p < .001$.

Based on the Phi coefficient there is a large positive correlation between language and supporters leaning, $\phi = .50, p < .001$.

Table 10. Crosstabulation of Supporters leaning and Language (N = 225)

| | Pro-unitarism supporters | Pro-independence supporters | Total |
|---------|--------------------------|-----------------------------|-------|
| Spanish | 44.9% | 4.5% | 16.9% |
| Catalan | 55.1% | 95.5% | 83.1% |
| Total | 100% | 100% | 100% |

The Crosstabulation shows that 44.9% of pro-unitarism supporters preferred the Spanish language to do the survey and 55.1% Catalan. But if we look in more detail into the three possible categories of pro-unitarism, 100% of people who wants Catalonia to be a region of Spain choose Spanish as language, 77.3% of those wanting Catalonia to be an autonomous community of Spain preferred Spanish and 19.5% of those who want Catalonia to be a state inside of a federal Spain choose Spanish. Therefore, it can be argued that the Spanish language is more present in extreme supporters of the unitarism movement and less present with the unitarism supporters that stand for remaining in Spain but with a more open federal territorial system. If we look at the language preference of the other stance, 4.5% of pro-independence supporters preferred to do the survey in Spanish and 95.5% in Catalan, which shows a clearer and stronger connection between Catalan language and pro-independence.

Table 11. Crosstabulation of Types of relationship with Spain and Language (N = 225)

| | A region of Spain | An Autonomous community of Spain | A state inside a federal Spain | An independent state | Total |
|---------|-------------------|----------------------------------|--------------------------------|----------------------|-------|
| Spanish | 100.0% | 77.3% | 19.5% | 4.5% | 16.9% |
| Catalan | 0.0% | 22.7% | 80.5% | 95.5% | 83.1% |
| Total | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100% |

Overall, it is possible to acknowledge how language can become a political tool that distinguishes supporters and differentiates them. The more polarized and extreme a supporter is, the less willing they are to speak the language of the out-group, even if they have the knowledge to speak it and use it.

A Chi-square test revealed that *Language* is related to *Readers of online news outlets based on their provenience*:

$$\chi^2 (N = 226, 1) = 49.77, p < .001.$$

Based on the Phi coefficient there is a moderate positive association between *Language* and *Readers of online news outlets based on their provenience*, $\phi = .47$, $p < .001$.

Table 12. Crosstabulation of Readers of online news outlets based on their provenience and Language (N = 225)

| | Readers of Madrid-based online news outlets | Readers of Catalan-based online news outlets | Total |
|---------|--|---|-------|
| Spanish | 51.1% | 7.8% | 16.8% |
| Catalan | 48.9% | 92.2% | 83.2% |
| Total | 100% | 100% | 100% |

The Crosstabulation shows similar results to the ones obtained between language preference and supporters leaning had. 51.1% of readers of Madrid-based preferred the Spanish language to do the survey and 48.9% Catalan. The contrary happens with readers of Catalan-based outlets, 7.8% preferred to do the survey in Spanish and 92.2% in Catalan. This implies that the variables *Supporters leaning*, and *Readership of online news outlets based on their provenience* have the same tendency and display similar percentages when relating them to *Language preference*. Thus, pro-unitarism supporters and readers of Madrid-based online news outlets have similar results and pro-independence supporters and readers of Catalan-based online news outlets do too.

4.3.2 Political party

A Chi-square test revealed that sympathy to a political party is related to supporters leaning towards the relationship between Spain and Catalonia:

$$\chi^2 (N = 225, 8) = 127.09, p < .001.$$

Table 13. Crosstabulation of Supporters leaning and Political party (N = 225)

| | Pro-unitarism supporters | Pro-independence supporters | Total |
|----------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------------|-------|
| Partido Popular | 4.3% | 0.0% | 1.3% |
| Esquerra Republicana | 13.0% | 43.6% | 34.2% |
| Partit Socialista | 14.5% | 0.6% | 4.9% |
| Ciutadans | 11.6% | 0.0% | 3.6% |
| CUP | 7.2% | 25.0% | 19.6% |
| PdeCat | 2.9% | 21.8% | 16.0% |

| | | | |
|----------------------------|-------|------|------|
| Catalunya en Comú Podem | 29.0% | 1.3% | 9.8% |
| Other | 1.4% | 5.1% | 4.0% |
| None | 15.9% | 2.6% | 6.7% |
| Total | 100% | 100% | 100% |

A Chi-square test revealed that sympathy for a political party is related to readers of online news outlets based on their provenience:

$$\chi^2 (N = 226, 9) = 55.221, p < .001.$$

Table 14. Crosstabulation of Readership of online news outlets based on their provenience and Political party (N = 225)

| | Readers of Madrid-based online news outlets | Readers of Catalan-based online news outlets | Total |
|----------------------------|---|--|-------|
| Partido Popular | 6.4% | 0.0% | 1.3% |
| Esquerra Republicana | 17.0% | 38.8% | 34.2% |
| Partit Socialista | 14.9% | 2.2% | 4.9% |
| Ciutadans | 12.8% | 1.1% | 3.6% |
| CUP | 14.9% | 20.8% | 19.6% |
| PdeCat | 4.3% | 19.1% | 16.0% |
| Catalunya en Comú Podem | 19.1% | 7.3% | 9.8% |
| Other | 2.1% | 4.5% | 4.0% |
| None | 8.5% | 6.2% | 6.7% |
| Total | 100% | 100% | 100% |

Thus, it is possible to see a connection between a supporters' leaning, the readership of online news outlets based on their provenience, and having sympathy for a political party. These three variables show similar results; if someone is a pro-unitarism supporter tend to be also a Madrid-based reader of online news outlets and having more sympathy to pro-unitarism

political forces. Same results in the opposite direction for respondents that are pro-independence supporters.

4.3.3 Age

A *t*-test shows that there is no significant relation between *Age* and pro-independence supporters ($M = 46.39, SD = 13.20$) and pro-unitarism supporters ($M = 45.81, SD = 13.66$), $t(212) = -.29, p = .773$.

Thus, the age of the respondents does not condition one's political leaning towards the independence of Catalonia.

4.3.4 Gender

A Chi-square test revealed that *Gender* is not related to *Supporters leaning towards the independence of Catalonia*:

$\chi^2 (N = 225, 2) = 1.19, p = .554$.

A Chi-square test revealed that *Gender* is not related to *Readers of online news outlets based on their provenience*:

$\chi^2 (N = 226, 2) = 5.23, p = .073$.

Thus, there is not a relation between being male or female and supporting one of the political stances as well as being a reader of Madrid-based or Catalan-based online news outlets.

4.4 Discussion

In this section, the interpretation of the researcher will be argued based on the results obtained after the analysis and the rejection and acceptance of the hypotheses.

Overall, the results show a high polarization on the trust given to the online news outlets depending on whether they are Catalan-based or Spanish-based and if an individual is a pro-independence or pro-unitarism supporter. Regarding this assumption, as Hallin and Mancini (2016) argued, Spain has always historically had a Polarized Pluralistic media system in which media has always tended to have a partisan leaning and connections with the ruling governments. This fact is well known between the citizens and it is common knowledge which outlets are more conservative or more leftist than others, which is also visible in the homogeneity within the answers giving to the discourse perception of the online news outlets among supporters of both stances. What is more unexpected is that it is possible to see that some of the news outlets that were thought to be balanced and neutral, such as *El País*, *El Mundo*, *TV3*, *La Vanguardia*, are losing this notion among the citizenship, encouraging the partisan selective media exposure of individuals. One of the main problems in the Catalan political conflict is the lack of neutral voices, as both stances have become more polarized

from each other and the media has taken sides as well instead of remaining balanced. That it is why is not surprising that pro-independence supporters tend to read more Catalan-based online news outlets and give them more trust since many of the Spanish-based online news outlets have increased their tones and their partisan leanings, hardening their discourses and portraying Catalan political events in a way that is favorable for pro-unitarism politics. What can be more threatening for democratic politics is the moderate hostile media effect towards *La Vanguardia* that pro-independence supporters show in the results. The fact that they perceive the online news outlet as having a pro-unitarism discourse but then trusting it when they see an undisclosed headline, clearly shows that pro-independence supporters are having a biased preconception of *La Vanguardia*, thus discrediting its reports.

Pro-unitarism supporters do not show such a strong selective media exposure or hostile media effect but, it is also important to consider that the pro-unitarism supporters selected for the thesis live in Catalonia and have ties with the region, and perhaps different results could have been found with a broader Spanish population of pro-unitarism supporters. On the national level, pro-unitarism supporters are more radical and contrary to any referendum or autonomy for Catalonia. The positive aspect of all of this is that the four hypotheses concerning affective polarization towards out-group of individuals got rejected, meaning that even if there is a partisan leaning in the media and selective exposure among Catalan citizens with polarized opinions of what is trustworthy press, these still do not display, in a meaningful way, affective polarization towards out-group individuals. This is a relevant note since it implies that there are still spaces involving dialogue, toleration towards discrepant opinions and comprehension among the Catalan society.

5. Conclusion

This section offers a conclusion of the findings of the study, answering the research question, giving an explanation of the limitations that the thesis faced and recommendations for future research in this field of study.

5.1 Conclusion and implications of the research

This thesis has studied and researched the online media choices of news outlets among Catalan citizens, focusing on the period when the self-determination referendum took place in Catalonia. Using a questionnaire as research method, respondents had to answer a series of questions about their political leaning, online media consumption, perception upon a series of online news outlets discourses and trust given to them in order to explore if Catalans were subject to selective media exposure and polarization of attitudes among the two different political stances. A series of Chi-square tests, Phi association coefficients, Crosstabulation and t-test for independent means and one-sample t-test were used to measure the phenomena of selective media exposure, polarization of attitudes, hostile media effect and affective polarization.

The findings of the thesis show how pro-independence supporters display a higher selective media exposure towards Catalan-based online news outlets than pro-unitarism supporters towards Spanish-based online news outlets. Although when it comes to their opinion on which online media outlets are more trustworthy, both political stances show polarized attitudes, always favoring the like-minded online media of each stance and distrusting the dissimilar online media. The supporters of the independence show a higher level of trust to Catalan-based online news outlets almost stating a complete trust as scale category if we look at the mean number of the Chi-square test, while pro-unitarism supporters even if they trust more Spanish-based online news outlets their level of trust is not as high, the mean number is closer to scale answer category of neither trust or distrust.

Bringing back to the analysis the research question stating *to what extent does selective media exposure relate to polarized attitudes in Catalan society regarding the Catalan referendum*, it is now possible to answer it arguing that there is a relationship between having a higher polarized attitude and having a higher level of selective media exposure to political concordant online media. The nature of this relationship demonstrates that individuals with a higher polarized attitude are trusting more the media organizations following like-minded political stance while they show untrustworthiness towards politically dissimilar media organizations. Moreover, according to the research results, the stance of pro-independence supporters displayed a higher selective media exposure towards Catalan-based online news

outlets than pro-unitarism supporters towards Spanish-based online news outlets. This entailed that pro-independence supporters showed a higher level of trust in Catalan-based online media than pro-unitarism supporters towards Spanish-based online media.

This argument was built after running several tests among different variables. The results obtained show that respondents, even without knowing the source of the online news outlet, still trusted more what was being reported by the like-minded media of each political stance and experiencing discomfort with the way that dissimilar online media reported the events of the referendum. Pro-unitarism supporters also display this behavior and opinion with Spanish-based online news outlets, however not in such strong way as pro-independence supporters thus stating that because pro-independence supporters have a higher selective media exposure and a hostile media effect than pro-unitarism supporters that can be related to their higher trust on Catalan-based online news outlets and higher discomfort to dissimilar online media.

It was not found affective polarization towards out-group individuals but yes affective polarization towards the political elites, which contributes to the existence of polarized attitudes among the Catalan society creating stronger differences among stances and opinion in relation to political elites. Again, the ratings of unfavourability were higher among pro-independence supporters towards against-referendum politicians than the ratings of unfavourability of pro-unitarism supporters towards pro-referendum politicians.

These findings contribute to add new literature to the concepts of selective media exposure and polarization of attitudes and corroborate some of the main arguments done by other academics in the field of media and political studies such as the relation between the polarization of attitudes and the partisan selective media exposure to like-minded media (Levendunsky, 2013). This thesis is only small-scale research regarding the Catalan referendum but can encourage other researchers to continue this line of investigation and explore in a broader and deeper level the media phenomena's in political conflicts with high emotional loadings and mediatic coverage. The results show in a moderate level how supporters have hardened their beliefs and strengthened their differences. The findings of this thesis could be interpreted as a warning, implying that this situation can get aggravated if the political conflict persists and a political solution is not found among the Catalan and Spanish governments. The continuous exposure to concordant media and the discredit of dissimilar media can produce a non-reconstituable fracture among the Catalan and Spanish society in the long run, by threatening democratic politics and creating hostility and animosity between individuals of

different political leanings. Polarization and selective media exposure can also bring hostile media effect which can demise the moderate opinions, making individuals perceive as biased what is neutral information. Ultimately, these media phenomena can weaken an individual's reasoning in politics thus the relevance of continue researching this political conflict using a media approach. The findings contribute to the citizenship by portraying a slightly polarized Catalan society, attach to certain media preferences reinforcing one's beliefs, that hold a partisan posture depending on the political parallelism of the outlet. This situation enhances the need for continuing studying and closely following these media phenomena in order to not compromise more the democratic and social role of media in Spain and to not contribute in the creation of disinformed and manipulated individuals.

5.2 Limitations of the research

Regarding the limitations that the thesis research faced, the most relevant one is the fact of not conducting a probabilistic sample procedure during the sampling process. This entailed that there was not an equally distributed number of pro-independence supporters and pro-unitarism supporters. The sample had a higher number of participants supporting the independence of Catalonia than any other of the possible relationships with Spain which might have unbalanced some of the results, since pro-independence supporters' findings end up being stronger than the ones regarding pro-unitarism supporters. Moreover, if we look at the three possible political leanings that determined if an individual was a pro-unitarism supporter, it is possible to acknowledge how there are more respondents that want Catalonia to be a federal state inside of Spain than an Autonomous community or a region of Spain, which is not a representative stratified numerical quota of the actual political sensibilities within the Catalan society. The researcher faced limitations when accessing more right-winging pro-unitarism supporters since they turned out to be more inaccessible and less predisposed to participate voluntarily. Individuals holding this political position end up being a minority within the sample. It is possible to see these unbalanced quotas in the frequency's statistics of *Political party* in where only 1.3% of respondents have sympathy for the party Ciutadans when is actually the third political force leading the opposition in the Catalan Parliament. On the other side, CUP is overrepresented within the number of pro-independence supporters, since 19.5% of respondent sympathizes with the party but is the fifth political force in the Catalan Parliament. This party defines itself as extreme left and pro-independence which may have influenced some of the pro-independence supporter's results and findings.

Another factor to take into consideration is having unbalanced stratified quotas within the demographic variables too, thus having more women than men as respondents, and uneven respondents in the age categories.

Having to build a questionnaire that had to be completed in less than 10 minutes also could be considered as another limitation that conditioned the thesis, since the number and type of questions and answer categories had to be adapted to encourage the respondents to finalize the survey. This implied that the questionnaire could have been built in a more complex way, asking more in-depth questions but due to the time conditioned, it was built going straight to the main questions regarding the hypotheses and research question leaving out some nuances that could have brought deeper insights of the sample.

If the researcher would have had accessed to more resources, the thesis research could have been expanded to use a qualitative method to complement the findings obtained with the survey. This way, using focus group or interviews with pro-independence and pro-unitarism supporters, it would have been possible to obtain more in-depth opinions, only reachable using a qualitative method and that would have been relevant for the purpose of this thesis since an individual's political opinion is a multi-characteristic aspect to study.

5.3 Future research

I proposed to future researchers interested in the media phenomena of selective media exposure and polarization of attitudes regarding the Catalan referendum to study the political event with a broader sample of respondents, including Spanish citizens and/or European citizens and an extended list of items, including more Spanish and European media.

Since the Catalan referendum has highly affected the politics in Spain, it is relevant to study how the rest of Spanish citizens followed the event and whether their political opinions have been polarized because of that. During the last Spanish elections of April 2019, it was possible to see how the extreme right-wing party Vox enter for the first into the Spanish Parliament with 24 seats. This is an unprecedented situation since the reestablishment of democracy in Spain. In the electoral program of Vox were included measures such as the abolishment of the Autonomías political system, going back to a regional system with less power for the Autonomies, among many other controversial political measurements (Rus & Utrero, 2019). Some political scientists attributed these increased of the extreme right among Spanish citizens due to the political crisis in Catalonia thus the relevance in study it in more depth to analyze the impact that has had the Catalan referendum on the citizens opinions

regarding politics and whether these opinions have been polarized since the political event (García, 2018).

This research focused on the media exposure of Catalan citizens mainly during the events of the referendum, but it is also pertinent to continue to study the follow up political events developed after the referendum. There has been also an extensive media coverage of the Catalan politicians involved in the organization of the referendum that have been in custody since November 2017 and now are been judged in the High Spanish Court or the exile of the former president of 'La Generalitat', Carles Puigdemont to Brussels in where the High Tribunals of that country decided not to put him in custody, not judge him for rebellion or high treason and not extradited to Spain, which has caused also a diplomatic crisis among the countries.

On the other hand, it is also relevant to study the media coverage that the Catalan referendum received from the international media, especially networks and newspapers from Europe, to compare how Spain's covered the event and how other European countries did, comparing as well the political opinions of citizens in different countries. This comparison with outside media, would allow to study if the Spanish citizens are having (or not) a more selective media exposure due to the way of reporting of the news outlets and to explore if the media have been reporting in an unbalanced or biased way. The internationalization of the Catalan political conflict has been always important for the pro-independence politicians that promoted the referendum, since they stand that the European law allows the celebration of self-determination referendums thus focusing in having international attention to validate this event. By comparing the Spanish media coverage with other European countries, it could be studied which role and discourse have taken the European Union towards the political conflict, whether remaining neutral or supporting one of the political stances.

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APPENDIX A

Questionnaire translated into English

Q1 State the language in which you want to do the questionnaire

- a) Spanish
- b) Catalan

Q2 The following survey aims to know more about the online news outlets that Catalans used to gather information during the 1st of October of 2017. Thank you for the interest and the willingness to answer this questionnaire, it won't take more than 10 minutes to completely fill it. This research is part of a Master thesis that the author is currently doing in the Erasmus University Rotterdam. All the information and data provided in this survey will be processed anonymously and it will only be used for the academical purposes beforementioned. Please answer honestly and expressing your opinion, there are no good or bad answers. Thank you again for participating. By clicking the checkbox of "Accept" you are verifying that you have read the previous information and that you agree in participating. Remember that you can abandon the survey at any time.

- a) Accept

Q3 Indicate with numbers:

- a) Year of birth

Q4 Gender:

- a) Feminine
- b) Masculine
- c) I don't want to answer

Q4 Are you born in Catalonia?

- a) Yes
- b) No

Q5 In which Catalan province have you reside the most?

- a) Barcelona
- b) Girona
- c) Lleida
- d) Tarragona

Q6 Could you indicate with which frequency do you usually read news on the Internet?

- a) Everyday/Almost every day
- b) Two or three times per week
- c) Once per week
- d) Two or three times per month
- e) Never

Q7 Could you indicate which of the following online news outlets did you check last week? You can select more than one option

- a) El País

- b) El Mundo
- c) ABC
- d) La Razón
- e) La Vanguardia
- f) El Diario
- g) TV3
- h) Vilaweb
- i) Ara
- j) Other pages (open answer category)

Q8 Could you indicate towards which political party do you have more sympathy:

- a) Partido Popular (PPC)
- b) Esquerra Republicana (ERC)
- c) Partido Socialista (PSC)
- d) Ciudadanos (Cs)
- e) Partit Demòcrata de Catalunya (PdeCat)
- f) Catalunya en Comú Podem
- g) Other parties (open answer category)
- h) None

Q9 Indicate your opinion towards each of the political leaders' performance during the referendum of the 1st of October of 2017, being 0 exceptionally unfavorable and 10 exceptionally favorable:

- a) Xavier García Albiol
- b) Carles Puigdemont
- c) Oriol Junqueras
- d) Anna Gabriel
- e) Inés Arrimadas
- f) Miquel Iceta
- g) Xavier Doménech

Q10 Could you indicate how would you like the relationship between Spain and Catalonia to be? Do you think Catalonia have to be...

- a) A region of Spain
- b) An Autonomous Community of Spain
- c) A state inside a federal Spain
- d) An independent state

Q11 How comfortable would you feel if you had a good friend that support the independence of Catalonia/ the unitarism of Catalonia?

- a) Not comfortable at all
- b) Not very comfortable
- c) A little bit comfortable
- d) Very comfortable

Q12 Would you say that you support the unitarism of Catalonia/the independence of Catalonia because of what the movement represents or because you are contrary to the people that defend the independence/unitarism of Catalonia?

- a) Because of what the independence/unitarism represents
- b) Because I'm against independence/unitarism people

Q13 During the events of the 1st of October referendum to which of the following online news outlets did you access for gathering information of what was happening? You can choose more than one option

- a) El País
- b) El Mundo
- c) ABC
- d) La Razón
- e) La Vanguardia
- f) El Diario
- g) TV3
- h) Vilaweb
- i) Ara
- j) Other pages (open answer category)

Q14 Indicate the level of trust that you assign to the following online news outlets. Please indicate if you tend to trust or not each of them. (1 = Completely untrust, 5 = Completely trust).

- a) El País
- b) El Mundo
- c) ABC
- d) La Razón
- e) La Vanguardia
- f) El Diario
- g) TV3
- h) Vilaweb
- i) Ara

Q15 In general do you think that the following online news outlets covered the 1st of October referendum in a positive way towards the independence supporters, towards the unitarism supporters or in a neutral way? Please, indicate your valuation for each of the online news outlets.

- a) El País
- b) El Mundo
- c) ABC
- d) La Razón
- e) La Vanguardia
- f) El Diario
- g) TV3
- h) Vilaweb
- i) Ara

Q16 Indicate if you agree or not with the following statements (1 = Strongly disagree, 5= Strongly agree)

- a) I try to avoid exposure to media outlets expressing irritating opinions
- b) I try to expose myself only to media outlets and news messages that are in line with my own attitudes"
- c) I try to expose myself to all the opinions heard in the media equally" (reverse coded)
- d) If I need to select between two op-ed pieces, I'll choose the one that is closer to my opinions
- e) It is important for me to read not just articles supporting my views, but also articles opposing my views" (reverse coded)"

Q17 Read the following news report that was published during the 1st of October referendum:

Image of El País headline

Q18 Indicate if according to you, the previous headline reported in a trustworthy way the events of the 1st of October of 2017.

- a) Not at all
- b) Not much
- c) Partially
- d) Extremely

Q19 Indicate if you feel discomfort with the way of reporting that the previous online news outlet used

- a) Not at all
- b) Not much
- c) A little bit
- d) Extremely

Q20 To which online news outlet do you think it belongs?

- a) La Razón
- b) La Vanguardia
- c) El País
- d) Vilaweb
- e) TV3
- f) None of the previous ones

Q21 Read the following news report that was published during the 1st of October referendum:

Image of La Vanguardia headline

Q22 Indicate if according to you, the previous headline reported in a trustworthy way the events of the 1st of October of 2017.

- a) Not at all
- b) Not much

- c) Partially
- d) Extremely

Q23 Indicate if you feel discomfort with the way of reporting that the previous online news outlet used

- a) Not at all
- b) Not much
- c) A little bit
- d) Extremely

Q24 To which online news outlet do you think it belongs?

- a) La Razón
- b) La Vanguardia
- c) El País
- d) Vilaweb
- e) TV3
- f) None of the previous ones

Q25 Read the following news report that was published during the 1st of October referendum:

Image of La Vanguardia headline

Q26 Indicate if according to you, the previous headline reported in a trustworthy way the events of the 1st of October of 2017.

- a) Not at all
- b) Not much
- c) Partially
- d) Extremely

Q27 Indicate if you feel discomfort with the way of reporting that the previous online news outlet used

- a) Not at all
- b) Not much
- c) A little bit
- d) Extremely

Q28 To which online news outlet do you think it belongs?

- a) La Razón
- b) La Vanguardia
- c) El País
- d) Vilaweb
- e) TV3
- f) None of the previous ones

APPENDIX B

Table 1B. Crosstabulation of Supporters leaning and Perception online news outlets discourse

| | | Pro-independence discourse | Neutral discourse | Pro-unitarism discourse |
|------------------------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------------------|----------------------|----------------------------|
| <i>El País</i> (N=177) | Pro-independence supporters | 1.6% | 2.4% | 96.1% |
| | Pro-unitarism supporters | 6.0% | 32.0% | 62.0% |
| <i>El Mundo</i> (N=183) | Pro-independence supporters | 0.8% | 1.5% | 97.7% |
| | Pro-unitarism supporters | 3.9% | 13.7% | 82.4% |
| <i>ABC</i> (N=186) | Pro-independence supporters | 0.0% | 1.5% | 98.5% |
| | Pro-unitarism supporters | 1.9% | 11.5% | 86.5% |
| <i>La Razón</i> (N=183) | Pro-independence supporters | 0.0% | 0.0% | 100% |
| | Pro-unitarism supporters | 1.9% | 9.4% | 88.7% |
| <i>El Diario</i> (N=134) | Pro-independence supporters | 5.1% | 49.0% | 45.9% |
| | Pro-unitarism supporters | 13.9% | 58.3% | 27.8% |
| <i>TV3</i> (N=216) | Pro-independence supporters | 49.3% | 50.0% | 0.7% |
| | Pro-unitarism supporters | 85.9% | 14.1% | 0.0% |
| <i>Vilaweb</i> (N=216) | Pro-independence supporters | 82.9% | 17.1% | 0.0% |
| | Pro-unitarism supporters | 90.2% | 9.8% | 0.0% |
| <i>Ara</i> (N=197) | Pro-independence supporters | 68.1% | 30.5% | 1.4% |
| | Pro-unitarism supporters | 89.3% | 8.9% | 1.8% |