
Miscellaneous

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Submitted

December 19, 2024

Approved

October 7, 2025

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Communication & Society

ISSN 0214-0039

E ISSN 2386-7876

www.communication-society.com

2026 – Vol. 39 (1)

pp. 391-408

How to cite this article:

Park, C. S., & Molla, M. A. M. (2026). "I Feel Informed?": Encountering News on Social Media, News-Finds-Me Perception and Perceived Political Knowledge, *Communication & Society*, 39(1), 391-408. <https://doi.org/10.15581/003.39.1.025>

"I Feel Informed?": Encountering News on Social Media, News-Finds-Me Perception and Perceived Political Knowledge

Abstract

We distinguish subjective political knowledge (a metacognitive self-assessment of feeling informed) from objective political knowledge (quiz-based factual accuracy). Drawing upon an online panel survey ($W_1 = 2,058$, $W_2 = 1,264$) of South Korean Internet users in 2022 and 2023, we find that incidental news exposure on social media has a positive link to the news-finds-me perception and subjective political knowledge, while it does not relate to objective political knowledge. The news-finds-me perception bridges the association between incidental news exposure and subjective political knowledge. That is, the increase of incidental news exposure on social media is associated with a stronger belief that news will find me and, in turn, with a feeling of being informed. The findings suggest that incidental news exposure creates an illusion of knowing.

Keywords

Incidental news exposure, social media, news-finds-me perception, subjective political knowledge, objective political knowledge.

1. Introduction

A functioning democracy depends on an informed and engaged citizenry capable of participating in open discourse on pressing issues (Valentino et al., 2008). However, in digital media environments, political information is increasingly undermined by misinformation, algorithmic filtering, surveillance, and declining trust in news sources (Gundu, 2024; Zuboff, 2019). This study examines incidental news exposure—the unintentional encounter with news while engaging in non-news activities on social media (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2018). For instance, users may come across political headlines while scrolling through Facebook or YouTube (Mitchell et al., 2013). As this mode of exposure becomes dominant (Lee & Kim, 2017), its impact on political knowledge warrants investigation.

We distinguish between objective political knowledge (factual accuracy) and subjective political knowledge (self-perceived informedness). These constructs often diverge in digital contexts, leading to an "illusion of knowing," where familiarity is mistaken for understanding (Lee et al., 2022a; Leonhard et al., 2020). This illusion inflates confidence despite limited actual knowledge (Rozenblit & Keil, 2002), influencing decision-making and information-seeking behavior (Dodd et al., 2005).

A key variable in this dynamic is the “news-finds-me” (NFM) perception—the belief that important news will reach individuals without active effort (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2017). As users increasingly encounter news passively, they may rely less on traditional sources and engage less deeply with content, potentially diminishing objective knowledge (Gil de Zúñiga & Diehl, 2019). We conceptualize the news-finds-me (NFM) perception as a metacognitive bridge linking incidental exposure to knowledge outcomes. Repetitive news feeds foster ambient awareness and familiarity (Boczkowski et al., 2018; Hermida, 2010), reinforcing the belief that news will reach users regardless of effort (Toff & Nielsen, 2018). This passive model promotes cognitive ease, where recognition is mistaken for comprehension (Alter & Oppenheimer, 2009), inflating subjective knowledge and encouraging superficial civic engagement.

Recent studies support modeling NFM as a psychological mechanism transmitting the effects of incidental exposure to political cognition. Lee et al. (2022a) found that social media users often report high subjective knowledge despite low factual accuracy. Similarly, Gherghina and Marian (2024) show that ambient exposure fosters perceived informedness among first-time voters, even when objective knowledge is lacking.

This study investigates three questions: (1) Does incidental news exposure predict objective and subjective political knowledge and NFM?; (2) Does NFM predict objective and subjective political knowledge?; and (3) Does NFM mediate the relationship between incidental exposure and political knowledge? To address these questions, we conducted a two-wave panel survey in South Korea in 2022 and 2023, enabling analysis of temporal ordering and longitudinal associations among variables.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Incidental News Exposure on Social Media

Incidental news exposure refers to the unintentional encounter with news while individuals engage in non-news activities. This phenomenon has grown significantly in social media environments (Oeldorf-Hirsch, 2018), becoming central to how users interact with information online (Boczkowski et al., 2018; Fletcher & Nielsen, 2018). Users often come across news while scrolling for entertainment or social updates. These encounters may include headlines, summaries, or video clips related to current events. Incidental exposure also arises from engagement behaviors such as liking or commenting, which amplify visibility through social filtering (Bode, 2016; Yamamoto & Morey, 2019). Friends’ interactions increase perceived relevance, drawing attention even when users are not seeking news (Kim et al., 2013). Additionally, algorithms curate and push news based on user behavior, reinforcing passive exposure through ambient feeds and notifications (Bode & Vraga, 2015; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2020).

The Political Incidental News Exposure (PINE) model (Matthes et al., 2020) conceptualizes this process in two stages. The first involves passive scanning—briefly noticing political content during non-political activities. If deemed relevant, users may shift to deeper engagement, which is more likely to influence political learning. This study adopts the first-level definition, focusing on low-elaboration, situational encounters with news that occur without an explicit information-seeking goal.

Despite its prevalence, the impact of incidental news exposure on political knowledge remains debated. Some research suggests it can enhance learning through passive accumulation (Bode, 2016), while others argue it fosters superficial familiarity without true comprehension (Oeldorf-Hirsch, 2018; Lee et al., 2022b). This tension raises a key question: Does incidental exposure promote genuine learning or merely the illusion of being informed?

The distinction between objective and subjective political knowledge adds further complexity. Objective knowledge refers to factual accuracy, while subjective knowledge reflects individuals’ self-assessed understanding. These often diverge in digital contexts, where familiarity is mistaken for comprehension (Dunning, 2011; Leonhard et al., 2020).

Most existing studies rely on cross-sectional data, limiting insights into how incidental exposure affects knowledge over time. To address this, the present study uses a two-wave panel survey to examine temporal dynamics and strengthen causal claims. It also introduces the news-finds-me (NFM) perception—the belief that important news will reach individuals without active effort. Repeated passive exposure may cultivate this belief, discouraging intentional news-seeking and reinforcing subjective knowledge without factual depth.

2.2. Objective Political Knowledge

Political knowledge refers to the ability to retain and retrieve factual information about political institutions, issues, and current affairs (Ashcraft, 1989). In this study, objective political knowledge is defined as demonstrable, test-based understanding (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Lee et al., 2022a), and is widely regarded as essential for a healthy democracy. Informed citizens are better equipped to make rational decisions about leaders and policies, contributing to democratic vitality (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996). As Mill (1859) argued, an informed electorate helps safeguard liberty and prevent majority tyranny. Empirical research consistently shows that individuals with higher political knowledge are more likely to vote and engage in political discourse (Verba et al., 1995).

Objective political knowledge also acts as a defense against misinformation and propaganda. Informed individuals are more capable of critically evaluating media content and resisting manipulation (Kümpel et al., 2022; Prior, 2013). Without such knowledge, citizens may fall prey to demagoguery and make decisions that undermine collective interests. Thus, promoting political knowledge through education and news access is vital for democratic resilience (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996).

The relationship between incidental news exposure—unintentional encounters with news—and objective political knowledge is complex. It depends on factors such as news quality, individual processing habits, and the diversity of online networks (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2021). People who encounter news passively on social media may show varying levels of political knowledge depending on their engagement and information-seeking behaviors.

Research findings on this relationship are mixed. Some studies report minimal or no gains in objective knowledge from incidental exposure. For example, Oeldorf-Hirsch (2018) found no significant link between incidental exposure and current event awareness. Matthes et al. (2020) observed only slight improvements, while Lee et al. (2022b) found that exposure on platforms like Facebook and Twitter had no positive effect—and YouTube exposure was negatively associated with political knowledge.

On the other hand, other studies suggest that incidental exposure can support passive learning. Morris and Morris (2017) found a positive correlation between online incidental exposure and political knowledge. Bode (2016), Lee and Kim (2017), and Nanz and Matthes (2020) also report that individuals can retain information encountered unintentionally. These findings suggest that the repetitive and ambient nature of online news may facilitate learning even without deliberate effort.

Using a two-wave panel survey, we aim to explore temporal patterns and clarify how passive news encounters shape political understanding over time. Given these contradictory results, this study asks:

RQ1: How does incidental news exposure on social media relate to objective political knowledge over time?

2.3 Subjective Political Knowledge

Subjective political knowledge reflects individuals’ self-assessed understanding, regardless of factual accuracy (Gajora, 2011). Subjective knowledge is shaped by familiarity and surface-level attention rather than deep comprehension or correct recall (Lee et al., 2022a). It represents “what we think we know,” and when it exceeds objective knowledge, the resulting gap is termed the illusion of knowing (Leonhard et al., 2020). This illusion can lead individuals to overestimate their understanding, potentially resulting in misguided decisions and increased confidence in sharing misinformation (Pennycook & Rand, 2019). It may also hinder critical thinking and openness to new information, especially when existing beliefs feel familiar and thus “correct” (Dunning, 2011; Rozenblit & Keil, 2002).

People often misjudge their own knowledge, overestimating their depth of understanding (Kruger & Dunning, 1999). Exposure to frequent media content can foster recognition without comprehension, leading to inflated perceptions of being informed. Individuals may even claim familiarity with nonexistent concepts (Atir et al., 2015). Frequent news consumers, especially on social media, may develop a false sense of being well-informed (Gil de Zúñiga & Diehl, 2019), as incidental exposure creates ambient familiarity without deeper learning.

Mondak (1995) found that reading local newspapers increased perceived understanding of political campaigns. Similarly, incidental exposure on social media resembles opportunistic information acquisition—like watching TV while dining—where users encounter content without actively seeking it. Many log onto platforms habitually and come across news that captures their attention (Ahmadi & Wohn, 2018; Boczkowski et al., 2018). Thus, it is highly plausible that incidental encounters with the news are more likely to have elevated levels of subjective knowledge.

H1: Over time, people who frequently encounter news incidentally on social media show higher levels of subjective political knowledge than those who do not.

2.4. Direct and Indirect Effects of News-Finds-Me Perception

The rise of digital media has reshaped how individuals access news, with many relying on passive exposure rather than active search. This shift is captured by the news-finds-me (NFM) perception, via algorithms, social media feeds, and personalized recommendations (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2018; Gil de Zúñiga & Diehl, 2019).

Incidental news exposure reinforces NFM through three cumulative processes. First, repeated exposure to “important” news without active search leads users to believe seeking is unnecessary (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2017). Second, users increasingly delegate news discovery to algorithms and social networks, which act as surrogate gatekeepers (Bode & Vraga, 2015; Kalogeropoulos et al., 2018). Third, brief encounters with news foster familiarity, which can be misinterpreted as being informed, reducing the perceived need for deeper engagement (Atir et al., 2015; Dunning, 2011).

Individuals with strong NFM beliefs often stay “informed” through casual interactions with headlines, memes, or shared articles. Algorithmic curation and social sharing continuously push salient news into their media environments, reinforcing the idea that news will “find” them. This low-effort mode of news acquisition aligns with broader trends in digital consumption (Park & Kaye, 2021).

However, this passive model has implications for political knowledge quality. Notifications and pop-ups may give users the impression that active news-seeking is redundant (Toff & Nielsen, 2018). Over time, users become accustomed to superficial engagement—limited to headlines or summaries—which can hinder critical evaluation and deeper understanding (Boczkowski et al., 2018; Kim & Gil de Zúñiga, 2021). Moreover, algorithms may reinforce selective exposure and confirmation bias, prioritizing content aligned with users’ existing beliefs (Flaxman et al., 2016), potentially leading to echo chambers and reduced exposure to diverse perspectives.

In sum, incidental news exposure contributes to the development of NFM by repeatedly delivering unsolicited news. These encounters reinforce the belief that news arrives without effort, reduce the perceived value of active seeking, and foster a subjective sense of being informed—strengthening NFM over time.

H2: Incidental news exposure on social media has a positive association with the news-finds-me perception, over time.

NFM is related to a superficial awareness of current events, which may hinder the nuanced understanding necessary for informed political decision-making. We argue that NFM can erode objective political knowledge via three reinforcing mechanisms. First, when people believe “news will find me,” they downshift effortful monitoring and seek less, narrowing source diversity and contact with professionally curated content (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2017; Gil de Zúñiga & Diehl, 2019). Second, reliance on automatic feeds and friends increases redundant, homophilous, and mixed-quality exposure, limiting corrective information and contextual depth that typically support encoding/recall (Bode & Vraga, 2015; Kalogeropoulos et al., 2018). Third, incidental news exposure creates a sense of being informed by fostering familiarity and processing fluency, which can reduce elaboration and verification, yielding weaker memory traces despite higher confidence (Park et al., 1988). Together, these processes help predict lower objective knowledge among high-NFM individuals.

Passive exposure to news content may only offer individuals a limited perspective on political issues, leading to gaps in their levels of political knowledge. Further, individuals who primarily rely on personalized news algorithms may have a more limited exposure to diverse political viewpoints, potentially leading to a narrower understanding of complex political issues (Napoli, 2019). Considering NFM positively relates to algorithmic news use (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2022), it is likely that NFM has a negative link to objective political knowledge. A related implication is greater vulnerability to misinformation: if NFM discourages source checking and diversifying inputs, users are more likely to encode inaccurate claims and less likely to encounter correctives, which can depress factual accuracy on knowledge batteries (Bode & Vraga, 2015; Lee et al., 2025). Thus, NFM should predict stagnant or declining objective knowledge over time. Indeed, research shows that NFM exhibits a negative correlation with the consumption of the news from traditional media (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2017).

H3: The news-finds-me perception is negatively related to objective political knowledge over time.

Individuals seeking specific information regarding important events may perceive that they do not require regular news consumption to stay informed (Hargreaves & Thomas, 2002). This perception is rooted in the idea that news has an ambient quality, leading some to believe that they can stay informed passively, as news will naturally reach them (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2017). This viewpoint may foster the mistaken belief that simply being exposed to news is equivalent to being well-informed. In other words, individuals who embrace the NFM often

perceive themselves as being well-informed about politics, even if their actual knowledge may be limited. As a result, passive exposure to news content may give individuals a false sense of confidence in their political knowledge, as they may mistake familiarity with political topics for genuine understanding. This perspective can be self-deceptive.

H4: The news-finds-me perception is positively related to subjective political knowledge.

Taken together, the logic above specifies a mediational pathway: incidental news exposure → NFM → knowledge assessments. Incidental exposure supplies familiarity without depth, strengthening NFM. Elevated NFM then reduces intentional news search and elaboration while limiting gains in objective knowledge but amplifies subjective knowledge through cognitive miscalibration.

The rationale supporting the anticipated correlation stems from the idea that there is no necessity for active news-seeking since their social circles supply them with relevant information (Bergström & Belfrage, 2018). As individuals encounter news content passively while using social media, they may develop a stronger belief that news effortlessly finds its way to them without active effort. When individuals firmly believe that news will naturally reach them, and they feel their informational needs are met through their peers and social connections, they are less likely to actively seek out additional news (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2017). This heightened perception of passive news consumption, in turn, leads individuals to perceive themselves as more knowledgeable about politics, despite the passive nature of their news consumption habits. Repeated, socially and algorithmically delivered encounters foster the sense that “news will find me,” which inflates felt knowledge while dampening active news seeking (Gil de Zúñiga & Diehl, 2019; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2017). Thus, we predict that NFM will mediate the relationship between incidental exposure to news on social media and subjective political knowledge.

H5: Incidental exposure to news on social media increases the news-finds-me perception, which subsequently increases subjective political knowledge.

The ambient nature of the news on social media platforms—characterized by algorithmic filtering, peer curation, and emotionally resonant content—reinforces passive exposure and undermines epistemic vigilance (Hermida, 2010; Pennycook & Rand, 2019). Users increasingly rely on social cues and platform algorithms to determine relevance, which shifts informational authority from journalistic institutions to opaque systems and social networks (Bucher, 2018). Incidental news exposure often occurs in fragmented, low-effort environments like social media feeds (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2018). This mode of exposure fosters a superficial sense of awareness, which can be mistaken for genuine understanding (Tandoc, 2019). This delegation of curation fosters a false sense of informational sufficiency and discourages deeper inquiry. NFM emerges when individuals internalize the idea that they are sufficiently informed simply by being online or connected to social networks. This belief reduces the perceived need for intentional news consumption and critical engagement, which are essential for acquiring and retaining factual political knowledge (Kim et al., 2013). In essence, NFM often leads to overconfidence and reduced motivation to verify, contextualize, or elaborate on political information (Park & Kaye, 2021). Research shows that individuals with stronger NFM perceptions are less likely to engage with traditional news sources, less likely to verify information, and more prone to misinformation (Diehl et al., 2016; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2017). As a result, the shift from active surveillance to passive reception disrupts the cognitive processes required for political learning—such as attention, elaboration, and integration—resulting in stagnation or decline in test-scored political knowledge.

H6: Incidental exposure to news on social media increases NFM, which subsequently decreases objective political knowledge.

2.5. Research Context

In South Korea, digital news use has undergone substantial changes over the past decade, driven by technological advancements and changing media preferences. The Internet penetration rate of South Korea is 93% as of 2022 (Statista, 2022). As of 2021, 88.8% of the population actively use social media (Statista, 2023b). As of July 2022, the most popular social media platforms are Instagram (41%), Facebook (22%), Naver Band (12.9%), Kakao Story (12.6%), and Twitter (8.6%) (Statista, 2022).

One notable trend in digital news consumption in South Korea is that news aggregators and social media have become major information sources. According to Reuters Institute, 79% South Koreans consume news through the Internet including social media (Lee, 2023). Over half of South Korean adults (53%) use YouTube for news each week (Lee, 2023). As of 2022, 94% of South Koreans own a smartphone, making it a primary device for accessing news (Statista, 2023a).

3. Method

3.1. Data Collection

To collect data, we conducted a two-wave panel survey in South Korea in 2022 and 2023. The survey was implemented with a panel organized by a survey firm in South Korea. The company has more than 500,000 South Korean adults in the pool. To create a sample of 5,000, we used quota sampling in terms of age and gender. Quota sampling has a few limitations. For example, quota sampling does not use random selection, which increases the risk of selection bias and limits the generalizability of findings to the broader population (Yang & Banamah, 2014). In quota sampling, certain groups may be over- or underrepresented, affecting the validity of subgroup comparisons (Yang & Banamah, 2014). But quota sampling helps ensure representation of key subgroups, and it is the closest in representativeness to probability sampling (Yang & Banamah, 2014). Indeed, our sample shows quite a similarity to the demographic characteristics of the South Korean population: (female: population 50.1%, sample 50.9%; 18–34 years: population 19%, sample 39%; 35–54 years: population 29.7%, sample 31%, 55+ years: population 34.4%, sample 31%). Despite this, we interpret estimates as associational for South Korean internet users in this panel rather than fully generalizable to the national adult population.

We conducted the first wave (W1) survey between August 1 and August 30, 2022. In total, 2,058 completed surveys (41.2% response rate). We raffled off 5 \$10 gift cards to encourage participation. The second wave (W2) survey was conducted between March 1 and March 30, 2023. A total of 1,264 participated (retention rate 61.4%). In longitudinal social science research, 60–80% retention is generally considered acceptable (Cantrell et al., 2018).

A longer interval between two waves may result in a significant decline in data quality, while a short interval may fail to identify nuanced changes (Lynn, 2009). This study notes that many household panel studies in the U.S. have adopted a 1-year interval (Buck et al., 1996). Accordingly, we decided to employ an 8-month interval.

3.2. Measures

While Western-developed scales have long served as the foundation for measuring political knowledge, media use, and psychological constructs, their direct application in non-Western contexts can pose validity and cultural relevance challenges. Some constructs such as political

efficacy, news use, and subjective political knowledge knowledge may manifest differently across cultural settings because of variations in media systems, civic norms, and communication styles (Hanitzsch, 2007). We acknowledge this limitation, adapted and refined measurement items to better reflect the South Korean sociopolitical context. This approach aligns with best practices in cross-cultural survey research, which emphasize the importance of cultural calibration—modifying item wording, response formats, and conceptual framing to ensure semantic, conceptual, and functional equivalence (He & van de Vijver, 2012; van de Vijver & Leung, 2021).

Incidental news exposure on social media. To measure this variable, we mainly followed Matthes et al.’s (2020) definition of the first-level incidental exposure, which is ‘quick, casual scanning of incidental political content (e.g., headlines, snippets) that is not actively sought.’ We also drew insights from Oeldorf-Hirsch (2018) and Tewksbury et al. (2001). We asked how often participants encounter news about politics or current affairs without actively seeking it out on a scale from 1 (never) to 5 (very often): Facebook ($W_1 M = 2.35$, $SD = 1.26$), YouTube ($W_1 M = 2.58$, $SD = 1.52$), X (former Twitter) ($W_1 M = 2.06$, $SD = 1.15$), Naver Band ($W_1 M = 2.51$, $SD = 1.77$), Kakato Story ($W_1 M = 2.64$, $SD = 1.37$). We averaged the responses ($\alpha = .80$, $M = 2.48$, $SD = 1.52$). Facebook, YouTube, and X are some of the most popular social media platforms in South Korea. Kakao Story and Naver Band are Korean-unique social media platforms.

Objective Political knowledge. Drawing upon Delli Carpini and Keeter (1992), we conceptualize the objective political knowledge measure encompassed five key political issues relevant at the time the survey was conducted: health crisis policies, the government’s stance on North Korea, controversy regarding illegal immigrants, development of rural areas, and debate about nuclear power plants. We chose the items after thoroughly reviewing news stories from network television, current-affairs magazines, and newspapers.

For each query, survey participants were instructed to select one out of four available responses or indicate “don’t know.” These responses were subsequently reclassified (0 = incorrect or don’t know; 1 = correct) and then averaged. Since the political knowledge items were developed from composite tasks rather than random equivalents, we evaluated reliability using Guttman’s λ_2 , which is a more general reliability coefficient that can be used with both dichotomous and polytomous items. A coefficient larger than .70 is considered acceptable (Osburn, 2000; $W_1 \lambda_2 = .76$, $M = 0.64$, $SD = .34$). The second measurement round followed an identical procedure but utilized a distinct set of items ($W_2 \lambda_2 = .79$, $M = 0.67$, $SD = .35$).

Subjective political knowledge. Drawing upon Park (2001), we conceptualize subjective political knowledge as measured with five items about important political topics in South Korea: (1) I know pretty much about the primary election process of the ruling party; (2) I am well informed about the national referendum process; (3) I know a lot about how the National Assembly works; (4) When it comes to political donation, I know the relevant facts; and (5) I have a good overview of news on the President. The items rated on a 5-point scale with strongly agree and strongly disagree at each end ($W_1 \alpha = .85$, $M = 2.72$, $SD = 1.42$). The second round of measurement followed the same procedure, but used a different battery of items ($W_2 \alpha = .86$, $M = 2.89$, $SD = 1.40$).

News-finds-me (NFM) perception. Unlike incidental news exposure which refers to unintentional encounters with news content (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2018), NFM is a cognitive belief or heuristic where individuals assume they do not need to actively seek news because it will reach them anyway through their digital environment (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2017). While incidental exposure is a behavioral phenomenon, NFM is a psychological orientation that can

develop over time through repeated passive encounters, ultimately influencing news-seeking behavior and political learning (Kim & Gil de Zúñiga, 2021).

We model NFM as a metacognitive belief that can transmit the influence of incidental exposure to subsequent knowledge outcomes by encouraging reliance on passive, socially filtered news over active seeking (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2017; Napoli, 2019). Based on previous work (Gil de Zúñiga & Diehl, 2019; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2020; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2017), we asked respondents how much they agree with the following statements on a 5-point agreement scale: (1) “I rely on my friends to tell me what’s important when news happens”; (2) “I rely on information from my friends based on what they like or follow through social media”; (3) “I can be well informed even when I don’t actively follow the news”; (4) “I don’t worry about keeping up with the news because I know news will find me.” The responses were averaged to create an index ($W1 \alpha = .82, M = 3.12, SD = 1.78$; $W2 \alpha = .84, M = 3.24, SD = 1.79$).

Mainstream media news use. Drawing upon Park (2019), we asked during the past one week, how many days participants watched/read/listened to news on (1) network television, (2) local television, and (3) cable television ($W1 \alpha = .82, M = 3.60, SD = 1.84$; $W2 \alpha = .82, M = 3.61, SD = 2.05$); from (1) a national newspaper, (2) a local newspaper, and (3) a current-affairs magazine?” ($W1 \alpha = .84, M = .96, SD = 1.03$; $W2 \alpha = .84, M = .95, SD = 0.95$); from (1) network radio and (2) local radio ($W1 M = 1.31, SD = 1.17$; $W2 M = 1.49, SD = 1.24$); from (1) online news sites and (2) news aggregators such as Daum News, Naver News? ($W1 M = 3.29, SD = 1.52$; $W2 M = 3.46, SD = 1.48$). We averaged the responses ($W1 \alpha = .84, M = 3.35, SD = 1.73$; $W2 \alpha = .84, M = 3.28, SD = 1.72$).

Social media for news. Drawing upon Gil de Zúñiga et al. (2020), the following three items were used to create a social media use for news index: (a) I use social media (Facebook, YouTube, X, Naver Band, or Kakao Story) to stay informed about current events and public affairs, (b) I use social media to get news about current events from mainstream news media, and (c) I use social media to get news about current events through friends. Responses were recorded on a 7-point scale, with 1 indicating “never” and 7 indicating “very frequently” ($W1 \alpha = .78, M = 2.81, SD = 1.18$; $W2 \alpha = .80, M = 2.89, SD = 1.83$).

Internal political efficacy. For internal political efficacy, we asked respondents (1) how much they consider themselves qualified to participate in politics, (2) how much they feel informed about politics and government, and (3) how much they think they have a good understanding of important political issues. Resonance was recorded on a 5-point agreement scale ($\alpha = .86, M = 3.14, SD = 1.28$).

Political interest. We asked respondents (1) how closely they pay attention to, and (2) how interested they are in, information about what is going on in politics and public affairs. The two items were assessed using a 5-point Likert scale and then averaged (Spearman-Brown = .85, $M = 2.49, SD = 1.40$).

Political ideology. We asked participants to place themselves on a 5-point political ideology scale, ranging from 1 (strongly conservative) to 5 (strongly liberal). In the modified version, responses of 3 were recoded to 0, 2s and 4s were recoded to 1, and 1s and 5s were recoded to 2 ($W1 M = 0.84, SD = 0.75$).

Demographics. We also measured demographic variables, including age ($M = 39.9, SD = 13.8$), gender (50.7% female), education (Mdn = some college degree), and household income (Mdn = KRW 40 million to KRW 50 million).

4. Results

We conducted a partial correlation test and performed a structural equation modeling (SEM) analysis to examine our research questions and hypotheses. Consistent with our mediation rationale, we estimated lagged indirect effects for the path incidental news exposure → NFM → outcomes using SEM with bias-corrected bootstrapped 95% CIs (5,000 resamples) and interpret coefficients as longitudinal associations, not causal effects (Hair et al., 2014). Table 1 shows a strong link between incidental news exposure in Wave 1 (W1) and the news-finds-me perception (r = .34, $p < .001$) and subjective political knowledge in Wave 2 (W2) (r = .23, $p < .001$). Incidental news exposure (W1) was not significantly associated with objective political knowledge in W2 (r = .04, $p = .37$) and mainstream media news use in W2 (r = .05, $p = .26$). Incidental news exposure (W1) is positively correlated with social media use for news in W2 (r = .08, $p < .05$).

The news-finds-me perception (W2) had a no connection to mainstream media news use in W2 (r = -.03, $p = .20$). Objective political knowledge (W2) had a positive correlation with subjective political knowledge in W2 (r = .08, $p < .05$), mainstream media news use (r = .39, $p < .001$), and social media use for news (r = .31, $p < .001$). As expected, the association between objective and subjective knowledge was small (r = .08, $p < .05$), indicating limited calibration (Table 1).

Table 1. Partial correlations among major variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Incidental news exposure (W1)	–	.34***	.04	.23***	.05	.08*	.05	.07	-.02
2. News-finds-me perception (W2)		–	-.01	.19***	-.03	.03	-.05	-.08*	-.03
3. Objective Political knowledge (W2)			–	.08*	.39***	.31***	.13*	.20***	.06
4. Subjective political knowledge (W2)				–	.05	.06	.09*	.09*	.07
5. Mainstream media news use (W2)					–	.45***	.15**	.16**	.08*
6. Social media use for news (W2)						–	.08*	.09*	.05
7. Internal political efficacy							–	.21***	.17**
8. Political interest								–	.16**
9. Political ideology									–

Note. W1 N = 2,058, W2 N = 1,264. Cell entries are partial correlation coefficients, controlling for age, gender, education and income. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Source: own elaboration.

Overall, The SEM model demonstrated a good fit with the data, producing the following results: $\chi^2/df = 4.756$, goodness of fit index (GFI) = 0.953, root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = 0.063, standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) = 0.050, Tucker–Lewis index (TLI) = 0.948, and comparative fit index (CFI) = 0.953. All fit indices met the recommended threshold criteria (Hair et al., 2014).

Figure 1 displays the main path coefficients and the proportion of explained variances (R^2) for the endogenous variables. For RQ1, the beta coefficient ($\beta = .034$, $p = .31$) indicates no

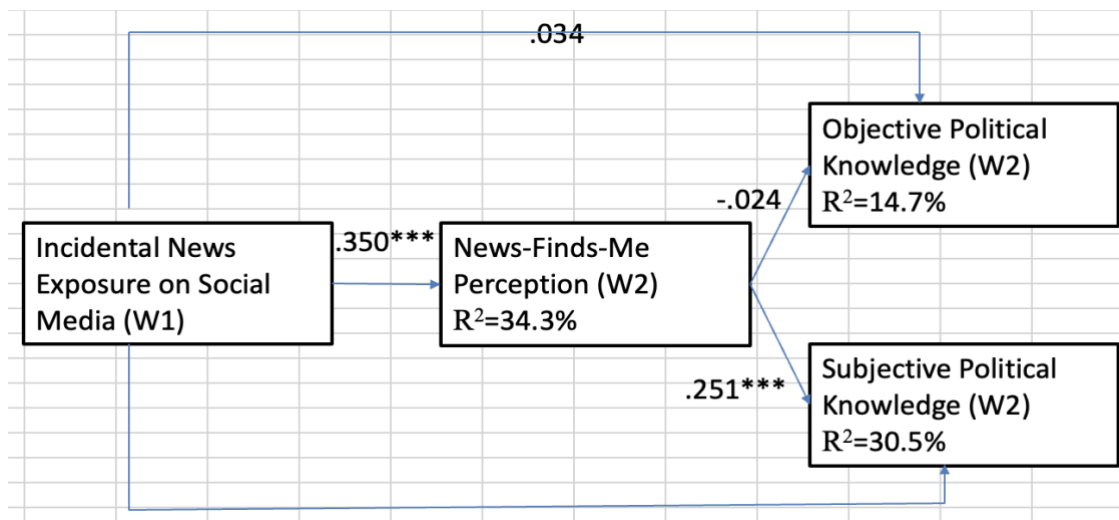
significant relationship between incidental news exposure and objective political knowledge. Incidental news exposure accounts for approximately 15% of the variance in objective political knowledge.

The first hypothesis anticipated a positive relationship between incidental news exposure and subjective political knowledge. The analysis confirmed this, accounting for about 31% of the variance in subjective political knowledge ($\beta = .245, p < .001$).

The second hypothesis posits a positive relationship between incidental news exposure and NFM. This hypothesis is supported, with $\beta = .350, p < .001$. The structural equation model accounted for 34% of the variance in NFM.

The third hypothesis suggests a negative relationship between NFM and objective political knowledge, $\beta = -.024$. Thus, H3 is not supported. The fourth hypothesis predicts a positive link between NFM and subjective political knowledge. H4 receives support, $\beta = .251, p < .001$ (Figure 1).

Figure 1. The Structural Model of Incidental News Exposure and Its Consequences



Note. N = 1,264. Path entries are standardized SEM coefficients (betas) at $p < .05$ or better. The effects of demographic variables (age, gender, education, and income), antecedents (political interest, political efficacy, and political ideology), and media use (mainstream media news use, social media use for news) on our variables of interest were residualized. Model goodness of fit: $\chi^2/df = 4.756$, GFI = .953, RMSEA = .063, SRMR = .045, TLI = .948, and CFI = .953. Explained variance of criterion variables: news-finds-me perception ($R^2 = 34.3\%$), objective political knowledge ($R^2 = 14.7\%$), and subjective political knowledge ($R^2 = 30.5\%$). This theoretical model was bootstrapped using standard errors, with 5,000 iterations at a 95% confidence interval.

Source: own elaboration.

The SEM test also provided insights into the impact of incidental news exposure on objective and subjective political knowledge by estimating indirect paths through NFM (Table 2). The analysis supports the prediction that NFM mediates the relationship between incidental news exposure and subjective political knowledge ($\beta = .13, p < 0.01$, H5). However, NFM does not mediate the link between incidental news exposure and objective political knowledge. The incidental news exposure $\rightarrow$ NFM $\rightarrow$ objective political knowledge indirect effect was negative but not significant (H6). These outcomes indicate that people who encounter news accidentally on social media tend to have a heightened level of belief about their knowledge level, although they do not show any visible increase in their objective political knowledge.

Table 2. Indirect effects via News-Finds-Me (NFM)

Indirect effect paths	β
Incidental news exposure $\rightarrow$ News-finds-me $\rightarrow$ Objective political knowledge	.03
Incidental news exposure $\rightarrow$ News-finds-me $\rightarrow$ Subjective political knowledge	.13**

Note. N = 1,264. Standardized regression coefficients (β) reported. ** $p < .01$.

Source: own elaboration.

5. Discussion

This study contributes to the growing literature on political learning in digital environments by empirically demonstrating a dissociation between subjective and objective political knowledge. While incidental news exposure increases individuals’ self-perceived knowledge—partly through the news-finds-me (NFM) perception—it does not enhance factual learning. This supports the concept of the illusion of knowledge, a metacognitive bias where familiarity is mistaken for understanding (Dunning, 2011; Rozenblit & Keil, 2002). Algorithmic curation and social filtering amplify this illusion by creating ambient exposure to news without requiring active engagement (Boczkowski et al., 2018; Hermida, 2010).

Theoretically, this illusion challenges normative democratic assumptions that exposure to political information leads to informed participation (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996). Our findings suggest that confidence in political affairs may be decoupled from actual learning, undermining deliberative ideals. This miscalibration can distort discourse, as individuals assert opinions or make decisions based on perceived knowledge rather than verified facts (Lee et al., 2022a; Leonhard et al., 2020). It may also reduce motivation to seek diverse or high-quality information, reinforcing selective exposure and epistemic closure (Flaxman et al., 2016).

Recent studies show that this gap between felt and factual knowledge is especially pronounced among social media users who rely on algorithmic feeds and peer recommendations. These users often report high subjective knowledge but low objective knowledge, suggesting that digital environments foster overconfidence without comprehension (Lee et al., 2022a). This pattern has implications for polarization, misinformation susceptibility, and civic disengagement, as individuals may feel informed enough to participate but lack the factual grounding necessary for meaningful engagement (Gherghina & Marian, 2024).

Normatively, the illusion of knowledge threatens epistemic integrity and civic competence. Informed citizenship requires not just access to information but the ability to critically evaluate and integrate it into decision-making. When individuals believe they are informed simply because they are online or connected to social networks, they may become less curious and more vulnerable to misinformation. This undermines the democratic ideal of a well-informed electorate and contributes to low-quality discourse and policy preferences based on falsehoods.

To mitigate these risks, scholars and practitioners should consider interventions that promote epistemic humility and critical media literacy. Platforms could implement nudges prompting users to verify information or reflect on their confidence. Educational initiatives should emphasize the distinction between feeling informed and being informed, encouraging active news-seeking and source triangulation. Future research should explore how platform design, algorithmic transparency, and social norms influence the calibration between subjective and objective knowledge.

This study also theorizes and empirically tests NFM as a mediating mechanism between incidental news exposure and political knowledge outcomes. This enriches the Political Incidental News Exposure (PINE) model (Matthes et al., 2020) by introducing a psychological bridge that explains how ambient exposure inflates subjective knowledge. It contributes to broader debates on passive news consumption, algorithmic curation, and epistemic shortcuts in digital media (Gil de Zúñiga & Diehl, 2019).

As disinformation becomes more sophisticated through generative AI and algorithmic targeting, distinguishing between felt and factual knowledge becomes increasingly urgent. Disinformation—intentionally false or misleading content—has become a pervasive threat in digital ecosystems (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). Exposure to disinformation can distort political knowledge, especially when users rely on heuristics like familiarity or social endorsement to judge credibility. This dynamic exacerbates the illusion of knowing, as users may feel informed after encountering viral content, even if it is inaccurate (Lewandowsky et al., 2017). NFM compounds this issue by reducing motivation to verify sources or seek corrective information (Gil de Zúñiga & Diehl, 2019).

Our findings have direct implications for understanding how disinformation distorts political knowledge. In environments saturated with low-quality or misleading content, users may develop a false sense of being informed, especially when relying on social cues or algorithmic feeds (Lewandowsky et al., 2017; Pennycook & Rand, 2019). This reinforces the need for models that account for cognitive miscalibration and selective exposure.

This study also advances information overload theory by showing how incidental news exposure contributes to ambient familiarity, which users misinterpret as understanding. In high-choice media environments, users are bombarded with vast amounts of content, impairing attention, memory, and critical evaluation (Bawden & Robinson, 2008). Overloaded users resort to shallow processing, relying on surface cues like repetition or emotional salience, which inflates subjective knowledge without improving factual accuracy (Mengis & Eppler, 2004). The illusion of knowing thrives in such environments, as users mistake exposure for comprehension (Rozenblit & Keil, 2002). Our findings support the idea that subjective knowledge is inflated in high-choice digital environments, while objective knowledge stagnates or declines.

Media literacy offers a potential remedy to the subjective-objective knowledge gap. Individuals with higher media literacy are better equipped to detect disinformation, manage information overload, and engage in active news-seeking (Koltay, 2011). Media literacy interventions can improve epistemic vigilance and reduce susceptibility to false information (Guess et al., 2020). Our study suggests that low media literacy may interact with NFM to reduce vigilance and deepen the knowledge gap. By showing how NFM inflates subjective knowledge while leaving objective knowledge unchanged or diminished, we underscore the importance of media literacy as a corrective tool. Interventions should not only teach fact-checking but also promote metacognitive awareness, helping users recognize the limits of their own understanding. This insight is valuable for educators, policymakers, and platform designers seeking to foster informed citizenship.

Taken together, this study advances theoretical understanding of political learning by distinguishing between objective and subjective political knowledge and modeling NFM as a metacognitive mediator in digital news environments. It also highlights the civic risks of the illusion of knowing, offering insights into how incidental news exposure together with NFM may undermine epistemic vigilance and informed democratic participation.

5.1. Limitations and Future Research

Applying Western-developed scales to the South Korean context may limit validity due to cultural, linguistic, and institutional differences in how individuals interpret survey items. Despite this, many studies in non-Western settings continue to rely on Western-origin instruments (Hanitzsch, 2007; He & van de Vijver, 2012). In this study, we refined and adapted measurement tools to better reflect South Korea’s sociopolitical and media environment, enhancing cultural relevance and construct validity. Comparative research could further illuminate how the illusion of knowing operates across different democratic contexts.

While panel studies offer advantages for examining correlational relationships over time, they cannot fully account for unobserved confounders or long-term media effects. Future research should retest our hypotheses using experimental designs, which allow for stronger causal inference and control over extraneous variables (Campbell & Stanley, 2015). Experiments can clarify mechanisms underlying media exposure and psychological mediators.

Additionally, future studies should explore how diverse media consumption patterns influence the development—or absence—of the news-finds-me (NFM) perception. Our current objective knowledge index emphasizes factual recall; future work should incorporate structural and relational knowledge items, as well as delayed testing, to broaden the construct and better capture long-term political learning.

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