“THAT REMINDS ME OF JESUS”:

WHITE EVANGELICAL CHRISTIAN WOMEN’S PERCEPTIONS OF

NEWS OUTLETS PERSECUTION OF DONALD J. TRUMP

by

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A dissertation submitted to:

Faculty of the Graduate School of the University of Colorado

In partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy in Media Research and Practice (Journalism)

College of Media, Communication and Information

2019

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This dissertation entitled:

“That reminds me of Jesus”: White Evangelical Christian Women’s Perceptions

of News Outlets Persecution of Donald J. Trump

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find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards

of scholarly work in the above-mentioned discipline.

IRB protocol #s 17-0388/18-0651

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“That Reminds Me of Jesus”: White Evangelical Christian Women’s Perceptions of News Outlets Persecution of Donald J. Trump

Dissertation directed by Assistant Professor Patrick Ferrucci

ABSTRACT:

This research assesses the phenomenon of white evangelical Christian women’s support of Donald J. Trump as the United States President and their enduring distrust of mainstream news outlets. Qualitative focus groups and semi-structured interviews were employed with high identifying evangelical, conservative Christian women who voted for Trump. The purpose of the study was to examine how the participants construct their religious identity and moral values and how these elements influence their voting behaviors, views of perceived out-groups, opinions of news outlets and media routines by utilizing Social Identity, Moral Foundation and Cognitive Dissonance Theories.

From the perspective of many opponents of Donald Trump, the support of white evangelical Christians appears paradoxical and hypocritical. Despite acknowledging that Trump is an imperfect and ill-mannered man, the women in this study say their vote is most consistent with their religious identity and moral values given the alternatives. A longstanding prejudice against Hillary Clinton, a threatening out-group member, resulted in an asymmetrical moral assessment between her and Trump. The morality of liberals is perceived as an extreme threat to society. Trump’s defiance of “political correctness” and “gloves off” rhetoric against Washington insiders strengthened his persona as a God-ordained, in-group enforcer who would challenge a Godless bureaucracy. Any cognitive dissonance created by Trump’s “unchristian” behaviors is lessened or dissipated under the manifestation of their communal religious identity and situational moral principles. These beliefs seem to be high correlated with participants’ view of the untrustworthiness of out-groups: liberals, Democrats and news outlets. Conformational bias allowed criticism to be considered as politically motivated attacks and, therefore, unreliable. Furthermore, they perceive the liberal news media as having a distinctly “anti-Christian” bias, and their unrelenting, persecuting attacks on Trump contributed to their perception of his presidency as being part of “God’s plan for America.” Trump is viewed as a “King Cyrus” rescuer to facilitate America turning back to God. The competitive directive, for the greater good of society, was so pronounced nearly half of the participants welcomed any assistance Russians may have had in getting Trump elected, in order to keep Clinton and the immoral liberals out of power.

DEDICATIONS AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT:

This dissertation is dedicated to my father, Reverend Albert E. Jansen, who passed away in 2014 after a lengthy and courageous battle with cancer. There were countless times during the construction and writing of this research project that I would have loved to have gotten his wise input. He was a compassionate and godly man, who I deeply missed not being a part of my academic journey. Though I know he would be extremely proud of this accomplishment and it makes me smile to think of him beaming over my accomplishment. Also, I want to express my boundless appreciation to my family: my supportive husband Bertrand and my charming triplet daughters, Abby, Bella and Simone. You are my world, and the ultimate reason I chose this path! You all were so patient and understanding with your Momma as she spent days holed up in her office reading and writing, wondering if she’d ever “finally graduate from college.” My doctoral studies would absolutely have never happened without the unselfish, enduring and all-encompassing support of my mother, Jackie Jansen. She uprooted her world to assist me in chasing my dreams and loved and cared for my daughters like only the best grandmother in the world could do. This project is equally dedicated to her. I am also indebted to my sister-in-law, Brenda Jansen, for editing my manuscript. Her keen eye caught a host of punctuation errors, missing words and incomplete thoughts.

Additionally, I want to acknowledge and thank my dissertation chair, Dr. Patrick Ferrucci. Without his advice, encouragement and tolerance of my developing research abilities, I doubt I would have been able to get this project done on schedule. I also want to thank my other committee members: Dr. Stewart Hoover, Dr. Elizabeth Skewes, Dr. Mike McDevitt and Dr. Thomas Zeiler. Your time and prudent input were invaluable in guiding me towards the completion of this effort. Dr. Hoover, your depth of knowledge on this subject and guidance in helping me find the right direction for this overwhelming topic is greatly appreciated. Liz, you were a great help to me in getting this research off and running with my first focus group and during my independent study with you. Mike, your course, Populism and American Media, was instrumental in assisting me in wrapping my mind around what is happening in politics today. And Tom, you have been an amazing encourager and motivator. I always knew I would get sagacious counsel from you, whether it was regarding my research, my frustrations with the process or my job search. Last, but definitely not least, this research would have never materialized if it wasn’t for the evangelical Christian women who opened their hearts and minds to me during the focus groups and interviews. Thank you for trusting me with your thoughts and opinions during this contentious time when it would have been easier to remain private. I am immensely grateful for your willingness to participate in my research.

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INTRODUCTION

Scholars have begun unraveling the extraordinary cultural phenomenon that is Donald J. Trump, political candidate and United States President (Kellner, 2016; Maisel & Dinnen, 2018; Gutsche, 2018; Kalb, 2018). It has become a portent that promises to engage critical theorists and interdisciplinary scholars for an extensive amount of time. Several books have already been written about the distinctive characteristics of Trump’s presidency (Wolf, 2018; Woodward, 2018; Comey, 2018; Sims, 2019). Trump’s inexperience in politics and determination to follow through with his campaign promises have both endeared him to his political supporters and generated conflicts throughout various spheres, including the Department of Justice, the Republican party, international allies and news media outlets (Frank, 2018). A quick look at President Trump’s social media usage, specifically his Twitter account, confirms persistent criticism of most legacy news outlets. Trump has labeled them as “the enemy of the American people” (February 17, 2017 tweet), setting a dangerous precedent. A 2016 Gallup Poll showed that Republicans’ trust in the media was at 32 percent in 2016 but plummeted to 14 percent just one year later (Swift, 2016). Evangelical Christians constitute a sizeable faction of Trump devotees; Pew Research Center (2016) election exit polls in November of 2016 revealed that 81 percent of white evangelicals voted for Trump. In that group, a substantial portion were evangelical Christian women. They have been particularly scrutinized for backing a political candidate who has an alleged history of misogyny (Zuckerman, 2016). Nonetheless, dissecting their backing of Trump entails a multilayered examination into their social identity, morality and processing of cognitive dissonance.

The awareness of news outlets’ partiality, by evangelical Christians like the participants, enacted a noteworthy function in Trump’s sustained political success. The current disdain many conservative, evangelical Christian voters feel towards most news outlets was similarly displayed in the Richard Nixon presidential era (Hofstetter, 1976; Collins, 2004), when the then president, Richard M. Nixon, compiled a list of press “enemies” and asserted a fervent liberal media bias (Liebovich, 2003). A more recent partisan resentment, a result of Democratic President William Jefferson Clinton’s affairs and subsequent impeachment, “deepened the anger of conservative viewers who had long believed that the mainstream media nurtured unacknowledged liberal bias” (Collins, 2004, p. 3). This acuity was further fueled when several well-known journalists, anchor Lou Dobbs (who worked for CNN at the time), reporter Bernard Goldberg and producer Don Dahler (both former CBS employees) left their perspective networks due to their perception of liberal bias at their workplace. “I left [CNN] because I was tired of what I perceived to be the liberal side of the network and the cozy relationship between Mr. [Rick] Kaplan (CNN Executive Producer) and [Bill] Clinton,” said Dobbs (Collins, 2004, p. 123). Fox News Channel (FNC) filled a perceived void when it entered the cable news market in the mid-1990s; it quickly established itself as being slanted towards the right (Rutenberg, 2000; Collins, 2004). Still, FNC’s employees have also complained of a significant conservative bias by their employer (Collins, 2004). Another Gallup/Knight (2017) survey found nearly half of Americans, 45 percent, say there is a “great deal” of political bias in news coverage, up from 25 percent in 1989 when Pew Research Center conducted a telephone survey asking the same question (Jones & Ritter, 2018). These sentiments led to a majority in the United States unable to name an objective news source. “With perceptions of bias so pervasive, it is perhaps not surprising that less than a majority of Americans, 44 percent, say they can think of a news source that reports the news objectively” (Jones & Ritter, p. 1).

A free press performs a fundamental watchdog role for any democracy, by holding the powerful accountable. The First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution guarantees freedom of religion to all Americans as well as freedom of speech, freedom of the press and the right to assemble peacefully. In fact, the establishment of a free press was deemed so important by our nation’s founders, if given the choice between newspapers and government, Thomas Jefferson proclaimed he would choose newspapers over government (Jefferson, 1787). The current distrust and insolence towards the free press by a segment of Americans, chiefly for this study, evangelical Christians who voted for Trump, is troublesome. There is an increased sense of skepticism and incense over the uncertainty of information being disseminated by news media outlets and their perceived relentless personal attacks on President Trump. This has arguably contributed to the current fracture between Americans and, for a large segment of our nation’s population, has tarnished the status of many news outlets.

The research questions this study aspired to answer are as follows:

RQ1: How do white evangelical Christian women construct their identity?

RQ2: How do white evangelical Christian women characterize Democrats and liberals in respect to their social/religious identity?

RQ3: Do white evangelical Christian women apply moral standards equally between Donald Trump and other male politicians, vis-a-vis female politician, Hillary Clinton?

RQ4: What are white evangelical Christian women’s perceptions of how their religious identity and moral values affect their voting behaviors and support of Donald J. Trump as President of the United States?

RQ5: What are white evangelical Christian women’s news habits and opinions of news outlets?

By employing Moral Foundation Theory, Social/Religion Identity Theory and Cognitive Dissonance Theory, this inquiry explored the root of evangelical Christian women’s voting behaviors and opinions on polemic social issues such as abortion, same sex marriage and immigration. Additionally, an analysis of the “us versus them,” or in-group and out-group mentality, assisted in understanding the potential motivations behind their behaviors and opinions. Negative emotions associated with an out-group can be just as, or more, important than positive in-group emotions for social identification constructed on moral principles, which tend to evoke deeper convictions (Parker & Janoff-Bulman, 2013). “Research suggests that out-group ‘hate’ plays a central role in moral social identities” (Parker & Janoff-Bulman, p. 93). Furthermore, cognitive dissonance theory was applied in order to unravel the multifaceted nuances emerging from the complex relationship between religion, politics and attitudes towards the mainstream media as well as the perceived paradoxical nature of white evangelical Christians support of Donald Trump.

Qualitative methods were utilized by way of focus groups and semi-structured in-depth interviews with women who identified as both white evangelical Christian women and Donald Trump supporters. Discourse analysis was applied to each discussion and interview in order to take a rhetorical approach, analyzing what participants say, how they say it as well as what is not said, while also allowing the researcher to take a cultural approach, looking at how the “larger cultural contexts are reflected in the discourse and focusing on social structures that influence meaning” (Davis, 2016, p. 85).

Extensive research has been directed at Christianity and politics (Wills, 1990; Lindsay, 2007; Haidt, 2012; Winship, 2012; Steensland, 2014), as well as Christianity and the media (Buddenbaum, 1987; Hubbard, 1990; Hoover, 1998; Hoover, 2006; Underwood, 2002; Stout & Buddenbaum, 2003; Schultze, 2003). However, there is limited research on how all three attributes associate, particularly in light of the dogmatic events over the past two plus years. Few, if any, have focused entirely on white evangelical Christian women. This research project will examine white evangelical Christian women’s religious identity and moral values and how these qualities influence voting behaviors, views of perceived out-groups, news consumption and opinions of news outlets. This analysis can provide valuable insight and understanding of key issues relating to Christianity, politics, gender and the media.

For the purposes of this research, when utilizing the term “news outlets” or “mainstream media,” it will be in reference to legacy news media in three areas of journalism: cable news outlets (such as CNN, Fox News Channel, MSNBC, etc.), television network news channels (e.g. ABC News, NBC News, ABC News), and national newspapers (including the New York Times, Washington Post, Wall Street Journal, etc.), as well as for each of their corresponding online, digital presence. Additionally, when mentioning evangelical Christians throughout this project, it will be in reference to the evangelicals who are Trump supporters, chiefly the research participants and others who feel similarly. A definition, used for this research, for an evangelical Christian is assessed in the literature review. This examination recognizes the fact that there are many evangelical Christians who did not vote for Trump, and to imply a complete voting homogeneity within this religious identity would be erroneous. As you will read in the self-reflection section, the researcher herself has identified as an evangelical Christian and did not vote for or support Trump.

II. LITERATURE ON BIBLICAL AND HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

The correlations between Christianity, politics and the media are multifaceted and frequently perplexing for those who do not share evangelical Christians’ social identity. In this examination, it is imperative to keep in mind that when people accept Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior and are dedicated to the Christian faith, their religious identity often becomes one of, if not, the most important aspects of their life (Witte & Alexander, 2006). Their meaning in life comes from their religious beliefs and eternal community membership (Stark & Finke, 2000). At the moment of accepting Jesus as their Savior, their future does not just comprise of their time and energy spent on earth. Instead, the objective of their mortal life is to live a purposeful life in relationship with God, so they may spend eternity in heaven communing with their Savior and loved ones (Storr, 1918). The sins and evil of the world are to be kept at bay and not just avoided, but Christians are biblically instructed to wage war on sin, even if it means being mistreated and cast out of favor (Noble, 2014). The Bible teaches that to be persecuted for one’s faith is virtuous (Cobb, 2008). Therefore, most evangelical Christians values and morals are deeply intertwined with their social or religious identity, as they continually assess every day decisions, all the while bearing in mind the motto, “What Would Jesus Do?” (Yancy, 2012). The Old Testament gives Christians a clear moral compass to its benefactors with the Ten Commandments:

1. You shall have no other Gods but me.
2. You shall not make for yourself any idol, nor bow down to it or worship it.
3. You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God.
4. You shall remember and keep the Sabbath day holy.
5. Respect your father and mother.
6. You must not commit murder.
7. You must not commit adultery.
8. You must not steal.
9. You must not give false evidence against your neighbor.
10. You must not be envious of your neighbor’s goods. You shall not be envious of

his house nor his wife, nor anything that belongs to your neighbor.

(Exodus 20)

In the New Testament, Jesus Christ once preached to a multitude on a mountainside a doctrine he wanted his followers to live by. The following verses are known as The Beatitudes:

Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the sons of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me.

Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven for the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you. (Matthew 5:3-11)

In spite of these clear-cut and flawless directives, the Bible also declares that it is unachievable for mortal humans to live a pure and holy life. Several distinct Bible verses declare that only Jesus has lived on earth without sin (Stalnaker, 2006). This spiritual struggle on earth is a continuous reality for devoted Christians. Parables and narratives of God utilizing imperfect men are spread throughout the Bible: Abraham doubted God, Samson was arrogant and hard-headed, King David was an adulterer, Moses was a murderer, and Jesus’s disciple Peter disowned him three times (Mabilog, 2016). Therefore, it is written that even irreligious men served God’s purpose. In the Hebrew Bible is the story of Cyrus the Great, King of Persia. King Cyrus was not a man after God’s own heart like David but was still considered a “patron and deliverer of the Jews” (Briant, 2002, p. 46). Though he was not a Jew, Cyrus was exhorted by God to liberate the Jews and have the temple in Jerusalem rebuilt.

The duplicitous nature of white evangelical Christian women’s support of Donald Trump cannot be comprehensively examined without considering the elements detailed above; the intensity of their religious identity, the biblical dictate to be disposed to persecution for one’s faith, their morality based on biblical principles, and their discernment of the propensity of human nature’s sinfulness. And while these ideologies may not be entirely consistent across all aspects of the issues this research explores, particularly when you consider social identity conflicts, this study ascertains them as being at the core of the reasoning and resolution of cognitive dissonance.

**Christianity in America:**

The concept of a “Christian America” has caused tremendous strife and divisiveness within our diverse, multicultural nation over the course of its history (Hunter, 1991; Smith, 2000; Fitzgerald, 2017) and continues to this day. It is necessary to recognize and assess the historical nature of this ideology when examining Christianity, politics and the media. The struggle to mark American society as Christian has deep historical roots (Fitzgerald, 2017). The two-word idiom, Christian America, is arguably, the core origin of contention in our presently acrimonious nation (Hunter, 1991). Protestant authority, a hegemonic foundation of the United States, has been undermined in various manners over the past century (Lindsay, 2007; Hunter, 1991). The following is an abbreviated overview of the ideology behind the current dictum of Trump’s campaign slogan (borrowed from Ronald Reagan), “Make America Great Again,” or reclaiming America for Christ, as the agenda for conservative and politically motivated evangelical Christians seeks to achieve.

**Protestantism:**

There has long been a wrangling between conservatives and liberals over the religious roots, or the religious intentions, of America’s founding fathers (Fitzgerald, 2017; Hunter, 1991). At the end of the nineteenth century, almost all of American Protestantism understood America to be a Christian nation (Marsden, 1980), despite the pluralistic, heterogeneous nature of a country that is known as “a melting pot”. Nevertheless, Protestantism has remained a dominant force for centuries. “It was more than just a religion. It was *the* religion, and one that was unique and particular in its aspirations for the new American nation” (Hoover, 2017, p. 2995). Yet, it was, in fact, England who first declared its devotion to Protestantism, likening itself to Israel, as “God’s true church” (Winship, 2012, p. 15). Elizabethan reformers famously exclaimed, “God is English… but only so long as England remained Protestant and faithful to Jesus’ command” (Winship, p. 6). Although, by the late 1560s some of England’s citizens were “racialized” and began founding “their own illegal, loosely Presbyterian-modeled churches” (Winship, 2012, p. 7). They were disillusioned with the monarchy and distressed by the corruption within the church and the government.

In 1620, radical puritans left England and resettled in Massachusetts largely because of the absence of separation between church and state under England’s monarchy (Winship, 2012). Bishops in Church of England parishes were appointed by the monarch instead of having presbyters, or elders, elected by the congregations. Elections were deemed to be “populist,” “destabilizing and dangerous,” and opponents of the Puritans contended that the radicals’ ultimate goal was to have all monarchies overthrown (Winship, p.14). In fact, the “fear of tyrannical power in large measure shaped them [puritan pilgrims]” (p. 4). Albeit, the Massachusetts settlers had the ability to create their own “biblically perfected church/state establishment, yet the religious and political conflicts that had driven them to emigrate continued to escalate” (p. 9). Eventually the early governments in Massachusetts became secular. Indeed, when the United States Constitution was created in 1787, much of its contents were contradictory to religious morals. “In fact, for much of American history prominent religious activists were as likely to condemn the Constitution as to praise it” (Compton, 2014, p. 1). Thus, conflict and misinterpretations between the matters of religion and politics have been inescapable since the inception of the United States.

From the late eighteenth through the twentieth centuries, a series of Great Awakenings, or waves of religious revivals, swept the nation and dramatically increased rates of church memberships (Hammond, 1979; Fitzgerald, 2017). And while these conversions produced spiritual well-being, many believed it also created an increasingly polarized society (Hoover, 2006). As Maurer (2009) pointed out:

Ironically, the Puritans, who fled England to escape the religiously repressive policies of Elizabethan England, created in their new home a society regulated by their own religious beliefs; they instituted repressive policies against non-Puritans in the New World, even to the point of executing those who refused to conform with Puritan beliefs and customs (p. 56).

**Evangelicalism:**

The term “evangelical” has been widely debated. Even world-famous evangelical leader, Reverend Billy Graham desired to ask someone what the word meant (Mattingly, 2013). The term “evangelical” is translated from a Greek word that means “gospel” or “good news” (Fitzgerald, 2017). Evangelicalism became more prominent during the Great Awakenings however its starting point goes back much further. British scholar David Bebbington (2005) encapsulated four fundamentals of evangelicalism: 1) Biblicism, or a reliance on the Bible as the religious authority, 2) Crucicentrism, an emphasis on Christ’s sacrifice for our sins by dying on a cross, 3) Conversion, an experience or acceptance of the Lord as your savior that signifies the beginning of a walk with God, and 4) Activism, the call to convert others and be involved in the world (p. 22). Evangelical Christianity’s origin is thought to have occurred during the Protestant Reformation in the early sixteenth century, when Martin Luther protested against the Roman Catholic Church’s resolve to retain a need for penance as well as confession of sins in order to receive salvation (Hankins, 2008). Luther believed that salvation was by faith alone and did not require a physical form of atonement. At that point in time, the term evangelicalism was another word for Protestantism (Hankins, 2008). The Great Awakenings assisted in forming modern evangelicalism in the English-speaking world (Marsden, 1980). Two notables in the eighteenth century, Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield, were instrumental in proselytizing the “good news” in their efforts to purify the Church of England. Individually, the men became well-known for their sermons, both in England and America. Whitefield is regarded as “one of the greatest preachers in the history of English-speaking Christianity” (Hankins, p. 7). Evangelicals were thought of as the “conservative Protestants” as a modern, liberal approach of Protestantism took shape in the second half of the nineteenth century. Progressivists repositioned the notion that Christian theology was an inflexible series of truths located solely in scripture and focused more on experiencing God through one’s feelings and intuition (Hankins, 2008). Evangelicals, on the other hand, could not accept the weakening of biblical authority and understood they had a duty to preserve traditionally theological truths (Hankins, 2008).

Challenges to Protestant authority were largely squashed throughout the nineteenth century (Marsden, 1980; Fitzgerald, 2107). However, cultural shocks during the twentieth century, particularly mid-century (e.g. civil rights, abortion rights, the end of prayer in public schools and the sexual revolution) destabilized both the public and domestic spheres, creating “moral cultural anxieties” (Hoover, 2017; Winston, 2007). These cultural and societal grievances produced a sense of powerlessness and political disenchantment for evangelicals (Lindsay, 2007; Hunter, 1991). The diminishing of Protestant authority instigated a concern that political leaders weren’t representing conservative Christians (Fitzgerald, 2017). That concern along with a desire to return to “founding Christian principles,” triggered an influx of evangelical Christians in the political arena. Evangelicals were called to action by their leaders to thwart the country’s perpetual digression into a profane society.

By the late 1970s, evangelicalism was a compelling influence in American politics, forming the core of the new Christian right (Steensland & Wright, 2014). They performed a pivotal role in advancing the conservative movement’s political agenda, developing into the foundation of the Republican Party’s voting bloc (Brint & Schroedel, 2009).

The Republican Party in general and right-wing politicians in particular increasingly have adopted positions on specific “cultural” or moral issues such as abortion, prayer in public schools, and the restriction of civil marriage to heterosexual partners, that are congruent with traditional Christian doctrine. (Ross, Lelkes and Russell, 2012, p. 3616).

One of the most vocal and well-known faces in this movement was Baptist pastor Jerry Falwell. In 1979, he launched the Moral Majority, a conservative organization mobilizing evangelical Christians to battle against “secular humanism” and the “moral decay” of the country. A couple of decades earlier, Falwell had been in favor of maintaining a separation between Christianity and politics because of its “worldly,” “non-spiritual aspects” (Hankins, 2008, p. 139). However, Falwell had a change of heart as he perceived the spiraling increase of society’s wretched immorality. “We are fighting a holy war,” Falwell said, “and this time we are going to win” (Fitzgerald, 2017, p. 291). The upsurge of the Christian right was abrupt and took political observers by surprise (Fitzgerald, 2017). Akin to the Moral Majority, around the same time another conservative organization called the Christian Coalition, founded by the Christian Broadcasting Network’s Pat Robertson and Crusade for Christ’s Bill Bright, was directly assembling evangelical politicians. Its core mission was “mobilizing and training Christians for effective political action” (Fitzgerald, 2017, p. 413). The coalition initially supported evangelicals in elections in local races and then worked its way up to congressional races and eventually the White House (Fitzgerald, 2017). Jimmy Carter, a professed “born again” Christian and Democrat was elected president in 1976, just prior to the Christian right’s emergence. He is considered to be the first major politician to discuss his Christian faith candidly (Hankins, 2008). Despite his religious convictions, he was a “huge disappointment” for evangelicals. “He was fair too liberal in domestic policy and way too soft on foreign affairs” (Winston, 2007, p. 977). Carter was cautious to not force his own religious and moral viewpoints on others (Hankins, 2008), much to the chagrin of evangelicals.

Yet, the political clout of evangelicals continued to grow. It was widely regarded that the support of the Christian right abetted Ronald Reagan’s successful presidential election in 1980. Likewise, the 41st and 43rd presidents had strong religious convictions. George H.W. Bush was a conservative devout Episcopalian. His Thousand Points of Light Initiative encouraged Americans to volunteer and help the less fortunate. His son, George W. Bush, was a professed “born again” evangelical. George W. Bush brought more evangelicals into the federal government than any previous Republican administration (Fitzgerald, 2017). Yet, despite all of these conservative, religious Republican presidents, the nation’s slide into secular humanism endured.

In 2008, Americans were fatigued from the war in Iraq and distressed by the country’s economic collapse (Fitzgerald, 2017). A dynamic Illinois Senator, Barack Obama, captured much of the nation’s attention and his campaign for presidency was an utter phenomenon. His campaign, termed “*The Audacity of Hope,”* resulted in a record voter turnout, particularly of African-Americans and Hispanics. He easily won the presidency, becoming the 44th president of the United States and the nation’s first African-American chief executive. His victory signaled a political and cultural shift, removing the racial barrier in politics. However, it also catalyzed a direct indignant populist reaction, with racial undertones (Guardino & Snyder, 2012). The Tea Party movement’s launch is widely understood to be linked to a short window of time soon after President Barack Obama took office. In February 2009, Rick Santelli, editor for the CNBC Business News network, went on an on-air tirade from the floor of the Chicago Mercantile Exchange on account of Obama’s foreclosure assistance program (Burack & Snyder-Hall, 2013). That diatribe is thought to have set the movement in motion.

As the Tea Party movement became prominent it did not take long for journalists

and researchers to identify strong evidence of Christian conservative mobilization

in its ranks as well as staunch support for ‘family values’ positions on reproductive

rights and LGBT rights. (Burack & Snyder-Hall, p. 445).

The Tea Party was a movement, not a political party, but was aligned with the Republican party, calling for limited government and a decrease in government spending; it also strongly opposed Barrack Obama’s health care plan (Guardino & Snyder, 2012). This populist movement, through conservative media, proliferated a sundry of right-wing propaganda; for example, the fabrication that Obama was not born in the United States and the presence of a glaring media liberal-bias (Burack & Snyder-Hall, 2013). The perception of a liberal bias will be discussed shortly. A few years ago, many political pundits declared The Tea Party dead and buried (Pindell, 2018), yet, remnants of conservative populist anxieties and resentment persisted. Donald Trump and his presidential campaign took advantage of the remains of right-wing populist anger and made it his rallying cry and slogan, *Make America Great Again*. Trump appealed to evangelical Christians’ sense of powerlessness, their nationalism and xenophobic anxiety, their distrust of the elite establishment (politicians and media), while portraying a crafted image of vox populi.

As this literature clarifies, evangelical Christians consign immense value on the founding Christian principles of the United States. However, over the past several decades, they have deemed the influence of the conservative political aspects of Christianity to be waning in the political sphere to the point of a reckless decline into secular humanism or a binary spiritual struggle between God’s directives and evil. This has instigated an immense distrust of the political establishment (career politicians), and a revulsion of liberal political policies. These perceived attacks on evangelical Christians’ religious identity and moral values have triggered a potent and sustained response that was shown in this research and will be discussed in the results and discussion sections.

III. LITERATURE ON RELIGION IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE AND IN THE MEDIA

**Religion in the Public Sphere:**

Religion has performed a vital role in preserving our democratic way of life (Tocqueville 2005: Holloway, 2016; Habermas, 2006). Tocqueville maintained that “religion should be considered the first of the political institutions” (Holloway, p. 4). However, he also asserted that while religion is worthy of distinction, democracy shouldn’t require absolute conformity of a religious belief (Tocqueville, 2005, pp. 417-418). German philosopher and sociologist, Jurgen Habermas (2006), offers an inclusivist understanding of the significance of religious beliefs in a secular society and religiosity’s response to the “challenges of modernity”:

The constitutional freedom of religion is the appropriate political answer to the challenges of religious pluralism. In this way, the potential conflict at the level of citizens’ social interaction can be restrained, while at the cognitive level deep-reaching conflicts may well continue to exist between the existentially relevant convictions of believers, believers of other denominations, and non-believers.

(p. 4)

Habermas (2006) upholds the necessity of the “secular character of the state,” but not at the cost of discriminating against those who hold a religious identity. “The parties themselves must reach an agreement on the always contested delimitations between a positive liberty to practice a religion of one’s own and the negative liberty to remain spared from the religious practices of the others” (p. 4). In other words, he contends that reasonable understandings can be reached if groups take the perspective of others and avoid oppressive elements. In John Rawl’s, *Political Liberalism* (1993), he argues for a moral “duty of civility” and the “public use of reason,” where each side should strive to reach a “rationally motivated agreement” (Rawls, p. 3). Habermas contends that we can only reach this ideal citizenship if we see each other as “free and equal citizens” and validate “political statements and attitudes before one another in light of a reasonable interpretation of valid constitutional principles” (Habermas, p. 5). Groups should not force their will on others, but instead justify how and why a tenet is beneficial for societal common good in a “language which is equally accessible to all citizens” (Habermas, p. 5). In other words, a government ought not to burden citizens bearing a strong religious identity with obligations that are irreconcilable with their ability to practice a moral, devout existence. He also rebuffs the marginalization of religion. Religion to religionists is much more than a political or social actuality. However, it is in this reasoning that Habermas maintains that political leaders, who are responsible for “representing competing worldviews,” should remain neutral.

The conflict between a person’s own religious conviction and secularly justified politics or bills can only arise by virtue of the fact that the religious citizen should also have accepted the constitution of the secular state for good reasons. He no longer lives as a member of a religiously homogeneous population within a religiously legitimated state. (p. 9)

Yet, Habermas empathizes with religious citizens, which would include evangelical Christians, who haven’t felt a part of the democratic process and he also cognizes their resentment towards a secular state (p. 13). He asserts that there must be more than “mere tolerance” politically of other viewpoints by both parties. Tocqueville offers a note of caution, the danger of democratic despotism (Holloway, 2016). In essence, the danger is that “people as a whole will surrender their right to govern themselves, handing themselves over to the rule – perhaps benevolent, but perhaps not – of an all-powerful government directed by one man or perhaps a small elite” (Holloway, p. 50).

Fundamentally, Tocqueville and Habermas both argue in favor of the necessity for religion to protect the common good in our society or a mutual morality that supports the prerequisites of a free democracy and provides a defense against the perils of tyranny. This reasoning postulates a sensible basis for evangelical Christians’ fear that society will suffer if their religion is eradicated from the democratic structure of our culture and the requirement that its survival be vigorously fought for. Yet, if our society’s concerns allow for despotism and does not include a respect for the rights of individuals while also disparaging the free press, then democracy is impaired. This is one of the paradoxes explored in this study.

**The Bible, Christian Women and Trump**:

Evangelical Christian women’s support of Donald Trump has been particularly scrutinized, as a result of his history of misogyny, philandering, and chauvinism as previously mentioned (Hinckley, 2016; Gerson, 2018). Through biblical teachings, Christian women are instructed to accept patriarchal authority (Reid, 2013) and forgive the sins of others (Kekes, 2009). The tension between genders and the long-established gender roles increased during the mid-nineteenth century as the suffrage movement developed into a powerful crusade (Schrieber, 2008). The “feminists” were organizing to protest their lack of representation and demand the right to vote. The suffragists were not only opposed by men, they were also in conflict with women as well. Conservative women were similarly forming organizations to counteract the “radical” feminists who “threatened their preferred general order and social relations” (Schrieber, p. 18). Josephine Dodge, who founded the National Association Opposed to Woman Suffrage (NAOWS), argued that “suffrage would undermine women’s privileged status and burden them with duties that would distract them from their more important and central domestic lives” (Schrieber, p. 19). Clearly, the suffragists eventually prevailed; however, the tension between “progressive” and “conservative” women endured and flared up again a century later.

By the mid-twentieth century, feminists’ objectives went beyond voting, as they demanded equality. Widespread protests eventually succeeded with the passing of the Equal Rights Amendment approved by the U.S. Senate in 1972. Not surprising, many conservative Christian women still shunned progressive women movements, believing it to be an affront to and an enemy of the domestic sphere (Griffis, 2017). The traditional family was to be fought for at all costs. “Appeals to maternalism were often featured, with women claiming legitimacy as actors through their status as mothers, or by arguing that feminism devalues women’s role as primary caretakers” (Schrieber, 2008, p. 17). In 1979, an organization called Concerned Women for America (CWA) was formed with the mission to “protect and promote Biblical values among all citizens – first through prayer, then education and finally by influencing our society – thereby reversing the decline in moral values in our nation” (Smith, 2014, p. 2). Smith (2014) offered this assessment of the organization:

In a vision offered by [founder] Beverly LaHaye, God created and ordered an exacting world where men are men and women are women, and to threaten such order with feminist liberation, abortion, gay rights, or governmental aid programs is to ultimately undermine the authority of the godly family, male-headed and female nurtured. (p. 5)

These conservative women presumably benefited from many of the advances the feminist movement afforded women in general (e.g. increased career opportunities and higher pay), yet they resented feminists seeking power and independence, “pitting women against each other based on class, race and/or sexuality” (p. 17). A logical religious reasoning for this is the biblical doctrine and conservative dogma of the patriarchal structure in Christianity (Elshtain, 1993). The literal, traditional definition of patriarchy is “rule of the father” (Ortner, 2014, p. 534). Ortner (2014) refers to patriarchy as a “system of social power, cultural categories and personal identities,” and a “set of relations between relations” (pp. 534-535). She organized three sorts of possible interactions within a patriarchal structure: 1) “between patriarchal figures and other men, 2) the heterosexual relationships among men themselves, and 3) the relationships between men and women, with women being “either excluded from the group, or included on condition of being subordinated and controlled” (p. 535). Women who are not subservient to men bear the responsibility for the demise of the traditional domestic structure.

Therefore, biblically directed gender roles and the patriarchal character of evangelical Christianity are important features of the participants’ in-group identity to consider in this research. This friction between conservative and liberal women will be examined in a juxtaposition of the moral standards evangelical Christian women employ against both Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton. Additionally, this temperament may well allow for the persistent patronage of Trump, throughout his presidency, in spite of the conflicting moral standards.

**Christianity and the Media:**

The mediatization of evangelical Christianity has played a credible role in the alienation of conservative Christians, particularly in the tension between religion and journalism (Silk, 1995; Hoover, 1998). For the past few decades, religious leaders have complained about religion news coverage being either biased against them or ignored altogether (Buddenbaum, 1998). The tension is, in part, due to the nature of each institution. Journalistic traditions call for facts, sources, motivations, interests and consequences when vetting a story. Yet, “religion of individuals – religion as experienced – is difficult or impossible to ‘source’” (Hoover, 2006, p. 57). The ethereal nature of the religious experience and belief is contrary to journalistic standards. “Journalists work in a world of facts. Truth means accuracy, but also empirical evidence. Religion, however, rests on ‘a faith that is largely impervious to the kind of proofs that will satisfy those who do not already believe’” (Buddenbaum, 1998, p. xv). Furthermore, religion is pluralistic, inherently controversial and complex.

Three key interrelated components are vital in understanding the conflict between religion, journalism and politics. First is journalism’s role in serving as the “watchdog,” or the “fourth estate,” through special protection of the press provided by the First Amendment, which dictates that a free and responsible press is the most important safeguard on the government or holding the powerful accountable by “speaking truth to power” (Hoover, 1998). Second is the rise of the modern public sphere. Habermas linked that the “public sphere became an important challenger to church and state authority and that conversations previously suppressed were now possible” (Hoover, 1995, p. 146). And finally, the development of printing allowed for information to be disseminated and consumed by the masses. Obviously, the more recent technology of the Internet and social media has had profound implications on the instantaneous, global propagation of news and the lack of control of truthful discourse, which in turn has given rise to the current crisis of global proliferated “fake news” (Peters, 2017).

Conservative media critics have long objected to a “liberal bias” by a majority of mainstream media (Underwood, 2002). However, during the golden age of television, there were conflicting accounts as to which political party the bias benefited (Efron, 1971; Hofstetter, 1976). Efron (1971) conducted research of the three television networks (ABC, CBS and NBC) over a six-week period of time when the 1968 presidential campaign was in full swing. Efron was convinced that television network coverage of the campaigns had been tainted by a liberal bias. Likewise, a few years later, Hofstetter (1976) exposed a bias in network television coverage of the 1972 presidential election campaigns, although those results revealed a slanting towards the Republican party. “There was very little issue content favorable to the Democrats, this resulted in a net Republican advantage” (p. 203).

For decades, conservative media critics, who pronounced the press as being hostile toward Christianity, have relied on 1980 research conducted by Robert Lichter, Linda Lichter and Stanley Rothman. The researchers “surveyed 238 journalists in top media positions and found that 86 percent of them seldom or never attended religious services and half said they had no religious affiliations” (Lichter, Lichter and Rothman, 1987, p. 131). This particular study was criticized for giving a “false impression about the media,” only using journalists from seven major news agencies in just two cities, New York and Washington, D.C. (Dart & Allen, 1993). Focusing only on journalists in these two major cities would obviously skew the results towards a liberal slant. Since then, the depiction of pervasive secular, agnostic journalists have been probed by other researchers. For example, a 1992 Freedom Forum study discovered that 72 percent of editors surveyed said religion was very important in their lives (Dart & Allen, 1993; Underwood, 2002). A nationwide survey of 1,400 journalists in 1991 found similar results (Weaver & Wilhoit, 1991). If one was to judge a bias from the media based on journalists’ personal feelings about religion, then the reproach of the press having a strong liberal bias was proven unfounded, at least in the late twentieth century (Underwood, 2002). Other media critics have complained not of an anti-religious bias, but of a “non-religious” bias, due to the sparse coverage of religious topics (Schultze, 2003). Schultze (2003) concurred with the analysis of religion in the media as any bias being more of an omission than an outright prejudice:

The contemporary news media are quite secular, not so much in their reporting about churches and ecclesiastical matters but in their overall un-interest in the human condition, in the substance of virtue, and in the transcendental aspects of human responsibility to care justly for the world. News reporting is grounded in the secular faith that there is no transcendent purpose to life and therefore no ultimate responsibilities. (p. 304)

Some researchers suggest the media has a “blind spot” or “tone deafness” when it comes to religion reporting (Dart & Allen, 1993; Wills, 1990; Buddenbaum, 1998). “Research conducted over the past 20 years consistently shows that many journalists seriously underestimate both audience interest in news about religion and their dissatisfaction with what passes for coverage in many newspapers and on television” (Buddenbaum, p. xiii). “Certainly, complaints about coverage are sometimes overblown, especially when they come from people who believe journalists should support, defend and even promote their kind of religion at the expense of others” (Buddenbaum, p. xiv). Nevertheless, regardless of whether there is a valid argument or not, the perception of anti-religious bias endured as noted in The Freedom Forum (1992) study stating an “unhealthy distrust exists between religionists and journalists, even a fear of each other in many cases.”

Religionists aren’t the only ones suspicious of the media. A Gallup poll published on September 14, 2016 declared “Americans’ trust in mass media sinks to a new low.” Gallup has measured the public’s trust in the media on a yearly basis since 1972. Their most current poll found only 32 percent of Americans said they have “a great deal” or “fair amount” of trust in mass media, the lowest level in Gallup polling history. Meanwhile, Republicans’ trust in the media has fallen the most dramatically, while Democrats’ and Independents’ trust has only slightly declined.

With many Republican leaders and conservative pundits saying Hillary Clinton has received overly positive media attention, while Donald Trump has been receiving unfair or negative attention, this may be the prime reason their relatively low trust in the media has evaporated even more. (Swift, 2016, p. 2)

As previously mentioned, a Gallup poll showed that Republicans’ trust in the media was at 32 percent in 2016 but plummeted to 14 percent just one year later.

Fox News Channel (FNC), which started broadcasting in October of 1996, rapidly ascended past CNN in 2002 to become the nation’s top-rated cable news channel, while catering to conservative Republicans (Rutenberg, 2000). FNC’s ratings soared during the Republican Convention in May 2000 (Collins, 2004). “FNC founder, Rupert Murdoch, paved the way for his news channel by often decrying publicly that Ted Turner’s CNN was ‘too liberal’ and needed a rival that would restore ‘balance’ to television journalism’” (Collins, 2004, p. 24). It is largely recognized that FNC has an “increasingly conservative slant” (Martin & Yurukoglu, 2017, p. 2566). A 2010 survey found that 43 percent of Americans see the news media as liberally biased, while just 23 percent perceive a conservative bias (Guardino & Snyder, 2012). DellaVigna & Kaplan (2007) found a “significant effect of the introduction of Fox News on the vote share in Presidential elections between 1996 and 2000” (p. 1187). Burack & Snyder Hall (2012) pointed to FNC and other conservative media sources as instigators that “polarize and inspire conservative activism”:

According to a 2010 study from the University of Maryland, compared with those who never watch Fox, frequent viewers of the network are 31 percent more likely to believe most economists who say the health care law will worsen the deficit, 31 percent more likely to believe Obama was not born in the U.S., 30 percent more likely to believe that there is no scientific consensus about climate change, 14 percent more likely to believe the stimulus did not include any tax cuts, 14 percent more likely to believe their own income taxes have gone up, 13 percent more likely to believe that the auto bailout occurred under Obama, and 12 percent more likely to believe that most economists say the stimulus caused job loss, even though all those beliefs are empirically false. Consequently, people who watch Fox News and listen to Rush Limbaugh and those who consume *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* essentially live in two separate worlds. (p. 449)

Correspondingly, Martin & Yurukoglu (2017) showed that viewing FNC “increases the probability of voting Republican in presidential elections” (p. 2597). Research has also shown, in the recent past, that evangelical Protestants vote more Republican than mainline Protestants (Campbell, 2007; Green, 2007; Layman, 2001) and “those who attend an evangelical church are more likely to vote Republican” (Lockerbie, 2013, p. 1156). With the 2016 election exit pools revealing that 81 percent of evangelicals voted for Republican candidate, Donald Trump, it is reasonable to conclude that these same Republican evangelical voters also have a significant degree of distrust of mainstream media. Harvard researchers Benkler, Faris and Roberts (2018) recently investigated this phenomenon:

These factors include the long-term patterns of identity threat born of race relations and relatively open immigration policy; the economic insecurity born of policies aimed to reduce taxes and services, reduce labor power, and reduce regulatory oversight over business; and an increasing mismatch between a large, deeply religious population and an increasingly pluralistic and gender-egalitarian mainstream. These patterns laid the groundwork for the 30-year ascendance of a commercially successful strategy of news and opinion media outlets committed to serving identity-confirming news and views for that conservative wing, while denigrating the veracity and honesty of all other outlets. (p. 348)

An interesting perspective comes from research conducted shortly after the 2016 election and published by Shorenstein’s Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy. This study found that, “over the full course of the election, it was Clinton, not Trump, who was more often the target of negative coverage. Overall, the coverage of her candidacy was 60 percent negative to 38 percent positive, while his coverage was 56 percent negative to 44 percent positive” (Patterson, 2016, p. 3). Therefore, the argument that, in the pre-election cycle, overall mainstream media targeted Trump with negative coverage and a liberal bias is not entirely accurate. Meanwhile, conservative, right-wing television and talk radio programs have capitalized on an alleged liberal bias, or gap in the news market for conservative opinions, and have in turn drawn large audiences (Collins, 2004). Through his tweets and frequent appearances on FNC, Trump openly praises the conservative news outlet, FNC, and reportedly often talks to and consults with Fox News personality, Sean Hannity (Shaer, 2017).

In 1949, legislation was introduced to prevent news outlets from disseminating a singularly extreme ideology. The Fairness Doctrine was a federal policy regulated by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) that required U.S. television and radio stations to present opposing perspectives on polemic issues of public importance. The intention was to require news broadcasts to remain honest, equitable and balanced (Benkler, Faris and Roberts, 2018). However, the policy was abolished in 1987. The eradication of the policy has allowed right-wing radio and television personalities such as Rush Limbaugh, Alex Jones, Bill O’Reilly and Sean Hannity to resort to bombastic language and outlandish conspiracies that weave distrust and delusion, creating a right-wing media bubble (Jamieson, 2008) with one objective being to discredit and attack mainstream media through antagonism and suspicion (Thrift, 2014; Major, 2015). Connolly (2005) described this phenomenon as the “avenues of crossing and intensities of inter-involvement between corporations, conservative think tanks, the Republican Party, evangelical churches, Fox News, and its social media echo chamber” and subsequent term, the “evangelical-capitalist resonance machine” (p. 869).

Recent comprehensive research conducted by a Harvard law professor and colleagues (Benkler, Faris and Roberts, 2018) reveals an alarming “propaganda feedback loop” by right-wing media outlets. The technology-enabled data analysis of millions of online stories, tweets and Facebook-sharing data points exposed the “right-wing ecosystem” as being much more inclined to spread “disinformation, lies and half -truths” (p. 75) than other news outlets. Misleading or false stories spread by extreme websites that do not follow any journalistic norms, are picked up by conservative news outlets like Fox News Channel, who claims to follow journalistic standards but often fails. Unsubstantiated stories are then continually disseminated in a “disinformation vortex” (p. 387).

Dynamics on the right tend to reinforce partisan statements, irrespective of the truth, and to punish actors – be they media outlets or politicians or pundits – who insist on speaking truths that are inconsistent with partisan frames and narratives dominant within the ecosystem. (p. 75)

Additionally, the conservative news outlets’ audience, who is absorbed in the propaganda feedback loop, holds strong to their social identity in their media consumption by “exhibiting high trust in identity-confirming media, and low trust in external media” (p. 79). The researchers found that there are currently no significant websites on the left that mirror the persistent falsity of those on the right. To back up their claim, the researchers detail several case studies of fallacies or propaganda that were reported during the 2016 presidential campaign. When bizarre stories didn’t pass the “reality-check dynamic” or “institutional truth-seeking norms” (p. 77), most news outlets stopped their coverage of them. However, right-wing media outlets like FNC and the Daily Caller had no system in which to self-correct, and instead continued to repeat various versions of the falsehoods over an extended period of time to the point that the believability and recollection were reinforced by the repetition (Benkler et al., 2018). One of the Benkler et al. study’s main conclusions is that right-wing media itself is the main culprit in propagating uncertainty and skepticism in our society.

IV. THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

**Social & Religious Identity Theory:**

Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) has been significant in presenting understanding into the “relation between the self-concept and the social groups to which one belongs” (p. 40). Identity can be examined at three levels: personal [how we perceive ourselves], social [individual perception within a group], and collective [group identity] (Owens, 2000). A person’s identity, from race to religion to socioeconomic level, shapes the way they respond to a range of situations (Ysseldyk, Matheson & Anisman, 2010). Furthermore, identity-making is an ongoing and adaptive “process of identification” (Susin, 2000, p. 79). Identities are not merely self-imposed or hereditary, but also evolve as a result of socialization. “Identities are derived not only from a person’s self-conceptions but are also derived from the perceptions and declarations of others that have been imposed on that individual” (McGill, 2005, pp. 16-17). Identity encompasses sameness with others [who I am] and disparity [who I am not] (McGill). This identification is central to the forming of an “us versus them” mindset.

Cameron (2004) distinguishes three factors when considering social and self-identity. The Three-Factor Model includes:

1. Centrality (cognitive) – the amount of time spent thinking about being a group member.
2. In-group effect – the positivity of feelings associated with membership in the group.
3. In-group ties – perceptions of similarity, bond, and belongingness with other group members. (p. 241)

Religiosity submits “a system of guiding beliefs through which to interpret one’s experiences and give them meaning” (Park, 2007, p. 321). Religious identity is unique in its “eternal membership” and “sacred” worldview (Ysseldyk et al., p. 60). The depth of this form of identity speaks to the core of the believer’s soul and stretches beyond their lives on earth into immortality. McGill (2015) speaks of humans’ predisposition to stretch beyond our fundamental needs, “To be a self is to evaluate levels of fulfillment in life. One is not wholly satisfied to breathe, to eat, to rest; one inclines to understand, to create, to remember, to strive” (p. 100). One fundamental belief for evangelical Christians is that the Holy Bible is God’s word incarnate.

The biblical hierarchy of the Divine Maker and human creation that is presented in these texts offers practical implications for a theology of identity. Firstly, it implies that God has certain intentions for humanity. Secondly, it asserts that by considering these intentions, humanity may understand its identity. (McGill, p. 102)

If Christians’ identity comes from belonging to God and all humans are created in God’s image, then it would appear that Christians should no longer see the “other” as the enemy and “feel a responsibility to protect the other as a fellow creature of God” (McGill, p. 116). Yet, scholars of political tolerance repeatedly reveal that religiosity is associated with political intolerance (Nunn, Crockett, and Williams, 1978; Sullivan, Piereson, and Marcus, 1982; McClosky & Brill, 1983; Gibson, 2010). Kinnvall (2004) argues that “nationalism and religion supply particularly powerful stories and beliefs (discourses) through their ability to convey a picture of security, of a ‘home’ safe from intruders” (p. 763). Subsequently, when right-wing pundits and conservative news outlets exploit the fears of evangelical Christians by relentlessly warning of the precipitous decline of moral values and absolute demise of Christian America, it may well be the catalyst that transforms the “love thy neighbor” biblical adage to self-preservation, nationalistic exclusivity. Populist movements evolve from an “us versus them” mentality. Still, the ability to politicize disenchantment and antagonism into populist movements occurs on both sides of the political spectrum. Both left-wing and right-wing populism are born out of sentiments felt by the working-class and arise in the form of a political movement (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). In that manner, they are the same; however, they are also polar opposites on social issues. To put it simply, right-wing populism favors small groups, exclusivity or inequality, and nationalism; whereas left-wing populism favors big groups, equality, socialism, and globalism (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017).

According to a Pew Research study (2014) of over 10,000 Americans, the United States is more deeply divided along political ideological lines and “partisan antipathy is deeper and more extensive” than at any point in last 20 years. The study found that the higher identifying participants of each political party believe that the opposing party’s policies aren’t just wrong, but “are so misguided that they threaten the nation’s well-being.” In researching her book, *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning in the American Right*, Hochschild (2016) spent several months in Mississippi and Louisiana conducting an ethnography to better understand the nature of our cultural divide. Her discovery was a paradox which she termed, “The Deep Story” (pp. 136-161). She utilizes a “waiting in line” metaphor to examine the sentiment. To sum it up, good loyal citizens, like her participants, have been patiently waiting in line for the ultimate goal, the American Dream. However, the aspiration is not visible; it is on the other side of a hill. The line is not moving for these hard-working Americans, because other people keep cutting into the line in front of them, such as minorities, immigrants, the impoverished, etc.

In an undeclared class war, expressed through the weary, aggravating, and ultimately enraging wait for the American Dream, those I came to know developed a visceral hate for the ally of the ‘enemy’ cutters in line – the federal government. They hated other people for needing it. They rejected their own need of it – even to help clean up the pollution in their backyard (Hochschild, p. 161).

This same hostility has been fueled by right wing-populists. Right-wing populism has been successful in associating itself with conservative evangelical Christians, while also attracting reactionary nationalistic groups who are focused primarily on Second Amendment rights and white supremacy, with little regard to Christian morality (Berry, 2017). Clearly, there are degrees of intersections between these two ideologies; however, most evangelical Christians would rebuff and object to being referred to as racists, xenophobes and misogynists. Not all populists are Christians and not all Christians are populists. However, both ideologies appear to have the same end goals, even if their reasoning differs. For instance, irreligious populist groups, akin to white supremacist groups, might credit their cultural and societal grievances to be the product of the decay of white authority (Berry, 2017). Conservative Christians, who have similar complaints, could equate it to the need to bring Jesus Christ (or Christian morality/Protestant authority) back into America’s culture. Evangelical Christians may not always grasp that these different mindsets can easily be perceived as the same thing by non-believers; Protestant (Christian morality) authority = white authority. The United States is not alone in its desire to claim perceptions of in-group superiority and moral exactitude. “Values of in-group solidarity, loyalty, tradition, and conformity; respect for, honoring of, or obedience to authority; and purity (or disgust at impurity) are widely evident around the world and do impact moral foundation” (Gibbs, 2010, p. 5).

To a great extent, this research project is an exploration of how evangelical Christian women’s social or religious identity influences their political opinions, voting behaviors, news habits and attitudes towards news media outlets. For the reason that the evangelical Christian women in this study consider their religious identity as such a vital aspect of their character, it motivates their viewpoints in numerous aspects of their lives, including individual motivations, group stimuli and political impulses. Consequently, how they construct their religious identity, as well as how and why they react to in-group threats is a focal element for this exploration.

**Moral Foundation Theory**:

Moral psychology captured the attention of history’s greatest philosophers. Where does our morality come from? How do children discern right from wrong? Is it nature or nurture? The Bible would lead us to believe that God has etched it into hearts, while Darwin would argue our morality evolves from our moral emotions (Haidt, 2012). A fairly recent Pew Research Center polling (2011) examined evangelical Christians’ beliefs and practices. The researchers found that 56 percent of evangelical Christians believed that in order to “be a good evangelical,” one needed to “take a stand on issues in conflict with moral and Biblical principles.” Another 44 percent felt that this directive was important but not necessarily essential.

In the 1920s, Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget (1932) defined a two-stage process of moral development suggesting that it is a constant progression through our lifetime. Decades later, psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg (1984) built on Piaget’s effort by offering six stages of moral development with three distinctive levels: preconventional, conventional and postconventional. The first level, preconventional morality is typically found in children between the ages of 4 and 10 years old. This level has two stages, an orientation toward punishment and obedience and instrumental purpose and exchange, where children’s actions are based on consideration for what others can do for them or self-interest. In Level 2, conventional, morality is usually reached between ages 10 and 13. The third stage is concerned with maintaining mutual relations, approval of others, and the golden rule, a good boy/girl attitude. In this stage, children evaluate acts according to the motives behind them and can take circumstances into account. Stage four refers to social concern and conscience. At this stage individuals are concerned with respecting authority, maintaining social order, and doing their duty within society or law and order morality. In this stage, an act is considered wrong if it harms others or violates a rule or law (Kohlberg, p. 52). In the third or final level, postconventional, morality is reached in early adolescence or young adulthood, though some individuals never reach this level. Stage five is concerned with “morality of contract, of individual rights, and of democratically accepted law” (p. 52). In this stage, individuals value the will of the majority and the well-being of society. At this stage, individuals do what they think is right, even if it is in conflict with the law. At this stage, people act according to their internalized standards of morality. Kohlberg added a sixth stage, where individuals are more concerned with the morality of universal ethical principles.

One of the criticisms of Kohlberg’s theory is that the research subjects were only male and thus the conclusions were centered on masculinity (Gilligan, 1982). Carol Gilligan was a research assistant for Kohlberg and developed an alternative model for female moral development, through additional research on females. She asserted a relational theory relevant for women that she referred to as the ethics of care (Harlick, 2018). While Kohlberg’s masculine-based theory involved a focus on justice, Gilligan’s theory comprehended women’s caring and relationship needs. Even though her theory appeared to be inconsistent with Kohlberg, scholars have also viewed it as an extension of Kohlberg (Reed, 1997; Jorgensen, 2006). Gilligan includes the identical three levels of moral development (preconventional, conventional and postconventional); only “for women, the transitions between stages are fueled by changes in the sense of self rather than in changes in cognitive capability” (Harlick, p. 2). In other words, women delineate morality in a distinctive way and retain different moral qualities as important. Gilligan (1997) details females’ progression through the three levels:

Women's moral judgments proceed from an initial focus on the self at the first level to the discovery, in the transition to the second level, of the concept of responsibility as the basis for a new equilibrium between self and others. The elaboration of this concept of responsibility and its fusion with a maternal concept of morality, which seeks to ensure protection for the dependent and unequal, characterizes the second level of judgment. At this level the good is equated with caring for others. However, when the conventions of feminine goodness legitimize only others as the recipients of moral care, the logical inequality between self and others and the psychological violence that it engenders create the disequilibrium that initiates the second transition. The relationship between self and others is then reconsidered in an effort to sort out the confusion between conformity and care inherent in the conventional definition of feminine goodness and to establish a new equilibrium, which dissipates the tension between selfishness and responsibility. At the third level, the self becomes the arbiter of an independent judgment that now subsumes both conventions and individual needs under the moral principle of nonviolence. Judgment remains psychological in its concern with the intention and consequences of action, but it now becomes universal in its condemnation of exploitation and hurt. (p. 492)

Moreover, Gilligan connects the third level’s independence with determinations regarding birth control and abortion. The “dilemma of choice,” or decisions in which they can control, conflict significantly with “traditionally defined women’s identities” (Gilligan, 1997, p. 490), or their reproductive abilities and maternal responsibilities. Essentially, by practicing birth control, she is able to explore her aspirations, free from the “passivity and reticence of a sexuality that binds them in dependence” (p. 491). Having an abortion is a much more complex issue. In this case, a woman’s decision does not affect just the self, but becomes a moral issue of hurting, which is very problematic for women (p. 491).

If you believe moral knowledge is the result of nurturing, you are considered an empiricist (Haidt, 2012). Yet, if morality fluctuates across time and cultures, then it can’t necessarily be inherent (Haidt). In the late twentieth century, moral psychology scholarship was focused on a third answer, rationalism. As a response to Kohlberg’s work, social psychologist Jonathan Haidt (2012) argued that in rationalism “kids figure out morality for themselves, but only when their minds are ready, and they are given the right kinds of experiences” (Haidt, p. 6). In other words, it is a continuous process throughout childhood and beyond. “Rationality is our nature, and good moral reasoning is the end point of development” (p. 7). Haidt continued, “If morality doesn’t come primarily from reasoning, then that leaves some combination of innateness and social learning as the most likely candidates” (p. 26).

Haidt gives three principles of moral psychology, the first principle being, “Intuitions comes first, strategic reasoning second” (p. xiv). The second principle is, “There’s more to morality than harm and fairness” (p. 110). And the third and final principle is, “Morality binds and blinds” (p. 191). Haidt, along with colleague Jesse Graham, developed Moral Foundation Theory. They identified five opposing moral value pairings that form the basis of our political ideology: 1) care/harm, 2) fairness/cheating, 3) loyalty/betrayal, 4) authority/subversion, and 5) sanctity/degradation (Haidt, 2012). In 2011, more than 130,000 people participated in their research by taking a Moral Foundation Questionnaire on-line. Researchers found that liberals are mainly concerned with just the first two foundations of morality: care/harm and fairness/cheating. However, “conservatives endorse all five foundations more or less equally” (p. 161). Thus, Democrats are so focused on issues such as equality and supporting marginalized groups that they fail to deliberate the other three moral foundations: loyalty/betrayal, authority/subversion and sanctity/degradation. Haidt argued that Republicans have had a better understanding of moral psychology than Democrats, by appealing to all five values in their campaign strategies. Whereas Republicans often use “scare” tactics to heighten the anxiety to the point of increased activism by their constituents, the Republican Party is responsive to all of the moral concerns that conservatives share. Haidt’s was inspired by French sociologist Emile Durkheim’s vision of society:

A Durkheimian society at its best would be a stable network composed of many nested and overlapping groups that socialize, reshape and care for individuals who, if left to their own devices, would pursue shallow, carnal, and selfish pleasures. A Durkheimian society would value self-control over self-expression, duty over rights, and loyalty to one’s groups over concerns for out-groups.

(p. 166)

Research has shown that, when left to their own devices and without any accountability, people are lazy and selfish (Tetlock, 2002). However, when it comes to politics, people care about their groups, whether those be racial, regional, religious, or political (Westen, Glagov, Harenski, Hamann, and Kilts, 2006).

Haidt (2012) lists three ethics that affect our moral foundation:

1) The ethic of autonomy, based on the idea that people are, first and foremost, autonomous individuals with wants, needs, and preferences.

2) The ethic of community, based on the idea that people are, first and foremost, members of larger entities such as families, teams, armies, companies, tribes, and nations.

3) The ethic of divinity, based on the idea that people are, first and foremost, temporary vessels within which a divine soul has been implanted. (pp. 99-100)

For atheists and agnostics, there are only two possibilities, the first two ethics. However, for religionists, the ethic of divinity speaks to the core of their identity, a metaphysical reality that is not understood by those outside of religion. This misconstruction could be one of the primary instigators of a great chasm between believers and non-believers.

There are other crucial perspectives to keep in mind when cogitating the current political divisiveness. An “ideal,” orderly society needs to have rules and accountability. “Democrats often say that Republicans have duped these people into voting against their economic self-interest. But from the perspective of Moral Foundation Theory, rural and working-class voters were, in fact, voting for their moral interests” (Haidt, 2012, p. 185). Research conducted by the Center for the Study of Beliefs and Values at the Search Center in Minneapolis contended the correlation between politics and religion is comprehensive:

Religious beliefs and political decisions are closely and actively connected… Whatever the issue – whether foreign aid, crime and punishment, taxes, genetic engineering, abortion, money, racial equity, labor rights, business ethics, war, or peace – religion and its moral premises have definite implications.

(Hubbard, 1990, pp. 23-24)

Morality is a key component to evangelical Christians’ religious identity. A perceived lack of morals in our modern-day society can cause great distress for evangelical Christian women, who embrace their role as maternal nurturers, and are also expected to be caretakers of higher moral standards than men (Smith, 2000). The conflict between conservative and liberal women could arguably be connected to Gilligan’s (1997) transition from the conventional to post-conventional levels, where independence and self are autonomically situated and take precedence over duty and responsibility to others. On this topic, abortion is a hotly contested political issue, particularly for evangelical Christian women, as will be discussed in further detail in the findings.

**Cognitive Dissonance:**

There is a certain level of discomfort we all feel in our day-to-day lives as we experience situations that are contrary to our beliefs and values. This discord is arguably more pronounced in evangelical Christians lives, due to the fact that they are biblically instructed to retain high moral principles yet must also interact and exist in a world permeated with immorality (Dreher, 2018). This spiritual struggle on earth is a continuous reality for devoted Christians, which produces a consciousness referred to as cognitive dissonance. Festinger’s (1957) cognitive dissonance theory terms “cognition” as “the things a person knows about himself, about his behavior, and about his surroundings,” elements being “knowledges” (p. 9). Dissonance refers to “relations which exist between pairs of ‘elements’” (p. 9). Knowledges can include opinions, beliefs, values and attitudes. Festinger argued that cognition is a combination of experiences and how they interrelate with others:

Elements of cognition correspond for the most part with what the person actually does or feels with what actually exists in the environment. In the case of opinions, beliefs, and values, the reality may be what others think or do; in other instances, the reality may be what is encountered experientially or what others have told him. (p. 11)

Yet, Festinger also points out that cognitive elements may also diverge from reality, at least as others might see it. When that happens, “the reality which impinges on a person will exert pressures in the direction of bringing the appropriate cognitive elements into correspondence with that reality” (p. 11). Two elements are considered dissonant if, for whatever reason, they are inconsistent or contradictory with each other (Festinger, 1957). Moreover, Festinger identifies degrees of dissonance:

If two elements are dissonant with one another, the magnitude of the dissonance will be a function of the importance of the elements. The more these elements are important to, or valued by, the person, the greater will be the magnitude of a dissonant relation between them. (p. 16)

The existence of dissonance is usually followed by a pressure to reduce or remove the dissonance. Festinger uses the metaphor of the act of eating in order to eliminate hunger. Changes in attitude, behavior or beliefs are most likely to occur when it can be changed with the least amount of effort and expense (Aronson, 1969). Additionally, new cognitive social realities can be established by obtaining agreement from other people when there is cognitive pressure to change (Festinger, 1957). Festinger offers reasons why someone might be resistant to change. “One element might be in relationship with a number of other elements” (Festinger, p. 27). Thus, changing that one element could alter the stability of other knowledges. From their study on propaganda dissonance, Cooper & Jahoda (1947) deduced that people “prefer not to face the implications of ideas opposed to their own so that they do not have to be forced either to defend themselves or to admit error” (pp. 15-16). Their subjects avoided initiating dissonance by making the total propaganda message “invalid” or misinterpreting the information to be in-line with their existing cognition (p. 19). “With already existing dissonance, they would be more alert to prevent increase of dissonance and would, hence, perhaps react in an instantaneous manner” (Festinger, p. 136).

Selective factors of dissonance avoidance can be seen in intentional and unintentional exposure to information disseminated through the media (Klapper, 1949). “Both religiosity and conservative ideology provide ‘coherency, control, and the reduction of ambiguity’” (Brandt & Reyna, 2010, p. 715). Overcoming dissonance often does not take place in seclusion. Group members can endure disconfirming suggestions if the ingroup members support one another in order to maintain the collective belief (Berjemo-Rubio, 2017). The extent of group cohesiveness influences how well it will handle irrefutable evidence (Dawson, 2011). When members of a group experience “hopeful” and “joyful” feelings from their membership before receiving any destabilizing information, and those feelings are valuable enough that members want to keep them even in the presence of dissonance (Bermejo-Rubio, 2017). This frequently happens in religious communities:

The shared belief system and the total group experience endow their existence with a sense of order, reassure people that they dwell within a meaningful universe with a goal, give them an orienting framework with some values of behavior guides, create a sense of identity, provide necessary (emotion and often economic) support, and allow them to walk on a path along which they do not feel alone, thereby generating a feeling of well-being within a bonded community (Bermejo-Rubio, p. 143)

Ross, Lelkes and Russell (2012) argue that contemporary American Christians have “adjusted their perceptions of Christianity itself. More specifically, they have adjusted their perceptions of the political positions that Jesus of the New Testament would hold if he were alive today” (p. 3617). This readjustment can often lead to a justification of out-group condemnation. “Moreover, when other individuals see matters involving important social and political beliefs differently, the result is denigration of those others’ morality and even rationality. Attributions of bias are made for those on the ‘other side’ of issues” (p. 3617).

Cognitive dissonance reduction is a supplementary but noteworthy assessment in this study. In order to robustly support an infamously immoral man like Donald Trump, the evangelical Christian women in this study were required to address factors related to cognitive dissonance. An examination through the lens of cognitive dissonance theory can facilitate a better understanding of the motives for this diminution of moral standards as well as the participants rationalization for their defensive reactions and coping strategies they utilize to protect their religious identity.

V. METHODOLOGY AND PROCEDURES

To answer the aforementioned research questions, qualitative focus groups and in-depth interviews with women who both identified as white evangelical Christians and voted for Donald Trump as President were employed for this study. To analyze the data, discourse analysis was utilized in order to interpret how white evangelical Christian women view their political responsibilities, as well as what has transpired to cause the current divide and distrust of news outlets.

1. **Research Approach and Design**
2. **Focus Groups**

Three focus groups were conducted in the following states: Idaho, Colorado and Arizona between July 27, 2017 and February 28, 2018. Focus groups were employed for this project in order to allow for a deeper conversation about the following topics related to white evangelical Christian women: their support of Trump, aversion to Hillary Clinton, voting behaviors, media habits and opinions of news outlets. Christian women have been particularly scrutinized for their support of a known misogynist and philanderer (Zuckerman, 2016). The focus groups enabled the researcher to view how white evangelical Christian women collectively share their political viewpoints and opinions regarding the media. Focus group method is considered especially appropriate for feminist and critical measures by providing a voice to marginalized people and sharing power with those who are researched (Wilkinson, 1998). Focus groups have gained popularity due to the flexibility of the method (Wilkinson, 2004).

A discourse related to how people influence each other is achieved through focus groups. “In an ideal focus group, everyone is talking to everyone else, back and forth, with the facilitator gently leading the group toward the desired topic” (Davis, 2016, p. 11). Group interviewing as a method has been used since the mid-1920s, but its practice is mostly attributed to Robert Merton, who himself credits Paul Lazarsfeld, the “father” of market research (Davis, 2016). Morgan (1988) contends that focus groups are thought to produce prolific data.

This method provides opportunities for participants to interactively exchange views in a relatively free-flowing process. In this way, the researcher is better able to understand a phenomenon from the point of view of the participants because the researcher has less power to influence the participants with his/her views. (p. 4)

A disadvantage to using focus groups is maintaining control of the conversation (for the moderator). “Too much control and you interrupt the interaction; too little and the session is no longer ‘focused’” (Davis, 2016, p. 5). There can also be power dynamics at play in the groups that can hinder interaction. Therefore, in this study, the researcher was diligent to avoid interjecting personal bias during the discourse; instead she focused mainly on keeping the conversation on track.

The focus groups were conducted prior to the in-depth interviews. The Idaho and Arizona focus groups took place in the homes of one of the participants, the “host”. The Colorado focus group took place at the researcher’s home. Because of the difficulty in recruiting participants for the focus groups, a $10 gift card was used as an incentive. Light appetizers as well as coffee and tea were served since the discussions were held at an early dinner hour, or approximately 6 p.m. The atmosphere was similar to a church Bible study. The women talked informally as they got settled into a circle of chairs in the family room. Once the focus group began, each woman introduced them self and told the group how they came to participate in the research. Most of the participants were eager to offer their opinions; however, each group had a couple of quieter participants. Several of the questions were asked so that every participant got to comment by going around the circle. Those who didn’t speak up as often were also asked directly for their opinion in order to try to include their viewpoint when they were being subdued by more assertive participants. The researcher asked open-ended questions and as a moderator, only inserted herself into the discussion only when the conversation was veering off track.

As the discussion progressed, the women got more comfortable opening up about their viewpoints and were emboldened by the common collective identity of the group as a whole. Their answers were reassuring to other group members. What emerged were individuals who reinforced each other and bolstered their support of Trump, creating a deeper sense of community for them. The Arizona focus group participants even discussed meeting regularly, similar to a Bible study. But instead of reading and deliberating the Bible, they wanted to continue to discuss their conservative political viewpoints. Each focus group ended jovially as they expressed their enjoyment from the ability to express their political views without being criticized.

**b) Semi-Structured Interviews**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 women between November 9, 2018 and January 7, 2019. The interviews were conducted in person whenever possible, however, most of the interviews were done over the phone or by video conferencing application like Skype. The interview participants lived in different states including: Arizona, California, Colorado, Idaho, Missouri and Utah.

The purpose for these interviews was to more acutely examine how these participants’ political views, opinions of news outlets and news consumption have been formed through their religious identity and sense of morality. While the focus groups allowed for a free-flowing discussion of opinions and interactive idea exchange, conversely, the individual interviews allowed for a deeper conversation into the distinct views of the participant and follow-up questions regarding specific issues that arose during the dialog. In qualitative research, the purpose of interviewing is to “allow us to enter another person’s perspective” (Patton, 2002, p. 341). There are three basic types of research interviews: structured, unstructured and semi-structured (Russell, 2000). The structured interviews consist of fixed questions with minor or no variations and no ability to ask follow-up questions, while unstructured interviews are performed with little organization and do not reveal any preconceived theories (Gill, Stewart, Treasure and Chadwick, 2008). Semi-structured interviews entail several strategic questions to delineate specific areas to delve into. “The flexibility with this approach allows for the discovery or elaboration of information that is important to the participant but may not have been previously thought of as pertinent by the research team” (Gill et al., 2008, p. 293). The interviewees are informants who can instruct the researcher regarding their religious identity.

Obviously, when choosing the interview subjects for this research, it was assumed that their viewpoint would be meaningful and revealing. The quality of data obtained in an interview is chiefly determined by the researcher or interviewer (Patton, 2002). Responses can vary greatly based on how a question is phrased. Consequently, the interview questions were semi-structured to be open-ended whenever possible. Occasionally, there were more challenging follow-up questions posed, if the participant was too off-base or imprecise in their answers. Listening, or the art of hearing, is also an imperative aspect in conducting a successful interview. For this reason, answers to the questions were listened to carefully in order to better understand any potential meaning and context being communicated. At the beginning of each interview the participant was told that the conversation was being audio-recorded and asked for their consent for both being recorded and for participating in the research. They were then given a short summary of the research, reminded that their answers would be used anonymously and were asked to try to not give any identifying details in their answers. The researcher asked each interview participant the same set of questions. When an answer was unclear, they were asked additional questions to clarify their response and position. The researcher remained impartial during the questions and discussion, but occasionally confronted responses that were known to be erroneous assumptions.

**c) Sampling and Recruitment**

For the focus groups, snowball sampling was utilized to recruit the participants. At the outset, the researcher approached acquaintances who were known to be evangelical Christian women through email and social media and asked them to participate in the research. All of the women recruited not only identified themselves as evangelical Christians, but also acknowledged that they voted for Donald Trump. They were then asked for recommendations of other women who might be willing to take part in the study. This type of recruiting was necessary for this particular study because of the political and religious location of the individuals who were being studied. Due to the polemic nature of the current political climate and the hesitancy to take part in the research, the snowball sampling allowed potential participants to feel more comfortable taking part in the research because their participation was recommended by a trusted friend or family member. Consequently, most of the participants in those focus groups were not known to the researcher. However, all of the participants in the Idaho focus group were women the researcher knew.

Seven of the 20 interview participants were also focus group participants. The researcher was familiar with a majority of the interview participants. Just a few of them were recruited through snowball sampling. Most of the interviewees were recruited through purposeful sampling. Additionally, an effort was made to enlist minorities into the study in order to have some diversity in the research, given that almost all of the participants were White. After the participants agreed to join the study, they were emailed IRB consent forms and, in some cases, given more details about the research if they had additional questions to alleviate any concern they had about participating. The focus group participants and in-person interview participants physically signed consent forms, while the phone interview participants agreed to the research verbally on an audio-recording device. All of the focus groups and interviews were audio recorded, after getting permission from all of the participants, in order to ensure accuracy. The recordings were transcribed in detail as soon after the sessions as possible. This research was approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of Colorado Boulder.

**d) Participants**

Three focus groups were conducted with between 5-12 women in each focus group for a total of 27 focus group participants. Each focus group was assembled in a different state; Idaho, Colorado and Arizona. The women were all white with ages between their late 20s and late 70s. A few of the women knew each other while most of the others were meeting each other for the first time. The focus group discussions lasted between 90 minutes and two hours.

Twenty women were interviewed in depth. Six of the interviews were conducted in-person interviews; 14 were over the phone or through video-conferencing application, Skype. The researcher purposefully strove to recruit minority participants. Ultimately, the ethnicities of the interviewees were as such: 17 were white, two were African-American and one was Hispanic. The age range was from early 30s to early 80s, with the largest group of women being in their 50s (nine of them). The interviews lasted between 45 minutes and one hour. Both the focus groups and interviews were audio recorded for accuracy and quickly transcribed by the researcher. Prior to participating in the research, the participants were asked if they identified as evangelical Christians. Huber & Huber (2012) developed The Centrality of Religiosity Scale (CRS) which measures the importance of salience of religious meaning in personality. And while CRS defines five-core dimensions of religiosity, there is an acceptable commonly used single item scale “asking for a self-report on the subjective importance of religion or the salience of religious identity… this allows the most economical assessment of the general intensity of religiosity” (Huber & Huber, p. 711). Therefore, the first question participants were asked during the focus groups and interviews was how important their Christian faith was in their lives. All of the participants identified themselves as conservative, evangelical Christians and all of them regarded their Christian faith to be “very important”, “extremely important”, “number one in my life”, “most important”, “ultimate importance”, “it’s everything”, or “first and foremost”. Hence, the participants were deemed to be high identifiers to their religious identity group, evangelical Christians. All of the participants were promised anonymity, so they are referred to with pseudonyms. The focus group participants have their state of residence next to their pseudonym, while the interview participants only have a first name pseudonym. This is how to determine whether the quote was from a focus group or individual interview.

**e) Discourse Analysis and Writing**

A common coding procedure for focus groups and interviews is discourse analysis (Davis 2016). Unlike textual analysis that portions sizeable amounts of text data into easy to interpret data pieces (Jenner & Titscher, 2000), one tradition of discourse analysis is utilizing it to examine conversation or “any significant semiotic event” (Bacchi, 2005, p. 208). In other words, it is the study of social life realized through the analysis of language with the intention of increasing our understanding of the human experience (Wodak & Meyer, 2001). This type of analysis is deemed to be extremely useful when interpreting women’s perspective (Powers, 2001). In the discourse analysis tradition, much of the information analyzed originates from interviews (Bacchi, 2005), the undertaking being to ascertain how individuals navigate their way through ubiquitous, but conflicting “discursive structures and meanings” (Stapleton & Wilson, 2004, p. 46). Lupton (1992) defines discourse analysis as “a group of ideas or patterned way of thinking which can be identified in textual and verbal communications and also be located in wider social structures” (p. 145). Discourse analysis was applied in order to take a rhetorical approach, analyzing what participants say, how they say it as well as what is not said. It also “allows researchers to take a cultural approach, looking at how the larger cultural contexts are reflected in the discourse and focusing on social structures that influence meaning” (Davis, 2016, p. 85). The context is able to shift between micro and macro viewpoints in order to understand meaning from each angle (Davis, 2016).

Discourse analysis coding and the analysis process were employed to dissect the dialog from the focus group and interview research. The five-step process recommended by Davis (2016) was utilized. First, the sessions were recorded and transcribed by the researcher as soon as possible after the sessions. The thorough transcription of the recordings facilitated a preliminary discernment of the data collected. After all of the data was gathered, the researcher performed an initial read-through of all the transcripts. Then a first coding pass or open coding was completed, where the researcher wrote down the themes emerging from the data. A second coding pass, or constant comparison, allowed for categories to be broken apart, combined or re-categorized. Similar responses were also tallied to determine equivalent sentiments. The researcher created summaries of each focus group and interview transcript in order to better visualize the themes and match similar attitudes and then compared them once again to the complete transcripts. As the findings were deliberated, a few more analytical passes were performed in which bigger-picture ideas and conclusions were formulated and associated to the preexisting theories of social identity, moral foundation and cognitive dissonance. These theories were then employed to address the project’s research questions.

VI. FINDINGS

To better understand the complicated relationship between white evangelical Christian women and their political voting behaviors, as well as their opinions of news outlets, the data from this study was analyzed through the lens of social identity, cognitive dissonance and moral foundation theories. The qualitative data was collected with the following research questions in mind:

**RQ1: How do evangelical Christian women construct their identity?**

**High-Level of Religious Identification:**

Bearing in mind the CRS scale, the first question the evangelical Christian women participating in this study were asked during the focus groups and interviews was how important their Christian faith was in their lives. All of the participants equally referred to their Christian faith or, as will also be termed throughout this study, their religious identity as “very important,” extremely important,” “number in my life,” “most important,” “ultimate importance,” “it’s everything” and “first and foremost”. Therefore, all of the research participants are regarded as highly identified subjects with strong ties to their group, evangelical Christianity. Subsequently, evangelicalism is an all-encompassing identity. Every aspect of the individuals’ lives interacts with their religious identity and moral values: social, political, family relations, and their existence in the public sphere. Furthermore, evangelical Christianity also overlaps with political conservatism. Therefore, considering their deep-seated membership in a fundamentally conservative group, it should be expected that conservative Christians response to perceived liberal circumstances would elicit a potent response. As will be shown later, the participants high identification with evangelical Christianity triggered derogatory labeling of out-groups.

The focus group participants were not questioned about when or how they became a Christian. However, the interviewees were asked about their conversion to Christianity and a majority of them stated that they became Christians when they were a child or a teenager. Two were raised in the church but their faith didn’t have a lasting impact on their life until they reached their 20s and 30s. And four participants did not become Christians until well into their adult lives. Subsequently, a majority of the interview participants have maintained their intense religious identity for a greater part of their lives which further strengthens their identification with the collective group identity of evangelical Christianity.

**Group Distinctiveness:**

The evangelical Christian women’s religious identity allows them to be part of a community of believers. The participants had affirmative feelings being associated with Christianity and shared a sense of similarity and belongingness with other group members. An interview participant said, “It feels like a community, you share a common faith. One of those things those without a faith don’t realize. It’s a big family” (Sherri, ID). These evangelical Christian women construct their social identity as perceiving an eternal life that is more important than their mortal life.

I have gone to so many different funerals for my friends who are not believers. And they are just, they are so distraught. Their life is over, they don’t feel like they have anything else. And I know, this isn’t my life. I am just a visitor here. My home is in eternity. (Margaret)

There is meaning and purpose for how they are living their lives right now. This motivational influencer supports their self-identity and influences how they interact with those around them.

Hence, many of the participants could not empathize with how non-Christians subsist without a higher power guiding them. Because evangelical Christians believe their religion is the true religion, this distinguishing trait, in their eyes, sets them apart from non-Christians in a location of distinction. Therefore, “believers” have a hard time relating to “non-believers” or those who do not have a faith in God, and the assurance of immorality in heaven after they die. There is a need to preserve their group distinctiveness. And while the participants have colleagues or even friends who are not Christians, they assess them as having a different perspective on life and how it should be lived. The interviewees largely perceive non-believers as having “no hope” and “no peace,” or have trouble finding “purpose in their lives,” and as a result are “self-absorbed” and “self-motivated” because they don’t have a higher power shaping and influencing their lives. When asked how their life differs from someone who does not have a Christian faith, one participant commented:

I sort of feel sorry for them [non-believers]. Um, because I can count on, you know, God, God always being there. Um, so I think your perspective is much different… But, um, uh, I think mine is perhaps more peaceful or more content perhaps. Um, more secure. (Nancy, CO)

Brewer and Gardner’s (1996) give three types of self-representation: self-evaluation, different frames of reference and different motivational goals. These categories are seen in the following ways in the data; participants’ self-evaluation is that of themselves having “hope,” “joy,” and “purpose”; they distinguish themselves as seeing the world differently, or with a different frame of reference, such as “God is always there” in times of need allowing for more contentment; and their motivational goals are to serve a higher, eternal purpose. A younger participant, in her 20s, connected her pro-life stance to giving her a deeper significance of life. For her every life, including her own, has meaning and to eliminate a life is to deny God’s design, an emotional intention that her religious identity provided her.

Um, I know that I have purpose in life. I guess that comes from the sanctity of life, um, my life is purposeful, it’s not just random, and I’m here on a mission to do something. I think a lot of people, um, feel really lost and are constantly wondering why they are here. (Roxanne)

By setting themselves apart, the participants maximize the differentiation between members of their in-group and those in out-groups. Quite a few other interview participants had comparable reflections on not being able to relate to those who do not believe in an afterlife or a creator. There is a sense of disparity or “otherness” when referencing non-Christians.

I can’t imagine how people without faith survive. God helps in tough times. Non-believers don’t know what they’re missing. I have peace. People who don’t know Jesus never have that inner peace. They’re always looking for something, other ways to fill it. (Jennifer, CO)

A component of the groups’ distinctiveness is the concept of restoration and salvation. When a Christian, or an in-group member, sins, there is forgiveness from fellow Christians and the expectation of redemption. However, when a non-Christian, or an out-group member, commits a similar sin, there is little hope for redemption because the “depraved” lacks faith and the moral values or the desire to repent and “sin no more”. For those who do not have Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior, it is comprehended that there is no eternal redemption for them, because they have rejected it. Therefore, if emancipation is unachievable then immoral actions are less justifiable or forgivable. Redemption is a duplicitous premise in the Bible. Essentially, it states that we have all sinned and Jesus is the only one who can take away our sin in the eyes of God. Jesus alone can offer grace and restore us. The all-encompassing assessment is that God is in control of everything, which was verbalized by a majority of the participants.

For most of the participants, their religious identity has remained steady throughout their life; however, identity can also adapt which has happened to a few participants who did not come to their faith when they were children. A participant who came to her faith as a young adult had a hard time relating to those who felt that there was nothing after death, even though she had once had that mindset. She was one of the few women who, at one time or another, straddled both spheres, a Christian and a non-Christian adult existence.

I know, just looking at my life before, of course I was a young woman and I was a troubled woman, but I didn’t have any hope. And I feel like hope is the central, the central thing. Because, you know, if you don’t have hope, I, I think you feel pretty lost… it’s hard for me to imagine what it would be like to, to, to feel like this life and it’s just the end. (Margaret)

This participant’s identity shifted from being a “troubled woman”, to one having “hope” and finding sameness with other Christians, defining “who I am”. Her identity also evolved to a distinction from others and who she used to be, or “who I am not”.

Albeit the focus groups were not specifically asked how their lives differed from those who do not have a Christian faith, there was an unmistakable sense of community throughout their discussion and even more so afterwards, as the participants started to leave. The focus groups in Arizona and Colorado were a mix of primarily strangers along with a few people who knew one or two of the other participants. After initially being hesitant to participate in the research for fear of being ridiculed for their political views, they all appeared to thoroughly enjoy voicing their opinions with like-minded women. Their in-group religious membership served as a powerful medium in determining their cognitive and social processes. Nearly every participant in all three focus groups commented to the researcher on how much they enjoyed the political dialogue. Some even sent follow up emails thanking the researcher for the opportunity to participate.

Additionally, it appeared that the focus group discussions strongly reinforced the participants’ support of Trump and created a deeper sense of community as a result of political unity. They explained they have been hesitant to talk politics with anyone other than individuals who are known to be members of their in-group. They avoided having political conversations altogether with perceived out-group members. The in-group cohesiveness was heartening for them because of the conflict they experience when they are physically outside of a consortium of like-minded Christians. This identity incorporates sameness with other in-group members, an “us versus them” mentality.

But I mean you guys, we are very outspoken about Trump and are willing to vocalize it, but don’t you know a lot of people that are still, won’t say it, won’t even admit it? [voting for Trump]. (Erin, AZ)

This inquiry was followed by a unanimous “yes” from the group of eleven women. In addition, two participants in this focus group told narratives of how they’d been shunned by people after vocalizing their support for Trump. One was actually asked to leave a church she and her husband had attended for seven years, after they complained to the pastor about the sermons delivered after the 2016 presidential election.

They do nothing political, not even pro-life anything and they are a big church. And they gave an election sermon, like ‘go vote your conscience, blah, blah, blah,’ but then when Hillary lost, they started teaching all this liberal social political thought through the text of scriptures and we went and met with them, with the head pastor, and he asked us to leave the church. (Rosemary, AZ)

The other account took place on an airline after a participant had chatted with her seatmate for two hours about several topics, including God.

He looked at me and goes, ‘Who did you vote for?’ And I went, ‘Well, you might not like this, but I voted for Trump and I truly believe if we give him a chance, he will make America great again.’ And he said, ‘We can’t talk anymore.’ (Elise, AZ)

After both of these stories, the entire group gasped in disbelief. It appeared to support their apprehension that there were political antagonists in their midst, even within their own churches. Their unified response, filled with angst and amazement, positioned the group into a cohesive unit, determined to stand their ground. The church narrative is particularly intriguing in how the participant referred to her head pastor as teaching “liberal, social political thought,” perhaps placing him in a social identity out-group. The essence of her shock at being asked to leave her church was that her head pastor was on the wrong side of the argument, potentially a traitor to the faith. This imaginable phenomenon, perceiving liberals and Democrats as adversaries, will be discussed in detail in RQ3 and in the discussion chapter.

**Moral Values and Conservative Philosophy:**

As has been discussed, religiosity and conservativism have been intrinsically linked. Therefore, it was anticipated that the participants would have conservative morals and political philosophies. Many of the interview participants articulated that their most principal moral values included biblical directives, such as the Ten Commandments and the Beatitudes. The moral values mentioned most often were: honesty/truth, integrity/high character, kindness/compassion/empathy/love. Furthermore, other analogous comments included, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and love your neighbor as yourself,” “the Bible tells us to, you know, love one another.” A few of them also mentioned terms involving chastity and virtuousness, for instance, “I consider important morals to be sexual purity, and marriage between a man and a woman,” as well as, “I value life,” and “I believe strongly in sanctity of life… I believe in marriage and um, keeping yourself, um, sexually pure, um not compromising in areas.” Christian marital ideals were brought up by several interviewees. One participant said, “I put a high value on my husband and giving him respect. And respecting authority and respecting the president.” Not surprisingly, the conservative philosophy, pervasive in both methods, is also ardently against abortion or pro-life, and in opposition to the “gay agenda,” while additionally valuing patriotism, including being tough on immigration. “I think it is, it is Christian and biblical for us to be protecting our country from people that want to come in here illegally and take away from others. Because taking away is never Christian, giving is,” declared one participant. In this case, the participant utilized biblical doctrine to justify her opposition to people who come to the United States illegally without remorse or empathy. While Christianity is thought of as a religion that cares for the poor and needy, giving the appearance of a heterogeneous directive, in actuality there is a circumvention, suppression, and a homogeneous assessment of out-groups.

**Summary:**

As the above transcript excerpts demonstrate, evangelical Christian women’s religious identity has wide-ranging impact on their lives. Their ultimate goal is to retain a holy world view and maintain an eternal ingroup membership with like-minded Christians. They perceive their life perspective as being distinct from non-Christian in that they have more hope because of an everlasting future and more joy because of a creator who takes care of them. Redemption, salvation, hope and joy are solely for the in-group members who have accepted Jesus as their Lord and Savior. Thus, they possess out-group homogeneity, the notion that everyone who does not share their religious identity and conservative philosophies are seen in a similar manner. They avoid out-group political conversations because of the potential conflict, and, instead choose to keep political views to themselves or share their viewpoints mainly in an in-group setting where they will be understood and validated. Furthermore, a homogeneous interpretation of religious out-group conflicts with the heterogeneous nature of the central Christian commandments.

**RQ2: How do evangelical Christian women characterize Democrats and liberals in respect to their social/religious identity and moral values?**

Evangelical Christian women’s religious identity is extremely important to them, and often puts them at odds with non-believers, particularly in the political sphere, or even in conflict with fellow Christians who have liberal leanings or vote along a Democratic party line.

**Identity Maintenance:**

Most of the participants perceive their religious freedom to be threatened. “We just want to have, you know, the freedom to live the way we want” (Barb, ID). Another focus group participant brought up the Supreme Court case of the Colorado baker who refused to bake a cake for a gay marriage. “There’s just a lot of moral situations where as Christians we’re, we are called hatemongers because we stand up for those rights that we have as Christians” (Renee, ID). An Arizona focus group participant who is also a teacher was warned in the 1970s, at a Christian school retreat, that liberals would infiltrate the education system and threaten the country’s religious identity.

I don’t remember who the speaker was, but I was amazed by what she said. She said, she said that the liberals are infiltrating our country… first was colleges. They would change what was going on in colleges. Then would work in the high schools and eventually they would get into the elementary schools and start them there and they would own this country. (Pearl, AZ)

Therefore, the necessity of maintaining their religious identity creates anxiety and demands a collective response to the threat. In voting for Trump, they are reacting to that threat by supporting someone who could confront their out-group enemies. “Initially I supported Ben Carson. But I don’t think he was up for the task. Trump had an abrupt personality that would be strong enough to battle the liberals” (Renee). In other words, defeating the out-group “liberals” was imperative.

**Political Out-groups:**

The participants label liberals as a community of out-group members who are counterparts to evangelical Christians when it comes to morals and values or as a homogeneous out-group. Only two interview participants volunteered that the term “liberal” did not have a bad connotation for them. The remaining interviewees labeled them in negative terms such as “angry,” “intolerant,” “post-logical,” “free-wheeling,” “less patriotic,” “too extreme,” “unstable,” wanting “too many social programs,” or “wanting to spend my money.” One interviewee, who is Hispanic, accentuated her antipathy for liberals.

Ugh! It’s like a sound I make, UGH!… I think they would call themselves, would say, “I’m open-minded.” Well, I find that they are not open minded. Liberals are, they, in my opinion, believe based on their value system that they are right and nobody else is right. And if you disagree with them you are racist. And it’s so simplistic that it is disgusting. (Jessica)

For one of the older interviewees, the word “liberal” had adverse racial and diversity connotations.

Affirmative action, that was important for a certain stage, but it, it shouldn’t continue. It just seems like women, and people of color, and uh, and, have, have, we’ve come a long way in recognizing abilities and not holding them back… And, you know, the gay parades, the flaunting around, you know, showing eh, awful, sexually implicit, you know, things that homosexuals do. It just, it just turns my stomach. (Renee)

Another believed that when a liberal person makes an argument, they are strictly emotional, antagonistic and illogical.

When you press them to make their points, they just throw hurls and nasty things back at people. There’s nothing logical about what they are having to say, they are just shouting anger and hatred and vitriol. I have very little respect for people who define themselves as liberal. (Barb)

While both of the terms “liberal” and “Democrat” are perceived as out-groups to the conservative political agenda of evangelical Christianity, overall, the term “liberal” brought up more visceral reactions than the word “Democrat”. A liberal stance is, in fact, thought of as a direct opposition to evangelical Christians’ conservative perspective. Therefore, the threat from liberals, or an extreme out-group, provokes a defensive response. Liberals are perceived as having not just an agnostic outlook, but an anti-Christian directive, in which the participants are required to fight an adversarial battle in the spiritual realm of “good versus evil”. This coping response is heightened for chronically salient members of the group.

Due to the diversity of mindsets within the Democratic party, the idioms used for Democrats were less of a personal attack, instead more in-line with tenets. Democrats were regarded as “wanting to be taken care of,” “entitled,” “wanting free stuff,” “all-inclusive,” or “pushing immigration and socialistic agendas.” A few of the interview participants replied that they have close friends or family members who are Democrats. There was more relatability with people who refer to themselves as Democrats; hence, the term is not as threatening to the in-group’s identity and existence. The two African-American participants were once Democrats but switched to the Republican party. For the younger of the two, her affiliation with the Republican party and voting for Trump came at a considerable personal cost, losing or straining close relationships.

Yeah, absolutely. Um, yeah, I mean, I’d say most of my childhood friends and most of my friends I had in college, um, are no longer my friends. Um, my family does not support, I mean they support me… but after Trump won, none of us spoke for like almost a week. (Roxanne)

This participant relocated into a different “group” first when she became an evangelical Christian (she was raised Catholic), and secondly when she switched to the Republican party (her entire family are registered Democrats). She no longer felt a deep connection with her friends in college when her evangelical Christianity became an important aspect of her life. And her family did not understand her transformation to strict conservative political views. She has had to readjust to life in a distinct ingroup as well as being outside of her former ingroup.

Ironically, voting for Trump didn’t affect any friendships for the older African-American interviewee because 95 percent of her acquaintances and friends are White and 80 percent are Christians. Instead, her conflict came when she voted for Barack Obama in 2008.

Um, that was an eye-opening experience for me. Because, um, a lot of people that I sat next to in church, that I had coffee with and friends with and um, started saying ugly things, and ugly things on Facebook and social media and just, I, I saw their motives. I saw some ugly things come out and it was hurtful. Um, it was raw… the attitude behind a black man running for office and possibly becoming our president, showed a lot of racism. (Judy)

This participant maintained a high level of identification within the evangelical Christian group in 2008 when she voted for Barack Obama; however, to other in-group members she was not following in-group norms with her voting behavior. In doing so, she confronted racial attitudes in an attempt to modify her position. And while she still identifies as an evangelical Christian woman, she recognizes the ramifications of not following in-group standards. Her group identity comes more from her eternal aspirations than a collective covenant of individuals within the group.

White evangelical Christian women primarily characterize liberals and Democrats in out-group negative terminology. While immigrants individually were rarely the target of personal scrutiny, both interview and focus group participants had broad agreement that our country needed to have secure borders and be tougher on immigration restrictions. One younger interviewee felt we were the only country “that just let’s anybody just walk in”. Thus, it could be implied that immigrants are also widely regarded as out-group members. The Arizona focus group was especially adamant, most likely because they live in a border state.

I probably think the immigration issue was the most important [in the election]… I have a lot of concern of people coming over the border, and not just the Hispanic issue, but a lot of people from the eastern countries and I think this is going to sound a bit strange, but I’m worried about the future of the Christian people in the United States with the influx that we do have that isn’t being spoken about from the Islamic groups that are, uh, settling throughout different locations in the country. (Pearl, AZ)

**Competitive Directive:**

A surprising revelation in the study was the participants’ attitudes towards Russia. The interviewees were asked the following question by the researcher. “I was watching a newscast where they were interviewing a Trump supporter and they asked him about the possibility of Russia meddling in the 2016 election. The supporter didn’t necessarily agree that Russia helped Trump get elected, but he said, ‘If Russia did help Trump get elected, it was better than having the liberal Democrats in power.’ What are your thoughts on that mindset?” Almost half of the interviewees felt that if Russia assisted Trump in getting elected, it was definitely better than having Hillary in power.

Oh, absolutely. Absolutely, if, oh my gosh, if Hillary had gotten into office, taxes would have been higher, jobs would not have been any better, the pipeline would not have gone through… Russia is very different than what people have in their mind about what Russia is. (Melanie)

A few other interviewees also did not consider Russia an adversary anymore, even though the attitude of Russia being an enemy of the United States was impressed on them decades ago.

Um, yeah, I mean, it’s hard to, it’s hard to think that maybe somebody else had influence on our election. Um, but, yeah, I think, I think our country would be worse off if we had liberal Democrats in power. So yeah, I’d sort of agree with the statement… I don’t, I don’t see them so much as bad guys. (Linda)

Several more did not agree with the logic but followed up with a caveat that casted doubt on any evidence on there being possible meddling or felt it was God’s plan regardless. “I don’t know if Russians were involved or not. All I know is that he got elected and this is part of the bigger plan, of what God intended as, ‘in God we trust’.” Two participants couldn’t even voice an opinion as to whether it was a good or bad thing if Russia meddled in the election and a couple of others were indifferent to whether his presidency was illegitimate.

Is the story blown out of proportion? Do I care? Probably not… I’ve got way too much on my plate. Everybody does it. He’s elected, let him do his job. I’m sorry if he cheated. I don’t mean to make that mean… I shouldn’t say I don’t care, but what are you going to do about it. Let him run the country. (Beth)

Only five interview participants gave definitive answers that deemed any meddling by the Russians in our elections would be a bad or negative thing. Bear in mind, these interviews were conducted several months after it was widely reported by nearly all of the news outlets and confirmed by intelligence agencies that Russia meddled in the 2016 U.S. elections. Prevailing in a perceived spiritual battle is of utmost importance to the participants. Thus, their conservative moral values are viewed as existing for the common good of all citizens in the United States, regardless of whether out-group members acquiesce with their supposition. Therefore, “winning” by any means necessary for the sake of a society that has been corrupted by evil forces, is not a cause for doubt or remorse for the participants. “I’m okay if Russia helped. I didn’t want her [Hillary Clinton] in there at all. It’s better than we could have had.” (Margaret)

**Moral Perspective:**

Christianity has a binary view of morality, established through the mandates in the Bible. What God commands is right and good, and all the decrees in opposition of God’s word are sinful and immoral. When considering Haidt’s (2012) five moral foundations; 1) care/harm, 2) fairness/cheating, 3) loyalty/betrayal, 4) authority/subversion and 5) sanctity/degradation, in this study, the participants predominantly acknowledged the moral values that held the highest importance to them were fairness/cheating (e.g. “honesty,” “integrity” and “truth” were the terms used the most often). Yet, during the discussions, the opposing morals referenced repeatedly as important were authority/subversion (e.g. “respect our president,” and “let him run the country”) and sanctity/degradation (“sanctity of life,” “sanctity of marriage” and “sexual purity”).

Upon closer inspection, however, analogous to Haidt’s study, all five of the opposing moral foundations arose during the data collection. The care/harm foundation emerged, but for reasons diverse from the liberal agenda of caring for the poor and afflicted. Several participants acknowledged that unborn aborted babies were the afflicted group that deserved more care and required outrage from conservatives for the harm they suffered. “There is nothing more evil than what is going on in our country, and our systematic murder of unborn children.” Fairness/cheating and care/harm foundations materialized during the contemplation of liberals and Democrats “They want free stuff, um, they think, ah, everybody else should pay for what they want.” When considering the loyalty/betrayal foundation, they enjoyed steadfast in-group members, while equally or more so hating traitors and enemies. The participants see liberals as traitors to the American way of life and capitalism. “They don’t care about America,” as one participant put it. Liberals and Democrats are deemed to wanting completely open borders, being fiscally irresponsible, taking money from hardworking capitalists and giving it to undeserving, lazy freeloaders. “I think of somebody who wants to maybe spend my hard-earned money, um, on something I don’t agree with,” one participant commented.

The participants, for the most part, reject the ethics of autonomy. The “liberals” look through a lens of autonomy, which the participants consider to be “self-absorbed,” “free-wheeling” and “intolerant”. This ethic dominates the secular world, where individuals’ wants, needs and preferences are most important. For the participants, the last two ethics are more coveted. The ethic of community and the ethic of divinity. As a part of a community, there is an obligation to perform delegated roles. Preserving the Christian America viewpoint is an in-group charge. While Trump is seen as loyal to Christianity and to the U.S., the liberals and Democrats are viewed as anti-Christian with a primarily global view. “Look at Clinton… Obama sold out Christianity in so many ways” (Sherri). Another participant’s values also revolve around her patriotism and loyalty to the president.

I will vote in favor of anything that protects our country, over, even over environmental issues… You may have not voted for Trump, but he is your president and you are being disloyal to your citizenship by claiming that you are disowning the president. (Jennifer)

The ethic of divinity in the data for this research is primarily projected by a few participants through comments about the sanctity of life, sanctity of marriage and sexual purity. The legality of gay marriage has always been objected to by a majority of evangelical Christians. One participant felt that the term “marriage” is biblically consecrated and shouldn’t be used for a gay “union,” any sexual perversion should be kept private and the government’s slide into sexual humanism is wrong.

It isn’t the government’s right to try to change, uh, our country that was built on biblical principles, try to change that. Like we’re hatemongers if we talk about passages in the Bible, that, that talk about the sins of homosexuals. (Renee)

Most of the dialog involving the ethics of divinity comprised of pro-life adages such as, “It comes down to the sanctity of life and preserving that life and protecting that life. Um, it’s precious because God created it” (Roxanne).

**Summary:**

The evangelical Christian women in this study predominantly perceived both liberals and Democrats as members of a social identity out-group. However, the term “liberal” provoked stronger, more threatening out-group reactions than the term “Democrat”. Hence, it could be suggested that they assess “liberal” as being opposite ideologically and morally, while Democrats are deemed as being politically dissimilar. In-group competitive behavior was discerned when discussing Russia’s possible involvement in the 2016 U.S. elections. The former U.S. nemesis was often perceived in a more positive light than Democrats and liberals. Their assistance, if any, was part of “God’s plan,” allowing Trump, an in-group accomplice, to come into power, thus stifling malevolent forces, Hillary Clinton and the liberals. The salience of their identity and the steadfast belief that Christianity is the truth, gives evangelicals a powerful directive to overcome the evils of the world and reclaim their nation for godly purposes.

Contemplating the moral perspective, the overall research data revealed the existence of all five of Haidt’s opposing moral values. However, when considering the concept of fairness, unlike liberal Democrats’ agenda to help the poor and needy, the participants’ notion of fairness concentrated more on what was fair for themselves or their in-group (e.g. lower taxes, less of their money going to social programs, their right to freedom of religion, etc.). Loyalty, Authority and Sanctity foundations were also present: patriotism, respect for the president, protecting our border. Additionally, they feel the need to strive to live a moral life, for instance, upholding the sanctity of life and marriage, as well as sexual purity.

**RQ3: How much of evangelical Christian women’s application of moral standards vis-a-vis Donald J. Trump and Hillary Clinton can be explained by their social identity?**

**Anti-Hillary Stance:**

There was an overarching and profound anti-Hillary Clinton sentiment throughout the focus group and interview data. Conservative Christian women have had a lengthy history opposing progressive women’s movement from the suffrage times to the passing of the Nineteenth Amendment and to the current day in age. Their ideal Durkheimian society revolves around women’s maternal and domestic responsibilities, where self-control supersedes self-expression and duty precedes rights. Women who display ambitious behavior, such as Hillary Clinton exhibits, are automatically positioned in an out-group due to their rejection of their accepted gender identity roles. The collective incensed emotions, provoked by just the thought of Hillary Clinton, was a strong indicator of the emotional intensity directed toward the out-group which Mrs. Clinton is located in. The internalized standard of morality of the evangelical Christian women causes out-group members’ religiosity and moral paradigm to be presumably situated at a different measure of acceptance. Hillary Clinton was widely reported to have regularly attended Founders Methodist Church when living in Washington, D.C.; however, her attendance at a Christian church was a nonentity in locating her as part of the participants’ religious in-group.

Almost all of the interview participants verbalized that they had voted for Trump primarily because they were anti-Hillary, and “anyone” would have been better than having “corrupt” Hillary Clinton as the U.S. president. Correspondingly, in each focus group, anti-Hillary sentiment was brought up numerous times. Clinton was regarded as being a threat to the participants’ social identity, in part because of her liberal policies. For some participants, their loathing of Hillary Clinton began when she was the wife of Arkansas governor, William Jefferson Clinton, beginning in the late 1970s. Many of the conspiracies that have surrounded Bill and Hillary Clinton’s public life were also brought up in both the focus groups and individual interviews. Mrs. Clinton shared a brunt of the blame for many of Mr. Clinton’s both substantiated and purported depravities. One participant in the Colorado focus group recalled the rumor mongering she heard as a child about Gov. Clinton’s early political life and had always believed the allegations.

I’m from Tennessee, so we always heard when I was growing up about Bill’s prostitutes and about him running drugs and about the CIA and how they had people disappear back then. (Ariel, CO)

The prejudice towards the Clintons is a collective response to a perceived threat to the ingroup. Many of the rumored Clinton scandals persist predominantly due to an abundance of conspiracy and conservative websites and talk shows, such as *Infowars* and *The American Spectator.* Despite the falsities or half-truths of many of these rumors, the reiterated gossip of them remained on the forefront of several of the participants thoughts as they criticized the Clintons.

Um, from the very beginning, way, way back. There was so much corruption involved with both, both of them. The Clintons. And then it turned out that these things were really true. But everyone said, ‘So what,’ and just kept promoting her, was it just because she was a woman?... The whole Foster thing. I know it was said that she had an affair with [Vincent] Foster. And he was ready to tell all he knew about the Clintons and then he mysteriously died. Um, and they said, ‘oh it was suicide.’ Well it couldn’t have been suicide because um, of the way the gun and everything. He couldn’t have shot himself, so somebody killed him… She is corrupt, she’s a criminal. She should be arrested for the things she did. The Clintons have always gotten off Scott-free for everything they’ve done.

(June, CA)

For reference, Vincent Foster was a childhood friend of the Bill Clinton’s, and also a colleague of Hillary Clinton when she worked at a law firm in Arkansas. Foster eventually joined the Clintons in Washington, D.C. and became a White House aide in the Clinton administration. His death in 1993 was ruled a suicide by “the FBI, Department of Justice, U.S. Congress, U.S. Park Police and two independent investigations” (Howard, 2016), including an investigation by conservative Special Counsel Kenneth Starr and his staffer, Brent Kavanaugh, a current conservative Supreme Court Justice.

Conspiracy theorists also allege Hillary harassed and intimidated the women who accused Bill of sexual harassment. Yet, many wives of disgraced evangelical leaders have stood by their husbands in times of scandals. Still, a few participants felt even an allegation of espousal of her husband made her anti-women and depraved.

I was really disturbed when it came out that she was the one that was blackmailing the girls Bill Clinton had, like, harassed and stuff. She was the one sending people to slash their tires because she is a woman. So, it’s a woman hurting a woman, not just a man. So that would be more showing to me of her moral character in like a personal way, not in a politician way. (April, ID)

Hillary Clinton was deemed “corrupt” and “untrustworthy” by most of the participants. Several interview participants went so far as to call Hillary Clinton “evil” due to her liberal agenda. Her pro-choice abortion stance was the primary reason one participant indignantly located her in an outgroup, or anti-Christian.

I came to support Donald Trump at the time more begrudgingly than for him now. Because my choice was between a woman, Hillary Clinton, whose behavior and actions in the public office were reprehensible. She actively supports and promotes the murder of children in the womb. And that goes to the heart of Christ. That is evil to the core. (Barb, ID)

The most common complaints by the interview participants were that she “couldn’t be trusted” and had “bad ideas”. Additionally, Clinton is located in an out-group of career politicians, who are seen as dishonest and greedy. Part of Donald Trump’s presidential campaign was to get rid of the “swamp” in Washington, D.C. Several of the participants in both methods did not want business as usual in our nation’s capital. They wanted someone in charge who was not a politician, someone who would “shake things up”. Hillary was perceived as just another “slimy politician” who “loves the power that our country gives her”.

**Donald Trump Validation:**

Donald Trump was not a politician and he aligned his policies to befit a conservative Christian agenda. In doing so, he is perceived by the participants as an asset in protecting the in-group identity. Several of the participants also remarked that Trump’s business acumen was a strong qualification for leading our country, giving him license to ruffle feathers in order to get things done. Yet not one participant mentioned his widely publicized business failures and bankruptcies.

I keep thinking like the wild west, you needed a gunslinger to come in and deal with a problem. You weren’t looking for a guy who was politically correct, you were looking for someone with good aim who has a history of solving problems.

(Pearl, AZ)

Most of the participants’ dislike of Hillary Clinton was partially because of her untrustworthiness. However, when it was pointed out to some participants that Donald Trump frequently lies, his fabrications and deceitfulness were downplayed and chalked up as something a successful leader does.

I think it’s more bragging about what I’ve done. He’s so not a politician. I mean, um, politicians and this is like across the board, talk a lot, but don’t get a lot done. He’s a businessman, he talks, and he’s, “This is what we’ve got done.” And for the positive, for the nation, for everybody, not just the Republican party. (Melanie)

Furthermore, others called his falsehood “silly stories,” or he was “doing it just for fun” or wanted to merely “stir a reaction”. One interview participant blamed “liberal people” for embellishment.

Well you know, I have not heard anything out of his mouth that has been, um, disgraceful or immoral. Um, I never thought [well] of people who will say things that he has said, and I take it with a grain of salt of what they say and what he says… the liberal people, you know, are, um, trying to stir the pot. (Margaret)

One focus group participant imagined Trump’s social media outlandishness was, in reality, concealing shrewd behind-the-scenes victories.

He throws out red balls so the dogs will go run over there, while he’s over here doing something. Every time there’s a Twitter storm, I’m thinking, ‘what’s going on over here?’ Ha, ha, ‘What’s happening over here? Did he just round up 500 more MIF’s? Did he kill 20 more? Did he kill 20 more executive orders of Obama?’ (Ariel, CO)

Throughout the interviews and focus groups, the women appear to behold Trump as they envision God would consider him, worthy of love in spite of his sins, and believe Trump is president because it was “God’s plan”. Several analogous truisms were dispersed throughout the dialogue from all of the women, such as, “No one’s perfect,” “God can change his heart,” “God is in charge,” “Who am I to judge? That’s God’s job,” “I’m not ready to judge. God has purpose for him,” “God can use people, even people we don’t like. And I do believe that Trump’s winning that election was part of God’s big plan,” or “God is allowing this man to hold office… no matter how hard they try, they can’t get rid of him until or when God raises his hand [off of him]”. Several of the interviewees said they were praying intensely before the election for wisdom and guidance, and felt God calling them to support Trump. They also repeatedly mentioned that they were “praying for him [Trump],” cogitating that the Bible is filled with narratives of God utilizing imperfect people, like Abraham, Samson, King David, even Jesus’s disciple, Peter, or even irreligious men, like Cyrus the Great. It is written that each of these men served God’s purpose. Similarly, Trump could conceivably be seen by evangelical Christians as enacting a similar role as King Cyrus, prompted by God to free them from profane tyranny. God in his power, wisdom and mystery accomplishes his perfect will through imperfect people. Hence, comprehensive in-group membership is not absolutely necessary in order to achieve successful results intended for the collective group.

Trump’s falsehoods and depravity were trivialized and inconsequential, while Hillary Clinton’s untruths and questionable activities made her untrustworthy, corrupt and evil. Bill Clinton’s sexual misconduct was seen as criminal and loathsome. Meanwhile, Trump’s inequities were rationalized, and his brash personality was viewed in a positive light, as being a strong, capable leader, a problem-solver who doesn’t let political correctness get in his way. Evangelical Christian women’s abhorrence toward Hillary Clinton is reminiscent of anti-feminist sentiment which occurred at least as far back as the women’s suffrage movement in the mid-nineteenth century, as well as in the mid- twentieth century when conservative women opposed the passing of the Equal Rights Amendment in 1979. Hillary Clinton could conceivably be seen as a “poster child” of the feminist movement, graduating with a law degree from Yale in 1973. Hillary Clinton’s law and political career is perceived as showing that she is power hungry and devious. Any conspiracies or rumors about Clinton have automatically been assumed to be true by the participants, putting Hillary in the light of being a harasser, blackmailer, even an accessory to murder. Yet, conversely, the participants countered unflattering stories about Trump by moderating its significance or disregarding it completely as fake news. When the in-group is threatened, members may resort to derogatory comments and defensive reactions towards the out-group threat, which can be seen in the reactions from the participants. On the contrary, Trump is viewed as a resource for evangelical Christians to abet the threat of Hillary Clinton and other liberal politicians in Washington, D.C. The contempt for Hillary Clinton from the mouths of evangelical Christians, who are Biblically directed to love and not judge others, was astonishing.

**Asymmetrical Morality:**

The participants’ intuition is that Hillary Clinton is evil, corrupt, and untrustworthy. There is often little reasoning used that would easily disregard the rumors as outlandish. Their deep-seated resentment towards Hillary is blinding and prejudiced, in contrast to the moral values related to empathy that they hold near and dear: kindheartedness; compassion, kindness, empathy and love. The participants appear to remain in Kolberg’s (1984) conventional stage where respect of authority and maintenance of social order become primary motives. “I’m sorry if he cheated… let him run the country,” said a participant.

Conversely to Clinton, the evangelical Christian women’s familiarity with Donald Trump has a much shorter duration. Almost all of the participants supported other Republican politicians until Trump became the GOP’s nominee. Previously, they had a distant perception of Donald Trump, the brand, knowing of him mainly because of his NBC show, *The Apprentice*, or as being the “rich, successful guy in New York”. He is thought to be an astute businessman because of his wealth, and their belief in his tale of earning his fortune on his own accord after a small loan from his father.

A few interview participants asserted that they are open to having a woman as U.S. president, but felt there “hasn’t been a qualified woman” to take on the position. Irrespective that Hillary Clinton was a U.S. Senator and Secretary of State, in their eyes she remained unqualified for the position. Whereas Trump, with no government experience, was welcomed and was considered refreshing because he wasn’t a politician. A couple of interviewees gave him a pass on his three marriages and alleged philandering and misogyny because of his Type-A personality and success as a businessman.

Because I know these people of “A” personalities, you know, always out there, always striving, always with, you know, a young woman on their arm… maybe you say that their moral values aren’t as high as others, but I have a background with that, so I have an allowance to give them. (Melanie)

**Summary:**

There is an obvious paradoxical paradigm in how the participants assessed Trump and the Clintons’ morality. Discriminatory behavior and derogatory criticism are common approaches when an ingroup senses that it is being threatened. Hillary Clinton is regarded a foe, whereas, Donald Trump is viewed as a fighter for the conservative cause. Much of the discrepancy could be from decades-long loathing of powerful and self-confident progressive women who are not satisfied with strictly having maternal, domestic accomplishments. For the participants, Bill Clinton’s iniquities remain unforgiven and horrendous. However, the participants absolve any immoralities committed by Trump. In standing by and supporting her husband, Hillary Clinton has been even further disparaged by evangelical Christian women, even though evangelical Christian women pray for and encourage Christian male leaders who have committed similar transgressions. His brashness and sexual immorality were overlooked because he’s a successful “Type-A” businessman and he’s given “an allowance” for questionable morals. Because the participants distrust news outlets (as is indicated in RQ5), they receive any negative coverage of Trump with “a grain of salt”. This duplicitous standard indicates an asymmetrical morality and consequence based on whether an individual is located within or outside of the collective group identity.

**RQ4: What are evangelical Christian women’s perceptions of how their religious identity and moral values affect their voting behaviors and support of Donald J. Trump as the President of the United States?**

**Political Identity and Moral Equivalence:**

Donald Trump is thought to support evangelicals’ religious identity by his adherence to conservative political policies. Predictably, almost all of the evangelical Christian women who participated in the study (focus groups and interviewees) acknowledged being registered Republicans. Only two of the interview participants were registered Independent voters. None were currently Democrats; however, three had previously been registered Democrats. Half of the interview participants mentioned that they vote based on their Christian biblical values. The appointment of conservative Supreme Court justices was talked about widely in the focus groups. Only a handful of interview participants brought up Trump’s campaign promise that he would appoint conservative Supreme Court justices. An explanation for the differentiation is that the focus groups were conducted before Trump appointed conservative justice Neil Gorsuch, while the interviews happened after both Gorsuch and Brett Kavanaugh’s appointment as Supreme Court justices. However, there were underlying references in the interviews to the need to restore conservative family values back into the political realm, such as his alignment with their values (e.g. pro-life stance, policies against gay agenda, etc.). The upcoming vacancies on the Supreme Court were highly important issues for all of the focus group participants. The two most important political issues for the focus group in Idaho were gaining a conservative Supreme Court and getting back their religious freedoms; they felt they have lost these because of secular humanistic legislation that allowed widespread abortion and supported the transgender and gay agenda. “That [a conservative Supreme Court] would probably be my number one, because they will set policy for the next 20 years,” said a participant. For these women, they perceive a generation of tolerating a “liberal” Supreme Court, which greatly influenced the nation’s turn toward secular humanism. The participants’ moral values include the biblical principles of sanctity of life, sanctity of marriage, and sexual purity. By achieving a conservative Supreme Court, the participants felt some of society’s profane movements could be undone and the United States could once again be indoctrinated towards God or in other words, *Make America Great Again,* through a resurgent impulse of a “Christian America”. For most of the participants, they supported Trump because, “One, he’s a Christian and two, he has committed to putting in conservative judges,” as one Colorado focus group participant put it. Another Colorado participant reinforced that sentiment, but added a patriotic note, “I love the fact that he stands for biblical points, but he really cares about our country. He really wants it to be great.” Likewise, the Arizona focus group’s most important political issue was to have a conservative Supreme Court. The second most important political issue was equally split between supporting the military and being tough on immigration and/or building a border wall. The increased importance on a rigid immigration stance could be mainly because Arizona is a border state and the participants feel more threatened by illegal immigrants in their community. When immigrants were mentioned in the data, it was almost always in terms of an out-group. Only one participant (interview) mentioned foreigners in a sympathetic light and those she classified as Christians, as the persecution of Christians in other countries and the need for the U.S. to help them. “Why aren’t we coming together, going, not only are there families fleeing violent areas, there’s people being gunned down because of their faith,” said a participant.

**Cognitive Dissonance:**

Few instances in life are black and white. Situations are rarely clear cut. Consequently, experiencing cognitive dissonance is often a part of everyday life. Each participant in the research recognized their religious identity in various terms intending that their Christian faith was “extremely important” and touches every aspect of their lives, the political views withstanding. As suggested in the previous research questions, the value placed by the participants on their religious views and moral standpoints is weighty. Therefore, when political cognitive elements are dissonant, there is increased pressure to resolve or relieve the inconsistencies.

Just a few women in both the focus group and interviews believed that Donald Trump shared their deeply held Christian faith. When asked how Trump supports their religious beliefs and values, a majority of the interview participants paused and then responded that they were “not sure” if, or “don’t think” Trump was even a Christian or “believer”. One participant felt he “probably falls into the fake Christian category.” Only three assumed he is “probably a churchgoer,” “goes to church,” or “he says he’s a Christian and he says he prays.” Likewise, most stated in one idiom or another that, “No one is perfect,” “No leaders have lived up to my moral standards,” or “Who am I to judge?”

Whereas, critics believe evangelical Christians who voted for and support Trump are being hypocritical and voting against interests, the participants employed their religious identity as a confirmation that they made the right choice in voting for Trump. Nearly all of the participants stated in one form or another that they were anti-Hillary, “anybody was better than her.” They were, in fact, voting primarily for their moral interest over anything else. “Nancy Pelosi doesn’t reflect my moral values. Hillary Clinton definitely does not reflect my moral values,” said a participant. However, this rationalizing mindset did not completely dissolve the dissonance felt by all of the individuals. A few participants struggled to justify Trump’s boorish behavior, but in order to reconcile their discomfort, they chose to focus on any positive attributes they could think of.

I’m conflicted because um, some of the moral values that are important to me are courtesy and kindness and respect. Um, and I don’t see him with that. Um, I see him holding fast what he thinks are the right things for our country and I appreciate that. (Eleanor)

Many of the women have no illusions that Trump is necessarily an honorable person. But they credit him with at least being open about his crassness versus other politicians who are two-faced, portraying themselves to be something they are not.

I think the things he said and says is off color and um, unnecessary, and undignified, and plain old mean. And disrespectful, but, you know, you could get somebody who says all the right things and looks the right way and has all the right words and all that. But, but still, what are they doing with the, um, with the influence they have? How are they leading us? (Judy)

One participant, who came to support Trump “begrudgingly,” is now delighted with her decision to vote for him. She would even campaign for him in 2020. Her disgust of immoral behavior in politics is instead directed towards the vices of other politicians.

I had a choice between that [Clinton] and supporting policies that are against my Christian values, or Donald Trump, who seemed boorish and a little bit of um, somebody you can’t control… And I think that’s been very good for our country and I absolutely want to laugh at the hypocrisy of the left at the name calling they put at him. Because there is probably a handful of politicians that we have elected into any public office that are not corrupt, that haven’t slept with women, have done these immoral things that I find horrendous. (Barb)

It could be expected that an individual experiencing increased amounts of political dissonance would seek out new information that might reduce the overall dissonance. However, obtaining new information can also increase dissonance. This appeared to be something the participants considered and then chose to avoid (an increase of dissonance) by making political conversations off limits for the most part with those who disagree with their political viewpoints. Furthermore, they mostly negate disconfirming information by not watching news outlets or only watching and listening to news outlets that have an established agreement with them on social and political issues. This will be discussed in detail in RQ5.

**Moral Dissonance:**

A resolute sense of morality or an inherent moral foundation is a chief component in evangelical Christian women’s sense of social/religious identity. It informs their views on political issues, yet their morality doesn’t necessarily translate entirely when affecting their voting behaviors. Ethics become situational. Morality is emphasized in considering outcomes or political gains, such as gaining a conservative Supreme Court justice who will have an enduring conservative effect on issues such abortion, gay rights and religious freedoms in the United States. “If I don’t help make a stand for what I feel is right by voting [conservatively], then I’m just handing it over to the bad guys… or the enemy,” said a participant. Nevertheless, morality is minimized or rationalized when taking into account the immorality of their political candidate, Donald Trump’s character. “All of the crying about that he’s [Trump] a pig and this and that. You know what? They are all pigs. He just doesn’t care and doesn’t try to hide it,” exclaimed a participant. Moral judgment is disseminated unevenly between Trump, whose public, political discourse aligns more with their religious identity and moral foundation, and Hillary Clinton, whose policies they believe to be in conflict with their religious identity.

For the participants, any sense of cognitive dissonance can be quickly set aside because “no one’s perfect”. As long as Trump is championing their political causes and surrounding himself with Christian leaders, the dissonance of voting for an iniquitous man can be resolved and justified. In fact, at the end of the Idaho focus group, the researcher was scolded for even conducting this research. “It’s like saying that we’re stupid, how on earth could you vote for him? … it’s condescending and insulting,” she declared. The gist of her argument being, “of course we voted for Trump when Hillary was our only other choice.” Another participant added, “I don’t understand how someone who is an evangelical Christian woman could vote for Hillary or anybody like Hillary.”

Many of the participants had an “us versus them” mentality, or collective group identity. When contemplating Trump’s immorality, rather than judge him on his own deeds, these women evaluated him vis-a-vis politicians from the opposing party. Even though, for some, Trump is not directly embedded in their social identity, the fact that he shares similar political standpoints with them allows Trump to maintain residence in their in-group, albeit, on the outer edges. However, by electing Trump to be the leader of the free world, many of the participants had less ethical requirements of him than someone ensconced in their religious identity. Several participants mentioned that they weren’t voting for a “Sunday school teacher,” a “pastor,” a “religious leader,” or a “Savior”. Another participant said, “He isn’t supposed to be Jesus.” They defend their choice of Trump by pointing to other politicians and even religious leaders who have also sinned. They have been disappointed in the moral behavior of many evangelical Christian leaders over the past few decades, in countless church scandals, as well as past U.S. presidents who have been unfaithful to the sanctity of marriage. “I’m not his moral judge. I didn’t have to work through the conflict. A high percentage of previous presidents have done immoral things, cheated on wives. Look at Clinton,” said a participant.

Evangelical Christians’ support helped Trump get elected because of his straightforward political alignment with many Christian principles, thereby attempting to reestablish Christian authority. There became an expectation of reciprocity the evangelicals had of Trump, and Trump has been determined to come through with his campaign promises (e.g. conservative Supreme Court justices, attempted ban of transgenders in the military, travel ban of Muslims, hardened stance on immigration, etc.). Few politicians have followed through on a majority of their campaign pledges. Subsequently, Trump’s countless violations of decorum and reasonableness do not offend evangelical Christians because the umbrages are mostly directed against out-groups that are perceived to be dangerous to their identity: liberals, Democrats and news outlets.

When the Idaho focus group was asked how Trump represents their Christian values there was a long awkward pause before anybody answered. The first response was, “Good question! I’m not going to judge him.” Almost everyone appreciated that he surrounded himself with Christian leaders and turned to the Christian community for support.

I thought, if you had him [Ben Carson] alongside of Donald Trump, he was going to be a good balance for Trump and uh, and for the fact that a lot of Christian men were praying for, hands on Donald Trump, feeling that the Lord was choosing somebody to help our country from going the direction it’s been going. (Renee)

The bar on Trump’s behavior and morality is set quite low by some of the participants. One of the Idaho focus group participants was just happy he “wasn’t anti-Christian”. Participants in the Colorado focus group also pointed out the importance of Christian leaders supporting Trump.

When you pull in someone like Ben Carson, who is a Christian man, who is a godly man and is willing to pull in his support with the Mike Huckabees. If the Huckabees are behind him, that says something. (Liza, CO).

Others had their mind put to ease when Trump selected Mike Pence as his running mate.

In fact, a couple of interviewees were okay if Trump got impeached because then they would have Pence as their president. “Mike Pence, people, I think he’s a man of character. If he’s behind Trump, if he is supporting Trump, Trump has a chance.” (Olivia, CO).

In a way, the participants view Trump’s simple association with Christian leaders as admittance into their religious identity. Even though they don’t consider Trump as a high identifying member of their group, Trump’s advocacy of their identity is seen as a qualifying aspect to their group membership, because they perceive their group as threatened, similar to a member of any exclusive group (country club, fraternity, etc.) sponsoring or vouching for a new member. Likewise, Trump’s willingness to adhere to group rituals also paints him in a positive light with some of the participants.

He met humbly with some of the [Christian] leaders and he continues to meet with them, and he’s brought prayer back to the White House. Donald Trump is not always there, but they have weekly prayer meetings at the White House, and I don’t even know when that’s happened last. (Ariel, CO)

A participant in the Arizona focus group also brought up the Bible studies and Christian leaders support as important indicators that the president’s administration was turning to God for instruction and wisdom.

And you hear from people, there are so many Bible studies going on. More Bible studies are going on right now in the cabinet than ever before. Once a week more of the cabinet is getting together. (Elise, AZ)

Again, Trump’s association with members of their perceived in-group, allows these Christian women to accept him into their social identity in-group. Even though Trump didn’t completely fit into most of the participants definition of an evangelical Christian, they still perceive him as existing within their religious identity framework through his affiliations with other political leaders who were professed evangelical Christians, whose motives were to bring God back into the political realm. The fact that Trump was willing and eager to be associated with their consortium as well as listen to and act on their pleas, made him a symbolic member of their alliance, at the lease, if not a solid ingroup member.

When the Colorado focus group was asked for their reaction to the *Access Hollywood* video, which contained vulgar and predatory language by Trump towards women, they again rationalized the repulsive discourse and amalgamated his conduct to the transgressions of others, specifically referring to Bill Clinton’s conduct. “Look at what her [Hillary’s] own husband did in the office” (Liza, CO). The interviewees had a similar perspective as the focus groups when discovering the revelations of Trump’s immorality during the presidential campaign, one way or another diminishing the conduct. “After hearing *Access Hollywood* tape, it bothered me, but it didn’t change anything. It didn’t surprise me. It’s just human nature. Some men are more apt to do it than others,” said a participant. Bill Clinton’s sexual scandal with Monica Lewinsky was deemed to be on a different scale of appalling because his sexual encounter was thought to have occurred in the Oval Office (though Lewinsky has publicly denied that any of the sexual encounters took place in the actual Oval Office).

I mean whatever Trump has done, it has not been within the political framework. But when Monica Lewinsky, in the Oval Office, and nothing is said about it… he [Bill Clinton] ruined lives, you know, and there was nothing. He was not called to accountability at all. (Melanie)

When it was pointed out that Clinton had in fact been impeached because of the incident and resulting perjury charge when he lied to cover it up, she still believed that Trump was being held to a “different standard today”. Several other participants felt Clinton’s sexual scandals were far worse than anything Trump has ever done.

I think his [Trump’s] treatment of women is, is, for what I’ve known or seen is a way higher standard than Bill Clinton’s ever was. And Hillary’s is. (Barb)

**Summary:**

Evangelical Christians’ support of Donald Trump is paradoxical and hypocritical to everyone except a majority of white evangelical Christians. They believe that by supporting Trump, they voted in support of, not against, their religious identity and moral values. Most of the participants perceive Trump as being an imperfect and ill-mannered man; however, in his politically incorrectness, they also see him as a strong leader who is willing to fight for their beliefs and values with the gloves off, an intimidating enforcer who can do their dirty work. They wanted and needed someone who was willing to take a stand against liberal politicians and go to war for their families against the evil schemes of the world. They perceive liberals to be trying to unravel and destroy their collective religious identity. Any cognitive dissonance that Christians struggle with in the political sphere is lessened or completely dissipated under the manifestation of their communal identity and rigid moral principles. Their hostility towards Hillary, Trump’s alignment with Christian policies and the belief that nobody is perfect, particularly those who are seen as being in-group members, allows them to identify with Trump more as an ingroup member than Hillary. The pressure to reduce cognitive dissonance is alleviated by reducing political discussions with out-group members and lessening or eliminating disconfirming messages from news outlets.

An acute sense of morality is a chief component to evangelicals’ religious identity. Trump’s morality is juxtaposed with other politicians which reduces or eliminates moral dissonance felt by the participants. In fact, the understood, but wrong, physical location of one of Bill Clinton’s transgressions (the Oval Office) helped the participants construct a narrative which made it more appalling than any sins Trump has committed. Trump’s befriending of evangelical Christian leaders and willingness to enable group rituals, such as prayer, back in the White House, in part, appears to annul his depravity.

**RQ5: What are evangelical Christian women’s opinions of news outlets and their media habits?**

**News Consumption:**

A sizeable number of participants in both methods consumed a limited amount of news. Half of the interview participants identified Fox News Channel as the news outlet they watch while other news outlets, ABC News, NBC News and BBC were only mentioned by one participant. Several did not read any newspaper, others did not read any online news, and a few did not watch any television news.

It makes me so angry. All of them… I’m not watching t.v. [news] anymore because my blood pressure can’t handle it. (Ariel, CO)

Half of the interview participants get updates on their phone or consumed their news via the Internet or Google. Predictably, for those who regularly consumed news, Fox News Channel was by far the most watched news outlet for most of the participants. “If you are going to find anything positive about Trump in my opinion, it’s going to be on Fox. The rest is all negative,” said a participant. Fox News Channel’s television personality, Sean Hannity, was one of the people the participants mentioned that they watched the most. Fox News Channel’s Laura Ingraham was also pointed out several times as someone they watched regularly. “The person who was on it through the Obama administration was Sean Hannity. He 100% lays it out a day at a time. Sometimes he’s hard to listen to and sometimes it’s overwhelming. But thank God for him” (Erin, AZ). Only a handful of participants acknowledged that they try to get both of the recognized conservative and liberal sides of the story so they can evaluate all of the coverage and come up with their own opinions.

I’ll look at various sources. I might compare both ends of the spectrum. I might compare the CNN and Fox News and find my, what I believe somewhere in the middle. And once again, honestly, I try to find as many facts as I can and then take the other stuff with a grain of salt. (Jennifer)

Generally, the participants strongly disapprove of the opinion-based news shows primarily because they want to be able to form their own opinions based on factual, honest reporting. They also deem the perceived news outlets’ liberal slant of trying to “brainwash” people. Additionally, they often have a hard time distinguishing between what is fact and what is opinion. Nonetheless, many participants listed opinion news personalities such as Sean Hannity, Ann Coulter, Tucker Carlson, Bill O’Reilly and Rush Limbaugh as political shows that they watch and enjoy the most. Therefore, provided that the political opinions of news shows are consistent with their own political opinions, or confirmation bias, they appreciate the opinion-based political programming.

**Perception of Liberal Media Bias:**

Every participant retained sharply disapproving views of the media and news outlets in varying degrees. Only two participants brought up the necessity of a free press for a democratic nation. The remaining participants failed to mention any redeeming virtues for any news outlet other than those who gave a conservative perspective, like Fox News Channel. Furthermore, the participants’ religious identity clashed with a majority of news outlets, because they have long deemed the organizations to be deeply biased and slanted towards a liberal agenda, even “anti-Christian” and “evil”. All of the interview participants felt that every news outlet can’t be completely trusted, are biased or have an agenda. One interviewee felt the media were unwittingly Satan’s instruments.

I, I feel they are being deceptive… I say it like this because it’s true. There is an enemy in this world, he is Satan. And I believe he is doing everything he can to take this, take everybody down. And I feel that those that are in the media, I feel that they are being led by the enemy. (Mauve)

Nearly half of the interviewees agreed with Donald Trump’s assessment of news outlets, when he repeatedly calls the press “the enemy of the American people”. A majority of the remaining participants deem some journalists to be enemies of the American people, but also stated that you “can’t generalize,” or “lump them all together,” or he “overstates” when he calls all press the enemy of the people. Just a handful of interview participants disagreed with that assessment that the press is the enemy of the people yet added that news outlets are guilty of doing a “disservice” to the country by disseminating too much opinion-based reporting and not just reporting the “facts”. “It seems to me it’s become more of an antagonist contest. One-up-mans-ship in everything. They’re not really after, seeking after what’s true. I feel like I’m being told a bunch of crap,” said a participant. One Idaho focus group participant pronounced that while Fox News Channel gives a conservative slant to the news, they admit their bias while all of the other news outlets feign being objective but aren’t.

I think most of the rest of the news outlets are completely disingenuine and um, and, are, have their already deeply biased narrative that they want to put forth without acknowledging that they have a deeply bias narrative that they are putting forth. (Barb, ID)

Akin to liberals and Democrats, the participants perceive the media to be a threat to their identity. An interviewee blamed the media for any societal identity discords because of what she perceived to be destructive, confrontational political reporting.

It’s so ‘us versus them,” and “them versus us”. It’s just constant negativity and opinions. It’s frustrating, I don’t like it. I don’t, you know, I just think it’s awful… Just do your job, whether you hate him or like him. (Jessica)

The focus groups had similar sentiments. Each participant in the Arizona focus group concurred that news media are all biased. And there was also unanimous agreement in the Idaho focus group that news outlets report false facts or leave important facts out when reporting on liberal issues or candidates. “Sometimes it’s not only fake news, it’s, it’s discriminating news. Something that’s really important news is being left out… It’s not only fake news it’s disregarded news that’s important,” said a participant. Other focus groups participants accused most news outlets of being anti-Christian and contemptuous.

Hostile, especially towards Christians, the fact that when Trump was meeting with evangelical leaders, that was being reported very little and very mockingly that he was even meeting with Christians. And smearing him, saying, “Here’s a man who’s, that’s said this and done that,” you know. (Ariel, CO)

In at least one focus group participants mentality, conservative news organizations were the only entity keeping new outlets from becoming state television.

The media is a threat to our democracy because you need a free press that you can trust for your information and it’s not good that you feel you can only go to Fox News or a conservative website. You need a press that you can trust. Truth is key… And you see then, in all these countries that have trouble and democracies fail, it’s because the message does not get out. It’s a slanted state message. (Zoe, AZ)

The overall consensus from all of the participants in the research was that they did not know which news organizations to turn to in order to get neutral, unbiased and factual reporting.

So much of it is yellow journalism and it is so biased that it is hard to know, what is the truth, and what is not the truth. And I think that, yeah, where do you find the objective opinion? (Ariel, CO)

**Anti-Christian Persecution by Liberal News Outlets:**

The “liberal” media is perceived as a dangerous aggressor in their coverage of Trump’s administration. As previously mentioned, being persecuted for your Christian faith maintains a pious aspect. For this reason, Trump’s persecution by irreverent powers, particularly liberal news outlets, appears to further endear him to his political base. He conceivably bears a role akin to King Cyrus the Great, as a protector of Christian interests with the media playing the role of antagonist, thus locating Trump as champion of the ingroup. Several participants commented that the media is “always ragging on Trump”.

Yeah, the media is driving me crazy, because they are constantly on the attack… They’re ignoring a lot of the good parts of what he is doing, and they just want, you know, they’re, I feel the media is terribly anti-Trump and so they are just doing all they can to make all of America anti-Trump. (Kristi, CO)

Another participant believed that the more the media tries to destroy Trump’s presidency, the more convinced she is that God has him in office for a reason, while also admitting that his presidency is, in part, a calamity.

The more they come after him as vicious as they can, the more I think he’s there for a purpose. They say, ‘We’ve gotta get rid of him.’ I don’t know why he’s there, I don’t know if it’s to wake America up to something or it’s just part of the disaster we have to cave in, I don’t know. But I believe he’s there for a reason and the world doesn’t like it. (Liza, CO)

In a similar sentiment, a Colorado focus group participant equated Trump’s sacrifice to “serve” America and persecution by the media for Christianity’s sake with the suffering and torment Jesus Christ endured before being nailed to the cross.

He is trying to serve… and he didn’t have to, he chose to do this to help us… he sacrificed his life and his, his, you know, I mean he is beaten down every single day and you know, that reminds me of Jesus. (Tiffany, CO)

An interviewee recounted a story she had heard where Trump put himself in the role of martyr for evangelical Christians’ political gains, when he allegedly pleaded with Christian leaders to pray for him because of the assaults he was enduring on their behalf.

He asked them [Christian leaders] to stay and expressed, uh, concern about the, the atmosphere he was having to live under with hate, uh, being thrown at him all the time. He [Trump] said, ‘I, I need your help. I need your prayers because, uh, I just feel there’s a wave of, you’d call, evil, that is, that is, um, rolling freely in our country.’ And, uh, he had real concern that, um, how he could manage his presidency under those kinds of, uh, stresses he was experiencing, both he and his wife. (Renee)

If this narrative, repeated by a participants who heard it from a conservative news outlet, actually transpired, it would appear that Trump is utilizing the perceived maltreatment from liberals, Democrats and the media, as a way to further solidify his political base by emphasizing his role as a martyr for the evangelical Christian or conservative causes without taking any responsibility for the adversarial relationship he has with his critics and detractors. Hence, he is constructing his conflict against those who question his utmost authority as a “good versus evil” campaign, jargon that fits seamlessly into the doctrine of Christianity. In other words, in the eyes of evangelical Christians, morality must win this spiritual battle, regardless of the costs to moral convictions.

Godly intentions are perceived by evangelical Christians to clash with modern secular humanism. Those perceptions in turn detain ingroup members in a conventional stage of moral development, where respect for authority and maintenance of social order is required. They are kept from the postconventional stage of universal ethical principles. Correspondingly, they also emphasize opposing morals, authority/subversion and sanctity/degradation. For the reason that evangelical Christians assert their religiosity or religious identity is the only truth, there is justification that Christian authority is the preeminent mode of how society should function. News outlets, who are powerful disseminators of information, have the ability to imperil their identity. After perceived relentless attacks on their identity by news outlets, they cogently rely on conservative news outlets who affirm their identity and reduce cognitive and moral dissonance.

**Summary:**

These evangelical Christian women in this study have a pessimistic view of news outlets. They are exceedingly frustrated about what they perceive to be a lack of factual, unbiased news coverage and, for the most part, consequently limit their exposure to news outlets. When they do choose to consume news, they generally turn to conservative news outlets, primarily Fox News Channel. Most of the participants recognize FNC as having a conservative slant, but observe the other cable news, network news and legacy newspapers are having a more pronounced bias to the left or liberal side. For the most part, the participants chose to exist in a right-wing media “echo chamber,” where other “liberal” news outlets reside in a perceived out-group. When reporting on conservative political perspectives, particularly on matters related to Christianity, they felt that news outlets ridiculed their faith or disregarded any positive news about Christianity or Donald Trump. Another of their assessments of news outlets is that they repeatedly attack and try to discredit Donald Trump to the point of persecution (e.g. “that reminds me of Jesus”). The participants believe the news outlets assaults on everything Trump does are meritless; but on the other hand, the oppression by “evil,” or secular forces from the media and liberals, only reinforces and strengthens their resolve that God is using Trump to bring our country to a reckoning. Hence, the more destructive and disapproving messages they hear from news outlets, the more encouraged they are that they made the right decision by voting for Trump, taking into account the righteousness of being persecuted for your Christian faith.

VII. Discussion

**Review of the problem:**

Evangelical Christians’ political support of Donald J. Trump has been continuously debated by political journalists and pundits ever since Trump was selected as the Republican candidate in the 2016 U.S. presidential election. The seemingly paradoxical quality of their patronage of Trump is multifaceted, particularly in regard to evangelical Christian women. Evangelical Christianity’s perceived exclusion from the tenets of governmental regulation instigated an impetus of conservative Christian’s emergence into politics several decades ago. Around the same time, conservative political leaders began criticizing news outlets due to an observed liberal bias. As this study shows, currently news outlets play a prominent role in how evangelical Christian women scrutinize the mediatization of Christianity and its role in the public and political sphere. In light of the importance of the free press’ responsibility to keep the powerful accountable, there is potential peril to democracy when news outlets aren’t trusted to fulfill this vital role. Therefore, this topic is worthy of a closer examination.

This research explored various contemporary topics at the intersection of Christianity, politics, gender and the media, that have arisen during this uniquely dogmatic climate through the lens of social identity, cognitive dissonance and moral foundation theories. By utilizing focus groups and semi-structured in-depth individual interviews with Republican, conservative, evangelical Christian women, this study examined the following queries: 1) how evangelical Christian women construct their social or religious identity, 2) their attitudes towards outgroups, specifically liberals and Democrats, in respect to their social identity and moral foundation, 3) a juxtaposition, through their social identity, of how evangelical Christian women apply their moral standards vis-à-vis Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton, 4) how these philosophies affected their voting behaviors and support of Trump, and 5) their media habits and opinions of news outlets.

**Findings Related to the Research Questions and Theories:**

The results of the study found that evangelical Christian women largely construct their social identity via their religious identity. Each one of the participants were high identifiers with evangelical Christianity based on the Centrality of Religiosity Scale (CRS). Almost all of the participants have maintained their religious beliefs for a greater part of their lives and, in most cases, all of their adulthood. One of the creeds of Christianity that inspires followers and emboldens their religious identity is the resolute belief that one’s own religion is truth (Kinnvall, 2004). As Park (2007) maintained, religiosity guides believers’ interpretation of experiences and gives them meaning. For the participants, they consider their Christian faith to be the truth, which gives them significance and purpose as well as guides them in deciphering God’s intentions. Their mortal existence correlates wholly to the awareness and anticipation of eternal salvation (Pargament, 1997). Consequently, their natural life is purposeful in understanding and accomplishing what they perceive to be holy objectives. Each of the features of Cameron’s (2004) Three-Factor Model of social identity transpires in their religious identity. It is central in the participants lives, they have positive feelings linked to their membership in the group (in-group effect), and their in-group ties give them a sense of deep connection with other group members.

As Turner (1982; 1987) argued convincingly, social identity provides its group members an inner certainty and allows for individuals to be bonded in collective opinions and behaviors. Religious identification is perhaps one of the strongest social adherents in that it “offers a distinctive ‘sacred’ worldview and ‘eternal’ group membership, unmatched by identification with other social groups” (Ysseldyk, 2010, p. 60). Their religious identity allows the participants to be a part of a community of believers, deep-seated and communal in their all-encompassing outlook on life: social, familial and political. They have affirming associations and a shared sense of similarity with other in-group members or in-group cohesiveness. Conversely, part of their religious identity is a distinction related to in-group and out-group members, or an “us versus them” mentality. The participants maximize the differentiation between “believer” and “non-believers” to the point of feeling “sorry for them” for a perceived lack of “hope” and “peace”. Most of them “can’t imagine” how non-believers go through life without a belief in God. In doing so, they follow Brewer and Gardner’s (1996) three types of social identity self-representation. Their self-evaluation is that they have “hope,” “joy” and “peace” which gives them a unique and enhanced frame of reference when situations happen in their individual lives, their community or in the world. They also perceive that their motivational goals have a higher purpose which, regardless if non-believers acquiesce to it or not, is essential for the common good of society. Therefore, due to being high religious identifiers, the maintenance of their religious identity is crucial for the participants’ emotional and spiritual well-being.

Pew Research Center’s (2011) inquiry into evangelicals’ beliefs and practices showed that to be a “good evangelical,” a majority of evangelical Christians believe they need to “take a stand on issues in conflict with moral and Biblical principles.” This conviction is particularly important when it comes to political issues because legislation determines what is permissible and prohibited in our society. It was also an opinion expressed throughout the research data. The participants’ moral values were in accordance with biblical principles, such as the Ten Commandments and the Beatitudes, as well as a respect for the patriarchal structure of the family. The data revealed both a spoken and implicit awareness in the importance of challenging secular humanism. Schrieber (2008) argues that conservative women who oppose any form of feminist activity are mostly “bound by gender-based visions of maintaining a culture premised on women’s social and biological differences from men” (p. 17). And while many of the participants have professional careers, most of the women who were married incorporated their spouses into the discussion. One participant deferred to her husband to help her assess the hidden agenda of political news reporting. Additionally, honesty, integrity and truth were the important moral values the participants mentioned the highest number of times. Correspondingly, evangelical Christians predominantly identify as conservatives (Pew Research Center, 2011) as was reflected by the participants in this research.

A fundamental belief in the Christian roots of the United States enables the participants to correlate and heighten their patriotic sentiments and its perceived privileges with their religious identity. In religious identity in-groups, there is a necessity to protect the belief system from external, or out-group threats. Recognized threats to an in-group from other groups can take the form of explicit prejudice (Jetten et al., 1999; Goplen & Plant, 2015). For evangelical Christians, the infallible authority of the Bible can also be an impetus to “protect ideology with a variety of strategies including discrimination against value-violating out-groups” (Brandt & Reyna, 2010, p. 716). Accordingly, individuals with a resilient group identity are most likely to adapt to group norms (Turner, 1987) and may trigger prejudice of “others” in order to protect their “meaning system” (Goplen & Plant, 2015; Brandt & Reyna, 2010). The political threats the participants referred to most frequently were in reference to liberals and Democrats. However, they used more intense derogatory terms for liberals than Democrats. A majority of participants used negative terminology for liberals, such as “angry,” “unstable,” “intolerant,” even believing they were “less patriotic” and “didn’t care about America”. Tajfel and Turner (1979) argue that high identifiers of a group are likely to exhibit competitive behavior. The struggle to bring Christianity back into the political sphere is viewed by the participants as a spiritual battle between good and evil. As a consequence, being triumphant is of the utmost importance, winning by any means necessary. A byproduct of perceived threats is a default position of “social exclusion,” where “everyone except the most clear-cut in-group members” are deemed as out-group members (Capozza & Brown, 2000, p. 4).

One unforeseen result in this study was the participants’ tolerance of the feasible interference of Russians in the 2016 U.S. elections. Even though numerous intelligence agencies had already confirmed election tampering by Russia when the focus groups and interviews were conducted, most of the participants were not aware of it or did not believe it had happened. Nearly half of the interview participants endorsed any assistance the Russians may have had in helping Trump get elected because they believed the United States was better off with Trump in office than having Hillary Clinton and the liberal Democrats in power. The competitive directive of winning at all cost assisted in these participants perceiving any assistance from Russia in helping their in-group succeed was likely part of God’s plan. This is one exception observed in the data to the above-mentioned default position of social exclusion. The necessity of the exclusion of their most dangerous out-group threat, Hillary Clinton and liberals, is so potent that many of the participants were willing to have foreign assistance to insure victory. In doing so, their morality was compromised; however, cognitive dissonance was easily resolved by considering the political success as being imperative to society’s greater good. The threat of liberals to their evangelical Christian collective identity accedes to political intolerance in order to preserve their identity. It is ironic when one considers some of the participants nationalistic views of American exceptionalism, to then be willing to accept assistance from not only non-American entities, but people from a country who has previously been one of our country’s principle adversaries. For the participants who felt aid from the Russians was acceptable, this concession ostensibly signifies the gravity of the participants’ prejudice against fellow Americans who hold different political views.

The intensity of the populist “us versus them” sentiment minimized their traditional moral values in Haidt’s (2012) fairness and cheating foundation. After all, honesty and integrity were the two moral values mentioned most by the participants; yet if Trump’s political conquest came as the result of deceitfulness, that particular unethical instance was tolerable. Which begs the question: if God is all powerful, then why would he require an illicit action to accomplish his perfect will? The participants’ spontaneous intuition of Hillary Clinton’s wickedness suppressed strategic reasoning. This specific example is analogous to Ross, Lelkes and Russell’s (2012) argument that some American Christians have adjusted their perception of Christianity, altering their acuity to make Jesus political and determining how he might act in the political arena if he were on earth today. These participants’ discernment appears to be something like, surely Jesus would condemn women who abort their fetuses and men who marry men. This conviction associates itself to the degree of dissonance the participants might experience, because to think otherwise would likely alter the stability of their religious identity. Additionally, when there is collective agreement within their in-group as there was between participants in the focus groups, cognitive dissonance also lessens. As Brandt & Reyna (2010) argue, “religiosity and conservative ideology provide coherency, control and reduction of ambiguity” (p. 715).

When considering the participants moral values in respect to their characterization of political out-groups, or liberals and Democrats, the participants, for the most part, had a binary assessment: anything biblical is virtuous and anything contradictory to biblical virtues is malevolent. Therefore, contrasted with biblical morality, the principles of out-groups are deficient or criminal. This line of reasoning also correlates to creating a homogeneous out-group effect. The data showed that the participants perceive liberals and Democrats to primarily covet the ethic of autonomy, where individuals’ freedoms considered to be of the utmost importance. The participants considered Democrats and liberals to want to “be taken care of,” get “free stuff,” “take my hard-earned money,” and do not have “compassion for life”. In other words, they view these out-groups to be predominantly concerned about Haidt’s (2012) care/harm moral foundation. Contrariwise, the participants judge the ethic of community and the ethic of divinity as more imperative. “I’m all about God and country,” one interviewee declared. The impression of a “Christian America” allocates for the responsibility of citizens to add to society and acknowledge the importance of maintaining godly principles. They believe people aren’t entitled to handouts and instead should be contributing to the community. “At what point do you start taking responsibility and stop blaming others for your lack of success and your difficulty,” said another interviewee. Throughout the data, at one point or another, the participants contemplated all five of Haidt’s (2012) opposing moral foundations, particularly authority/subversion and sanctity/degradation. While the participants deem themselves as respecting authority and sanctity, liberals and Democrats are considered to be subversive to the authority of Trump as president and degrade the sanctity of life and marriage with their anti-Christian, immoral scruples.

Most group members desire to have their group positively distinct from other social groups (Mummendey & Schreiber, 1983). Nevertheless, a “group distinctiveness threat combined with high commitment” may lead to displays of hatred and disgust towards an outgroup (Keltner & Haidt, 1999). This research displayed an overwhelming anti-Hillary sentiment by the participants. This attitude and their social identity sharply affected their application of moral standards between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump. which was consistent with extreme prejudice. A multitude of conspiracy narratives have swirled around Bill and Hillary Clinton for decades. However, a good amount of the gossip has long been debunked after years of independent investigations, along with probes by various journalists and news organizations (Lyons, 1996; Walker, 1996; O’Harrow & Kranish, 2018). One participant admitted that she had never given Clinton “the benefit of the doubt,” instead believing unconfirmed conspiracy accounts given by conservative media outlets. Benkler et al. (2018) demonstrated that conservative news outlets have been culpable in the repetitively dispersing inaccurate information. Several focus group and interview participants brought up conspiracy stories about the Clintons, unprompted by the researcher. They also repeatedly articulated that Hillary could not be trusted; she was “corrupt,” “slimy” and “evil”.

In contrast, all of the idioms the participants used for Trump were affirmative. Even his widely known undesirable traits were transformed into positive attributes. He is a “successful businessman,” “a family man,” and a “strong leader who can get things done.” His falsehoods were thought of as simply “bragging” or telling “silly stories”. His three marriages and alleged misogyny were excused as being something successful, type-A men do. His vulgarity and brashness are necessary characteristics in order to stand up to and defeat out-group threats. When an in-group perceives a source of threat, they look for a conceivable asset to assist them in dealing with said threat (Ellemers, Spears & Doosje, 2002). Therefore, by aligning himself with the conservative Christian agenda, Trump was viewed as their rescuer. Hence, the standards for Trump’s morality are diminished. This follows Haidt’s (2012) three principles of moral psychology, the first principle being, “Intuitions come first, strategic reasoning second” (p. 1). Haidt utilizes an example he calls “The Elephant Rule”. “Thinking is the rider; the effect is the elephant” (p. 66). The key metaphor is “The mind is divided, like a rider on an elephant, and the rider’s job is to serve the elephant” (p. 1). The idea is that thinking often works independently of feelings; however, sometimes emotional reactions can happen so quickly and persuasively that they can “reduce the universe of alternatives available to later thinking” (p. 66).

Over several decades, the participants have been conditioned to hate Bill and Hillary Clinton and recognize them as threats to their religious identity. Whenever the Clintons’ names were brought up in both the focus groups and interviews, there was instantaneous reaction of disgust, removing the ability to use strategic reasoning to disregard bizarre rumors such as Bill Clinton’s drug running as governor of Arkansas, or their involvement in a pedophilia ring, or Hillary Clinton having the tires of Bill’s accuser slashed or having a friend murdered to be silenced. After reflexively reacting to their intuitions about Hillary Clinton, the participants’ moral thinking justified voting for Trump because Hillary was such an immoral alternative, thus eliminating any cognitive dissonance over their choice at the ballot box in 2016.

The second of Haidt’s moral principles is, “There’s more to morality than harm and fairness” (p. 110). He reasons that experiences take on a different meaning when you are raised in a “Western, educated, industrial, rich and democratic nation” (p. 129). In this principle, Haidt argues that “if you are raised in a more traditional society or within an evangelical Christian household in the United States, you become so well educated in the ethics of community and divinity that you can detect disrespect and degradation even when the apparent victims see nothing wrong” (p. 128). The metaphor he employs with this principle is the righteous mind that is “like a tongue with six taste receptors” (p. 368). In other words, societies are complex and no single moral foundation or no “one true morality” can be used for everyone, everywhere, all the time. Evangelical Christians should not require non-believers to adhere to the same moral standards. The conflict here for the evangelical Christians in this study is the conviction that their morality and religious identity is the true religion and their single veritable morality is vital for the good of society. Society’s progress toward inclusiveness is regarded as an offense to Christians’ religious freedom. One interviewee brought up the Supreme Court case of the Colorado baker who refused to produce a wedding cake for a gay couple. The argument was that Christians should be allowed to take a moral stand based on their religious identity even if it requires them to discriminate against people who do not maintain their matching moral convictions or are out-group members. In the participant’s mind this was not a discriminatory act; it was solely a Christian defending his religious right to not participate in what he deemed to be an immoral act, a homosexual marriage.

Lastly, Haidt explains that “morality binds and blinds” (p. 217). He asserts that we are both selfish and groupish. Religion has a history of binding communities together in a positive way; however, it also can blind people when something is pronounced sacred. This can cause believers to feel that they cannot question it or think critically about it. This appeared to happen in the data. In a way, Trump, with all of his known immoralities, is being considered by the participants to be hallowed, due to his taking up the shield for conservative Christians’ fight against a secular world. Furthermore, the patriarchal biblical principles are a cogent deduction for the participants’ tolerance of Trump’s moral flaws, even if their forgiveness is often inclusive to those who hold their own conservative views of morality or at least profess to be their combatant. The participants, over and over, referred to Trump as being redeemable in God’s eyes, which could be expected in light of his perceived assistance (Smith, 2018; Wilson-Hartgrove, 2018). For these participants, there is no hypocrisy in their support of Trump, because they believe that, while he is deeply flawed, he is still useable by God to restore Christian principles (Wilson-Hartgrove, 2018). Conversely, politician Hillary Clinton encapsulates the principles of the ongoing feminist movement and makes her a vilifiable target for conservative Christian women. Her ambition and success outside of the domestic sphere and her support for “liberal” policies locate her as a threat to conservative women’s desire for separate spheres. There is a restriction to the participants’ ability to question or criticize Trump’s words and deeds. In doing so they would be rebuffing their own religious identity or destabilizing one of their most vital identities. Hence, due to their religious identity, it is more unproblematic for the participants to disparage and discriminate against Hillary Clinton for her iniquities than to admit any misgivings in supporting Trump, in spite of his sins.

Altogether the participants’ religious identity and moral values are aligned with their support of Trump as the president of the United States. He is both a warrior for their evangelical Christianity’s conservative efforts to bring God back into the political sphere and a protector of their patriotic sensibilities. The participants mainly voted based on their biblical values. However, in this paradigm their morality is situational. The participants minimize ethics in light of their voting for Trump because the alternative would have been even less moral. Yet, the political conservatism the participants anticipated gaining was strictly due to high moral standards, and the desire to abolish or at least lessen secular society’s depravity. Any conflicting quandaries in supporting a presidential candidate who clearly lacked high moral standards were resolved in the participants’ minds by reasoning that “no one is perfect,” and “it is up to God to judge him,” and “anybody was better than Hillary.”

Cognitive dissonance was lessened by only focusing on Trump’s positive traits and rationalizing his negative traits into constructive qualities. “At least he isn’t two-faced like all the other politicians,” said one participant. Any dissonance regarding morality is also reduced by making Trump part of their in-group, even though many participants didn’t believe he was a Christian, and some even labeled him a “fake Christian”. Yet, owing to his willingness to fight for their causes against evil powers, Trump is given a King Cyrus type of distinction within their religious identity. In turn, Trump’s reciprocity is in the appointments of conservative Supreme Court justices, rolling back every possible Obama policy, taking a critical stand against liberal policies such as transgenders in the military, and having a hard stance on immigration to name a few. For the participants, this is far more than any other conservative politician has ever accomplished for their in-group’s causes. Therefore, he continues to be regarded in a very positive light. It is the in-group’s unifying belief that God in his grace and mercy is willing to redeem the unredeemable. In-group membership is viewed heterogeneously, giving members a license to be unique, with distinctive sinful characteristics. This notion also used to comprise of the need to seek forgiveness from God for one’s iniquities. However, Donald Trump has publicly declared that he’s never even asked God for forgiveness (Scott, 2015). Yet, for most of the participants, politically speaking, liberals and Democrats are a homogeneous out-group, comprised of an unethical, threatening faction, who endanger their collective group identity. They are to be blamed for society’s demise. As a Pew Research study (2014) found that the higher identifying participants of each political party accept as true that the opposing party’s policies aren’t just erroneous, but “are so misguided that they threaten the nation’s well-being.”

Conservative media critics have alleged a “liberal bias” by a majority of news outlets for an extended period of time (Underwood, 2002; Jamieson & Cappella, 2008; Goldberg, 2002; Benkler et al., 2018). Decades before Donald Trump began referring to the free press as the enemy of the American people, conservative talk show host Rush Limbaugh had already crafted the decree. “The Republican base considers the media to be part of the enemy that has to be defeated and overcome,” said Limbaugh (Jamieson & Cappella, 2008, p. 72). This mindset was echoed by all of the participants in this research and has affected how they consume news. Every participant maintained negative views of news outlets, only two mentioned anything affirming in regard to the freedom of the press. In their discussion regarding news outlets it appeared that many of them were not extensive consumers of news before Donald Trump became U.S. president. However, at least part of their motive for not consuming much news was because of a perceived lack of religious identity representation in broadcast and print news stories. Almost half of the participants agreed with Trump that the media was the “enemy of the American people.” Akin to the liberals and Democrats, news outlets are then also perceived as a threatening out-group to the participants’ religious identity. They perceive the liberal media as being “anti-Christian,” persecuting Trump in their aggressive, negative coverage of his administration. One participant went so far as to parallel the daily abuse he suffers at the hands of the news outlets to Jesus Christ’s persecution before being crucified, “that reminds me of Jesus.” Therefore, Trump portrays the role of martyr for the Christian faith in the conflict between good and evil.

It can be argued that the participants remain in Kohlberg’s (1984) conventional stage of moral development, or the necessity to respect authority and the maintenance of social order, without fully understanding the reasons for that order. However, when also considering the participants’ confidence in their religious identity as being beneficial for the greater societal good, there also could be an aspiration to locate in the post-conventional. In this specific case, there is uncertainty in Kolberg’s classification, yet, their group stability bodes to remaining in the conventional stage. In Gilligan’s (1997) conventional stage, the participants responsibility is to members of their in-group. Nevertheless, it appears that Haidt’s moral foundations of authority/subversion and sanctity/degradation play a prominent role here. The participants view that news outlets are disrespecting authority and degrading the office of President in their strictly negative portrayal of Trump’s presidency. Their definition of fake news prominently includes the absence of negative news pertaining to liberals and Democrats, their out-group enemies. In order to minimize cognitive dissonance regarding the criticized components of Trump’s policies and actions, most of the participants only consumed news from conservative news outlets. They were critical of all of the opinion news programs on the news outlets other than Fox News Channel and other conservative new outlets and news personalities.

**Conclusions:**

Religious identity, particularly evangelical Christianity, was a strong indicator of conservative politics and biblical moral standards for the evangelical Christian women in this study. The participants’ religious identity is so central in their lives that it becomes chronically salient and overpowers other social identities (Ellemers, et al., 2002). Benkler et al. (2018) points out the relationship between their in-group mentality and politics and its ultimate resolve. The “two pillars of the emerging conservative coalition were fundamentally about meaning and identity, rather than about programmatic achievement” (p. 382). Given that a competitive aspect exists in their conservative political demands, it is, for the most part, not for personal gain. Instead it is a collective fear that the country and the world are reaping dire consequences for turning their backs on God. Conservative news outlets convey relentless warnings of moral decline and attacks on evangelical Christian identity, while also indicating who is to blame, usually liberals, Democrats and liberal news outlets (Benkler et al., 2018). This type of barrage instigates discriminatory reactions to these out-group threats.

High identifiers convey unity and dedication to the in-group when it is threatened (Hutchinson, Jetten, Christian & Haycraft, 2006). When the moral value of a group is endangered, “those who feel highly committed to their group are unlikely to express high levels of guilt” and are “more inclined to display defensive reactions when their group’s moral value is challenged” (Ellemers et al., 2002, p. 177). Defensive reactions to in-group threats and low levels of guilt for any conceivable hypocritical acts were exhibited in this research. This coping mechanism is enhanced due to the salience of their identity. When another group signifies a threat to the values for a central identity, out-group derogation can be seen as an advantageous tactic by which group members restore their damaged self-esteem (Branscombe & Wann, 1992). By identifying liberals, Democrats and news outlets in out-group, disapproving terminology, the participants are able to reestablish their exclusive way of life. Furthermore, studies have shown that an essential component of social frameworks is the collective response to threats (Branscombe, 1999; Ellemers, et al., 2002).“Religious out-groups threaten the foundational beliefs of people with strong religious worldviews” (Goplen & Plant, 2015, p. 1474). A crucial element within social identity theory is the impulse to pursue or preserve group distinctiveness (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Since evangelical Christians, including the participants, perceive their religious identity to be the truth, their directives are meant to preserve a higher quality of life for all, if “others” choose to accept the same religious identity and become in-group members.

McGill’s (2016) biblical hierarchy maintains that God has intentions for humanity and through those intentions, humanity understands its identity. This belief arguably causes the participants to feel powerful in their resolve and in turn, decreases cognitive dissonance involving any duplicitous or defensive behavior they may exhibit. In beholding Trump as an in-group member, or at least an in-group asset, cognitive dissonance is dissolved by contrasting Trump and Hillary Clinton (a threatening out-group member); this distinction leads to asymmetrical moral standards, as ascertained in the data, vis-à-vis Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton. The researcher was challenged by a participant wanting to know how any evangelical Christian woman could possibly vote for Hillary Clinton, consequently, confronting the possibility of an in-group member not following group norms and the conflict it brings to the collective group identity.

Piaget’s (1932/1965) evolving construction of moral development argues that it is a continuous process over one’s lifetime. However, for the participants in this study, the Bible exclaims that morality is imprinted on our hearts and souls by God. Most of the participants have maintained their religious identity for a majority of their lives. Moreover, the belief in the inerrancy of the Bible and its directives has remained constant, unchanging over time, with the exception of diverse interpretations of biblical decrees. Still, the Ten Commandments and the Beatitudes are invariable and hard to misconstrue, and evangelical Christians base their morality on their interpreted consistency of God’s words which gives instruction to endeavor to live like Jesus. “I think just following Jesus, um, being like him…,” said one participant about how she tried to live her life. The participants’ evangelical Christian identity provides them an outlook on life where all of Haidt’s (2012) five opposing moral foundations are viewed somewhat equally, rather than focusing strictly on care/harm, fairness/cheating as liberals and Democrats are perceived to be doing. However, because evangelical Christians regard nearly all out-group members to be threats and enemies to their social identity, they are only considering in-group members to be worthy of redemption and forgiveness. Yet, the paradox is that if everyone was created in the image of God, then “the self, gains the capacity to consider the other in a new way. If the other is no longer the enemy, the self feels a responsibility to protect the other as a fellow creature of God” (McGill, 2016, p. 116). Therefore, if evangelical Christians are truly following God’s directives, they would see all “others” as God sees them, not as adversaries. A biblical decree calls Christians to love others, as Christ has loved you. However, what has happened is an acquiring of allocentric group mentality, where people mainly focus their negative attention on other people rather than being introspective, due to an instilled fear of others and their perceived threat to Christian identity. This is a dangerous path. Hatred and disgust of “others,” at times solely because of diverse religious identity, has historically led to horrific genocides throughout the world, such as the Holocaust and massacres in Rwanda.

The lingering query is whether this faction of evangelical Christianity (those who support a candidate like Trump) could ever embrace religious pluralism, thus minimizing the fear of religious out-group threats and eliminating derogatory responses to a religious group such as Islam, without the remorse from a perceived betrayal of their own religious identity. Haidt (2012) points out that often the ethic of divinity, the notion that we are all primarily “temporary vessel within which divine souls have been implanted” (p. 117), can also be “incompatible with compassion, egalitarianism and basic human rights” (p. 124). This incongruity with the basic premise of Christian faith is arguably the crux of much of the current divide being studied here. “Righteous anger demands we are right, and they are wrong” (Haidt, 2012, p. 127). Has righteous anger ever functioned as an effective tool for judicious transformation? Proportional morality for in-group and out-group members would require evangelical Christians to deem out-group members as “free and equal members of their political community” (Habermas, p.5). Correspondingly, non-Christians should do likewise towards Christians. In his essay, Religion in the Public Sphere, Habermas (2006) ascertains the following:

Religious citizens can only develop an epistemic stance towards the independence of secular from sacred knowledge and the institutional monopoly of modern scientific experts. They can only succeed if from their religious viewpoint they conceive the relationship of dogmatic and secular beliefs in such a way that the autonomous progress in secular knowledge cannot come to contradict their faith. (p. 14)

Habermas asserts that government has not lived up to its responsibility of neutrality of competing worldviews on either side of the political argument. Neither political party should coerce its collective will on the other. It is worthy to consider that not all that is secular is immoral (Habermas, 2006). Equally, it should be acknowledged that religiosity has performed a valuable function for the propagation of American democracy (Weithmann, 2002; Habermas, 2006: Tocqueville, 2015). This outlook should also apply to news outlets treatment of evangelical Christianity. There has been a disregard, by some news outlets, to the importance of the religious identity conviction of evangelical Christians. Journalistic integrity isn’t just to “seek truth and report it”; it is also to “avoid stereotypes” and “treat members of the public as human beings, deserving of respect” (SPJ Code of Ethics). Regardless of their own personal opinions, whenever possible, journalists should take the perspective of both sides. The Fairness Doctrine policy, introduced in 1949 and abolished in 1987, required broadcast stations to give equal time to opposing political issues. If it was still in effect, it would have circumvented our current cable news climate crisis. Though there have been rumblings of reintroducing a similar measure, attempts have been suppressed. There is too much money that cable news outlets generate by appealing to a certain side of the political aisle.

As Benkler et al. (2018) exposed, conservative news outlets, lacking journalistic integrity, have undermined journalism’s vital watchdog role. In doing so, they have sown confusion and distrust, leaving evangelical Christians, including the participants in this study, and other conservative news watchers, susceptible to conspiracies and skeptical of political establishments, the rule of law and a cynical view of the free press. It is a formula that can sanction despotic rule. There is a tangible reason Donald Trump’s presidency occurred. In my opinion, supporting Trump was a desperate act for the participants in this study. To borrow the famous phrase uttered by the fictitious news anchor, Howard Beale, from the 1975 film classic, *Network*, “I’m mad as hell and I’m not going to take it anymore.” The participants and other evangelicals who voted for Trump are indignant and bellicose because they judge that they are left with no other choice in defending their religious identity. It could be argued that part of their outrage is due to conservative news outlets constantly barraging them with reasons why they should be angry and giving them anxieties and enemies to blame for their problems. However, they have also been disillusioned by their lack of representation in political matters, deprivation in their ability to live out their religious faith in the public sphere and comprehension of an intolerance for their religious identity from most news outlets. These and other factors discussed in this research forced them to take drastic measures in voting for and supporting a problematic political candidate like Donald Trump. Trump warrants reproach from news outlets for what he does outside the bounds of decency, benevolence and moral ethics, however, the 24-hour news cycle of cable television has created a repelling cycle of adversarial news coverage no matter which channel one watches. News outlets are obliged to continue in their role of holding powerful people accountable. However, news outlets and politicians in both political parties must also persist in exploring the root source of the division that brought our nation to this critical point and address it. Innate attitudes, particularly when they are strongly aligned with social identity, are not transformed by ridicule or quarrelling, but by understanding and fortitude to address and resolve justifiable grievances.

VII. SELF-REFLECTION AND LIMITATIONS

**Self-reflection:**

I was drawn to perform this research directly from my own cognitive dissonance after Donald J. Trump was elected as our nation’s 45th president in 2016. My father was a United Methodist minister for 42 years. Akin to a majority of the research participants, I was raised a Christian. As a preacher’s kid, my childhood life revolved around church activities. And while I went through a season of my life ignoring my relationship with God, I have tried to faithfully live out my Christian beliefs and values for the past couple of decades. I spent most of my adult life as a registered Republican, because that’s how my family identified. However, approximately ten years ago I became disillusioned with both the Republican and the Democratic parties after one of many government shutdowns. I have been registered as an Independent ever since. I did not vote for Donald Trump, yet also felt that Hillary Clinton was a unsound candidate. This was not because I didn’t think she was qualified, I believed she was one of the most qualified candidates. I felt she had made some political errors that put her in a bad light. Therefore, I was conflicted in voting for her. But I saw Trump as a potentially more alarming candidate.

Whether you watch the news or read online comments on social media and digital journalism, it is clear that the current political climate is causing a deep and widening chasm between conservative and liberal Americans. What engrossed me to examine this phenomenon was the dynamics it has triggered in my own, otherwise closely knitted, Christian family. As a former broadcast journalist, who ironically worked for 16 years at a local Fox news station that is owned and operated by Fox News Corporation, it has been troubling to witness some of my family member’s indifference and suspicion of the political reporting of reputable news outlets. Furthermore, as I sat in church the Sunday after the 2016 U.S. presidential election, I felt uneasy and anxious. I looked around me and contemplated if most of the people felt the same way as members of my family, voting for and supporting Donald J. Trump. Were they sacrificing moral values in the hopes of more conservative national policies and a majority of conservative justices on the Supreme Court in order to stifle the intensifying threat of secular humanism? I questioned how a large percentage of evangelical Christians reached a moral compromise for political gain and the path that led them to distrust and discount most mainstream media’s political reporting.

In my childhood, I witnessed my parents showing the love of Christ to those in need. Although I underwent and resolved a crisis of faith for a few years in my 20s, my Christian faith (a belief in the Holy Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Ghost, that the Bible was inspired by God, and that Jesus died for our sins) has been a mainstay in my life, a critical component of my definition of self-identity. However, the 2016 presidential campaign and years following have caused me to feel like an outsider of the ingroup I have mostly identified with for my entire life. I continue to attend an evangelical Christian church and attend a women’s group formed by my church, yet I sense my political opinions now locate me in an outgroup. This has been quite disconcerting. Hence, this research has transpired as a beckoning of sorts to examine and reflect on the distinctive dynamics encompassing the current divisive political mood regarding Christianity and the media.

Performing research exempt of bias is unachievable, taking into account that most researchers are drawn to exploring specific phenomenon due to their individual passions and interests. Since the researcher’s role in qualitative methods are both as the observer and interpreter, there must be assiduous awareness to researcher reflexivity. For the purposes of this study, the definition of reflexivity being used is “the process of reflecting critically on the self” as the researcher is “the human instrument” (Patton 2002). Considering that I am an Independent voter, registered neither as a Democrat or Republican, I approached this research with no partisan agenda. I grew up in a Republican household and voted as a registered Republican for most of my adult life. During this study I occupied the location as both an insider and an outsider. As an insider, I identified with the participants’ religious identity, hence, sharing with the participants many of their Christian beliefs and personal religious experiences. Yet, I also persisted as an outsider situated as a researcher and former journalist, who is alarmed by the phenomenon I am examining. Bearing this in mind, I thoroughly contemplated and recorded how my own presence, as the researcher and evaluator, interacted with the research throughout the process. My personal opinions were repeatedly acknowledged and evaluated, in order to prevent those views from influencing the interpretation during the data analysis. I approached this research neither to condemn evangelical Christian women for their support of Trump, nor to serve as an apologist for their patronage. I truly wanted to better understand the dynamics that have troubled me over the past two plus years, and hopefully I’ve helped others comprehend that the answer to this dilemma is not as black and white as it might seem.

**Limitations**

The data was collected for this research until the point of saturation; however, the quantity of participants is a fairly small number. More participants, particularly additional younger, evangelical Christian women, might have changed the percentage of participants who felt strongly about certain political issues. Another limitation is that only evangelical Christian women who voted for Trump were recruited as participants. There are evangelical Christian women who did not vote for Trump who might have vastly different viewpoints on some or all of the topics covered in this research. Further research could juxtapose evangelical Christian women who share the same religious identity yet have contrasting political objectives and opinions on news outlets. Additionally, this research only examined the data based on three theories: social identity, moral foundation and cognitive dissonance. There are arguably several additional dynamics at play with this topic, such as the fundamental error of attribution; where we assume that flaws seen in others are due to their internal flaws, whereas in-group members weaknesses are because of external factors. Another concept that could be assessed more deeply is selective exposure, or how we only choose to get news from media outlets that match our beliefs.

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APPENDIX A:

Questions for Focus Groups

* How important is your Christian faith to your life?
* What were the three most important issues to you during the 2016 election?
* What initially drew you to support Donald Trump for President?
* Were there specific ideological reasons that influenced you to vote for him?
* Were there other reasons you preferred Trump?
* What was your opinion of Hillary Clinton as a candidate?
* What was your opinion of her as a woman?
* Does President Trump represent your Christian values? In what ways?
* What was your main reason for not supporting Hillary Clinton?
* Did the prospect of openings on the Supreme Court factor into your decision?
* Do you believe Trump’s presidency has been successful so far? In what ways?
* Do you have any specific concerns about his presidency going forward?
* How do you think men should treat women?
* Do you believe Trump’s treatment of women has been acceptable?
* Many people question how Christian women could vote for Trump considering the number of women who came forward accusing him of sexual harassment and the infamous video aboard the bus from the Entertainment Tonight show, how did you reconcile that?
* On a scale of 1-10, how offensive to you is the “P” word he used in that video?
* Arguably, it would have sunk any other presidential candidates in the past, why do you think his campaign survived?
* What news organization do you turn to the most for the latest news? How often?
* Are there any news organizations you refuse to watch or read? Which ones and why?
* Do you believe news outlets are guilty of reporting false facts?
* How do you attempt to determine what’s real and what’s fake in the news?
* At this point in Trump’s presidency, have you had any second thoughts about voting for him?

APPENDIX B:

Questions for semi-structured interviews

* How important is your Christian faith to your life?
* How did you become a Christian?
* What moral values are most important in your life?
* In what ways are these values unrelated to your religious beliefs?
* What were some of the biggest influences, from childhood up until today, on your moral beliefs and values?
* What is the one moral value most important for human flourishing? Why?
* How do you think your life differs from those who do not have a Christian faith?
* What is your overall opinion of news outlets?
* How do you consume news? How do you decide what news you watch/read?
* Why do you vote the way you do?
* What comes to mind when you hear the word “liberal”?
* How did you come to support Donald Trump?
* How does he support your religious beliefs?
* Does he live up to your moral standards?
* How do you deal with this conflict?
* Why do you think people vote for the opposing party you support?
* Have you lost friends or have strained relationships over politics? What happened?
* It was reported that a Trump supporter said that even if Russia helped Donald Trump get elected, it’s better than having the liberal Democrats in power? Do you agree?

APPENDIX C:

IRB CONSENT FORM

## Research study: Mitigating the tension between faith and politics: Evangelical Christian women’s religious identity and moral foundation and how it determines media consumption and voting behaviors.

## Investigator: Gayle Jansen Brisbane

## Why am I being invited to take part in a research study on evangelical Christians, media and politics?

We invite you to take part in a research study because you are an evangelical Christian woman and your opinions on the topic are needed to better understand how evangelical Christian women’s sense of morality and religious identity determine how they vote and how they consume the news.

Someone will explain this research study to you.

1. Whether or not you take part is up to you.
2. You can choose not to take part.
3. You can agree to take part and later change your mind.
4. Your decision will not be held against you.
5. You can ask all the questions you want before you decide.

## Who can I talk to?

If you have questions, concerns, or complaints, or think the research has hurt you, talk to the research team at 602-625-9739 (Gayle Jansen Brisbane) or Patrick Ferrucci (Dissertation Chair) at [Patrick.ferrucci@colorado.edu](mailto:Patrick.ferrucci@colorado.edu).

This research has been reviewed and approved by an Institutional Review Board (“IRB”). You may talk to them at (303) 735-3702 or [irbadmin@colorado.edu](mailto:irbadmin@colorado.edu) if:

1. Your questions, concerns, or complaints are not being answered by the research team.
2. You cannot reach the research team.
3. You want to talk to someone besides the research team.
4. You have questions about your rights as a research subject.
5. You want to get information or provide input about this research.

## Why is this research being done?

This research is being done in order to better understand how morality and religious identity play a part in evangelical Christian women’s political views, voting habits and news consumption.

## How long will the research last?

I expect that the research will last until May of 2019 when the dissertation is due to be completed.

## How many people will be studied?

I hope to interview 20-25 evangelical Christian women for this research study.

## What happens if I say yes, I want to be in this research?

You will be contacted to set up a time for an interview and/or observation. If it is not possible to do an in-person interview, it will be done over a video conference application.

* + The interview will last no more than one hour, in person if possible or via a FaceTime phone call or Skype.
  + The interview will be audio recorded. The tape will be destroyed after the research is complete.
  + Follow-up questions might be required, which can be done by phone or email.
  + Your identity will be protected, all comments will be used anonymously, and your comments will not be used with any identifying information.

## What happens if I do not want to be in this research?

You can leave the research at any time and it will not be held against you.

## What happens if I say yes, but I change my mind later?

You can leave the research at any time it will not be held against you.

## Is there any way being in this study could be bad for me?

There is no risk to you in this research. All quotes from the interview will be used anonymously and your identity will be protected.

## Will being in this study help me in any way?

There is no direct benefit to you other than perhaps having a better understanding of how evangelical Christians view the news media and consume the news, as well as how their religious identity and morality play a role in their voting habits.

## What happens to the information collected for the research?

The information from the interviews will be examined by discourse analysis to look for common themes and reactions.

**Signature Block for Capable Adult**

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