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Ignorance Is Bliss: Emotion, Politics, and Why Whites Avoid Information About Race

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## Abstract

This study investigated partisan differences, as well as guilt, anger, and shame as motivating emotions, to understand and predict information avoidance on topics related to race and policing. We predicted liberals would be more likely than conservatives to seek information on topics related to race; guilt, anger, and shame would be motivating emotions to seek information. We expected liberals to use guilt, anger, and shame as motivating emotions to seek information, and expected conservatives to experience lower levels of these emotions, and therefore avoid such information. Participants ( $N=420$ ) were given information about police violence against people of color. Following this, participants completed the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule and finished by responding to an Information Avoidance questionnaire. Results showed that political orientation, anger, and shame had significant effects in predicting information avoidance (IA), while guilt had no significant effect. Anger and shame had a significant effect in motivating liberals to seek information, while guilt had a significant effect in motivating conservatives to avoid. These findings suggest that information about victims of racialized violence do not enact the same motivation response in conservatives as they do in liberals. Therefore, it is important to understand these implications when reaching consensus on the divergent viewpoints of racial injustices.

*Keywords:* information avoidance, guilt, shame, anger, race, policing

# Ignorance Is Bliss: Emotion, Politics, and Why Whites Avoid Information About Race

Though many consider modern America to be a beacon of light in an ever-darkening world, race relations and police violence have caused the shine of liberty to dim for people of color in recent years. In fact, when polled, a full 42% of Blacks report feeling “very dissatisfied” with the way their group is treated in the U.S., and another 25% feel “somewhat dissatisfied” (Gallup, 2016). At a time where an unprecedented amount of information is made available to the public at the touch of a button, stories of inequality and injustice dominate news coverage and give birth to movements desperate to break the cycle. Black Lives Matter (BLM) is one such contemporary movement that emerged following the acquittal of George Zimmerman, a neighborhood watch volunteer who shot and killed an unarmed, 17-year-old African American, Trayvon Martin.

BLM represents one of the most influential and controversial protest movements in recent history (Hoffman, Granger, Vallejos, & Moats, 2016), which explains why it has become such a polarizing issue. After the police shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Mo., Blacks were twice as likely (80%) than Whites (37%) to say that the shooting of the unarmed teenager “raises important issues about race that need to be discussed” (Pew Research Center, 2014b). In the same survey by the Pew Research Center, Whites were divided when asked if the police have gone too far in responding to the protests in the shooting’s aftermath: 33% said the police had gone too far, 32% said the police response had been about right, and the remaining 35% had no response. This indicates that society’s White majority was hung when it came to how to react to the shooting of Michael Brown, a phenomenon we continually see whenever modern social injustice strikes (Hoffman, Granger, Vallejos, & Moats, 2016). This stands in contrast to Blacks polled who largely agreed (65%) that the police have gone too far. The lack of unified empathy

among a major social group is certainly perplexing given that these occurrences are not isolated (Weitzer, 2015).

Information Avoidance Theory suggests that people are less likely to seek learning information on topics that might produce undesired feelings, cognitions, or behaviors; instead people will opt to remain ignorant. Information that proves one's held beliefs are false is an almost sure way to create dissonance and foster a pattern of behavior that avoids such information (Sweeny, Melnyk, Miller, & Shepperd, 2010). Moreover, people will often be faced with information they do not understand or cannot comprehend, especially when it comes to issues that have an impact on society as a whole. Shepherd and Kay (2010) conducted five different studies based on the contexts of energy, environmental, and economic issues to examine how people cope with social issues they might not comprehend. Their overall findings supported this chain of events that unfamiliarity surrounding an important social issue leads to dependence on the government to handle the issue, which leads to increased trust that the relevant governmental agencies would handle these threatening issues effectively. Trust in the government, in turn, was connected to avoidance of information about that issue. Believing that what the government does is right, based on their authority to do so, is one factor that can explain why there is an avoidance of controversial information, such as police brutality. Police officers are primarily supposed to protect citizens and stand for justice in communities. Learning information that contradicts this image of the police can cause mistrust in the government can therefore create dissonance and foster a pattern of behavior that avoids such information.

Political affiliation appears to be a strong force when it comes to support of racial injustices, as well as of information avoidance more generally. The Pew Research Center (2014b) found that the majority of Republicans thought race was getting too much attention in the shoot-

ing of Michael Brown while only 21% of Democrats agreed. Believing that race is getting too much attention is perhaps a subtle way of saying they do not want to hear about race anymore. They would rather avoid this set of information for a variety of reasons, rather than constantly be faced with it. There have also been several studies that have highlighted partisan differences in regards to selective exposure to partisan information. Garrett and Stroud (2014) broke down avoidance into two mechanisms: selective approach, seeking information that is consistent with one's beliefs, and selective avoidance, avoiding information that is contradictory to those beliefs. Using this phenomenon, they analyzed the role of political orientation in shaping motivations to engage in selective approach or avoidance. They found that Republicans were significantly more likely to engage in selective avoidance (i.e., avoiding information), while non-Republicans (Democrats, Independents, and third-party affiliations) were significantly more likely to select a story that affirms their beliefs (i.e., confirmation bias). Garrett, Carnahan, and Lynch (2013) found similar evidence with political orientation and selective exposure. Their study suggests that confirmation bias is a stronger form of selective exposure than defensive avoidance. In general, however, selective exposure, is a subtler approach to information avoidance, because an individual is not explicitly avoiding a topic; instead they are finding information that is closely linked with their personal and political beliefs. Political differences have also been found in the role of ethnic perspective taking (Sparkman & Eidelman, 2016). Liberals are less likely than conservatives to express prejudice and endorse stereotypes. They're also more likely than conservatives to look at the world from the viewpoint of other racial/ethnic groups. This could mean that having empathy toward disadvantaged groups would be a reason to seek and learn new information, especially on the complex issue of reoccurring, racialized police violence.

Though existing research has largely neglected to examine a possible connection between emotion and information avoidance, other studies have shown that guilt, anger, and shame have been linked to motivating engagement in political action. Leach, Iyer, and Pedersen (2006) conducted 3 studies examining non-Aboriginal Australians' guilt and anger about their ingroup's advantage over the structurally disadvantaged Aborigines. They found that participants who perceived their ingroup to have a greater advantage felt more guilt and anger about this inequality. Anger, more so than guilt, predicted a willingness to engage in political action on behalf of the Aborigines. Other literature suggests guilt as a motivating emotion for political change in support of disadvantaged groups. Harvey and Oswald (2000) found that guilt (and shame) was significantly associated with support for Black programs after watching a civil rights video. Shame has also been linked to restore and approach behaviors. de Hooge, Zeelenberg, and Breugelmans (2010) conducted a number of studies with different shame inductions and dependent measures to examine how shame can activate approach behaviors to restore threatened self, and withdrawal behaviors to protect from further damage. Specifically, the researchers found that participants engaged in higher achievement approach behaviors and lower avoidance behaviors after a shameful event. Higher achievement approach was associated with wanting to repair and protect self-image following a situation, while avoidance was the opposite. In another paradigm, the participants had higher repair (i.e., how much they wanted to repair damage) and lower hiding tendencies (i.e., how much they wanted to hide from others following the situation) following a shame induction. This framework of shame could be conceptualized as a motivator for seeking information on topics related to race and race in policing. Seeking information on these subjects after feelings of shame could indicate support to restore and protect race relations (also suggested by de Hooge, Zeelenberg, & Breugelmans, 2011).

In the present research, we draw from partisan differences in selective exposure, as well as guilt, anger, and shame as motivating emotions in political engagement, to understand and predict information avoidance on topics related to race relations and racialized policing. No research has directly investigated the role of guilt, anger, and shame in predicting information avoidance. In line with previous research that those emotions are associated with motivating political action, we predict that they will be motivating emotions to seek information, rather than avoid. We also predict partisan differences in information avoidance: liberals will be more likely than conservatives to seek information on topics related to race. Lastly, we propose these two variables (political orientating and emotion) will interact to predict information avoidance. Specifically, we expect liberals to use guilt, anger, and shame as motivating emotions to seek information, but we expect conservatives to experience lower levels of these emotions overall. Thus, conservatives will avoid information not only because they tend to selectively avoid in general, but also because they do not share these motivating emotions with their liberal counterparts.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Participants ( $N = 420$ ; 267 women, 150 men, 1 gender-neutral, and 1 multiple gender identities) were undergraduate students at the University of Connecticut ranging in age from 18 to 23 years. On average, participants described themselves as slightly liberal ( $M = 3.58$ ,  $SD = 1.50$ ; 1 = *extremely* liberal; 7 = *extremely* conservative). All participants were enrolled in introductory level psychology classes and received class credit for their participation. Only White-identified participants were eligible for participation.

### **Measures and Procedure**



Several demographic and political items from a mass survey completed by introductory psychology students in the beginning of the term were linked to the participants' responses. Participants were given a questionnaire online through the Qualtrics survey platform and randomly assigned to either the experimental or control condition, in a between-participants design. The experimental group viewed images depicting 15 publicized cases of victims of police and other racialized violence, and rated how familiar they were with each case, from 0 (*not at all*) to 5 (*extremely*) (see Appendix A). Following this, participants were given the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS-X; Watson & Clark, 1994). The PANAS is a 41-item self-report questionnaire including words and phrases ranging from emotions related to fear, sadness, self-assurance, guilt, and so forth, with items ranked from 0 (*definitely not*) to 5 (*extremely*). Participants were asked to report the strength of their emotions in response to the images of the publicized cases of violence. The control group did not get the familiarity scale, instead they read the following statement on the current state of race relations:

In the United States, there have recently been numerous cases of excessive force by police officers on unarmed Black men and women that have led to heightened tensions across the country. These cases have sparked a conversation that has now made its way onto the front pages of news and social media outlets alike.

Next, participants completed the PANAS in regards to their feelings about the above statement.

Following the experimental manipulation, all participants were asked to complete four questions about information avoidance tendencies on issues of race in policing (e.g., “When it comes to issues of race in policing in the U.S., I would be more comfortable to just turn a blind eye to the issue”; “I would prefer to know the whole story when it comes to issues of race in policing in the U.S., regardless of how much the truth hurts” [adapted from Shepherd & Kay,

2012]). The remaining measures were recorded as part of a larger study beyond the scope of this paper: questions regarding trust in the government (adapted from Shepherd & Kay, 2012) a scale measuring attitudes toward Black Lives Matter's (BLM) efficacy, a scale testing motivations to engage in BLM activities (adapted from van Zomeren et al., 2004), and a scale on police attitudes (Leach & Reinka, 2017). Finally, we included a one-item behavioral measure of information avoidance where participants were asked if they were interested in knowing more about issues or race in policing, and if so, told they would receive a list of resources on the issue such as relevant podcasts. For the sake of this paper, the self-reported information avoidance questions will be the main outcome measure, rather than the behavioral outcome measure, since only 34 of the 420 participants asked for more information.

## Results

All analyses were done in SPSS version 24.0 (IBM Corp, 2016). Scales were calculated based on author recommendations. Descriptive statistics and inter-item correlations are shown in Table 1. The between-participants manipulation, both on its own and in the regression models, had no significant effect on predicting information avoidance, therefore we collapsed across conditions for the final analyses.

Consistent with expectations, each of the emotion variables were negatively correlated with political orientation, indicating that those who identify with conservative values tend to feel less emotions in reaction to information and images of victims of racialized violence compared to those with liberal ideologies: anger,  $r = -.430, p < .001$ ; shame,  $r = -.321, p < .001$ ; guilt,  $r = -.204, p < .001$  (see Table 1).

We next examined how political orientation interacts with key emotional variables (shame, guilt, and anger) shown to motivate political action in predicting information avoidance

about race relations and issues of race in policing. All analyses were done in hierarchical regression models, with political orientation and the PANAS emotion (guilt, shame, and anger) as main effects entered in step 1 and interactions between political orientation and the emotion scale entered in step 2. Therefore, three separate multiple linear regression models were calculated, one for each of the emotion of interest. All predictor variables were mean-centered to reduce collinearity (Aiken & West, 1991).

The results of the first regression indicated that political orientation, anger, and their interaction, explained a significant amount of the variance  $R^2 = .16$   $F(3,408) = 26.47$ ,  $p < .001$  (see Table 2). We found that political orientation significantly predicted information avoidance,  $\beta = .154$   $[.041, .186]$ ,  $t(408) = 3.06$ ,  $p = .002$ , conservatives were more likely to avoid information about race and police relations than liberals. Anger also significantly predicted information avoidance,  $\beta = -.330$   $[-.406, -.216]$ ,  $t(408) = -6.413$ ,  $p < .001$ , those who expressed anger more had a desire to avoid information less, than those who reported little to no anger. The interaction of anger and political orientation also significantly predicted information avoidance,  $\beta = .114$   $[.012, .117]$ ,  $t(408) = 2.423$ ,  $p = .016$ . Anger appeared to be a motivating emotion for all participants, but it was more effective in those with liberal views to avoid information less, than in more conservative participants (see Figure 1). An examination of simple slopes revealed that, while both groups showed slopes significantly different from zero, anger worked more as a motivating emotion in liberal participants,  $b = -.41$ ,  $t(409) = -6.31$ ,  $p < .001$ , than in conservatives,  $b = -.22$ ,  $t(409) = -3.32$ ,  $p = .001$ , to seek information, as shown by the steeper slope.

Similar to the first, the second regression model, which included political orientation, shame, and the interaction of the two, significantly predicted avoidance to information about race and policing,  $R^2 = .12$ ,  $F(3,405) = 17.76$ ,  $p < .001$ . We found a main effect of political orienta-

tion to significantly predict information avoidance,  $\beta = .248$  [.111, .255],  $t(405) = 4.99$ ,  $p < .001$ , where conservatives reported a desire to avoid information about race and police relations more than liberals. Shame also had significant results,  $\beta = -.145$  [-.164, -.032],  $t(405) = -2.90$ ,  $p = .004$ : participants who reported feelings of shame were less likely to avoid information about race and policing, than those who did not express feelings of shame. There was also a significant interaction between shame and political orientation to predict information avoidance,  $\beta = .110$  [.008, .091],  $t(405) = 2.33$ ,  $p = .021$ . Shame did not have a motivating impact on conservatives one way or another, but shame was more effective in those with liberal views to avoid information less than participants who were more conservative and reported less feelings of shame (see Figure 2). An examination of simple slopes confirmed that shame operated as a motivating emotion in liberal participants,  $b = -.18$ ,  $t(406) = -5.52$ ,  $p < .001$ , but not in conservatives,  $b = -.03$ ,  $t(406) = -0.87$ ,  $p = .39$ , to seek information. For full hierarchical regression results, see Table 3.

The results of the final regression model indicated that political orientation, guilt, and the interaction also predicted a significant amount of variance of participants' information avoidance about topics related to race,  $R^2 = .09$ ,  $F(3,408) = 14.07$ ,  $p < .001$ . Once again, we found that conservatives are more likely than liberals to avoid information,  $\beta = .299$  [.150, .291],  $t(408) = 6.15$ ,  $p < .001$ , but guilt, on its own, did not significantly predict information avoidance,  $\beta = .058$  [-.043, .175],  $t(408) = 1.19$ ,  $p = .237$ . Expressing guilt had no effect in predicting whether a participant would avoid information related to racial issues in policing or not. The interaction between guilt and political orientation, however, did significantly predict information avoidance,  $\beta = .132$  [.030, .181],  $t(408) = 2.74$ ,  $p = .006$ . Conservative participants were more likely to avoid information when they felt guilty, unlike liberal participants who were not moved one way or another by guilt (see Figure 3). For full hierarchical regression results, see Table 4. An examination of

simple slopes confirmed that guilt worked more as a motivating emotion in conservative participants,  $b = .22$ ,  $t(410) = 3.04$ ,  $p = .002$ , than in liberals,  $b = -.10$ ,  $t(410) = -1.30$ ,  $p = .19$ , to avoid information.

## Discussion

This study was conducted to determine whether or not there are political differences in information avoidance, and if guilt, anger, and shame could act as motivating emotions to understand and predict information avoidance on topics related to race relations and racialized police violence. The results of our study suggest that political orientation does have an effect in predicting information avoidance. Our first hypothesis was confirmed, as we saw that liberals are more likely to seek information about race and policing, while conservatives are more likely to avoid. Our second hypothesis, however, was only partially confirmed. Anger and shame have a significant effect on predicting information avoidance, indicating they both act as motivations to seek information, but guilt did not have an effect on predicting information avoidance. With regards to our third hypothesis, we anticipated that liberals would use guilt, shame, and anger as motivating emotions to seek information. We expected conservatives to not only report lower levels of these emotions, but also avoid information because of it. Consistent with our expectations, conservatives did, in fact, report lower levels of these emotions overall, compared to liberals. Furthermore, we found that anger and shame had a significant effect in motivating liberals to seek information. Guilt, on the other hand, had a more significant influence on motivating conservatives to avoid information, rather than seek it, while providing no impetus for liberals either way.

The data we collected is subject to some limitations, most notably the reliance on self-reported data, which is always susceptible to bias. Race relations and racialized police violence are highly controversial topics in the United States. Therefore, there could be a potential risk of

dishonesty when participants responded to questions, despite the study being anonymous. Research has shown that Whites tend to avoid racial terminology and ignore the disadvantages of a non-White population by adhering to the racial ideology of color blindness (Bonilla-Silva, 2002). Whites will go to great lengths when talking about non-Whites in public to use language that will not make them appear racist. This fear of being racist could be so entrenched that even anonymity cannot make them feel safe to express contradicting language. Additionally, our participant pool came from a fairly liberal college campus. College freshman in America today tend to be more liberal, less religious, and more committed to social justice than previous students within the last 50 years. Moreover, they increasingly dedicate time to civic involvement and political activism, more than any generation (Eagan, Stolzenberg, Bates, Aragon, Suchard, & Rios-Aguilar, 2016). This dedication in political action would suggest that this age group would be far less likely to avoid information because they want to make race relations better, perhaps even among relatively staunch conservatives. It is also worth mentioning that the mean level of information avoidance motivation in our study was fairly low. The modest rate of reported information avoidance could be in part due to the environmental exposure of a liberal college campus, or through technological devices that make it challenging to completely tune out the kinds of information that often makes headlines, such as issues surrounding police brutality (Freelon, McIlwain, & Clark, 2016).

Many questions still remain on the topic. It is imperative that future studies examine more diverse populations. Our participants only consisted of White college students, so it is important for future studies to examine this effect on other races. For example, Blacks and Latinos are much more vulnerable to police misconduct (Weitzer & Tuch, 2004). Because of this, it would be interesting to see if these populations would be more or less likely to avoid information

because of their vulnerability. Future researchers should study people of different parts of the country, from major cities to rural areas, to get a more accurate representation across political, racial, and geographic spectrums. BLM and similar movements have had to overcome enormous obstacles, such as the attempts people make to discredit their claims and false portrayals of victims in the media (Hoffman, Granger, Vallejos, & Moats, 2016). Portrayals of victims of racial injustices are often misrepresented in the media, e.g. depicting them with the criminal stereotype of young Black males as ‘thugs’. With Trayvon Martin, some news outlets went to great lengths to demonize him by portraying him as a dangerous Black thug. When victims are being portrayed with these stereotypes, they lose the credibility of being innocent victims, which could then influence whether or not people avoid information related to these cases. Future studies should observe the differences in media coverage and how that could be connected to information avoidance, especially with news outlets that target specific political ideologies.

Our results suggest that a key part of why conservatives are skeptical of minority movements such as the issue of police violence is because they are unmoved by shame, less influenced by anger, and use guilt as a motivation to avoid. Information or images of Black victims do not enact the same motivational response in conservatives as they do in liberals. This problem is not just limited to political differences; Whites and Blacks are divided on the current state of race relations and racial equality (Pew Research Center, 2014a). Race in America has a profound impact in the way in which we experience day-to-day life, from college acceptance letters (Pew Research Center, 2014a) and promotions or hiring in jobs (Pew Research Center, 2016), to getting pulled over by the police (Epp, Maynard-Moody, & Haider-Markel, 2014). Our motivations and attitudes surrounding the color of one’s skin are so deeply ingrained in American society that exposing them is a top priority if we are ever going to solve the problem of racialized police vio-

lence and other racial inequalities. Once we understand how Americans receive, process, and act upon new and groundbreaking information, we will be better equipped to form a cohesive and inclusive response to our most troubling societal issues in a way that all Americans would be happy to support.



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## Appendix A

### Familiarity Scale

Please rate how familiar you are with the names and cases listed below from 0 (Not at all familiar) to 5 (Extremely familiar).

#### Trayvon Martin



#### Eric Garner



#### Michael Brown



#### Tamir Rice



### John Crawford



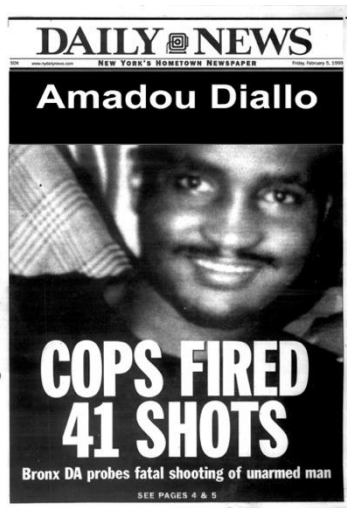
### Oscar Grant



### Rodney King



## Amadou Diallo



## Jordan Davis



## Jerame Reid



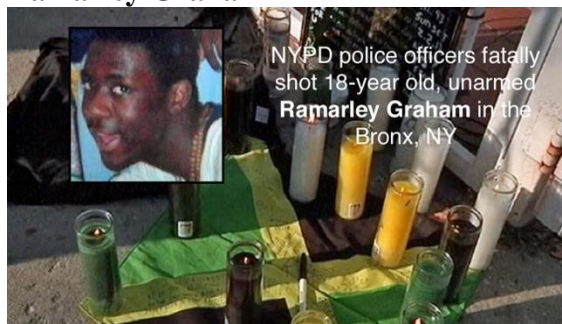
## Jonathan Ferrell



## Rekia Boyd



## Ramarley Graham



## Akai Gurley



## Renisha McBride



Table 1

*Summary of Intercorrelations, Means, and Standard Deviations*

	Mean (SD)	1	2	3	4	5
1. Information Avoidance	-1.86 (1.11)	--				
2. Political Orientation	3.58 (1.50)	-.277**	--			
3. Anger	2.70 (1.18)	-.373**	-.430**	--		
4. Shame	1.96 (1.63)	-.243**	-.321**	.577**	--	
5. Guilt	0.70 (0.98)	-.037	-.204**	.297**	.471**	--

*Note.* \*\* $p < .01$  (2-tailed).



Table 2

*Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Information Avoidance (N=411)*

Variable	Model 1			Model 2		
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	$\beta$	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	$\beta$
Political Orientation	.108	.037	.146*	.113	.037	.154**
Anger	-.285	.048	-.303**	-.311	.048	-.330**
Anger x Political Orientation				.065	.027	.114*
$R^2$		.151			.163	
<i>F</i> for change in $R^2$		36.33**			5.87*	

*Note.* Political orientation and anger were centered at their means.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

Table 3

*Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Information Avoidance (N=408)*

Variable	Model 1			Model 2		
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	$\beta$	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	$\beta$
Political Orientation	.172	.037	.234**	.183	.037	.248**
Shame	-.109	.034	-.160**	-.098	.034	-.145**
Shame x Political Orientation				.049	.021	.110*
$R^2$		.105			.117	
<i>F</i> for change in $R^2$		23.67**			5.41*	

*Note:* Political orientation and shame were centered at their means.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

Table 4

*Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Information Avoidance (N=411)*

Variable	Model 1			Model 2		
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	$\beta$	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	$\beta$
Political Orientation	.208	.036	.283**	.220	.036	.299**
Guilt	.035	.055	.032	.066	.055	.058
Guilt x Political Orientation				.105	.039	.132**
$R^2$		.077			.094	
<i>F</i> for change in $R^2$		17.10**			7.49**	

*Note:* Political orientation and guilt were centered at their means.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

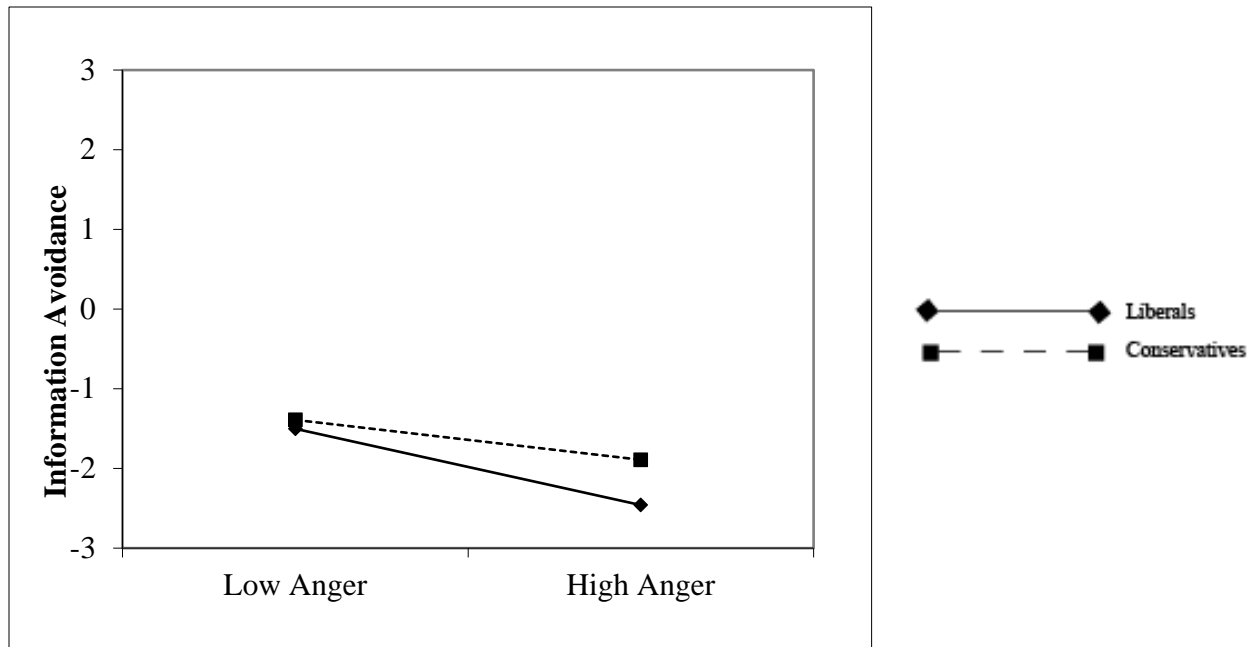


Figure 1. Interaction Between Anger and Political Orientation. Political orientation and emotion measures are graphed at  $\pm 1$  standard deviation from the mean.

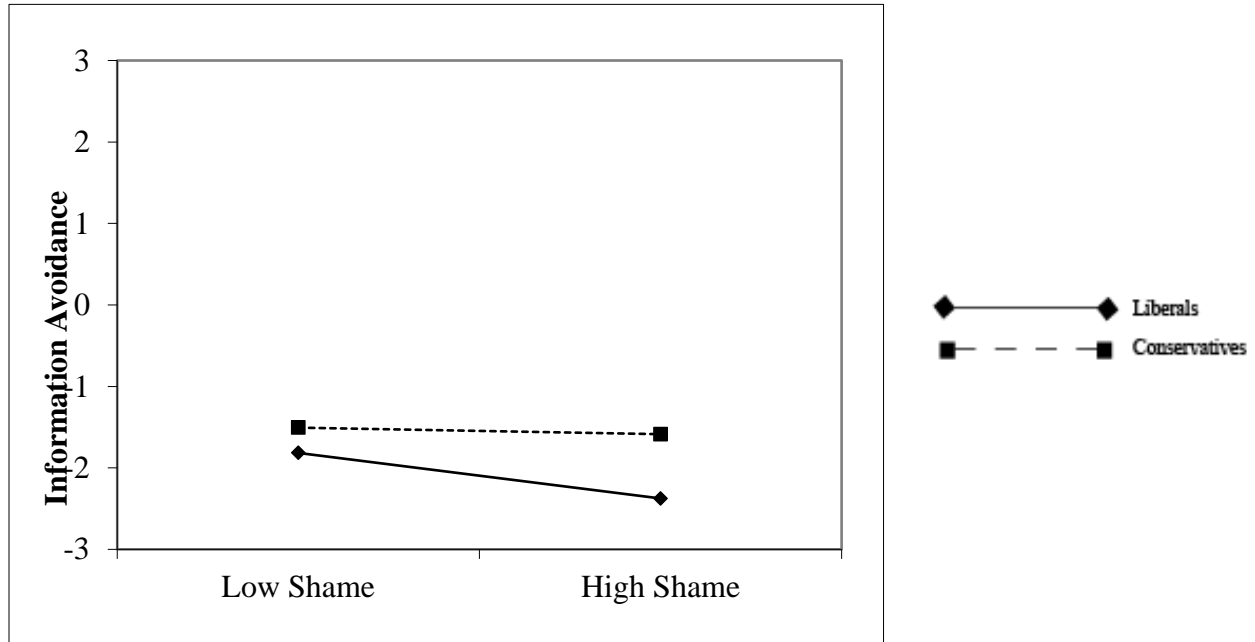
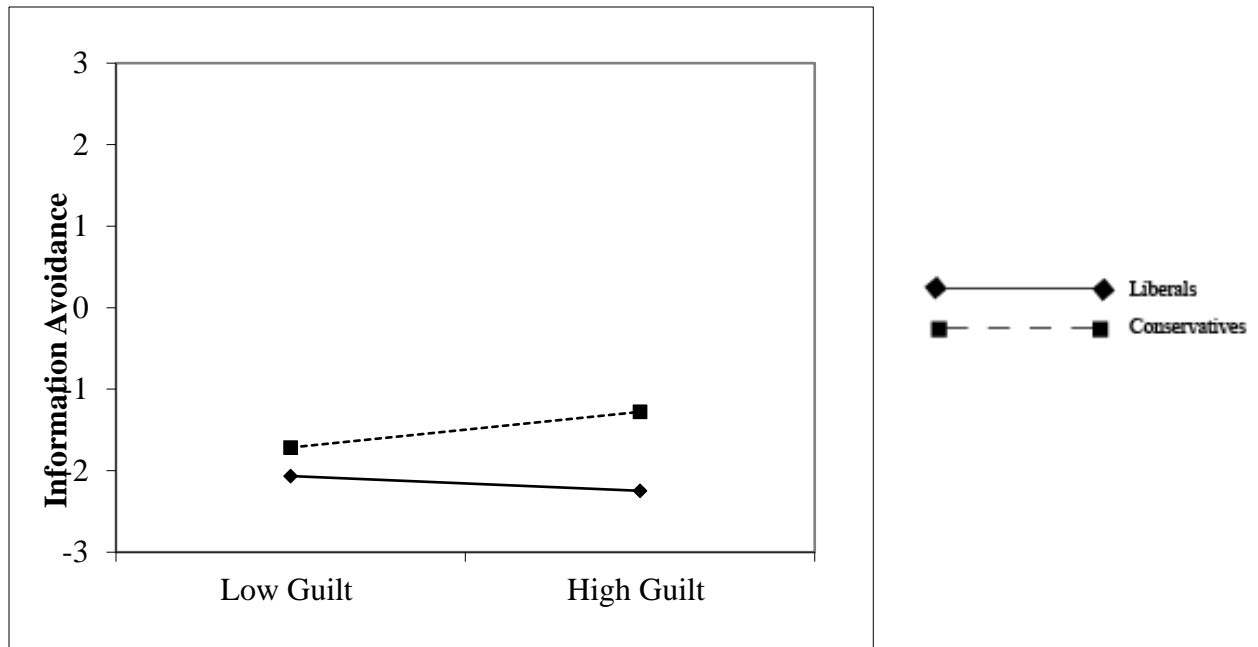


Figure 2. Interaction Between Shame and Political Orientation. Political orientation and emotion measures are graphed at  $\pm 1$  standard deviation from the mean.



*Figure 3. Interaction Between Guilt and Political Orientation. Political orientation and emotion measures are graphed at +/- 1 standard deviation from the mean.*