

“Embarrassed, Frustrated, Unfairly Judged”: Examining the Relationship between Media Frames of Welfare Recipients and Recipient Behavior

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RESEARCH FOCUS

This project inquires into the relationship, in any, between media consumption and self-regulatory behavior within a selective welfare regime.

Research Question: **how do media portrayals of welfare recipients and perceived judgement affect recipient behavior?**

MOTIVATION FOR THIS WORK

On October 31, 2025, *Fox News* published a story titled “SNAP beneficiaries threaten to ransack stores over government shutdown”. The story frames the government shutdown, which compromised food access for 40 million Americans, as an exposé of undeserving recipients, or individuals who receive welfare but *should not*. However, the video evidence was generated by artificial intelligence, an important fact not indicated in the story. On November 1, *Fox* edited the story with a new title “AI videos of SNAP beneficiaries complaining about cuts go viral” and added an editor’s note: “This article previously reported on some videos that appear to have been generated by AI without noting that. This has been corrected” (Cuebas-Fantauzzi 2025a). As of March 2026, the article has been permanently deleted without official statement from *Fox*.

Individual perceptions of others and themselves is an important area of study. While U.S. portrayals of recipients have changed especially with technological advancements, undeserving portrayals permeate news outlets and social media. When vulnerable populations receive critical media coverage, it can shape perceptions of judgement and behavior.

HYPOTHESES

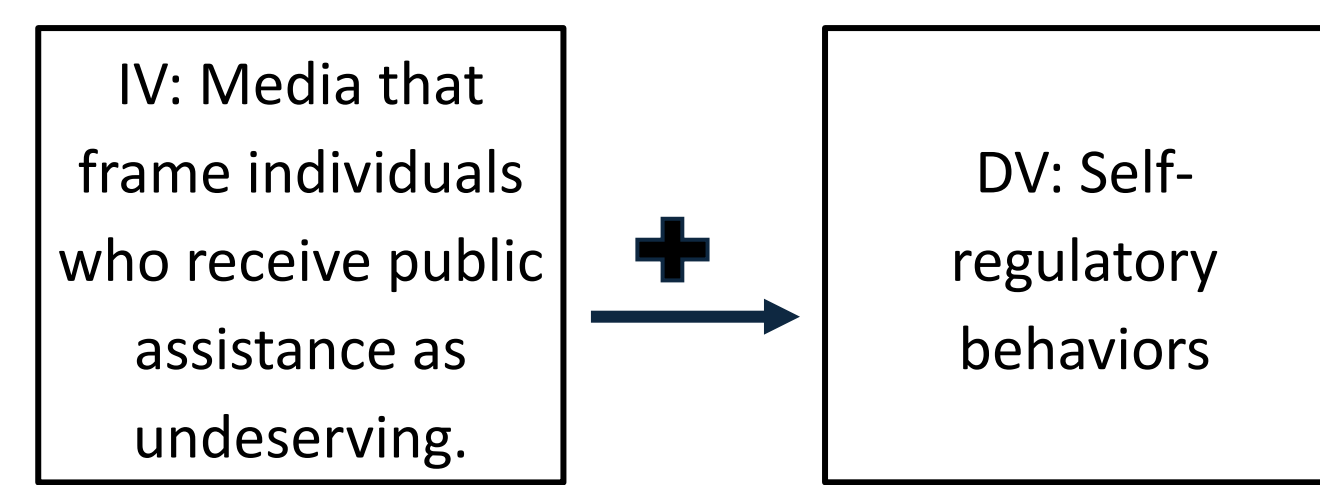


Figure 1. Hypothesis 1 arrow diagram

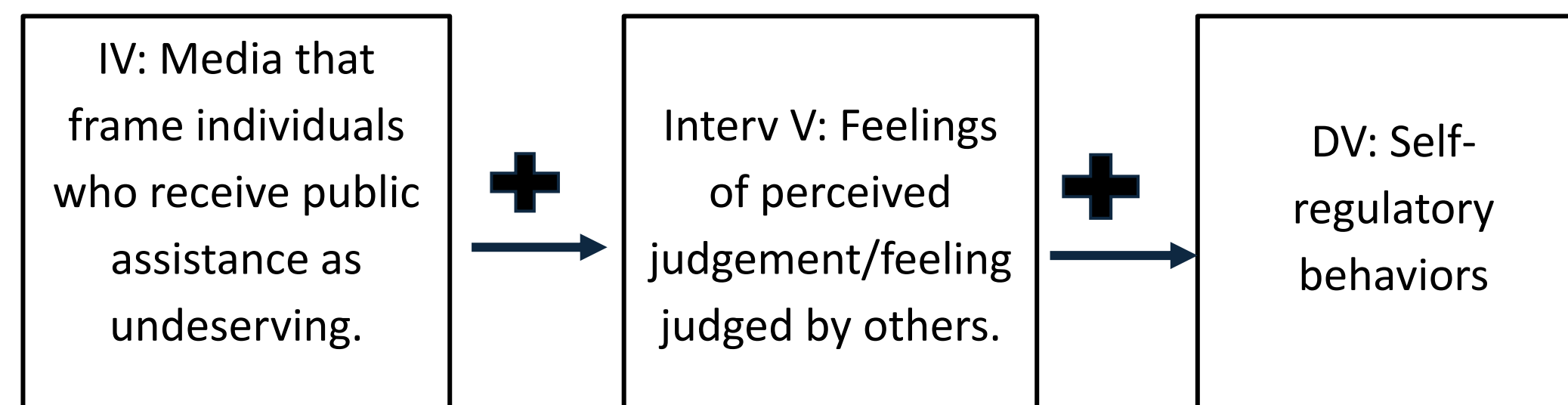


Figure 2. Hypothesis 2 arrow diagram

LITERATURE

The thesis uses literature within four thematic camps:

- Defining the Welfare State**
 - Organized, governmental power that collects funds for and distributes benefits
 - Categorized by the selectivity/universality of assistance
 - Liberal, corporatist, and social democratic
- Neoliberalism within the Selective Welfare State**
 - Emphasizes individual responsibility, “pull yourself up by your bootstraps”
 - Welfare takes from the “hard working” majority
 - Only the neediest, most deserving can **temporarily** benefit
- Macro-Institutions Affecting Micro-Actors**
 - A welfare state, as an institution, “others” welfare and recipients
 - Needy v. non-needy? Deserving needy v. undeserving needy?
 - CARIN criteria as method of distinguishing
 - Zero-sum game: someone else receiving assistance potentially jeopardizes your access
- Media Framing**
 - Institution for disseminating information
 - Frames: what is important and true, what to emphasize
 - Frequent undeserving portrayals of recipients
 - Contingencies, fraud, welfare queen, using the taxpayer’s money

Gap in the scholarship: what is the relationship between macro- and micro-actors (i.e. the media and recipients)?

THEORETICAL ANALYSIS

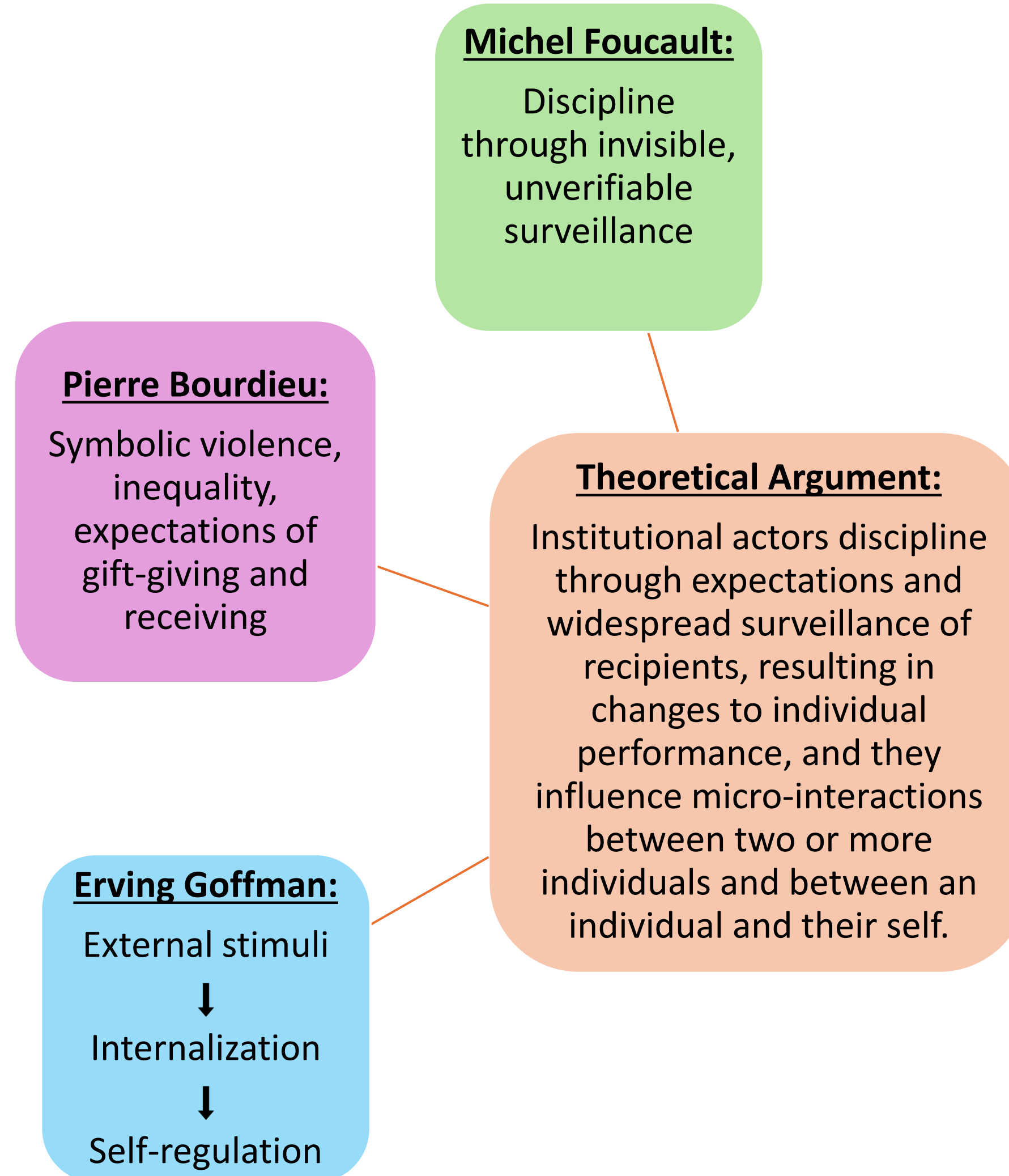


Figure 3. Theoretical analysis map. Three theorists, their respective ideas, and their impact on the theoretical argument.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses a small *n* comparative analysis and an observational case study. For the small *n* comparative analysis, I examine the perceived judgement and self-regulatory behaviors of 50 recipients. For the observational case study, I examine the news coverage of recipients across 10 outlets to infer the outlet’s tendency to publish articles that portray recipients as (un)deserving.

Survey:

Through CloudResearch Connect, 50 participants who, at the time of taking the survey, received government assistance completed a survey where they answered questions about their behaviors and perceptions of judgement.

Behavior Scenario (DV)	“I would present myself in a specific way or change my behavior when I use SNAP at a qualifying establishment.”	“I would choose not to use SNAP at a qualifying establishment if I felt judged.”	“I would present myself in a specific way or change my behavior when I use Medicaid/Medicare at a doctor’s office.”	“I would choose not to receive medical care at a qualifying establishment because I felt judged for my government provided health insurance.”	“I feel it is necessary for someone to change their behavior or appearance when they apply for government assistance.”
Judgement Scenario (Interv V)	“I feel judged when I use government assistance. For example: using EBT at a grocery store or Medicare at a doctor’s office.”	“I believe that officials who evaluate welfare applications judge the applicant’s character.”	“I believe that officials who evaluate welfare applications judge the applicant’s appearance.”	“I believe that a person who goes to their welfare interview with luxuries such as a new iPhone or a designer handbag will be judged.”	

Table 1. Behavior (top row) and Judgement (bottom row) scenarios found in the survey to measure the DV and Interv V, respectively.

Participants reported their demographics and where they consume news through. They also record their reactionary feelings when presented with hypothetical scenarios. The hypothetical scenarios portray or treat recipients negatively. These responses are not associated with the hypotheses; they are used to supplement the findings with personal testimony.

Latent Content Analysis:

To measure the IV, I sampled 599 articles (“articles” meaning news articles and posts on social media) from the most popular news and social media outlets: *ABC, CBS, CNN, Fox, MSNBC*, Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, X/Twitter, and YouTube. I conducted six searches on each outlet: “welfare”, “TANF”, “SNAP”, “Medicaid”, “Medicare”, and “EBT”. I sampled the first 10 results when sorting by relevance.

I first determined if each article was eligible for content analysis: was the article posted during 2025 or 2026 and does it specifically mention welfare recipients? If the article is eligible, it received two passes of analysis. In the first pass, I record my first impression: does the article generally portray recipients as deserving or undeserving? In the second pass, I record which (un)deserving themes the article uses to verify my first impression. After completing content analysis, I determine if each outlet produced more “deserving” or “undeserving” articles. Because most Americans read headlines or summaries as opposed to an entire article, I coded the headlines, summaries, and pictures for news articles. For social media videos, I coded the first minute.

The theoretical analysis sets the framework for this thesis. Individuals are not determined by the institutions they exist in, but they are not entirely free agents either. They are shaped and disciplined by their surroundings, but every individual has their own internalization process. When exposed to framing, such as the media consistently portraying recipients as lazy or fraudsters, or expectations, such as work requirements or expected gratitude from recipients, individuals internalize the institutional influences.

Internalization has three theorized outcomes: individuals view themselves and others within the institutional frames, they change their behavior to fit the expected or desirable frames, and they distance themselves from undesirable frames. When exposed to institutional frames and expectations, individuals internalize and self-regulate their behavior accordingly. Fronts or performances act as self-regulation.

FINDINGS

(Un)deservingness in Media:

The most surprising result in the media analysis is the proportions of “(un)deserving” and ineligible articles. I did not expect the ineligible articles – most of which discussed policy disputes over SNAP funding – that did not specifically mention recipients. Out of the eligible articles, the number of “undeserving” articles is nearly double the number of “deserving”.

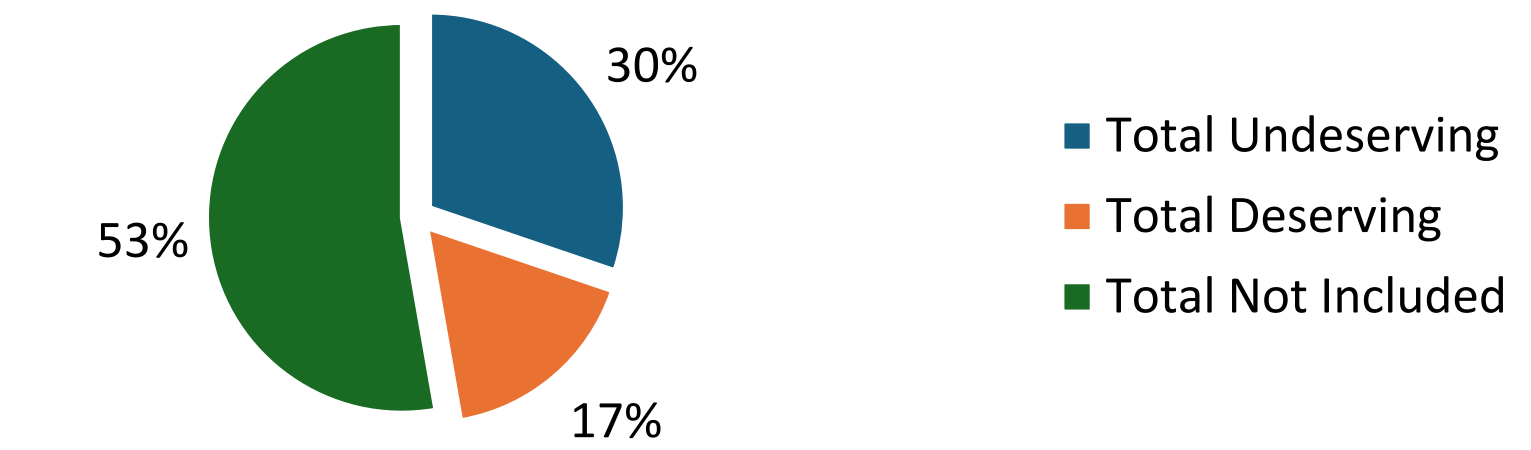


Figure 4. Pie chart of “deserving”, “undeserving” and ineligible articles.

Media Consumption and Self-Regulatory Behaviors:

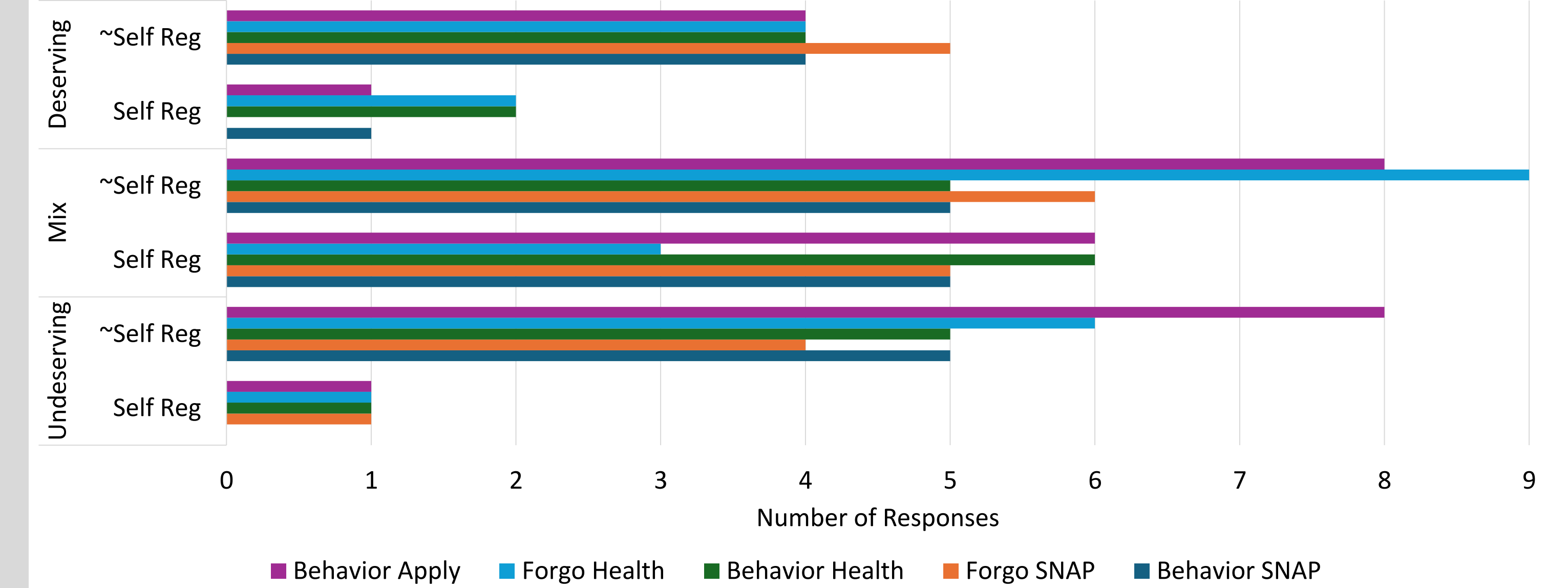


Figure 5. Bar chart of participant responses to Behavior scenarios, by their consumption of (un)deserving news.

Overall, most participants reject self-regulation. Participants who **only** consume news from “deserving” or “undeserving” outlets report similar self-regulation. Surprisingly, participants who consume news from **both** “deserving” or “undeserving” outlets engage in self-regulation more often than participants who **only** consume news from **either** “deserving” or “undeserving” outlets. This is not in line with hypothesized expectations.

Perceived Judgement:

The results do not support a relationship between the outlet a recipient consumes news through and their perceived judgement. Participants tend to view perceive judgement similarly regardless of where they consume news. However, participants who perceive judgement are more likely to engage in self-regulation compared to participants who do not perceive judgement.

Judgement Scenario	Response to Judgement Scenario	Response to Behavior Scenario	“Behavior Health”	“Forgo Health”	“Behavior Apply”
“Judge During Use”	~Judged	~Self Reg	0.9	1	0.857
	Judged	Self Reg	0	0	0.071
“Judge Character Apply”	~Judged	~Self Reg	0.4	0.68	0.429
	Judged	Self Reg	0.44	0.28	0.357
“Judge Appearance Apply”	~Judged	~Self Reg	0.786	0.857	0.938
	Judged	Self Reg	0.071	0.071	0
“Judge Apply Luxuries”	~Judged	~Self Reg	0.375	0.625	0.346
	Judged	Self Reg	0.333	0.208	0.385
“Judge Apply Luxuries”	~Judged	~Self Reg	0.818	0.818	1
	Judged	Self Reg	0.091	0.182	0
“Judge Apply Luxuries”	~Judged	~Self Reg	0.4	0.68	0.321
	Judged	Self Reg	0.48	0.2	0.464
“Judge Apply Luxuries”	~Judged	~Self Reg	0.8	0.8	0.875
	Judged	Self Reg	0.2	0	0.125
“Judge Apply Luxuries”	~Judged	~Self Reg	0.543	0.8	0.564
	Judged	Self Reg	0.286	0.171	0.282

Legend:
Orange Cells: [% Self Reg] >= [% ~Self Reg]
Blue Cells: [% ~Self Reg] - [% Self Reg] >= 0.6

Table 4 Proportion distribution of responses to Judgement scenarios by responses to Behavior scenarios

IMPLICATIONS

Many of the generalizations are speculative given the close-ended survey. The data does not support that the news media that individuals consume directly impacts their perceived judgement or self-regulation. The theoretical argument emphasized the importance of macro-level actors influencing micro-level actors. However, the results did not support that argument but instead support that micro-level interactions (perceived judgement) affect micro-level actors (individuals engaging in self-regulation). Further research should analyze the relationship between media and self-regulation through an experimental research design. Additionally, probing as to how and where recipients perceive judgement could further explore judgement, how recipients internalize it, and how it can affect self-regulation.

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