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**RELIGION IN THE MEDIA: A STUDY OF STUDENT PERCEPTION OF MEDIA
BIAS IN GEORGIA**

An honors paper submitted to the Department of English, Linguistics, and Communication
of the University of Mary Washington
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Departmental Honors

Alexander Clegg

May 2017

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Alexander W. Clegg
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05/08/17

Religion in the Media: A Study of Student Perception of Media Bias in Georgia

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Abstract

Georgia is fighting to make the step from developing to developed and the influence of the Georgian Orthodox Church has been an identified barricade for European Union leadership to accept Georgia into the supranational organization. This research investigates the relationship between religiosity and the perception of media bias among college students in Tbilisi, Georgia. It was hypothesized that the relationship between religiosity and perception of media bias will be negative, as measured by survey administered to the students. This paper proves the more religious a student is, the less likely he or she will recognize a media bias towards the Georgian Orthodox Church. Similarly, students who are more religious use and trust domestic news sources than those who are less religious. The implications are that religiosity plays a role in how students are viewing the news and that religious affiliation can alter how someone critically analyzes the information put forth.

Keywords: (domestic, international, news source, perception, media bias)

Religion in the Media: A Study of Student Perception of Media Bias in Georgia

In the 21st century, the governments of developed countries are generally expected to be removed from their state religion (Audi, 1989). However, in many countries that is not fully the case. In Georgia, the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC) is the second most trusted institution in the country (Charles, 2009) and according to the Concordat of 2002, it has a legitimate advisory role within the government (EurasiaNet, 2016). While constitutionally there is no connection, the current research is interested in the perceived media bias presented in the state media. As Georgia continues to work towards joining the European Union (EU), EU leadership has expressed concerns with how involved the GOC is in developing and influencing legislation, amongst other things. The intellectual development of current university students will determine the path that Georgia will follow. This study is attempting to understand those students' perceptions and understandings of state media. The research presented in the paper attempts to identify a relation between media usage, media perception, religiosity, and religious affiliation.

As presented in the following sections, the study was conducted via survey during a field visit to Georgia and was analyzed upon return to the United States. Based on readings and prior regional knowledge, the researchers anticipated that educated individuals, such as university students, will see a clear media bias towards the Georgian Orthodox Church. This can be anything from influenced legislation to homophobic rhetoric. Research in this field is scarce, but this project is constructed to fill this void.

Literature Review

Research on the relation between religion and media bias has largely focused on Christians in America (Glacock, Livesay, and Ruggiero, 2008; Golan and Day, 2010; Rouner,

Slater, and Buddenbaum, 1999) or on how certain religious institutions are covered in news stories (Cohen & Goldberg, 1999). The religious landscape of Georgia is much different than that of America, where religious citizens are split between Islam, Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity, and then many subdivisions within Christianity. In Georgia, it is much more consolidated, with approximately 83.9% of the citizens belonging to the Georgian Orthodox Church and roughly 10% identifying as Muslim (Charles, 2009). There has been some research on the usage and trust of Georgian news sources (IRI 2016) but not linking that usage and trust to someone's religiosity. This research will look to fill in some of the gaps in research about religiosity and media bias in Georgia.

Religious Practice

The important people consider religion to be in their daily lives is a significant predictor of trust in all three countries. When researching religious practice and its correlation to trust in Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, Charles (2009) found that while religious practice as measured by attendance, prayer, and fasting are low in all three countries, religious institutions are the second most trusted institutions in Georgia. The notion of religion extends beyond religious feelings and practices in Georgia, and many of its people believe institutions associated with the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC) play a positive role in society.

Religion and Media

Golan and Day (2010) found that media trust exhibited a statistically significant negative correlation between both network television news and daily newspapers and someone's religiosity. The amount of prayer someone participated in was negatively correlated with perceived network television trustworthiness, and there was a positive correlation between the role of religion in one's life and perception of internet news as factual. The role of religion in

one's life is a significant positive predictor of perception that internet news is factual. Those who use internet news more often find it to be more factual. It is important to note that the way Golan and Day survey was coded, a positive correlation indicates disagreement and a negative correlation indicates agreement. Armfield and and Hobert (2003) found that religiosity is negatively associated with internet use.

Opinions on the Georgian Orthodox Church and Domestic Media in Georgia

A 2013 International Republican Institute (IRI) survey found that out of all the institutions in Georgia, the church had the highest favorable response rate, with 95% of respondents expressing favorable opinions about the work of the church. The Georgian media was also highly rated in this survey, with 84% expressing positive opinions about their work. A similar survey done by IRI in 2016 found that 39% of Georgians felt that media freedom had progressed in the past four years, while 20% felt that it had regressed. In the 2016, survey the Georgian Orthodox Church was still ranked as the most favorable institution, with 89% responding favorably to the work of the church, while the Georgian media was ranked third, with 74% responding favorably. In the same survey 48% of respondents felt that the issue of media freedom was improving, while 31% felt that ,it was getting worse.

Usage and Trust of Different News Sources in Georgia

The 2016 IRI survey also polled Georgian citizens on their consumption and trust of several news sources, mainly focusing on domestic sources. They found that 5% watched the Georgian Orthodox Church's patriarch's channel regularly, while 2% listed it as the source that they trusted the most. Domestic TV stations such as Rustavi 2 and Imedi TV were among the most used and trusted sources. In the same survey, 94% said they followed the current international situation on Georgian TV, followed by Georgian websites (15%), Facebook (9%),

Georgian print media (8%), Russian TV (9%), and Georgian Radio (4%). Georgian TV was also the most trusted with 88% responding that it was the most trustworthy source for information about the current international situation, followed by Russian TV (3%), Georgian websites (3%), Georgian print media (2%), Georgian radio (1%) and Facebook (1%). When polled on internet usage, 34% of respondents reported using the internet everyday, while 49% reported never using it. Facebook seems to have an important role following the news for Georgians, as it was the second most popular website for getting news, with 15% saying it was their most used site for news. This information was important for deciding which kind of news sources to list on our survey.

Hypotheses

Based off the literature review, the researchers have created the following research questions and hypotheses to guide this study:

H1: Students who identify as more religious will be less likely to recognize a media bias towards the Georgian Orthodox Church.

H2: Students who are more religious will have more trust in domestic news sources.

H3: Students who are more religious will use domestic news sources more frequently than international news sources.

Methodology

Pre-Study Procedures

Before the start of the study, the researchers were required to submit an application to the International Review Board (IRB). The form included a brief abstract, rationale behind the study, proposed methodology of data collection, sampling methodology, information on gathering consent, confidentiality agreements, necessary precautions, and the risks and benefits of

participating in the study. All documents were submitted in both Georgian and English and were approved by the IRB.

Sampling Methodology

The participants were localized to one university in Tbilisi, Georgia. Researchers isolated the university for two reasons: 1) the lack of available online information from other public institutions and 2) the university is the largest, public, multi-discipline university in Tbilisi. A convenience sampling methodology was used to identify participants. The researchers sent emails to ten professors from the Political Science, Journalism, and International Relations disciplines at the university asking to attend a class period and administer the surveys to the students during a field visit. Four professors responded and approved the administering of the surveys. Individual students were not contacted until meeting in classroom. The researchers attend a total of six classes. The total number of students surveyed was 107 ($N = 107$), 36 (33.6%) of which were male ($n = 36$), 67 (62.6%) female ($n = 67$), and five (4.6%) declined to specify ($n = 5$). The average age of the respondents was $M = 20.44$ ($SD = 1.54$) years old.

Procedure

In March of 2017, the researchers travelled to Tbilisi, Georgia to administer the in-class survey. At the date and time agreed upon between the researchers and the professors, the researchers met with the students in classrooms at the university. At the beginning of the class period, the researchers introduced themselves in English. If any translations were required, the professors agreed to do so. Once the process was understood, the researchers distributed the informed consents and collected every paper once signed by the participants. It is important to note that it was emphasized that participation was not required. Numerous students did decide to opt-out, and no penalty was administered. Once every consent form was collected, the

researchers distributed the surveys to the students and waited until they were completed. Once done, students would raise a hand and the researchers would collect the survey. When all the surveys were collected, the researchers would distribute the debriefing form which explained the purpose behind the study and provided contact information in case of any questions. The time between the introduction and the distribution of debriefing forms was roughly 20 to 25 minutes. Students were able to ask questions during the survey, but very few did. All questions that were asked were related to translation interpretations.

Measures

Need for Cognition. Students were asked to answer 16 questions regarding their cognizant decisions. Questions included “I want to know exactly what is good and bad about everything” and “It is very important to me to hold strong opinions,” all of which were measured on a five-point scale from “extremely uncharacteristic” to “extremely characteristic.” The researchers created a sum for each student comprising of each question ($M = 55.25$, $SD = 6.95$), and it was this calculated number that was used for comparison in later correlation and regression tests. The importance of this variable is to attempt to measure how cognizant, aware, and critically thinking the student was.

Media Usage. The second variable on the survey was used to measure the respondent’s media usage. The questions were broken down by different sources, and respondents were asked to identify how often each source was utilized for the gathering of news information. The sources included were Twitter, Facebook, international news websites, domestic news websites, international newspapers, domestic newspapers, international news television, domestic news television, radio, Ertsubneba Television (a local television station owned by the Georgian Orthodox Church), and other. This variable was included so the researchers were aware of how

often the students were using each source. It is important to know this information because connecting usage to trustworthiness can give insight into how aware the respondents are regarding current events and bias. This variable was measured on an eight point Likert-style scale from “never” to “more than three times daily.”

Media Trust. Media trustworthiness was a variable included to measure how much students trust the sources used for information gathering. On a 1-7 Likert scale, students would report how trustworthy they perceive various media sources are. The sources used for this measure were the same as those used for the media usage variable. The importance of this measure was to connect trustworthiness to media bias. Perceived bias could be a factor of low trust, and this variable allowed the researchers to measure this.

News Fact Checking. Students were asked to report how often they fact checked the news they consumed on a scale from one to seven ($M = 4.86$ $SD = 1.59$). The importance of this variable was to quantify how likely students were to challenge the information from the news sources. Reporting a high value of fact checking may imply that students recognize that not all news is legitimate and needs to be verified by another source.

Media Bias. Participants were asked to rate how biased domestic Georgian media was towards certain organizations or groups on 1-7 Likert scale (1 = not biased to 7 = extremely biased). The organizations or groups included were the Georgian Dream Coalition, the United National Movement, the Free Democrats, the Georgian Orthodox Church, the Catholic Church, nationalistic groups, pro-Russian groups, and the European Union. The organizations chosen were based off of known large organizations or movements in the region.

Religious Identity. Students were asked to disclose which religion they identify with. Students were provided five options: Georgian Orthodox (80.3%), Catholic (0.93%), Muslim (2.8%),

other (3.7%), and none (13%).

Religiosity. For the purpose of this study, the researchers quantified religiosity by asking students how often they attended their holy buildings (church, mosque, temple, etc), how often they prayed daily, and how often they fasted. These measures were based off research done by Charles (2009). A mean of these three values was created to use as a single variable. Students were prompted to respond by filling out a five-point scale from never, 1-3 times per day, 4-6 times per day, 7-10 times per day, 10+ times per day. A measure was also taken to quantify how religious a student's family is.

Demographics.

Age. Students were asked to provide their age. The average age of the students was $M = 20.44$ years old, $SD = 1.54$ years. The minimum age was 18 and the maximum was 26.

Sex. The 'sex' variable was used to classify students for further analysis. Thirty two of the respondents were male, 67 female, and two chose to not specify.

Ethnicity. Of the 107 respondents, 106 identified as white/caucasian and one student identified as asian. This variable was included to act as an identifier for further analysis.

Nationality. Of the 107 students surveyed, 106 (99%) identified as Georgian citizens, and one student (1%) identified as Armenian. This variable is an identifier used to classify the students surveyed. For the purpose of this survey, nationality is defined as the location where the student identifies as being originally from.

Citizenship. Of the 107 students surveyed, 107 (100%) identified as Georgian citizens. This variable is an identifier used to classify the students surveyed. Citizenship is defined as which country the student's passport is issued by.

Results

The data was analyzed using SPSS.

H1 hypothesized that the more religious a student identifies as, the less he or she will recognize a bias towards the Georgian Orthodox Church. The first test run was a bivariate correlation test, which reported a significant correlation ($r(df) = -.323, p < .001$). Next, a regression test revealed a significant and negative predictor of media bias recognition, $\beta = -.323, t = -3.34, p < .001$. See **Figure 1**. The relationship between the two variables indicates the more religious a participant is, the less he or she recognizes a bias towards the Georgian Orthodox Church.

H2 posited that the more religious a student identifies as, the more he or she will trust domestic news sources. First, using SPSS, H2 was tested for a correlation. After a significant correlation was identified ($r(df) = .340, p < .001$), a regression test was conducted. The regression test found a significant and positive predictor of trust, $\beta = .340, t = 3.69, p < .001$. See **Figure 2**. As shown in the data, the more religious a student is, the more he or she will trust domestic news sources.

The final hypothesis says the more religious a student identifies as, the more he or she will use domestic news sources over international news sources. In order to test this hypothesis, religiosity was divided into two levels: low and high religiosity. Low religiosity was defined as a level from 0-2.5 and high religiosity was >2.5 . Again, a bivariate correlation test was the first measurement computed which presented a statistically significant correlation ($r(df) = .239, p < .001$). Next, a regression test found a significant positive predictor of news source use $\beta = .239, t = 2.53, p < .001$. See **Figure 3**. To further interpret the data, an independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare high and low religiosity against domestic news consumption ($t(106) = -3.51, p = .001$). These results suggest that religiosity of highly religious students predicts

domestic news consumption with a 99% confidence interval. See **Figure 4**. As shown in the data, the more religious a student is, the more he or she will trust domestic news sources.

Discussion

Hypothesis One posited that students who identify as more religious will be less likely to recognize a media bias towards the Georgian Orthodox Church. The results from the survey support this hypothesis. The relationship shows that as religiosity goes up, perceived bias towards the GOC goes down. The concept was formulated under the belief that those who are more religious will identify with the messages being put forth by the Georgian media. A comparison can be made between United States of America's Republicans and Fox News viewers. Viewers tend to watch news that portrays their own beliefs (Iyengar and Hahn, 2009).

The results from Hypothesis Two confirmed that students who are more religious will have more trust in domestic news sources. The positive relationship shown in **Figure 2** illustrates the more religious a student is, the more trust he or she will have in domestic news sources. It is unlikely an international news source, like CNN or BBC, will be biased towards the Georgian Orthodox Church. Therefore, the researchers were interested in how more religious students viewed and trusted Georgia's own domestic media. The implications of these findings are consistent with those found in the results for Hypothesis One. Students who are more religious watch and associate their views with news sources that have the same opinions.

Hypothesis Three, which read "students who are more religious will use domestic news sources more," was confirmed as well. To prepare the data necessary for testing Hypothesis Three, religiosity was divided into two levels: low and high religiosity. The cut-off for the two were 0-2.5 and >2.5 respectively. As shown in **Figure 3**, the difference between the two was minimal, but it was significant. These findings fall in line with the other two hypotheses. It can

be inferred from this data that students in Georgia are often acting in confirmation bias.

A point of contention with Hypothesis Three is the argument that Georgia is a small country hidden within the Lesser Caucasus, meaning that it is unlikely international news sources, like the ones previously mentioned, would cover news applicable to Georgians. This could, in theory, skew the results because Georgians would watch domestic news sources more than international as domestic is the only real medium of relative news. This was factored into the data analyzed and is why the researchers split religiosity into two, more descriptive, variables of high and low religiosity. If the above theory were to remain true, that Georgians watch domestic more than international simply because of who covers Georgia more, the two values of high religiosity and low religiosity versus amount viewed would be equal. However, because students with high religiosity watch domestic news more than those who are less religious, we can conclude religiosity does play a role in what sources a student chooses to engage with.

The research presented in this study falls in line with previous literature done. The findings confirm what Golan and Day (2010) found when they tested the correlation between trust and religiosity of someone in the USA. This study, Golan and Day (2010), and the report done by the International Republican Institute (2013) paint a picture of the current relationship between media, trust, and religiosity in Georgia. As previously mentioned, the role of religion in one's life has been found to be significant positive predictor of perception that internet news was factual. The past research concurs with the findings in this study and allows the researchers to confirm the conclusions made in this paper.

It should be noted that throughout the duration of this study a lawsuit against the domestic news station Rustavi 2 was in court. A battle over the ownership rights for the station was underway, and it was the understanding of the researchers that most students sided with the

complainant. While the effects are unknown, it is anticipated by the researchers that this may have caused a slight decrease in trust towards domestic news sources.

Similarly, the researchers believe it may have been important to specify what was and what was not considered domestic news sources. On multiple surveys students wrote in Rustavi 2 (a domestic news source). It is not known whether this was to emphasize his or her use of Rustavi 2 or because he or she did not consider Rustavi 2 a domestic news source. Nevertheless, specifying on the survey could have been beneficial.

Limitations of this research mostly stem from the lack of surveys collected. After initial contact with the professors in Tbilisi, the researchers were hopeful for close to 300 students. At the time of surveying, a significant portion of students were not in attendance and the final tally was significantly lower. This is a major shortfall of this study while; 107 is still a representative portion, a larger number would have given the research more of a complete picture.

When the Rustavi 2 case is settled, further research may include collecting the same information and see if students' opinions have changed. The research presented in this paper begins to fill a void in media and Georgian scholarship. While religiosity is not the sole predictor to media bias perception, this study begins to tell a story. Further research into media bias perception in Georgia is important to the future development of the Caucasian nation.

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Figures

Figure 1.

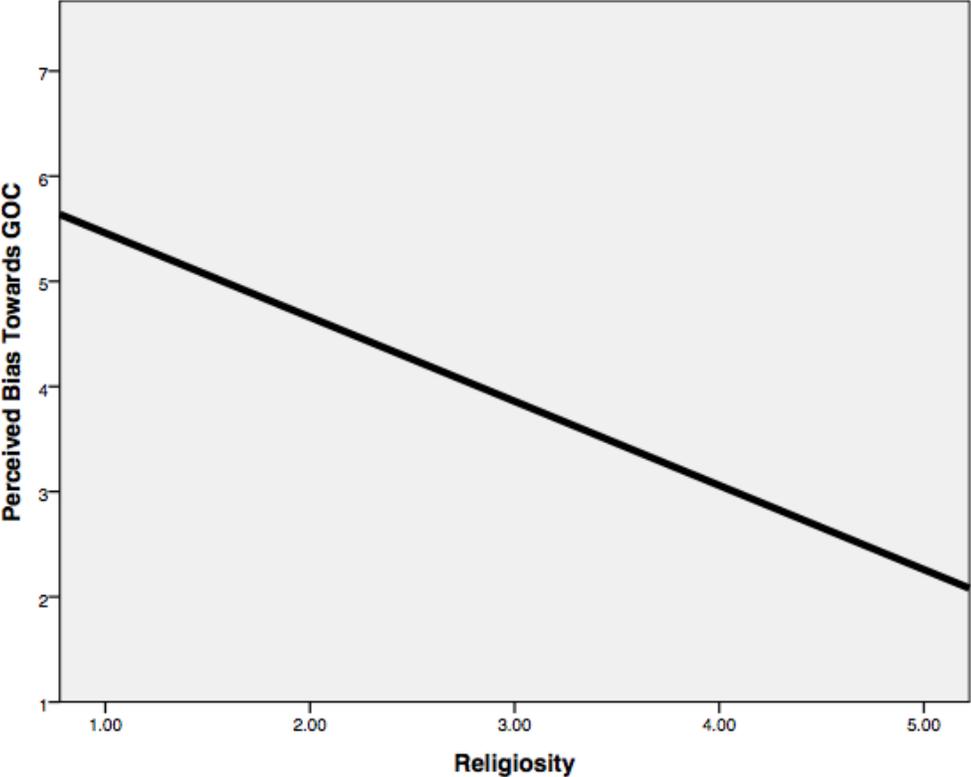


Figure 1 demonstrates a negative correlation between religiosity and perceived media bias towards the Georgian Orthodox Church. The coefficient for this relationship is $\beta = -.323$, significant to the 99% level.

Figure 2.

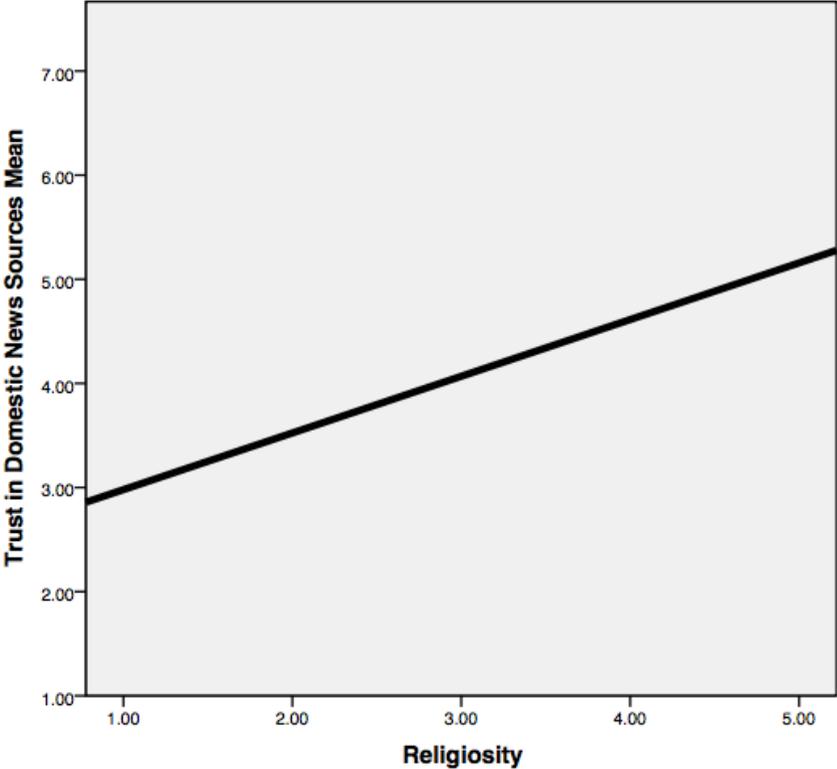


Figure 2 demonstrates a positive correlation between religiosity and trust in domestic news sources. The coefficient for this relationship is $\beta = .340$, significant to the 99% level.

Figure 3.

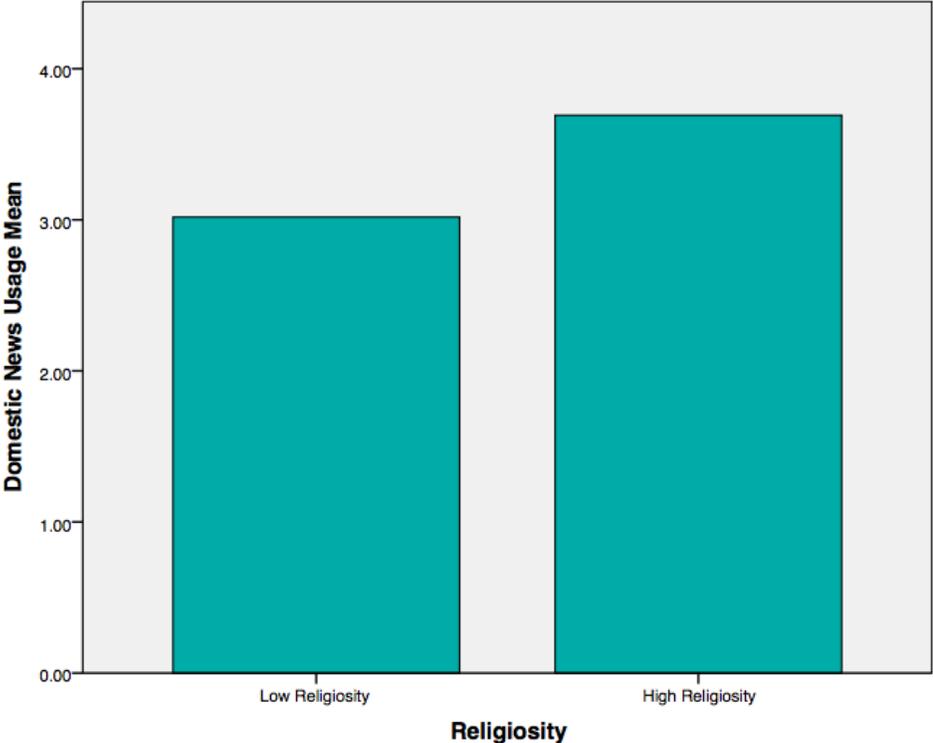


Figure 3 demonstrates the difference in usage of domestic news sources by low religiosity and high religiosity students. The coefficient for the relationship between religiosity and domestic news usage is $\beta = .239$ significant to the 99% level.

Figure 4.

Independent Samples Test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means	
		F	Sig.	t	df
dom_use_mean	Equal variances assumed	2.940	.089	-3.503	106
	Equal variances not assumed			-3.391	83.152

Independent Samples Test

		t-test for Equality of Means		
		Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
dom_use_mean	Equal variances assumed	.001	-.67382	.19234
	Equal variances not assumed	.001	-.67382	.19872

Independent Samples Test

		t-test for Equality of Means	
		95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
		Lower	Upper
dom_use_mean	Equal variances assumed	-1.05516	-.29247
	Equal variances not assumed	-1.06905	-.27858

Figure 4 demonstrates the results from an independent-samples t-test between high and low religiosity and domestic news usage.