"Shouting Matches and Echo Chambers": Perceived Identity Threats and Political Self-Censorship on Social Media

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This mixed-methods study, conducted during the highly polarizing and uncivil 2016 U.S. presidential election, examines how college students' conceptions of audience and the tone of discourse on social media informed their decisions to express or withhold political opinions. A preelection survey found that students (*N* = 198) preferred to discuss political views offline rather than on social media. Postelection focus groups (*N* = 196) found near consensus that posting political opinions on social media was an ineffective way to persuade others or break new ground in political dialogue. Participants perceived no benefit to sharing opinions that had already widely circulated within their politically homogenous social network, and they sought to avoid conflicts they witnessed when outspoken members of their networks engaged with people with whom they disagreed. We explore how students' impression management and perceived identity threats led them to limit political expression on social media despite having strong interest in and feelings about the election.

Keywords: impression management, identity threat, online incivility, political engagement, presidential election, social media

Exchanging political information and perspectives online can help young adults make informed decisions (Yamamoto, Kushin, & Dalisay, 2015), establish a political identity (Bode, Vraga, Borah, & Shah, 2014; Middaugh, Bowyer, & Kahne, 2017), and manage disagreements (Weinstein, Rundle, & James, 2015). Social media has become a key venue for political discussion (Anderson, Toor, Ranie, & Smith, 2018), allowing younger generations who embrace expressive modes of citizenship to communicate on a growing number of platforms (Park, 2015).

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Yet young adults commonly avoid political expression on social media (Lorenzano, Sari, Storm, Rhodes, & Borah, 2018; Middaugh et al., 2017; Thorson, 2014; Weinstein et al., 2015). Scholars have suggested a variety of factors to explain this phenomenon: low self-efficacy and political interest (Bode, 2017; Yang & DeHart, 2016), uncertainty about audience (Marwick & boyd, 2010; Thorson, 2014), conflict aversion, and fear of an online backlash (Thorson, 2014; Vraga, Thorson, Kliger-Vilenchik, & Gee, 2015; Weinstein et al., 2015). These factors, which may appear disparate, taken together reflect attitudes and beliefs that are tied to young adults' identity development, behavior, and expressions (Bandura, 1999).

Identity development is not a linear process and is filled with uncertainties. Young adults frequently face threats to their burgeoning identity when interacting with others (Erikson, 1968; Valde, 1996)—especially on social media, where incivility is rampant (Chen, 2017), and multiple, overlapping audiences make it difficult to vary identity presentation and manage impressions (Marwick & boyd, 2010). Evidence suggests that young adults rely on others to validate their identity and self-worth on social media (Manago, 2015), and they fear the possibility of embarrassment or negative evaluation in social situations (Mazalin & Moore, 2004).

Research has examined how social media users' conceptions of their audience and perceptions of political discourse shape decisions on whether and how to engage in online dialogue (Lorenzano et al., 2018; Marwick & boyd, 2010; Thorson, 2014; Weinstein, 2014). Yet few studies have explored whether young adults perceive posting to social media as a threat to their identity. We explore the role of identity and the perception of identity threats in the case of college students during the 2016 U.S. presidential election.

The 2016 election provided an ideal backdrop to study students' decisions to express or withhold political opinions on social media and their perceptions of identity threats. The contentious presidential contest between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump captured young voters' attention, with roughly three quarters—a far greater share than in previous elections—saying they gave "a lot of thought" to the election and believed it "really mattered" who won (Pew Research Center, 2016b). Young adults found social media the most helpful source for learning about the election (Gottfried, Barthel, Shearer, & Mitchell, 2016), but commonly felt that any political expression on social platforms would invite backlash from users who did not share their beliefs or disliked finding political information in their feeds (Lorenzano et al., 2018). Partisans' views of the opposing party were more negative than at any time in recent history, and growing numbers viewed their political adversaries as a threat (Pew Research Center, 2016a). Partisan antipathy and political polarization made for "an exceptionally complex atmosphere" for social media users (Duggan & Smith, 2016, p. 7).

We explore how young adults perceived the environment for political discussions both online and offline, and why, given high interest in and strong opinions about the election, they largely avoided stating their views on social media. Through a preelection survey and postelection focus groups, this study examines how students' impression management and perceived identity threats factored into limiting political expression on social media. It explores how context collapse—the merging of diverse social contexts into one (Marwick & boyd, 2010)—created uncertainty about audience, hindered participants' ability to differ self-presentation strategies, and led to decisions about whether to conceal political opinions or reveal their authentic selves.

We first review scholarship on expressive political engagement to identify ways in which social media users communicate their views. Then we explore how perceived incivility on social media led young adults to conceal their political opinions to avoid conflict. Finally, we explicate a theoretical framework of identity threat and impression management online to examine factors that limit social media users' political expression.

Expressive Political Engagement on Social Media

Scholarship on online political activity often distinguishes between informational consumption and citizen expression (Gil de Zúñiga, Bachmann, Hsu, & Brundidge, 2013). Park (2015) describes consumptive behaviors (e.g., reading or watching news) as relatively passive. Expressive behaviors (e.g., posting, endorsing, sharing links, engaging in dialogue) are "more active and interactive, which can engage people in more dialogical and dynamic processes of political involvement" (Park, 2015, p. 699). "Harder" expressive social media behaviors (e.g., posting views or discussing politics) often translate into offline political engagement that is crucial in developing a political identity (Bode et al., 2014). "Easier" behaviors (e.g., liking, sharing, or commenting on others' content) can also be gateways to more significant political activities under the right conditions (Bode, 2017).

Young adults are thought to prefer expressive political engagement, defined around peer content sharing and social media, to dutiful citizenship based on joining with others in sanctioned civic activities and organizations (Bennett, Wells, & Freelon, 2011). Yet posting about politics was rare in recent elections. During the 2012 election, college students far more often used social media to monitor political news than voice their political opinions (Powers, Moeller, & Yuan, 2016; Yang & DeHart, 2016). That trend held in 2016; young adults most commonly followed the election on social media (Gottfried et al., 2016), but rarely posted their political views (Anderson & Jiang, 2018).

To gauge possible influences of social media on identity, we explore how and in what context participants used a variety of platforms during the election. This study examines participants' interest level in following politics and the 2016 election, whether they primarily used social media to follow political news or share political views, and whether they engaged more in harder or easier expressive behaviors. Specifically, we ask:

RQ1: *What are the preferred settings for college students to follow and discuss politics during a presidential election year?*

Online Incivility, Conflict Avoidance, and the 2016 Election

During the 2016 election, social media users found discussing politics with people they disagreed with frustrating and stressful (Duggan & Smith, 2016; Pew Research Center, 2016a). They frequently disliked sharing political views because they perceived discourse as uncivil (Duggan & Smith, 2016; Weinstein et al., 2015), characterized by insulting language, profanity, and hate speech (Chen, 2017). Many avoided conflicts by suppressing their political opinions (Dalisay, Kushin, & Yamamoto, 2016).

Self-censorship in public communication was observed long before the advent of social media. Noelle-Neumann's (1974) spiral of silence theory posited that people closely monitor the opinion climate and are more likely to self-censor out of fear of social isolation if they hold a minority opinion. Gearhart and Zhang (2015) found that social media users who receive negative reactions to political postings are less likely to respond to disagreeable posts and are more likely to self-censor, fearing others' reactions.

In 2016, nearly half of young adults reported witnessing conflict in online discourse (Middaugh et al., 2017), most commonly on Facebook, where they encountered the most uncivil political comments (Lorenzano et al., 2018). Earlier studies found that young adults avoided conversations on social media about controversial topics out of concern regarding who would view their posts, lack of control over the setting, and the possibility of alienating others (Thorson, 2014; Vraga et al., 2015).

Weinstein et al. (2015) found a shift in attitudes and behaviors of civically engaged youth. When first interviewed, the majority "blended" their offline and online lives, engaging in political expression on social media because it allowed them to showcase their values and promote their identity as civic actors (Weinstein, 2014). Comparatively few displayed a "bounded" pattern of expression by refraining from expressing their political beliefs online, or "differentiating" by posting on some platforms but not others depending on context (Weinstein, 2014). When surveyed several years later, the same participants often silenced their expression on social media, citing concerns about online incivility. They viewed political expression on social media as more harmful than beneficial, and offline expression as more meaningful and less risky (Weinstein et al., 2015).

This study further examines young adults' decisions about whether to post about politics on social media—specifically, how they assessed the tone of political discourse, and how conflict avoidance factored into decisions to conceal political views. Perceptions of conflict and incivility provide a glimpse into whether students sensed potential threats to their identity.

Impression Management and the Imagined Audience

Identity is constructed and maintained as individuals play roles within various settings and modify their behavior based on context and audience (Goffman, 1959), whom Mead (1934) described as the "generalized other." Some role performances are meant for certain audience members, but not others. In "front-stage" settings, people engage in impression management to project an idealized identity and monitor audience response. "Back-stage" settings allow people to be freed from social norms and display their uninhibited, authentic selves (Goffman, 1959).

Social media, a front-stage setting, is ideal for impression management because users have curatorial control over their image (Weinstein, 2014). Yet they cannot tailor self-presentation to specific interaction partners because they are addressing a broad audience (Kramer & Winter, 2008) and thus have limited understanding of who is viewing their posts. "Social media collapse diverse social contexts into one, making it difficult for people to engage in the complex negotiations needed to vary identity presentation, manage impressions, and save face" (Marwick & boyd, 2010, p. 122). Users often take cues from their

online environment to construct an imagined audience. This conception of audience helps individuals determine how to present their online identity (Marwick & boyd, 2010).

Marwick and boyd (2010) observed context collapse in self-presentation strategies of Twitter users, who used the platform in a variety of ways (e.g., as a news source, broadcast medium, and marketing channel) and had diverse networks, leading them to identify a variety of imagined audiences (Marwick & boyd, 2010). Because having to present a singular identity to overlapping audiences made it impossible to differ self-presentation strategies, Twitter users often concealed personal information and avoided controversial or negative topics that might alienate followers. Marwick and boyd described this as the "lowest-common-denominator effect, as individuals only post things they believe their broadest group of acquaintances will find non-offensive" (p. 122). An audience is often imagined as "nightmare readers" such as parents, partners, and bosses. Social media users weigh the need to conceal information from these audiences against their instinct to reveal their authentic selves. Twitter users favored concealment to manage impressions. "Without the ability to vary information flow based on audience, participants could not risk a sensitive topic being viewed by the wrong person" (Marwick & boyd, 2010, p. 125). This phenomenon is also prevalent on other social media platforms where young adults and teens "must regularly contend with collapsed contexts and invisible audiences as a part of everyday life" (boyd, 2014, p. 31).

In evaluating the social media landscape during the 2016 election, Duggan and Smith (2016) described a similar phenomenon:

> The typical social media user inhabits a digital world that contains a wide mix of connections, ranging from close friends and family members to public figures or distant acquaintances. Often these friend networks represent a potentially combustible mixture of conflicting political opinions, and this intermingling of the personal and the political can lead to frustration and annoyance for users as they attempt to make their way through these digital spaces. (p. 7)

Maintaining an online identity requires managing impressions. As Goffman (1959) suggested, one strategy is avoiding conflicts that could pose a threat to one's role or identity within a specific social context. This study explores how students navigated their online identity, conceived of their audience on social media, and engaged in impression management. Specifically, we ask:

RQ2:   *How do students evaluate political discourse on social media and offline, and perceive their audiences in both contexts?*

Identity Threat

Beyond describing young adults' online behavior, this study explores identity threat as a reason why they largely refrained from engaging in political expression on social media. We suggest that participants often determined that offline spaces were safe to share political views and promote their identity as civic actors (Weinstein, 2014), while posting to social media threatened their identity. Our premise is that "action is the social expression of identity. The only route of access to the identity of another is through

his or her actions. . . . Since identity comprises emotions, beliefs, and attitudes it is a prime motivator of action" (Breakwell, 1986, p. 43) or inaction. Moreover, because online identities are frequently connected to offline identities, interactions and behaviors online can be regarded as contributing to an individual's sense of self (Lim, Nicholson, Yang, & Kim, 2015).

Identity develops through an ongoing interaction between the self and social world. Identity is constituted through a content dimension (characteristics such as group affiliation used to describe oneself), and a value dimension (negative or positive evaluation of characteristics; Breakwell, 1986). The self is a "cognitive system processing information," assimilating "new components to the identity structure" (content and its value) and accommodating existing components (Breakwell, 1986, p. 188). The process of assimilation and accommodation is guided by three principles of identity: continuity (identity persistence over time and situation), distinctiveness (uniqueness of character), and self-esteem (feeling of personal worth or social value). An individual's identity evolution is based on the interplay of these principles and the assimilation/accommodation process. "A threat to identity occurs when the processes of assimilation-accommodation and evaluation are unable, for some reason, to comply with the principles of continuity, distinctiveness and self-esteem" (Breakwell, 1986, p. 192).

Conflict arises when thoughts or experiences threaten an individual's perception of self or status in a social group. Young adults, whose identity development includes periods of vulnerability that are due to internal (e.g., biological and psychological) and external (e.g., social group) crises (Erikson, 1968), continuously evaluate possible identity threats. Responses to such threats typically involve ways to protect or restructure identity (Petriglieri, 2011). Restructuring is a complex process that often involves a drastic change of identity. More common is maintaining one's identity structure and avoiding confrontations, a response Breakwell (1986) described as isolation (intentional withdrawal from a potentially threatening situation), and Petriglieri (2011) defined as concealment (reducing the salience of an individual's identity to avoid a possible threat). A less common response is negativism: confronting a threat directly, often by attacking its source (Breakwell, 1986).

Online comments that attack one's self-esteem or call into question one's continuity or distinctiveness can be a threat to identity evaluation and may be an underlying motivation for self-censorship. Research suggests that social media users, when presented with identity threats, may manage impressions to avoid conflict and maintain self-esteem. This study explores how students identified potential threats of posting about politics, and which coping mechanisms they used in response. Specifically, we ask:

RQ3:   *How do students perceive posting to social media as a possible threat to their identity and cope with that threat?*

Method

This study used a sequential explanatory research approach in which qualitative results help explain and interpret quantitative data (Creswell, 2003). We began with an online survey distributed to college students in a media literacy course two weeks before Election Day 2016, and we held focus groups with the same students three days after the election. The survey measured interest in following and discussing politics,

including use of social media for informational and expressive purposes. Focus groups—examining how students perceived the tone of political discourse online and offline, imagined their audience in both settings, and decided whether to conceal or express political opinions— helped explain and interpret survey results.

Survey Instrument

The online survey first asked about demographics, political affiliation, and participation in the political process (e.g., voting history/plans, and expressive forms of social media use). Five-point Likert scale questions asked about (a) interest in politics and the 2016 election, and (b) interest in following politics and the election on social media; discussing politics and the election on social media; and discussing politics and the election offline (in person).[1]

Participants were asked how often they used Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat, and on each platform their interest in (a) following political news and information, (b) endorsing/sharing political news and information, and (c) expressing political views. Researchers defined following political news and information as consuming news stories or content posted by social media users. Endorsing/sharing news and information meant liking or in some manner circulating a social media post within one's network (e.g., retweeting or posting a link) with a response that does not necessarily indicate a political opinion. Sharing a political view meant expressing a political opinion in response to a news story or in a broader discussion of politics.

Focus Group Instrument

Eight semistructured focus groups, each with between 23 and 25 students, were conducted during regularly scheduled course discussion sections three days after Election Day. To minimize artificiality, researchers preserved existing discussion sections. Each section's teaching assistant moderated, along with a researcher. Focus group questions explored: (a) reactions to election results; (b) strengths and weaknesses of social media platforms for informational and expressive purposes; (c) tone of political discourse on social media and offline; (d) perceptions of audiences in both settings; (e) use of social media for informational and expressive purposes before, during, and after Election Day; and (f) reasons for expressing and withholding political opinions. To avoid priming effects, we did not ask participants directly about identity threats; instead, we considered their action or inaction to be an expression of identity.

Focus Group Data Analysis

Focus group responses were transcribed and coded using thematic analysis, a qualitative approach that allows researchers to identify, analyze, and report patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2006), and test theoretical issues to enhance understanding of data (Green & Thorogood, 2004). Researchers did the initial coding together. The first step of open coding resulted in the development of descriptive categories and subcategories: (a) observing political discourse on social media (e.g., reading political posts, evaluating the

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[1] This and all other Likert scale questions used a 5-point scale, with 1 = *very disinterested*, 2 = *somewhat disinterested*, 3 = *neutral*, 4 = *somewhat interested*, and 5 = *very interested*.

tone of dialogue, imagining one's audience); (b) circulating/expressing political views on social media (e.g., liking, sharing, or commenting on existing posts, or posting original thoughts); and (c) discussing politics offline (e.g., group texts, phone calls, or in-person conversations).

We then explored the role of identity and perceptions of identity threats. Guided by Breakwell's (1986) concept of identity, we reread the transcripts and categorized comments based on whether they referred to (a) threats to continuity (e.g., identity persistence over time and situation), distinctiveness (uniqueness of character), and self-esteem (feeling of personal worth or social value), and/or (b) coping mechanisms such as concealment (self-censoring on social media) or negativism (directly confronting a threat).

Profile of Participants

Participants (*N* = 198 for the survey; *N* = 196 in focus groups)[2] were undergraduate students in a general education media literacy course of roughly 200 students at a major U.S. university. This course was selected because it attracts students from a variety of academic levels and fields. Participants included freshmen (22.61%), sophomores (41.71%), juniors (21.11%), and seniors (12.06%).[3] Fields of study were science/technology/engineering/math (33.33%), business (25.25%), social sciences (17.17%), undecided (9.09%), journalism/communication (7.58%), other (6.06%), and humanities (1.52%).

Democrats (42.56%) outnumbered Independents (20.51%), Republicans (19.49%), Libertarians (4.62%), Green Party supporters (0.51%), and those identified as "other" (12.31%). Most (80.30%) were registered and planned to vote in the general election (51.02% "definitely yes"; 22.96% "probably yes"; 12.24% "unsure"; 6.12% "probably not"; 7.65% "definitely not"). A minority had ever voted in a national (29.10%), state (33.33%), municipal (14.81%), or campus (22.75%) election.[4]

Results

Following and Discussing Politics

RQ1 asked: *What are the preferred settings for college students to follow and discuss politics during a presidential election year?* Survey results show substantial participant interest in following the election on social media and discussing it offline, but disinterest in discussing it on social media. As Table 1 shows, most were at least somewhat interested in politics generally (68.37%; *M* = 3.70, *SD* = 1.03), and the 2016 election specifically (72.45%; *M* = 3.94, *SD* = 1.12).

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[2] Students were informed that their participation was voluntary and would not affect their grade.

[3] Other was indicated by 2%.

[4] Many participants were not yet 18 years old for the prior U.S. election.

Table 1. Interest in Politics and the 2016 Presidential Election.

	Very Disinterested %	Somewhat Disinterested %	Neutral %	Somewhat Interested %	Very Interested %
Politics	3.57	11.22	16.84	47.96	20.41
2016 Presidential Election	4.08	9.18	14.29	33.67	38.78

Table 2 illustrates that roughly half (51.01%) of participants were at least somewhat interested in following politics on social media ($M = 3.20$, $SD = 1.22$), while far fewer (18.18%) were at least somewhat interested in discussing politics on social platforms ($M = 2.21$, $SD = 1.19$). The vast majority (80.21%) were at least somewhat interested in following news on social media specifically about the presidential election ($M = 3.96$, $SD = 0.98$), while fewer (19.70%) were at least somewhat interested in discussing it on social media ($M = 2.34$, $SD = 1.18$).

Table 2. Interest in Following and Discussing Politics and the Presidential Election on Social Media.

	Very Disinterested %	Somewhat Disinterested %	Neutral %	Somewhat Interested %	Very Interested %
Following Politics	14.4	13.64	21.21	40.40	10.61
Discussing Politics	36.36	22.28	17.17	14.14	4.04
Following Presidential Election	3.55	6.09	10.15	50.76	29.44
Discussing Presidential Election	30.30	29.29	20.71	15.66	4.04

Participants used Snapchat (83.16% once or more daily), Facebook (74.75%), Instagram (69.69%), and Twitter (45.46%). Nearly half (48.24%) were at least somewhat interested in following political news and information on Facebook ($M = 3.08$, $SD = 1.31$), followed by Twitter (44.45%; $M = 2.86$, $SD = 1.56$), Snapchat (30.81%; $M = 2.40$, $SD = 1.43$), and Instagram (14.65%; $M = 1.96$, $SD = 1.23$). Few were at least somewhat interested in endorsing/sharing political news and information on news on Twitter (9.1%; $M = 1.73$, $SD = 1.10$), Facebook (8.08%; $M = 1.61$; $SD = 1.02$), Snapchat (4.55%; $M = 1.40$, $SD = 0.86$), or Instagram (4.07%; $M = 1.39$, $SD = 0.87$), or expressing political views on Twitter (10.10%; $M = 1.78$, $SD = 1.11$), Facebook (7.07%; $M = 1.57$, $SD = 1.00$), Snapchat (6.60%; $M = 1.46$, $SD = 0.93$), and Instagram (3.54%; $M = 1.38$, $SD = 0.84$).

As Table 3 shows, participants were more interested in engaging in offline conversations about politics (52.53% at least somewhat interested; $M = 3.26$, $SD = 1.23$) and the 2016 election (60.61% at least somewhat interested; $M = 3.40$, $SD = 1.20$) than having social media conversations about these topics.

Table 3. Interest in Offline Discussions of Politics and the Presidential Election.

	Very Disinterested %	Somewhat Disinterested %	Neutral %	Somewhat Interested %	Very Interested %
Offline Discussions on Politics	12.63	14.65	20.20	38.89	13.64
Offline Discussions on Election	10.61	13.64	15.15	46.46	14.14

Consistent with preelection survey results, focus groups revealed that on and shortly after Election Day, participants consumed political news and information on social media far more often than they shared, endorsed, and commented on it, and they preferred to discuss election results offline. They were motivated to use social media before the election as a first-alert system for finding news and information, a form of entertainment (e.g., political satire or election memes), and a way of gauging diversity of reactions to news stories and commentary. On Election Day, many used it to track results and get instant analysis on emerging (and often unexpected) narratives, such as Donald Trump's electoral victory despite losing the popular vote, the crumbling of Hillary Clinton's "Blue Wall" of Midwestern states, the failure of polls to predict final results, and Republicans maintaining control of both legislative branches.

Focus groups revealed strong opinions about election results. Many expressed shock (e.g., "surprised," "unexpected," "surreal," "confused," and "unprecedented") and emotional distress (e.g., "stressed," "depressed," "scared," "disgusted," "devastated," and "numb")—particularly about Trump's election victory. Some expressed relief that the election was over. Few conveyed positive emotions, using words such as *excited* and *happy*. Rare was the participant who expressed no opinion about election results, encapsulated in the comment, "I just don't really like politics, so I don't want to share my views on social media."

Given that action is an expression of identity (Breakwell, 1986), survey results showing participants' high levels of voter registration, interest in the election, and attention to election news indicate that many had—or were invested in developing—a political identity. Focus group comments reflecting participants' strong feelings about election results support this notion. The following section explores why, despite having strong reactions, most did not express them on social media.

Political Discourse and Imagined Audiences

RQ2 asked: *How do students evaluate political discourse on social media and offline, and perceive their audiences in both contexts?* Participants found political discourse on social media to be largely uncivil and unproductive, and viewed offline settings as safe to express political opinions. While audiences on social media and in person were often described as politically homogenous, context collapse on social media meant that participants were highly attuned to users whose attacks on political adversaries contributed to the poisonous atmosphere.

Social media incivility. Participants described the tone of political discourse on social media as "angry," "argumentative," "vulgar," "disrespectful," and "immature," noting that "there is a lot of confrontation and you rarely get open-minded discussions," creating a climate that is "not very productive." Notably, participants did not primarily blame social media users whose views they do not share, those with whom they rarely communicate, or unknown users (e.g., trolls or followers they do not follow back) for creating this toxic atmosphere. Instead, they described the problem of uncivil, highly partisan political discourse as being created by a "generalized other," not confined to specific types of users or platforms.

Participants noted that social media magnifies disagreements and exacerbates political polarization, which heightened toward the end of the contentious election. Said one participant, "Online people feel like they can be rude since it's not a face-to-face conversation. They're more likely to attack each other about their

opinions, so I think that caused the hatred between political parties to grow." Many observed a lack of tolerance for opposing viewpoints, leading to friends unfollowing social media users with whom they disagreed.

Intolerance and incivility were most evident on Twitter and Facebook, where participants closely followed political discourse. Participants described Twitter as "quick and abrasive," "shallow," and "very emotional." Several commented that, unlike Twitter, Facebook allows users to "write fully fleshed-out thoughts." Like Twitter, however, it also brings out confrontations. On both platforms, tone is difficult to express, and comments get misconstrued. "You see friends fighting on Facebook, and if they had just been speaking in person, maybe things wouldn't have been taken in such an offensive way." Several commented that social media is "not the place for politics" and lamented Facebook "becoming a platform less for friends and more for social activism."

Participants perceived the tone on Snapchat and Instagram as less toxic. One described Snapchat as a safe space for positing opinions "because you're less likely to get backlash on it." Another appreciated that on Instagram, "people are not constantly posting pictures, whereas on Twitter people just rant and on Snapchat people can post a billion stories." However, some commented that it is easier to stay informed about politics on Facebook and Twitter than on Snapchat and Instagram, which have less political content.

Social media echo chamber. While acutely aware of vitriolic exchanges on social media, participants often perceived that most people in their networks were not *their* political adversaries. Rather, they viewed their social networks as largely politically homogenous—using phrases such as *information bubble* and *echo chamber* to describe the hive mindset. Some viewed this as a positive and others a negative feature of social media. Several called being surrounded by political allies comforting, making it "easy to connect with people I know and trust." Many others, however, decried the homogeneity and sought opportunities to "get outside the bubble." Participants perceived Facebook as the most insulated. "With the unfriend-me trend, Facebook becomes a big echo chamber that shuts out voices that aren't your own."

One comment succinctly encapsulates the prevailing view about political discourse on social media: "It normally turns into shouting matches and echo chambers, and no one's opinion ever changes on anything." Shouting matches and echo chambers are, in some respects, competing forces. Incivility signals clashes between political foes, while information bubbles reflect consensus among allies. On social media platforms, which collapse diverse contexts into one (Marwick & boyd, 2010), both can exist within a single feed, making it difficult to know one's audience. As one participant commented, "I have to really know you and really feel comfortable around you to express [my political beliefs]."

Safe space offline. In offline settings, participants described no context collapse. They were more comfortable discussing election results that many considered upsetting in person, on the phone, or through text messages than on social media because they better understood their audience and did not fear a backlash. One participant noted that speaking with friends with similar political views "was nice because we could express how we were really feeling and not have to censor ourselves because of what other people might say." Another said, "I don't like using [social media] platforms because I think it's kind of hard to convey tone and to get a message across the way you would if you were talking face to face." Several also avoided discussing politics in classes, at work, or with family when they were uncertain about audience

reception, sensed tension, and "didn't want to say anything to trigger anyone." Even those having heated in-person conversations with political adversaries were thankful those disagreements were out of broader public view.

The uncivil tone of political discourse gave participants a sense of how audiences might react to their posts. Perception of audience and tone helps social media users determine how to present their online identity (Marwick & boyd, 2010). While findings from RQ1 suggest that many participants were invested in developing a political identity, perceptions of a hostile audience may pose a threat to this development. In the following section, we explore how participants identified and responded to perceived threats.

Identity Threats and Concealing Political Expression on Social Media

RQ3 asked: *How do students perceive posting to social media as a possible threat to their identity and cope with that threat?* Many participants viewed posting about politics as threatening their identity as civic actors. Focus group comments revealed threats to participants' feeling of social value or self-worth (self-esteem), uniqueness of character or political insights (distinctiveness), and maintenance of friendship or social ties (continuity). Deciding not to participate in political discussions on social media (concealment) was the most common coping mechanism to ward off threats.

Self-esteem threat. The incivility that participants observed on social media had a discernible chilling effect on self-expression, with some refraining from sharing opinions because they sought to avoid conflict in a hostile online environment. Perceptions of self-esteem threats often were expressed as fears of holding unpopular views and becoming the target of online harassment. One participant commented, "People don't necessarily want to hear dissenting opinions . . . I would just be making enemies if I [posted to social media]." Another said, "I don't post anything political because there are always people who disagree with you and will attack you for it. You aren't going to persuade anyone's views online so I don't think there's any value to writing anything online about it." This comment reflects a common concern voiced by participants about their inability to persuade people with opposing views.

Participants cited several external forces that make persuasion difficult: increasing political polarization, and social media platforms that reward extreme voices and conflict over reasoned debate. One participant commented, "I avoid voicing my political views on social media altogether because of the polarized state of politics that we live in." Another said, "I just don't want to get into an argument that 9 times out of 10 is completely unproductive. You aren't going to have a successful discussion about politics on Facebook. I've never seen it happen."

Participants less commonly refrained from expressing political opinions because they felt ill-equipped to comment on politics or doubted their own persuasive abilities. One said, "I tend to post when I feel really, really strongly about something and I don't like to post about things unless I've read extensively about them. I don't want to be that ignorant person who's just spouting opinions." Being labeled as ignorant, coming under attack for sharing political views, and failing to persuade others in a political debate emerged as participants' main perceived threats to self-esteem.

Continuity threat. Another common concern was being unfriended, unfollowed, or "muted" in response to a political post. Loss of friendship or diminished social status constitutes a threat to role continuity (Breakwell, 1983). Notably, participants avoided posting about politics even if they had never been the target of online incivility or received negative feedback from friends about political posts. Observing negative interactions on social media was a sufficient deterrent. As one participant commented, "Watching people who used to be friends fighting each other made me less confident to post my opinions." Another noted, "I chose not to share or post anything because I have friends on Facebook who aren't very educated on political matters, and a lot of them have closed opinions. If I do post something it might spark conflict." A participant recalled being reprimanded by a Trump supporter in her peer group after posting memes in a private group chat making fun of the candidate. The experience made the participant hesitant to "share things too outwardly" on social media. "If I see something that I believe in I'll share it, but I won't add my own rhetoric. I won't share something that's super insulting—it's just not a good look for me."

Threats to continuity and self-esteem sometimes were apparent in the same comment. One participant alluded to the challenge of establishing a political identity by expressing a political opinion, which could alienate friends (or adversaries) and lead to personal attacks:

> You're pretty much damned if you do, damned if you don't when you post something. You say one thing about Trump, you get attacked by Hillary supporters. You say one thing about Hillary, you get attacked by Trump supporters. And if you don't vote you get yelled at for not voting.

Distinctiveness threat. Participants also described how their individuality or distinctiveness would be threatened by posting about politics. They commonly felt that they might annoy or upset political allies by expressing a view that contributed nothing new to political discourse. Observations that others had already posted, liked, shared, and commented on similar political ideas led some to perceive that their voice would be lost in the social media echo chamber. Said one participant, "My entire Facebook timeline was just people talking about the election. I wouldn't have been saying anything that people haven't heard yet." Another voiced concern about a potential loss of individualism, explaining the reason for self-censorship on social media this way: "I don't want my view to be seen as representing every black person." Yet another participant described a double threat of continuity and distinctiveness:

> When I see other people who post opinions that are similar to mine, I don't want to put it out there or restate it just because you can see all the hate and stuff that gets directed toward the person that posted the original opinion that you just don't want to even have to deal with it.

Alternative coping mechanisms. While most participants concealed their political opinions on social media, some only partly isolated themselves from the political discussion. Rather than post original commentary, they preferred to endorse existing comments (e.g., retweeting, liking, or sharing); this allowed them to align themselves with political views without being the originator of that message, who may face the most vitriolic attacks. As one explained, "While I really didn't want to make a statement of my own, I did like and try to promote posts that captured my own sentiments well."

Yet others adopted a different coping strategy when sensing a potential threat to their identity—directly confronting the perceived challenge, which Breakwell (1986) described as negativism. Several responded directly to social media users who attacked them or made comments perceived by participants as threats to their identity. One participant responded to social media comments she considered offensive:

> I am a Muslim woman born and raised in [the United States]. Being a feminist, I wanted Clinton to win. I was particularly distressed when she lost. Now I think my personal space and security is threatened . . . I had a couple of friends who were being pretty vulgar about the fact that Trump was winning. Considering that I'm a Muslim and a woman it felt very discriminatory and disrespectful. So I was commenting [on social media] on how wrong their comments felt.

Another participant alluded to a threat of distinctiveness—specifically, a concern about adding unoriginal political commentary—and challenged the threat head-on:

> Opinions similar to mine have probably been expressed before, but I still find it necessary to post because on social media everyone has their own bubble . . . and just because an opinion like mine might be out there and posted a certain number of times doesn't necessarily mean people who I personally known have heard that opinion.

Several others who expressed their political views on social media did so not to spark a debate, but rather to share a cathartic moment with friends. One posted a Facebook question asking for "angry political punk music to get me through the next four years." Another posted a comment saying, "Don't blame Millennials for what's going to happen next because we get blamed for everything." Others shared cathartic humor to "break the tension," with one commenting, "I posted both serious thoughts and jokes because a lot of people cope better with humor."

Discussion

This mixed-methods study found that U.S. college students demonstrated strong interest in and opinions about the 2016 presidential election, but largely avoided political expressions on social media. Survey results show that participants preferred discussing politics offline rather than on social media. In focus groups, they described political discourse on social media as uncivil and unproductive, while considering offline settings as safe spaces for political discussions. They frequently cited conflict avoidance in a hostile and hyperpartisan opinion climate or concerns about alienating others in their network as reasons for silencing their political expression.

This study suggests that one of the primary reasons for self-censorship on social media is perception of identity threats. Researchers have noted a link between political expressions and the development and promotion of identities as civic actors (Bode et al., 2014; Weinstein, 2014). Our survey results, showing high levels of voter registration, interest in the election, and attention to election news, indicate that many participants were invested in developing a political identity. Thus, we argue that participants' perceptions of hostile audiences and uncivil discourse can be understood as threats to their

identity development, challenging the three principles of identity: continuity, distinctiveness, and self-esteem (Breakwell, 1986). Because identity is considered to direct behavior (Breakwell, 1986; Goffman, 1959), participants' disengagement from political and civic discourse can be viewed as concealment, a common identity threat response (Breakwell, 1986; Petriglieri, 2011).

Strategies of coping with threats to identity are closely linked to impression management—projecting an idealized self and monitoring audience response (Goffman, 1959). Impression management and the notion of self as information-processing system (Breakwell, 1986) assume an awareness of the various social settings, audiences, and discourses within interactions (Marwick & boyd, 2011; Mead, 1934). Participants' responses reflected a high degree of sensitivity to these factors. They generally did not refer to social media as a single entity when commenting on their experience consuming political content and observing political dialogue. They were attuned to each platform's strengths and weaknesses, including the type of content unlikely to be found (e.g., political views outside their filter bubble on Facebook). They described friends on Facebook as not wanting to hear their political opinions, while on Twitter, the broader audience created less fear of negative repercussions from friends. They commonly evaluated platforms by the level of vitriolic comments accompanying political posts.

Participants rarely cited negative repercussions of offline political expression, and, as such, offline settings did not appear to hold any perceived threat to most individuals. The few who self-censored offline out of fear of possible backlash usually were in professional settings (e.g., the classroom or workplace), where some audience members are unfamiliar to them, rather than in everyday social settings, where there is more certainty about audience and freedom to be uninhibited in conversation.

The primary differences between sharing political views online and offline had to do with the greater civility of in-person conversations. Much like the young adults in Weinstein and colleagues' (2015) study, participants made the calculation that posting about politics on social media did more harm than good. Specifically, they perceived political discourse on social media as toxic, and self-censored out of fear of an online backlash. Participants agreed that social media discourse often devolved into name-calling or bullying—all threats to individuals' sense of identity continuity and self-esteem. This incivility had a chilling effect on participants. Not only did they refrain from starting or entering into highly charged debates, or sharing or endorsing news that may be deemed controversial, but they also generally avoided voicing their political views altogether. Marwick and boyd's (2010) description of the "lowest-common-denominator effect" applies in this context, as participants imagined their nightmare audience: social media users who contribute to the poisonous atmosphere and constitute a possible identity threat. As a result, they only posted comments that they believed their broadest audience would view as nonoffensive (e.g., expressions of cathartic humor).

Previous research found that social media users self-censor after receiving negative responses to their political posts (Gearhart & Zhang, 2015), which, according to Breakwell (1983, 1986), constitutes an identity threat. Participants in this study, however, often self-censored as a preventive measure to avoid, rather than respond to, personal attacks or threats to their identity. Observing others being harassed for sharing their political views can be seen as a deterrent to posting.

Participants more often passively followed political news rather than demonstrating active and interactive forms of behaviors—sharing and endorsing news, and voicing political views. This is consistent with research showing that students (Powers et al., 2016; Yang & DeHart 2016) and all age groups (Gottfried et al., 2016) more commonly use social media for informational rather than expressive purposes. Participants gravitated toward "easier" behaviors, such as liking or commenting on someone else's content, rather than "harder" behaviors, such as posting original thoughts or joining a discussion thread (Bode, 2017), which would require greater time commitment and may leave them more vulnerable to personal attacks. Participants frequently maintained their distinctiveness by avoiding expressive political engagement on social media. While they viewed themselves as able to contribute and interested in the election, they sensed that their contributions, within echo chambers, would not add to their perception of distinctiveness; this was summarized by the comment, "My post on social media wouldn't really make that much of an impact because there were already posts similar to them out there."

Some also felt that posting about politics was an ineffective means to influence policy makers or potential voters, or to break new ground in political dialogue. Comments did not indicate a hopelessness about effecting political change or an unwillingness to exchange political information or perspectives—many were willing to discuss politics in offline settings even though they cited election fatigue after a prolonged, polarizing campaign. Instead, they suggest widespread skepticism about the efficacy of using social media to make a valuable civic contribution.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Among this study's primary limitations is its use of a convenience sample, which limits the generalizability of findings. The large size of the focus groups was a logistical necessity to ensure high rates of participation. However, in some cases, the size of each focus group made it more difficult to get sufficient data from each participant. Additionally, having teaching assistants help moderate focus groups may have influenced responses. Holding focus groups and distributing the survey in the same time period rather than several weeks apart would have allowed researchers to compare data reflecting the same political realities.

This study raises questions about whether students view social media as hopelessly hostile or are willing to contribute to the political conversation during less contentious political events. Future research could examine the circumstances under which they express political opinions on social media, and the types of contributions they are willing to make if they view the environment as less divisive and poisonous. Research could also further examine the role of identity and identity politics in online political discourse.

Conclusion

This study found that college students commonly viewed posting about politics as threatening their identity as civic actors and responded by concealing their views—a common coping mechanism to avoid potential threats. They often found political discourse on social media to be uncivil and unproductive, and they viewed offline conversations as safe spaces to express political opinions. Participants perceived no benefit to sharing opinions that had already widely circulated within their politically homogenous social

network, and they sought to avoid conflicts they witnessed when outspoken members of their networks engaged with people with whom they disagreed.

The widespread perception that social media is a hostile environment threatening individuals' identities regardless of political views is an ominous sign for online political discourse. As Weinstein et al. (2015) argued, "The online space is a place where youth go to hang out. It is a loss for youth's individual development as citizens, and for democracy, if productive civic discourse cannot flourish in these communities" (p. 97). Young adults are able to engage in such discourse outside of social media, of course, but other online forums (news websites, video-sharing platforms, etc.) are not immune from incivility either. As a consequence, many appear to move political discussions offline within smaller groups, where they can better understand and control the context, audiences, and messages, and limit the perceived threats to their identity.

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