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Bäck, Emma; Bäck, Hanna; Fredén, Annika; Gustafsson, Nils

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LUND UNIVERSITY

PO Box 117
221 00 Lund
+46 46-222 00 00

A Social Safety Net?

Rejection sensitivity and political opinion sharing
among young people in social media

Emma A Bäck

University of Gothenburg, Sweden

Hanna Bäck

Lund University, Sweden

Annika Fredén

Karlstad University, Sweden

Nils Gustafsson

Lund University, Sweden

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ABSTRACT

One reason why people avoid using social media to express their opinions is to avert social sanctions as proposed by the spiral of silence theory. We here elaborate on individual-level sensitivity to social rejection in relation to voicing political opinions on social media sites. Given the uncertainty about sharing political views in social media, and the fact that social acceptance, or rejection, can be easily communicated through for instance likes, or a lack of likes, we argue that rejection sensitive individuals are less likely to share political information in social media. Combining an analysis of unique survey data on psychological characteristics and online political activity with focus groups interviews with Swedish youth supports our argument, showing that rejection sensitive individuals are less inclined to try to influence others politically in social

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media. The results extend on previous research by establishing the role of rejection sensitivity in political engagement in social media.

Introduction

In this paper, we focus on who shares political information in social media, and how different groups express, or choose not to express, their political views. A large body of research on political activities in social media has developed over the past decade (see e.g. Boulianne, 2015). Even though there are notable exceptions (see e.g. Weeks, Ardèvol-Abreu & Gil de Zúñiga, 2017; Dvir-Gvirsman, Garrett & Tsfat, 2018), there are still relatively few studies of social media participation taking psychological factors into account (Bimber, 2017). Even fewer studies focus on social psychological explanations to such activity, even though a number of studies of “offline” political behavior suggest that social incentives and personality features are important to take into account when analyzing group-oriented political activities (e.g. Bäck et al., 2013; Bäck et al., 2015).

In relation, a growing body of literature has focused on the so called “Spiral of Silence” (Noelle-Neumann, 1974; 1993) in expressing or self-censorship on social media (Fox & Holt, 2018; Gearhart & Sang, 2015; Hampton et al. 2014; Stoycheff, 2016; Yun & Park, 2011; Wang et al. 2017). In addition, recent studies on social media participation have stressed the individual-level feature, “fear of isolation” (Fox & Holt, 2018; Hayes, et al. 2011; Wu & Atkin, 2018).

In a similar vein to some previous research in expression on social media, we connect to individual-level features related to belongingness (Fox & Holt, 2018; Hayes et al. 2011; Wu & Atkin, 2018). Extending on this research, we here specifically establish effects of individual-level sensitivity for rejection, which is a personality feature that has long been stressed within the social psychological literature on ostracism (Downey & Feldman, 1996). Whereas previous research has shown that rejection and rejection sensitivity sometimes instigate the individual’s willingness to take part in group-related political activities due to the importance placed on the ingroup (Knapton et al., 2015), we hypothesize that the specific affordances of the social media environment, in which the information-flow is often hard to control, bring about different effects. Given the less certain environment, we suggest that individuals who are not sensitive to rejection are more active opinion-makers in public and semi-public social media, whereas more sensitive individuals prefer more private ways of communicating their political views. This notion aligns with previous research that show that individuals who fear isolation exercise stronger self-censoring on social platforms (Fox & Holt, 2018; Wu & Atkin, 2018).

Literature and theory

Social media and political activity

Social media is an increasingly important information source (Papacharissi, 2015), and an essential venue for political discussion and activity. Here, we define social media as deinstitutionalized and interactive communication in an environment characterized by user-generated content (Bechmann & Lomborg, 2013: 767). This includes social network sites such as *Facebook*, microblogs such as *Twitter*, image sharing sites such as *Instagram* and *Snapchat*, and so on.

The potential effects of social media use on political participation have often been discussed in terms of the “mobilization hypothesis” stating that social media lowers thresholds for participation and makes more people politically engaged, and the “reinforcement hypothesis”, stating that existing structures in society are strengthened in social media, resulting in increased participation biases (Anduiza et al., 2009). Previous research support both views: some research shows that it is above all the highly educated who use social media for political activities, and that groups that are strong in resources and political interest are likely to become more dominant (e.g. Bode, 2017; Keating & Melis, 2017). However, others find that whereas online political activity is more common among the more educated, it can still lower the thresholds for some groups, such as young persons and people with little interest in institutional political activity (cf Boulianne, 2015; Gustafsson, 2013; Valeriani & Vaccari, 2016). There have been fears that the young generations participate to a lesser degree than previous generations (Garcia, 2011). Hence, it is of particular interest to study participation among young individuals. Moreover, when it comes to establishing effects on social media, the younger generation is the most active.

The difficulties encountered when applying resource-based explanations for political activities in social media has led to an interest in studying other characteristics. For instance, although social media has been lauded as a space where everyone can freely express their opinions, research shows that many people avoid contentious issues, such as politics, in semi-public settings (Eliasoph, 1998; Ekström, 2016; Mascheroni & Murru 2017; Mor et al. 2015).

One popular theoretical framework when it comes to opinion expression in general is the so called “spiral of silence” (Noelle-Neumann, 1974; 1993), which has recently also been discussed in relation to voicing opinions on social media (Fox & Holt, 2018; Gearhart & Zhang, 2015; Hampton et al. 2014; Stoycheff, 2016; Yun & Park, 2011; Wu & Atkin, 2018). The general idea of the spiral of silence is that how an individual perceives that their own opinion is positioned in relation to that of others has consequences for their willingness to voice that opinion. For instance, the perception of being in the minority leads to self-censoring due to a risk of otherwise

being socially sanctioned. This leads to a spiral of silence where individuals avoid expressing themselves. In relation, one tenet of the spiral of silence paradigm is that the issues must be of a sensitive character (Noelle-Neumann, 1974; 1993).

However, the spiral of silence idea is not straightforwardly applicable to a social media setting (Fox & Holt, 2018). One characteristic, or affordance, of social media compared to face-to-face communication is that there is more uncertainty regarding who the recipient of a message is (Metzger, 2009; McDewitt, Kioussis, & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2003; Rössler & Schulz, 2014). Even though social media affords network associations – the possibility to identify many of one’s connections (boyd & Ellison, 2007; Fox & McEwan, 2017; Treem & Leonardi, 2013), it may be difficult for the user to keep track of these connections (Mor et al. 2015).

This may lead to a so-called “context collapse” in social media, which blurs the boundaries between the private and the public, and conflates different social circles (boyd, 2008; Vitak, 2012). The result is that some people say more than they would have said in a public setting, but most often people say less than they would have in a private setting, since close relationships and clear norms are generally a prerequisite for being open and capable of handling silence also in the online environment (Koudenburg et al., 2014; Baym, 2015). Thus, some social media services create a ‘semi-public’ space, creating specific affordances for how contentious issues are discussed (cf. Beam et al 2017). This insight paves the way for social psychological aspects of political activities in social media, and suggests that it is important to analyze how it may differ between individuals (Hayes et al. 2011; Hayes & Mattes, 2014).

Other affordances that separate social media from face-to-face interactions, and that further suggest that social factors should affect the willingness to voice opinions, are the social presence of others, the possibility to be identified, and the unpredictable life-time of a message. Due to the individual’s inability to control these affordances, socially sensitive individuals should refrain from expressions. The uncertainty of who receives a message could lead to increased willingness to express oneself (McDewitt et al 2003; Metzger, 2009; Rössler & Schulz, 2014), but it has not been confirmed (Hampton et al 2014; Neubaum & Krämer, 2018). Hence, it is highly likely people will be concerned about whether a message will be ignored (Baym, 2015).

Being rejected online is as socially harmful as being rejected in real life (Sherman et al., 2016; Williams, Cheung & Choi, 2000; Wolf et al. 2015). Moreover, bandwagon-behavior, that individuals repeat what others are doing, is particularly influential in the online environment (Coviello et al., 2014). An unattended post tends to stay unattended, whereas a like (or a corresponding signal, depending on platform), gives additional likes. Likes signal social acceptance cues and hence a lack of likes signal rejection (Wolf et al., 2015). In particular, if one’s political opinion is associated with a less accepted alternative, citizens may tend to stay

quiet, rather than expressing their own view in social media (Fox & Holt, 2018). This tendency is likely to be more widespread among certain individuals (Hayes et al. 2011; Fox & Holt, 2018; Wu & Atkin, 2018), which is the perspective we focus on here.

Rejection sensitivity and political activity

We here take a social psychological perspective in explaining political behavior in social media. Our starting point is that adherence to social norms and the desire for social connections is a fundament of humanity (Williams, 2007; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Noelle-Neumann, 1977). A major body of research on ostracism and social exclusion confirms this (Williams, 2007; Hartgerink, et al, 2015; Williams et al, 2000). Rejection (or fear of rejection) may lead individuals to conform to the social norms of a new group (Knapton et al., 2015; cf. Halpern & Gibbs, 2013; Williams et al. 2000), and rejection increases participation in protest activities, which is motivated by belongingness needs (e.g. Bäck et al., 2015; Knapton et al., 2015), that is, a desire for being accepted in the group.

Even though most people react negatively to rejection (Williams, 2007), there are individual differences in how sensitive an individual is to rejection (Downey & Feldman, 1996). *Rejection sensitivity* is a personality feature defined as a disposition to anxiously expect rejection, to readily perceive rejection even when it is not actually happening, and to intensely react to rejection (see e.g. Berenson et al., 2009). The trait rejection sensitivity is based on early experiences of rejection in close interpersonal relationships, and explains why some individuals are more vulnerable to rejection than others. Generally, individuals who are high in rejection sensitivity avoid situations that may put them at risk for experiencing rejection (Downey & Feldman, 1996). Individuals with high sensitivity to rejection are more compliant following rejection. Additionally, rejection sensitivity is “particularly important and salient” in late adolescence because of the increasing importance of social contacts and the establishment of personality traits (Marston et al., 2010: 960). Young people also seem to react more strongly to rejection (Löckenhoff, Cook, Anderson & Zayas, 2013; Marston et al. 2010).

Given the uncertainty about sharing political views in social media, and the fact that social acceptance, or rejection, can be easily communicated through for instance likes (Sherman et al. 2016; Wolf et al. 2015), it is plausible that rejection sensitive individuals are more likely to avoid political activity online. Hence, rejection sensitivity should decrease political activity online.

In relation to this argument, a measure to test one of the basic tenets of the spiral of silence has been developed – fear of social isolation (Hayes, Mattes & Eveland, 2011). As specified in the spiral of silence theory, people avoid voicing their opinion because they fear social isolation (Noelle-Neumann, 1974; 1993). In fact, it has been proposed that this fear of isolation is the most

important aspect of the spiral of silence (Noelle-Neumann & Petersen, 2004), because it is the trigger of the spiral (Lin & Pfau, 2007). Noelle-Neumann defines fear of social isolation as “fear – probably developed over the course of evolution – of being rejected by those around us” (Noelle-Neumann, 1977, p. 144). For long, such fear was considered applicable to all individuals equally.

Newer research instead conceptualizes this as an individual difference variable, although there is some debate about whether it should be assessed at the trait or state level (Hayes et al. 2011; Hayes et al. 2013). Even though there are clear interconnections between the fear of isolation measure developed by Hayes et al. (2011) and the rejection sensitivity measure (Downey & Feldman, 1996) that we employ here, there are some notable differences. Hayes et al.’s (2011) measure is a 5-item scale of statements which refer both to a need to be with others and a fear of being left out – two features that are conceptually different.

Moreover, the fear of isolation has only been validated in relation to other fear of isolation measures, but not contrasted to other psychological concepts, except for shyness that positively correlated with fear of isolation (Hayes et al. 2011). Considering that there is also a correlation between need to belong (Leary & Baumeister, 1995) and shyness (Leary et al. 2007), it is unclear what fear of isolation measures. Instead, rejection sensitivity clearly measures the relation between worry of being rejected and the expectation to be rejected. The measure also takes a wide range of social situations into account, such as asking a friend, family, or a loved one for help (e.g. Downey and Feldman, 1996).

Based on the idea that highly rejection sensitive individuals tend to avoid situations where they risk being rejected (Downey & Feldman, 1996), we argue that individuals who are more sensitive to rejection are less inclined to state their political opinions for an unknown audience. Such a result would support the spiral of silence tenet that people avoid expressing themselves due to a risk of being socially excluded (Noelle-Neumann, 1974; 1993), and would be in line with research that has used the fear of isolation measure (Hayes et al. 2011; Fox & Holt, 2018; Wu & Atkin, 2018).

Because rejection sensitivity is strongly linked to an increased expectation of being rejected, highly rejection sensitive individuals should strongly avoid putting themselves in situations where rejection is possible. Rejection sensitivity entails that anxiousness about rejection lead to a readiness to perceive others’ ambiguous behavior as rejection (Downey & Feldman, 1996). Relating this back to social acceptance cues in social media, others’ silence for instance in the shape of lack of likes, may be interpreted as rejection by highly rejection sensitive individuals, while for those low in rejection sensitivity it is not. We thus hypothesize that:

Highly rejection sensitive individuals are less likely to share their political views in social media compared to less rejection sensitive individuals

Methods and data

Case selection and overall research design

Most research on youth and political expressions on Facebook has been in a US context (Mor et al. 2015), which calls for research from a multitude of cultures. We have here chosen to focus on the Swedish case. Sweden is a typical example of a country in which the internet has become a very important arena for political networking and information sharing. About half the population uses social network sites, and among young people, 95 percent use social network sites (Davidsson & Findahl, 2016). Moreover, the Swedish population is relatively highly educated (SCB, 2016), has high political interest (Oscarsson & Holmberg, 2016).

We use a mixed-methods approach to understand the relationship between personal characteristics related to rejection sensitivity and sharing political opinions via social media, using both a representative online survey and focus groups. Several scholars have argued for mixed methods designs, and as argued by Cyr (2017: 1039), focus groups can be useful to combine with large-n work, either because they enable the construction of valid instruments, or because they make it easier to explain the correlations that have been uncovered in statistical work. We here use the mixed methods design for the second purpose, that is, to explain and understand the results found in a statistical analysis. First, we test the hypothesized relationship between rejection sensitivity and political media use more directly analyzing a unique online survey on Swedish citizens' political behavior. Second, we explore our underlying causal mechanism by interviewing younger citizens about political activity in focus groups interviews. The focus is on the young in the interviews since we expect young being more sensitive to what others think and are more frequent in their use of different social media tools (Ling, 2010; Baym, 2015). We should thus be more likely to find illustrative examples of the relationship we seek to explain.

An online survey on social media participation

We here analyze an originally designed survey, which includes a number of items on political activity online, the type of activity, and a number of items on personality characteristics. It was conducted online by the survey provider *Enkätfabriken* in March–May 2016. The sample was recruited based on a mix between a self-selected and probability recruitment procedure (the probability-based share was 18 percent, and 22 percent among those who completed the survey).

The self-recruited participants were mainly recruited via online news media sites. As discussed above, we decided to over-sample young participants. Among those who completed the survey, the modal value is 24 years. Nevertheless, it contains respondents from all age groups up to 80-year-olds, and the respondent sample is more evenly spread over age groups than the original sample (see the Appendix for a comparison of the age distributions). About half of the respondents have attended some higher education, which means that citizens with higher education are slightly over-represented (in the general Swedish population, 42 percent of citizens aged 25–64 have attended some higher education (SCB, 2016)). Males are in slight majority (52 percent). The final response rate of completed surveys was 49 percent (N=1865). The survey took approximately 15 minutes to complete and the participant received a small reward (about \$2 (15 SEK)).

Measurement of independent and dependent variables

In the analysis of online political activity, we focus on the respondents who are politically interested and who to some extent follow politics on the Internet. We distinguish the politically active who participated in the survey using the following question: “Do you use the social media as a tool for discussing, influencing or keeping yourself updated about political issues?” with the following response alternatives: “1=Yes” “2= No, but I use social media for other things” “3= No, I do not use social media.” Those who responded “Yes” were coded as politically active in social media, and were included in our statistical analyses.¹

The question used to specify our main dependent variable was given to those who had indicated “yes” to the previous item on general political activity. It focuses on whether the respondent has made a (semi-)public statement on politics in social media, or not: “Have you ever used social media in order to actively change or improve the society or influencing others in an issue? (For example, by sharing political material, signing a petition, or engage in the political debate)” Please select only one of the following: 1) “Yes” 2) “No”. Those who indicated “Yes” were classified as being politically active or having stated their opinions online. We chose to use this relatively broad measurement of political activity for two main reasons. First, our purpose is to generally distinguish between the active and the passive users of social media. Hence, it is not so much a matter of *what* is done, but whether something political is done at all. If we would have defined political activities in greater detail, the focus would have been on that particular activity rather than political activity or voice at all. Furthermore, sample sizes would have been considerably reduced and we would have lost statistical power.

As a robustness check, we have used a follow-up item where the respondent could specify the kind of political activity, such as for example writing a debate article, or sharing political information. Here, we used the activity *information sharing* as the dependent variable (76 percent

of the politically active respondents indicated this as an activity they had done). These analyses point in the same direction as the model using the more general item (see the Appendix for tables).

The main independent variable in our analysis is the personality characteristic *Rejection Sensitivity (RS)*, which we hypothesize will affect individuals' likelihood of participating online. This was measured using the short version of the Rejection Sensitivity Scale (Downey & Feldman, 1996; see also the Appendix). Participants are asked to imagine themselves in different situations describing things that people sometimes ask of others, for example "You ask your parents or another family member for a loan to help you through a difficult financial time"; "You call your partner after a bitter argument and tell him/her that you want to see him/her (if you do not have a partner, imagine that you had one)". For each situation, participants rate a) how concerned or anxious they would be over the others' reactions, for example "How concerned or anxious would you be over whether or not your family would want to help you"; "How concerned or anxious would you be over whether or not your partner would want to see you" (1 = very unconcerned to 6 = very concerned), and b) to what extent they expect the others to help them in this situation, for example "I would expect that they would agree to help as much as they can"; "I would expect that he/she would want to see me" (1 = very unlikely to 6 = very likely). Eight similar scenarios were presented.

To calculate a score of RS for each situation, the level of rejection concern (response to question a) is multiplied by the reverse of the level of expectancy (response to question b). An index of overall RS is then calculated by taking the mean of all scores for each situation. In our online survey sample, the values on the rejection sensitivity index ranged between 1 and 24.4. The mean value of the rejection sensitivity index in our sample was 6.7.

The education variable, which is a control variable in our analyses, is coded so that 0 = no higher education, and 1 = has attained some higher education.

Focus groups interviews

Focus groups can be used to study motives, experiences and thought processes of individuals not obtainable through surveys (Stewart & Williams, 2005). In this study, focus groups serve to provide a credulous link can be rendered between the attitudes of individuals and the more generalizable patterns that we demonstrate. Focus groups have been demonstrated to be a fruitful method for studying the political use of social media (cf. Vromen et al., 2015; Ekström, 2016).

Sixty Swedish residents aged 16–25 were interviewed in focus groups consisting of 6–9 participants, in accordance with standard recommendations (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2014: 64). The focus group discussion, followed a semi-structured model with a rough interview guide used to allow for a relatively free discussion. For more information on the focus groups, see the

Appendix. In order to provide a balance between relating to deductive hypotheses while still being able to take the empirical data as a starting point, the constant comparison analysis was used (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), in which codes are assigned to data and then grouped into categories.

Empirical analysis

Online survey results

Our survey data shows that a substantive share, though not a majority of, the respondents uses social media for some kind of political activity: 37 percent said that they use social media for political activities, including reading about politics. Previous research suggests that it is above all people with more resources who use social media for political activity (Gustafsson, 2013). Highly educated individuals are somewhat more inclined to use social media for political activities, though, the difference is rather small (40 percent vs. 35 percent among less educated).

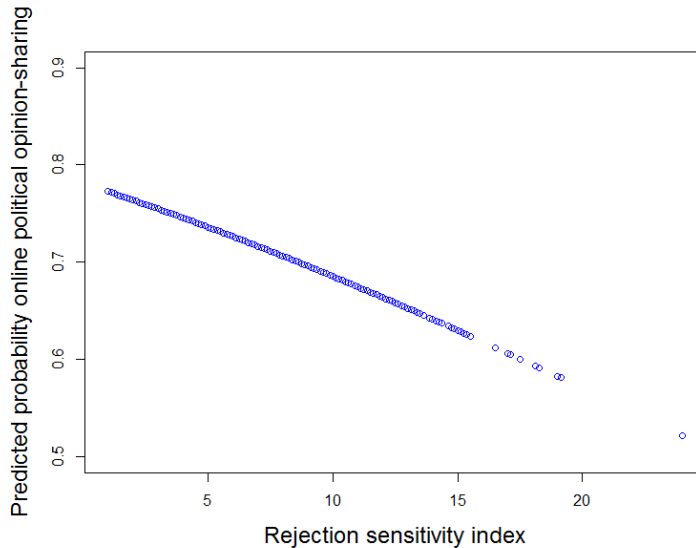
The next step is to test the hypothesis that rejection sensitive individuals are less likely to demonstrate political views in social media, focusing on the individuals who use the Internet for political activities. Since the aim of our study is to distinguish whether rejection sensitivity is a characteristic that may hinder some citizens from expressing their opinions, this comparison is the most relevant. It is thus the distinction between politically interested quiet voices, versus the more outspoken, that is the focus of this study. The descriptive statistics show that among those who are politically active online, 71 percent say that they have, at some point in their lives, used social media for influencing others or manifesting their political views, whereas 29 percent say they have not used social media for influencing others politically or making political statements.ⁱⁱ

We hypothesized that the rejection sensitive citizens would be less open about their political views and showing off their views in social media. We first test this using a binary logistic regression in which the predicted probability of being an active online opinion-sharer, as defined above, is plotted on the y-axis, and the rejection sensitivity index is plotted on the x-axis (Figure 1). This analysis shows that higher levels of rejection sensitivity is related to a decreasing predicted probability of belonging to politically interested opinion-sharers online.

Next, we proceed to the multivariate analyses, and the relationship between the standard socio-economic variables, rejection sensitivity and public opinion sharing.ⁱⁱⁱ Results are presented in table 1. In line with previous research, being highly educated, and being female is associated with political activity online (see e.g. Gustafsson, 2013) (Model 1).^{iv} More important for our purpose, when the rejection sensitivity index is added, the model is improved, indicated by the higher likelihood value and better chi-square test values. The relationship between rejection sensitivity and actively sharing political information online is statistically significant at the 0.05

level. In line with our hypothesis, having a high score on the rejection sensitivity index is *negatively* related to being active. Thus the chances to be a political voice online decreases by higher score on the index, controlling for relevant socio-economic characteristics (Model 2).

Figure 1. Rejection sensitivity and sharing political views online



Only respondents who have indicated that they use social media for political purposes are included. Dependent variable is online political opinion sharing. Relationship is significant at the 0.05-level. N=666. Estimations performed in R.

An illustration of the substantive effects of rejection sensitivity can be given using marginal effects. We here use the procedure suggested by King et al. (2000). For example, for a politically interested, 30-year-old male respondent with higher education, the predicted probability of being a politically active voice online falls by 28 percentage points when moving from the lowest value on the rejection sensitive index (1) to the highest (24.4). Whereas the less rejection sensitive and politically interested younger male is very much likely to express his opinions in social media – with a predicted probability of 0.70 to do so – the more rejection sensitive young male is considerably more hesitant, with a probability of 0.42 of being among the politically active.^v

As a robustness check, we should here consider the possibility that the individuals who are the most rejection sensitive are those who we filtered out in these analyses: the ones who say that they do not use social media to discuss, influence or keep up to date on societal issues. In order to test this, we ran a *t*-test, separating the groups on our selection variable – being active vs. not being active, with rejection sensitivity as the dependent variable. This showed that there was no significant difference between the groups $t(1769) = -1.21, p = .23$ (M for the non-active group = 6.64, $SD = 3.86$, and M for the active group = 6.87, $SD = 3.90$). Hence, it does not seem that

rejection sensitivity is decisive for being completely politically inactive on social media: rather it moderates the magnitude of activity for those being active.

Table 1: Rejection Sensitivity and Political Opinion Sharing in Social Media
(Binary logistic regression)

	MODEL 1	MODEL 2
Explanatory factor		
Age (16-80)	-0.00 (0.00)	-0.01 (0.01)
Female (0-1)	+0.40* (0.17)	+0.39*(0.18)
Education (0-1)	+0.38* (0.17)	+0.31 (0.18)
Rejection Sensitivity (1-24.4)		-0.05* (0.02)
Constant	+0.27 (0.34)	+0.83 (0.43)
N	666	666
Log likelihood	-391.97	-389.64
Probability>chi2	0.01	0.00

*= significant at the 0.05-level. Only respondents who have indicated that they use social media for political purposes are included in the analysis. Dependent variable is online political opinion sharing.

To sum up, the analyses presented here indicates that the more rejection sensitive individuals are relatively under-represented among the active political voices in the semi-public social media sphere.^{vi} Whereas young people are well-represented and active in social media, more sensitive voices are less represented in what is the actual political information flow over the net. Given that the sample is based on young and relatively politically interested and active respondents, it could be seen as a “conservative” test of the hypothesis, since we would be most likely to find politically active and outspoken people here, suggesting that effects may be greater in the larger population.

Findings from the focus group interviews

Many themes emerging from the interviews are in line with theoretical expectations and the hypothesis posed in this paper. One of the most important given reasons for non-participation in social media in the focus group interviews is the fear of being rejected socially or being punished in other ways by adversaries and friends. Contentious issues are generally avoided. This is in accordance with previous research on young people viewing politics as sensitive issues that should be handled with care in public or semi-public settings (Eliasoph, 1998; Ekström, 2016), and with previous research on the spiral of silence (e.g. Noelle-Neumann, 1974; and the effects

of fear of isolation (Hayes et al. 2011; Fox & Holt, 2018; Wu & Atkin, 2018). We would expect people sensitive to rejection to be especially careful in avoiding politics in social media. This was a recurring theme in all focus groups along with the observation that politics is all about conflict, and conflict is unpleasant, especially in social media, where the lack of social cues tend to make language more vitriolic and condescending. This exchange in the group comprised by students in post-secondary vocational education illustrates this result:

Interviewer: You, who are a member of the SSU [Swedish Social Democratic Youth League], have of course engaged in political discussions?

C: Yes, there was this guy in my former class who was very engaged in the MUF [Swedish Young Conservatives]. The youth league of the Moderate Party. We had innumerable discussions. But that was verbal. Face-to-face, so to speak. It was very rewarding. You could see it from the other one's point of view. [...]

Interviewer: Do you think it's different to discuss [politics] face to face if you compare with discussing in social media?

C: You can't compare. There's such a big difference concerning energy and body language and everything. It weighs in much more than you think. [...] No, I don't believe in that concept. Your boss and your mom might see it. And then you get fired, sort of.

T: It's the freedom of speech out the window. You are being judged. You are being judged for what you believe in.

What makes this exchange even more interesting is the fact that C is member of a political youth organization, and has obviously no problems with (semi-)publicly stating his ideological allegiance and engaging in confrontational debates. But when talking about political debates in social media, there is a fear of repercussions from speaking out: “then you get fired, sort of”.

And indeed, several participants in different groups report that they have unfriended contacts who either post too much politics, or who express problematic political views. The following outtake is from the labor market training program (the Sweden Democrats is a right-wing populist party represented in the Swedish parliament):

N: I know someone who has principles. And if someone goes against that, they can't be friends with that person.

Interviewer: On Facebook?

N: In life! It goes together. Facebook is like your life. I'm like this: if one of my friends said that I'm a Sweden Democrat I wouldn't be a friend of that person. I don't think it's OK to

be a racist, and I think the Sweden Democrats are racists. [...] If you share things like that on the internet, I will probably take you off my Facebook.

M: If a friend doesn't fit in he will represent you for all of your friends because everyone can see what he posts. If he likes this it means you accepted what he thinks.

The focus groups clearly show that most of the participants prefer to talk about contentious issues in private with close friends. There are also indications that some of those who engage in political discussions in social media, choose to do so in semi-closed setting, that is, in groups or forums where they are with like-minded and thus can speak their minds in a “safe space”.

There are, however, also a very small number of participants who seem to be less rejection sensitive, such as one participant, who states that he regularly engages in persuasive conversation with others in social media, especially concerning religion, racism and terrorism. For instance, being himself born in Iraq and having migrated to Sweden as a child, he encounters IS recruiters in Facebook groups frequented by the Arabic/Iraqi diaspora in Sweden – in those cases, he engages in debate in order to dissuade others from joining IS. Taking on terrorists in social media under your own name would arguably require thick skin. At one point during the interview, the same participant is asked by another participant what he does when the other part refuses to take in his arguments, to which he replies that “[y]ou just move on. It's easy! Just press ‘delete’”, ‘delete’ being a way of saying that you disengage in the discussion, unfriend or block the person. But that statement is an outlier: an overwhelming majority of the participants in all groups clearly state that they do not engage in contentious discussions in social media, citing fear of repercussions as discussed above. The focus group discussions thus provide an insight into the mechanisms underlying the statistical relationship we found when analyzing the online survey.

Discussion

In this paper, we have argued that social characteristics related to belongingness needs should have implications for how citizens behave politically in social media, and who express their views online. These ideas are in line with the theory on the spiral of silence (Noelle-Neumann, 1974; 1993), and recent research on how fear of isolation leads to self-censoring (Hayes et al. 2011), also in an online environment (Fox & Holt, 2018; Wu & Atkin, 2018). In this paper, we explore an alternative trait – rejection sensitivity (Downey & Feldman, 1996). The main argument for doing so is that this is a well-established measure in social psychological research, and specifies the previously found results on fear of isolation. Rejection sensitivity is specifically related to rejection, rather than fear of isolation. Rejection sensitivity is based in early experiences of

rejection in close interpersonal relations. However, it has recently been established as a fruitful approach to understanding political behavior, such as engagement in protests (Bäck et al. 2013; 2015; Knapton et al. 2015). In the social media setting, rejection sensitivity should be particularly fruitful since expressions on social media clearly are either attended to or ignored. For instance, ‘likes’ or similar attention cues are interpreted as social acceptance cues (Wolf et al. 2015).

This implies that individuals that are highly rejection sensitive should be particularly reluctant to voicing their opinions if they perceive that their message may go unattended – that is being rejected. In support of this, Neubaum and Krämer (2018) showed that the expectation to be personally attacked can explain why people are more prone to voice a deviant opinion in face-to-face interactions than in online settings. This finding, although confirming of previous research, also highlights important novel insights into the mechanisms of political participation in social media. Previous research using rejection sensitivity has shown that highly rejection sensitive individuals are more likely to engage politically after experiencing rejection (Bäck et al. 2015; Knapton et al. 2015; Bäck et al. 2018). This conformity in offline settings is explained by individuals increased desire to please the group in order to stay in the group. In online settings, “the group” one belongs to is most likely not as clear and it is difficult for the individual to know whether their behavior will please their group or not.

In the present research, we found that less rejection sensitive voices are the most active in the semi-public information flow. Our focus group interviews showed that younger citizens tend to be followers to a greater extent and shy away from making claims that are not accepted by their peers. In fact, it can be even harder for more rejection sensitive individuals to express their political views in the more public online environment, since there is no defined audience and greater risk of silence (cf. Koudenburg et al., 2014; Neubaum & Krämer, 2018). Even people who are interested and active in politics might refrain from engaging in political discussions and sharing political information in social media because of the perceived risk of rejection one might encounter. Some people, however, are less concerned about what their online peers think.

One implication of these findings is that the political content that people come across in social media is mostly produced by users with low rejection sensitivity, meaning that “teflon don” characters and voices, with little fear of being criticized or rejected, are most present. This is in line with what Noelle-Neumann (1974; 1993) called the “hard core”, that is, those individuals that keep expressing themselves even in the face of isolation. One potential consequence of this could be that a self-reinforcing circle develops, as people sensitive to rejection hesitate to engage in political discussion in social media because of fear of reactions or the absence of them.

Another important result from the present research is that tendencies to self-censor and the general ideas of the spiral of silence are not limited to specific, sensitive issues, which was

proposed by Noelle-Neumann (1974; 1993). In line with that idea, much previous research has delved into discussions of particular issues such as police brutality (Fox & Holt, 2018) abortion issues (Wu & Atkin, 2018), or whether the US should invade Iraq (Neuwirth, Frederick, & Mayo, 2007). Nonetheless, we here show that politics as a general theme may be sufficiently contentious to elicit the same effects. That is, the results are generalizable across the board. Relatedly, Wu and Atkin (2018) showed that state-based fear of isolation was a stronger predictor of self-censoring than trait-based. A plausible explanation is that state-based fear of isolation is related to the specific issue at hand. Hence, while investigating specific issues, state-based emotions are better predictors, but if one wants to say something more general about human behavior, trait-based individual differences that affect general behavior is more informative.

Limitations and future research

The present research used a combination of an online survey and focus groups, and in follow-up studies experiments may be used to further strengthen the results. Such experiments may for instance manipulate experiences of rejection and determine effects on willingness to express oneself in social media. One validated paradigm for this is the online ostracism paradigm that builds on the cyberball paradigm (Williams et al. 2000). The online ostracism is powerful in eliciting feelings of rejection and takes the form of a social media platform, similar to Facebook (Wolf et al. 2015).

Little research has been dedicated to understanding the psychological underpinnings of those who defy potential social sanctions. One article showed that opinion strength is related to “hard core” behavior (Matthes, Morrison & Schemer, 2010). However, this article did not investigate how opinion strength and fear of isolation interacted. It is plausible that some people who hold strong opinions are also highly rejection sensitive. For instance, Mor and colleagues (2015) showed that even though their informants were highly motivated to discuss politics online they also weighted this with the risks of such involvement. Similar results were also found by Vraga and colleagues (2015), and supported by the results from the focus group interviews in the present article. Hence, future research may focus on interactions between different explanatory factors when investigating “hard core” behavior. In addition, we suggest that future research connect the concepts of fear of isolation and rejection sensitivity further, and that development of these concepts and their impact are allowed to influence each other.

Future research should also elaborate whether the relationship between social characteristics and online political activity is similar in other political contexts, and how it differs between different types of activities. It would also be interesting to dig deeper into the social

influence-aspect of the political behaviors, and what would make the more sensitive citizens more likely to be more active political voices online.

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Appendix

**Table A1: Rejection Sensitivity and Political Opinion Sharing in Social Media, full sample
(Binary logistic regression)**

	MODEL A2
Explanatory factor	
Age (16-80)	-0.020* (0.00)
Female (0-1)	+0.132 (0.109)
Education (0-1)	+0.361* (0.111)
Rejection Sensitivity (1-24.4)	-0.029 (0.015)
Constant	-0.340 (0.265)
N	1767
Log likelihood	-1002.78
Probability>chi2	0.00

*= significant at the 0.05-level. Dependent variable is online political opinion sharing, coded 1 if the respondent shares political opinions online, 0 otherwise. Respondents who said that they do not use the internet for political purposes are coded 0.

Table A2: Rejection Sensitivity and Political Information Sharing in Social Media
(Binary logistic regression)

	MODEL A2 II
Explanatory factor	
Age (16-80)	+0.01* (0.01)
Female (0-1)	+0.19 (0.22)
Education (0-1)	+0.61* (0.23)
Rejection Sensitivity (1-24.4)	-0.12* (0.03)
Constant	+0.82 (0.55)
N	477
Log likelihood	-245.06
Probability>chi2	0.00

*= significant at the 0.05-level. Only respondents who have indicated that they use social media actively for political purposes are included in the analysis. Dependent variable is online political information sharing as a type of activity that the respondent has used for political purposes, in this case, people who said that they have used social media for “information sharing (for example, articles or links)”.

Table A3: Rejection Sensitivity and Political Opinion and Information-Sharing in Social Media among Respondents under 25 (Binary logistic regression)

	MODEL I	MODEL II
	General Opinion Sharing	Information Sharing
Explanatory factor		
Age (16-24)	-0.06 (0.08)	-0.02 (0.09)
Female (0-1)	+0.22 (0.33)	+0.70 (0.38)
Education (0-1)	-0.09 (0.38)	+0.12 (0.43)
Rejection Sensitivity (1-24.4)	-0.06 (0.04)	-0.12* (0.05)
Constant	+0.05 (1.73)	+1.07 (1.99)
N	190	137
Log likelihood	-110.81	-82.44
Probability>chi2	0.50	0.02

*= significant at the 0.05-level.

Model I. Only respondents who have indicated that they use social media for political purposes are included in the analysis. Dependent variable is online political opinion sharing, coded 1 if the respondent has used social media for any kind of active political engagement. **Model II.** Only respondents who have indicated that they use social media actively for political purposes (i.e. the respondents coded 1 in Model I) are included in the analysis. Dependent variable is online political information sharing as a type of activity that the respondent has used for political purposes, in this case, coded 1 if the respondent indicated that he or she has used social media for information sharing (for example, articles or links).

Table A4: Rejection Sensitivity and Political Opinion and Information-Sharing in Social Media among Respondents 25 or over (Binary logistic regression)

	MODEL I	MODEL II
	General Opinion Sharing	Information Sharing
Explanatory factor		
Age (25-80)	-0.01 (0.01)	+0.02* (0.01)
Female (0-1)	+0.45 (0.21)	-0.20 (0.28)
Education (0-1)	+0.40 (0.21)	+1.03* (0.29)
Rejection Sensitivity (1-24.4)	-0.05 (0.03)	-0.11* (0.04)
Constant	+0.64 (0.53)	+0.77 (0.70)
N	476	340
Log likelihood	-277.90	-158.24
Probability>chi2	0.01	0.00

*= significant at the 0.05-level.

Model I. Only respondents who have indicated that they use social media for political purposes are included in the analysis. Dependent variable is online political opinion sharing, coded 1 if the respondent has used social media for any kind of active political engagement. **Model II.** Only respondents who have indicated that they use social media actively for political purposes (i.e. the respondents coded 1 in Model I) are included in the analysis. Dependent variable is online political information sharing as a type of activity that the respondent has used for political purposes, in this case, coded 1 if the respondent indicated that he or she has used social media for information sharing (for example, articles or links).

Figure A1. *Age distribution full sample online survey (N=3817; mean 41.16; std. dev 19.1)*

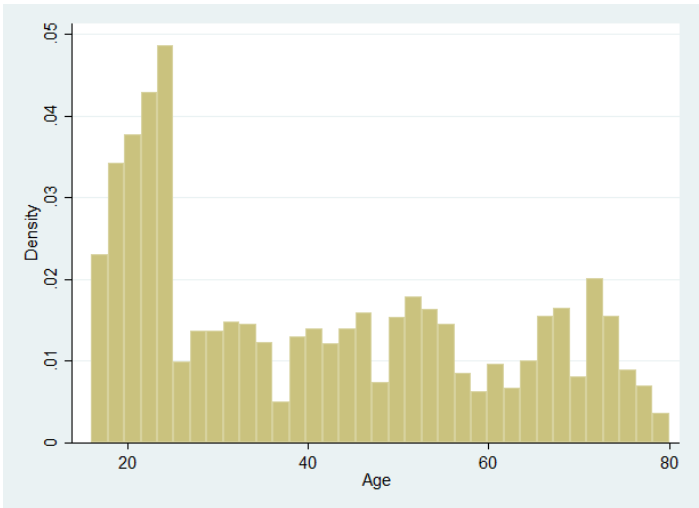
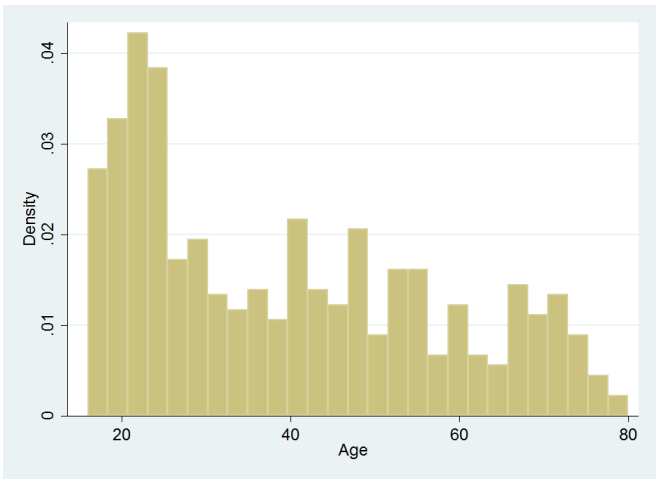


Figure A2. *Age distribution respondents with a valid answer on online political activity item (Dependent variable, Table 1) (N=759; mean 39.6; std. dev 17.8)*



Focus Group Interviews

Selection of participants aimed to compose the groups so that they would include a variety of socio-economic backgrounds. Recruitment was made in cooperation with the schools and a labor market training program. Participants were informed of the purpose of the focus group initiative, that participation was completely voluntary, that the interviews would be anonymized and that the transcripts and recordings would be kept in a secure way complying with ethical standards.

The focus group discussion, which went on for 30 minutes to an hour, followed a semi-structured model with a rough interview guide used to allow for a relatively free discussion. The focus group discussion opened with a general question about social media in order to get people talking about how they used social media and what platforms were used. The moderator then steered the discussion over to the topic of political content in social media, including questions of whether they had any friends or other contacts who tried to influence them or recruit them and whether they had been politically active, changed their minds about something, and the like.

Table A5: Information on focus groups

Group	Participants	Men	Women	Age	Type
1	7	3	4	16-19	Preparatory program, upper secondary school
2	8	3	5	16-19	Preparatory program, upper secondary education
3	6	3	3	19-25	Labor market training program
4	9	3	6	19-25	University students (technology)
5	7	1	6	19-25	University students (social science)
6	6	1	5	16-19	Vocational program (upper secondary school)
7	8	6	2	16-19	Vocational program (upper secondary school)
8	9	7	2	19-25	Post-secondary vocational education
Total	60	27	33		

The constant comparison analysis was used (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), in which codes are assigned to data and then grouped into categories. A total of 127 unique codes were initially assigned to textual units in the transcribed material. As an example, the textual unit, “Facebook is either right or wrong, nothing in between. No one can accept that anyone else has an opinion. Either right or wrong”, was assigned the code “political discussion in social media is polarised”. The number of times each code appeared was noted, as well as which participant uttered the speech act associated with the code in question. The number of times each participant spoke was also noted, thereby making dominant participants visible. This code was then grouped with other codes expressing attitudes towards political discussion in social media related to a perceived high conflict level. In a third stage of the analysis, themes were developed to express the content of the categories (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009). These themes were then analyzed in the light of previous research and the statistical analysis provided in this paper.

Rejection sensitivity scale

This version is the short version of the Rejection sensitivity scale (Downey & Feldman, 1996), which has been adapted by the authors to fit with respondents other than students.

1. You approach a close friend to talk after doing or saying something that seriously upset him/her.

	Very unconcerned					Very concerned
How concerned or anxious would you be over whether or not your friend would want to talk to you?	1	2	3	4	5	6
	Very unlikely					Very likely
I would expect that he/she would want to talk to me.	1	2	3	4	5	6

2. You have lost your job and ask those closest to you if you can stay with them for a while.

	Very unconcerned					Very concerned
How concerned or anxious would you be over whether or not your closest would want you to stay with them?	1	2	3	4	5	6
	Very unlikely					Very likely
I would expect that they would want me to stay with them.	1	2	3	4	5	6

3. You call your partner after a bitter argument and tell him/her you want to see him/her (if you do not have a partner, imagine that you had one).

	Very unconcerned					Very concerned
How concerned or anxious would you be over whether or not your partner would want to see you?	1	2	3	4	5	6
	Very unlikely					Very likely
I would expect that they would want to see me.	1	2	3	4	5	6

4. You are short on money and ask those closest to you (e.g. family, close friends) if you can borrow money from them to pay your rent or another important cost.

	Very unconcerned					Very concerned
How concerned or anxious would you be over whether or not your closest would help you?	1	2	3	4	5	6
	Very unlikely					Very likely
I would expect that they would want to help me.	1	2	3	4	5	6

5. You ask those closest to you (e.g. family, close friends) to come to an occasion important to you.

	Very unconcerned					Very concerned
How concerned or anxious would you be over whether or not your closes would want to come?	1	2	3	4	5	6
	Very unlikely					Very likely
I would expect that they would come.	1	2	3	4	5	6

6. You ask a friend to do you a big favor.

	Very unconcerned					Very concerned
How concerned or anxious would you be over whether or not your partner would want to help you?	1	2	3	4	5	6
	Very unlikely					Very likely
I would expect that they would want to help me.	1	2	3	4	5	6

7. You ask your partner if he/she really loves you (if you do not have a partner, imagine that you had one).

	Very unconcerned					Very concerned
How concerned or anxious would you be over whether or not your partner would say yes?	1	2	3	4	5	6
	Very unlikely					Very likely
I would expect that they would answer yes sincerely.	1	2	3	4	5	6

8. You go to a social gathering (e.g. a party) and do not know anyone else, but you decide to start talking to a person standing close to you.

	Very unconcerned					Very concerned
How concerned or anxious would you be over whether or not they would want to talk to you?	1	2	3	4	5	6
	Very unlikely					Very likely
I would expect that they would want to talk to me.	1	2	3	4	5	6

ⁱ We also ran comparative analyses including all respondents in the analyses, which point in the same direction as our analyses focusing on the politically interested. Including all respondents in the analysis, i.e. even those who do not use the Internet for political activities in the “quiet voice” group (0), points in a similar direction (see the Appendix Table A1). However, the results are not as distinct, why we choose to focus on the within-variation among the politically interested respondents.

ⁱⁱ The relatively high share may be due to the “generously” formulated item, which includes participatory acts such as signing a petition as well as more direct forms of influencing others’ political views. We chose this broader definition in order to increase generalizability of active versus passive politically interested social media users, and to gain greater statistical power.

ⁱⁱⁱ Drawing causal inferences from observational data is often difficult, and requires careful model specification and interpretation of coefficients and error terms (Freedman, 1999). We include the variables in multivariate models, using maximum likelihood estimation (MLE) techniques, in which the independent variables are associated with the political activity outcome.

^{iv} Conducting a SEM model which accounts for measurement errors and relationships between variables (Bollen and Noble, 2011) as a robustness check, supports the main findings whereas the impact of gender becomes insignificant, which indicates that the relationship is not as robust as the binary logistic regression

models suggest. Since the gender factor is not our main focus in this paper, we do not discuss this relationship further here.

^v The simulated effect size is similar for female respondents (0.26).

^{vi} The significant negative impact of rejection sensitivity on public opinion-making holds using the natural logarithm of the age-variable, and goes in the same direction transforming the age-variable into a dummy representing two age groups: under 30, or 30 or older.