Social Media Expression, Political Extremity, and Reduced Network Interaction: An Imagined Audience Approach

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Abstract
The recent rise of political extremity and radicalization has presented unique challenges to contemporary politics, governance, and social cohesion in many societies in the world. In this study, we propose an imagined audience approach to understand how social media’s expanded expression capabilities are related to users’ political extremity and reduced network interaction. We demonstrate the usefulness of our imagined audience framework using a multi-country survey data set. Results from the United States, South Korea, and Japan reveal that expressive use of social media is associated with more extreme political attitudes and heightened intolerance, but the effect is contingent on whom the expresser has in mind as their audience. In particular, expressing one’s political self has a depolarizing effect for those expecting low audience reinforcement. We test the boundary conditions of our model in a more restricted information environment with a Chinese sample. We conclude by discussing the significance of our imagined audience approach and its relevance to today’s technology-mediated self-presentation.

Keywords
expression effect, imagined audience, political expression, political extremity, social media, context collapse, self-presentation, political polarization

Scholars have shared concerns over the surge of political extremism and radicalization around the world. Particularly with respect to issues surrounding border and immigration control, extreme rhetoric and intolerant speech have abounded, exerting an undue large influence on political agendas and public discourses across Western societies and parts of Asia (Parker, 2018). While political extremity may take various forms, it could be particularly troubling when citizens hold extreme positions on important policy issues and shield themselves from opposing views.

Conceptually, an extreme attitude lies toward the two ends on an evaluative continuum—either extremely favorable or extremely unfavorable—distant from the midpoint of a moderate, middle-of-the-road stance (Wojcieszak & Rojas, 2011). Studies have shown that those holding extreme attitudes tend to believe their views are superior (Toner et al., 2013), perceive the other side as radical (Westfall et al., 2015), and engage in politically motivated unfriending (John & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015). Reduced network interaction may further lower the possibility of an attitude change, leaving individuals intolerant of voices unlike their own (Zhu & Skoric, 2021).

In this study, we propose a new research avenue to understand social media’s implications for issue extremity and reduced network interaction from an imagined audience perspective. Building upon expression effects research (Pingree, 2007), we examine the expressive use of social media as an alternative pathway to political extremity, apart from the popular echo chamber argument. While the dominant perspectives of social media’s polarizing effects have focused on the formation of like-minded communities that are insulated from contrasting views (Sunstein, 2001), recent scholarship has demonstrated that self-expressive acts may also lead to entrenched opinions and heightened polarization (Cho et al., 2018). This expressive pathway to political extremism has become increasingly important as social media

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enlarges the opportunities and formats with which citizens can broadcast their political self to a wider audience (Barnidge et al., 2018). In addition, as self-expression becomes an integrated component of civic life against the backdrop of participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006), expressive citizenship (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2014), and affective publics (Papacharissi, 2014), there is a call for shifts in perspectives from message exposure to expression when conceiving communication effects (Pingree, 2007).

Situated within this broader paradigm shift, our imagined audience approach seeks to integrate a new set of challenges and tensions with online expression processes. In particular, conflated social circles, coupled with complex privacy settings and proprietary algorithms, have obscured the size and nature of one’s audience (DeVito et al., 2017). For instance, proprietary algorithms largely mediate when, how, and to whom the expressed content gets displayed, making it difficult to know one’s audience (Hogan, 2010). Given these complexities, to adapt self-presentation and manage network boundaries, online expressers constantly need to “imagine” their audience (Marwick & Boyd, 2011). Such mental representation of “who is listening” and “how expressions are received” may profoundly shape the processes and outcomes of political expressive acts.

By bringing together theoretical insights from expression effects (Pingree, 2007), self-presentation (Goffman, 1959), and social media’s unique infrastructure (Marwick & Boyd, 2011), this study advances a new research avenue to understand social media’s polarizing effect. Using a multi-national survey data set from three democratic countries (Japan, South Korea, and the United States), we demonstrate how political expression on social media may be related to extreme issue attitudes and reduced network interaction, contingent on the expresser’s imagined audience. Importantly, instead of assuming universality, we test our model application within an authoritarian state (China).

**Political Expression and Extremity on Social Media**

Social media has become one of the primary pathways for contemporary citizens to express their political views (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2014). Users now have a wide array of opportunities to “give voice to their civic concerns” (Bimber, 2012, p. 122). These include posting their own thoughts, sharing news articles or content from others, changing profiles for a political cause, or discussing politics with others (Cho et al., 2018; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2014). With the interactive and multimedia nature of social media, self-expression may also take place through graphics and videos (e.g., “memes,” “gifs,” or “vines”) or via click speech (e.g., like, recommend, or upvote), moving beyond traditional forms (Wojcieszak & Rojas, 2011).

While political expression has been associated with many democratic benefits, such as political learning and participation (e.g., Beam et al., 2018), recent studies have shown that expression may reinforce the message sender’s existing attitudes (Lee et al., 2014), feeding confirmation biases to a greater extent than passive exposure to like-minded views (Johnson et al., 2020). This idea that expressive activities may have a reinforcing effect on the expresser is theoretically grounded in multiple strands of literature. Social psychological perspectives have long suggested that frequent expression during group discussions may contribute to political extremity, above and beyond argument exposure (Brauer et al., 1995). Along similar lines, work on self-presentation also indicates that people tend to internalize their public image, which, in turn, alters their self-identity (Carr & Foreman, 2016).

There are several potential mechanisms that could be at play. First, according to self-perception theory, individuals often infer their beliefs retrospectively by observing their overt behaviors (Bem, 1967). Through the act of expression, people “learn” what kind of person they are, which further strengthens prior attitudes and leads to a more evaluatively consistent belief system. Moreover, expressive behaviors may induce stronger ego-involvement, heightening commitment to the expressed views in an attempt to avoid psychological discomfort or social pressure (Festinger, 1957). Finally, political expression may also promote cognitive elaboration, increasing both certainty and accessibility of one’s prior attitudes (Lane et al., 2019). Providing some support, research on role-play and counter-attitudinal advocacy has demonstrated that merely thinking about an attitude object (e.g., issue, candidate) pushes one’s attitudes toward the extremes (Tesser & Conlee, 1975).

This expression-extremity link may be particularly prevalent on social media where the expressed content is centrally tied to the self (Hogan, 2010). Moreover, since shared content remainsarchivable and searchable in “a persistent and widely accessible ecosystem” (Marwick & Boyd, 2014, p. 1054), expressive behaviors require stronger commitment, creating permanent ties between the expressed views and one’s online self (Lane et al., 2019) and promoting extended rehearsal and elaboration with the posted content (Thorson, 2014). Most importantly, political expression is often motivated by defensive goals and ingroup/outgroup differentiation (Shin & Thorson, 2017). This likely results in stronger contrast effects (Sherif & Hovland, 1961), leading to more polarized attitudes and heightened intolerance. Studies with panel surveys (Barnidge et al., 2018; Cho et al., 2018) and experiment data (Sude et al., 2021) have offered some support for this self-persuading process. Following the expression effects literature, we propose the hypothesis:

**H1.** Political expression on social media is associated with (a) attitude extremity and (b) reduced interaction with disagreeable others.

**Social Media and Audience Perception**

Despite initial evidence, the underlying mechanisms linking expression to extremity have remained unclear. To address
this gap, we propose an imagined audience approach to understand how and when politically expressive behaviors may be associated with attitudinal extremity. Our imagined audience approach is grounded in the theoretical framework of Goffman’s (1959) dramaturgical analogy of social interaction. According to this perspective, expressing one’s political views on social media constitutes “front stage behavior” where the expressers are constantly aware of the scrutiny of others (Goffman, 1959, p. 24). This notion of audience is particularly relevant to polarization research, as the recognition that one is being judged “accentuates” the behavior, making it “twice-behaved behavior” (Schechner, 1993, p. 1).

Moreover, research shows that social media’s characteristics may have accentuated the importance of the audience to an expressive self. Like authors envisioning an audience when developing narratives, social media users also constantly adapt expressive behaviors based on audience perception (Shin & Thorson, 2017, p. 236). However, networked audiences tend to consist of a mix of affiliations varying in strength and nature (Marwick & Boyd, 2011). This has made it difficult to project a “context-free” self-image that is “flexible enough to withstand the vagaries” of roles and expectations of one’s diverse audience (Duffy & Chan, 2019, p. 123). Further complicating the issues, opaque algorithms and personalization settings have substantively governed content visibility, shaping who is in the actual audience (Hogan, 2010). As a result, audience perception can be influenced by a variety of factors such as personality traits or digital literacy (French & Bazarova, 2017; Litt & Hargittai, 2016), and may not align with one’s actual network structure (Bernstein et al., 2013).

Despite the difficulty to navigate audience perception, research continues to show that people do form expectations regarding potential audiences and adapt their communication accordingly (French & Bazarova, 2017). They may choose to write posts intended for “the lowest common denominator” (Hogan, 2010) or stay politically neutral to avoid unexpected responses (Thorson, 2014). Audience perceptions were also found to shape expressive activities such as platform choice (Semaan et al., 2015), language styles (Gil-Lopez et al., 2018), and privacy behaviors (Duffy & Chan, 2019), as well as overall communication satisfaction (Bazarova et al., 2015). When receiving no or unintended responses, people may question their posted content, make minor edits, or even delete the first draft altogether (Das & Kramer, 2013). This means the expressive use of social media may involve varying levels of perceived publicness and controllability and induce distinct psychological processes, dependent on each individual’s imagined audience.

An Imagined Audience Approach to Political Extremity

Bringing together the notion of imagined audience (Marwick & Boyd, 2011; Thorson, 2014) with the theoretical insights from expression effects (Pingree, 2007), we propose an imagined audience approach to investigate under what conditions social media expression may be related to political extremity and intolerance. Among various dimensions of an imagined audience, we specifically focus on three aspects that are most relevant to self-reinforcement and public commitment.

Perceived Relevance. One critical dimension is the perceived personal relevance of one’s imagined audience. Researchers coined the term “audience value” to underscore that not all types of audience matter when it comes to expression effects (Marder et al., 2016). Those of high personal relevance, such as families, close friends, and work relations, tend to exhibit greater social costs and elevate self-presentational concerns compared with low relevance audiences (Hogan, 2010).

When facing a highly relevant audience, expressive activities are often constrained by the possibility of losing personally or professionally important relationships (Neubaum et al., 2021). In such cases, individuals tend to make greater efforts to manage a desired social self. They may engage in self-censorship or selective sharing based on envisioned audience and situational goals (Semaan et al., 2015). As a result, to balance expressive needs and self-presentational concerns, individuals often moderate existing position in favor of political middle grounds (Collander et al., 2017). Providing some support, Kligler-Vilenchik (2021) found that political talk within personally relevant networks has a greater potential to persuade due to its sociability dimensions.

By contrast, the low social costs associated with less relevant audiences may heighten expression effects on political extremity and intolerance. In the face of a less relevant audience, people likely feel more comfortable ignoring potential sanction and are generally more immersed in their own expression. As such, articulating one’s political views with a weak-tie audience in mind has a higher probability to self-reinforce (Marder et al., 2016). Taken together, we propose the following hypothesis regarding audience relevance:

**H2.** Perceived audience relevance will moderate the relationship between political expression and (a) attitude extremity and (b) reduced network interaction, such that the positive association will be more pronounced for those with a lower personally relevant audience.

Perceived Closeness. Another related yet conceptually distinct dimension is the perceived closeness of an imagined audience. Perceived relational closeness refers to the subjective experience of intimacy, emotional affinity, and psychological bonding (Aron et al., 2004). While personally relevant networks tend to bring subjective closeness, people do not necessarily view all strong-tie others as psychologically close.

Perceived closeness is an important dimension to consider as the relational context may influence “how people
experience, perceive, and react to disagreement” (Zhu & Skoric, 2021, p. 6). When facing a close audience, individuals tend to take into account their likes and needs, which enhances rehearsal and elaboration. They may also expect more support and responsiveness from a closer audience. In other words, as the anticipated exchange becomes more personal and intimate, people likely see the expressed content as more central to their self-perception (Walsh et al., 2020). Such cognitive elaboration and identity-relevant processes may further entrench one’s initial position.

By contrast, as distance audiences tend to consist of cross-cutting networks, envisioning a distant audience likely promotes open-mindedness, ultimately leading to more moderate attitudes (Mutz, 2002). Distance audiences also alleviate the pressure to maintain consistency in one’s self-presentation, giving the expresser a greater leeway for attitudinal ambivalence and opinion conversion (Carr & Foreman, 2016). In support, related evidence found that imagined contact with disagreeable others may reduce polarization among opposing camps (Warner & Villamil, 2017). Given the above, we expect that those with a distant audience in mind are less inclined to experience self-persuasion.

With respect to reduced interaction, political expression intended for a close audience tends to appear safer, protected by social-relational buffers and affective bonds. Such expressive practice, once met with disagreement, may seem less tolerable and taken at a personal level. Consistent with this view, research found that while disagreement among distant acquaintances can be easily overlooked, dissonance with close others tends to be harder to bypass, often resulting in corroded trust or even relational dissolution (Neubaum et al., 2021). Following this line of thinking, we expect that political disagreement from close others is often taken as “deep interpersonal dysfunctionality or detachment” (Neubaum et al., 2021, p. 196). Hence, a close audience often “raises the stake,” making the expresser less tolerant of any sort of criticism or disagreement. Based on the above, we propose an additional hypothesis:

**H3.** Perceived audience closeness will moderate the relationship between political expression and (a) attitude extremity and (b) reduced network interaction, such that the positive association will be more pronounced for those with a relationally close audience.

**Expected Reinforcement.** In addition to network relevance and psychological closeness, the expected audience response may also affect how political expression relates to extremity and reduced interaction. Specifically, for those expecting positive audience reinforcement, political expression may consolidate existing attitudes. By contrast, when people are unsure whether their shared content will receive support, they may reconsider posting or ultimately moderate their position (Wojcieszak & Rojas, 2011). Expected negative responses may also cause individuals to iteratively adjust their initial communication, hoping to garner more favorable reactions (Hayes et al., 2018). In support, a recent study found that people express greater disappointment when receiving fewer likes than expected and even start to doubt their initial posts (Scissors et al., 2016). Thus, it is reasonable to expect perceived reinforcement may also play a moderating role:

**H4.** Expected audience reinforcement will moderate the association between political expression and (a) attitude extremity and (b) reduced network interaction, such that the relationship will be more pronounced among those expecting high audience reinforcement.

**Considering the Socio-technological Context**

It is important to note that expression effects and the role of an imagined audience may vary across socio-technological contexts. While social media’s polarizing potential has been predominantly studied in western societies and focused on Euro-American-centric platforms, it remains an empirical question whether the observed mechanisms can be generalized to other societies (Barnidge et al., 2018). Contextual variance is particularly important given our theoretical lens of self-presentation and imagined audience. To enhance generalizability and relevance, we take advantage of a culturally diverse data set that includes a broader range of experiences.

Specifically, we test our imagined audience model with a multi-national sample pooled from representative social media users from Japan, South Korea, and the United States. These three countries are comparable in terms of their levels of democratization, information infrastructure, and expression norms (see Online Appendices 1–3 for details). At the same time, the multi-national sample also allows us to include a wider range of lived experiences and cultural norms important to our theoretical inquiry, such as self-presentation motives, consideration of others, and relational mobility (Heine et al., 2008). In particular, research has documented substantial variations between American and East Asian cultures in their self-concept and group embeddedness (Heine et al., 2008). Given that the notions of self and others are implicated in our imagined audience approach, we believe that the inclusion of the United States and East Asian countries is theoretically meaningful, helping us make stronger arguments and prevent a US-centric bias.

**Testing Model Boundary.** As an additional robustness check, we examine whether the proposed model can be reasonably applied to societies with more restricted information environment. Toward that goal, we use China as a case of study for its known restriction on internet freedom and civil liberties (see Online Appendices 1–3 for details). As an authoritarian country, China has a restricted media environment and probably the most sophisticated information control in the world (Freedom House, 2019). These practices are in place
to uphold China’s one-party regime and preferred ideology. Hence, the less open media environment may reduce the constitutive role of self-presentation and the salience of an imagined audience.

Furthermore, within the state-managed telecommunication infrastructure, foreign companies such as Facebook are banned in China; WeChat, a homegrown Facebook-like platform, provides similar functionality, allowing citizens to share news, post comments, curate personal news feeds, and form reciprocal connections (Wei et al., 2018). Despite these similarities, we expect the psychological processes underlying online self-expression to be different in the Chinese context. In particular, on WeChat, social ties are privately held instead of publicly articulated. This reduces levels of context collapse and social browsing, unlike Facebook where audience reactions are broadcast to one’s entire network by default (Gil-Lopez et al., 2018).

Given the above, we expect expressive acts to be less relevant to political extremity and intolerance in the Chinese context. This in part results from the limited opportunity structures in which private views can be expressively reinforced. In addition, since social media as a public space are censored and regulated, citizens may perceive lower political efficacy in their expression, which likely reduces its importance in opinion reinforcement. Importantly, political expressions are less motivated by intergroup contexts in China, as opposed to democratic societies where open debates are normatively desirable (Barnidge et al., 2018). Along similar lines, a conflated audience is not a defining feature on WeChat as on Facebook, making imagined audiences less central to one’s self-expressive experiences. Given our literature is predominantly drawn from democratic contexts, we propose a research question, asking whether the Chinese case conforms to the findings obtained in democratic countries:

**RQ1.** To what extent the observed relationships can be generalized to China?

**Methods**

**Issue Context**

We examine our research questions using (im)migration as the issue context. Despite the recent increase in global interconnectedness, anti-immigration rhetoric has been pervasive in many migrant-receiving countries. The conversations surrounding the debate have primarily focused on potential threats to national security and cultural integrity, boosting an “us vs. them” agenda. As an example, the former US President Donald Trump tried to ban nationals from seven Muslim countries from entering the United States in the first week of his presidency. Many of his calls for immigration regulation have stimulated fierce debates and radical reactions throughout his presidency. The political controversies fueled by immigration rhetoric and resource distribution have also increased in some East Asian countries, including Japan and South Korea (Stokes & Devlin, 2018). Similarly, China has recently witnessed the largest mass migration in history, fueling social controversies and tensions between urban and rural residents as immigrant issues in other societies (Kuhn, 2017). The comparable issue salience and contested nature across the four countries provide a suitable context to study political extremity.

**Data**

Data were collected between May and July of 2018 using online survey panels administered by Qualtrics. Qualtrics uses a two-stage sampling process. First, subjects are randomly selected from each country’s online panel constructed along geographic and demographic parameters. Next, subjects are presented with profiling questions to create a final sample that is balanced regarding age, gender and education. Given our focus on social media expression, the final sample for analysis included those who reported using any social media platform popular in their countries. The sample is broadly representative of adult social media users in each country, with 1,425 complete responses (descriptive statistics in Online Appendix 4).

**Measures**

**Issue attitude extremity** was operationalized as the absolute deviation from the scale midpoint, assuming the midpoint represents the least intense attitudes (Wojcieszak & Rojas, 2011). Participants were asked to indicate their position on (im)migration on a 6-point scale; then the responses were folded such that the resulting 3-point scale reflects opinion extremity, with a higher score indicating more extreme issue position ($0$ = less extreme, $2$ = more extreme).

**Reduced interaction with disagreeable others** was measured using two items: the first question asked whether respondents had reduced interaction with someone on social media because they did not share political views, and for those who reported having such experiences, the second question followed up by asking the frequency. The combined 6-point scale reflects the frequency of reducing interaction due to political disagreement on social media ($0$ = never or almost never, $5$ = frequently).

**Political expression** was measured using a 6-point scale where respondents indicated their frequency of engaging in the following activities on social media: (a) express views on current events, (b) engage in political discussion, (c) share news that one agrees with, and (d) share news that one disagrees with ($0$ = never, $5$ = frequently) (Beam et al., 2018). The four items were averaged, with higher scores indicating greater expression frequency (Cronbach’s $\alpha$ = .93).

**Perceived relevance** was measured on a 6-point scale asking respondents how personally relevant their Facebook (or
try-specific variances. To do so, we included two dummy
ual-level variables that were universal controlling for coun-
approach which allowed us to examine the effect of individ-
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To answer H1–H4, we conducted a series of fixed effects
Analytic Approach
To answer H1–H4, we conducted a series of fixed effects regression analyses using a multi-country data set pooled from Japan, South Korea, and the United States. Following common practice in comparative social science research using clustered data with a small number of macro-level units (Huang, 2016), we opted to employ the fixed effects approach which allowed us to examine the effect of individual-level variables that were universal controlling for country-specific variances. To do so, we included two dummy variables indicating the country, with the United States being the reference group. This approach follows a number of previous studies comparing social media use across nations (e.g., Kalogeropoulos et al., 2017). We replicated the procedures with the Chinese data set to answer RQ1.

Results
We ran a baseline ordinary least squares (OLS) regression (without interactions) to examine the relationship between political expression on social media and (a) attitude extremity as well as (b) reduced interactions (H1). Overall, results from the baseline model (not shown in the table) show that South Koreans (b = −.51, p < .001) and Japanese (b = −.42, p < .001) tended to exhibit more moderate attitudes toward immigration and were also less likely to reduce interactions with disagreeable others compared with the US counterparts (b = −.46, p < .001 for South Korea; b = −.50, p < .001 for Japan). Compared with female participants, males were less likely to hold extreme immigration attitudes (b = −.16, p < .01) or reduce interaction due to political disagreement (b = −.19, p < .05). In addition, while older participants were less likely to reduce interaction than younger participants (b = −.01, p < .05), there was no age difference regarding attitude extremity (b = −.00, p = ns).

Beyond demographics, party affiliation was positively associated with extreme immigration attitude (b = .15, p < .05), but not necessarily with reduced network interaction (b = .08, p = ns). However, political interest was positively associated with both issue extremity (b = .05, p < .01) and reduced interaction (b = .11, p < .001). General media use was not a significant predictor for both issue extremity (b = .02, p = ns) and reduced interaction (b = −.02, p = ns). Finally, those high on self-censorship were more likely to reduce interaction due to political disagreement (b = .32, p < .001) but no significant difference was found regarding issue extremity (b = .01, p = ns).

Regarding the main effect of our focal predictor, social media political expression was only marginally related to extreme immigration position (b = −.03, p < .10), with Cohen’s effect size value (f² = .03) suggesting a small to moderate effect size. Frequent expressers were more likely to reduce interaction with disagreeable others (b = .17,

| Political expression | Relevance | Closeness | Reinforcement | Attitude extremity | Reduced interaction |
|----------------------|-----------|-----------|--------------|-------------------|---------------------|
| Democratic sample   | 0.53 (1.15)| 3.62 (1.52)| 1.77 (1.20)  | 2.41 (1.15)       | 0.64 (0.78)         |
| Japan                | 0.31 (1.10)| 3.60 (1.51)| 1.19 (1.22)  | 2.13 (1.09)       | 0.87 (0.85)         |
| South Korea          | 0.41 (1.12)| 3.28 (1.54)| 1.91 (1.04)  | 2.27 (1.07)       | 0.44 (0.64)         |
| US                   | 0.89 (1.66)| 3.88 (1.48)| 2.30 (1.04)  | 2.92 (1.14)       | 0.95 (0.84)         |
| China                | 2.05 (1.35)| 3.58 (1.51)| 1.61 (0.89)  | 2.71 (1.12)       | 1.27 (0.83)         |

Note. Sample means are reported with standard deviation in parenthesis.
The findings support H1(b) and offer no support for H1(a). To test H2–H4, which proposed that imagined audience variables moderate the relationship between political expression and issue extremity as well as reduced network interaction, we ran a series of moderation analyses in the multi-country data set from Japan, South Korea, and the United States (see Model 1 in Table 2). Our results suggest that audience relevance serves as a moderator, shaping the relationship between political expression and issue attitude extremity ($b = -0.03$, $p < .01$) as well as reduced interaction ($b = -0.05$, $p < .01$). Specifically, for those who perceived their audience to be highly personally relevant, the more frequently individuals expressed themselves politically on social media, the more moderate their immigration attitudes would be. By contrast, for those with a low relevance audience, political expression was positively associated with more extreme immigration position and greater tendency to reduce interactions with disagreeable others (see Figure 1), supporting H2(a) and H2(b).

In addition, audience closeness is a significant moderator in the relationship between political expression and issue extremity as well as reduced interactions, supporting H3(a) and H3(b) (see Model 2 in Table 2). For example, for those with low audience closeness (i.e., audiences distant from themselves), the more they engage in political expressions on social media, the less likely they hold extreme issue attitudes.

Given that distant audiences tend to be more context collapsed and politically heterogeneous, it is likely that expecting distant audiences invited an imagined contact with political and social outgroups, mitigating negative affect and close-mindedness (Warner & Villamil, 2017). Likewise, the positive relationship between political expression and reduced interaction was observed only for those with a relationally close audience (Figure 2).

Expected audience reinforcement displayed similar patterns (see Model 3 in Table 2). When the expresser anticipated low audience reinforcement from potential audience, expressive activities were negatively related to attitude extremity. This negative association disappeared for those who envisioned a supportive audience. And while not reaching significance, results with respect to reduced interaction showed similar patterns: expressive activities were more associated with heightened intolerance of political disagreement, but to a greater extent when the expressers anticipated audience reinforcement, supporting H4(a) and offering some evidence for H4(b) (Figure 3).

### Testing Model Boundary in an Authoritarian State

RQ1 asked to what extent our expression effects approach to political extremity, contingent on one’s imagined audience, remains a useful framework in an authoritarian political

| Table 2. OLS Regression Predicting Issue Extremity and Reduced Interaction. |
|---------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Issue attitude extremity        | Reduced interaction |
| Predictor | Model 1 | Model 2 | Model 3 | Model 1 | Model 2 | Model 3 |
| Controls: Gender | -.15** | -.06 | -.07 | -.17* | .00 | .00 |
| Age | -.00 | .00 | .00 | -.01* | .00 | .00 |
| Education | -.02 | -.02 | -.02 | .01 | .02 | .02 |
| Party affiliation | .16* | .02 | .03 | .09 | -.08 | -.04 |
| Korea | -.49*** | -.49*** | -.47*** | -.48*** | -.07 | -.06 |
| Japan | -.40*** | -.40*** | -.38** | -.51*** | -.23 | -.22 |
| Self-censorship | .01 | .16† | .12 | .29*** | .57*** | .54*** |
| Political interest | .05** | .12*** | .12*** | .10*** | .10† | .10† |
| Media use | .01 | -.01 | -.01 | -.02 | -.02 | -.02 |
| Network size | .00 | -.00 | -.00 | .00 | .00† | .00† |
| Moderator: Political expression | -.15* | -.21* | .31*** | -.02 | .04 |
| Interactions: Expression $\times$ Relevance | -.03** | -.05 | -.01 | -.06 | -.04 |
| Expression $\times$ Closeness | -.06* | .06* | -.05** | -.10* | -.06 |
| Expression $\times$ Reinforcement | .05* | .05* | .05* | .06* | -.06 |
| Total $R^2$ (%) | 14.64*** | 19.61*** | 19.68*** | 19.23*** | 23.86*** | 22.54*** |

$p < .001; \ d ot p < .05; \ * p < .01; \ ** p < .001$. 

### Notes

1. $p < .10; \ * p < .05; \ ** p < .01; \ *** p < .001$. 

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Toward that end, we replicated findings reported above and conducted OLS regressions with the same model specification within the Chinese sample (see Table 3). Overall, the Chinese results reveal that our imagined audience variables play a limited role in moderating the relationship between political expression and (a) issue extremity and (b) reduced interaction. Across the three dimensions (i.e., audience relevance, audience closeness, and expected reinforcement), imagined audience was not a significant moderator in China.

Figure 1. The effect of social media expression on (a) issue extremity and (b) reduced interaction conditional on audience relevance. Note. Values show estimates at means ± 1 SD. All covariates are set to sample mean for continuous variables and reference group for factors when plotting marginal effects.

Figure 2. The effect of social media expression on (a) issue extremity and (b) reduced interaction conditional on audience closeness. Note. Values show estimates at means ± 1 SD. All covariates are set to sample mean for continuous variables and reference group for factors when plotting marginal effects.
Figure 3. The effect of social media expression on (a) issue extremity and (b) reduced interaction conditional on audience reinforcement.

Note. Values show estimates at means ± 1 SD. All covariates are set to sample mean for continuous variables and reference group for factors when plotting marginal effects.

Table 3. OLS Regression Predicting Issue Extremity and Reduced Interaction in China.

|                  | Issue attitude extremity | Reduced interaction |
|------------------|--------------------------|---------------------|
|                  | Model 1     | Model 2    | Model 3    | Model 1     | Model 2    | Model 3    |
| Controls         |             |             |             |             |             |             |
| Gender           | -.11        | -.07       | -.07       | .13         | .09         | .08         |
| Age              | .00         | .01        | .01        | .01***       | .02**       | .02**       |
| Education        | -.07*       | -.06       | -.08†      | .05         | .00         | -.01        |
| Income           | .02         | .03        | .03        | -.05        | -.05        | -.04        |
| Party affiliation| -.02        | .03        | .04        | .32*        | .21         | .20         |
| Self-censorship  | .14†        | .10        | .07        | .14         | .08         | .10         |
| Political interest| .01        | -.03       | -.02       | .12**       | .14*        | .16*        |
| Media use        | .04*        | -.01       | -.00       | -.03        | -.05        | -.05        |
| Network size     | .01**       | .00        | .00        | -.00        | -.00        | -.00        |
| Predictor        |             |             |             |             |             |             |
| Political Expression| .01       | -.10       | -.06       | .07         | -.04        | .09         |
| Moderators       |             |             |             |             |             |             |
| Relevance        | .13**       |             |             | -.13*       |             |             |
| Closeness        |             | -.07       |             | -.07        |             |             |
| Reinforcement    |             |             | .08        |             |             | -.03        |
| Interactions     |             |             |             |             |             |             |
| Expression × Relevance | -.01   |             |             | -.00    |             |             |
| Expression × Closeness |             | .07†      |             |             | .05         |             |
| Expression × Reinforcement |             |             | .01        |             |             | -.01        |
| Total R² (%)     | 7.26**      | 4.81       | 4.14       | 11.26***    | 7.38        | 7.17        |

†p < .10; *p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001.

Another noticeable difference was that while self-censorship was an important source of influence on reduced interaction in the democratic data set, it was not a significant predictor in China, where political interest seemed to play a much stronger and robust role. Relatedly, audience relevance was a critical factor in China, associated with more extreme
attitude but lower likelihood of reduced interaction, while in our democratic data set, audience relevance was not related to the decision to shield oneself from political disagreement. Overall, our findings suggest that expression effects and particularly the role of imagined audience may operate differently in societies where information flows and expression opportunities are more restricted.

Discussion

Many countries have witnessed increasing political extremity and intolerance, against the backdrop of heightened polarization and populist surge. Contemporary scholarship has emphasized restricted information exposure, particularly on social media, as a contributing factor. Joining this important conversation, the current study focuses on the expressive use of social media and how it relates to political extremity and reduced network interaction.

Drawing on multiple threads of theoretical insights, primarily expression effects (Pingree, 2007), self-presentation (Goffman, 1959), and imagined audience (Marwick & Boyd, 2011), our results suggest a (de)polarizing potential when people use social media to express themselves politically. Moreover, we demonstrate that such effects may be contingent on characteristics of the expresser’s imagined audiences. For instance, frequent expression is associated with more moderate opinions when the expresser envisions an audience comprising personally or professionally relevant individuals. However, this is not the case for those expecting a low-relevance audience. Similarly, political expression is related to attitudinal moderation particularly when the envisioned audience is held to be less supportive or psychologically distant.

Apart from issue attitude extremity, the expressive use of social media also has implications for selective availability. Increasingly, people are granted opportunities to “homogenize” their ego-centric network by “pruning” viewpoints unlike one’s own (Zhu & Skoric, 2021). Since expressive activities involve cognitive elaboration and defensive rehearsal of one’s thoughts (Cho et al., 2018), frequent expression may heighten the expresser’s value involvement and cognitive rigidity. These likely motivate network boundary work in the form of political unfriending, news feed cura- tion, or reduced interaction (Zhu & Skoric, 2021).

Adding to this line of work, our study further demonstrates that self-expression is related to reduced network interaction particularly when one expects a weak-tie audience. This finding underscores the volatility of weak-tie network and casts doubts on its democratic potentials: Despite the value of bridging capitals (e.g., Granovetter, 1973), our study reveals that frequent expression can exacerbate the tendency to break ties with less personally relevant audiences, possibly due to the low social cost associated with relational dissolution (John & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015). Such tendency may cancel out the potential benefits of weak-tie relationships in promoting cross-cutting encounters. By contrast, presenting one’s political self in front of a relatively close audience tends to forefront social-relational goals. As a result, people are motivated to engage in stricter boundary behaviors to ensure no “unmeant gestures” (Goffman, 1959, p. 60) or “gatecrashing” (Goffman, 1959, p. 39) disrupt impression management or relationship maintenance.

Compared with our democratic countries, the moderating role of imagined audiences is largely absent in China, where a more restrictive media system and expression norms prevail. While our research design does not warrant a direct examination of the causal mechanisms, we offer several speculations. Our theoretical reasoning builds on the idea that online expression often takes place in a highly contentious environment where partisan conflicts or political disagreement motivate corrective action (Rojas, 2010) or attempted persuasion (Thorson, 2014). In such antagonistic contexts, it is likely that people proactively imagine their audiences and incorporate audience feedback into their attitude formation and action plans.

By contrast, Chinese social media users are less likely to engage in political expression for intergroup differentiation (Yuki, 2003), reducing the role of imagined audiences in the cognitive elaboration or normative influence. And while expressing one’s political self is an integral part of broader civic culture in democratic countries, Chinese social media users face additional layers of uncertainties due to the sophisticated censorship system. This poses unique challenges to adapt self-presentation based on audience perception.

On a broader note, our finding in China suggests that the relationship between expressive social media use and political extremity needs to be evaluated within specific socio-political contexts. Under a one-party regime, pro- and anti-party information may differ in their likelihood of being shared, and the act of sharing involves different levels of uncertainty and social sanction, providing an important context for political expression among Chinese users. Another crucial point to note is that our work foregrounds users’ “reconstruction of their responsive audience,” which reflects both network and platform features; this communication-centered approach to understanding social media effects (Costa, 2018) implies that our findings cannot be solely interpreted by any built-in technological affordances specific to a medium (Facebook or WeChat), but are better understood as the role of that medium as it exists in situated practice.

Before we discuss the broader implications, several limitations are worth noting. First, while we rely on self-reported measures as a proxy for behaviors, future studies can benefit from using direct behavioral data. Second, this study focuses on a subset of active social media users, which limits generalizability to broader populations. Along the same line, future studies could employ multi-item scales, or replicate the findings across different issues and platforms to enhance reliability and external validity of the findings. In particular, some recent studies (e.g., Otala et al., 2021) have observed mass migration from mainstream social media (e.g., Facebook) to
emerging platforms, leading to more isolated echo chambers at the platform level. Future studies can expand our study, which focuses exclusively on Facebook, to other platforms with varying socio-technological features.

In addition, our study uses cross-sectional data, which limits a causal interpretation. While we base our interpretation on theoretical grounds, future studies can clarify the relationship using panel data. Relatedly, following expression effects literature, we measure political expression as routine expressive practice. This approach offers a more conservative estimate of expression effects, yet we hope future research could expand our analysis to issue-specific expressive acts, as well as differentiating content features and user motivations for more nuanced observations. Finally, while our preliminary findings in China offer important insights into expression effects in non-democratic contexts, we acknowledge the limitation of having only one authoritarian case and join the calls for more research in authoritarian political systems, in which big sections of the world population reside.

Conclusion

Overall, our study offers several implications regarding the relationship between social media and political extremity. First, building on expression effects research, we demonstrate that while social media provides greater opportunities for citizens to express themselves politically, this expanded self-expression may amplify the existing political division by engaging the expresser in a self-persuading process (Cho et al., 2018).

Second, we propose a new research avenue to understand the political implications of social media from an imagined audience perspective. This is especially important as context-collapsed networks (Marwick & Boyd, 2011) and behind-the-scene algorithms (DeVito et al., 2017) have complicated the notion of audience traditionally defined. Especially, proprietary algorithms largely mediate when, how, and to whom the expressed content gets displayed (Hogan, 2010), playing into both actual and imagined audience composition (Bernstein et al., 2013). By promoting content most likely to be deemed important to a given user, algorithmic curation profoundly shapes online reality, guiding not only audience perception but also the very algorithms feeding into audience composition (Kaun & Uldam, 2018). From this perspective, our imagined audience approach bears significant relevance to the complex dynamics in today’s technology-mediated self-presentation.

Our study also adds insights to existing theories outlined in the communication field. For example, following the notion of egocentric publics (Wojcieszak & Rojas, 2011), our study suggests that despite the informational value brought by weak-tie relationships, individuals may not take the full advantage if they bury themselves in over-sharing or selectively avoid political disagreement. Also, we demonstrate that active sharers are more likely to engage in boundary management, expanding the selective exposure research to its expressive antecedents (Garrett, 2009).

Finally, this study underlines the importance of comparative perspectives in theorizing the relationship between social media and political extremity. By emphasizing individual perceptual processes as well as broader social contexts, our study provides a deeper understanding of the expressive pathway to political extremity and reduced network interaction.

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Supplemental Material

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