Understanding President Trump Supporters' Behaviors about a Political Controversy

Abstract

- **Purpose**: This study seeks to understand Trump supporters' behaviors on social media in the wake of a political controversy: President Trump's continued support for Judge Roy Moore's candidacy for the U.S. Senate representing the state of Alabama despite several allegations of sexual assault against him.

- **Design/methodology**: To explore Trump supporters' social media behaviors, including unfriending/unfollowing contacts and speaking out about the controversy, an online survey was conducted among 325 supporters of President Trump a few days before the special election was held in Alabama in December 2017.

- **Findings**: We found negative presidential image to influence individuals' loss of face, and such loss of face to impact unfriending/unfollowing behaviors on social media, as well as outspokenness. Furthermore, the differences between strong issue supporters and weak issue supporters' opinion climate perceptions and outspokenness were investigated.

- **Originality/value**: Rather than using fear of isolation as the mediator between opinion climate and willingness to speak out, as is generally the case in the spiral of silence model (e.g., Moy, Domke and Stamm, 2001), this study investigated the role of another affective indicator, loss of face on two social media behaviors, outspokenness, and unfollowing/unfriending contacts on social media.

- **Keywords:** face saving, opinion incongruence, outspokenness, social media behaviors, spiral of silence, unfollowing, unfriending

Understanding President Trump's Supporters' Behaviors over a Political Controversy

In November 2017, the *Washington Post* reported on several allegations of sexual assault against Judge Roy Moore, the Republican candidate for a United States Senate seat from Alabama (McCrummen, Reinhard and Crites, 2017). Although Moore denied all the allegations vehemently, several prominent Republicans, including Senator Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, withdrew their support for his candidacy, and even speculated on a potential dismissal from the Senate should Judge Moore win the special election. One prominent Republican, however, maintained his support for Judge Moore; on December 4, 2017, President Trump tweeted his support for Judge Moore, writing, "Democrats refusal to give even one vote for massive Tax Cuts is why we need Republican Roy Moore to win in Alabama. We need his vote on stopping crime, illegal immigration, Border Wall, Military, Pro Life, V.A., Judges 2nd Amendment and more. No to Jones, a Pelosi/Schumer Puppet!"

Despite criticisms and questions over whether he was morally and ethically fit to serve the U.S. senate, Moore stayed in the race, eventually losing to Democrat, Doug Jones. According to exit polls by the *Washington Post* survey, Moore's image was more negative than that of his opponent among voters (Washington Post, 2017). Yet, Senator Jones' victory margin was a mere 1.5%, with over 650,000 votes cast in favor of the beleaguered Republican candidate. Not surprisingly, 97% of those who voted for Judge Moore said they did so express their support for President Trump rather than Judge Moore himself (Washington Post, 2017).

Understandable as it is for President Trump's supporters to continue their support in the anonymized ballot box by voting for Judge Moore, strategies adopted by such individuals online to express or suppress their opinions about President Trump's endorsement of Judge Moore before friends and family and express their opinions about it deserve attention. Judge Moore's

candidacy was certainly controversial, and framed by several prominent Republicans as an embarrassment to the GOP (ABC, 2017). Such a framing may have put President Trump's supporters in the difficult position of having to defend their controversial candidate of choice to the Republican establishment as well non-Republicans. Going against the Republican establishment is not new for President Trump's supporters, given that President Trump himself ran as an anti-establishment candidate. However, the controversial nature of the allegations against Judge Moore and the nationwide outrage against his candidacy following these allegations, including one from a self-avowed Trump supporter who said she was 14 years old when a 32 year-old Moore assaulted her, may have complicated matters. Would Trump supporters express their opinion about the president's endorsement of Judge Moore, or would they stay silent? Furthermore, are certain Trump supporters more prone to expressing their opinions? These are the questions that this study sought to answer.

To understand individuals' behaviors when faced with the dilemma of expressing a controversial opinion or staying silent, we turn to the theory of spiral of silence (Noelle-Neumann, 1977; 1984; 1991; Noelle-Neumann and Petersen, 2004). The spiral of silence postulates that individuals will choose to remain silent about controversial topics when they perceive their opinion to be incongruent with that of the majority, and speak up when they believe their opinion to match that of the majority. However, in the social media environment, people can engage in other "actions of revoking and undoing on the social media" (Weller, 2016, p. 259), beyond speaking up or remaining silent; they may delete content or disconnect from individuals they believe to be unsupportive of their positions. They may even delete their profiles from a specific social medium (Weller, 2016). Furthermore, by weeding out those who

contribute to one's perceived opinion incongruence, an individual may create for himself or herself an echo chamber where silence may become unnecessary.

Accordingly, the purpose of this study is to understand President Trump's supporters' social media behaviors, particularly in light of the controversy surrounding Judge Moore. Drawing from the spiral of silence (Noelle-Neumann, 1977; 1984; 1991; Noelle-Neumann and Petersen, 2004) and the concepts of face and face-saving strategies (Goffman, 1967; Ting-Toomey and Kurogi, 1998; Zhang, Cao and Grigoriou, 2011), we attempt to explain President Trump's supporters' social media behaviors. Specifically, we first explore differences between perceptions of Trump supporters who agree with the president's endorsement of Judge Moore and those who do not to understand the underlying cognitive and affective factors that may contribute to social media behaviors. Second, we investigate the impact of loss of face, negative image of President Trump, and perceived opinion incongruence on individuals' unfollowing/unfriending behaviors on social and their outspokenness about the issue. This study seeks to contribute to the body of knowledge in the areas of public opinion and public behavior in the social media environment by complementing previous research on the spiral of silence. In the next section, we review the literatures upon which our investigation is grounded.

Literature Review

The Spiral of Silence: Perceived Opinion Incongruence

The spiral of silence (Noelle-Neumann, 1977, 1984, 1991; Noelle-Neumann and Petersen, 2004) is a theoretical framework that explicates when and why people may or may not express their opinions. The theory contends that when people who find their opinions to be on the side of the minority tend to stay silent and/or agree with majority opinions. In contrast, if

they perceive their opinions to conform to the majority, they are likely to express such opinions (Neuwirth, Frederick and Mayo, 2007).

However, recent studies on the postulates of the spiral of silence have had mixed results and/or have noted boundary conditions. For example, Gearhart and Zhang (2018) found opinion (in)congruence with the media to have no impact on individuals' opinion expression, regardless of the type of issue. Instead, perceived opinion incongruence with friends and family was found to impact individuals' opinion expression, particularly on the issue of immigration. Interestingly, Matthes, Morrison, and Schemer (2010) suggested that opinion climate may only impact opinion expression of those with low or moderate attitudes toward the issue, and leave those whose opinions are hard-core or very strong unaffected. Lee *et al.* (2014) echoed this suggestion, and found those with hard-core opinions to be unmoved by perceived opinion climate.

With the advent of social and digital media technologies, the spiral of silence has been further tested and challenged by scholars (e.g., Gearhart and Zhang, 2015; Yun and Park, 2011). Many scholars (e.g., Kim, Han, Shanahan and Berdayes, 2004) view the Internet as an environment from which people learn and estimate public opinion. Several studies have found spiral of silence to hold true in the online media environment. For example, a negative relationship has been identified between perceived climate of opinion and willingness to express opinions in online forums (Yun and Park, 2011) and social networking sites (Fox and Warber, 2015; Jang, Lee and Jin, 2014). Furthermore, scholars have discussed how the Internet helps form individuals' perceptions of opinion climate, and have shown their intentions to speak out or to remain silent to be impacted by the perceived opinion climate on their social media feeds and on the Internet in general (Yun and Park, 2011).

Supporters of President Trump present a particularly interesting challenge to scholars of public opinion, as they tend to be firm and vocal in their support of the president. Smith and Henley (2018) reported that "nearly 75% of Trump supporters count themselves among his enthusiastic supporters," (p. 195) and are characterized by high levels of authoritarian aggression (Ludeke, Klitgaar and Vitriol, 2018), looking for leaders to "crush evil" and "get rid of bad apples (Smith and Henley, 2018, p. 203). They tend to be resistant to social justice and change not because of inherent biases, but because they do not believe inequalities exist, and follow meritocratic ideologies (Cech, 2017).

In the specific case of President Trump's endorsement of Judge Moore despite several allegations of sexual assault against him, Trump supporters may display differentiated levels of support for Judge Moore and for President Trump's endorsement. Logic would dictate that not all supporters of President Trump would agree with all his actions and/or opinions. Rather, Trump supporters tend to be resistant to changing their minds about their support for the president (Wood and Porter, 2018), and likely to continue to identify as Trump supporters despite disagreeing with one or more of his actions and/or policies. Among Trump supporters, however, how perceptions of opinion climate and outspokenness about controversial issues differ based on their approval or disapproval specific policies or actions is yet unknown. Understanding these differences between Trump supporters may help advance further theorizing about the spiral of silence, and help further understand different types of Trump supporters, rather than simply lumping all Trump supporters into one homogenous category. The following research question is posited to address this query.

RQ1: Among Trump supporters, how do perceptions of opinion climate differ based on individuals' strong or weak issue[1] support?

RQ2: Among Trump supporters, how does outspokenness about the issue differ based on individuals' strong or weak issue support?

Face Theories: Loss of Face and Face Saving Actions

Loss of face. When people hold opinions that that are morally challenging, controversial, and highly visible, such as supporting Judge Moore despite the many allegations of sexual assault, they may worry about others' judgment about such opinions, and consider themselves under social pressure to either change or suppress such opinions. Although maintaining the opinion may be important to the individuals, they may not want others to know those opinions for fear of developing a negative image of themselves, or to lose face. In such situations, they may employ certain strategies "to manage desired social impressions" about themselves (Guan and Lee, 2017, p. 69), and save face among their social networks.

The idea of face has been theorized upon for several decades, particularly in the intercultural communication literatures. Brown and Levinson's (1987) face-saving model of politeness, Ting-Toomey's face negotiation theory (1988) and Arundale's (1999; 2010) face constituting theory are a few examples of the scholarship on face over the years. Brown and Levinson (1987) defined face as "the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself" (p. 61) or herself. To Goffman (1967), the concept of face is "an image located in the flow of events" (p. 7). Ting-Toomey (1988) defined it as "an individual's claimed sense of favorable social self-image in a relational and network context" (as cited in Ting-Toomey and

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[1] The "issue" is defined as President Trump's endorsement of Judge Moore, rather than Judge Moore's candidacy for the U.S. Senate, and was explained to participants as such in the survey.

Kurogi, 1998, p. 190). Others see face as relational identity (Locher, 2008) or "an interactional and a relational phenomenon" (Arundale, 2013, p. 110). The general idea of face in the literature is that people in social interactions need to maintain a publicly acceptable image of themselves (Zhang, Cao and Grigoriou, 2011), and aspire to enhance social face and avoid losing face during social interactions (Ho, 1976).

Based on the context of the study, that is, social media where users have the opportunity to follow and interact with individuals beyond their personal, face-to-face networks, Ting-Toomey's (1988) definition of face, which encompasses both relational and network contexts, is adopted in this study. Loss of face, then, is defined as the self-perceived negative impact on an individual's social self-image in relational and/or network contexts. In other words, loss of face takes place when the individual believes his/her own social self-image to have been negatively impacted or less favorable in his/her social networks or relational partners' minds than before. As the consequences of losing face are more significant than those of gaining face, individuals tend to be highly concerned with protecting their images (Zhang *et al.*, 2011).

Loss of face may be of particular concern to those who hold opinions that are controversial and a challenge to morality. However, beyond just the nature of the opinion, we argue that individuals' perception of opinion climate on their online social networks may also influence whether or not they experience loss of face. As one of the key constructs of the spiral of silence, perceived opinion climate is conceptualized to impact one's likelihood of expressing one's opinion through one's fear of isolation. However, with online social networks, we argue that rather than fearing rejection or isolation, it is the impact of one's opinion on others' impression of one that may influence the likelihood of opinion expression. Indeed, as Hogan (2010) noted, online social media may be thought of as exhibition sites which individuals use to

perform and present for audiences for impression management. If expressing an opinion may negatively impact one's face, i.e., impression among others, one will be less likely to express said opinion. Following the logic of the spiral of silence, we hypothesize that perceived opinion congruence will reduce individuals' perception that they have lost face, and perceived opinion incongruence will increase loss of face. Specifically, when individuals believe their online opinion climate about President Trump's continued support for Judge Moore to be incongruent with their own, we hypothesize they may experience greater loss of face about their own status as a Trump supporter. Therefore, the following hypothesis is posited:

H1: Perceived opinion incongruence is positively associated with perceived loss of face among Trump supporters.

Additionally, this loss of face may prevent individuals from expressing their opinions about President Trump's controversial endorsement of Judge Roy Moore. Loss of face, as an affective indicator may perform a function similar to that of fear of isolation in the spiral of silence, mediating the relationship between perceived opinion climate and outspokenness about the issue at hand. As argued earlier, rather than fearing isolation on social media, individuals holding controversial opinions may be more likely to censor themselves if they perceive that expressing such an opinion would negatively impact their self-image presented to others on social media. In order to manage one's impressions on social media, we argue for the following hypothesis.

H2: Loss of face among Trump supporters will be negatively associated with outspokenness about President Trump's endorsement of Judge Roy Moore.

President's Image

In addition to opinion incongruence, we believe that another factor that may influence an individual's loss of face for being an avowed supporter of President Trump's may be the individual's own evaluation of President Trump. Leader image has been an important area of research in political science (e.g., Bean, 1993; Stewart and Clarke, 1992), and although high-profile leaders and their actions tend to impact voters' or supporters' evaluations of their image (Stewart and Clarke, 1992), the impact on perceived (presidential) image is not always positive. On December 11, 2017, the date on which the data for this study were collected, the president's approval ratings were at 37.2%, while 56.8% disapproved of his performance as president (https://projects.fivethirtyeight.com/trump-approval-ratings/). Furthermore, President Trump has been rated low on aspects of his personality including trustworthiness, being even tempered, being caring, and being well-informed (PEW Research Center, 2018). These findings represent a serious threat to the president's image. As Mayer (2004) noted, "Public opinion about the personal characteristics of a leader has been seen as part of successful governance since before Pericles" (p. 621), and such a negative image of the president, or "the impression Americans have of their chief executive" may also influence those who have supported him in the past, or still identify as Trump supporters.

The relationship between negative presidential image and supporters' loss of face may be deduced from literature on brand-consumer relationship. Cheng, White and Chaplin (2012) suggest that brand performance influences highly involved or "fused" consumers' self-perceptions significantly, as they feel 'oneness' with the brand they love. Therefore, they may consider reputational damage to a brand as a personal reputation loss (Lin and Sung, 2014). Applying this logic to political issues, lowered perceived presidential image in the minds of Trump supporters may be considered by them as a personal reputation loss and a source of

embarrassment, further impacting loss of face. Therefore, we argue that President Trump's supporters who now perceive a negative image of him may experience loss of face due to embarrassment about their own support for him or for his actions. The following hypothesis is therefore posited.

H3: Perceived negative image of President Trump will be positively associated with loss of face among Trump supporters.

Face-saving Actions: Unfollowing and Unfriending on Social Media

When individuals expect their face to be threatened or is threatened, they perform face-work actions (Goffman, 1967) or use face-saving strategies (Ting-Toomey and Kurogi, 1998). Face-work can be "a variety of communicative devices available to interactants for preventing face loss (both their own and others'), restoring face if lost, and facilitating the maintenance of poise" (Metts, 1997, p. 374). Similarly, Ting-Toomey and Kurogi (1998) defined face-work as clusters of communicative behavior that individuals use to protect their self-face or to support the other person's face. People want to avoid potentially face-threatening acts or to perform redressive acts (Goffman, 1967). A face-threatening act refers to "any verbal or nonverbal act that runs contrary to one's desired face needs" (Guan and Lee, 2017, p. 69).

The concept of face-work strategies or face saving strategies (Brown and Levingson, 1987; Goffman, 1967; Metts, 1997; Ting-Toomey and Kurogi, 1998) may also be applicable on people's social media behaviors. To avoid potentially face-threating situations or to maintain their online positive self-images, social media users may use certain approaches, such as deleting their profiles or posts, or editing their posts as long as the specific social media platform allows it. For example, on Facebook, people have several options to undo their actions (Weller, 2016) to avoid socially awkward or embarrassing situations. Furthermore, they may unlike past posts,

unfollow current "friends" or contacts who threaten their face or contradict their opinions, unfriend current contacts, and untag themselves from face threatening photos and/or posts. They can also hide their posts from their newsfeeds or limit who can see certain posts. These subtle, unsocial activities can be used to save face in face-threatening situations (Byrant and Marmo, 2012).

According to Gearhart and Zhang (2015), social media users who have received negative reactions to their posts are more likely to refrain from posting. Additionally, such individuals are more likely to refrain from responding to opinion incongruent posts. These findings indicate, we argue, that individuals prefer to avoid online confrontations with those who disagree with them. In political contexts in particular, people choose to unfriend those who disagree with them to avoid confrontation (Bode, 2016; John and Gal, 2018). In the case of support for Judge Moore's candidacy, individuals may expect their support for President Trump and Judge Moore to threaten their face/impressions among certain individuals, e.g., those who are not Trump supporters, and may engage in face-saving actions to mitigate or avoid negative consequences to their self-image. Taking advantage of the aforementioned social media functions, people may want to protect their social and moral face (Hwang, 2006) and avoid the possibility of being rejected or being criticized by others people who may morally judge their support for President Trump, particularly in light of his endorsement of Judge Moore. As unfriending and unfollowing can be done without the individual being unfriended or unfollowed being explicitly notified, we argue that individuals may utilize these mechanisms as an alternative to silence. Therefore, the following hypothesis is posited:

H4: Perceived loss of face among Trump supporters will be positively associated with unfollowing and unfriending behavior on social media.

Furthermore, we argue that upon unfriending or unfollowing individuals who may threaten one's face regarding one's support for President Trump, individuals may create social media circles the opinions of which would likely correspond to one's own beliefs, especially about President Trump. In such a situation, we argue that individuals may be more willing to express their opinions, however controversial, because of having eliminated those who may threaten their face or impressions online. Therefore, we posit the following hypothesis:

H5: Unfriending/unfollowing behavior on social media will be positively associated with individuals' outspokenness about their support for President Trump's endorsement of Judge Moore.

[Insert Figure 1]

Method

Data Collection

The data for this study were collected using Question Pro's online panels. The survey was open to U.S. citizens who self-identified as President Trump's supporters. Participants were compensated for their responses. Data were collected on December 11, 2017, before the day of the special election in Alabama. Initially, 1,806 responses were received. After screening out responses from non-Trump supporters as well as those unaware of the special election in Alabama, 325 valid responses were retained for analysis. Three screening questions were utilized: "I consider myself a Trump supporter", "I am aware of the controversy surrounding Judge Roy Moore, the Republican candidate for Alabama's U.S. Senate seat", and "Are you aware of the sexual assault allegations against Judge Roy Moore?"

Of the sample, 132 identified as male (40.74%) while 192 identified as female (59.26%), and 1 individual did not provide a response. Regarding the age distribution of the sample, we

used quota sampling for age groups based on the US Census Bureau's 2015 population statistics

(American FactFinder, 2019). Of the total sample, 74 were between 20 and 30 years old

(22.84%), 89 reported being between 31 and 40 years old (27.47%), 58 between 41 to 50 years

old (17.9%), 62 between 51 and 60 years old (19.14%), and 41 were between 61 and 69 years old

(12.65%). One individual did not provide a response to the question on age. Furthermore, 42

individuals reported being Democrats (12.92%), 189 (58.15%) were Republican, 70 individuals

(21.54%) reported being Independent, 1 (0.3%) reported "other" and 23 people (7.08%) declined

to answer. In terms of political orientation, 17 individuals reported as extremely liberal (5.23%),

34 as liberal (10.34%), 116 as neither liberal nor conservative (35.69%), 115 as conservative

(35.38%), and 43 as extremely conservative (13.23%). Ethnicity, income, and education

distribution of the sample are reported in Tables 1, 2, and 3 respectively.

[Insert Tables 1, 2, and 3]

Measures

All measurement items were derived from existing research and were revised for the

purpose of our research. President's image was measured using three items from the Pew

Research Center (Wike, 2017). Perceived opinion incongruence was calculated as the absolute

difference between self's issue support and perceived issue support of online majority (or on

Twitter), whereby 0 indicated the lowest level of opinion incongruence while 4 was the highest

level of opinion incongruence (or the lowest level of opinion congruence). Perceived issue

support of online majority (or on Twitter) was measured by one item: "To what extent do you

think the majority of people online (or on Twitter) support President Trump's support of Judge

Roy Moore's candidacy for the U.S. Senate?" Perceived opinion climate was measured by seven

items, adapted from Matthes (2015) and Kim (2012). Loss of face was measured by eight items,

adapted from Yang (2015) (see Table 4), while outspokenness was measured with three items

adapted from Lee and Kim (2014). Unfollowing/unfriending behavior on the social media were

measured by 4 items, such as "I have unfriended people on social media because of their political

opinions/posts related to President Trump" (see Table 4). All items were measured on a 1 to 5

Likert-type scale.

[Insert Table 4]

Data Analysis

All data analyses were conducted using Stata IC/14. First, Cronbach's alphas were

calculated to ensure reliability of the measures (Table 4). Then, the answers to the research

questions were investigated. To do so, t-tests with equal variances were utilized, and the sample

was split between strong issue support and no/weak issue support using the item "To what extent

do you support President Trump's support of Judge Roy Moore's candidacy for the U.S.

Senate?" A procedure similar to that used by Krishna (2017) was used; a new variable was

created wherein individuals who responded either 1 or 2 on a scale of 5, indicating weak or no

issue support, were classified as 0, and those who responded either 4 or 5, indicating strong issue

support, were classified as 1. Those who responded with a score of 3 to the item were not

included in the analysis. Through this procedure, 90 individuals were classified as 0, and 134

were classified as 1. A total of 111 were not included in the t-test analyses.

Then, the hypotheses were tested using structural equation modeling. Hu and Bentler's

(1999) joint-criteria was used for evaluating the data fit (CFI > .95, SRMR ≤ .10, or RMSEA ≤

.06 and SRMR ≤ .10). Maximum likelihood (ML) procedures were used for data analysis with

Stata IC/14. Missing data were replaced based on the series mean method. Standardized

coefficients are reported.

Results

First, t-tests assuming equal variances were conducted to answer the research questions. RQ1 enquired about potential differences between respondents' perceptions of opinion climate based on their issue support. On all seven items measuring perceived opinion climate, those with strong issue support reported significantly higher perceptions of supportive opinion climate than those with weak or no issue support (see Table 5). For example, on the item, "My opinion about President Trump's support of Judge Roy Moore's candidacy for the U.S. Senate is similar to most of the opinions I hear from others around me" those with strong issue support reported significantly higher agreement than those with no or weak issue support ($t = 5.979$, $p < .001$). This trend was found to hold across seven items that spoke to perceived opinion climate (see Table 5), indicating that those with strong issue support perceived strong support with their opinions in various parts of their social circles more so than those with weak issue support.

[Insert Table 5]

A similar procedure was used to understand the differences between strong and weak issue supporters' outspokenness about the issue (see Table 5). Strong supporters of the President Trump's endorsement of Judge Moore displayed significantly higher levels of outspokenness about the issue than did non- or weak supporters.

Then, Kline's (1998) two-step procedure was utilized to test the hypotheses using structural equation modeling. First, the measurement model including all tested variables was tested (see Figure 1 for conceptual model). The measurement model was found to have good fit, with CFI = .959, RMSEA = .069, SRMR= .041 ($\chi^2 (136) = 344.58$, $p < .001$). Then, the conceptual model (see Figure 1) was tested to test the hypotheses. The tested model yielded good

fit with CFI = .959, RMSEA = .067, and SRMR= .044 (χ^2 (137) = 349.47, $p < .001$). The paths

denoted in the hypotheses were then analyzed.

[Insert Figure 2]

First, it was hypothesized that perceived opinion incongruence would be positively

associated with loss of face (H1). This hypothesis was not supported, as the path from opinion

incongruence to loss of face was not significant. H2 predicted that loss of face would be

negatively related to outspokenness, and this hypothesis too was not supported. Instead, the

opposite relationship was found, as perceived loss of face was positively related to

outspokenness on social media ($\beta = .551$, $p < .001$). Then, in H3 it was expected that negative

presidential image in the minds of the respondents would be positively associated with loss of

face, and this hypothesis was supported ($\beta = .509$, $p < .001$). We then predicted that loss of face

would be associated with unfriending/unfollowing behavior on social media, a finding that was

supported ($\beta = .426$, $p < .001$). Finally, a positive relationship between unfriending/unfollowing

and outspokenness was expected (H5) and it too was found to be supported ($\beta = .223$, $p < .001$).

Discussion and Implications

The purpose of this study was to understand President Trump's supporters' social media

behaviors related to those who threaten their face or whose opinions contradict their own. We

specifically investigated Trump supporters' loss of face related in the context of President

Trump's continued support of Judge Roy Moore's candidacy for the United States Senate, and

investigated how such loss of face impacted their unfriending/unfollowing behaviors as well as

outspokenness about the issue on social media. Our results revealed individuals' loss of face to

be unaffected by perceived incongruent opinion climate online. Further investigation into

individuals' perceptions of opinion climate congruence revealed that those who agreed with

President Trump's endorsement of Judge Moore perceived the opinion climate about the issue to be congruent with their own opinion more so than those who disagreed. Furthermore, those with strong issue support reported being more outspoken on social media about the issue than did those with weak or low issue support.

Overall, we also found that loss of face was affected by individuals' negative image of President Trump, which in turn positively affected individuals' unfriending/unfollowing behaviors on social media. They also experience loss of face about their support for the President when they report having a negative image of President Trump and consider him to be arrogant, intolerant, and dangerous. Such loss of face was found to predict individuals' unfriending/unfollowing behaviors on social media; individuals' loss of face was associated with their unfriending/unfollowing those who have posted their political opinions on social media, particularly about President Trump. Unfriending/unfollowing behavior together were significantly associated with individuals' outspokenness about the issue. Contrary to our expectations, however, loss of face did not negatively impact outspokenness; instead, loss of face was positively associated with outspokenness. In the paragraphs that follow, we articulate the theoretical and practical implications of this work.

Advancing Theorizing on Online Spiral of Silence

The findings of our study complement and advance the postulates of the spiral of silence specifically in the online context. First, our results showed that those with strong issue support tended to project their opinion on to others and believed others' opinions to be congruent with their own. Such projection was found to be significantly higher among those with strong issue support than those with weak issue support. The spiral of silence postulate would lead us to

conclude that such individuals would be more outspoken about the issue at hand, a finding that was confirmed from the data.

Second, rather than using fear of isolation as the mediator between opinion climate and willingness to speak out, as is generally the case in the spiral of silence model (Moy, Domke and Stamm, 2001), this study investigated the role of another affective indicator, loss of face on two social media behaviors, outspokenness, and unfollowing/unfriending contacts on social media. Given the nature of social media where individuals are arguably more concerned about managing their impressions in the minds of their social networks (Hogan, 2010) than they may be about being isolated by their social networks, loss of face may be a better explicator of individuals' behaviors on social media. As an affective indicator, loss of face parallels the role played by fear of isolation in the spiral of silence, by acting as a mediator between opinion climate and individual behavior. This argument was supported by the data, but only partially, as loss of face did predict both unfollowing/unfriending and outspokenness.

Third, this study helps scholarship on the spiral of silence as well as echo chamber formation by explicating why individuals may choose to unfollow or unfriend those with whom they disagree, thereby limiting their social networks to only friendly or opinion-congruent networks. As Colleoni, Rozza and Arvidsson (2014) noted, "the "echo chamber" effect is due to a tendency of individuals to create homogeneous groups and to affiliate with individuals that share their political view" (p. 319). This echo chamber effect may also be supported John and Dvir-Gvirsman's (2015) work where they sees Facebook unfriending as "a mechanism of disconnectivity that contribute to the formation of homogeneous networks" (p. 955). Furthermore, such unfollowing/unfriending behaviors are adopted by activist publics who tend to be closed-minded yet politically engaged (John and Dvir-Gvirman, 2015). This result may also

help explain Fox and Holt's (2018) unexpected finding of network association to negatively affect self-censorship; if individuals, particularly Trump supporters, build their social networks such that only those with homogenous issue opinions are retained, then they may not deem self-censorship necessary as they may not anticipate push back from their networks.

The results of this study further explicate the cognitive and affective conditions influencing unfollowing and unfriending behaviors on social media, which arguably contribute to the formation of echo chambers. In doing so, this study helps provide theoretically grounded explanations for how and why people, specifically Trump supporters, may contribute to the creation of their own congruent opinion climates on their social media accounts. Future study may further investigate the linkages between opinion formation, perceived opinion congruence, echo chamber formation, and other communicative actions and behaviors.

Finally, although we expected loss of face to play a role similar to fear of isolation in the spiral of silence, this expectation was not confirmed from the data. First, opinion incongruence was not associated with loss of face. To understand the lack of relationship between opinion incongruence and loss of face, we investigated the data further, and found that of our respondents fewer than 6% (n = 18) reported moderate or high levels of opinion incongruence, while greater than 85% of the sample (n = 271) reported no or very low opinion incongruence. The lack of variability in the data may have contributed to the non-significant relationship. This finding further contributes to our understanding Trump supporters' confidence in their opinions, perhaps strengthening due to the perceived external support for their opinions. Second, loss of face was found to positively predict outspokenness, a finding contrary to the postulates of the spiral of silence and our expectation. However, we urge the reader to consider this finding together with the relationship between unfollowing/unfriending and outspokenness. It may be that although

Trump supporters experience face loss, because they engage in unfollowing/ unfriending behaviors, such a removal of face threats may mitigate the effect of face loss on outspokenness.

Additionally, people's unfriending/unfollowing behavior over political issues is considered an active reaction to confrontation (Bode, 2016; John and Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015; John and Gal, 2018). As a new form of "political gesture" (John and Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015, p. 954), disconnecting behavior is political actors' "conscious act" (Sibona, 2014, p. 1677). To explain, when President Trump's supporters feel that a face-threatening issue, i.e., the controversy over Judge Moore's candidacy, is against their political interest (i.e., winning the election), they may be further motivated to engage in two active forms of political communication behavior over social media, i.e., cutting off adversary networks and expressing their opinions strongly.

It may also be that supporters of President Trump simply do not care about loss of face, and would rather risk losing face before their social networks rather than suppress their opinion. Another possible explanation is the anonymity that Twitter offers, which Suler (2004) suggests gives the people the opportunity to separate their actions online from their real lifestyle and identity. Furthermore, as Lim and Lee (2016) found, Twitter is the platform through which President Trump fosters and maintains relationships with his supporters. Given that Twitter is how President Trump's supporters feel connected with him, they may be willing to risk loss of face among their immediate social networks to express their support for the man they admire on the medium of his choice. Future studies may investigate the role of perceived reduced distance between celebrities and politicians and their supporters, and how such perception impacts individuals' behaviors.

The results of this study have some implications for political campaign communication. Although the present study is not directly related to the campaign, it helps shed light on how

political supporters process and react to a morally challenging/controversial issue. This study demonstrates how crucial it is to understand publics' cognitive, affective and behavioral responses to controversial social issues that challenge the fate of their political party. The anonymity afforded by platforms like Twitter may help trigger behaviors from supporters to amplify campaign messages and express defense and support of candidates during instances of controversy. Political campaign managers may continue to rely on Twitter campaigns and hashtags to trigger supportive behaviors from the Twitterverse. Future studies may investigate whether these results follow similar or different patterns across different social media.

Future study may investigate these findings, and help provide further explanations for what affective factors matter to Trump supporters in expressing their support for the president. For example, the dynamics between their moral decoupling or moral rationalization (Bhattacharjee *et al.*, 2013) and political motivations may contribute to further explanation behind their social media behaviors. In other words, people may separate out their moral judgment about a certain issue from their supportive actions.

Explicating Online Facework

As noted earlier in the literature review, a large body of research exists in intercultural and interpersonal communication literature on facework, face maintenance, and loss of face mitigation strategies. Much of the focus in this work, however, has been on individuals' face-saving strategies in one-on-one or interpersonal contexts. Social media, however, present a unique opportunity for the study of facework, as they offer an opportunity for individuals to enact a variety of social moves for facework, including friending, self-presentation, replying and responding, and sending birthday wishes and event invitations (West and Trester, 2013). As West and Trester (2013) noted, "only friends can perform face threats toward one another" (p.

134), and therefore it would logically follow that individuals, particularly those with opinions that are morally and ethically challenging, may attempt to eliminate such face threats by removing the "friends" from their social networks. This logic was borne out in the findings of this study, as we found that Trump supporters experiencing loss of face due to their status as Trump supporters also tended to unfollow or unfriend those on their social networks who had previously posted content about politics and/or President Trump that the individual did not want to see. The results of this study help bring facework scholarship in direct conversation with mass communication and public relations literature.

Limitations

This study is not without limitations. First, we examined only Trump supporters' perceptions, and so this study is not generalizable to the population of the United States. Since we instituted age-related quotas based on the United States Census, the data may not be generalizable to the population of Trump supporters either. However, we wanted to ensure that we received opinions for different segments of Trump supporters to avoid age-related bias. Second, although the other measures were more general, our measure for outspokenness was limited to Twitter, primarily as it is President Trump's preferred method of (social media) communication. However, we fully recognize that his supporters may also take to other social media to express themselves, perhaps explaining the relatively low scores on the outspokenness measures. Third, although we did our best to define the issue under investigation as being President Trump's endorsement of Judge Moore rather than the controversies surrounding Judge Moore himself, there may have been confusion among the participants related to the issue about which they were being asked to think. Despite these limitations, the findings of this study represent several points of interest for scholars of mass communication and public opinion.

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