Does Fear of Isolation Disappear Online?
Attention/status-seeking and Anonymity-seeking Motivations
behind Online Political News Consumption and Discourse

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Abstract

This study investigated the effects of fear of isolation (FOI) on political content consumption and creation in the content of online communication. Using more than 1000 respondents from South Korea, the study empirically tested a theoretical model of FOI on political content consumption and expressions with two mediators (i.e., attention/status-seeking, and anonymity-seeking). Results indicated that FOI is related to seeking attention and status in political outlets also connected to anonymity-preference that leads to political expression. Implications for political communication scholarship and for practitioners are that voters’ political participations can be understood in a framework different from traditional focus on persuasion, political ideology, or demographics because – in today’s virtual and interactive media environment – users are more content consumers or community participants.

Keywords: Fear of isolation, attention/status-seeking, anonymity-seeking, political communication, social media
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On March 10, 2017, South Korea’s Constitutional Court unanimously decided in favor of the impeachment of then-President Park Geun-hye. Her involvement in corruption and scandalous ties to her aides had sparked national uproar, fostering an unprecedented level of political participation in which, inter alia, the public gathered en masse on streets and in public squares for candlelight vigil protests, in unprecedented numbers (Lim, 2016). However, another notable phenomenon could be found in online news consumption and discourse. One conspicuous distinction was that on Korea’s top news portal site Naver News relevant articles in the politics section were the most-viewed story and received the most comments for every day of 2017. In fact, one story alone - on March 10 - received in excess of 27,000 comments (Naver, 2017). One of the highest commented news articles ever was about former president Lee Myung-bak’s controversial remarks regarding the island of Dokdo, which surpassed 349,000 comments (S. Kim, 2010). Considering that the website limits users to 20 comments per day, this level of participation is significant. As for other online platforms, eight of the top ten most listened-to podcasts are about politics. (Podbbang, 2017).

South Korea has been considered a frontrunner in terms of online news consumption (Reuters, 2016), owing to the popularity of news portal services that aggregate numerous news outlets in a single website. Coupled with advancements in mobile technologies, users conveniently can access news stories and instantaneously comment on them, vitalizing political discourse online (Houston, Hansen, & Nisbett, 2011, p. 79). This study explores online users’ motives for political participation from the theoretical frameworks of fear of isolation and attention-seeking, which may lead to political disinhibition (Suler, 2004) - that is, increased
political participation online. We posit that individuals who display fear of isolation due to their political opinions will actively use online platforms for their attention-seeking and anonymity-seeking preferences. Being able to gauge the political climate and express opinions anonymously will reinforce these individuals’ willingness to be recognized and to be influential, tendencies that could augment political online participation and expression.

We believe this study explores a new framework of political psychology that goes beyond conventional paradigms (e.g., selective exposure based on partisanship or ideology) and contributes to a better understanding of anonymous and attention-seeking online behaviors in politics-based news consumption and conversation. We hope to propose a new definition of individuals’ “preference of online” with emphasis on online efficacy and motivation/gratification factors sought after in the online sphere.

**Literature Review**

**Fear of Isolation and Factors for Online Political News Consumption and Discourse**

Fear of isolation (FOI) is defined as a “psychological variable representing a negative emotional state associated with the prospect of voicing one’s opinion about a given topic.” (Neuwirth, Frederick, & Mayo, 2007, p. 452). FOI is associated with perceived public opinion—when others seemingly disagree with an individual’s opinion on a topic matter, that individual feels discouraged from sharing his or her own (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). Also, as discussed in Neuwirth et al. (2007), the theoretical framework of communication apprehension is applicable to FOI; perceived disagreement of the self’s opinions with the group’s may cause “fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with a person or persons” (pp.452-453). Pertinent literature on FOI associated it with the spiral of silence, indicating that FOI often leads to silence or conformity to the perceived dominant opinion. The same applies to
the online environment—in Gearhard and Zhang (2015), agreeable political content was a predictor for the willingness to speak out, while exposure to disagreeing postings hindered opinion expression. Moreover, findings on motives for selective posting (Porten-Cheé & Eilders, 2015; Yun & Park, 2011) imply that online participation increases as people look for homogeneity of opinions.

Based on the above, FOI mostly has been linked to bandwagon effects or to explain successful agenda-setting by mainstream media (Liu & Fahmy, 2011). However, we focus on a different potential outcome related to FOI: Increased online activities. This might seem counter to the concept of fear, which might imply discouragement. However, we posit that FOI might well lead to increased political activities, especially given the characteristics of the online environment.

Reasons for our argument are threefold: First, FOI has to do with a lack of confidence about one’s own opinion, a state of mind which may be amplified in the online setting. Developments in speed and interactivity have allowed for a facilitated access to information and ideas (Jensen, 2017), which makes it easier for an individual to determine, from her or his perspective, what the dominant public opinion seems to be (Springer, Engelmann & Pfaffinger, 2015). As a result, the individual might experience higher (or more frequent) degrees of FOI. Second, and as a result of this increased degree of FOI, individuals might be inclined to constantly consume online political content (news, user posts, comments, etc.) to gauge the public opinion climate. This might be accelerated among those with FOI, since these individuals worry that their opinions might conflict with dominant ones (Hayes, Matthes, & Eveland, 2011; S.-H. Kim, Kim, & Oh, 2014; Weiman et al., 2012). Finally, the online environment allows for individuals with FOI to do something about their fear. While in past studies FOI has been
associated most closely with spiral of silence, we posit that it might actually lead to increased participation in online political discourse. In the online setting this is possible because of anonymity, inclusivity and virtual identities (Nagy & Koles, 2014). Masked by an online identity, an individual need not experience isolation in real life—rather, the individual might utilize interactive features online to easily post ideas conforming to the (perceived) dominant opinion. For those with FOI, we argue that this increased activity may be a way to react to their fears and ultimately resolve them by being a part of the conversation (and not being isolated). By the same token, consequences of online communication are lighter, meaning there is a smaller chance of the individual facing actual isolation as may be the case when engaging in face-to-face communication. This is further discussed below in light of a possible anonymity-seeking tendency among individuals with FOI.

Attention Seeking and Online Political News Consumption and Discourse

Many studies have found that narcissism and subsequent attention and status-seeking are strongly connected to online behaviors (e.g., DeWall, Buffardi, Bonser & Campbell, 2011; Huberman, Romero, & Wu, 2009). It is predicted that narcissists communicate in ways that draw attention to themselves via profane and self-promotional content (DeWall et al, 2011). In the same vein, one study on YouTube video uploading and downloading behaviors has found that productivity in crowdsourcing is strongly affected by attention-seeking (Huberman et al., 2009). So it is indicated that attention is an important driver of contributions to the digital commons. Interestingly, participants’ attention-seeking preference is affected by online content consumption behaviors exhibiting the aggregate bandwagon effect. Especially, popularity cues on the viewership of online user-generated content stimulate both consumption and participation behaviors.
To note, “web users … overwhelmed by information and quality uncertainty, will gravitate toward the popular choices made by earlier decision makers, which appear via indicators such as hit counts to forge quality impressions” (Hu & Sim, 2011, p.2382). Moe and Schweidel (2012) also found that positive ratings environments increase posting incidence, whereas negative ratings environments discourage posting. This finding indicates that political news consumption and conversation might be the consequence of inherent needs of attention, reputation and status and so on. Therefore, it is conjectured that the traditional notion of bandwagon effect emerging in online content consumption, in turn triggers the attention-seeking preference of those contributors who - to avoid social isolation - want to belong to an homogeneous political community. Applying this notion to the context of political news consumption and participation, we presume that attention-seeking behaviors will lead to politics-based news consumption and conversation.

**Anonymity-seeking in political expression**

We posit that anonymity in the online environment will be an important factor for increased political activities among individuals with FOI. That is, as online media expand in their utility as tools for public opinion formation, isolation in real-life settings can be overcome with anonymity and interactivity in the online environment (McElroy, 2013; Nielsen, 2014). Communication factors such as anonymity, invisibility, and lack of face-to-face contact provide the opportunity of lowering behavioral inhibitions in online media environment (Joinson, 2003, 2007; Kiesler, Siegel, & McGuire, 1984; Lapidot-Lefler & Barak, 2012; Suler, 2004).

Anonymous conversations are unique to online communication (Samuel, 2004). Anonymity enables an *alter ego* whereby one can build a hidden and virtual identity to possibly protect one’s real identity from the potential threat of negative outcomes (e.g., criticism,
disapproval, isolation) imposed on minority opinions. We note that anonymity helps users to relieve psychological discomfort and self-monitoring efforts when posting comments or expressing their opinions in the face of fear of potential negative outcomes (Beilenson, Yee, Merget, & Schroeder, 2006). Indeed, anonymity was a factor that encouraged individuals to give opinions about controversial issues (Berg, 2016; Cho & Kwon, 2015). Lack of face-to-face confrontations helps avoid heated discussions, therefore fosters an environment where participation from all individuals is welcome (Papacharissi, 2004). In fact, online anonymity has been found to decrease one’s inhibition and to increase self-disclosure (Bailenson, Yee, Merget, & Schroeder, 2006; Bargh, McKenna, & Fitzsimons, 2002; Chiou, 2006, 2007; Joinson, 2001).

From the above, we further speculate that individuals with FOI will in fact display anonymity-seeking tendencies. In general, online users favor anonymous features in political conversations and engagement, because anonymity in online news sites allows for an individual to voice opinions more freely; online aliases are not directly linked to an individual’s own personal and/or professional networks (Nielson, 2014). Again, this is contrary to traditional schools of thought on FOI, which emphasize a spiral of silence-type behavior. However, given that online anonymous platforms enable people to do what they usually would not in the real world (Suler, 2004), we can posit that anonymity can free people from potential fear occasioned by active political engagement and expression.

As noted above, we conjecture that FOI would be associated with the need to be a part of a partisan community who share common political ideologies. Therefore, one easily could draw attention or status from peer members in the group through excessive and enthusiastic politics-based knowledge attainment and conversation. To be specific, online participation would be driven by status and status seeking, and that status sentiments are more likely to sustain online
We would like to focus on self-serving interest as a major driver to participate in political conversations via online. In sum, attention/status-seeking (DeWall et al., 2011; Lampel & Bhalla, 2007) and anonymity-seeking can encourage people to do certain things that they would not usually do in the real world (Suler, 2004). Therefore, we hypothesize that such attitudinal and behavioral tendencies of FOI combined with characteristics of online media will amplify an individual’s political consumption and participation online.

H1) Fear of isolation will be associated to a) attention/status-seeking and b) anonymity-seeking preferences online.

H2) a) Attention-seeking and b) anonymity-seeking preferences online will lead to politics-based news consumption and conversation.

H3) Fear of isolation will be indirectly related to politics-based news consumption and conversation via a) attention/status-seeking and b) anonymity-seeking preferences online.

Method

Procedure

A web-based survey was conducted to answer proposed research questions and test hypotheses. The survey was administered by the Korean panel of Macromill Embrain Co., a leading research firm. The survey was conducted from January to February 2017. A total of 1107 respondents participated in the survey. The probability quota sampling was designed based on Korean population statistics (Ministry of the Interior, 2017, July). Participants from the general population were given credit according to the individual reward policy of the company. The number comprised 47.8% female, 52.2% male. Average age of participants was 40.75. We also
exclude “less than 20” and “more than 60” age brackets as our study focuses on the population of online users in the political context: 228 were in the 20-29 bracket (20.6%), 280 in the 30-39 bracket, (23.4%), 275 in the 40-49 bracket (24.7%), 315 in the 50-59 bracket (28.5%).

Participants’ age- and gender-distribution was close to the regional population representation designed by our quota sampling. Compared to the statistics (excluding the “more than 60” and “less than 20” age bracket), our sample is fewer in 20-29 (-0.4%), 30-39 (-0.6%), 40-49 (-3.3%) and more 50-59 (+1.5%). Given that Internet use is saturated among younger generations but not among older,¹ this distribution is acceptable.

**Measures**

Most of the survey items were adapted from pre-validated research work, so as to increase the construct validity, except the measure for anonymity-seeking and politics-based news consumption and conversation (PNCC), which were created for this study. For all measures, 5 point Likert scales were used (1=strongly agree, 3= neither agree nor disagree, 5=strongly disagree) except for PNCC which was measured with amount of time. All items for each variable are displayed in appendix 1.

**Political news consumption and conversation online (PNCC).** A composite index of political news consumption and conversation online was created by adding a total of six items measuring the frequency of respondents’ use of social media for political content. Six major social media platforms and portal site news platforms were selected based on their impact on the political landscape in South Korea. Respondents were asked to report their use in ten-minute intervals (from 0 to 60+, 1= 0min 8=more than 60min), i.e., how long they used social media for political news checking and participation in conversations (Range = 6 to 48, $M = 16.34$, $SD$

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Fear of isolation (FOI). To measure FOI, we borrowed three items from Kim (2012). The items include “I worry about being negatively evaluated when others disagree with me,” “I tend to let the other person win an argument even when I know I am right,” and “If my political opinion were to become widely known around my workplace, I am very concerned that people would avoid me or act differently towards me.” ($\alpha = .64$, $M = 2.82$, $SD = 0.47$).

Attention/status-seeking. We borrowed six measurement items to gauge perceived attention/status-seeking from Berger (2014). The items include “I want to be perceived positively,” “I would like to look special,” “I would like to be considered an expert,” “I would like to be considered more knowledgeable,” “I would like to be seen as an opinion leader” and “I would like to receive attention from others” ($\alpha = .89$, $M = 3.05$, $SD = 0.72$).

Anonymity-seeking. We developed four measurement items to gauge perceived anonymity-preference. The items include “During anonymous online conversation via social media or online news sites, I feel less constrained to talk about certain things than in conversations where I can be identified,” “Anonymous online platforms enable me to support my favorite politicians on political-news websites,” “With anonymity online, I can argue with someone of different opinions without reservations, in comparison to in the offline setting,” and “Anonymous online platforms enable me to engage in political discussions.” ($\alpha = .87$, $M = 3.30$, $SD = 0.67$).

Result

The study tested a structural model of attention/status-seeking and anonymity-seeking preferences as mediators between FOI and PNCC. Data were analyzed with the AMOS 23
software program, with a covariance-based approach, using maximum-likelihood estimation. The structural equation model was developed after including all hypothesized paths among variables: 
\[ \chi^2(54, n=1000)=203.94.64, \ p < .001, \ \chi^2/df=3.183, \ SRMR=.0361, \ TLI (NNFI)=.969, \ RMSEA=.046, \text{ and } CFI=.978. \]

**Hypotheses testing**

The suggested model (See Figure 1) indicated all hypothetical paths to be statistically significant. The effect of FOI on attention/status-seeking (H1a) was significant (B=.334, S.E.=.048, \( \beta = .431 \), \( p < .001 \)). The effect of FOI on anonymity-seeking (H1b) was significant (B=.730, S.E.=.070, \( \beta = .483 \), \( p < .001 \)). So H1 was confirmed statistically significant. The effect of attention/status-seeking on politics-based news consumption and conversation (H2a) was significant (B=2.294, S.E.=.490, \( \beta = .162 \), \( p < .001 \)). Also, the effect of anonymity-seeking on politics-based news consumption and conversation (H2b) was significant (B=1.847, S.E.=.323, \( \beta = .186 \), \( p < .001 \)).

**Mediation analysis**

H3 posited the mediating effect of key traits of social media such as attention/status-seeking. The indirect effects of FOI on PNCC via attention/status-seeking (H3a) and anonymity-seeking (H3b) were examined using an approach proposed by Baron and Kenny (1986), and the significance of the indirect effects was examined using bootstrapping techniques. As suggested by Preacher and Hayes (2008), 5000 bootstrap samples were computed and a bias-corrected 95% confidence interval (CI) calculated. H3a examined whether attention/status-seeking would connect FOI with PNCC. The indirect effect of FOI on PNCC via attention/status-seeking was significant (\( \beta [\text{Bootstrap 95\% CI}] = .044 [.018, .067], \ p < .005 \)). And H3b examined whether anonymity-seeking would mediate between FOI and PNCC. The indirect effect of FOI on PNCC
via anonymity-seeking was significant ($\beta$ [Bootstrap 95% CI] = .049 [.021, .073], $p < .005$). Hence, H3a and H3b all were supported.

**Discussion**

This paper takes a different approach to FOI and suggests a new model for understanding its role for online political discourse. This model suggests that FOI is a possible factor for online activities such as news consumption and commenting. Traditionally, FOI has been studies in association with passive effects (e.g., bandwagon effect, agenda-setting). However, this study implies that FOI actually be a major predictor for active news engagement (news consumption, commenting) online.

We found that FOI was associated with attention/status- and anonymity-seeking preferences online, and that these preferences led to politics-based news consumption and conversation. This means that the individual’s fear resulted in an increased motivation to become part of the mainstream (dominant opinion), rather than be shut them down. In fact, we found that stronger the FOI, the higher an individual’s desire for attention and heightened status. This leads the FOI individual to have a stronger urge to consume information (to comprehend what the dominant opinions are) and to become a part of the discourse (through conversations in commenting threads) (Velasquez, 2012).

Noteworthy here is that these tendencies are shown in the online environment, due to these individuals’ anonymity-seeking behavior. Per H3, we found that FOI was related indirectly to politics-based news consumption and conversation via attention/status-seeking and anonymity-seeking preferences online. We must note that these individuals still have high levels of FOI, and the fear is most detrimental in possible face-to-face isolation and negative responses from others. Therefore, FOI individuals turn to online platforms where they can participate in
conversation through virtual identities (Lapidot-Lefler & Barak, 2012; Joinson, 2001). This reduces anxiety about what might come from the consequences of their actions. Coupled with the attention/status-seeking characteristics, FOI individuals indeed become highly motivated to engage in political news consumption/conversation online. Other studies also found that willingness to gauge the public opinion climate was associated with the willingness to speak out (Nielsen, 2014; Yun & Park, 2011), but the influence of anonymity *per se* in the online setting was not confirmed. In this light, this study contributes to scholarship through its exploration of the linkage among FOI, anonymity and the willingness to engage in political discourse.

Another contribution of this study to scholarship about online political behaviours is that it provides a theoretical framework of digital consumerism to understand political news consumptions and participations. While studies on marketing and virtual communities (e.g., DeWall et al., 2011) have focused on ‘attention/status-seeking’ in relation to the motivation of content creators and community leaders’ political communication, scholarship has paid little attention to this area. Considering that traditional political scholarship has examined participants mostly with close attention to political ideology or orientation, partisanship and other demographical variables such as race, gender, ethnicity and age, this study proposes a new paradigm via looking at online news sites as political communities where interactive content consumers create and consume the content in a self-fulfilling and sufficient way. Also, it is indicated that by and large political-content consumers online might be different in nature as they are not so much political-enthusiasm driven by political persuasions or grave social concerns and causes, as by those individuals’ narcissistic psychological states, and that seeking a high level of public recognition might be a strong driver to political engagement online through various social platforms. Therefore, this framework also can provide practical implication to
news organizations that news consumption also combines with expressive participation to boost their knowledge and/or to gain recognition from peers in the news site or social platforms.

We also point out the importance of this study from an intercultural perspective. This study was conducted in South Korea, a culture and population that holds implications regarding key factors in our model. The 2018 study by Shim & Oh indicates that anonymity-seeking behavior is even stronger in South Korea due to its cultural characteristics. Such characteristics include individualism vs. collectivism from Hofstede’s (1983) cultural dimensions and heightened influences of self-construal. According to the cultural dimensions perspective, Koreans (as part of the East Asian culture) display higher levels of collectivism as opposed to the individualism of the west. That is, Koreans value harmony and blending in as a whole, and refrain from actions of conversation that might be deemed different. By the same token, Koreans tend not to voice their opinions conspicuously, especially when they are recognizable, lest they cause discord among communities and collectives of which they are part (Choi & Park, 2014).

Self-construal refers to the degree of an individual’s concerns regarding how the self is construed by others. Markus and Kitayama (1991) notes that Eastern and Western individuals have “strikingly different construals of the self” (p. 224) in that individuals in Asian cultures define the self closely based on how others might view them, with emphasis on fitting in. In similar light, Yoo’s (2012) study found that Koreans paid close attention to how others would view them, and even hesitated to publicly post their thoughts on social media due to concerns over how they will be judged by others. We believe that such characteristics increase anonymity-seeking inclinations among Koreans moreso than in Western culture, where individuals participate in political conversations and voice opinions more freely. Thus, future studies could
benefit from further exploring and online political discourse behavior in light of cultural differences between East and West.

**Limitations and suggestions for future studies**

While this exploratory study aimed at a new approach to contribute to the scholarship on FOI and political discourse, we acknowledge that the paper is not without limitations. One limitation relates to measures of fear of isolation. FOI may manifest itself in different forms for individuals with different backgrounds. To be specific, fear of isolation has differentiating subtle nuances in its concept such as trait-, issue-, and state-based fear. We measured only communication apprehension based on personal trait in this study, whereas future effort can explore different types of fear arising via a specific issue or personal situations. In that way we can examine how political expression via online outlets are connected to the various types of FOI whether source of fear derives from personal history of negative interactions or from a perception of dominant opinion about a specific issue, or from factors sensitive and unique to the political itself. Therefore, we believe that a refined definition and exploration of FOI itself based on online and political contexts is necessary.

Also, in this study we looked at only six major social platforms for political engagement yet, nowadays, various platforms such as podcast and political communities have arisen as political agenda-setting and forming conversations, so future research could delve into more diverse and cutting-edge political communities to understand political expressions via online. Another limitation could stem from the fact that data was collected only in South Korea. While South Korea is known to be highly advanced in terms of Information Communication Technologies (ICTs), and boasts one of the highest numbers of Internet users, its media environment differs from those in other societies due to political and cultural discrepancies.
Therefore, different online media environments may exert varying levels of influence on someone with FOI. Even with the same level of FOI, societal characteristics, online culture, and available resources may promote or inhibit behaviour similar to that of Korean participants.
References


Appendix 1

Fear of isolation (Kim, 2012)

- I worry about being negatively evaluated when others disagree with me.
- I tend to let the other person win an argument even when I know I am right.
- If my political opinion were to become widely known around your workplace, I am very concerned about that people would avoid me or act differently toward me somehow.

Attention/status-seeking (Berger, 2014)

- I want to be perceived positively
- I would like to look special
- I would like to be considered an expert
- I would like to be considered more knowledgeable
- I would like to be seen as an opinion leader
- I would like to receive attention from others

Anonymity-seeking (Self-developed items)

- During anonymous online conversation via social media or online news site, I feel less constrained to talk about certain things than I would in identifiable conversation.

- The anonymous online platform enables me to support my favorite politicians on political news websites
- Thanks to anonymity online, I can argue without reserve with someone having a different opinion, than in the offline context
- The anonymous online platform enables me to engage in political discussion.

Social Media Use (Self-developed items)

- The next set of questions asks about your use of media for searching for news on politics and political conversations. Please provide your answer in ten-minute intervals (from 0 to 60+). Usually, on a typical day, how many minutes a day do you spend on these media platforms for political news consumption and conversation?

  1) Facebook
  2) Twitter
  3) Naver news
  4) Daum news
  5) YouTube
  6) Other online platforms
Figure 1.

Results of Testing Hypotheses with Standardized Path Coefficient