

What prevents a person from becoming an immigration activist?:
Understanding the impact fear of isolation and the level of privacy has on individuals

by

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Spiral of Silence (SOS), immigration, activism, social media, social media activism

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Abstract

The current study aims at gaining a deeper understanding of the impact of spiral of silence on social media regarding a specific immigration issue; refugees or asylum-seekers in the United States. There is a focus on how partisanship, issue importance, privacy, and fear of isolation can predict people's willingness to express an opinion (WTEO) or their willingness to self-censor (WTSC). A hierarchical multiple regression (controlling for demographics) finds that partisanship does not have a significant influence on people's WTEO or WTSC, however, there are relationships between WTEO or WTSC and the other predictor variables. The study supports the findings of previous research, which suggests the framework spiral of silence theory is applicable to social media.

Keywords: Spiral of Silence (SOS), immigration, activism, social media, social media activism

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What prevents a person from becoming an immigration activist?: Understanding the impact fear of isolation and the level of privacy has on individuals

Immigration is a complex subject that involves various groups of immigrants, from those who have legal status (e.g., green card holders), to asylum-seekers or refugees, to undocumented immigrants. Radford (2019) explains that according to a 2017 survey conducted by the *Pew Research Center*, 62% of Americans believe that immigrants bolster the United States because of their skills and work ethic, whereas 28% of Americans find immigrants to be a burden on American society. The topic of immigration is comprised of a complicated set of issues involving policy, legal status, and navigating the social structure of the United States. Since the 2016 inauguration, the Trump administration and their immigration policies have been a controversial topic in American society that, as the previous statistics indicates, is divided along party lines (Gramlich, 2019; Krogstad, 2019; Krogstad & Gonzalez-Barrera, 2019; Radford, 2019).

American citizens are divided along partisanship lines on the immigration debate. According to Radford (2019), 83% of liberal-leaning Independents and Democrats find that immigrants help to strengthen American society, while 11% see immigrants as a burden. In contrast, a majority of conservative-leaning Independents and Republicans (49%) see immigrants as a burden and 38% believe they support American society (Radford, 2019). According to Brockway and Doherty (2019), a *Pew Research Center* survey finds that a majority of Americans believe America being open to immigrants is critical to the nation's identity (62%). The study suggests that more Democrats and Democrat-leaning Independents believe immigrants are a crucial part of American society (57%). In contrast, the majority of Republicans and Republican-leaning Independents find immigrants cause the nation's identity to diminish. In

response to the Trump administration's policies on immigration, activists engage in politics by using online social media platforms and engaging in traditional forms of offline activism, such as street protests (Holpuch, 2019; Kohli, 2019; Samuel, 2019; Wemple, 2019).

This study focuses on a specific immigration issue, which involve asylum-seekers or refugees. Previous research examines the issue of immigration in relation to the spiral of silence, SOS, more generally by evaluating immigration as one of the multiple topics in the study (Sherrick & Hoewe, 2016) or by only addressing one immigration issue (Gearhart & Zhang, 2015). The current study will address the limitations of previous research by conducting a study on a different immigration issue. This study will focus on the influence that fear of isolation, privacy, and anonymity have an opinion expression and self-censorship in regard to immigration activism on social media. Immigration is a political issue, so the current study includes the examination of partisanship in relation to the concepts described above. To better understand how people become immigration activists on social media, this study will conduct an online survey to answer the questions: what prevents people from becoming an activist? The following section will closely examine previous literature that developed the framework for the concepts used in the current study.

Chapter 1 Literature Review

The review of literature will begin by breaking down the SOS framework, explain research adapting the theory to online platforms, discuss the current debate surrounding immigration issues, and pose a series of hypotheses and research questions.

Spiral of Silence Theory

Noelle-Neuman (1974) developed SOS after realizing that two political groups "might be equal in numbers, but they were far from equal in energy, enthusiasm, or in willingness to

express and display their convictions” (Noelle-Neumann, 1993, p. 4). The SOS occurs when the opinions are shared in multiple contexts, which either encourage people to express or suppress their opinion until a dominant opinion arises and the other opinion diminishes from public knowledge until they are completely silent (Noelle-Neumann, 1993).

Noelle-Neumann (1974) initially suggested four key assumptions of SOS and added a fifth some years later (Noelle-Neumann, 1993). The first assumption is that individuals who do not fit within societal norms are susceptible to isolation. Secondly, fear of isolation is an ongoing experience. The third assumption suggests that the climate of opinion is continuously evaluated by individuals because of a fear of isolation. The judgement of individuals regarding the opinion climate influences behavior regarding expressing and concealing opinions is the fourth assumption. Finally, the four assumptions above are interrelated, which explains the development of preserving and altering public opinion (Noelle-Neumann, 1993).

A person’s willingness to speak out or not is determined by a hostile media climate because of the public awareness of a threat of isolation (Lee, Oshita, Oh, & Hove, 2014; Noelle-Neumann, 1993). There is some level of self-control that happens before social control to screen certain behavior that helps to avoid the threat of isolation (Noelle-Neumann, 1993). Even the thought of isolation is likely to influence an individual to correct their behavior before reaching the level of social control is enacted by the public (Noelle-Neumann, 1993). The type of public does change the influence of the fear of isolation (Lee et al., 2014). Furthermore, individuals are more concerned with people who are close to them (e.g., friends and family) believe than they are with strangers (Noelle-Neumann, 1993).

Aligned with Noelle-Neumann’s (1974) study, Gearhart and Zhang (2015) tested the likelihood of SOS to occur with certain topics. The topics in the study are abortion, immigration

and gay marriage, selected because they represent three typologies: enduring, emerging, and transitory. Testing different topics using SOS ensures the applicability of the theory in different contexts (Gearhart & Zhang, 2015). Their findings suggest that the SOS theory can be used to explain situations that occur on social media platforms. However, the impact of SOS varies depending on the topic and the level of agreement with different types of opinions. Overall, their study confirms the compatibility of the theory to online platforms (Gearhart & Zhang, 2015).

Several studies examine different aspects of the SOS theory and its application in different contexts. Matthes, Knoll, and Sikorski (2017) focus on SOS's assumptions and framework. Matthes et al. (2017) examines the core assumption of SOS in regard to willingness to speak out. Liu, Rui, and Cui (2017) applies self-presentation to the SOS theory based on the self-disclosure assumption, as well as providing further explanation for individuals who remain silent due to their perception of the opinion climate on Facebook.

Other studies attempt to expand the theory (e.g., Chen, 2018; Lee & Kim, 2014; Lee et al., 2014; Liu et al., 2017). Chen's (2018) study finds that political expression is important in the process of SOS. Abril and Rojas (2015) use the SOS theory to examine different types of influences. For example, the study examines the SOS in relation to geopolitics in Columbia and the application in a "post-electoral environment" (Abril & Rojas, 2015, p. 73). Chen (2018) also proposes a moderated mediation model and applying it to the SOS theory to understand the process that occurs online in contrast to offline. Similarly, Matthes (2015) introduces latent growth modeling to the theory.

Lee et al. (2014) is one of the first studies to consider the type of public to explain the inadequacy of "predictive power" in SOS (p. 198). Lee and Kim's (2014) study examines the theory's applicability to opinion leaders in South Korea (e.g., journalists) rather than the general

public in the social media environment. They find that opinion leaders were not as willing to express their political views on social media when they perceived their opinion to be different from others. Furthermore, Lee and Kim (2014) suggest journalist silence is particularly influential as opinion leaders than is the silence of others in regard to the silence as the result of an opinion gap. The following paragraphs break down the conceptual framework of the SOS theory, which involves the fear of isolation, opinion climate, self-censorship, and an individual's willingness to speak out.

Fear of Isolation. According to previous research, the fear of isolation is what prompts the SOS and this fear can be significant (Matthes et al., 2017; Noelle-Neumann, 1993). Matthes et al.'s (2017) study suggests that this connection remains relevant to the environment of new media as well. A core assumption is that opinion suppression is a result of the fear of isolation (Lee et al., 2014; Noelle-Neumann, 1993). Lee et al. (2014) suggest that individuals are less willing to publicly express their views if they go against popular opinion because of the individual's fear of being isolated; representing an "avoidance strategy" (p. 196).

If an individual does not go along with the popular opinion, they can choose to remain silent, not expressing an opposing opinion "so others can put up with you," which is a fear of isolation (Noelle-Neumann, 1993, p. 6). Noelle-Neumann (1993) suggests that an individual's attempt to scan the environment for the majority opinion is considered to be more beneficial than the risk of being rejected from the group. In Matthes et al.'s (2017) study, individuals who have views opposing popular opinion are faced with arguments from the perspective of the popular opinion to be supported by personal anecdotes to scrutinize the political minority's viewpoint. Fox and Holt (2018) examine the difference between "trait fear of isolation" and "context-specific fear of isolation" in an attempt to address a conflict with the theory's methodological

framework. Their study finds that both were related, however, each type of fear of isolation adds to opinion expression separately (Fox & Holt, 2018).

Congruent with Noelle-Neumann's findings, Chen (2018) finds an indirect link between fear of isolation and one's willingness to self-censor, which is impacted by the extent of disagreement and the level of publicness that exists in the person's network. Similarly, Lee et al.'s (2014) study supports the original findings by extending those concepts to a hostile opinion climate. Chen (2018) suggests that in a polarized political climate, an individual is likely to self-censor because of the fear of isolation, which indicates a relationship between one's fear of isolation and willingness to self-censor in that context.

However, Matthes et al., (2017) suggest "the fear of social isolation becomes salient even when there is only one single person that could isolate someone holding minority views" (Matthes et al., 2017, p. 23). Matthes et al. (2017) and other studies (Lee & Kim, 2014; Xiaodong & Li, 2016) contradict Noelle-Neumann's (1993) findings regarding fear of isolation. For example, Matthes et al. (2017), suggest the silencing effect's scope is larger than originally considered. Lee and Kim (2014), as well as Xiaodong and Li (2016), do not find opinion climate to be an influential factor on a person's willingness to speak out. Their studies suggest that the online environment is the cause for the fear of isolation to be a less influential factor. Xiaodong and Li (2016) argue the controlled environment of an experiment does not provide a setting that is conducive to a real-world environment where participants may actively comments. Therefore, the fear of isolation does not take effect. The current study will enhance the scholarship of previous research in regard to how fear of isolation is impacted by the level of privacy and anonymity on an issue in the online context of social media.

Opinion Climate. Matthes (2015) suggests “there can be no SOS when there is no variation in the initial levels of opinion climate perceptions and opinion expression” (p. 170). An individual’s perception of the opinion climate (Lee & Kim, 2014; Noelle-Neumann, 1993) and political ideology (Lee & Kim, 2014) impacts the individual’s willingness to speak out. Those who perceive their opinion to be congruent are more willing to speak out publicly and privately. However, when individuals perceive their opinion to be in the minority, they will become silent for fear of speaking out.

Regardless of opinion congruence, if an individual perceives they hold a minority opinion, the individual will choose to self-censor and become silent (Matthes et al., 2017). Matthes et al. (2017) indicate there is a strong relationship between opinion climate and expression without conditions. The silencing effect increases in strength when two moderators are brought together, such as when opposing opinions on an issue are introduced to individuals who have a close relationship, e.g., family or friends (Matthes et al., 2017). Gearhart & Zhang (2015) suggest “future opinion congruency” impacts a developing issue “when people sense that their opinion is gaining momentum, they are emboldened to speak up even when they find themselves in an incongruent opinion climate” (p. 48). In the context of friendly as opposed to a hostile opinion climate, avoidance strategies are more likely to occur in a hostile opinion climate, such as walking away or changing the topic (Lee et al., 2014). The one exception to the influence of fear of isolation on opinion expression is the hard-core public (Noelle-Neumann, 1993).

Noelle-Neumann (1993) identifies a hard-core public, or a minority public, as willing to speak out despite the risk of isolation. The willingness to express an opinion is likely due to the perception of the hard core to be unconventional because their opinion expression is equivalent to the public in the majority (Noelle-Neumann, 1993). In other words, the hard core public is

motivated by the aim for a future where “the supporters of a majority opinion that becomes large enough will, with time, be unable to argue well for it, since they no longer meet anyone who has a different opinion” (Noelle-Neumann, 1993, p. 170).

Media can play a role in public opinion at an unconscious level, which is an important factor to predict one’s willingness to speak out (Noelle-Neumann, 1993). Individual perceptions as a result of media effects are a combination of personal media perceptions, where an individual indirectly adapts the media’s view of an issue (Noelle-Neumann, 1993). Different issue types that indicate varying opinion congruency are significantly related to strategies for speaking out (Gearhart & Zhang, 2015). In particular, individuals are motivated to speak out if the individual’s views align with the opinions portrayed in media (Gearhart & Zhang, 2015). This assumption is supported by Kim, Kim and Oh (2014), which also extends the concept of opinion climate to the internet by stating that it may tell us “what to think” but online media can also influence opinion perception (p. 726). The opinion gap influences the media and general public on social media (Lee and Kim, 2014). However, when the public perception directly contradicts the opinion climate portrayed by the media, there is a climate of opinion that is twofold (Noelle-Neumann, 1993). Identifying the type of publics may help to determine if the activists are a hardcore minority or if they are part of the majority opinion, which is influenced by selective exposure resulting from one’s level of privacy and anonymity online or offline.

Self-Censorship. A key factor in causing the SOS is an individual’s willingness to self-censor because individuals who self-censor are more likely to not share honest opinions or to comment on the issue online regardless of whether the circumstances are friendly or hostile (Gearhart & Zhang, 2015). Self-censorship and fear of isolation are related and having a strong attitude does not appear to have a similar connection with self-censorship (Fox & Holt, 2018).

Self-censorship limits the expression of opposing opinions, but not for an opinion that supports popular opinion, as a result of an individual's willingness to self-censor (Chen, 2018). Tone influences this situation because of the influence a positive or negative tone will have on communication and emotions. Therefore, individuals will choose to self-censor when his or her opinion opposes popular opinion (Chen, 2018).

There are certain factors that influence self-censorship. Self-censorship depends on social norms that exist where individuals live (Abril & Rojas, 2015). People in a city with high levels of censorship will be less likely to express views than those who have the same level of censorship that live in a city with lower self-censorship (Abril & Rojas, 2015). In Abril and Rojas' (2015) study, there was a distinction between larger and smaller cities' general level of censorship, which impacts a peoples' willingness to express their views. An individual's attitudes can predict the individual's willingness to speak out in relation to a person's self-censorship (Sherrick & Hoewe, 2016).

Willingness to speak out. Different types of public have the same outcome in regard to opinion expression as a result of fear of isolation (Lee et al., 2014). By connecting SOS with STOPS, their study indicates that "people tend to express their own views when they recognize an issue, are highly involved in it, and perceive that their opinion expression can change, improve, or solve it" (Lee et al., 2014, p. 197). These findings suggest that the expression of opinion by active publics can also be impacted by fear of isolation. However, active publics are more willing to share their views with those who have opposing views (Lee et al., 2014).

Previous research supports the prevalence of a relationship between fear of isolation, perception of opinion congruency and power (Li & Sun, 2017). In particular, certain demographics impact one's willingness to express an opinion—gender and age. Perceived

opinion impacts public opinion, as well as an individual's willingness to publicly speak out (Kim et al., 2014). Opinion congruence is an indicator of one's willingness to publicly speak out, however, not with opinion expression online. In other words, their study does not suggest social media users support imposing social pressure on individuals with opposing viewpoints (Kim et al., 2014).

The awareness of the risk of isolation exists if an individual's opinion differs from another person, which is likely to result in the individual choosing to not express their true opinion (Li & Sun, 2017). However, when an individual's opinion aligns with the majority, the individual is more willing to speak out. Furthermore, opinion expression is influenced by the perception of the future opinion climate (Li & Sun, 2017). One's attitude can influence one's regard for the opinion climate and their willingness to speak out (Matthes, Hayes, & Shen, 2009). However, Matthes et al (2017) finds there is a stronger effect when expression opposing views to family and friends compared to the public because there is an elevated fear of isolation with those an individual is close in relationship with versus strangers.

The impact of the SOS varies depending on the type of issue because of the individual differences that may exist, such as those of hard-core publics (Gearhart & Zhang, 2015). The perception of power distance affects one's willingness to speak out, such as the difference between the tendency of older, male participants compared to young, female participants willingness to speak out (Li & Sun, 2017). Previous research indicates there is a relationship between political ideology and the perceived opinion gap (Abril & Rojas, 2015; Kim, 2016; Lee & Kim, 2014). In particular, Kim (2016) finds that strength of partisanship impacts opinion perception. The relationship between political ideology and perceived opinion gap can be reflected online through one's willingness to speak out (Lee & Kim, 2014) and offline through

geopolitics (Abril & Rojas, 2015). There is a distinction between online and offline opinion climate and strength of partisanship strength. The online opinion climate predicts offline activities for those with low or moderate partisanship, whereas it has no effect on individuals with strong partisanship (Kim, 2016).

Therefore, based on previous research, it is important to consider political ideology, the relationship between online and offline communication, and how these elements influence an individual's decision to remain silent due to a fear of isolation. The current study will utilize these concepts to understand this process in regard to a person's online behavior regarding a specific immigration issue. The following section breaks down a review of literature regarding SOS and social media, as well as research on social media activism.

Social Media, SOS, and activism

SOS on social media. Previous research suggests SOS is applicable on social media platforms (Matthes et al., 2017) based on the findings surrounding self-censorship (Gearhart & Zhang, 2015; Liu et al., 2017). However, Li and Sun (2017) found that due to the ability to more freely express an opinion online, the core variables of SOS theory are not applicable online. Given the dissent regarding the applicability of SOS online, further research is necessary to determine under what circumstances the theory is or is not relevant.

Kim et al. (2014) suggest that perception of opinion climate is influenced by the internet because "the internet can function as an information source, from which people assess social distributions of opinions" (p. 729). Access to public opinion is important for the process of the SOS (Kim et al., 2014). When the opinion climate is not clear, individuals resort to projecting their own opinions with the belief they are part of the majority (Kim et al., 2014). Without the awareness of public opinion, the SOS does not occur because minority and majority public

perceive their group to be in the majority (Kim et al., 2014). When an individual perceives their opinion to be in opposition to the opinions of those within their network, there is a likelihood that there are offline ramifications if one were to express their opposing views (Liu et al., 2017; Matthes et al., 2017). A characteristic that is more unique to social media is relates to withdrawal behaviors. Chen (2018) notes that as a result of a fear of isolation, an individual will self-censor to avoid social pressure in a manner that is not possible offline in an immediate interaction with an individual with opposing views.

The SOS relies on the assumption that individuals will be silenced when they perceive their opinion to not align with others (Liu et al., 2017). For this assumption to be applicable to online social networks, it is necessary to have a diverse online network. However, individuals' interactions are often limited due to selective exposure on social media, which occurs as a result of having the ability to choose who to be associated with on platforms like Facebook.

Another common discussion among studies using SOS to examine opinion expression online is anonymity (Chen, 2018; Fox & Holt, 2018; Li & Sun, 2017; Matthes et al., 2017). The perception of anonymity can determine the extent to which someone has a fear of isolation and the need to self-censor (Fox & Holt, 2018). Furthermore, the type of social media platform in regard to its level of association and anonymity will influence an individual's willingness to express their opinion (Fox & Holt, 2018). Direct interaction with others is possible through online posts regardless of the level of anonymity, which is likely to elevate the fear of the conflict that may arise as a result (Matthes et al., 2017). In other words, the fear of isolation functions as an intermediary of "anonymity and opinion expression" (Li & Sun, 2017, p. 90). Their study suggests that anonymity typically encourages opinion expression because of a reduction in a fear of isolation. (Li & Sun, 2017). In addition to anonymity, studies suggest it is

important to know that social media users have the ability to choose whether to edit or remove their posts altogether (Chen 2018; Fox & Holt, 2018). Users have the ability to “untag” their profile from other users’ posts. Therefore, while an individual may choose to express their opinion or be associated with an opinion, there is also the choice to hide it (Chen, 2018; Fox & Holt, 2018).

Social media can minimize the chances of exposure one has to opposing viewpoints and, in turn, to having one's personal views challenged (Chen, 2018; Fox & Holt, 2018; Kim, 2016; Liu et al., 2017). Therefore, the more diverse an individual’s social network is, the more likely individuals will have dissenting opinions from others in their network (Liu et al., 2017). Xiaodong, Li, (2016) and Kim (2016) discusses the implications of network “heterogeneity” and “homogeneity.” Specifically, when an individual has a more diverse (heterogenous) network, it can have a negative effect towards political engagement and opinion expression. In contrast, an individual with a less diverse (homogenous) network is more likely to participate in political discussion, which raises the individual’s political engagement (Kim, 2016; Xiaodong & Li, 2016).

Due to the immediacy of social media posts, the public has a stronger effect on influencing an individual’s willingness to speak out or become silent (Lee & Kim, 2014). However, the majority opinion expressed through online platforms may not be indicative of the majority public opinion or of opinion leaders because the public and opinion leaders are openly willing to express their views when they perceive their opinion to be in the majority (Lee & Kim, 2014). They state that the majority opinion can change online depending on the issue at hand (Lee & Kim, 2014). In contrast, Kim et al.’s (2014) study does not support Lee and Kim’s (2014) findings regarding individuals freely expressing opinions without fear of isolation. This finding

also indicates that concern for self-presentation and self-disclosure is based on the visibility of the individual's comments, which is uncontrollable (Liu et al., 2017). Gearhart and Zhang (2015) suggest potential alternative measurements for SOS variables (willingness to speak out and remaining silent), which are "posting true opinions" and "refraining from commenting" (p. 50). The findings of their study support those alternatives (Gearhart & Zhang, 2015).

Previous researchers took variety of approaches to examining SOS in the context of online, such as a news site (Sherrick & Hoewe, 2016), social networking sites (Chen, 2018; Xiaodong & Li, 2016), Facebook (Fox & Holt, 2018; Kim, 2016), Twitter (Lee & Kim, 2014), and Weibo (Luo, Li, Wang, Xue, Liu & Wang, 2016). Sherrick and Hoewe (2016) examines online communication in regard to its effect on censoring comments on news sites about affirmative action and immigration. Previous research regarding the applicability of SOS to social networking sites finds it possible to utilize the theory's framework online (Lee & Kim, 2014; Luo et al., 2016; Xiaodong and Li, 2016). Xiaodong and Li (2016) indicate that in regard to one's opinion expression online, opinion climate is an important factor, however, there is no indication of a relationship between fear of isolation, opinion climate and one's willingness to speak out. Similarly, Fox and Holt (2018) examine the applicability of the SOS framework to an online platform by focusing on how online platforms impact an individual's willingness to share their opinion or the likelihood for the individual to self-censor. The studies that use SOS to examine opinion expression online help to establish the current application of the theory to an online setting. The current study will contribute to further the understanding of whether the silencing effect does occur on social media when the opinions expressed are about a different issue from those examined in previous research. Additionally, to further determine what role privacy and anonymity play in the silencing effect online (e.g., Xiaodong & Li, 2016).

Social media activism. Social media can be used to support activism at local, national and international levels (Ramírez-Plascencia, 2016). Chon and Park (2019) identify four characteristics of activism, which are that activism involves controversial issues collective action, unifying collective identity, the desire to solve problems through communicative practices, and issue-based polarized groups. In their study, activism is conceptualized as “collective action of like-minded people (e.g., polarized people) to change a society, a policy, or an organization in relation to contentious issues” (Chon & Park, 2019, p. 3).

STOPS is useful for the study of activism because it can answer the question of “why people are active in communicative action and collectively engaged in activism on contentious issues” (Chon & Park, 2019, p. 19). Chon and Park (2019) propose a new model of activism in which seeks to understand public engagement in offline and online activism. The model combines four concepts: STOPS, social media efficacy, hostile media perception, and affective injustice. However, the study does not identify why some individuals will choose to not take action despite a strong desire to be an activist. Therefore, the current study will use SOS concepts based on previous social media research to examine what prevents individuals from becoming online activists regarding the issue of refugees and asylum-seekers in the United States.

Immigration Issues

There are several aspects of immigration in the United States that range from undocumented immigrants, to refugees, to individuals under Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA). Since the current study will focus on a specific immigration issue, asylum-seekers or refugees, it is important to review previous literature examining the topic of immigration in the United States.

In regard to undocumented immigrants, the majority (73%) of Americans think that those individuals should be able to legally remain in the United States so long as certain guidelines are met (Doherty et al., 2019). Furthermore, most Americans (69%) think that the likelihood of immigrants committing crimes is the same as that of citizens and 77% think that undocumented immigrants fill positions in the workforce that Americans do not want to do (Doherty et al., 2019). Gomberg-Muñoz (2010) discusses the issues related to undocumented immigrants who migrate to the United States in search of employment. U.S. immigration policies create issues of equality in the work force by enforcing a labor structure that is designed to not legalize employment of the working class (Gomberg-Muñoz, 2010).

Undocumented immigrants have a difficult time adjusting to life in the United States because of the stereotypes deriving from the social stigma of their legal status and the work undocumented immigrants do (Gomberg-Muñoz, 2010). Undocumented immigrants develop a life and identity that represent their core values that embody their place as people who are worthy of respect and dignity to combat the social stigmas and establish a good reputation of undocumented immigrants as good workers who contribute to American society (Gomberg-Muñoz, 2010).

In regard to migrants, social media has provided a way in which Latin American immigrants can be aware of political issues and participate in public affairs from afar, but it has also provided a way to organize and engage in activism in attempt to solve problems in migrants' homelands (Ramírez-Plascencia, 2016). In the context of United States immigration, Morrissey's (2013) research discusses the adoption of "disidentity" for the purpose of DREAMers who participate in a letter-writing campaign on social media to have a sense of belonging. In other words, these activists used this strategy to formulate and share their "intentions for national

belonging without radically subverting current citizenship structures or entirely assimilating to them” (Morrissey, 2013, p. 145).

According to *Pew Research Center*, through programs such as Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), one million unauthorized immigrants have temporary permission to work and live in the United States (Kragstad & Gonzalez-Barrera, 2019). Participants of DACA, DREAMers, make up 700,000 of the unauthorized immigrants who receive temporary status. The continuation of the DACA program has been heavily debated in Congress since President Trump took office. Trump ordered DACA to end in September 2017, however, DREAMers have been allowed to stay in the program pending the outcome of ongoing legal challenges to the President’s order (Kragstad & Gonzalez-Barrera, 2019). Since 2001, versions of The Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act have been introduced in the United States to provide a way for undocumented youth to obtain legal status (American Immigration Council, 2019). The DACA program impacts the same population as those who would be impacted by the DREAM Act. As of 2020, the DREAM Act has not been signed into law (American Immigration Council, 2019).

A controversial immigration topic during the development of the study (2019-2020) is mass deportation. Gramlich (2019) states the arrests for immigration offenses increased by 87% between 2018 and 2019. The majority of those cases (66%) were criminally prosecuted. At the United States-Mexico border, 53% of immigration apprehensions in early 2019 were of immigrant families (Gramlich, 2019). According to Doherty, Kiley, and Johnson (2019), *Pew Research Center* found that the majority of Americans believe the federal government is doing a poor job in managing asylum cases at the United States-Mexico border. Many Americans (86%) believe the number of judges should be increased to address the backlog of cases, and that the

federal government should ensure safe and clean conditions for incoming asylum seekers to the U.S. (Doherty et al., 2019). There are conflicting views in public opinion regarding asylum seekers obtaining legal status. Sixty percent of Americans suggest making it easier to receive legal status, whereas 53% do not (Doherty et al., 2019).

After the end the admission freeze in 2017, the Trump administration has continued to reduce the cap on refugee admissions into the United States (Krogstad, 2019). In 2018, the fiscal year cap was 45,000 and as of October 1, 2019, the fiscal year cap on refugee admissions was 18,000 (Krogstad, 2019). Krogstad and Gonzalez-Barrera (2019) states that refugees coming from “high risk” countries continue to be determined on a “case-by-case basis.” In 2018, 65% of Americans supported immigrants moving to the U.S. and 68% supported accepting refugees who are trying to escape war and violence (Rasmussen & Poushter, 2019). The majority of Americans (51%) feel a sense of responsibility to accept refugees (Rasmussen & Poushter, 2019). If previous research indicates support for accepting refugees, are Americans willing to express their opinion about the subject online in the current political climate of 2019 to 2020? The current study aims to understand what will impact opinion expression on social media regarding the issue of asylum-seekers and refugees.

Technology like social media affords marginalized groups with the opportunity to be themselves in a manner in which was not possible without these new forms of media. These media types also offer the ability for them to engage in political dialogue on issues in relation to identity as a method to influence social change (Morrissey, 2013). Activists supporting the DREAM act demonstrate how social media can be used to combat anti-immigrant policies by creating “testimonios” that express their issues with such policies through personal narratives, which establish a collective message (Zimmerman, 2016). This collective message is an

integration of “common signs, meanings, and shared narratives about immigrant rights, deportation, detention, criminalization, race, and citizenship among excluded communities” (Zimmerman, 2016, p. 1901). In sum, previous research argues that social media activism is a form of actual activism by showing how activist strategies can be applied to social media (Chon & Park, 2019; Zimmerman, 2016). The current study will expand research related to immigration activism that occurs through social media by understanding what may prevent someone from choosing to speak out on a particular immigration issue.

In regard to SOS, previous research examines immigration as a general issue (Gearhart & Zhang, 2015; Sherrick & Hoewe, 2016). Gearhart and Zhang’s (2015) study focuses on the DREAM act, however, the study does not represent the current political climate in the United States. Furthermore, the study by Gearhart and Zhang (2015) does not address other immigration topics. These studies analyze this issue from a broad perspective. As this section points out, issues like immigration are complex and contain multiple elements that can affect public opinion. Therefore, this study aims to address the limitations of prior research focusing on one broad topic by closely examining a specific issue related to the topic of immigration (e.g., refugees or asylum-seekers). In doing so, this study will provide a deeper understanding on how specific issues of immigration regarding online activism. Based on prior research, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

RQ1: How does partisanship relate to an individual’s (a) willingness to express an opinion and (b) willingness to self-censor when it comes to the refugee/asylum-seeker issue on social media?

Based on previous research (Chon & Park, 2019; Gearhart & Zhang, 2015; Li & Sun, 2017; Xiaodong & Li, 2016) this study proposes the following hypothesis:

H1: Fear of isolation is negatively associated with an individuals' (a) willingness to express an opinion and (b) willingness to self-censor on social media.

RQ2: Does the importance of the refugee/asylum-seeker issue play a role in opinion expression on social media?

Based on previous literature (Chen, 2018; Li & Sun, 2017), this study proposes the following hypothesis regarding an individual's level of anonymity and a fear of isolation:

H2: The level of privacy is positively associated with individuals' (a) opinion expression and (b) willingness to self-censor on social media.

Chapter 2 Methods

In order to address the hypotheses and research question posed above, the following variables are used to develop the framework of the online survey. The dependent variables, adapted from Gearhart and Zhang (2015), willingness to express opinion and willingness to self-censor. The independent variables are control variables (e.g., demographics) and variables based on previous SOS research (e.g., Xiaodong & Li, 2016): partisanship, privacy, and fear of isolation. In order to determine how long it will take for participants to complete the survey, a group of about five graduate students were asked to complete the survey and record how long it took them to complete the survey. Based on the average time, I expected it would likely take respondents approximately 16 minutes to complete. Qualtrics, the survey tool used in this study, also analyzes the average time it will likely take for participants to complete the survey and offered the same, approximately 16 minutes.

To determine that reliability and validity of the survey, a pretest of 30 participants was conducted using the M-Turk platform. The participant pool was collected in the same manner as the representative sample collected, which means that participants of the pre-test must be U.S. citizens and have a social media account. The pre-test participants were given an incentive of \$1.00 for completing the survey, which is equivalent to what participants are paid in the final test. Any issues that came up in the pre-test were addressed prior to the final test being completed. To analyze the findings of this study, a hierarchical multi-linear regression test was conducted using SPSS to identify the relationship between the independent and dependent variables. The following sections provide a more in-depth explanation of the current study's methodology.

Multiple regression

A multiple regression helps to predict how more than one independent variable is related to one dependent variable. (Cronk, 2016; Pederson, 2017; Wrench et al., 2016). Making a causal inference or prediction are two ways that a multiple regression is used (Pederson, 2017). For the current study, a prediction is made about the relationship of the independent variables to each of the dependent variables because it is attempting to predict a certain result. This method provides the opportunity to examine the relationship between the independent variables and dependent variables individually or collectively (Pederson, 2017). Therefore, a hierarchical multiple regression approach will help to understand how demographics (as the control variable), partisanship, fear of isolation and privacy affects an individual's willingness to express an opinion or a willingness to self-censor.

When conducting a multiple regression, independent variables can be continuous or categorical (Cox, West, & Aiken, 2013; Pederson, 2017). However, it is important to note that when using categorical variables, such as demographics (e.g., age, sex, income), dummy coding is used (Pederson, 2017). In the current study, this would apply to the demographics and partisanship variables. The other variables, fear of isolation and privacy, are continuous variables because 7-point Likert scales are used in the survey.

There are a few key assumptions with a multiple linear regression (Cox et al., 2013; Cronk, 2016). The first assumption, as mentioned above, is the variables are interval or ratio (Cronk, 2016). Secondly, the variables are "linearly related" and "normally distributed" (Cronk, 2016, p. 53). Specifically, it is necessary for the dependent variable to be "normally distributed around the prediction line" (Cronk, 2016, p. 52). Additionally, there is an assumption that there

are no measurement errors with the independent variables (Cox et al., 2016). Lastly, demographic variables can be used as independent variables (Cronk, 2016).

To analyze the results of a multiple regression, there are three key elements to emphasize. The first is the R square, which indicates the level of variance of the dependent variable that the variation of the independent variables explain (Cronk, 2016). The second element is the significance, which is only significant if the value is less than .05 (Cronk, 2016). Lastly, are the coefficients, which are found in the table showing the predictions (Cronk, 2016). Therefore, these elements of a multiple regression will be used to discuss the findings of this study in relation to how participants' demographic criteria, partisanship, fear of isolation, and privacy predict their willingness to express an opinion or their willingness to self-censor.

Participants

After obtaining Auburn University Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, participants were obtained through Amazon's Mechanical Turk (M-Turk). M-Turk is beneficial to researchers because the service provides a cost-effective way to obtain individuals representing diverse demographics (Sheehan & Pittman, 2016). There are some potential limitations in using M-Turk. According to Sheehan and Pittman (2016), some limitations to M-Turk involve whether the demographic makeup of the M-Turk participants reflect a representative sample of the U.S. population.

One demographic limitation is due to international M-Turk users. However, in the current study, a screening question asked participants if they are U.S. citizens, which ensures there is a representative sample of the U.S. population. Additionally, a majority of M-Turk participants are also active social media users, however, that may not be proportionate to the number of active social media users generally in America. In the current study, participants are screened according

to whether or not they have a social media account. Therefore, the likelihood of M-Turk participants being social media users is a strength for this study because it is necessary for participants to have a social media account.

Additionally, despite certain demographic limitations, M-Turk provides a random sample because the demographics can vary on a daily basis as a result of the flow of incoming and outgoing participants (Sheehan & Pittman, 2016). The general diversity of M-Turk participants is beneficial in this study, because the aim is to obtain participants who are a representative sample of the general public in the United States. Therefore, a question which asks whether participants reside in the United States will filter the M-Turk population into the random sample used in this study.

Another limitation is the accuracy of responses from M-Turk users. Previous research indicates there is the possibility that the time spent filling out surveys compared to the income and the lack of a controlled environment (e.g., laboratory) can affect the quality of participant responses (Sheehan & Pittman, 2016). Therefore, it is important to ensure the length of the survey does not result in participant burnout. In order to do this, a preliminary test was done to measure the average length of time it takes a participant to complete the survey. Additionally, there are two attention check questions included in the survey to check the accuracy of responses.

After response retrieval and cleaning the data, the final number of responses used in the analysis was 237. As shown in Table 1, the average participant age is 36 and 35.4% of participants are between the ages of 21 and 29. The majority of participants (38%) are between 30 and 39 years old. There are a smaller number of participants between the ages 40 and 49 (13.1%), 50 and 59 (6.3%), and 60 years and older (7.2%). Participants were asked what their

ethnicity is: 74.7% indicated they are White, 12.2% Black or African American, 5.9% American Indian or Alaskan Native, 7.2% Asian, and 20.3% Spanish, Hispanic, or Latino. Individuals were also asked to indicate their gender. 62% identify as male, 36.7% identify as female, 0.4% identify as non-binary or third gender, and 0.8% preferred to not answer.

The majority of participants earned up to a bachelor's degree (57%) or a master's degree (13.9%). Some participants had some college experience, but no degree (12.7%) or had completed an associate degree (9.7%). Some participants had earned up to a high school diploma or equivalent (5.1%). Few participants had a doctoral degree (0.4%) or a professional degree (1.3%). The range in income of the participants is as follows: less than \$10,000 (3.4%), \$10,000-\$19,999 (11.4%), \$20,000-29,999 (10.5%), \$30,000-39,999 (11.4%), \$40,000-49,999 (13.9%), \$50,000-59,999 (13.9%), \$60,000-69,999 (9.7%), \$70,000-79,999 (9.3%), \$80,000-89,999 (5.1%), \$90,000-99,999 (3.8%), \$100,000-149,999 (6.3%), and \$150,000 or more (1.3%). One of the predictor variables is partisanship. Participants were asked which political party they identify with: 34.6% identified as Republican, 46% as Democrat, 16% Independent, 1.3% chose another party and 2.1% indicated they have no preference. The survey questions are more extensively discussed in the following section.

Survey design

The key components of this survey used in the analysis are based on the variables: demographic information, partisanship, privacy, fear of isolation, and opinion expression (willingness to express an opinion or self-censor). The demographic information and partisanship questions are nominal variables. Therefore, categorical responses are appropriate for those questions (e.g., Republican (1), Democrat (2), Independent (3), Other (4) and No Preference (5))

for partisanship). For all other questions (Table 2), a 7-point Likert scale is used. A Cronbach's Alpha reliability test ensured the reliability of the scales used in the survey ($\alpha = 0.899$).

Demographic information and partisanship. Qualtrics contains survey question templates, which were revised to be included in this study in regard to the demographic and partisanship questions. The demographic criteria used in this study are participants' age, income, ethnicity, and gender. The partisanship questions ask participants which political party they identify with (e.g., Republican, Democrat, or Independent).

Privacy. The current study combines the question set of anonymity and privacy as one variable because these two concepts function similarly in previous research. The anonymity questions determine whether anonymity impacts participants' fear of isolation by indicating their level of agreement (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree) with the statements listed (e.g., "I am less afraid of being isolated in an anonymous setting"). The publicness questions use statements referring to a level of privacy where participants indicate how often (1 = never; 7 = always) their social media profiles reach a certain level of privacy (e.g., "I set the privacy settings on my social media profile so only people I allow to see the details of my profile").

Issue importance. Gearhart and Zhang (2015), the issue importance questions identify how important (1 = very unimportant; 7 = very important) the refugee/asylum-seeker issue is to the participant. This question is used to understand the relationship between issue importance and the dependent variables, willingness to self-censor (WTSC) and willingness to express an opinion (WTEO).

Self-censorship. Chen (2018), Xiadong and Li (2016) use a series of statements regarding self-censorship, which are used in the current study to identify the extent to which participants chose to self-censor. Participants were asked to indicate how much they agree (1 =

strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree) with the self-censor statements (e.g., when I disagree with others, I'd rather go along with them than argue about it). It is important to ask questions regarding self-censorship because it is influenced by participant fear of isolation.

Willingness to express an opinion. The willingness to express an opinion (WTEO) are adapted from Li and Sun's (2017) study. Based on a 7-point scale, participants are asked to indicate their level of agreement (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree) with statements describing the extent to which they are willing to express their opinion (e.g., "I will express an opinion to unknown individuals on social media, which includes leaving comments, forward messages and clicking the 'like' button"). Willingness to express an opinion questions are important because they are part of the dependent variables.

Fear of Isolation. Lastly, the fear of isolation is integral in regard to the independent variables. In this portion of the survey, adapted from Xiaodong and Li (2016), participants indicate their level of agreement (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree) with statements describing how it feels to share their opinion (e.g., I avoid telling other people what I think when there's a risk they'll avoid me if they knew my opinion) in the context of social media. In order to analyze the findings of the survey, a hierarchical multiple linear regression test will be conducted using SPSS.

Chapter 3 Results

The purpose of the study was to examine the relationship between partisanship, issue importance, fear of isolation, and privacy (independent variables) to an individual's willingness to express an opinion (WTEO) or willingness to self-censor (WTSC) as dependent variables (Table 2). Participant demographics are used as a control in a hierarchical multiple regression between the independent and dependent variables. This study sought to answer two research questions examining the relationship of partisanship and issue importance to opinion expression, and posed two hypotheses.

The first hypothesis predicted the impact of fear of isolation has on (a) willingness to express an opinion and (b) willingness to self-censor on social media. The second hypothesis predicted the impact of privacy has on (a) willingness to express an opinion and (b) willingness to self-censor on social media. The results section discusses the findings for the hierarchical multiple regression test based on the research questions and hypotheses posed in this study. The nominal variables, demographics and partisanship, were coded as dummy variables, with each option within the groups represented dichotomously.

Willingness to express an opinion regression

A hierarchical multiple regression analysis is used to control for demographics (age, education, ethnicity, gender, and income) as independent variables. The results of Model 1 with WTEO as the dependent variable is statistically significant ($F(6,230) = 2.151, p < 0.050$). Additionally, demographics explain 5.3% of the variance in an individual's WTEO (Table 3). In other words, 94.7% of WTEO's variance cannot be explained by the demographics only. The second model includes the independent variables (privacy, issue importance, and fear of isolation) used to predict WTEO.

The results of Model 2 hierarchical multiple regression was statistically significant ($F(10,226) = 19.792, p < 0.001$). All of the independent variables (demographics, privacy, issue importance, and fear of isolation) explain 46.7% of the variance in WTEO (Table 3). In Model 2, the R^2 change indicates that 41.4 % of the variance in WTEO is accounted for by privacy, issue importance, and fear of isolation when controlling for demographics ($F(4,226) = 43.847, p < 0.001$). The regression finds that privacy ($\beta = 0.325, p < 0.001$), issue importance ($\beta = 0.162, p = 0.003$) and FOI ($\beta = 0.360, p < 0.001$) are all significant in Model 2 regarding an individual's willingness to express an opinion (Table 3).

H1a predicts a “fear of isolation is negatively associated with an individuals' willingness to express an opinion... on social media.” Based on the findings of the study, H1a is not supported because fear of isolation (FOI) is positively associated to an individual's WTEO as indicated in Table 3. H2a predicts that “the level of privacy is positively associated with individuals' opinion expression... on social media.” The study indicates that H2a is supported because as shown in Table 3, privacy is positively associated with an individual's WTEO on social media. RQ2 asks if the importance of the refugee/asylum-seeker issue play a role in opinion expression on social media? The findings of the study show that issue importance is positively related to related to an individual's WTEO.

Willingness to self-censor regression

The results of Model 1 with WTSC as the dependent variable is statistically significant ($F(6,230) = 4.347, p < 0.001$). Additionally, demographics explain 10.2% of the variance in an individual's WTSC (Table 4). In other words, 89.8% of WTSC's variance cannot be explained by the demographics only. The second model includes the independent variables (privacy, issue importance, and fear of isolation). The results of Model 2 hierarchical multiple regression was

statistically significant ($F(10,226) = 36.987, p < 0.001$). All of the independent variables (demographics, privacy, issue importance, and fear of isolation) explain 62.1% of the variance in WTSC (Table 4). In Model 2, the R^2 change indicates that 51.9% of the variance in WTSC is accounted for by privacy, issue importance, and fear of isolation when controlling for demographics ($F(4,226) = 77.294$).

The most significant results in Model 2 are in regard to how privacy ($\beta = 0.263, p < 0.001$) and FOI ($\beta = 0.593, p < 0.001$) can predict an individual's WTSC (Table 4). As mentioned previously, RQ2 asks if the "importance of the refugee/asylum-seeker issue play a role in opinion expression on social media." The study suggests there is not a significant relationship between issue importance and an individual's WTSC. H1b predicts a "fear of isolation is negatively associated with an individuals'... willingness to self-censor on social media. H1b is not supported by the findings of the study because FOI is positively associated to an individual's WTSC as indicated in Table 4. H2b predicts that the level of privacy is positively associated with individuals'... willingness to self-censor on social media. H2b is supported because as shown in Table 4, privacy is positively associated with an individual's WTSC.

RQ1 asks: "how does partisanship relate to an individual's (a) willingness to express an opinion and (b) willingness to self-censor when it comes to the refugee/asylum-seeker issue on social media?" The study finds that the findings indicate that partisanship is not related to an individuals' WTEO or WTSC on social media in regard to the specific immigration issue regarding refugees/asylum-seekers. The study indicates that partisanship does not have a strong and significant relation that is sufficient to predict an individual's willingness to express an opinion or self-censor.

Chapter 4 Conclusion

This chapter will discuss the significance of the study's findings on its contribution to SOS research in the social media environment, the limitations of the study, and directions for future research based on the findings and limitations of the current research.

Discussion

The current study further supports the argument that the spiral of silence theory is applicable to the online environment, social media in particular (Lee & Kim, 2014). If people choose to express their opinion on social media, most people are willing to express their real opinion and not give neutral comments about refugees or asylum-seekers through discussions with social media users, posting comments, sharing messages or clicking the like button on posts. Many people do not have difficulty expressing their opinion even if it is not congruent with others and they are more likely to express an opinion with friends or family than the general public. The reason that certain people are more or less willing to express their opinion is due to critical factors that can impact opinion expression: privacy, issue importance, and a fear of isolation.

The positive relationship between privacy and an individual's decision to speak out or self-censor supports the findings of previous research regarding anonymity and publicness (Chen, 2018; Li & Sun, 2017; Matthes et al., 2018). Matthes et al. (2018) states that "even in anonymous opinion expression settings, online media allow direct interaction, that is, reactions by other" (p. 23). Anonymity plays a critical role in opinion expression. People are more willing to freely express their real opinion and are less likely to conform if their comments are anonymous on social media. Similar to Li and Sun's (2017) study, fear of isolation is less likely to have an impact on an individual's willingness to speak out in an anonymous setting.

As Chen (2018) suggests, it is important to consider a person's level of publicness because of the impact of anonymity and a person's social media "friends" or "followers." While many participants indicate they do not adjust the privacy settings on their social media profiles, there is an indication that some participants often set the privacy level on social media so that only friends, family, or followers can see their content. Privacy setting preferences are shown by the significant impact that privacy has on an individual's WTSC as shown in the current study. Issue importance, however, can potentially override the influence of privacy and fear of isolation on self-censorship.

Lee et al. (2014) states that "people tend to express their own views when they recognize an issue, are highly involved in it, and perceive that their opinion expression can change, improve, or solve it" (p. 197). Similar to Gearhart and Zhang (2015), who included immigration as part of the study, issue importance can predict an individual's willingness to speak out or self-censor. Specifically, issue importance is negatively associated with an individual's willingness to self-censor and positively associated with an individual's willingness to speak out. This may be indicative of the "hard core" public characterized in the spiral of silence theory (Gearhart & Zhang, 2015; Noelle-Neumann, 1993). In other words, if the issue is less important to an individual, they are more willing to self-censor, whereas the more important an issue is, the more likely someone is to not have a fear of being isolated and choose to express an opinion.

The findings of this research indicate that fear of isolation is positively associated with WTEO and WTSC, which does not support H1. However, based on the responses of participants, there is an indication of a hardcore public that are willing to express an opinion even if they would typically prefer to avoid arguments or facing dissenting opinions because they believe the refugees or asylum-seeker issue to be so important (Gearhart & Zhang, 2015; Noelle-Neumann,

1993). An interesting finding of this study is that while people may avoid getting into arguments, they enjoy *good* arguments about a controversial issue; suggesting that the perception of an argument as “good” will likely determine whether someone chooses to speak out. Therefore, issue importance can play a significant role in fear of isolation.

When comparing the findings of previous research and the current study, there is an indication that the circumstances surrounding a specific issue may impact the influence of FOI on WTEO or WTSC. For example, Chen (2018) and Lee et al. (2014) suggest FOI can cause people to self-censor, which is impacted by the opinion climate. However, the current study finds that there may be other factors, such as privacy rather than opinion climate, that can influence a fear of being isolated and thus a decision to self-censor. Additionally, in contrast to Xiaodong and Li (2016), the current study’s findings find the relationship between WTEO and FOI is significant, as well as for WTSC. However, partisanship is found to not be significant in the current study in relation to WTSC and WTEO.

The refugee or asylum seeker-issue is a political issue; however, this study indicates there is a weak-to-no significant relationship between political identity and people’s WTEO or WTSC. While prior research suggests a relationship between partisanship and SOS through different approaches (Abril & Rojas, 2015; Kim, 2016; Matthes et al., 2018), the current study indicates that further research is needed to understand whether the relationship of partisanship is issue specific or generalizable to any issue.

Conclusion

The purpose of the current study is to utilize concepts of spiral of silence theory to predict people’s willingness to express an opinion or choose to self-censor on the subject of refugees or asylum seekers on social media. The study’s findings indicate there is a significant relationship

between privacy and fear of isolation to predict people's willingness to express an opinion or self-censor. A significant relationship between issue importance and a people's willingness to express an opinion suggests that people are more willing to speak out if they believe an issue, such as that of refugees or asylum-seekers, to be an important issue. The theoretical implications of this study indicates that the spiral of silence exists in an online space, but there are critical factors to consider how it occurs.

In the realm of social media, this study helps people to understand that certain aspects of social media design will impact someone's decision to express an opinion. Privacy settings on social media does impact opinion expression in the sense that a perceived level of privacy will determine a person's comfort with expressing a true opinion. People are more comfortable sharing their true opinion to those in their social groups that consist of their family and friends rather than to the general public unless there is the ability to be anonymous.

Based on this study, individuals who are passionate about a topic to the extent they are willing to share their opinion regardless of the online opinion climate, are likely those willing to move beyond privacy or anonymity to share the message. However, it is important to recognize that there may be individuals who are expressing their opinion, but within their social group. This raises an important question regarding online activism. Is opinion expression a form of activism even if it exist within specific groups, or is it activism when the message is shared with the general public? This study begins to bridge the gap into this by recognizing what will prevent individuals from going beyond their social circles, anonymity and privacy, to share their opinion with the public as a whole on social media platforms

Limitations and future research

The current study provided meaningful insight into the spiral of silence theory through the issue of refugees or asylum-seekers, however, there are also several limitations to consider that can be improved in future research. The first limitation is in regard to the types of publics that were not included in the research design. The inability to identify the types of publics does not allow for a deeper understanding of a hardcore public. Future research on issues within immigration or another contentious issue focusing on the hardcore can provide contribute to a better understanding of the public's opinion expression on social media.

Secondly, the current study relies on political identity, which limits the understanding of partisanship as a whole and future research could use a more robust set of partisanship questions to provide better insight into its relationship to WTSC and WTEO or better explain why there is a weak or no relationship. The third limitation is the study's focus on one specific immigration issue. To better understand if concepts are applicable, or potentially differ, among other immigration issues, future research should examine other specific immigration topics.

The study focuses on specific SOS variables, which is the fourth limitation. Including all of the other SOS concepts would provide a stronger understanding of how certain aspects of the silencing effect can determine opinion expression. Future research can expand SOS research by doing so. The fifth limitation of the study is in regard to the structure of the survey, which limits the variety of questions on privacy due to time constraints. Future research should further examine relationship between publicness and WTEO or WTSC in greater detail to better understand how their perception of privacy versus true level of publicness and anonymity in relation to people's WTEO or WTSC.

Lastly, the first hypothesis is based on the findings of previous research, which predicts that fear of isolation is negatively associated with an individual's willingness to express an opinion or self-censor on social media. Previous research would suggest that fear of isolation is not as impactful on social media. However, H1 is not supported in the current study because fear of isolation is positively associated with a willingness to express an opinion or self-censor. This finding suggests that fear of isolation can have an impact on social media. The limitation to this finding is that the current study does not explore the reason for this relationship more in depth. Future research should examine this relationship further by finding out why there is a positive relationship between fear of isolation and opinion expression in one case, but a negative relationship in another.

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Appendix A: Tables

Table 1

Participant demographics of nominal variables

	N	%
Education		
High school graduate (HS diploma or equivalent including GED)	12	5.1
Some college but no degree	30	12.7
Associate degree in college (2-year)	23	9.7
Bachelor's degree in college (4-year)	135	57.0
Master's degree	33	13.9
Doctoral degree	1	0.4
Professional degree (JD, MD)	3	1.3
Ethnicity		
Spanish, Hispanic, or Latino ^a	48	20.3
White	177	74.7
Black or African American	29	12.2
American Indian or Alaskan Native	14	5.9
Asian	17	7.2
Gender		
Male	147	62.0
Female	87	36.7
Non-Binary/Third Gender	1	0.4
Prefer to not Answer	2	0.8
Income		
Less than \$10,000	8	3.4
\$10,000-\$19,999	27	11.4
\$20,000-\$29,999	25	10.5
\$30,000-\$39,999	27	11.4
\$40,000-\$49,999	33	13.9

	N	%
Income cont'd		
\$60,000-\$69,999	23	9.7
\$70,000-\$79,999	22	9.3
\$80,000-\$89,999	12	5.1
\$90,000-\$99,999	9	3.8
\$100,000-\$149,999	15	6.3
\$150,000 or more	3	1.3
Political identity		
Republican	82	34.6
Democrat	109	46.0
Independent	38	16.0
Other	3	1.3
No Preference	5	2.1

Note. N = 237

^a participants who answered “yes” to the question

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics of continuous variables

	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Willingness to express an opinion	237	4.13	1.09
Willingness to self-censor	237	4.24	1.48
Age	237	36.06	11.55
Privacy	237	4.69	0.95
Issue importance	237	4.43	1.66
Fear of isolation	237	4.15	1.25

Table 3

A hierarchical multiple regression to predict people's willingness to express an opinion

	Willingness to express an opinion		
	Model 1	Model 2	
Age	-0.04	0.01	
Education	-0.04	0.04	
Ethnicity ^a	-0.07	0.02	
Ethnicity ^b	0.19	0.02	**
Gender	0.00	0.02	
Income	0.02	-0.01	
Political Identity		-0.05	
Privacy		0.33	***
Issue Importance		0.16	**
FOI		0.36	***
R ²	0.05	0.47	
ΔR ²		0.41	
F	2.15	19.79	

Note. $N = 237$.

Dummy coding for nominal variables are: Education (1 = HS Graduate, 0 = Other); Ethnicity^a (1 = White, 0 = Other); Ethnicity^b (1 = Spanish, Hispanic, or Latino, 0 = None); Gender (1 = Male, 0 = Other), Income (1 = <\$10,000, 0 = Other), Political identity (1 = Republican, 0 = Other)

* $p < 0.050$, ** $p < 0.010$, *** $p < 0.001$

Table 4

A hierarchical multiple regression to predict people's willingness to self-censor

	Willingness to self-censor			
	Model 1		Model 2	
AGE	-0.02		0.03	
Education	-0.12		-0.01	
Ethnicity ^a	-0.15	*	-0.04	
Ethnicity ^b	0.20	**	-0.02	
Gender	-0.13	*	-0.11	**
Income	-0.01		-0.02	
Political Identity			0.09	
Privacy			0.26	***
Issue Importance			-0.07	
FOI			0.59	***
R ²	0.102		0.62	
ΔR ²			0.52	
F	4.35		36.99	

Note. N = 237.

Dummy coding for nominal variables are: Education (1 = HS Graduate, 0 = Other); Ethnicity^a (1 = White, 0 = Other); Ethnicity^b (1 = Spanish, Hispanic, or Latino, 0 = None); Gender (1 = Male, 0 = Other), Income (1 = <\$10,000, 0 = Other), Political identity (1 = Republican, 0 = Other)

* $p < 0.050$, ** $p < 0.010$, *** $p < 0.001$

Appendix B: Survey Instrument Cover Letter / Informed Consent

NOTE: The cover letter/informed consent form below is adapted from an informed consent/cover letter for a dissertation written by Sisson (2015).

You're invited to give feedback about how you might express your opinion on social media regarding immigration issues through a brief online survey. This survey assesses your willingness to express an opinion on social media, as well as your behaviors, privacy and anonymity on social media. Assessment of opinion expression on social media about immigration issues in the U.S. will inform current discussions regarding social media activism.

The short questionnaire that follows will take about 16 minutes to complete, and the results will help research on how immigration activism occurs on social media.

Your responses will support my master's thesis. I sincerely appreciate your help in completing this survey and would like to thank you in advance for your time.

Please read the information below before you begin. Proceeding with this survey indicates that you consent to participate in this study.

In order to be eligible to take the survey, you must be a U.S. Citizen and have a social media account.

As you complete the survey, you can end your participation at any time. Your participation is voluntary. Your responses will remain anonymous and no individual data about you will be reported.

If you have any general comments or questions, please feel free to get in touch with me by email at rachelson@auburn.edu. If you have questions about your rights as a study participant, please direct your questions to Niki Johnson, Auburn University's Director of the Office of Research Compliance, at (334) 844-5966 or johnsnl@auburn.edu.

Thank you for your time.

Rachel Son
M.A. Student, Communication
School of Communication and Journalism
Auburn University

Appendix C: Survey Questions

I. Screening Questions

1. Are you a U.S. Citizen? Yes No
2. Currently, do you have any a Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram account? Yes No

II. Demographic Questions

1. Your year of birth?
2. What is the highest level of school you have completed or the highest degree you have received?
 - (1) Less than a high school degree
 - (2) High school graduate (high school diploma or equivalent including GED)
 - (3) Some college but no degree
 - (4) Associate degree in college (2-year)
 - (5) Bachelor's degree in college (4-year)
 - (6) Master's degree
 - (7) Doctoral degree
 - (8) Professional degree (JD, MD)
3. Are you Spanish, Hispanic, or Latino or none of these?
 - (1) Yes
 - (2) None of these
4. Please mark which race you identify as:
 - (1) White
 - (2) Black or African American
 - (3) American Indian or Alaska Native
 - (4) Asian
 - (5) Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
 - (6) Other
5. What is your gender?
 - (1) Male.
 - (2) Female.
 - (3) Non-binary/third gender
 - (4) Prefer to self-identify as __.
 - (5) Prefer to not answer
6. Information about income is very important to understand. Would you please give your best guess? Please say the answer that includes your entire household income in (previous year) before taxes.
 - (1) Less than \$10,000
 - (2) \$10,000 to \$19,999
 - (3) \$20,000 to \$29,999
 - (4) \$30,000 to \$39,999
 - (5) \$40,000 to \$49,999
 - (6) \$50,000 to \$59,999
 - (7) \$60,000 to \$69,999

- (8) \$70,000 to \$79,999
- (9) \$80,000 to \$89,999
- (11) \$90,000 to \$99,999
- (12) \$100,000 to \$149,999
- (13) \$150,000 or more

III. Partisanship

1. Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, a Independent, or something else?
 - (1) Republican
 - (2) Democrat
 - (3) Independent
 - (4) Other
 - (5) No preference

IV. Social Media

Anonymity (SOS)

Please say how much you are willing to express your opinion in an anonymous setting (1 is strongly agree and 7 is strongly disagree):

Strongly disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Somewhat disagree (3)	Neutral (4)
Somewhat agree (5)	Agree (6)	Strongly agree (7)	

1. I am more willing to express my opinion in an anonymous setting.
2. I will generate more direct and critical comments in an anonymous setting.
3. I am less afraid of being isolated in an anonymous setting.
4. The pressure to conform decreases in an anonymous setting.
5. If social media requires real-name registration, I will be less likely to post messages.

Publicness on social media (SOS)

Please say how public your social media profile is to individuals on social media (e.g., friends on Facebook or followers on Twitter) on a 7-point scale (1 is “Never” and 7 is “Always”) using the following questions:

Never (1)	Very Rarely (2)	Rarely (3)	Occasionally (4)
Frequently (5)	Very Frequently (6)	Always (7)	

1. I set the privacy settings on my social media profile so only people I allow to see the details of my profile.
2. I set the privacy settings on my social media profile so only my friends or followers can see my profile content.
3. I set the privacy settings to be public where anyone can see my profile content.
4. I do not adjust the privacy settings on my social media profile.

5. This is a question to check your attention. Please just click number (3) "Rarely."

V. Immigration Issue: Refugee/Asylum-Seeker

Issue importance (SOS)

Please say how important the "refugee/asylum-seeker" issue is to the following individuals based on a 1-7 scale (1 is "Very unimportant" and 7 is "Very important"):

Very unimportant (1)	Unimportant (2)	Somewhat Unimportant (3)	Neutral (4)
Somewhat important (5)	Important (6)	Very important (7)	

1. How important is the "refugee/asylum-seeker" issue to you personally?

Willingness to express an opinion.

Using the scale provided (1 is "Strongly disagree" and 7 is "Strongly agree"), say how much you agree with the following statements:

Strongly disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Somewhat disagree (3)	Neutral (4)
Somewhat agree (5)	Agree (6)	Strongly agree (7)	

1. I will express an opinion to unknown individuals on social media, which includes leaving comments, forwarding messages and clicking the "like" button.
2. I will discuss the "refugee/asylum-seeker" issue with social media users.
3. I will verbally express my real opinion about the "refugee/asylum-seeker issue" on social media.
4. I will say I agree with users in the majority opinion regarding "refugees/asylum-seekers" in the U.S. even though I actually disagree with them.
5. I will give neutral comments without revealing what I really think.
6. I will say nothing about the "refugee/asylum-seeker" issue on social media.

Fear of isolation

Based on the scale provided (1 is "Strongly disagree" and 7 is "Strongly agree"), say how much you agree with the following statements:

Strongly disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Somewhat disagree (3)	Neutral (4)
Somewhat agree (5)	Agree (6)	Strongly agree (7)	

1. I worry about being isolated if people disagree with me.
2. I avoid telling other people what I think when there is a risk they will avoid me if they knew my opinion.
3. Arguing over a controversial issue improves my intelligence.
4. I enjoy a good argument over a controversial issue.
5. I try to avoid getting into arguments.

WTSC

Please say how much you agree with the following statements in a social media context using the 1-7 scale where 1 is "Strongly disagree" and 7 is "Strongly agree":

Strongly disagree (1) Disagree (2) Somewhat disagree (3) Neutral (4)
Somewhat agree (5) Agree (6) Strongly agree (7)

1. It is difficult for me to express my opinion if I think others won't agree with what I say.
2. There have been many times when I have thought others around me were wrong, but I did not let them know.
3. When I disagree with others, I would rather go along with them than argue about it.
4. I would feel uncomfortable if someone asked my opinion and I knew that he or she wouldn't agree with me.
5. I tend to speak my opinion only around friends or other people I trust.