

**Spirals of Speaking Out? Effects of the “Suppressed Voice Rhetoric” on Audiences’****Willingness to Express their Opinion**

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**Abstract**

A defining feature of counterpublics is to claim that their views are deliberately excluded from the mainstream public sphere. This rhetorical strategy – which we theorize as “suppressed voice rhetoric” (SVR) – has become omnipresent in today’s polarized media environments. In this article, we present an experimental study (N = 464) that investigated the effect of SVR in right-wing counterpublic user comments on the audience. We found that, when exposed to comments with SVR, participants with low media trust became more eager to express their opinion. This effect may contribute to setting in motion a “spiral of speaking out” among media-distrusting individuals.

**Keywords:** experimental research, media effects, opinion expression, right-wing counterpublics, media trust, user comments

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*Theirs [far-right bloggers'] is a potent and time-tested strategy. Unpopular arguments can benefit from being portrayed as forbidden, and marginal ideas are more effectively sold as hidden ones.*

*John Herrman, 2017, The New York Times*

Over the past two decades, with the rise of the Internet, a seemingly infinite variety of online spaces has emerged that provides individuals who feel marginalized by mainstream media, or by society in general, with opportunities to engage (Kaiser, 2017; Toepfl & Piwoni, 2015, 2017). In this context, particularly right-wing-oriented individuals have used digital technology to bypass mainstream media and express their allegedly suppressed views (Schroeder, 2018). As *The New York Times* journalist John Herrman has observed (see citation above), one rhetorical strategy that members of such groups widely deploy is to claim that those in power intentionally exclude their voices from the public discourse. In this article, we theorize this rhetorical device as “suppressed voice rhetoric” (SVR).

In communication research, the voicing of feelings of exclusion has been widely referred to as a key feature of “counterpublics” (Fraser, 1992, p. 116; see also Asen, 2000; Kaiser, 2017; Toepfl & Piwoni, 2015, 2017). Previous studies about counterpublics have typically investigated left-wing, progressive social groups, that is, for instance, feminist or ethnic counterpublics (Asen, 2000; Fraser, 1992). Recently, however, this rhetorical strategy has most prominently been adopted by right-wing counterpublics around the globe, for instance, by America’s far-right bloggers (Herrman, 2017) or supporters of right-wing populist ideologies across Europe (Toepfl & Piwoni, 2015, 2017). By portraying their ideas as being deliberately hidden from, or even forbidden in public discourse, these actors apparently resort to what political observer Herrman (2017) has referred to as a “potent and time-tested strategy.” And yet, extant academic research has produced little knowledge about whether right-wing counterpublics may actually benefit from deploying this rhetorical device.

In order to make an initial contribution to filling in this gap, in this article, we theorize SVR as a rhetorical tool that consists of an “us versus them” frame, which accentuates a conflict between the mainstream public and a counterpublic. Subsequently, in order to investigate potential effects of SVR on the public discourse, we present an experimental study conducted within one specifically configured communicative space: commenting fields beneath German news articles. More specifically, we aimed to shed light on how the effect of anti-refugee user comments changes when the user comments additionally contain SVR. We found that, when exposed to user comments with SVR, individuals with low trust in mainstream media coverage of refugees became more eager to express their opinion. This finding indicates that incessantly deploying SVR may contribute to setting in motion a “spiral of speaking out” among media-distrusting individuals, because it encourages them to express their putatively suppressed opinion even more vocally. We argue that this dynamic partly explains a paradoxical phenomenon of our time, which is that those individuals who claim to be silenced appear to be particularly vocal in communicative online spaces.

### **SVR as a Rhetorical Tool Adopted by Right-Wing Counterpublics**

According to counterpublic theory, counterpublics aim at “deconstructing power relations” (Toepfl & Piwoni, 2015, p. 476) by arguing that those in power deliberately work towards suppressing the counterpublic’s perspective. More specifically, counterpublics blame the mainstream public for creating a public sphere within which only mainstream opinions – and not those of the counterpublic – are permitted to circulate (e.g., Asen, 2000; Fraser, 1992; Toepfl & Piwoni, 2015, 2017). By definition, counterpublics thus distrust the mainstream media’s coverage of the specific issues around which each counterpublic has emerged. In recent years, particularly counterpublics of the right-wing spectrum have accused the mainstream public of applying this strategy (e.g., Fawzi, 2019; Mudde, 2004). By accusing the mainstream public of trying to silence them and yet expressing their opinions, right-wing

counterpublics have staged themselves as courageous and truth-seeking taboo breakers who are unwilling to subordinate themselves to any formal or informal rules (Mudde, 2004).

We conceptualize the counterpublics’ repeated claim that they are being silenced by the mainstream public—predominantly represented by the mainstream media—as suppressed voice rhetoric (SVR). Through SVR, right-wing counterpublics depict the mainstream public as an adversarial homogenous group that controls the dominant discourse and allegedly places it under the dictate of political correctness (Fairlough, 2003). As Kaiser and Rauchfleisch (2019) have argued, the identity formation of counterpublics is dependent on them demarcating themselves from the mainstream public as an “identity defining outgroup” (p. 246). Essentially, SVR applies social-identity framing (for social-identity framing, see Mols, 2012) by highlighting the conflict between the out-group (those who create and support the dominant discourse) and the in-group (those who reject the dominant discourse). Thus, SVR adds to the repertoire of polarizing types of right-wing populist discourse that create binary realities based on “us versus them” perceptions (e.g. Hameleers et al., 2019). For audiences, SVR functions as an identity cue, which indicates that the communicators see themselves as part of a right-wing counterpublic: that is, as part of a group that is marginalized because it holds opinions deemed socially unacceptable by the mainstream public.

Eventually, the vocal revolt of right-wing counterpublics against the alleged political correctness of the mainstream public reflects their conviction that if the dominant discourse changes, social change will follow (Fairlough, 2003). From this perspective, the mobilization of large numbers of others is key to “breaking the silence” and overcoming their perceived discursive domination. Paradoxically, as we argue, SVR’s claim of being silenced can contribute to this type of mobilization by increasing like-minded individuals’ willingness to speak out.

Right-wing counterpublics apply SVR in a variety of different communication contexts, ranging from Tweets to public speeches to blog entries. This study, however, has investigated effects of SVR in comments sections, because findings from content analysis indicate not only strong right-wing counterpublic activity in these communicative online spaces, but also frequent application of SVR (Toepfl & Piwoni, 2015, 2017).

### **Spirals of Speaking Out: The Effect of SVR on Opinion Expression**

A number of experimental studies have investigated how user-generated content influences public discourse by motivating other audience members to express their opinions, or preventing them from doing so. Within this body of literature, one strand of research has provided empirical support for the spiral of silence theory, which claims that individuals are less likely to speak out if they perceive themselves in the minority opinion (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). Essentially, these studies found that user-generated content can influence an audience’s perceived public opinion and, in turn, their willingness to speak out (e.g., Neubaum & Krämer, 2016). Another strand of research has investigated whether user-generated content can trigger “spirals of empowerment” instead of spirals of silence (Lee & Chun, 2016, p. 482). Essentially, these studies have shown that perceived opinion congruency with a reference group in online environments can motivate opinion expression regardless of what individuals perceive as the majority opinion held in the society at large (e.g., Chun & Lee, 2017; Lee & Chun, 2016; Wang, Hmielowski, Hutchens, & Beam, 2017). The authors have explained these potential spirals of empowerment with audience members’ tendency to tune into group thinking when exposed to opinion-congruent user-generated content (Chun & Lee, 2017; Lee & Chun, 2016). The sense of group belonging, in turn, is a driver for individuals’ willingness to speak out.

### **Social Identity Mechanisms Triggered by SVR**

Explicit criticisms of the mainstream public (i.e., SVR) distributed through user-generated content tend to be congruent and thus resonate with media-distrusting audience members. In other words, the perception that certain views are neglected and even censored by the mainstream public is more likely to fall on fertile ground among those individuals who perceive mainstream media as untrustworthy sources than among those who see mainstream media as trustworthy. Essentially, SVR confirms the negative media-related attitudes of media-distrusting audience members, which is likely to increase their perceived congruency with critical user comments. Thus, among these individuals, SVR may trigger a sense of group belonging.

In Western countries, most individuals are also aware that right-wing counterpublics exist because they not only are extremely active online but also have received much mainstream media attention (Kaiser & Rauchfleisch, 2019). Thus, individuals who share right-wing counterpublic views are likely to perceive themselves as part of an imagined community and adopt a social identity as a counterpublic member (Kaiser & Rauchfleisch, 2019). However, these social identities generally do not consistently come to the psychological forefront but tend to become particularly salient when social groups engage in conflict (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Given this rationale, SVR’s emphasis on group conflict and a portrayal of the mainstream public as a shared enemy is likely to increase the salience of pre-existing counterpublic identities. In this context, we consider low trust in the media’s coverage of right-wing key issues (i.e., issue-specific media distrust) such as refugees as a strong indicator of audience members’ pre-existing sympathies and social identification with the German right-wing counterpublic. German mainstream media have often labelled right-wing counterpublic views as unacceptable and have, in turn, been depicted by right-wing actors as one of the people’s worst enemies (e.g. Fawzi, 2019; Holt, 2019; Schroeder, 2018).

### **Consequences of Social Identity Mechanisms for Opinion Expression**

Social identity theory implies that when individuals are tuned into group thinking, they are more likely to behave according to perceived group norms (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In the case of right-wing counterpublics, this means “breaking the silence” and taking action against the alleged suppressors by speaking out. Moreover, when individuals think of themselves as social members of the right-wing counterpublic, the perceived bias of the dominant discourse simultaneously becomes more salient. Research has shown that individuals who perceive the media or the public to be biased against their view are likely to correct for this bias by engaging in expressive participation (e.g., Rojas, 2010; Wojcieszak, 2015). Thus, based on the arguments presented in the previous paragraphs, we have hypothesized:

H1: The lower the participants’ media trust, the stronger their willingness to express their opinion when exposed to user comments with SVR compared to user comments without SVR.

### **The Role of Perceived Social Support and a Perceived Sense of Power**

Beyond this, following the logic of Chun and Lee (2017), we expected the effect of exposure to SVR in user comments on opinion expression to be serially mediated through perceived social support and a perceived sense of power. In a survey study, Chun and Lee (2017) found that exposure to opinion-congruent user comments created a sense of group belonging among participants, which made them feel more socially supported. The feeling of social support, in turn, increased their sense of power, which made them more willing to speak out. The present study essentially replicates Chun and Lee’s (2017) findings about this kind of serial mediation but in a different and timely issue-related context. In addition, while Chun and Lee’s (2017) research was based on a survey, the current study was based on the experimental method. This approach allowed us to draw causal conclusions about congruent user comments’ effect on perceived social support, which both substantiate and complement

Chun and Lee’s (2017) results. A graphical overview of the model is given in the result section in Figure 3.

### **Perceived Social Support**

Individuals experience social support when they feel “reliably connected to others” (Barrera, 1986, p. 416). As Haslam and colleagues (2005) have argued, the premise for such feelings of social support is social identification with others. If individuals feel part of a social group with which they share similar attributes or interests, they are likely to rely on other group members to help them when needed. Research has shown that members of marginalized groups tend to feel less isolated and more supported when being socially identified and interacting with other in-group members (Frable, Platt, & Hoey, 1998; Postmes & Branscombe, 2002). Although strong ties are said to provide the strongest social support (e.g., Wellman & Wortley, 1990), in recent years, studies have shown that even weak ties in online environments can make individuals feel socially supported (Rains & Keating, 2011; Rozzell et al., 2014; Chun & Lee, 2017).

When deploying SVR in communicative online spaces, right-wing counterpublics emphasize their social identity as a marginalized group. As argued previously, this social identity frame tends to increase a sense of group belonging among individuals with low issue-specific media trust due to increased perceived congruency with user comments and the salience of pre-existing social identities. Thus, these individuals feel marginalized by the mainstream public, but their sense of group belonging is likely to make them feel less isolated. Consequently, the social identification with a virtual community can increase perceived social support because of the perceived connectedness and availability of others with the same attitudes and interests. Thus, we have hypothesized:

H2: The lower the participants’ media trust, the higher their perceived social support when exposed to user comments with SVR compared to user comments without SVR.

### **A Perceived Sense of Power**

Individuals experience a sense of power when they feel like they are mastering a situation and can have an impact on others (Chun & Lee, 2017). Generally, such a sense of power increases when individuals perceive fellow in-group members as working towards the same goal compared to working towards a goal on their own (e.g., Greenaway et al., 2015).

As Greenaway and colleagues (2015) put it, “groups nurture feelings of personal control and help individuals to feel capable of pursuing and accomplishing their goals” (p. 69).

Particularly when feeling socially supported by others, being part of a group that shares the same interests increases individuals’ sense of empowerment (Greenaway et al., 2015; Postmes & Jetten, 2006). Experimental studies have shown that, in working environments, a higher degree of empowerment has been associated with social support from co-workers or leaders (Liden, Wayne, & Sparrowe, 2000; Logan & Ganster, 2007). In the health context, receiving social support from online groups tends to make individuals feel like they can rely on themselves and peers instead of professional health staff, which increases their experience of personal empowerment (Barak, Boniel-Nissim, & Suler, 2008). Thus, individuals generally seem to feel in greater control of a situation, and, thus, more empowered, if they believe that they are supported by and can rely on other in-group members when needed. Thus, we have hypothesized:

H3a: Perceived social support will be positively associated with a perceived sense of power.

Chun and Lee (2017) found that a greater sense of power motivates individuals to engage in discursive activities online. The feeling of mastering a situation and being capable of having an impact on others may generally make opinion expression in online environments appear more worthwhile. Moreover, research has shown that internal efficacy, that is, a sense of personal competency, is associated with political participation (e.g., Moeller, Vreese,

Esser, & Kunz, 2014; Glasford, 2008). Similarly to internal political efficacy, a perceived sense of power reflects an individual’s belief in their personal competency in terms of mastering a situation and having an impact. Thus, we argue that, just as internal efficacy drives political participation, a sense of power is likely to drive discursive participation through opinion expression. It is hypothesized that

H3b: A perceived sense of power will be positively associated with a willingness to express one’s opinion.

Lastly, based on all hypotheses and the serial mediation suggested by Chun and Lee (2017), we expect that the effect of SVR on opinion expression stated in H1 will be mediated through perceived social support and a perceived sense of power.

H3c: The effect of H1 will be serially mediated through perceived social support and a perceived sense of power.

## Method

### Design, Procedure, and Sample

In order to test our hypotheses, we conducted a web-based survey-experiment with a single-factor (user comments with/without SVR) between-subjects design and a moderator (media trust). Media trust was measured before participants were exposed to the stimulus. Participants were randomly assigned to either the control group (user comments without SVR) or the treatment group (user comments with SVR). For data collection, we relied on a commercial German online access panel (*Respondi*). To ensure that we would have a sufficient variance on media trust for data analysis, we screened for party membership. As voters for the populist German party *Alternative fuer Deutschland* (AfD) are more likely to distrust mainstream media, we commissioned a sample consisting of approximately 30% AfD voters, with the remaining 70% being scattered across German parties. The sample consisted

of 464 participants (female = 51.5%,  $M_{\text{age}} = 43.57$ ,  $SD = 14.74$ ), with approximately 50% holding a high school or a university degree. The study was conducted in March 2019.

### **Stimulus material**

Our stimulus depicted a short, fictional online article from a German public broadcasting service news program (*Tagesschau*), with two fictional user comments (see Appendix). We selected public broadcasting news because it is the most relevant and most trusted source of news in Germany (Hoelig & Hasebrink, 2019), but it is also frequently attacked for being state propaganda and attracting many critical user comments (Prochazka & Schweiger, 2016). Moreover, we chose the issue of refugees because, in the last several years, this issue has divided German society into a mainstream public and a counterpublic (Haller, 2017). Whereas, particularly in the early months of the so-called refugee crisis, all major media outlets unequivocally supported Chancellor Merkel’s decision to let a large number of refugees come into Germany, counterpublics forming on the Internet, as well as in street protests, vocally expressed their demand for a more restrictive refugee policy (Haller, 2017). Today, right-wing counterpublics keep claiming that their opinions about migration and refugees are being censored, and that their views are systematically suppressed.

All participants were presented with the same media article from *Tagesschau*. The article represented the mainstream view by lamenting that EU countries refused to let rescue boats with refugees dock in their ports. It went on to describe the desperate situation of the refugees on board, and criticized the EU for a lack of solidarity. Under the media article, two user comments strongly disagreed with the article by, among other things, arguing that the EU could not take in all the refugees and that those rescue boats would only encourage more refugees to cross the sea. The first parts of the comments were identical in both the control and treatment conditions. In the treatment condition, however, the comments were appended with SVR. More specifically, commenters applying SVR, for instance, stated that their views

were censored and that they experience social sanctions when expression their opinion in public (for exact wording of the stimuli, see Appendix). Thus, SVR in our stimulus contained the typical SVR accusations made by right-wing counterpublics with regard to the public discourse on refugees and migration. The stimuli drew on real media coverage and user comments but were modified to fit the purpose of the study.

Our comments without SVR (control condition) were a little shorter than the comments with SVR (treatment condition), although we did slightly lengthen the comments without SVR by adding sentences that confirmed previous statements without providing more information (e.g., “I just don’t believe this”). However, as we could not operationalize a lack of SVR without changing the content, we accepted that these comments were still a little shorter than the ones with SVR (see Prochazka, Weber, & Schweiger, 2016).

## **Measures**

### ***Moderator***

Before participants were exposed to the stimulus, media trust was measured with eight items focused on evaluations of mainstream media coverage of refugees. The participants were first asked to think about the “big German news media” and indicate their agreement with the items on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from “do not agree at all” to “completely agree.” These items included, for example, “Reports on the refugee issue recount the facts truthfully” or “Journalists’ opinions about the refugee issue are well-founded”.

The items were taken from Kohring’s and Matthes’ (2007) media trust scale, although we chose to include only the items assessing media depictions and journalistic assessment’s accuracy. We considered these items to be particularly suitable for measuring whether individuals perceive the mainstream media’s reporting on refugees as reliable and whether participants’ show an appreciation for journalistic work on this specific issue at all. To test for unidimensionality, principle axis factor analysis was carried out, which identified one factor

with factor loadings starting from 0.54. The eight items were combined into a mean index, with a good Cronbach’s alpha ( $M = 3.39$ ,  $SD = 1.40$ ,  $\alpha = .95$ ).

### ***Dependent variables***

To measure individuals’ intent to express their opinion, participants were asked to indicate how likely they would be to do so in offline and online contexts on a 10-point Likert-type scale (*completely unlikely to extremely likely*) for three items: (1) “at a party where the guests have an opinion about refugee policy contrary to yours,” (2) “in a user comment under a news article about refugee policy,” (3) “in social media, where only friends and acquaintances can see your contribution.” With these diverse settings, we aimed to capture an overall effect on a broad range of discursive activities with different levels of anonymity. Although the principle axis factor analysis extracted one factor only, the item asking for opinion expression at a party was excluded due to a low factor loading (0.44) on the underlying factor. The remaining two items with factor loadings above 0.84 were scored up in a mean index ( $M = 4.44$ ,  $SD = 2.68$ ,  $r_s = .84$ ) that now captures discursive activities in online environments only.

To measure perceived social support, we applied the index of Chun and Lee (2017), who had modified items from Liang, Ho, Li, and Turban (2011) to make them suitable for digital media environments: (1) “I feel the comments below the post comfort me to participate in the conversation”; (2) “I feel the comments below the post encourage me to participate in the conversation”; (3) “I feel the commenters below the post would listen to me if I expressed my opinion.” The participants were again asked to indicate their level of agreement on a 10-point Likert-type scale (*do not agree at all to extremely agree*). The principle axis factor analysis extracted one factor only, with factor loadings starting from 0.58. The three items for perceived social support were scored up in a mean index ( $M = 4.90$ ,  $SD = 2.34$ ,  $\alpha = 0.84$ ).

We adopted and slightly modified Chun and Lee’s (2017) measurements of perceived power (adopted from Anderson, John, & Keltner, 2012), consisting of three items (“I have a great deal of power”; “I am able to get my way when expressing my opinion on the article”; “I can influence readers when I express my opinion in a comment”). Participants were asked whether they agreed with these three statements on a 10-point Likert-type scale (*do not agree at all to extremely agree*). The principle axis factor analysis resulted in one factor only, with factor loadings starting from 0.64. Again, the items for a perceived sense of power were scored up in a mean index ( $M = 4.02$ ,  $SD = 1.86$ ,  $\alpha = 0.73$ ).

### **Data Analysis**

To test our hypotheses, we ran a regression-based conditional mediation analysis, applying a customized model (see Figure 3) of the SPSS macro *PROCESS*. By default, *PROCESS* provides path coefficients for the OLS regression models of each dependent variable in the conditional mediation model. The stimulus was entered as a dummy variable (0 = user comments without SVR, 1 = user comments with SVR). Beta coefficients are unstandardized. All confidence intervals for the indirect (conditional) effects were based on 5,000 bootstrap replications.

## **Results**

### **Manipulation Test**

To test whether we successfully manipulated SVR, we created a mean index of four items (“The commenters claim that their point of view is suppressed in public”; “The commenters claim that they are forbidden to express their opinion”; “The commenters feel discriminated against”; “The commenters feel excluded”). The participants were asked how much they agreed with each statement on a Likert-type scale from 1 to 7 (1 = *do not agree at all* to 7 = *totally agree*). The scale had a high reliability ( $\alpha = 0.89$ ,  $M = 3.90$ ,  $SD = 1.73$ ). Principle axis factor analysis resulted in one extracted factor only, with factor loadings

starting from 0.81. An independent *t*-test showed that our stimulus significantly affected the perceptions of the participants in the predicted direction (without SVR [*n* = 230]: *M* = 2.97, *SD* = 1.53, with SVR [*n*=234]: *M* = 4.82 *SD* = 1.41;  $t[462] = -13.49, p < .001$ ).

### Data Analysis

Before conducting the hypothesis tests with PROCESS, we applied an analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) for explorative purposes in order to investigate whether comments with SVR had a main effect on opinion expression or perceived social support. We controlled for media trust in this analysis. The results show that respondents were neither significantly more willing to express their opinions,  $F(1,461) = 3.68; p = .056$ , nor felt more socially supported,  $F(1,461) = 1.62, p = .203$ , when exposed to user comments with SVR compared to user comments without SVR. The covariate, media trust, was also neither significantly associated with opinion expression,  $F(1, 461) = 0.02, p = .899$ , nor with perceived social support,  $F(1,461) = 0.15, p = .699$ .

In H1, we hypothesized that, the lower the participants’ media trust was, the more their willingness to speak out would increase when exposed to user comments with SVR. Our customized model thus estimated the interaction effect between user comments and media trust on opinion expression, while controlling for a perceived sense of power. The interaction term was found to be insignificant,  $b = -0.14, SE = 0.16, p = .371$  (see Table 1, Model 1).

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

The visualization of the interaction (see Figure 1, Panel A) and conditional effect (see Figure 1, Panel B) reveals that the lower the participants’ media trust, the larger the increase in their willingness to speak out when exposed to user comments with SVR compared to user comments without SVR. However, the insignificant interaction term indicates that the effect

of user comments with SVR was not significantly different across participants with different levels of media trust. Thus, H1 was rejected.

INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE

H2 anticipated that, the lower the participants’ media trust was, the stronger their perception of social support would be when exposed to user comments with SVR. Thus, our customized model tested an interaction effect between user comments and media trust on perceived social support. The interaction effect, in this case, was significant,  $b = -0.35$ ,  $SE = 0.16$ ,  $p = .023$  (see Table 1, Model 2).

We then visualized the dynamics of this interaction to extract additional information. The interaction’s visualization indicates that, when exposed to user comments with SVR, perceived social support increased for participants with low media trust (see Figure 2, Panel A). For participants with high media trust, user comments with SVR appear to decrease perceived social support. Therefore, H2 is supported.

INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE

We applied the Johnson-Neyman technique to obtain additional information about SVR’s effect strength and significance regarding perceived social support given different media trust values. The results show that when exposed to user comments with SVR, perceived social support increased significantly for participants with a media trust score lower than 2.90 (approximately 38% of the sample; see Figure 2, Panel B). For individuals with a media trust score higher than 2.89, user comments with SVR did not have a significant effect

on perceived social support. The insignificant results for individuals with high media trust are probably due to fewer cases and, thus, a larger standard error.

H3a makes the assertion that perceived social support is positively associated with a perceived sense of power, which is supported by our data,  $b = 0.45$ ,  $SE = 0.03$ ,  $p < .001$  (see Table 1, Model 3). In addition, we assumed that a perceived sense of power would be positively associated with opinion expression (H3b), which is also supported by the results,  $b = 0.67$ ,  $SE = 0.06$ ,  $p < .000$  (see Table 1, Model 1). Finally, H3c proposes that, the lower the participants’ media trust is, the more likely they are to express their opinion due to the serial mediation of perceived social support and perceived sense of power. The results reveal a significant index of moderated mediation ( $index = -0.11$ ,  $BootSE = 0.06$ ,  $CI [-0.22, 0.00]$ ), which implies that, for different values of media trust, any two conditional indirect effects are significantly different from each other.

However, a significant moderated mediation index does not imply that a significant indirect effect exists for all the moderator’s values. Thus, by default, PROCESS calculates the indirect effects’ CIs for the 16<sup>th</sup>, 50<sup>th</sup>, and 84<sup>th</sup> percentiles of the moderator variable. In this study, the estimated indirect effect is only significant for individuals with media trust at the 16<sup>th</sup> percentile, which corresponds to a value of 1.88 for media trust ( $b = 0.24$ ,  $BootSE = 0.12$ ,  $CI [0.03, 0.48]$ ). Overall, H3c is supported by our data (see Table 2).

INSERT TABLE 2 HERE

FIGURE 3 HERE

## Discussion

Right-wing counterpublics constantly accuse the mainstream public of silencing their views and, thereby, portray themselves as a suppressed group in the public discourse (e.g., Mudde, 2004). By drawing on literature on counterpublic theory (Asen, 2000; Toepfl &

Piwoni, 2015, 2017), right-wing populist discourse (e.g., Hameleers et al., 2019), and social identity framing (Mols, 2012), we have theorized this rhetorical device as SVR. Subsequently, we are presenting an experimental study that has investigated the effects of SVR in anti-refugee user comments on the audience. Based on previous findings of effects of user comments on opinion expression (Chun & Lee, 2017) and assumptions about group dynamics rooted in social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), we expected SVR to increase sense of group belonging among individuals with low trust in media coverage about refugees. We expected that the sense of group-belonging would, in turn, make these individuals more willing to speak out. Our findings show that individuals with low media trust indeed tended to be more willing to express their opinions when exposed to SVR.

Moreover, our study shed light on the psychological mechanism on which the effects of SVR is grounded. We found that, for participants with low media trust, the effect of SVR was mediated through perceived social support and a perceived sense of power: When exposed to SVR, participants with low media trust tended to feel more socially supported by other in-group members, which, in turn, made them feel more confident about their own capabilities to have an impact on others. This sense of empowerment was positively associated with willingness to speak out.

### **Spirals of Silence Vs. Spirals of Speaking Out: The Dynamics of Counterpublic Talk Online**

First of all, our findings provide insight into communication dynamics of groups that perceive themselves as marginalized in the public discourse and, thus, distrust mainstream media. Although right-wing counterpublics constantly claim that they experience restrictions with regard to voicing their opinions (Toepfl & Piwoni, 2015, 2017), they have not been reserved with regard to expressing their opinions online. As our findings indicate, somewhat paradoxically, it may be precisely the claim of being marginalized in the mainstream public

sphere (deploying SVR) that contributes significantly to stimulating group thinking and mobilizing other in-group members to speak out. This adds a new perspective to Noelle-Neumann’s (1974) spiral of silence theory: Claiming that certain views are silenced by the mainstream public appears to motivate like-minded individuals to break the perceived silence and to speak out.

Moreover, the present research replicated the empowerment process, which was first introduced by Chun and Lee (2017). The cited authors’ findings were corroborated by the current study as we found that a higher perceived congruency with user comments increased the readers’ perceived social support. This effect, in turn, increased their sense of power and, subsequently, willingness to speak out. As suggested by Chun and Lee (2017), we tested this serial mediation in a different issue-related context to increase the generalizability of the cited authors’ findings. Our experimental research design also provided empirical support for congruent user comments’ causal effect on perceived social support.

On the one hand, we argue essentially that SVR is likely to increase perceived opinion congruency among individuals with low media trust, which is in agreement with Chun and Lee’s (2017) hypotheses and findings. These individuals may perceive commenters’ views as more congruent with their opinions if they share the commenters’ negative view of the mainstream media. On the other hand, we contend that the social identity frame of SVR tends to make pre-existing right-wing counterpublic identities more salient. Thus, SVR in our study has a tendency to have a two-fold effect. SVR can both create group belonging among like-minded individuals due to increased perceived congruency and make pre-existing social identities more salient.

Lastly, by theorizing SVR and scrutinizing its effects, this study has paved the way for a new strand of research on online counterpublics. So far, research on counterpublics has largely been grounded in content analyses of online discourses and interviews with activists –

and has rarely ever been concerned with the psychological effects of counterpublic talk (for overviews of this research, see Asen, 2000; Toepfl & Piwoni, 2015, 2017).

### **Limitations and Future Research**

As with any study, this research has limitations. Initially, we argued that user comments with SVR would increase perceived congruency and social identity salience among individuals with low media trust. Notably, this assumption is most meaningful if low media trust stems from these individuals’ perception that the media coverage of refugees is overly positively biased. In contrast, individuals who have low media trust because they perceive the coverage of refugees to be overly negatively biased are unlikely to resonate with anti-refugee user comments containing SVR. However, our data support the conclusion that media distrust is common among individuals with negative attitudes toward refugees but uncommon among individuals with positive attitudes toward refugees (see also Fawzi, 2019; Haller, 2017; Holt 2019). Thus, we found a significant negative correlation between media trust and agreement with the view that refugees pose a threat to German society (measured on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from “do not agree at all” to “completely agree”,  $r = -.34, p = .000$ ). In addition, only a quite small number of participants (5.6%) had both very low media trust ( $< 3$ ) and a very positive view of refugees ( $< 3$ ).

In the end, SVR is a typical rhetorical tool of counterpublics, which by definition feel excluded from the mainstream public sphere. Consequently, it is likely that audience members, who strongly support the counterpublics’ view, share their low trust in mainstream media reporting on the issue. Future studies could, nevertheless, investigate the effects of SVR that does not take a specific issue stance and examine its impacts with regard to various issues. For instance, user-generated content that accuses the mainstream media of censoring views probably would fall on fertile ground among individuals with low general media trust even when this content discusses unfamiliar issues.

Further limitations of this study are related to the communicative space in which SVR was deployed. This study tested the effects of SVR only for comments posted by ordinary citizens, although the rhetoric has also been deployed by politicians and populist movements. Future research could, for instance, analyze effects of Tweets by U.S. president Donald Trump on his followers when applying SVR.

To conclude, we hope that future research pursuing these paths will generate deeper knowledge about the effects of SVR – that is, about a rhetorical device that appears to be omnipresent in today’s polarized political environments, but about whose very nature and consequences we still know little.

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Table 1

*Path Coefficients from Customized Moderated Mediation Model with PROCESS*

Outcome variables	Independent variables	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
<i>Model 1: Opinion expression</i>	Constant	1.90***	0.45	4.22	.000
	<b>Perceived sense of power</b>	<b>0.67***</b>	<b>0.06</b>	<b>10.91</b>	<b>.000</b>
	User comments <sup>a</sup>	0.91	0.58	1.57	.117
	Media trust	-0.11	0.11	-0.93	.355
	<b>User comments<sup>a</sup> x media trust</b>	<b>-0.14</b>	<b>0.16</b>	<b>-0.90</b>	<b>.371</b>
<i>Model 2: Perceived social support</i>	Constant	4.03***	0.41	9.86	.000
	User comments <sup>a</sup>	1.48	0.57	2.60	.010
	Media trust	0.21	0.11	1.89	.059
	<b>User comments<sup>a</sup> x media trust</b>	<b>-0.35*</b>	<b>0.16</b>	<b>-2.29</b>	<b>.023</b>
<i>Model 3: Perceived sense of power</i>	Constant	1.81***	0.17	10.97	.000
	<b>Perceived social support</b>	<b>0.45***</b>	<b>0.03</b>	<b>14.83</b>	<b>.000</b>

Note: N = 464, \**p* < .05. \*\**p* < .01. \*\*\**p* < .001. Coefficients in bold are hypothesis tests.

<sup>a</sup> Without SVR = 0, with SVR = 1

Table 2

*Moderated Mediation Effects on Opinion Expression*

	Low media trust (16 <sup>th</sup> percentile) <sup>a</sup>			High media trust (84 <sup>th</sup> percentile) <sup>b</sup>			Moderated mediation Index		
	95% CI			95% CI			95% CI		
	<i>b</i>	LL	UL	<i>b</i>	LL	UL	<i>Index</i>	LL	UL
User comments <sup>c</sup> -> social support -> sense of power	0.37	0.04	0.71	-0.11	-0.40	0.18	-0.16	-0.33	0.00
User comments <sup>c</sup> -> social support -> sense of power -> opinion expression	0.24	0.03	0.48	-0.08	-0.28	0.12	-0.11	-0.22	0.00

Note: N = 464

<sup>a</sup> Corresponds to low media trust (value 1.88 on media trust)

<sup>b</sup> Corresponds to high media trust (value 4.88 on media trust)

<sup>c</sup> Without SVR = 0, with SVR = 1

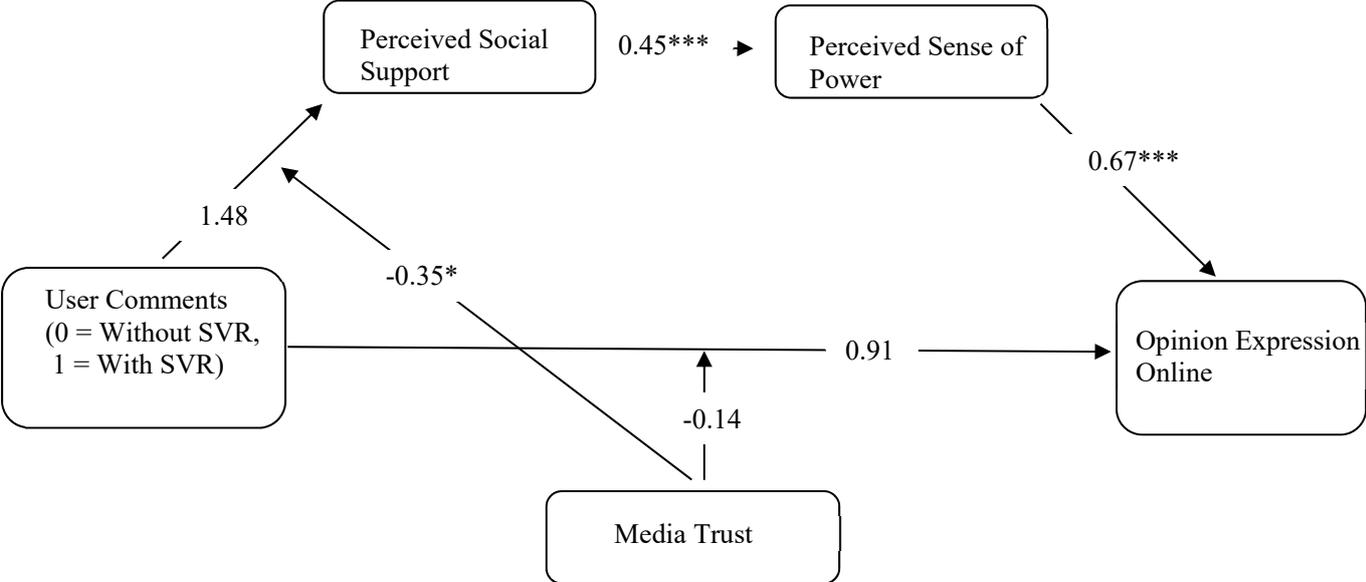


Figure 3: Effects of user comments with SVR on opinion expression (serially mediated through perceived social support and a perceived sense of power) as a function of media trust  
Note: N = 464, \*p < .05, \*\*p < .01, \*\*\*p < .001.

## Appendix

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### Rettungsschiff vor Lesbos: NGO appelliert an die Menschlichkeit

7. Februar 2019 – 16:59 Uhr



Seit zwei Tagen harren Flüchtlinge auf einem Rettungsboot der Hilfsorganisation Sea-Watch vor Lesbos aus, doch der Alarm der NGO stößt bei der EU auf taube Ohren. Die Lage an Bord des Flüchtlingsschiffs vor Lesbos verschlechtert sich nach Angaben der Helfer zusehends. Unterdessen wurde bekannt, dass an Bord des Schiffs Flüchtlinge, darunter auch Frauen und Kinder, die Nahrung verweigerten. «Wir fürchten, dass sich ihr psychischer und gesundheitlicher Zustand deutlich verschlechtert», twitterte Sea-Watch. Weil sich die Mitgliedsstaaten als handlungsunfähig erweisen, steht nun die EU als Ganzes am Pranger: Solidarität mit Menschen in Not zählt derzeit offensichtlich nicht zu ihren Stärken.

[f](#) [t](#) [e](#) [p](#)

#### Kommentare

Am 7. Februar 2019 um 17:58 von ein\_spruch2010

#### Falsche Signale!

Die Menschen werden durch die Rettungsschiffe doch erst dazu verleitet auf das Meer zu kommen. Die Rettungsschiffe senden falsche Signale! Durch diese „Retter“ sterben unzählige Menschen. Es ist an der Zeit diesen Banden das Handwerk zu legen! Ich sehe überhaupt keinen Grund dafür die Rettungsaktionen zu unterstützen, sondern halte das für eine schlechte Idee.

Am 7. Februar 2019 um 17:45 von DoJo

#### Kein Recht auf Asyl

Die EU kann die doch nicht alle aufnehmen! Es wird davon ausgegangen, dass es sich bei den Leuten auf den Schiffen wirklich um Flüchtlinge handelt, die ein Recht auf Asyl hätten. Diese Vorstellung lässt sich ganz einfach widerlegen, wenn man sich die Herkunftsländer dieser Menschen anschaut. Es fehlen hier einfach solide Argumente und Beweise, mit denen sich diese ganzen Rettungsaktionen gut rechtfertigen lassen würden.

Illustration 1: Control Group Condition

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Am 7. Februar 2019 um 17:45 von DoJo

**Kein Recht auf Asyl**

Die EU kann die doch nicht alle aufnehmen! Es wird davon ausgegangen, dass es sich bei den Leuten auf den Schiffen wirklich um Flüchtlinge handelt, die ein Recht auf Asyl hätten. Diese Vorstellung lässt sich ganz einfach widerlegen, wenn man sich die Herkunftsländer dieser Menschen anschaut. Aber halt: Das darf man ja wieder nicht sagen! Wenn man in der Öffentlichkeit diese Meinung äußert, wird man sofort zurechtgewiesen und als Unmensch beschimpft! Da holen die sogenannten Gutmenschen gleich ihre Keule raus!

Illustration 2: Treatment Group Condition

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### Rescue ship off Lesbos: NGO appeals to humanity

7. Februar 2019 – 16:59 Uhr



For two days, refugees have been waiting on a Sea Watch lifeboat off Lesbos, but the NGO's alarm has fallen on deaf ears in the EU. The situation on board of the refugee ship off Lesbos is worsening, according to the helpers. Meanwhile, it became known that refugees, including women and children, refused to eat on board of the ship. "We fear that their psychological and health condition will deteriorate significantly," twittered Sea-Watch. Because the member states are proving incapable of action, the EU as a whole is now being pilloried: solidarity with people in need is obviously not one of its strengths at the moment.

f t e p

#### Kommentare

Am 7. Februar 2019 um 17:58 von ein\_spruch2010

**Wrong signals!**  
The people are tempted by the rescue ships to cross the sea. The rescue ships send the wrong signals! Because of these "rescuers," countless people die. It's time to put a stop to these gangs! But facts are nowhere to be found these days! I see no reason why these rescue operations should be supported. It's a bad idea.

Am 7. Februar 2019 um 17:45 von DoJo

**No right to asylum**  
The EU cannot take them all! It's assumed that the people on the ships are refugees who have the right to asylum. This idea can be refuted merely by looking at the countries of origin of these people. There is simply a lack of solid arguments and evidence to justify all these rescue operations.

Illustration 3: Control Group Condition (english translation)

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f t e p

#### Kommentare

Am 7. Februar 2019 um 17:58 von ein\_spruch2010

##### Wrong signals!

The people are tempted by the rescue ships to cross the sea. The rescue ships send the wrong signals! Because of these "rescuers," countless people die. It's time to put a stop to these gangs! But facts are nowhere to be found these days! What does not fit into the rulers' worldview is simply not mentioned or is censored by the thought police! I have enough experience with this, as I belong to the people who are forbidden to speak in this country because they represent the "wrong" opinions.

Am 7. Februar 2019 um 17:45 von DoJo

##### No right to asylum

The EU cannot take them all! It's assumed that the people on the ships are refugees who have the right to asylum. This idea can be refuted merely by looking at the countries of origin of these people. But wait, we are not allowed to say that out loud! If you express this opinion in public, you are immediately rebuked and accused of being inhumane! Then the do-gooders come along with their morals!

Illustration 4: Treatment Group Condition (english translation)