university of groningen / faculty of behavioural and social sciences / research master

Master's thesis

Context Matters: A Comparative Study of Self-Censorship Motivations in Personal and Professional Settings

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Programme:	Research Master Behavioural and Social Sciences
Theme:	Understanding Societal Change
ECs:	30
Date:	17-7-2024
Word count:	10537

Are there deviations of the Master's thesis from the proposed plan?
☐No
☒Yes, please explain below the deviations

The word count exceeded the 10.000-word limit by 537 words, which was approved by the first supervisor.

Abstract

Self-censorship, defined as the deliberate withholding of one's true opinion in the presence of a disagreeing audience, challenges democratic ideals based on the exchange of diverse political perspectives. While self-censorship is recognized, knowledge about its specific motivations in concrete social situations remains limited. Employing an experimental survey design (N = 196) with a U.S. sample, we tested whether the primary reasons behind self-censorship, focusing on instrumental (self-oriented concerns) and social motives (other-oriented concerns), differ in personal versus professional social contexts. Participants were exposed to hypothetical scenarios positioning them with a contrary opinion against a group consensus on the controversial issue of immigration. As expected, instrumental motives were more strongly activated in professional contexts. However, contrary to our expectations, social motives were also more strongly activated in professional settings. In line with these findings, individuals were more inclined to self-censor in professional settings, and self-censorship motives were positively related to individuals' self-censorship tendencies. Indeed, a mediation-by-motives analysis suggests that self-censorship responses in social contexts are primarily influenced by the relative activation of self-censorship motives, which are stronger in professional settings. Efforts to mitigate self-censorship should focus on addressing and reducing individuals' motives in these situations. Together, these findings underscore the importance of understanding self-censorship within the specific context in which it occurs.

Keywords: self-censorship, motives, political conformity, political discourse, immigration

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Please imagine the following: *Your parents invite you and the rest of your family over for dinner. After a round of chitchat, the conversation inevitably turns to the ongoing election. While your family firmly supports the incumbent candidate, you lean towards the sitting president: you find yourself at a crossroads: do you share your views or remain silent? The next day at work, while waiting for coffee, you find yourself in the middle of a conversation about the government's latest healthcare reform. Your colleagues complain it's too costly, but you see it as a crucial investment in public welfare. Once again, you're left pondering: should you speak your mind or remain silent?*

These everyday dilemmas highlight a growing concern among Americans: self-censorship, defined as the deliberate withholding of genuine opinions in the presence of a disagreeing audience (Gibson & Sutherland, 2023; Hayes et al., 2005). Mentally, such self-censorship is linked to feelings of discomfort or anger directed at oneself or others (Bermiss & McDonald, 2018; Ryan, 2011). Moreover, employees who self-censor their political views experience diminished job satisfaction, and a decreased sense of community at work (Sinclair et al., 2024).

On a societal level, self-censorship challenges democratic ideals that rely on the exchange of diverse political perspectives (cf. Festenstein, 2015; Gibson & Sutherland, 2023). Political disagreements and exposure to varied viewpoints play a pivotal role in balancing the competing interests of diverse constituencies (Nir, 2014). Such exposure is linked to increased political participation (Dim, 2022), a deeper understanding of different political stances, and greater tolerance for differing views (Mutz, 2002; Mutz

& Mondak, 2006). However, with the rise of self-censorship, opportunities to challenge, refine, and balance potentially extreme ideas are becoming increasingly limited (Gibson & Sutherland, 2023; Hayes, 2005; Ryan, 2011). In light of this, understanding the reasons and circumstances under which individuals self-censor is important.

Despite such implications, systematic research into the primary reasons, or motives behind self-censorship remains scarce (cf. Peacock, 2019), and inconclusive (Ryan, 2011). Individuals who self-censor their views cite a range of different reasons, from career impediments to concerns about hurting loved ones or spoiling a pleasant atmosphere at social events (Carlson & Settle, 2022; Peacock, 2019; Ryan, 2011). These context-specific considerations indicate that motivations for self-censorship may vary depending on the setting. Broadly, there appears to be a distinction between more self-oriented, instrumental considerations in professional settings and more other-oriented, social considerations in personal settings. For instance, in professional settings, individuals might worry that a risky remark could damage their reputation and reduce their chances of promotion. In contrast, in personal settings, an individual might be more worried about a disagreement creating a rift between them and their loved ones.

The current research examines whether individuals, when deciding whether to express a contrary opinion to a disagreeing audience, are motivated to self-censor by instrumental and social concerns in professional and personal settings, respectively. Specifically, we examine whether these distinct, situation-specific self-censorship motives are expressed to varying degrees between professional and personal contexts in the United States. Furthermore, we explore whether instrumental and social motives differentially relate to individuals' decisions to express their views or remain silent, i.e., self-censorship.

Forms of self-censorship

We follow Hayes et al. (2005), who define self-censorship as the "deliberate withholding of one's true opinion from an audience that disagrees with that opinion" (p. 299). Accordingly, self-censorship requires both *a perception* of the audience's differing opinions and an *intentional decision* to withhold one's own opinion, even when given the opportunity to express it. This distinguishes our definition from Bar-Tal (2017), who defines self-censorship as "the act of intentionally and voluntarily withholding information from others in the absence of formal obstacles" (p. 41), which also includes scenarios like keeping secrets or hiding crimes and does not consider potential group disagreements on opinion as a social factor.[1]

We are interested in self-censorship within situations in which people are expected to express their opinions to some degree (e.g., when asked in conversation). Indeed, conversational norms and situational demands, such as turn-taking and being asked questions, can make it socially undesirable or impractical to stay completely silent (Carlson & Settle, 2022; Hayes, 2007; Peacock, 2019). For instance, silence might be perceived as tacit agreement with a controversial position (Silver & Shaw, 2022). Carlson and Settle (2016) found that individuals contradicted their pre-test opinions and

[1] Conceptually, self-censorship, driven by the perception of a disagreeing audience and ensuing social pressure (i.e., social influence), can be seen as a form of "conformity by omission" (van Kleef et al., 2015), where one opts not to share their opinion rather than actively contradicting it (Carlson & Settle, 2022; Hayes et al., 2005). Social conformity involves aligning one's behavior or beliefs with others to gain social rewards, such as praise and inclusion, and avoid punishments, such as conflict or rejection (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004; Chen et al., 2022; Hewlin, 2009). Similarly, impression management involves presenting a specific impression to others in order to achieve desired outcomes, including pretense, such as pretending to align with others' opinions (Bolino et al., 2016; Hewlin, 2009). For example, individuals may feign agreement with organizational values to appear as a better fit within the organization (Bermiss & McDonald, 2018; Hewlin, 2009). Self-censorship intersects with social conformity and impression management, as group pressure defines the acceptable range of opinions, and individuals deliberately create the impression of being less deviant or more aligned with those opinions by weighing the consequences of expressing contrary views versus remaining silent and self-censoring (Hewlin, 2009).

pretended to agree with a group of confederates who disagreed with them during discussions where they were directly asked questions just three days later (see also Levitan & Verhulst, 2016). Thus, pretending to agree can be a form of self-censorship akin to classic conformity, where one actively contradicts one's true opinion in order not to share it.

Indeed, self-censorship may come in different forms. Instead of outright pretending to agree or staying completely silent, for example, individuals may hedge their true opinions with caveats, expressing ambivalence. Notably, Hayes (2007) revealed that showing ambivalence and uncertainty was the second most popular approach for avoiding the expression of an unpopular opinion (see also Neubaum & Krämer, 2018). Therefore, expressing ambivalence can be an approach to balance the expression of one's contrary opinions by concealing, or censoring the true conviction behind them. In the study to come, we will therefore measure such different forms of self-censorship.

Why do individuals self-censor?

The first reason for self-censorship is based on *social* motives, conceptualized as the considerations related to maintaining interpersonal harmony (e.g., avoiding distressing others or inciting conflict) and a sense of belonging within social relationships when expressing dissenting opinions to an audience that disagrees. The term "social" implies that self-censorship serves more other-oriented considerations, influencing interpersonal outcomes such as interaction quality, others' emotional well-being, or the sense of belonging with others.

Research indeed shows that while attitude similarity fosters social attraction, dissimilarity has a disproportionately negative effect (Singh & Ho, 2000). For instance,

spouses with similar political views report higher relationship satisfaction (Leikas et al., 2018). Conversely, dissimilarity in friendships increases the potential for conflict, harming these relationships (Laursen, 2017). Carlson and Settle (2022) found that 26% of respondents had friends distancing themselves over political differences, while families with differing political views tend to spend less time together during holidays like Thanksgiving (Chen & Rohla, 2018). Furthermore, Sinclair et al. (2024) discovered that employees in a political minority are more likely to self-censor their political views and feel a diminished sense of community at work. They argue that self-censorship may serve as an adaptation to salvage a sense of belonging among co-workers. Thus, self-censorship may function to create a perception of attitude congruence, aiming to maintain bonds and affiliation with others.

In particular, political attitudes reflect deeply rooted moral beliefs (Graham et al., 2009), and form an integral part of an individual's self-identity (Chen & Urminsky, 2019; Duncan & Stewart, 2007). Attitude disagreements are often perceived as threats to the integrity of an individual's self-concept (Minson & Dorison, 2022). Consequently, sharing opposing political views may escalate conflicts or even cause emotional harm, as disagreements may be perceived as disapproval of others' character – per se (see also Levinsen & Yndigegn, 2015). For instance, Peacock (2019) found that individuals often self-censor to avoid conflict, invoking that political discussions can trigger intense reactions that potentially harm interpersonal relationships: "[i]t elicits strong emotions on both sides that lead to anger, animosity, etc." (p. 590) and "it may hurt others [*sic*] feelings" (p. 590). By the same token, individuals were found to self-censor to avoid ruining an enjoyable event or gathering, holidays or celebrations (Peacock, 2019). Thus, social motives play an important role in self-censorship.

The second reason for self-censoring is based on *instrumental* motives, conceptualized as the considerations individuals make regarding their public image or personal reputation (e.g., others interpreting and labeling political statements unfavorably), and direct social-professional ramifications when disclosing contrary opinions to a disagreeing audience (e.g., facing unfavorable scrutiny). The term "instrumental" underscores that self-censorship serves as a strategic tool to secure more self-oriented outcomes, such as safeguarding one's reputation and sidestepping negative consequences.

Research indeed shows that self-censorship, viewed from an impression management perspective, involves presenting a desirable political image to achieve favorable outcomes. For example, impression management is more prevalent when individuals depend on others, such as supervisors. A person might align their opinions with those of a job interviewer to ingratiate themselves and increase their chances of securing employment (Bolino et al., 2016). Hewlin (2009) found that individuals with lower status and greater dissimilarity to others within the organization were more likely to feign agreement with the company's values. Similarly, younger employees lower in the organizational hierarchy were more likely to self-censor their political opinions at work (Sinclair et al., 2024). This suggests that self-censorship may play a role in avoiding procedural repercussions, such as layoffs or negative performance evaluations, crucial for employees who rely heavily on others to advance their career.

Indeed, Bermiss and McDonald (2018) noted that U.S. investment professionals that find themselves in a political minority at work often avoid voicing their opinions due to career concerns, claiming a risk-reward calculus favoring self-censorship. For instance, concerns over unfavorable political labels were implicated. In fact, Sinclair et

al. (2023) found that job interviewers discriminated against applicants with differing political ideologies. These concerns are echoed broadly, with approximately 32% of employed Americans worrying about career impediments or job loss if their political views were known (Erkins, 2020). Additionally, 56% of students fear harming their reputation due to potential misunderstandings of their speech (Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression [FIRE], 2022), and 22% worry about harassment complaints or lower grades for expressing certain political opinions in class (Heterodox Academy, 2022).

Moreover, Silver and Shaw (2022) examined how participants navigated disclosing opinions on contentious issues like immigration policy to colleagues with opposing views, especially when support was crucial for a promotion. About two-thirds chose not to disclose their opinions. Notably, they found that in contexts where the audience discerns underlying incentives, neutrality can be seen as a deceptive attempt at impression management. In such situations, abstaining from taking sides can be perceived as a strategic concealment of opposition. This suggests that individuals do not only evaluate the potential negative consequences of expressing dissenting views (e.g., losing out on a promotion) and strategically modify their expressions (e.g., claiming neutrality), but also assume calculated behaviors in others. This indicates that self-censorship may be strategically motivated to protect self-oriented outcomes, such as career advancement, in contexts with discernible incentives.

The current study: When do people self-censor for instrumental or social motives?

Although we seem to know that people can self-censor for different reasons, we know little about when people self-censor for which reason. For example, we know little about whether and why people self-censor in more professional (i.e., work context)

or interpersonal settings (i.e, family context). Research indicates that sharing unpopular opinions with close relationships, such as family and friends, is associated with stronger restraints compared to communicating with strangers (Chan, 2018; Matthes et al., 2018). Conversely, other findings suggest that individuals are more likely to silence themselves when interacting with those they do not know well compared to close relationships (Carlson & Settle, 2022; Morey et al., 2012). For instance, overall greater political homogeneity within personal circles may make specific disagreements seem less severe (Dim, 2022; Morey et al., 2012).

An intermediate case might be professional contexts, where individuals interact regularly but generally do not share the intimate bonds that characterize close personal relationships (Dim, 2022; Mutz & Mondak, 2006). Here, greater heterogeneity in professional contexts is assumed to create a premise for incidentally encountering politically diverse opinions (Mutz & Mondak, 2006). Though, employees who perceive a misalignment between their personal politics and their company's prevailing political ideology are more likely to censor their political views (Bermiss & McDonald, 2018; Sinclair et al., 2024).

These findings indicate that social contexts between more personal compared to more professional ones create discrete circumstances for political conversations and self-censorship (Dim, 2022; Morey et al., 2012; Mutz & Mondak, 2006). On the one hand, both contexts are similar in that one cannot swiftly change one's workplace, much less one's family or long-standing social bonds with friends. On the other hand, these two contexts differ in that in more personal contexts, the focus is primarily on fostering intimacy and meaningful social interactions (Dim, 2022; Morey et al., 2012), while in professional contexts, behavior often serves to advance personal ambitions (Bolino et

al., 2016; Carlson & Settle, 2016), is characterized by high levels of competition (Johnsen et al., 2023; Yap et al., 2022), and political speech is more heavily regulated by third parties, such as HR departments (Hirsch, 2018).

Specifying social and instrumental motives offers insights into the situational considerations individuals make between personal and professional contexts, given the contextual differences and inconclusive variations in self-censorship between these settings (e.g., Carlson & Settle, 2022). Our work thus addresses a gap in existing literature, which operationalizes self-censorship concerns as context-invariant inter-individual differences (Hayes, 2005; Hayes et al., 2013; Matthes et al., 2012). However, trait-like approaches have shown limited success in predicting self-censorship in experimental designs, overlooking situational concerns (Neubaum & Krämer, 2018; Neuwirth et al., 2007). Conversely, Neuwirth et al. (2007) compared trait-like and state-like communication apprehension and found that state-like communication apprehension, defined as "more immediate situational factors associated with the particular and unique circumstances of speaking out," showed stronger positive relationships with self-censorship. This suggests that situational concerns may be better predictors of self-censorship decisions, and specifying social and instrumental motives may offer better insight into why self-censorship occurs, particularly between personal and professional social contexts. Doing so may help bridge the gap between contextual factors and self-censorship decisions, where trait-like approaches were largely unsuccessful (Neubaum & Krämer, 2018).

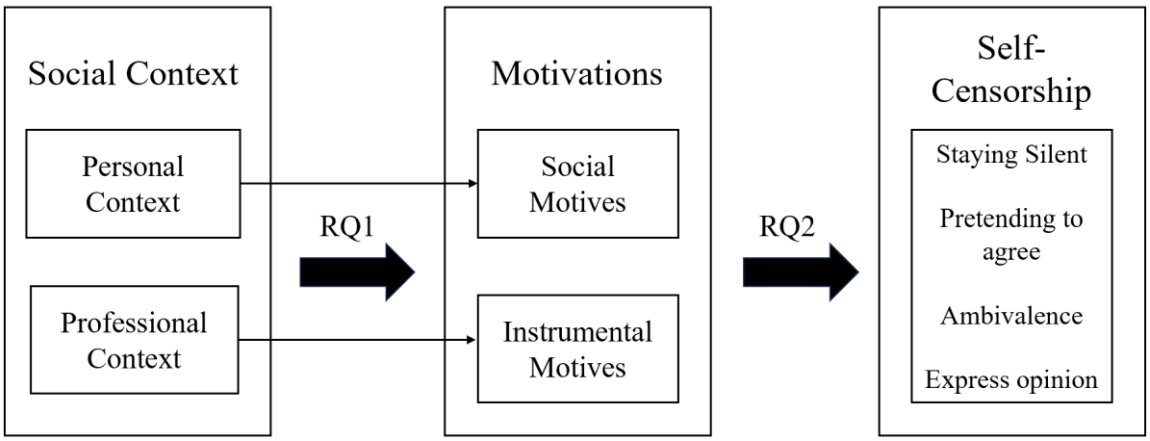
As such, the aim of the current study is to examine the specific motives behind self-censorship decisions among personal and professional social contexts, focusing on the distinction between instrumental motives (more self-oriented outcomes) and social

motives (more other-oriented concerns) (RQ1). To this end, we investigate self-censorship in two distinct social contexts that both carry *ongoing personal importance* but differ in their *emotional quality*: 1) personal contexts (family and friends, characterized by high intimacy and familiarity), and 2) professional contexts (co-workers, a more formal context with lower emotional intimacy). Specifically, we hypothesize that individuals will express greater instrumental motives in self-censorship situations within professional settings among acquaintances at work, where relationships are more superficial or instrumental (H1a). In these professional contexts, the focus is likely to be less on interpersonal considerations and more on realizing personal benefits and avoiding concrete sanctions. Conversely, we expect individuals to express greater social motives when self-censorship occurs in personal settings among family and friends compared to when it occurs in professional settings among acquaintances at work (H1b). In these intimate settings, individuals are more likely to consider the emotional reactions of others and their sense of affiliation with the group.

Additionally, we explore whether the distinction between social and instrumental motives relates to the likelihood of self-censorship within these settings (RQ2). We remain open to potential differences and communalities in these associations between both motives. Overall, conceptually, both self-censorship motives should be associated with self-censorship responses, such as staying silent, or pretending to agree. For instance, staying silent may be associated with instrumental motives, e.g., hiding opinions to avoid charged political labels (Bermiss & McDonald, 2018). Also, it may be linked to social motives, e.g., maintaining affiliation by avoiding political dissimilarity with others (Carlson & Settle, 2022). Figure 1 summarizes our design:

Figure 1

Conceptual model.



The study takes place in the context of the U.S., where escalating contempt between political partisans, known as affective polarization, has become a pervasive feature of American life (Finkel et al., 2020; Iyengar et al., 2019). Americans are increasingly reluctant to form friendships, engage in romantic relationships, or marry someone with opposing political views (Huber & Malhotra, 2017; Iyengar et al., 2019). This animosity extends to the workplace, where individuals favor job applicants who share their political beliefs and offer lower compensation to out-partisans compared to co-partisans for identical job performance (Iyengar et al., 2019; Iyengar & Westwood, 2015; Sinclair et al., 2023). Thus, in the U.S., specific situational concerns can be traced to the affectively polarized political environment, creating a compelling framework for studying self-censorship and testing social- and instrumental self-censorship motives (Gibson & Sutherland, 2023).

Method

Participants and Design. The experiment employed a two-group between-subjects design. Participants were randomly allocated to one of two experimental

conditions: 1) a personal context (a BBQ attended by family and friends) or 2) a professional context (a meeting at work attended by colleagues and supervisors).

Participants were recruited from the paid online panel Prolific.com and invited to participate in a 15-minute study on political discourse experiences in the U.S. Participants were compensated with $2 for their participation in the study ($8 per hour). Eligibility criteria included current residency in the U.S. and U.S. nationality. A priori power analysis using G*Power determined the sample size needed to test our hypotheses H1a and H1b, which concern the differential effects of contexts (personal vs. professional) on social- and instrumental self-censorship motives, respectively. For a one-sided independent samples *t*-test, a sample size of 102 participants is required to detect a medium effect size ($d = 0.5$) with 80% power and an alpha level of 5%. We targeted a sample size of approximately 200 participants to detect smaller effects as well; for instance, a sample size of 156 would be needed to detect a medium-small effect size ($d = 0.4$). Thus, our study was adequately powered to test the direct impact of context on motives within the range of medium-small effect sizes.

A total of 200 participants responded to the survey. One participant was excluded for failing to provide consent, and two others were excluded for not meeting the residency and nationality criteria. Additionally, data quality criteria were applied: two attention checks were included. One required recognizing the context stated in the manipulation scenario among four options, and another was embedded within a question, instructing participants to select a specific answer option from a Likert scale (see Appendix E). One participant failed both attention checks and was excluded from the analysis.

The final sample comprised 196 participants (107 female, 84 male, 4 non-binary, 1 prefer not to say; M_{age} = 40.57, SD_{age} = 12.18). The sample skewed liberal, with 28% identifying as liberal and 23% as very liberal. In contrast, 14% described themselves as conservative and 5% as very conservative, while 31% identified as moderate. In terms of education, the sample leaned towards higher educational attainment: 34% held a bachelor's degree, and 27% had a graduate or professional degree (e.g., M.Sc., Ph.D.). Additionally, 20% attended some college without graduating, 12% obtained an associate's or technical degree, and 8% completed high school.

Procedure

Participants were told that the study aimed to explore their experiences with political discourse in the U.S. After obtaining informed consent, the survey began with demographic questions regarding participants' age, highest educational attainment, gender, and political ideology, followed by the experimental manipulation. Post-exposure to our context manipulation, dependent measures, and manipulation checks were assessed. Upon completing the survey, participants received a positive debriefing that explained the nature and purpose of the manipulation, and they were thanked for their contribution to the research.

Experimental manipulation. As an experimental stimulus, we employed hypothetical scenarios consistent with previous self-censorship research, positioning the participant with a contrary opinion on a controversial topic against a group consensus (e.g., Hayes, 2007; Neubaum & Krämer, 2018; Neuwirth et al., 2007). To this end, we selected the issue of deporting undocumented immigrants. Currently, a majority of Americans express concerns over undocumented immigration, with 32% viewing it as a major problem and 45% as a crisis (Pew Research Center [PEW], 2024). Additionally,

there is substantial polarization on immigration policy: Democrats have become increasingly liberal on immigration since the 2010s, while Republicans maintain a restrictionist stance, emphasizing border closure (Ollerenshaw & Jardina, 2023). Thus, this issue was selected for its obtrusiveness, moral significance, and controversiality.

Before exposure, participants were encouraged to visualize and emotionally engage with the scenario as it unfolded. Participants were then randomly assigned to one of two conditions: 1) personal or 2) professional social contexts.

The scenario progressed over four screens. On the first screen, the context was described. In the personal context condition, participants were placed at a BBQ attended by family and friends, characterized by high levels of emotional closeness and familiarity, highlighting intimate bonds and a pleasant atmosphere with elements like laughter and sunshine. In the professional context condition, participants were placed in a staff meeting at work, attended by professional acquaintances, including colleagues from different departments and supervisors. This setting defined a more formal context with cordial but less emotionally close relationships, exemplified by the murmur of small talk before a meeting. In both contexts, the group's ongoing importance to the participants was emphasized: in the personal context condition, in terms of ongoing significance in one's personal life, and in the professional context condition, in terms of future importance in one's professional life (see Appendix E).

The second screen introduced the discussion topic, indicating that the group was debating whether to increase the deportation of undocumented immigrants to address undocumented immigration at the southern U.S.-Mexican border. On the third screen, initial remarks from individuals in the discussion were presented, offering arguments both in favor of and against deporting undocumented immigrants. These arguments

ranged from substantive considerations, such as legal and economic implications, to moral considerations, such as humanitarian and ethical concerns. The final screen informed participants that a decisive group consensus had emerged that was contrary to their opinion on the issue, and they were told they might soon be asked to share their opinion in front of the group. The scenarios were matched in content and length, differing only in their situational context (family BBQ and meeting at work) and the nature of the relationships between the participant and the other individuals (higher emotional closeness vs. lower emotional closeness).

Dependent measures. Participants evaluated their likelihood of engaging in self-censorship by choosing from four options: a) staying silent (i.e., self-censorship), b) pretending to agree, c) expressing ambivalence, and d) genuine expression. Next, participants' potential considerations in the self-censorship situation were assessed, with a focus on their inclination towards social and instrumental motives, respectively. All items were measured on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (Not at all likely) to 5 (Very likely).

Manipulation checks. In the personal context condition, the discussion took place among friends and family, reflecting intimate relationships characterized by high levels of similarity, sympathy, and emotional investment (Dim, 2022; Morey et al., 2012). Conversely, in the professional context condition, the discussion occurred among a mix of co-workers and superiors, involving individuals who primarily interact not out of mutual sympathy but for instrumental reasons related to work tasks. The workplace involves formal hierarchies, inter-individual competition (Johnsen et al., 2023; Yap et al., 2022), and greater dissimilarity (Mutz & Mondak, 2006), which may reduce

interpersonal closeness. This suggests that, on average, individuals feel more emotionally close to each other in personal settings compared to professional settings.

We measured perceived emotional closeness with two items: 1) participants indicated their level of emotional closeness with the individuals in the depicted scenario by responding to the statement "I felt emotionally close to the people around me" on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree). 2) participants chose between two statements best describing their feelings of emotional closeness with the individuals in the scenario: (a) "I felt emotionally close to most of the people surrounding me" and (b) "I felt little emotional closeness with most of the people surrounding me."

Self-Censorship Responses. Items were adapted from Neubaum and Krämer (2018) to align with our conceptual distinction between self-censorship as staying silent and other related responses, such as pretending to agree, and expressing ambivalence. As research suggests that self-censorship cannot be seen as an inverse of openly sharing one's opinions (Neuwirth et al., 2007), we included genuine expression as a response category to examine how self-censorship motives, and other self-censorship responses compare and relate to genuine expression. Analogous self-censorship responses, using similar items, had been successfully used in previous self-censorship research involving experimental designs with hypothetical group scenarios (e.g., Neuwirth et al., 2007; Hayes, 2007).

Staying silent was measured by two items. One item, adapted from Neubaum and Krämer (2018), covered verbal silence ("In this discussion, I would … withhold my contrary opinions and stay silent," $M = 3.05$, $SD = 1.45$). The next item was created for this research as a non-verbal variation ("In this discussion, I would … avoid revealing

my contrary opinions, maintaining a neutral demeanor," *M* = 3.05, *SD* = 1.37). The correlation between the two measures was *r* = .81 (*M* = 3.05, *SD* = 1.34).

Pretending to agree was measured by two items. One item, adapted from Neubaum & Krämer (2018), covered verbal behavior ("In this discussion, I would … verbally express agreement with the group although I disagree," *M* = 1.93, *SD* = 1.09). The other item was a non-verbal variation created for this research ("In this discussion, I would … indicate agreement with the group through non-verbal cues such as nodding, although I disagree," *M* = 2.13, *SD* = 1.21). The correlation between the two measures was *r* = .68 (*M* = 2.03, *SD* = 1.05).

Ambivalence was measured by two items. One item, adapted from Neubaum & Krämer (2018), emphasized maintaining a balanced position ("In this discussion, I would … participate and present arguments for and against in a balanced way," *M* = 3.52, *SD* = 1.27). The other item was inspired by Hayes (2007), Peacock (2019), and Carlson & Settle (2022), who propose that expressing doubts and uncertainty can be a form of hedging when avoiding disclosing a contrary opinion ("In this discussion, I would … express my actual opinion but also some doubts about it," *M* = 3.09, *SD* = 1.29). The correlation between the two measures was *r* = .38 (*M* = 3.30, *SD* = 1.07).

Genuine expression was measured by two items. One item, adapted from Neubaum & Krämer (2018), covered verbal expression ("In this discussion, I would … participate, clearly stating my actual opinion to the group," *M* = 3.52, *SD* = 1.35). The other item was a non-verbal variation ("In this discussion, I would … convey my actual opinion using non-verbal cues like gestures or facial expressions," *M* = 3.34, *SD* = 1.27). The correlation between the two measures was *r* = .40 (*M* = 3.43, *SD* = 1.10).

As our measurements comprised two variables per self-censorship response, our set of variables was insufficient to robustly determine the underlying dimensionality assuming four distinct factors. In such situations, it is recommended to investigate correlation matrices instead (Knekta et al., 2019). However, to provide additional information, we also performed an exploratory factor analysis with Promax oblique rotation to explore the underlying dimensionality of our items, given the lack of clear guidelines under these conditions. A detailed summary of our findings can be found in Appendix A.

Overall, our analyses did not strongly caution against our grouping into self-censorship response subscales. Therefore, we proceeded with our initial categorization of self-censorship responses based on our conceptual framework from the relevant literature. Notably, a distinction between genuine expression and ambivalence was less evident in our data, possibly because both involve a decision to express one's views, albeit with varying levels of conviction. Consequently, the distinction between genuine expression and ambivalence in our subscales should be considered with caution, despite the conceptual difference.

Self-censorship motives. We developed new items based on our theoretical framework to cover all conceptual elements of our self-censorship motive constructs. Where applicable, we used items from previous research that showed conceptual overlap with our constructs. Specifically, Neubaum and Krämer's (2018) "Fear of Social Sanctions" instrument, which measures latent concerns about punitive reactions from others when voicing controversial opinions, and Malone et al.'s (2012) "General Belongingness Scale," which assesses levels of interpersonal belonging. These items were adapted to reflect context-specific concerns related to self-censorship.

Social motives were assessed using six items, differentiated into two sub-categories. For each item, participants were asked to reflect on their potential considerations upon disclosing their contrary opinion in the hypothetical scenario used in this study (see Appendix E). For **interpersonal harmony,** three items were specifically created for this research (α = .82, M = 3.19, SD = 1.12). An example item is, "In this situation, I am concerned about instigating conflicts as a result of sharing my opinions." For **interpersonal belonging,** three items were adapted from Malone et al.'s (2012) "General Belongingness Scale" to the context of self-censorship (α = .93, M = 2.89, SD = 1.24). An example item is, "In this situation, I am concerned about feeling alienated from others over differences in political opinions." The total six items were aggregated to create composite scores for *social motives* (α = .89, M = 3.04, SD = 1.06).

Instrumental motives were also assessed using six items, differentiated into two sub-categories. Likewise, participants were asked to reflect on their potential considerations upon disclosing their contrary opinion in the hypothetical scenario used in this study (see Appendix E). For **personal reputation**, the measure consisted of one item adapted from Neubaum & Krämer's (2018) "Fear of Social Sanctions" and two items specifically created for this research (α = .91, M = 3.19, SD = 1.23). An example item is, "In this situation, I am concerned about damaging my reputation by expressing my opinions." For **social-professional risks**, the measure comprised two items adapted from Neubaum & Krämer's (2018) "Fear of Social Sanctions" instrument, and one item specifically created for this research (α = .92, M = 3.20, SD = 1.24). An example item is, "In this situation, I am concerned about risking negative repercussions in the future due to my opinions." The total six items were aggregated to create composite scores for *instrumental motives* (α = .94, M = 3.19, SD = 1.18).

To evaluate our proposed grouping into composite scales for social- and instrumental self-censorship motives, we again conducted an EFA using Promax oblique rotation. A detailed summary of our findings can be found in Appendix B.

Overall, our analysis revealed that a single dominant factor explains most of the variance in the data, beyond which additional factors contribute minimally to the variance. This suggests that the theoretical differentiation between two distinct self-censorship motives is not strongly reflected by our data. Rather, this implies that self-censorship motives might form a more unidimensional construct, with a similar meaning to participants. Consequently, in addition to the scales we created for social- and instrumental self-censorship motives, we also added a composite scale reflecting overall self-censorship motives to our analysis, allowing us to explore differences in overall self-censorship motives between conditions, and relationships to self-censorship responses. This composite scale comprises all twelve items (α = .94, M = 3.12, SD = 1.06), and allows us to explore our research questions with respect to how participants appear to have interpreted our items.

Results

Our analyses were conducted using the base R statistical software package, with effect sizes obtained through the psych package. First, we report on the effectiveness of the experimental manipulation. We then proceed with testing our hypotheses and exploratory research questions. Details on data quality checks and potential outliers, which suggest fair quality and overall no indication for data exclusion, are provided in Appendix C.

Manipulation checks. To test the effectiveness of our context manipulation[2], we compared the personal and professional conditions on two separate measures assessing participants' perceived emotional closeness with the people described in the hypothetical scenario.

A Chi-square test was conducted to examine differences in perceived levels of closeness between the two conditions. A large majority of participants in the personal condition (90.72%) reported feeling emotionally close, consistent with the intended manipulation. Conversely, a majority of participants in the professional condition (83.84%) reported feeling little emotional closeness, also consistent with the intended manipulation. These differences were statistically significant, χ^2 (1, N = 196) = 106.39, $p < .001$, Cramer's $V = .75$. Additionally, we compared participants' mean agreement with the statement that they felt emotionally close with the people in the scenario using Welch *t*-tests. There was a significant difference between the personal and professional conditions, $t(192.9) = 13.78$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 1.98$. As intended, the mean score was significantly higher in the personal condition ($M = 4.27$, $SD = 0.97$) compared to the professional condition ($M = 2.25$, $SD = 1.07$). The observed large effects support that our manipulation was successful in creating a perception of higher emotional closeness in the personal condition compared to the professional condition.

[2] We compared sample characteristics between the personal and professional conditions to check for significant differences that may have arisen during the pseudo-randomization procedure and could bias our inferences. We performed *Chi*-square tests for categorical variables and Welch *t*-tests for continuous variables, with the null hypothesis that there are no significant differences between conditions at the 5% alpha level. There were no significant differences between the two conditions in terms of participants' age ($t(190.92) = 0.246$, $p = 0.806$, Cohen's $d = -0.04$), gender (χ^2 (3, N = 196) = 1.036, $p = .792$, Cramer's $V = .07$), educational attainment (χ^2 (4, N = 196) = 7.829, $p = .098$, Cramer's $V = .20$), and ideology (χ^2 (4, N = 196) = 4.076, $p = .396$, Cramer's $V = .14$). Thus, as we did not find any significant differences between the personal and professional conditions, this generally indicates that the randomization process was effective in balancing the groups on these variables.

Model assumptions. To ensure the assumptions for the Welch *t*-tests used to address our main hypotheses were not violated, we examined Q-Q plots and histograms for social, instrumental, and overall self-censorship motives between personal and professional conditions. Figures 8 and 9 in Appendix D illustrate these Q-Q plots and histograms, respectively. The assumption of independence was satisfied based on the sampling method from the Prolific.com panel. The Q-Q plots indicate that the scores for each condition are roughly normally distributed, particularly with deviations at the tails. We deem these deviations not substantial enough to suggest significant violations of normality. Therefore, we proceeded with the Welch *t*-tests, as they are robust to some deviations from normality, particularly with larger sample sizes (Delacre et al., 2017).

Hypothesis testing

To answer our main hypotheses, two-sided Welch's two-sample *t*-tests were conducted to compare the levels of self-censorship motives between the personal and professional conditions, with the expectations that instrumental motives are larger in the professional condition (H1a), and social motives are larger in the personal condition (H1b).

As can be seen in Table 1, consistent with our hypothesis (H1a), the mean score for instrumental motives in the professional condition (M = 3.66, SD = 1.08) was significantly larger than in the personal condition (M = 2.72, SD = 1.08), $t(193.93) = -6.08$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 0.87$. However, contrary to our hypothesis (H1b), the mean score for social motives was not significantly larger in the personal condition (M = 2.86, SD = 1.03) than in the professional condition (M = 3.22, SD = 1.06), $t(193.95) = -2.40$, $p = .017$, Cohen's $d = 0.34$. In fact, the effect was in the opposite direction: social motives were stronger in the professional condition compared to the personal condition.

Thus, in the professional condition, for which the manipulation check indicated weaker emotional closeness, both motives for self-censorship were stronger.

Because our factor analysis suggested a unidimensional grouping of self-censorship motives, we additionally explored overall self-censorship motives between the two conditions using a two-sided Welch's *t*-test. In line with the above conclusion, the results showed that overall self-censorship motives were significantly higher in the professional condition ($M = 3.44$, $SD = 1.03$) compared to the personal condition ($M = 2.79$, $SD = 0.99$), $t(193.95) = 4.49$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 0.65$.

To summarize, our hypotheses were partially supported. While our context manipulation induced higher instrumental motives in the professional condition (as intended), social motives were also higher in the professional condition, opposite to our hypothesis[3]. This might indicate either that the context was perceived differently than intended, or it reflects that the motives reflect a more unidimensional construct.

[3] Because we conducted three tests, we need to account for multiple testing. A Bonferroni correction with an adjusted significance threshold of .05/3 = .0167 indicates that with $p < .001$, the differences in instrumental motives and overall self-censorship motives between the Work and BBQ condition remained significant, while the significance level of the difference between social motives is very close to the Bonferroni adjusted significance threshold ($p = .017$).

Table 1

Measures of central tendency, dispersion, and significance tests for mean differences by personal (BBQ) and professional (Work) conditions: manipulation check (emotional closeness), self-censorship motives, and self-censorship responses.

Variables	**Condition**	***M***	***SD***	***t(df)***	***p***	**Cohen's *d***
Emotional closeness	BBQ	4.27	0.97	13.78 (*192.9*)	<.001	1.98
	Work	2.25	1.07			
Self-censorship motives						
Social motives	BBQ	2.86	1.03	-2.40 (*193.95*)	<.05	0.34
	Work	3.22	1.06			
Instrumental motives	BBQ	2.72	1.08	-6.08 (*193.93*)	<.001	0.87
	Work	3.66	1.08			
Overall SC motives	BBQ	2.79	0.99	4.49 (*193.95*)	<.001	0.65
	Work	3.44	1.03			
Self-censorship responses						
Staying silent	BBQ	2.68	1.27	-3.94 (*193.92*)	<.001	0.57
	Work	3.41	1.32			
Pretending to agree	BBQ	1.82	0.88	-2.76 (*182.44*)	<.01	0.40
	Work	2.23	1.17			
Ambivalence	BBQ	3.45	1.07	3.71 (*184.76*)	<.001	-0.51
	Work	3.15	1.04			
Genuine expression	BBQ	3.71	0.92	2.00 (*193.55*)	<.05	-0.29
	Work	3.16	1.18			

Exploring RQ2

Given the unform findings regarding self-censorship motives, we conducted an exploratory analysis of between-condition differences within the various self-censorship measures included. As illustrated in Table 1, in line with the findings for the motives,

levels of staying silent were more pronounced in the professional condition (M = 3.41, SD = 1.32) than in the personal condition (M = 2.68, SD = 1.27), t(193.92) = -3.94, p < .001, Cohen's d = 0.57. Likewise, levels of pretending to agree were higher in the professional condition (M = 2.23, SD = 1.17) compared to the personal condition (M = 1.82, SD = 0.88), t(182.44) = -2.76, p < .01, Cohen's d = 0.40.

Conversely, levels of genuine expression were higher in the personal condition (M = 3.71, SD = 0.92) than in the professional condition (M = 3.16, SD = 1.18), t(184.76) = 3.71, p < .001, Cohen's d = -0.51. Interestingly, ambivalence was more pronounced in the personal condition (M = 3.45, SD = 1.07) compared to the professional condition (M = 3.15, SD = 1.04), t(193.55) = 2.00, p < .05, Cohen's d = -0.29. This pattern of results suggests that both motives for self-censorship and reported inclinations for staying silent, as well as pretending to agree, were stronger in the professional condition than in the personal condition.

We then explored the relationships between self-censorship motives and self-censorship responses (see Table 2 for correlations). There were high inter-correlations among the self-censorship motives. For instance, there are strong correlations between overall and instrumental self-censorship motives (r = 0.95, p < .001), overall and social self-censorship motives (r = 0.94, p < .001), and instrumental and social self-censorship motives (r = 0.80, p < .001).

Social and instrumental self-censorship motives showed significant correlations with all self-censorship responses except ambivalence. Specifically, instrumental motives were negatively correlated with genuine expression (r = -0.38, p < .001) and positively correlated with pretending to agree (r = 0.32, p < .001) and staying silent (r = 0.53, p < .001). Likewise, social motives were negatively correlated with genuine

expression (r = -0.27, p < .001) and positively correlated with pretending to agree (r = 0.35, p < .001) and staying silent (r = 0.46, p < .001). However, self-censorship motives were not significantly correlated with ambivalence, with r = -0.08, p = 0.28 for instrumental motives, and r = -0.09, p = 0.23 for social motives.

Regarding RQ2, whether the distinction between social and instrumental motives relates to self-censorship within these settings, we found that, in line with the mean-level findings, the correlations indeed show that higher degrees of both self-censorship motives are associated with higher levels of staying silent, higher levels of pretending to agree, and lower genuine expression. On the other hand, the correlations between self-censorship motives and self-censorship responses appear consistent for both types of motives. Interestingly, degrees of both self-censorship motives were unrelated to expressing ambivalence, something we will reflect on in the discussion section.

Table 2

Correlations between the dependent variables of self-censorship motives and self-censorship responses, along with measures of central tendency and dispersion across conditions for each variable.

	M	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Instrumental motives	3.20	1.18							
2. Social motives	3.04	1.06	.80***						
3. Overall SC motives	3.12	1.06	.95***	.94***					
4. Staying silent	3.05	1.34	.53***	.46***	.52***				
5. Pretending to agree	2.03	1.05	.32***	.35***	.35***	.24***			
6. Ambivalence	3.30	1.07	-.08	-.09	-.09	-.35***	.14		
7. Genuine expression	3.43	1.10	-.38***	-.27***	-.34***	-.63***	-.11	.42***	

* p < .05. ** p < .01. *** p < .001.

Exploring mediation-by-motives

Given that the professional context, compared to the personal context, increased self-censorship motives and appears to have influenced differences on self-censorship responses, we explored a potential mediation. Specifically, we investigated whether the context impacts self-censorship responses through its effect on self-censorship motives. To this end, we conducted mediation analyses[4] on the self-censorship responses that were affected by the manipulation of social context and showed relationships with self-censorship motives: staying silent, pretending to agree, and genuine expression. First, we examined both self-censorship motives as parallel mediators to explore their relative indirect effects on self-censorship responses, thereby further evaluating our proposed specification. Finally, as our factor analysis suggested a more unidimensional grouping of self-censorship motives, we explored potential mediation with overall self-censorship motives as a single mediator to understand how overall self-censorship motives may account for the effect of context on self-censorship responses.

Exploring parallel mediation. As shown in Figure 2, stronger instrumental motives, while controlling for social motives and social context, were significantly associated with a greater tendency to stay silent ($B = 0.42$, $SE = 0.19$, $p = .027$) and a

[4] Mediation analyses were performed in R using the PROCESS function v.4.3, model 4 (Hayes, 2022). The significance of indirect effects were tested using bootstrapping procedures with 5000 samples, 95% confidence intervals were defined by the 2.5th and 97.5th percentile of the range of obtained estimates. We used heteroscedastic robust standard errors: HC4 Cribari-Neto (Hayes & Cai, 2007). Model assumptions of linearity, and normality were visually inspected, see Appendix D. We observed notable deviations from normality between instrumental motives and opting for silence, as well as social motives and genuine expression. Furthermore, on all modelled paths, we observed some deviations of normality at the tails. It is important to note that since self-censorship motives are derived from two items on Likert scales, their discrete origin carries over to the composite scales, resulting in less optimal linearity between self-censorship motives and self-censorship responses. The Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) between social and instrumental motives was moderate, at 3.40 and 2.94, respectively, suggesting some inflation of standard errors due to predictor correlation that may undermine stability of our inferences. Overall, the results obtained from our parallel analysis must be interpreted with caution given these findings. Nevertheless, we decided to include a summary of our findings to further explore our proposed specification between self-censorship motives, with reasonable caution in interpreting these results. On the other hand, the results obtained from our mediation concerning overall self-censorship motives showed fewer violations and provided comparatively more robust estimates.

lesser tendency for genuine expression (*B* = -0.34, *SE* = 0.16, *p* = .038). Interestingly, stronger social motives, while controlling for instrumental motives and social context, were linked to a greater tendency to pretend to agree (*B* = 0.31, *SE* = 0.12, *p* = .013). Furthermore, we found significant indirect effects of the social context through instrumental self-censorship motives on staying silent (*B* = 0.39, 95% CI [0.11, 0.76]) and genuine expression (*B* = -0.32, 95% CI [0.11, 0.76]). Likewise, an indirect effect through social motives on pretending to agree was observed (*B* = 0.11, 95% CI [0.00, 0.27]), though the lower limit of the 95% confidence interval was close to zero (LLCI = 0.0057).

With the personal condition as the reference group, our findings indicate that the professional context, indirectly through an increase in instrumental motives, positively influenced the tendency towards staying silent and negatively affected the tendency towards genuine expression. Interestingly, this also suggests that the professional context, indirectly through an increase in social motives, fostered a greater propensity for pretending to agree. Furthermore, Figure 2 shows that in all three models, significant total effects of the social context on self-censorship responses disappeared once we controlled for the mediation by self-censorship motives. This suggests that the effect of being in the professional context, compared to the personal context, primarily influenced the inclination towards self-censorship responses through self-censorship motives, i.e., full mediation.

Exploring mediation-by-overall self-censorship motives. As illustrated in Figure 3, stronger overall self-censorship motives, controlling for social context, were significantly associated with a greater tendency to stay silent (*B* = 0.62, *SE* = 0.08, *p* < .001) and pretend to agree (*B* = 0.32, *SE* = 0.08, *p* < .001), and a lesser tendency for

genuine expression (*B* = -0.31, *SE* = 0.07, *p* = .001). Likewise, significant indirect effects of our context manipulation were found through overall self-censorship motives on staying silent (*B* = 0.40, 95% CI [0.22, 0.60]), pretending to agree (*B* = 0.21, 95% CI [0.09, 0.36]), and genuine expression (*B* = -0.20, 95% CI [-0.33, -0.09]). Thus, with the personal condition as the reference group, our findings indicate that the professional context, indirectly through an increase in overall self-censorship motives, positively influenced the tendency towards self-censorship and pretending to agree and negatively affected the tendency towards genuine expression.

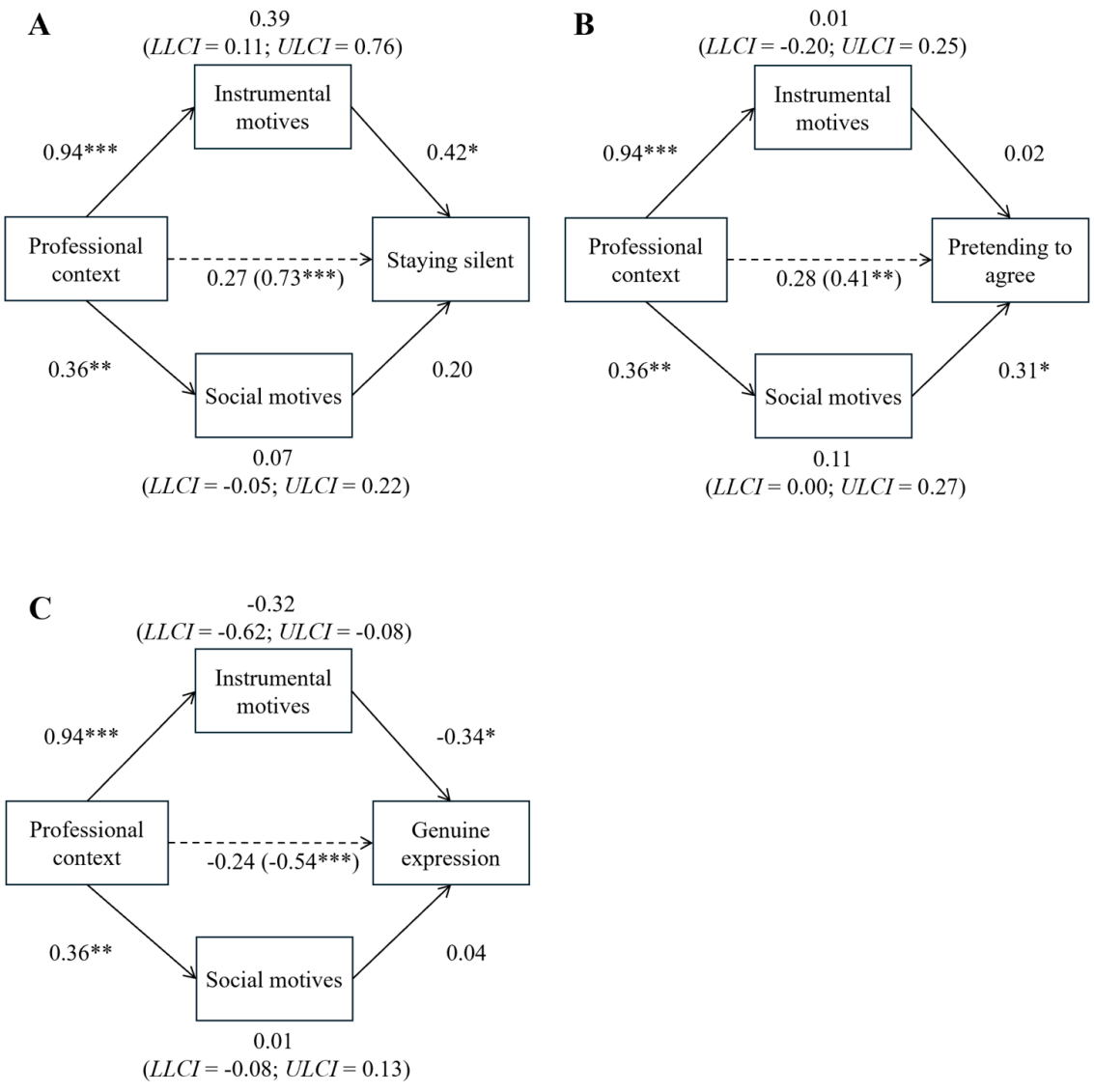
Moreover, the significant total effects of being in the professional context on staying silent and pretending to agree disappeared once we controlled for the mediation by overall self-censorship motives, suggesting full mediation. Interestingly, the direct effect of the professional context remained significant after controlling for the mediation by overall self-censorship motives, indicating that overall self-censorship motives partially mediate the relationship between the professional context and genuine expression. This suggests that while the effect of being in the professional context relative to the personal context on staying silent and pretending to agree is primarily through increasing overall self-censorship motives, other characteristics of the context appear to independently and significantly affect the relationship with genuine expression.

Together, our exploration of mediation-by-motives suggests that self-censorship responses (staying silent, pretending to agree, genuine expression) in both professional and personal contexts are primarily influenced by the relative activation of self-censorship motives, with stronger activation observed in professional settings. While distinctions between instrumental and social motives emerge in their relationship with

different self-censorship responses, these effects are less precise, exhibiting higher standard errors. Conversely, overall self-censorship motives more robustly mediate the impact of being in a professional context compared to a personal one on subsequent self-censorship responses. This indicates that self-censorship motives significantly account for the relationship between situational context and subsequent self-censorship behavior.

Figure 2

Parallel mediation models for social context on self-censorship responses mediated by social- and instrumental self-censorship motives: (A) staying silent, (B) pretending to agree, and (C) genuine expression.

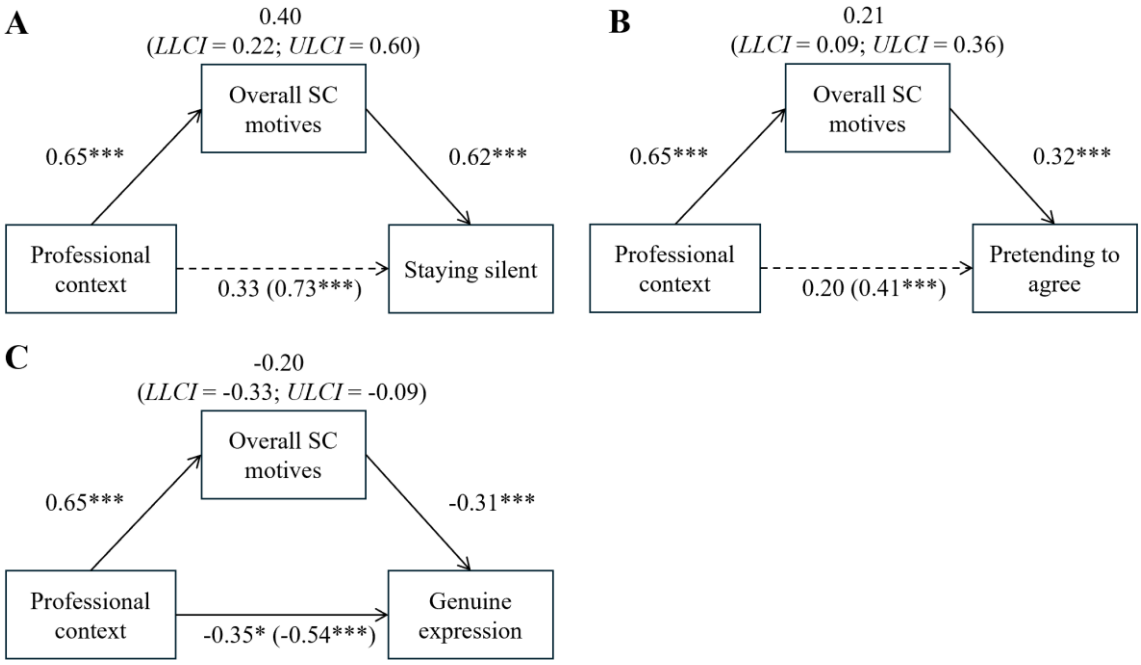


Note. Unstandardized regression coefficients for the relationships between social context and self-censorship responses, parallelly mediated by social- and instrumental self-censorship motives. With the personal context as the reference level, “Professional

context" coefficients reflect the change from personal to professional context, indicating the difference between our two experimental conditions. The coefficients in parentheses represent the total effect of the professional context on self-censorship responses. *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.

Figure 3

Mediation models for social context on self-censorship responses mediated by overall self-censorship motives: (A) staying silent, (B) pretending to agree, and (C) genuine expression.



Note. Unstandardized regression coefficients for the relationships between social context and self-censorship responses, mediated by overall self-censorship motives. With the personal context as the reference level, "Professional context" coefficients reflect the change from personal to professional context, indicating the difference between our two experimental conditions. The coefficients in parentheses represent the total effect of the professional context on self-censorship responses. *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.

Discussion

Recent studies indicate a growing hesitancy among individuals in the U.S. to share their political views with others, reflecting broader concerns about self-censorship in various social contexts (Gibson & Sutherland, 2023). This study aimed to test variations in motives for self-censorship between personal and professional contexts, exploring whether different situational concerns differentially relate to why individuals self-censor in these respective settings on the political issue of immigration. Specifically, we compared self-censorship in interactions with family and friends (personal) versus work acquaintances (professional) and distinguished motives for self-censorship in the form of situation-specific concerns into two primary types: instrumental motives (more self-oriented concerns) and social motives (more other-oriented concerns).

In line with our hypothesis 1a, instrumental motives were stronger in professional settings. However, unexpectedly and inconsistent with hypothesis 1b, social motives were also stronger in professional settings, though less distinctly. This suggests individuals have stronger motivations to self-censor in professional settings compared to personal ones or that our manipulation was not adequate to isolate the conditions under which social and instrumental motives become distinctly expressed.

Additionally, both self-censorship motives similarly related to self-censorship responses[5], showing positive associations with self-censorship behaviors and negative

[5] Self-censorship motives were unrelated to expressing ambivalence. This might be because individuals ascribed different meanings to ambivalence. On one hand, ambivalence can be seen as self-censorship by concealing the true conviction behind one's opinions, implying a positive, albeit weaker, relationship with self-censorship motives. On the other hand, we found empirical overlap with genuine expression, indicating that individuals might perceive ambivalence as akin to openly expressing their views. Thus, the ambiguity of the item might have cancelled out its association with self-censorship motives.

associations with the tendency to express one's views. The uniformity in activation patterns across conditions and similarity in association with self-censorship responses implies less distinction between social and instrumental motives than we anticipated. Indeed, a dimensionality analysis suggested that respondents interpreted both instrumental and social motives rather similarly.

Because of the pattern of our findings (i.e., individuals were more inclined to self-censor their views in professional contexts, where they had stronger self-censorship motives, while they were more likely to share their opinions in personal contexts, where they had weaker self-censorship motives), a mediation-by-motive analysis indicates a consistent mediation effect, where being in a professional setting, primarily through heightened overall self-censorship motives, is related to a greater tendency for self-censorship, including staying silent and pretending to agree, and a lesser tendency for genuine opinion expression, with the reverse pattern implied in personal contexts.

In summary, while our results did not strongly support a distinction between instrumental and social motives[6], overall self-censorship motives provided preliminary insights into why individuals may be more inclined to self-censor their views in professional settings compared to personal ones.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

Our findings have several implications for understanding self-censorship better. First, we expected individuals to express greater instrumental motives in self-censorship

[6] Interestingly, one finding pointed towards a purposeful distinction of social and instrumental motives. When considered simultaneously, the impact of social context on pretending to agree seems to occur indirectly through activating stronger social motives, rather than instrumental motives. Conversely, in the case of staying silent and genuine expression, instrumental motives mediate this relationship. Carlson & Settle (2016) argue that mimicry through expressing similar political views may help to build rapport, fostering a sense of belonging within social relationships, which would contextualize this finding. However, this interpretation must be made with caution, as inter-predictor correlations rendered inferences between social and instrumental motives in parallel less robust.

situations within professional settings among acquaintances at work, where relationships tend to be more ulterior or instrumental (H1a). In these professional contexts, the focus is likely to be less on interpersonal considerations and more on realizing personal ambitions and avoiding concrete sanctions (cf. Sinclair et al., 2024). We indeed found that individuals generally had stronger motives for self-censorship. These heightened concerns seem to make individuals more likely to self-censor by staying silent or pretending to agree in professional settings compared to personal ones. This suggests that the professional environment amplifies self-censorship motives, leading to more frequent suppression of opinions at work.

In fact, while previous comparisons between social and workplace settings have been inconclusive (Carlson & Settle, 2022), our work demonstrates consistent patterns indicating a greater proclivity for self-censorship in professional contexts. This aligns with prior findings that employees feeling in a political minority at work are more likely to self-censor their views (Bermiss & McDonald, 2018; Sinclair et al., 2024) or pretend to agree with the workplace majority (Hewlin, 2003, 2009; Hewlin et al., 2017). Thus, our findings challenge the narrative that workplaces inherently facilitate encountering diverse perspectives (Mutz & Mondak, 2006).

Impression management intentions increase with greater dependency on others for valued outcomes (Bolino et al., 2016), which aligns with the higher self-censorship motives observed at work in our study. Professional environments often have formal hierarchies (Yap et al., 2022), creating dependency on superiors (Bolino et al., 2016), and many tasks require collaboration with co-workers (Sinclair et al., 2024). Additionally, professional contexts involve heightened levels of inter-individual competition (Johnsen et al., 2023; Yap et al., 2022), potentially increasing vigilance

about undermining one's competitive advantage through controversial statements (Bermiss & McDonald, 2018). Relatedly, employees' false conformity to organizational values co-occurs with greater job insecurity (Hewlin et al., 2017). Furthermore, strict regulation of political speech by HR departments can set a precedent for self-censorship in professional environments (Hirsch, 2018). Therefore, greater dependency on others along with comparatively more substantial risks at work may be involved with greater self-censorship concerns, and subsequently behaviors reflected in our study.

Second, we hypothesized that individuals will express greater social motives when self-censorship occurs in personal settings among family and friends compared to when it occurs in professional settings among acquaintances at work (H1a). In these intimate settings, individuals are more likely to consider the emotional reactions of others and their sense of affiliation with the group. Instead, we found that individuals expressed fewer self-censorship motives when interacting with friends and family (compared to the professional condition) and, indirectly through having fewer concerns, appeared more inclined to openly express their opinions, and less likely to self-censor or contradict their opinions. This contrasts with previous work suggesting that intimate relationships create a stronger precedent for self-censorship due to their heightened emotional involvement (Matthes et al., 2018). On the other hand, our findings support previous research revealing a greater likelihood of sharing political views within close relationships (e.g., Carlson & Settle, 2022; Morey et al., 2012).

Theoretically, individuals may experience fewer self-censorship concerns because within intimate relationships, they have established routines for handling disagreements, including political ones (Morey et al., 2012). These routines can make them less likely to expect negative interactions or consequences such as conflict or political

stereotyping. Moreover, as relationships become more intimate, individuals are less likely to intentionally mislead others (DePaulo & Kashy, 1998), such as by concealing political opinions. Conversely, self-disclosure, including political opinions, is more likely in close relationships (Morey et al., 2012), fostering intimacy and greater relationship quality (Sprecher & Hendrick, 2004). Thus, our pattern of findings could reflect that individuals in personal settings emphasize authentic self-presentation and are more skilled at handling disagreements, reducing the expectation of negative consequences and encouraging greater expression of one's views.

Previous research highlights the impact of self-censorship at work, including increased turnover intentions (Bermiss & McDonald, 2018; Sinclair et al., 2024), heightened risk for burnout and exhaustion (Hewlin, 2009; Sinclair et al., 2024), a diminished sense of community, and decreased job satisfaction (Sinclair et al., 2024). Our study suggests that individuals self-censor in professional settings due to heightened concerns about adversarial consequences, such as damaging their reputation or experiencing a diminished sense of belonging. Conversely, self-censorship motives were negatively related to genuine expression, indicating that reducing these concerns may help alleviate self-censorship. Therefore, interventions or strategies aimed at mitigating the adverse effects of self-censorship on employees and companies should focus on addressing and reducing these specific concerns.

In contrast, our findings suggest that in personal settings, individuals have fewer motives or concerns about voicing contrary opinions, accompanied by a greater likelihood of genuinely sharing their views. This implies that discussions in personal settings, rather than professional ones, may benefit from encountering challenging opinions. For instance, disagreements within close relationships are associated with

greater political participation (Dim, 2022). However, increased political homogeneity in personal networks could ultimately diminish such benefits, as exposure to different views may become less likely on average (Carlson & Settle, 2022). On the other hand, this broad similarity may create avenues for more nuanced and productive discussions on smaller disagreements (Dim, 2022; Morey et al., 2012). Consequently, experiencing more fruitful political disagreements in personal contexts may encourage individuals to engage in open discussions with less well-known individuals over time (Conover et al., 2002; Morey et al., 2012).

Overall, our findings imply that open discussions are more likely to take place in personal settings. If one aims to increase the likelihood of such discussions in other contexts, such as the workplace, addressing and reducing individuals' motives for self-censorship is instructive, and may be informed by characteristics of personal contexts.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The main limitation of this study is that we did not find strong empirical support for distinguishing the primary motives for self-censorship into instrumental and social types. Indeed, participants seem to have interpreted social and instrumental motives similarly. Conceptually, this might be because it is difficult to disentangle other-oriented concerns from self-oriented ones with regard to their ultimate implications. For instance, while individuals strive to be liked by their supervisors to secure better performance reviews (Bolino et al., 2016), being likable may also involve avoiding conflict, such as by not opposing their political convictions. Alternatively, if the motive is to belong to a group, it may be crucial not to have a reputation as a political extremist. Conversely, if the goal is to maintain instrumental support for tasks at work, it may be beneficial to cultivate a strong sense of belonging within one's professional network

(Sinclair et al., 2024). Therefore, the interdependence of these concerns may account for why respondents seem to have interpreted them similarly, making it challenging to distinctly specify them into purely instrumental or social types. This implies potential issues with inferring specific motivations from final outcomes in our conceptualization. At the same time, even with this limitation in mind, our findings show that the professional context offers more scope for self-censorship through instrumental and/or social motives. Future research is needed to better distinguish these motives. For example, future research could employ a different manipulation that more effectively isolates the conditions under which social and instrumental motives may become differentially activated.

Another limitation of this study is that we cannot be certain whether the personal condition was a potential self-censorship condition (for social motives) as we intended, or if it was simply a condition in which self-censorship was less relevant, as our results indicate. In future research, we recommend differentiating social and instrumental self-censorship motives, for example, by comparing social situations that create self-censorship pressures similar to those in professional settings. This approach may provide a clearer test of whether social motives for self-censorship increase in personal contexts. It is also possible that social motives are similarly stronger when interacting with less familiar individuals rather than more intimate ones, contrary to our initial expectations. Personal settings where individuals are at the onset of developing relationships and feel more insecure about creating rifts and dissimilarities (Morey et al., 2012), such as when joining a recreational sports team or attending a dinner party with unfamiliar faces, may reveal different patterns (Hayes, 2007).

Other limitations concern the use of only one context and sample, which does not facilitate generalizability of the findings, and the lack of ecological validity inherent in scenario methods. For instance, participants underestimating the power of the situation and claiming they would be less likely to feel concerns or self-censor themselves than they actually would (Glynn et al., 1997; Hayes, 2007). Future research may help establish the robustness of our findings through using different conversation topics, different samples, and through employing a more real-life version of the scenarios (e.g., participants exposed to a real conversation; see Carlson & Settle, 2016).

Although these limitations warrant some caution in interpreting the results, the current research also has several strengths. Firstly, the experimental design of the study allowed for a direct comparison of similar yet distinct situations. This enhances confidence in the internal validity of the findings, particularly that professional contexts, compared to personal ones, provoke stronger self-censorship motives. Consequently, this underscores the importance of understanding self-censorship within the specific context in which it occurs.

Indeed, our situational approach to self-censorship predictors might offer advantages over the trait-like operationalizations in previous literature. Our study demonstrated strong associations between situational self-censorship motives and behaviors like staying silent, while trait-like concepts showed small and largely insignificant associations in experimental designs (Neubaum & Krämer, 2018; Neuwirth et al., 2007). Furthermore, trait-like approaches often failed to uncover indirect effects, leaving processes through which contexts might influence self-censorship unaddressed. In contrast, our study consistently found that situational self-censorship motives mediated the relationship between social contexts and self-

censorship outcomes. This suggests that situational concerns may be better predictors of self-censorship behavior, particularly in experimental designs, where trait-like approaches by definition fail to capture contextual influences (Neuwirth et al., 2007).

Conclusion

Our findings suggest that, particularly in professional settings, individuals are vigilant about facing backlash and damaging their social relationships by challenging others' political opinions. Due to these heightened concerns, individuals tend to lean towards self-censorship, either withholding their opinions or feigning agreement despite holding contrary views. This behavior can distort how people perceive their own attitudes in relation to others' attitudes (Carlson & Settle, 2022), and may inadvertently inflate the perceived support for less popular politics (Kuran, 1997; Robinson & Tannenberg, 2019). Although concealing political opinions in anticipation of negative consequences may seem reasonable or even desirable on an individual level, it potentially steers society away from democratic ideals, where citizens arrive at political decisions through debate and consideration of competing arguments and viewpoints (e.g., Festenstein, 2015; Mutz, 2002; Strickler, 2020).

Admittedly, individuals tend to favor information that aligns with their preconceptions. At the same time, this makes them adept at identifying flaws in others' reasoning, especially when those others hold dissimilar beliefs (Mercier & Sperber, 2011). As individuals self-censor in response to others' reactions, seemingly dominant opinions may gain a disproportionate advantage over minority views. This implies a twofold problem: the majority misses out on potentially valuable alternative perspectives, while the self-censoring individual forfeits the opportunity to engage with and be challenged by the majority. Consequently, political opinions may be dismissed

not through substantive argument but as a result of conformist responses (Festenstein, 2015; Noelle-Neumann, 1993). From this functional perspective, self-censorship may impoverish the critical scrutiny, revision, and balancing of political opinions. Addressing and reducing self-censorship concerns might facilitate a more diverse discourse (see Carlson & Settle, 2022, Chapter 10, for a critical review).

As a final note, this perspective on self-censorship does not make assumptions about whether specific opinions are inherently good or bad. Some argue that certain opinions are too extreme to be expressed and that allowing such views to surface risks undermining inclusive debate and reducing opinion diversity (Festenstein, 2015). Others rely on individuals who hold opinions they deem harmful to express their views so that they can be persuaded otherwise. Such as the American Immigration Council (2021), which issues guidelines on how to talk with immigration opponents. Ultimately, judgements on whether the suppression or expression of certain opinions is desirable, including functional considerations, depend on political convictions and aspirations.

Returning to the social situations at the outset of this paper, our findings suggest that individuals would have felt more comfortable expressing support for an opposing candidate to their family but would likely have self-censored their endorsement of an expanded healthcare program to their colleagues out of concern for potential backlash. Whether these omissions or contributions are ultimately deemed positive or negative, we must leave for others to decide. Or to debate?

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Appendix A

Self-censorship response structure

Correlation matrix. From the correlation matrix in Table 3, it can be inferred that the two staying silent items exhibit a strong correlation (r = .81) and display similar relationships with other items. Similarly, the two pretending to agree items show a moderate to strong correlation (r = .68) and exhibit consistent relationships with other items, indicating that both pairs of items behave similarly in relation to the rest of the items in the matrix, supporting the grouping of the items into subscales, respectively.

However, the items concerning genuine expression show only a moderate correlation (r = .40), as do the items concerning ambivalence (r = .38). The relationships of these items with other items are more heterogeneous. For example, the first ambivalence item has a correlation of r = -.45 with the first staying silent item, while the second ambivalence item has a correlation of r = -.14 with the first staying silent item. Despite this variability, the direction of the correlations is broadly consistent across the items. Additionally, the first ambivalence item and the first genuine expression item have a moderate correlation (r = .47), indicating similarity between the items. Overall, this suggests that the item pairs for genuine expression and ambivalence are more distinct, providing less straightforward support for their grouping based on the data.

Table 3

Pearson correlation matrix between self-censorship response items, grouped by self-censorship response categories.

	Staying silent		Pretending to agree		Ambivalence		Genuine expression	
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Staying silent 1	-	.81	.15	.25	-.45	-.14	-.68	-.32
2. Staying silent 2	.81	-	.18	.26	-.40	-.10	-.65	-.34
3. Pretending to agree 1	.15	.18	-	.68	.06	.14	-.09	-.02
4. Pretending to agree 2	.25	.26	.68	-	.07	.15	-.25	.03
5. Ambivalence 1	-.45	-.40	.06	.07	-	.38	.47	.20
6. Ambivalence 2	-.14	-10	.14	.15	.38	-	.23	.27
7. Genuine expression 1	-.68	-.65	-.09	-.25	.47	.23	-	.40
8. Genuine expression 2	-.32	-.34	-.02	.03	.20	.27	.40	-

Note: Coefficients are maintained above the diagonal to facilitate juxtaposition between the correlation patterns across self-censorship response item pairs.

Table 4

Pearson correlation matrix between self-censorship response categories.

	1	2	3	4
1. Staying silent	-			
2. Pretending to agree	.42	-		
3. Ambivalence	-.11	.14	-	
4. Genuine expression	-.63	-.35	.24	-

Exploratory factor analysis. An EFA, using the psych package in R with Promax oblique rotation (Osborne & Costello, 2008), suggests the presence of two dominant factors with eigenvalues greater than 1: Factor 1 = 2.77 and Factor 2 = 1.42. The scree plot in Figure 4 shows a steep drop after the first two factors, further supporting the

presence of two factors that explain the largest share of the variance in the data. Additionally, only a two-factor solution yields estimates without Heywood cases, which would otherwise indicate model misspecification (Norris & Lecavalier, 2010). Therefore, we examined the factor loadings for a two-factor solution, summarized in Table 5.

The loadings in Table 5 indicate a two-factor solution, where pretending to agree forms a distinct factor, separate from staying silent, ambivalence, and genuine expression. Except for the second ambivalence item (expressing views with uncertainty caveats), which did not load strongly on either factor, all remaining items loaded on the same factor. Staying silent items exhibited strong negative loadings, while genuine expression and the first ambivalence item (expressing balanced arguments) showed strong positive loadings. This suggests that staying silent and genuine (or ambivalent) expression may be opposites on the same continuum, whereas pretending to agree (actively contradicting one's opinion) may be distinct from degrees of opinion disclosure.

Figure 4

Scree-plot of Eigenvalues against Factors from an exploratory factor analysis of self-censorship response items, using Oblique Rotation (Promax).

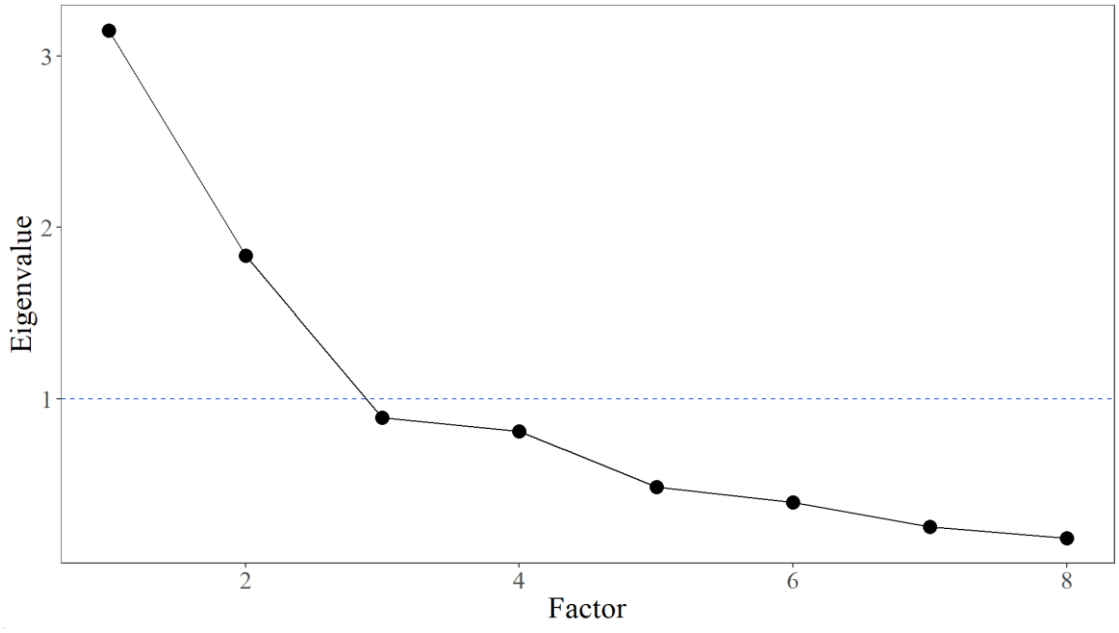


Table 5

Factor loadings from an exploratory factor analysis of self-censorship response items with a two-factor solution, using Oblique Rotation (Promax).

Item Text	Item Category	Factor Loadings	
In this situation, I would…		Factor 1	Factor 2
...withhold my contrary opinions and stay silent.	Staying silent 1	-.877	<.300
…avoid revealing my contrary opinions, maintaining a neutral demeanor.	Staying silent 2	-.821	<.300
…verbally express agreement with the group although I disagree.	Pretending to agree 1	<.300	.761
…indicate agreement with the group through non-verbal cues such as nodding, although I disagree.	Pretending to agree 2	<.300	.929
…participate and present arguments for and against in a balanced way.	Ambivalence 1	.687	<.300
...express my actual opinion but also some doubts about it.	Ambivalence 2	.360	.314
…participate, clearly stating my actual opinion to the group.	Genuine expression 1	.856	<.300
…convey my actual opinion using non-verbal cues like gestures or facial expressions.	Genuine expression 2	.507	<.300

Appendix B

Self-censorship motives structure

To evaluate our proposed grouping of self-censorship motives items into composite scales for social- and instrumental self-censorship motives, we conducted an exploratory factor analysis using the psych package in R with Promax oblique rotation (Osborne & Costello, 2008).

Extraction. The eigenvalues from the correlation matrix suggest that a single dominant factor explains most of the data, with the first factor having an eigenvalue of 7.71. Subsequent eigenvalues for the second, third, and fourth factors were significantly smaller (0.98, 0.90, and 0.51, respectively), indicating these additional factors explained relatively little variance. Although the second and third factors nearly meet the Kaiser criterion (eigenvalue of 1), the dominant first factor suggests that further differentiation may not be necessary. Additionally, Figure 5, shows the corresponding scree-plot with a steep drop after the first factor, further supporting extraction of a single factor that underlies responses to the items (Osborne & Costello, 2008).

Loadings. To further evaluate our proposed differentiation, we assessed factor loadings using EFA with Promax rotation for solutions ranging from four factors down to one factor (Costello & Osborne, 2008). In a two-factor solution, the interpersonal harmony items loaded on the same factor as all instrumental motive items (ranging from 0.530 to 0.940), while the interpersonal belonging items loaded on a separate second factor (ranging from 0.805 to 0.983), see Table 6. This mixing of factor loadings indicates that a clear separation between social and instrumental self-censorship motives is not strongly supported. Conversely, a one-factor solution showed consistently high loadings for all items on a single factor (ranging from 0.545 to 0.895), see Table 6.

Thus, we observe misalignment of our theoretical grouping within the two-factor solution. However, the presence of a single dominant factor does not strongly support differentiating two distinct self-censorship motives altogether, implying that any misalignment is less significant. Conversely, a single underlying factor might be the most appropriate representation of the data, given the large first eigenvalue, and consistently strong factor loadings across all items.

Model fit. Finally, model fit indices were considered to evaluate the appropriateness of a one-factor solution as suggested by the factor extraction. A one-factor solution showed compromised model fit, with a CFI of 0.81 and an RMSEA of 0.19, both below the conventional cut-off values for good model fit ($CFI \geq 0.95$, $RMSEA \leq 0.06$) (cf. Groskurth et al., 2024; Knekta et al., 2019). Model fit indices for solutions ranging from four factors down to one factor are summarized in Table 5. Thus, although the extraction points to a single-factor solution, the model fit indices suggest that additional factors might provide a better fit to the data. However, improving model fit with additional factors must be balanced against their explanatory power and the additional variance explained (Knekta, 2019), which were rather small, see Table 7.

In summary, while a single factor accounts for most of the variance in the data, there may be less significant dimensions that are not captured by this single factor alone. Nevertheless, we consider the large eigenvalue of the first factor and the converging support from the scree plot as indicators that responses to our items were largely unidimensional, making further differentiation less critical.

Figure 5

Scree plot showing the eigenvalues for each factor in the exploratory factor analysis of self-censorship motive items. The x-axis represents the number of factors, and the y-axis represents the eigenvalues. The horizontal dashed line indicates the eigenvalue threshold of 1.

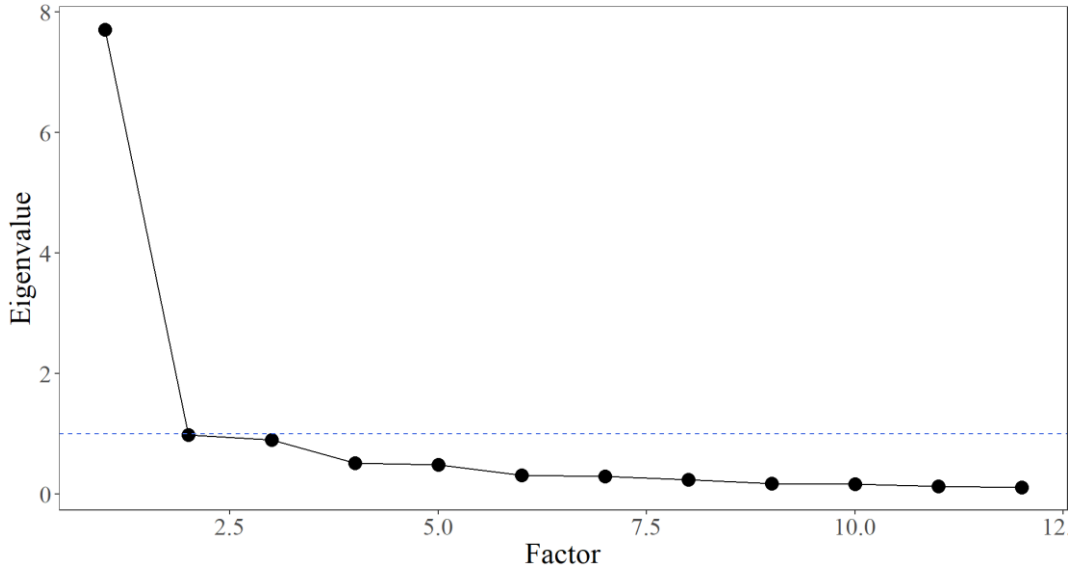


Table 6

Factor loadings from an exploratory factor analysis, using Oblique Rotation (Promax), of self-censorship motive items with a one-factor solution (left) and two-factor solution (right).

Item Text	Item Category	Factor Loadings		
		One-Factor Solution	Two-Factor Solution	
When thinking about joining the political discussion in this situation, I am concerned about...		Factor 1	Factor 1	Factor 2
…damaging my reputation upon expressing my opinions.	Reputation 1	.804	.624	
…my opinions leading to misinterpretations that reflect negatively on me.	Reputation 2	.777	.797	
..being labeled in unfavorable ways as a reaction to my opinions.	Reputation 3	.895	.862	
…jeopardizing significant relationships as a result of my opinions.	Social-Professional Risks 1	.796	.860	
...risking negative repercussions in the future due to my opinions.	Social-Professional Risks 2	.823	.831	
...provoking unfavorable scrutiny from others in response to my opinions.	Social-Professional Risks 3	.860	.940	
...instigating conflicts as a result of sharing my opinions.	Interpersonal Harmony 1	.739	.684	
...hurting or distressing others by expressing my opinions.	Interpersonal Harmony 2	.545	.569	
...disrupting the harmony in social situations by sharing my opinions.	Interpersonal Harmony 3	.710	.530	

Item Text	Item Category	Factor Loadings		
		One-Factor Solution	Two-Factor Solution	
When thinking about joining the political discussion in this situation, I am concerned about...		Factor 1	Factor 1	Factor 2
…damaging my reputation upon expressing my opinions.	Reputation 1	.804	.624	
...losing my sense of belonging within my usual social circles due to my opinions.	Belonging 1	.757		.855
...feeling alienated from others over differences in political opinions.	Belonging 2	.781		.983
...losing acceptance from others due to my political opinions.	Belonging 3	.843		.805

Table 7

Model fit indices for exploratory factor analysis of self-censorship motive items using Promax oblique rotation. The table presents the Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), and cumulative variance explained (Cum. Variance) for solutions ranging from one to four factors. Recommended cut-off values for good model fit are indicated in parentheses.

	CFI (≥ 0.95)	RMSEA (≤ 0.06)	Cum. Variance
One-Factor Solution	0.81	0.19	61.2%
Two-Factor Solution	0.92	0.14	63.6%
Three-Factor Solution	0.95	0.12	64.4%
Four-Factor Solution	0.99	0.07	65.5%

Appendix C

Data Quality

Outliers. Boxplots were created to visually inspect the presence of outliers on self-censorship motives between the personal and professional conditions. Figure 6 suggests the presence of some outliers. Although the data points do not fall outside the whiskers of the boxplots (i.e., within Q1 - 1.5 * IQR or above Q3 + 1.5 * IQR), the large error bars towards the lower end of the scales indicate that some observations skew the mean to the left of the median in the professional condition across all motives. Additionally, for instrumental motives in the personal condition, outliers appear to skew the mean to the right of the median.

Since the IQR method for identifying outliers was too liberal, we considered identifying outliers that fall outside 2 times the standard deviation of the respective scale. However, this method also did not identify any outliers. We further restricted our procedure by identifying outliers as those falling outside 1.5 times the standard deviation. This revealed 24 outliers on instrumental motives (13 in the professional condition), 26 outliers on social motives (10 in the professional condition), and 22 outliers on the overall self-censorship motives scale (11 in the professional condition).

Figure 7 shows the boxplots for social motives per condition without the identified outliers. Removing these outliers appears to reduce the variance in the respective scales and align the mean and median measures of central tendency. However, the relative relationships among the variables between the conditions did not seem to be affected. Additionally, there were no noticeable differences between outliers and non-outliers on sample characteristics such as education, ideology, gender, and age.

While removing outliers from the analysis may improve statistical power by reducing standard errors, it risks introducing bias, as there is no indication that the outliers do not reflect genuine information. That is, these outliers likely inform the relationship among self-censorship motives between conditions adequately. Thus, omitting them from our analysis would exclude information that we deem representative of the overall population, making our inferences less valid and potentially inflating our Type 1 error rate. Hence, we concluded to proceed with our analysis including these outliers.

Figure 6

Box plots comparing instrumental, social, and overall self-censorship motives between personal (BBQ) and professional (Work) conditions, including potential outliers.

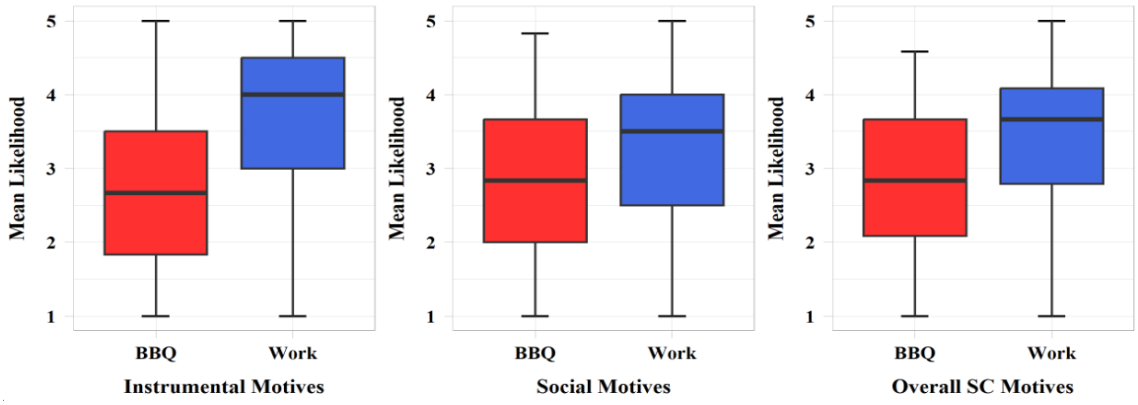
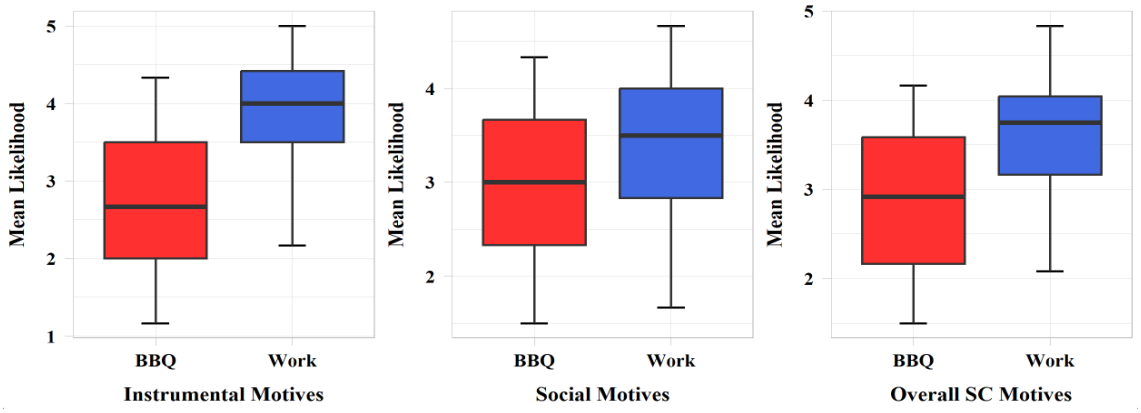


Figure 7

Box plots comparing instrumental, social, and overall self-censorship motives between personal (BBQ) and professional (Work) conditions, excluding potential outliers.



Careless responding. Six participants failed our embedded attention check, raising concerns about data quality. Additionally, the survey was estimated to take approximately 15 minutes. On average, participants spent approximately 9.17 minutes (mean = 550 seconds) completing the survey, with a median completion time of approximately 7.62 minutes (median = 457 seconds). We decided on a threshold of four minutes, roughly half the median response time, by which we considered due attention with our survey improbable. Five participants finished the survey in under four minutes (240 seconds), indicating potentially careless responding. Moreover, out of the 11 participants who raised doubts about their data quality, two were also considered outliers on our self-censorship motives outcome variables. One participant who failed the embedded attention check was marked as an outlier on both the social and total self-censorship motives scales. This participant identified as male, was 49 years old, held a graduate degree, and identified as politically moderate. Additionally, a participant who completed the study in less than four minutes was an outlier on all three self-censorship

scales. This participant identified as non-binary, was 26 years old, had some college experience, and identified as very liberal. However, given that only two cases were identified as potentially influential careless responders, we did not expect their presence to significantly affect our results, and included these in our analyses.

Appendix D

Model Assumptions

QQ-plots and histograms of normality assumptions for Welch t-tests between personal and professional conditions for social, instrumental, and overall self-censorship motives.

Figure 8

Q-Q plots assessing normality for social, instrumental, and overall self-censorship motives across professional (Work; left) and personal (BBQ; right) conditions. Each plot compares sample quantiles to theoretical quantiles from a normal distribution.

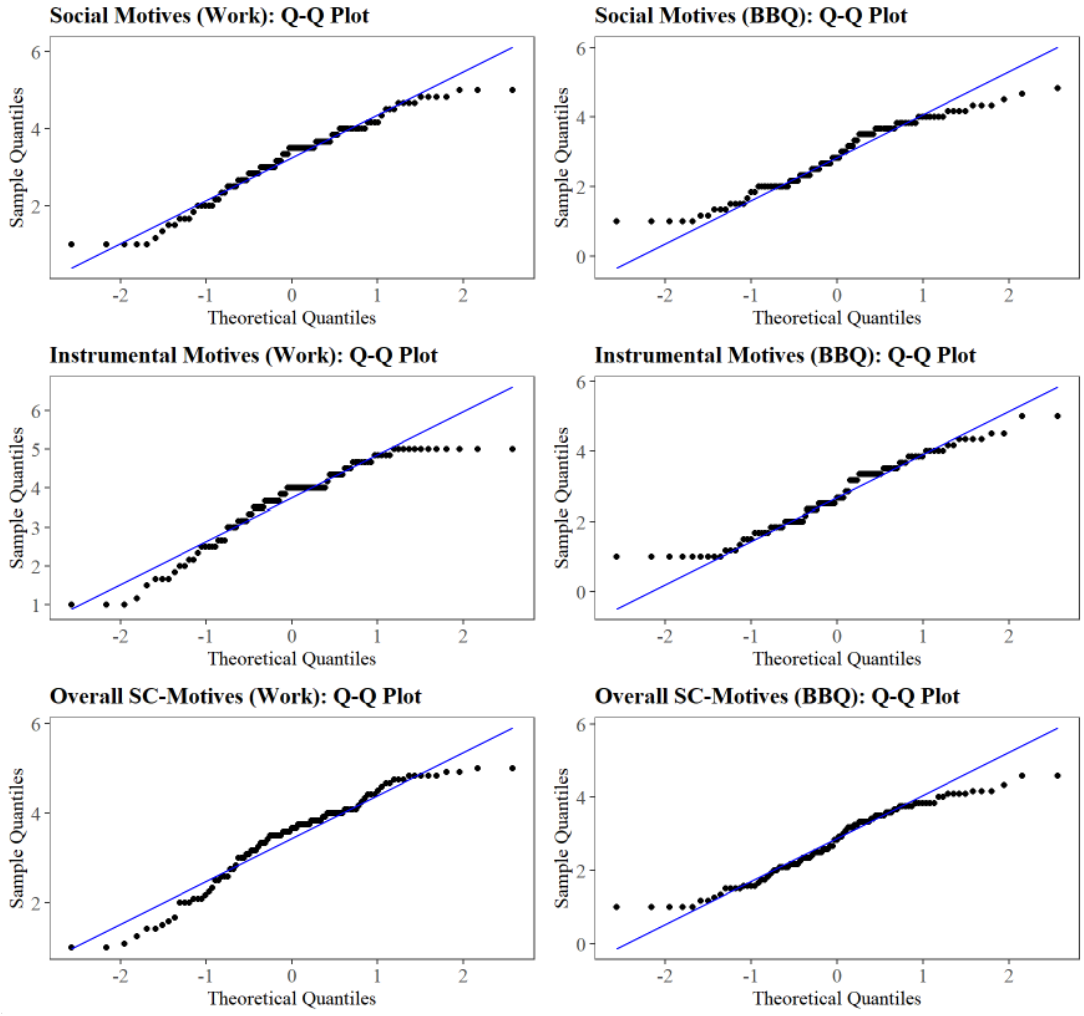
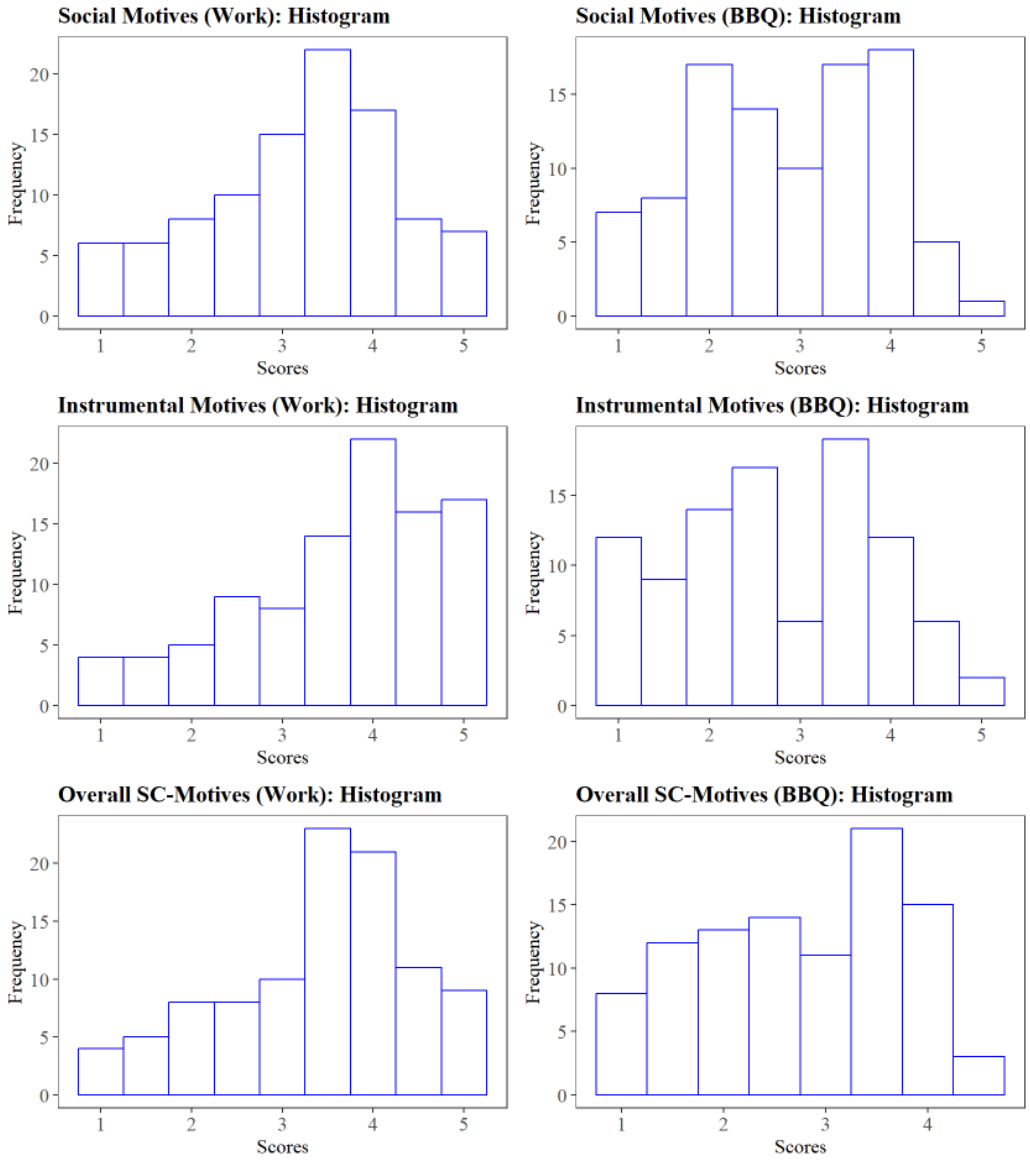


Figure 9

Histograms for social, instrumental, and overall self-censorship motives across professional (Work; left) and personal (BBQ; right) conditions. The frequency distributions for each condition display the spread of scores.



QQ-plots of normality of residuals for mediation-by-motives models (social context manipulation on self-censorship motives), and outcome models (social context manipulation, self-censorship motives, and self-censorship responses)

Figure 10

Q-Q plots assessing normality of residuals for social, instrumental, and overall self-censorship motives regressed on the categorical variable "Condition", indicating the change between personal to professional context. Each plot compares sample quantiles to theoretical quantiles from a normal distribution.

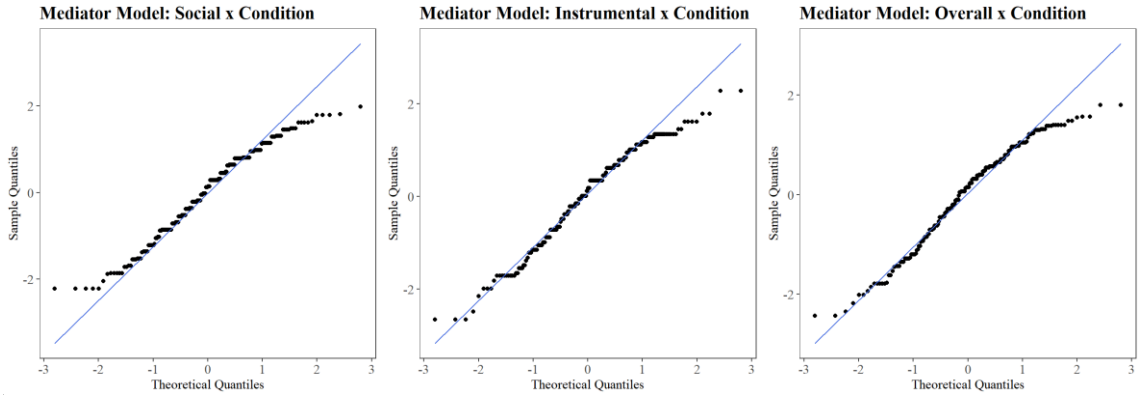
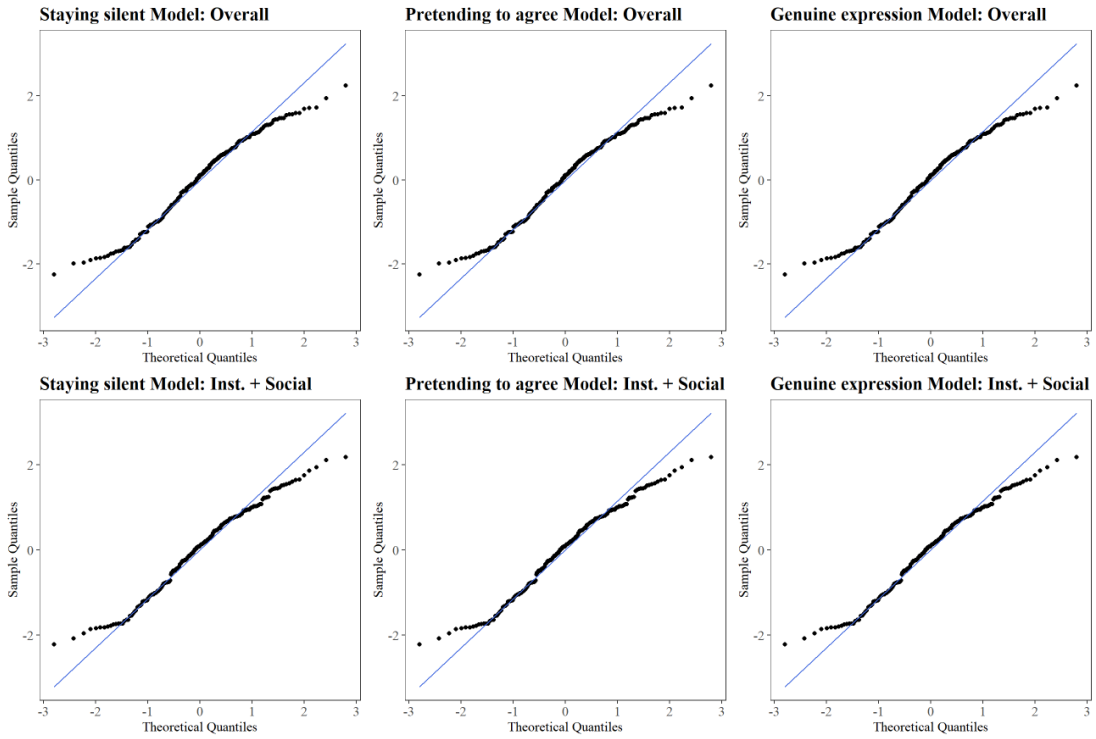


Figure 11

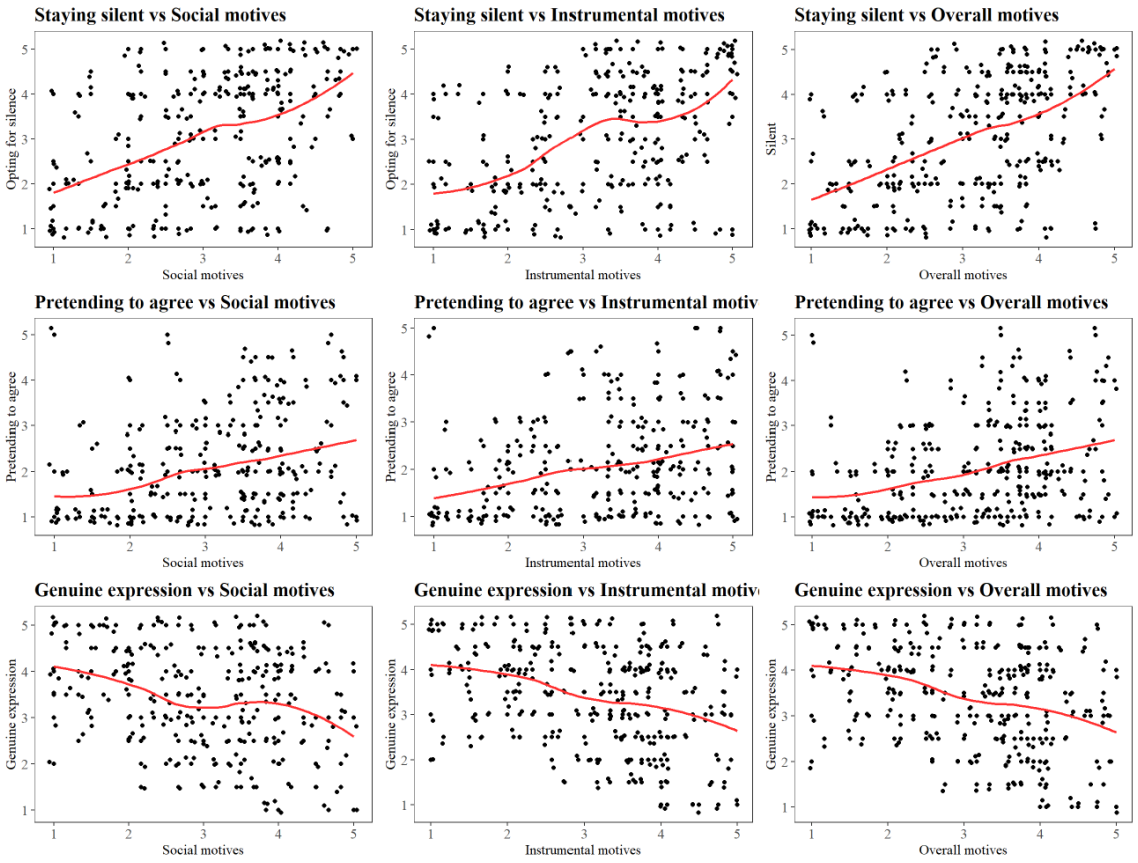
Q-Q plots assessing normality of residuals for outcome models of self-censorship responses (staying silent, pretending to agree, and genuine expression) regressed on the categorical variable "Condition", indicating the change between personal to professional context, and overall self-censorship motives (top), and social and instrumental motives parallelly (bottom). Each plot compares sample quantiles to theoretical quantiles from a normal distribution.



Scatter plots and locally estimated scatterplot smoothing (LOESS) lines showing the relationship between self-censorship responses and self-censorship motives.

Figure 12

Scatter plots with locally estimated scatterplot smoothing (LOESS) lines showing the relationship between self-censorship responses: staying silent (left), pretending to agree (center), and genuine expression (right) and self-censorship motives: social (top), instrumental (middle), and overall (bottom).



Note: Jitter has been added to the data points to facilitate the visualization of response density. A straight LOESS line indicates linearity between the variables.

Appendix E

Survey

Why do I receive this information?
This study concerns political conversations in the United States. As a citizen of the U.S., you are invited to take part in this study. This research is carried out by staff along with a student from the University of Groningen, namely Prof. Dr. Martijn van Zomeren and Konstantin Schmandt.

Do I have to participate in this research?
Participation in the research is voluntary. However, your consent is needed. Therefore, please read this information carefully. Ask all the questions you might have, for example because you do not understand something. Only afterwards you decide if you want to participate. If you decide not to participate, you do not need to explain why, and there will be no negative consequences for you. You have this right at all times, including after you have consented to participate in the research.

Why this research?
The purpose of this study is to investigate how citizens in the United States engage with political conversations and what influences their thinking in these situations.

What do we ask of you during the research?
Initially, you will be requested to provide consent for your involvement in this study. Next, you will be presented with a brief introduction, followed by a short text depicting a social scenario. Subsequently, we kindly request your response to several questions in an online survey format. Your engagement in this survey should last no longer than approximately 15 minutes and will be compensated according to your agreement with Prolific.com.

What are the consequences of participation?
Participating in this study will not yield any direct or indirect benefits for you. However, your participation is greatly appreciated by the researchers at the University of Groningen. The political discussions examined in this study may be divisive and touch upon sensitive topics. Therefore, engaging with these materials may cause some discomfort for participants. At the study's conclusion, we will provide an explanation regarding the necessity of these discussions for our research. Potential negative feelings that arise during the study will be acknowledged and addressed at the end of the survey. If you expect that you do not want to think about controversial political conversations, please feel free to not participate in the study.

How will we treat your data?
The gathered data will be utilized to complete a thesis as part of a Master student's training program.

The data gathered and analyzed for this purpose will encompass your responses to the survey questions following a brief introduction paragraph. A few of these questions pertain to your political disposition and opinions. Furthermore, there will be demographic inquiries. Given that the questions regarding your

political inclinations and demographic characteristics involve personal data, stringent measures will be enforced to safeguard the privacy and confidentiality of your personal information.
You will not be identifiable from the collected data, as Prolific.com will generate and assign a randomized ID to you, which, subsequently, will be used by the response collection program (Qualtrics).
Participants retain the right to access, rectify, and erase their personal data up to 2 weeks after the data collection period ends (02.06.2024). To initiate these changes or obtain a copy of your personal data, please contact the researchers via email, where you will be identified using your Prolific ID.
After June 2nd, 2024, your Prolific ID (along with your IP address) will be deleted to deidentify your data, thereby protecting your privacy. Subsequently, the deidentified data, along with the insights derived from it, may be utilized in scientific publications, and shared for further use.
What else do you need to know?
You may always ask questions about the research: now, during the research, and after the end of the research. You can do so by emailing Konstantin Schmandt (k.t.v.schmandt@student.rug.nl).
Do you have questions/concerns about your rights as a research participant or about the conduct of the research? You may also contact the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Behavioural and Social Sciences of the University of Groningen: ec-bss@rug.nl.
Do you have questions or concerns regarding the handling of your personal data? You may also contact the University of Groningen Data Protection Officer: privacy@rug.nl.
As a research participant, you have the right to a copy of this research information.

End of Block: Information Block

Start of Block: Informed Consent

This study aims to explore how citizens in the United States engage in political discussions and what influences their thinking in these situations. This questionnaire is **anonymous**, and your responses will remain confidential. Participation in this study is **voluntary**. At any point, if you find a particular question to be uncomfortable, you have the freedom to withdraw from the study without facing any consequences. While **no significant risks** are expected from taking part in this study, it is possible that you experience some negative emotions or discomfort. At the end of the study, we will provide resources that you could use to manage such feelings. Additionally, we will implement strict measures to protect the privacy and confidentiality of your personal data.
While participating may not offer you direct benefits, the insights gathered will contribute to a deeper understanding of the dynamics of political conversations in the U.S. Participation is entirely optional, and you retain the right to discontinue at any time without penalty or disadvantage. The researchers responsible are Prof. dr. Martijn van Zomeren and Konstantin Schmandt. They can be contacted via e-mail (k.t.v.schmandt@student.rug.nl) with any questions or uncertainties. I have read the information about the research. I have had enough opportunity to ask questions about it. I understand what the research is about, what is being asked of me, which consequences participation can have, how my data will be handled, and what my rights as a participant are. I understand that participation in the research is voluntary. I myself choose to participate. I can stop participating at any moment. If I stop, I do not need to explain why. Stopping will have no negative consequences for me.
Below I indicate what I am consenting to.

○ Yes, I consent to participate in the research and agree to the processing of my personal data as detailed in the research information. I understand that I can ask to have my data withdrawn and erased until 02-06-2024, or if I choose to discontinue participation in the research. (1)

○ No, I do not consent to participate in the research or to the processing of my personal data. (2)

End of Block: Informed Consent

Start of Block: Guide

Dear Participant,

We appreciate your willingness to participate in this study. Let's take a moment to outline the process you'll be going through.

The study is expected to take approximately **15 minutes** of your time.

Initially, we will gather some basic personal information from you. Next, you will be presented with a brief scenario. After reviewing the scenario, you will be asked to respond to a series of related questions.

At the end of this survey, we will give you a short explanation of the background of this study.

End of Block: Guide

Start of Block: Prolific_ID

Please provide your Prolific ID.
Please note that this response should auto-fill with the correct ID.

_____

End of Block: Prolific_ID

Start of Block: Screener Validation

First, we would like to ask you a few general questions about yourself.

Page Break

What is your nationality?

▼ Afghanistan ... Zimbabwe

Page Break

X→

In which country do you currently reside?

▼ Afghanistan ... Zimbabwe

End of Block: Screener Validation

Start of Block: Demographic Variables

What gender do you identify with?

- ○ Male
- ○ Female
- ○ Non-binary / third gender
- ○ Prefer not to say

Page Break

Please indicate your age, entering only the number of years.

_____

Page Break

What is the highest level of education you have completed?

- ○ Some high school or less
- ○ High school diploma or GED
- ○ Some college, but no degree
- ○ Associates or technical degree
- ○ Bachelor's degree
- ○ Graduate or professional degree (MA, MS, MBA, PhD, JD, MD, DDS etc.)
- ○ Prefer not to say

Page Break

How would you describe your political ideology?

- ○ Very Liberal
- ○ Liberal
- ○ Moderate
- ○ Conservative
- ○ Very Conservative

End of Block: Demographic Variables

Start of Block: Manipulation Instructions

People may come across political discussions in their day-to-day lives. On the next page, a scenario is described that captures such an encounter. As you read through the description, **please envision yourself fully immersed in the depicted situation**, experiencing the unfolding events as if you were present. Picture the environment and reflect on the feelings that might arise in such a situation.

Are you ready to proceed?

▼ Yes, I've read the instructions ... No, I need more time

End of Block: Manipulation Instructions

Start of Block: Manipulation (M1)

Imagine yourself at a family barbecue. It’s a warm, sunny day and the air is alive with laughter, background music, and the sizzle of food on the grill. Children play on the lawn while adults chat around picnic tables, enjoying the array of dishes.
As you glance around, you find yourself surrounded by a mix of extended family and friends. With most of these individuals, you maintain close emotional bonds and share a long-standing personal history, **recognizing their ongoing significance** in your personal life.
Usually, you engage in warm, familiar conversations, reminiscing about past events and discussing family news. That is, **you regard them as your close social circle**. (1/4)

Page Break

As you sit down to eat, you become aware of a discussion at the table. The topic at hand is the recent surge in undocumented immigrants passing the southern U.S.-Mexican border.
Specifically, the conversation revolves around the issue of **increasing the deportation of undocumented immigrants** residing in the U.S**.**, including more aggressive enforcement measures and raids, to address the situation at the border. (2/4)

Page Break

Initially, the people at the table raise a few points. For instance, one of your relatives notes, “You know, if we don’t deport, that could actually end up incentivizing more people to come over illegally...”

A friend of yours interjects, “But then again, we really have to think about what’s gained and lost. Looking at everything from how illegal immigrants impact public services or make economic contributions…”

Then, another relative sitting beside brings up, “And what about the human side of this? Like, separating families, or sending people back to really tough situations in their home countries?” (3/4)

Page Break

As you follow the discussion, **you realize that most people <u>disagree with your opinion</u>** on the deportation of undocumented immigrants in the U.S. You notice nods of agreement at points you clearly object to, as accord within the group unfolds.

That is, the prevailing consensus supports a stance that contradicts your views on the deportation of undocumented immigrants in the U.S.

Up to this point, each participant has expressed their opinion, painting a clear picture of the group's overall perspective. Now, as eyes gradually turn towards you, **you sense that soon, the moment may come when someone asks for your opinion.** (4/4)

End of Block: Manipulation (M1)

Start of Block: Manipulation (M2)

Imagine yourself at your workplace, just before a monthly staff meeting is about to begin in your local office. The air is abuzz with a blend of anticipation and the murmur of pre-meeting small talk.
As you glance across the room, you spot some of your superiors as well as various co-workers from different departments. While you don't share a strong emotional connection or a long-standing personal history with these individuals, **you recognize their future importance** in your professional life.
Your interactions are typically friendly and cordial, involving polite, brief conversations about weekend plans or current projects. That is, **you regard them as professional acquaintances**. (1/4)

Page Break

As you find your seat, you become aware of a discussion in the room. The topic at hand is the recent surge in undocumented immigrants passing the southern U.S.-Mexican border.
Specifically, the conversation revolves around the issue of **increasing the deportation of undocumented immigrants** residing in the U.S., including more aggressive enforcement measures and raids, to address the situation at the border. (2/4)

Page Break

Initially, the people in the room raise a few points. For instance, one of your co-workers notes, “You know, if we don’t deport, that could actually end up incentivizing more people to come over illegally...”

A supervisor interjects, “But then again, we really have to think about what’s gained and lost. Looking at everything from how illegal immigrants impact public services to making economic contributions…”

Then, another co-worker sitting beside brings up, “And what about the human side of this? Like separating families or sending people back to really tough situations in their home countries?” (3/4)

Page Break

As you follow the discussion, **you realize that most people <u>disagree with your opinion</u>** on the deportation of undocumented immigrants in the U.S. You notice nods of agreement at points you clearly object to, as accord within the group unfolds.

That is, the prevailing consensus supports a stance that contradicts your views on the deportation of undocumented immigrants in the U.S.

Up to this point, each participant has expressed their views, painting a clear picture of the group's overall perspective. Now, as eyes gradually turn towards you, **you sense that soon, the moment may come when someone asks for your opinion.** (4/4)

End of Block: Manipulation (M2)

Start of Block: Expression Avoidance

Below, you will find different ways that people might choose to react **in the situation you just read**. Please evaluate each of the options with respect to how likely you would be to react in that way.

In this discussion, I would...

	Not at all likely	Somewhat unlikely	Neither likely nor unlikely	Somewhat likely	Very likely
…participate, clearly stating my actual opinion to the group.	○	○	○	○	○
…convey my actual opinion using non-verbal cues like gestures or facial expressions.	○	○	○	○	○
…participate and present arguments for and against in a balanced way.	○	○	○	○	○
...express my actual opinion but also some doubts about it.	○	○	○	○	○

Page Break

Below, you will find different ways that people might choose to react **in the situation you just read**. Please evaluate each of the options with respect to how likely you would be to react in that way.

In this discussion, I would...

	Not at all likely	Somewhat unlikely	Neither likely nor unlikely	Somewhat likely	Very likely
…verbally express agreement with the group although I disagree.	○	○	○	○	○
…indicate agreement with the group through non-verbal cues such as nodding, although I disagree.	○	○	○	○	○
...withold my contrary opinions and stay silent.	○	○	○	○	○
…avoid revealing my contrary opinions, maintaining a neutral demeanor.	○	○	○	○	○

End of Block: Expression Avoidance

Start of Block: Motives

Think back to the discussion concerning the deportation of undocumented immigrants that you have just read. In the following, you will find several statements that pertain to your thoughts and feelings about engaging in this type of discussion. Please consider how each statement applies to your potential considerations in this situation.

Page Break

When thinking about **joining the political discussion** in this situation, I am concerned about...

	Not at all likely	Somewhat unlikely	Neither likely nor unlikely	Somewhat likely	Very likely
…damaging my reputation upon expressing my opinions.	○	○	○	○	○
…my opinions leading to misinterpretations that reflect negatively on me.	○	○	○	○	○
..being labeled in unfavorable ways as a reaction to my opinions.	○	○	○	○	○

Page Break

When thinking about **joining the political discussion** in this situation, I am concerned about...

	Not at all likely	Somewhat unlikely	Neither likely nor unlikely	Somewhat likely	Very likely
…jeopardizing significant relationships as a result of my opinions.	○	○	○	○	○
...risking negative repercussions in the future due to my opinions.	○	○	○	○	○
...provoking unfavorable scrutiny from others in response to my opinions.	○	○	○	○	○

Page Break

When thinking about **joining the political discussion** in this situation, I am concerned about...

	Not at all likely	Somewhat unlikely	Neither likely nor unlikely	Somewhat likely	Very likely
...instigating conflicts as a result of sharing my opinions.	○	○	○	○	○
...hurting or distressing others by expressing my opinions.	○	○	○	○	○
...disrupting the harmony in social situations by sharing my opinions.	○	○	○	○	○
...if you are reading this, please select the answer option 'Not at all likely'	○	○	○	○	○

Page Break

When thinking about **joining the political discussion** in this situation, I am concerned about...

	Not at all likely	Somewhat unlikely	Neither likely nor unlikely	Somewhat likely	Very likely
...losing my sense of belonging within my usual social circles due to my opinions.	○	○	○	○	○
...feeling alienated from others over differences in political opinions.	○	○	○	○	○
...losing acceptance from others due to my political opinions.	○	○	○	○	○

End of Block: Motives

Start of Block: Manipulation Checks Matrix

Thinking about **the people you interact with in the described scenario**, please rate how strongly you agree with the following statement on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree):

	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
I had the feeling that I was surrounded by people with whom I felt emotionally close.	○	○	○	○	○

End of Block: Manipulation Checks Matrix

Start of Block: Controls Matrix

Please rate how strongly you agree with the following statement on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree):

	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
I believe that a stricter deportation policy constitutes an appropriate strategy to manage the rising number of undocumented immigrants crossing the U.S.-Mexican border.	○	○	○	○	○

Page Break

Please rate how strongly you agree with the following statement on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree):

	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
The issue of deporting undocumented immigrants in the U.S. holds personal significance in my life.	○	○	○	○	○

End of Block: Controls Matrix

Start of Block: Attention Check

In the scenario you just read, where did the discussion take place? (Please select one):

- ○ At a family dinner/barbecue
- ○ In a work setting before a staff meeting
- ○ At a university lecture
- ○ At a local coffeeshop

Page Break

Reflecting on the scenario you were asked to imagine, please select the statement that **best describes your feeling of emotional closeness** with the people around you.

- ○ I felt emotionally close to most of the people surrounding me.
- ○ I felt little emotional closeness with most of the people surrounding me.

End of Block: Attention Check

Start of Block: Debrief

Dear Participant,

First, we would like to thank you for your participation in our study, your responses are very valuable to us!

At the start of this study, you were told that we were interested in how people in the United States experience political conversations. You were randomly placed into one of **two conditions**. In one, the focus was on **casual relationships**, such as those with acquaintances at work; in the other, the focus was on **close relationships**, like those with family and friends. In both scenarios, you were presented with a situation where you might choose not to share your political views because they appeared to be unpopular within the group.

The focus of this study was on the phenomenon of "self-censorship" regarding political views — that is, the intentional withholding of personal beliefs. We investigated two underlying motives: instrumental motives, which denote concerns about one's image and potential impacts on social and professional life outcomes, and relational motives, which concern the desire to maintain harmony and a sense of belonging within one's social group. Additionally, we examined how these motives might relate to the particular ways people refrain from expressing their true beliefs and how participants may avoid sharing their opinions in each social setting. Conversations revolved around the topic of deporting undocumented immigrants living in the United States — a subject chosen for its relevance in current political discourse and its potential to elicit self-censorship.

Should participating in this study have negatively impacted your mood, we invite you to watch a short video of strangers coming together for an impromptu music session on the street, which may help you manage your discomfort, accessible here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jr478w--dpE&ab_channel=JaimeMaldonado.

Thank you again for your time and effort in participating in this survey! Self-censorship affects many Americans, leading to concerns and discontent for some. Your responses may help to better understand this phenomenon.

If you have any further questions, you may contact the researchers at: Konstantin Schmandt k.t.v.schmandt@student.rug.nl

End of Block: Debrief

Start of Block: End of Survey

You have reached the end of the survey, thank you for participating in this study!

If there is anything you want to share with the researchers, you can leave a comment here.

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Page Break

Thank you for taking part in this study. Your response has been recorded. Please click the button below to be redirected back to Prolific and register your submission.

End of Block: End of Survey