

Motivated Reasoning, Social Networking, and Perceived Alikeness of Political Issues

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Abstract

Social media (SM) has become a major source of political information in the digital age. Campaigns simplify political issues into short terms for public communication (e.g., radical terrorism and violent extremism). Differentiation is crucial to generating perceived value that motivates behavior. However, the influx of negative political news over time has generated cynicism and partisanship. Based on the motivated reasoning theory (MRT), citizens interpret information through a preconceived filter in the decision-making process. This lens translates into a belief that policy terms are approximately the same even though there are meaningful nuanced differences (e.g., addressing income inequality and increasing the minimum wage). Moderated mediation analysis evinced social networking interest (SNI) related to greater perceived alikeness (PA) of issues. SNI related to greater rigidity (mediator). Rigidity related to greater PA of issues. Intellect moderated the relationship between SNI and rigidity. High SNI and high intellect dampened rigidity and thereby PA of issues. Political marketing implications discuss how to appeal to voters that view issues similarly.

Keywords: motivated reasoning theory, social networking interest, differentiation, perceived alikeness, rigidity, intellect, social media

1. Introduction

Imagine an average working citizen that has voted over the last ten years. Living conditions have remained stagnant. Campaign promises went unfulfilled. Corruption and scandals are common political news. There are incremental improvements with some easily overlooked policy wins (e.g., net neutrality and digital privacy acts). However, these voters believe the current U.S. political system will fundamentally not change. This becomes a cycle of overstated campaign messages (e.g., fearmongering) (Nai, 2021) and disappointing outcomes (e.g., legislation blocked by the Senate filibuster) (Bajwa, 2022). Motivated reason theory (MRT) explains individuals view information through a biased filter to confirm their preconceived notions (Radnitz, 2022). Relating to politics, MRT applies a cynicism and partisan bias in which election outcomes make little difference (even though historically and over the long-term this is not true) (Cotter et al., 2020). For example, slim majorities often pass state budgets that have substantial priority differences (e.g., education funding for common core versus funding schools based on standardized testing performance) (Bolton, 2022). While coded in political messaging, the ability for citizens to grasp long-term consequences of elections and enacted policies are vital for a healthy democracy. Public debate is part of the development of legislative priorities and policies (commonly viewed online in the digital era) (Abid et al., 2023). The purpose of this study is to investigate the impact of social networking interest (SNI) on the ability to distinguish between political issues.

Social media (SM) has expanded civic participation and learning opportunities (Baert & Booth, 2012). SM has become a major source for political communication, engagement (e.g., petitions), and campaign persuasion (e.g., expressing reasons to win over support) (Abid et al., 2023). Despite a general user aversion to political news, SNSs have enormous amounts of political content (e.g., TikTok) (Goyanes et al., 2021). However, the constant barrage of politically motivated content has created disparate policy positions that appear comparatively alike (Bok et al., 2022). So, while citizens may vote, they are voting for partisan and cynical reasons (e.g., to oppose another party) (Song et al., 2020). Arguably, rigidity (i.e., inflexibility, lack of open-mindedness, and preferred categorical thinking) is a mechanism behind this pattern of processing political content (Zmigrod, 2020). This rigidly categorizes policies (e.g., good or bad) with often flawed

reasoning. Thereby, while SM has benefits in civic participation, our purpose is to better understand unintended consequences of how users process political information.

2. Literature Review and Hypothesis Development

2.1 *Motivated Reasoning Theory (MRT) and Politics*

MRT explains an individuals' goals influence their thought process in a biased way to confirm their preferred beliefs (Cotter et al., 2020). Motivated reasoning (MR) is like viewing information through a lens with preconceived assumptions (Leeper & Slothuus, 2014). For example, if someone believes voting makes no difference in the outcome of elections, they will view tallied results with this skewed belief. If a winner was decided by dozens of votes or a landslide, they will interpret their single vote as meaningless in the outcome of the election. When individuals have preconceived motives information is often interpreted to confirm existing beliefs (versus objective observations). MRT is particularly relevant in how voters process political information. One's MR lens is shaped by norms (e.g., historical defaults) and the distribution of common resources in democratic nations (e.g., taxes to pay for various public programs and services) (Groenendyk, 2022). Self-interests often drive individual behaviors and support for public policies (Tummers, 2019). MR in politics is shaded by political cynicism (Radnitz, 2022). When politicians campaign on promises that are left unfulfilled, a negative bias forms. A degree of skepticism or cynicism filters political information.

2.2 *Social Networking Interest (SNI) and Perceived Alikehood (PA) of Issues*

Political cynicism coexists with political news consumption which contemporarily comes from SM (Song et al., 2020). MR cynicism was observed of recent 2016 and 2020 polling data that underestimated Republican turnout for the U.S. general elections (Lees et al., 2020). Voters expressed distrust in polling data, which related to perceived illegitimacy of election results (even though other recent polls were accurate and within presented margin of errors). Cynicism crosses the political spectrum and is based on preconceived notions. Perceptions are subjective and based on the observer. This project investigates MR cynicism that crosses political affiliations on how individuals perceive the alikehood of political issues. Discerning political policies is fundamental for an educated voting populace (Smith & Tolbert, 2009). Without discerning complex political issues, the public can be more easily manipulated to vote against their interests. Transmission of SM information is often short and simplified, requiring low effort to consume (e.g., viewing meme compared to reading legislation).

MRT helps to explain how individuals navigate complex political media which is coded and crafted to change someone's beliefs. Individuals process political information through a lens consistent with their prior beliefs and identity. Skepticism and distrust seemingly protect someone from potential harm (e.g., being influenced to vote against their own interests) but means shortcutting the important thought process on policies that are more beneficial for society (Johnson, 2009). By approaching political news with MR, it reduces the attention span and effort to distinguish campaign messages. One campaign stating they support green energy production and another claiming they support producing renewable energy sources is likely to be believed they are relatively the same (when they can be very different in policy outcomes). With limited budgets, legislative priorities translates into less/diverted funding (e.g., natural gas production versus hydroelectric power plants) (Lienert, 2010). We contend simplified cognitive processing (practiced with SM use) increases one's likelihood to view political issues alike. This can miss crucial policy differences.

When users consume SM content, they learn to process information quickly to determine if it is worth their attention (Hämäläinen et al., 2024). SM echo chambers (i.e., multiple sources of repeated or corroborating information) reinforce belief systems (Jost, 2017). When users view SM content supporting a belief, they become more entrenched (Carson et al., 2025). This narrows a MR lens to assess information first with respect to a narrative. Thereby, political issues coded in campaign messages appear less meaningful and distinct because it will be implemented by duplicitous politicians (bought out by special interests) (Radnitz, 2022). One would expect the inundation of SM information to create a well-informed public. However, while the public is cognizant of bits of information, it feeds a partisan and skeptical narrative that reduces one's ability to think critically about complex political issues (Song et al., 2020). Thus, more SM exposure is likely to relate to deeming political issues as alike.

H1: SNI will relate to greater PA of domestic, national security, immigration, and election issues.

2.3 *SM Influence on Cognitive Rigidity*

MR cynicism is a form of calcifying one's outlook to fit a preconceived narrative (Cotter et al., 2020). This closely aligns with the psychological construct rigidity. Rigidity is having a narrow-minded belief in one's opinions as being right and fixed (Simms et al., 2011). For example, in political marketing, partisan voters tend to believe their political party should be in power and enact their policies as the correct way to solve societal problems (Johnson, 2009, p. 405). Johnson (2009) also explained that rigidity can also feed into pessimism in politics. This appears when politicians are caught lying to garner support from different competing interest groups. Social networking sites (SNSs) use algorithms to populate users'

feeds with their preferred content to keep them online for longer (Zimmer et al., 2019). SNSs are designed for effortless scrolling and browsing (Hämäläinen et al., 2024). Contrarily, effortful thinking related to less SNS usage (Zhong et al., 2011). Thereby, how someone processes information is practiced with their SM use.

While SM users may know more bits of information (e.g., friends' life events), SM consumption establishes pattern of thought processing (Pentina & Tarafdar, 2014). For example, unfriending someone with opposing political views, reduces potential exposure to a diversity of ideas (Grevet et al., 2014). The remaining connections and content are more likely to reinforce a set of beliefs. Videos clips and posts can prop up absurd and disproven political beliefs (Douglas et al., 2019). The quantity and source of SM content can entrench someone into believing their way of thinking is correct and others are wrong. SM exposures users to content that frequently supports their way of thinking.

H2: SNI will relate to greater rigidity.

2.4 Ease of Public Opinion Persuasion with Cognitive Rigidity

Public opinion persuasion is easier when individuals are cognitively rigid. Prior research reviewed how citizens can be nudged to vote a certain way on ballot measures when there is low educational effort (Sunstein, 2015). For example, policies can be framed as a matter of favoring choice, even though it means reducing funding for programs used (e.g., diverting funds into a new privatized retirement system that will cut the existing U.S. Social Security system) (Diamond, 2002; Svihula & Estes, 2008). Framing and using select words can disguise harmful policies into perceived favorable terms (Blau & Abramovitz, 2010). This manipulative practice can influence those less willing or unable to expend cognitive effort into understanding ramifications of their voting decisions.

Voter partisanship and simplification of policies allows politicians to take rigid ideological positions to signal to constituents they share their policy positions (e.g., antiterrorism rhetoric with minimum details) (Canes-Wrone & Shotts, 2007). This matches the simplistic thinking of voters that will support representatives that share their beliefs and will do the necessary complex policymaking for them (Bischof & Senninger, 2018). This cognitive simplification of policy issues allows campaigns to use rhetorical messaging even if policy details harm constituents (e.g., federal tax cuts, has resulted in less corporate taxes to fund social programs) (Rabie, 2018, p. 75). Rigidity reduces one's ability to comprehend ambiguity and complexity present in politics (Zmigrod, 2020). Zmigrod (2020) explains that rigidity is linked to ideological extremism and partisanship through processing information for closure and certainty. A voter will evaluate policies in contrast to their partisan identity and attachment (Jost, 2017). Thereby, rigid cognitive processing will relate to lower perceived differentiation among political issues.

H3: Rigidity, as a mediator, will relate to greater PA of domestic, national security, immigration, and election issues.

2.5 Flexible Intellectual Thinking to Discern Political Details

Intellect refers to one's verbal comprehension skills and fluid ability to solve practical problems (Lüftenegger & Chen, 2017). Intellect expands when individuals engage content with open-mindedness for cognitive development (versus drawing from previous routines and assumptions to confirm repeated patterns) (Wu et al., 2011). This is observing for novelty and unique patterns within a given situation. Open-minded intelligent learning is fluid with a greater ability to apply new information to generate novel ideas. For example, many voters watch a political debate with an open mind looking for new ideas that will solve societal problems (Cormier et al., 2025). Meanwhile, others watch with a MR partisan lens looking for their favored candidate to score political points. While it may seem like an intelligent activity to watch a political debate, how information is cognitively processed can greatly differ. Openness to experiences has an intellectual component that is curious for semantic and abstract information (Dolbier et al., 2024). This sharply contrasts to categorical thinking related to rigidity that seeks to reaffirm prior knowledge.

In the digital age where much political communication is online, political change will require an advanced ability to navigate and process information on SM (Abid et al., 2023). However, oversimplification is a reductive bias that negatively effects learning by building cognitive networks that promote consequential and durable misconceptions (Spiro et al., 2012). Knowledge gaps are filled with assumptions and unsubstantiated information. This is knowing less and creating certainty with more subjective information. However, comprehending the impact of abstract concepts is part of policymaking. Intellectual openness is a crucial part of discerning political issues as well as wisely participating in the political process.

Intellectual political intervention is important in advancing public policy debate (Baert & Booth, 2012). Intellectual contribution deepens discourse and brings innovation that often opposes an adversarial status quo. SNSs are digital public spheres where users can voice their opinions and engage in political debate (Abid et al., 2023). However, SNSs have become places to engage with other like-minded individuals and reinforce beliefs (Goyanes et al., 2021). Higher cognitive ability associated with a greater ability to discern partisan misinformation and less likely to share it across the political

spectrum (Ahmed & Tan, 2022). Citizens have the option to select their partisan news exposure. Intellect is an important trait to discern the deluge of online partisan rhetoric. Recognizing biases helps to interpret information more accurately even if it is from a partisan source (Stroud, 2011, pp. 89–90). Intellectual openness allows someone to assess content beyond a partisan filter and more thoughtfully for policy implications that will meaningfully improve societal conditions. Thereby, we hypothesize high SNI and low intellect will heighten rigidity and the effect on perceiving political issues alike. Figure 1 shows the model of hypothesized relationships.

H4: Intellect will moderate the relationship between SNI and rigidity. In circumstances of high SNI and low intellect this will heighten rigidity and thereby the PA of issues.

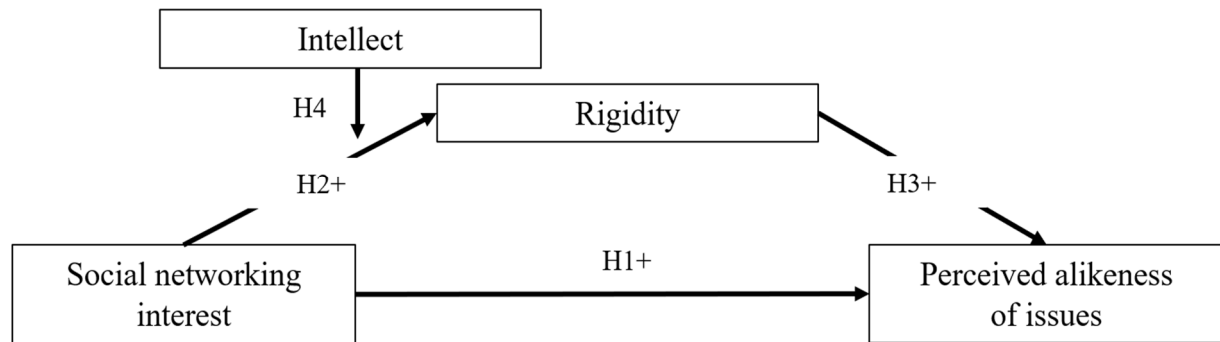


Figure 1. Hypothesized moderated mediation modeled effects on perceived likeness of issues

3. Method

3.1 Overview of Study and Participants

A U.S. convenience sample was collected using Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) through Qualtrics (survey platform) during the spring of 2023. High quality MTurk standards was applied towards eligibility criteria to participate in the study. Participants must have had 100 or more assignments completed with an approval rating of 97% or above (N=992) (Keith et al., 2017). Bootstrapping procedures and large samples (405 or larger) for path analysis was recommended to produce satisfactory statistical power (Fritz & MacKinnon, 2007). Males composed 44.9% of the sample (see Table 1). The median age was 37 (ranging from 18 to 79 years old). The three major political affiliations in the U.S. were represented in the sample (224 Republicans, 485 Democrats, 283 Independent/other). Identifying as a U.S. citizen that had voted in a past general election was required to participate in the study. After providing written online consent, participants completed survey questions and answered demographic questions. Control variables and political party affiliation questions were at the end of the survey to avoid influencing other survey questions. A diverse national sample was collected as a basis for generalizability (Levay et al., 2016). Zip code data analysis showed participants lived throughout the U.S. in urban, suburban, and rural regions.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of participants

Demographic characteristics	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Male	445	44.9
Female	547	55.1
News hours		
Less than 1 hour	71	7.2
1 hour	56	5.6
2 hours	105	10.6
3 hours	154	15.5
4 hours	164	16.5
5 hours	145	14.6
6 hours	71	7.2
7 hours	101	10.2
8 hours or more	125	12.6

3.2 Measures

Independent variable. SNI measures an individual's use and engagement with SM (Sigerson & Cheng, 2018). The validated measure used 5-items from the Oregon Avocational Interest Scales (e.g., "Participated in an online discussion group") ($\alpha=.69$) (Goldberg, 2010) (see Appendix).

Mediator variable. Rigidity measures an individual's narrow-minded belief in their opinions as being right and fixed using 10-items (e.g., "Am convinced that my way is the best way") ($\alpha=.80$) (Simms et al., 2011). Rigidity has a quality of inflexibility, lack of open-mindedness, and preference for categorical thinking.

Moderator variable. Intellect measures someone's self-reported cognitive ability to read and grasp ideas using 7-items (e.g., "Have a rich vocabulary") ($\alpha=.79$) (Hogan, 1995). Intellect captures a degree of someone's cognitive faculties to learn concepts. In politics, marketing nuance has been used to obfuscate and nudge voters towards a selection (Sunstein, 2015).

Dependent variables. PA of political issues was measured on a 0% to 100% continuous sliding scale ("Please rank the degree the two items are the same.") (Bok et al., 2022). Domestic issues included seven paired terms (net neutrality and digital privacy; entitlement benefits and retirement benefits; healthcare and health insurance; mandatory vaccines and disease prevention; marriage equality and gay marriage; income inequality and minimum wage; and death tax and estate tax).

National security issues included three paired terms (renewable resources and green energy; climate change and global warming; and radical terrorism and violent extremism). Carbon emissions and dependence on foreign oil are viewed as a threat to national security because of involvement in foreign affairs to maintain regional control for this energy source (Gainous & Merry, 2022). Climate change also poses an existential threat to humanity because of extreme weather conditions that globally impact environments (e.g., drought).

Immigration issues included two paired terms (immigrant detainment and border security; and sanctuary cities and immigration assimilation).

Election issues included three paired terms (electoral college and representative government; lobbyists and special interest groups; and campaign financing and corporate financing). There was random presentation of the political terms from left and right. Higher scores indicated a greater likeness (e.g., 75=75% alike).

Control variables. Control variables included gender, political party affiliation (Republican, Democrat, Independent/other), news hours (self-reported average hours per week of read/watched news), and recency voting.

4. Results

4.1 Path Analysis Results

Descriptive statistics and correlations are illustrated in Table 2. Moderate normality inside thresholds for kurtosis (within ± 7.0) and skewness (within ± 2.0) was present (Kline, 2015). SPSS PROCESS V3.5 path analysis (i.e., model 7 moderated mediation analysis) was conducted using the 10,000 bootstrapped sampling procedure (Hayes, 2017) (see Table 3). When the 95% upper and lower bound confidence intervals did not include zero this was considered statistical significance.

As a preliminary step, we assessed the model-level results prior to examining specific paths. The omnibus moderated mediation test of SNI with rigidity demonstrated a significant indirect effect with rigidity on PA of domestic issues ($b=-.431$, $SE=.157$ [$LLCI -.7528$ $ULCI -.1418$]), national security issues ($b=.125$, $SE=.059$ [$LLCI .0280$ $ULCI .2571$]), immigration issues ($b=-.603$, $SE=.220$ [$LLCI -1.053$ $ULCI -.1950$]), and election issues ($b=-.550$, $SE=.201$ [$LLCI -.9751$ $ULCI -.1835$]) (Hayes, 2018). SPSS AMOS V25 model fit results illustrated acceptable fit based on advised threshold points for large sample sizes (>200 participants) for domestic issues ($\chi^2/df=6.313$, $p<.0001$, $RMSEA=.073$, $SRMR=.053$, $CFI=.934$), national security issues ($\chi^2/df=3.111$, $p<.0001$, $RMSEA=.046$, $SRMR=.028$, $CFI=.991$), immigration issues ($\chi^2/df=2.859$, $p<.0001$, $RMSEA=.043$, $SRMR=.018$, $CFI=.996$), and election issues ($\chi^2/df=6.697$, $p<.0001$, $RMSEA=.076$, $SRMR=.040$, $CFI=.975$) ($RMSEA <.08$, $SRMR <.08$) (Kenny, 2015).

Table 2. Cross-level correlations and descriptive statistics

Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Kurtosis</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
Constructs																
1) Social networking interest (SNI)	5.02	1.21	-.74	.59	—											
2) Rigidity	3.91	1.31	-.02	.74	.121 **	—										
3) Intellect	4.96	.88	.13	.11	.193 **	-.210 **	—									
4) PA of domestic issues	61.49	6.00	-.41	.19	.203 **	.391 **	-.040	—								
5) PA of national security issues	73.61	8.33	-.53	.71	.150 **	-.102 **	.180 **	.418 **	—							
6) PA of immigration issues	57.38	11.83	-.47	-.08	.138 **	.431 **	-.131 **	.529 **	.203 **	—						
7) PA of election issues	61.24	17.52	-.44	.35	.167 **	.402 **	-.002	.483 **	.226 **	.480 **	—					
Control variables																
8) Gender (female)	1.55	.50	-.21	1.96	.038	-.149 **	.075 *	-.016	.116 **	-.035	-.013	—				
9) Democrat	.49	.50	.04	2.00	.037	.114 **	.000	.248 **	.131 **	.059	.076 *	.027	—			
10) Republican	.23	.42	1.31	-.28	.012	.088 **	-.013	-.123 **	-.129 **	.080 *	.083 **	-.032	-.528 **	—		
11) Independent/other	.25	.43	1.14	-.69	-.033	-.159 **	-.009	-.118 **	-.011	-.088 **	.101 **	.005	-.568 **	-.313 **	—	
12) News hours	5.28	2.35	-.01	-.89	.036	-.018	.157 **	.062	.095 **	-.027	.101 **	-.023	.069 *	-.015	-.057	—
13) Recency voting	.63	.48	-.52	1.74	.025	.189 **	.005	.095 **	-.068 *	.080 *	.098 **	-.075 *	.074 *	.085 **	-.116 **	.066 *

Table 3. Moderated mediation modeled effects of social networking interest on perceived alikeness of issues

	Outcome															
	Rigidity				PA of domestic issues				PA of national security issues				PA of immigration issues			
Antecedents	Coeff.	SE	t	p	Coeff.	SE	t	p	Coeff.	SE	t	p	Coeff.	SE	t	p
SNI	.188	.327	5.736	<.0001	2.018	.376	5.370	<.0001	2.345	.469	5.002	<.0001	1.487	.510	2.917	<.01
Rigidity	—	—	—	—	.254	.031	8.173	<.0001	-1.324	.452	-2.932	<.01	5.835	.491	11.879	<.0001
Intellect	-.354	.045	-7.800	<.0001	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
SNI x intellect	-.094	.032	-2.906	<.01	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Control variables																
Gender (female)	-.321	.078	-4.120	<.0001	.986	.920	1.071	.284	3.347	1.148	2.917	<.01	.209	.248	.167	.867
Republican party affiliation	.064	.097	.654	.513	-7.328	1.139	-6.435	<.0001	-5.913	1.420	-4.163	<.0001	4.860	.545	3.146	<.01
Independent/other affiliation	-.401	.094	-4.268	<.0001	-3.998	1.110	-3.602	<.001	-2.730	1.384	-1.972	<.05	.019	.506	.012	.990
News hours	-.003	.017	-.151	.880	.365	.193	1.891	.059	.681	.241	2.827	<.01	.256	.262	.978	.328
Recency voting	.413	.081	5.126	<.0001	.774	.956	.810	.418	-1.845	1.193	-1.547	.122	-.105	.297	-.081	.936
Model Summary																
	$R^2=.147$				$R^2=.218$				$R^2=.073$				$R^2=.162$			
	$F(8,983)=21.183, p<.0001$				$F(7, 984)=39.208, p<.0001$				$F(7, 984)=11.091, p<.0001$				$F(7, 984)=27.215, p<.0001$			

The table depicts moderated mediation results on rigidity and outcome variables. Dependent variables included domestic, national security, immigration, and election issues. Notes: Gender was dummy coded with males as 1 and females as 2. News hours was the self-reported average hours of read/watched news per week. Republican and Independent/other political party affiliation were dummy coded with Democratic party affiliation as the reference group. For parsimony, SPSS PROCESS moderated mediation models are displayed in a single table.

Next, we turned to the hypothesis testing (H1-H3). SNI positively related to greater PA of domestic ($b=2.202, t=5.370, SE=.376, p<.0001$ [$LLCI 1.281$ $ULCI 2.756$]), national security ($b=2.345, t=5.002, SE=.469, p<.0001$ [$LLCI 1.425$ $ULCI 3.264$]), immigration issues ($b=1.487, t=2.917, SE=.510, p<.0001$ [$LLCI .487$ $ULCI 2.487$]), and election issues ($b=1.642, t=3.925, SE=.418, p<.001$ [$LLCI .821$ $ULCI 2.463$]) (collective support for H1). SNI related to greater rigidity ($b=.188, t=5.736, SE=.033, p<.0001$ [$LLCI .123$ $ULCI .252$]) (H2 supported). Rigidity related to greater PA of domestic issues ($b=4.572, t=12.625, SE=.362, p<.0001$ [$LLCI 3.861$ $ULCI 5.283$]). Rigidity related to lower PA of national security issues ($b=-1.324, t=-2.932, SE=.452, p<.01$ [$LLCI -2.211$ $ULCI -.438$]). This was the opposite direction of the proposed hypothesis. Rigidity related to greater PA of immigration issues ($b=5.835, t=11.879, SE=.491, p<.0001$ [$LLCI 4.871$ $ULCI 6.800$]). Rigidity related to greater PA of election issues ($b=5.220, t=12.949, SE=.403, p<.0001$ [$LLCI 4.429$ $ULCI 6.011$]). Collectively this provided support for H3 (except for national security issues). Partial mediation was observed with a statistically significant direct path and simultaneous indirect paths (Hayes, 2018).

4.2 Moderated Mediation Results

This section reports on moderated mediation hypothesis testing (H4). Moderated mediation results of SNI and intellect with rigidity on PA of issues are illustrated in Figure 2 and Table 4. Intellect had a significant negative direct effect on

rigidity ($b=-.354$, $t=-7.798$, $SE=.045$, $p<.0001$ [$LLCI -.443$ $ULCI .265$]). SNI and intellect (moderation effect) associated with dampened rigidity ($b=-.094$, $t=-2.906$, $SE=.032$, $p<.01$ [$LLCI -.158$ $ULCI -.031$]). High levels of SNI and low intellect associated to heightened rigidity (compared to high conditions) ($b=.265$, $SE=.045$ [$LLCI .177$ $ULCI .353$]) (H4 supported). The moderated mediation path through rigidity positively associated with the PA of domestic, immigration, and election issues. The moderated mediation path through rigidity negatively associated with the PA of national security issues. High levels of SNI and low intellect associated to heightened rigidity, and thereby heightened effects on PA of domestic ($b=1.211$, $SE=.245$ [$LLCI .769$ $ULCI 1.724$]), national security ($b=-.351$, $SE=.133$ [$LLCI -.641$ $ULCI -.117$]), immigration ($b=1.545$, $SE=.320$ [$LLCI .963$ $ULCI 2.228$]), and election issues ($b=1.382$, $SE=.284$ [$LLCI .866$ $ULCI 1.981$]). Low intellect extended the effects of SNI associated with PA of issues (in positive and negative directions). For instance, moderation effects increased PA of domestic, immigration, and election issues, while decreasing PA for national security issues.

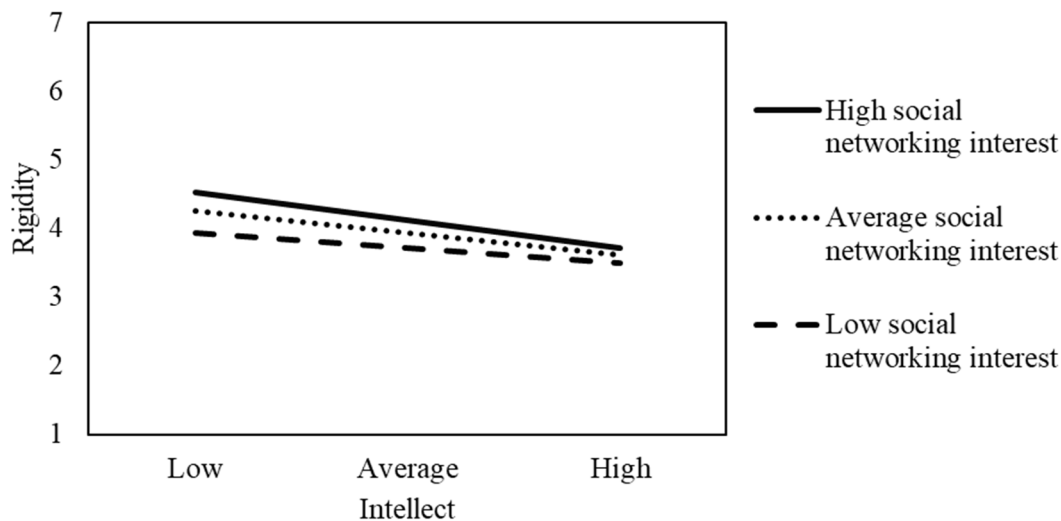


Figure 2. Moderator intellect with social networking interest on rigidity

Table 4. Conditional direct and indirect effects with moderator intellect

	Left-leaning Low (-1 SD)	Average Mean	Right-leaning High (+1 SD)
SNI → rigidity	.265 (LLCI .177 ULCI .353)	.198 (LLCI .132 ULCI .263)	.103 (LLCI .024 ULCI .183)
SNI → rigidity → PA of domestic issues	1.211 (LLCI .769 ULCI 1.724)	.903 (LLCI .573 ULCI 1.284)	.472 (LLCI .106 ULCI .864)
SNI → rigidity → PA of national security issues	-.351 (LLCI -.641 ULCI -.117)	-.262 (LLCI -.483 ULCI -.087)	-.137 (LLCI -.311 ULCI -.017)
SNI → rigidity → PA of immigration issues	1.545 (LLCI .963 ULCI 2.228)	1.153 (LLCI .719 ULCI 1.645)	.603 (LLCI .124 ULCI 1.107)
SNI → rigidity → PA of election issues	1.382 (LLCI .866 ULCI 1.981)	1.031 (LLCI .653 ULCI 1.469)	.539 (LLCI .117 ULCI .981)

The table illustrates social networking interest and intellect confidence interval moderation results.

5. Discussion

5.1 General Discussion

Main effect results showed SNI related to greater PA of domestic, national security, immigration, and election issues. This supports MRT within the context of political marketing. Greater SM consumption evinced a greater blurring of political issues. This suggests greater cynicism in policy differences and the ability to government to address issues. This filter becomes a psychological barrier to communicate important policy nuances that can greatly differ in long-term outcomes. A ruse is the ability to persuade the public into believing an issue is meaningful to them, when in fact, it can harm the public. For example, labeling the estate tax as the death tax suggests it effects everyone that passes away, whereas it is inheritance policies that effects wealthy property owners (Schaffner & Atkinson, 2009). The reduced tax revenue from taxing wealthy property owners decreases the amount of funds available to serve average citizens (e.g., funding public schools) (Orgain, 2011). The ability to understand policies and abstract topics are crucial to having a more competent

electorate, less likely to be manipulated to vote against their own interests. Results imply more SNI decrease one's ability to make policy distinctions.

In fact, mediation results showed SNI related to greater rigidity. This supports prior research that found more SM consumption relating to greater rigidity (Proma, 2023). SM consumption increases one's set beliefs by reinforcing a narrative (e.g., media echo chambers) (Jost, 2017). Moreover, through the mediation path, rigidity related to higher PA of domestic, immigration, and election issues. This implies voters who are more set in their beliefs are less likely to perceive these political issues as distinct. We attribute this to MR cynicism in the political system to implement meaningful changes regardless of policy terms. It is perceived as rhetoric to gain support, but when elected into office, it is likely to result in an unfulfilled promise (Radnitz, 2022). Voters care that their living conditions are improved regardless of the specific policy. Elections grant power to politicians to hash out the policy details that create tangible positive outcomes (Rahman, 2017). We contend rigidity in political beliefs is a mixture of having hardened policy positions shaded by a distrust in government to enact tangible outcomes.

Meanwhile, through the mediation path, rigidity related to lower PA of national security issues. This was the opposite direction of the proposed hypothesis (H3). These results indicate when voters have greater rigidity, they are more likely to perceive national security issues as different. This suggests voters have a better understanding of national policies and likely stronger opinions about them. This has potential benefits for society. When there is more debate and media coverage about a topic, informed voters may be more driven to act on specific impassioned policies (Canes-Wrone & Shotts, 2007). For example, there is a sizeable U.S. contingency that votes based on environmental conservation because they view dependence on foreign oil and oil production as a threat to national security (Gainous & Merry, 2022). While counter movements can form, it brings forth popular policies that can benefit society (e.g., investments in renewable energy sources to reduce dependence on fossil fuel). Public debate is part of the U.S. political process where ideas can win over voters. Voters then elect representatives to ideally enact policy demands. Rigorous public debate increases awareness, potentially forming stronger distinctions in voters' minds.

5.2 Implications

Moderator results showed low intellect and high SNI, heightened rigidity and reduced perceived distinctions among political issues. When someone is less able to grasp abstract concepts and ideas, they can be particularly influenced by SM in concretizing their political beliefs. For example, in modern politics, false conspiratorial beliefs are pervasive online (e.g., COVID-19 vaccine mandates intended to insert microchips to monitor citizens) (Bodner et al., 2020). While disproven citizens have politically mobilized based on misbeliefs (Carson et al., 2025). Algorithms designed to increase views for monetization fosters a misinformed electorate (Zimmer et al., 2019). This manipulates the MR lens citizens view politics which becomes a warped reality (e.g., the deep state is running the government) (Radnitz, 2022). One would imagine, if citizens were lied to and learned a source was pedaling lies, they would stop viewing. However, instead, it is often justified by archetypal narratives related to entrenchment (e.g., distrust in government). Intellectual openness to change one's misbeliefs could lessen SM misinformation sharing behaviors.

Moreover, results expand understanding of MRT. The practice of viewing information through a biased lens effects long-term evaluations of politics (Groenendyk, 2022). While there are clear distinctions between political issues, cynicism in the political process can filter communication from campaigns (Song et al., 2020). Campaigns need to win over public support, but if voters are fixed in their political thought process, it makes it more difficult to persuade votes (Carson et al., 2025). Campaigns are advised to confront biases, so communication is not blunted and reinterpreted as usual gridlock politics. For instance, marketing ads using phrases like "proven leader" and "fights on behalf of working Americans", emphasizing character traits that bypass the minutiae of policy differences (Luntz, 2007). This suggests regardless of the specific policy, the problem will be resolved somehow. In the minds of many citizens, it often does not matter what specific national security policies are implemented, but that they feel secure (Mueller, 2006). Historically, national security rhetoric has generated votes (e.g., war on terrorism). In practice, this means resolving the underlying pain points citizens seek government officials to change. Even if it means unconventional strategies, citizens want their issues addressed. The procedures of how government enacts change are less important to average citizens than the desired policy benefits.

5.3 Limitations and Future Research

The sample had more Democrats than other party affiliations, which could have potential issues with political party voter overrepresentation (Gelman & Novoa, 2023). To account for potential sampling bias, analysis included a large sample of the three major political affiliation in the U.S. (i.e., over 200 participants of Democrats, Republicans, and Independents/other). When there is adequate sample representation of different groups, there is sufficient statistical power to compare differences (Columb & Atkinson, 2016). Additionally, 10,000 bootstrapping resampling procedures can help minimize sampling bias for large representative samples (James et al., 2023). The inclusion of political party affiliations

as control variables in the model also allowed for statistical analysis of potential confounds. Control variable results of party affiliation showed differences between groups and meaningful heterogeneity. For example, Republican voters showed a perceived differentiation in domestic and national security issues compared to Democrat voters that perceived them more alike in the model. This was on par with group differences on domestic and national security priorities found in prior research (Nail & McGregor, 2009). Future research can investigate why certain groups view issues more alike and what impact that has on voter participation. A group may feel particularly disillusioned by their political party to enact policies which reinforces cynicism.

Furthermore, relevant political issues change over time. Some issues dominate a U.S. election cycle, becoming a major reason driving voters to the polls (Stimson, 2018). For example, specific policies around artificial intelligence (AI) and workers rights are increasingly relevant as they impact a growing number of citizens (Wang & Siau, 2019). Support or lack of support for a specific policy could sink a campaign. This is like a politician supporting an AI policy when it was the reason a voter lost their job. Direct impact from a policy increases its salience and awareness. Engaged voters want to know politicians' position and if they will enact legislation to better their lives (Rahman, 2017). Some political positions can become untenable because voters have developed an aversion to them (e.g., "defund the police") (Craig & Reid, 2022). Opinions are stronger for certain issues and may be viewed as more distinct. Future research can investigate emerging political issues to examine the application of findings on specific policy terms (e.g., unlimited financial contributions). The scope of this project was to examine more nuanced political terms that are less partisan yet still designed to articulate a distinct policy position. Policy details have major societal implications but are often blurred in communication when voters perceive information through a biased lens.

6. Conclusion

While SM has broadened the range of beliefs and ways to express users' viewpoints, exposure skews towards content that confirms preexisting narratives. MR offers a cognitive shortcut, lowering the effort needed to process political communication. Campaigns often manipulate this through slogans and simplified messaging suited to typical social media consumption. Rigidity emerged as a key mechanism linking SM use to greater PA of domestic, immigration, and election issues. Cultivating intellectual curiosity and deeper comprehension of complex political issues may counter this dynamic. This could shift public discourse away from partisanship and towards substantive dialogue to address underlying societal problems.

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Author contributions

Conceptualization, S.B., J.S., and M.L.; methodology, S.B. and J.S.; software, S.B.; validation, S.B. and J.S.; formal analysis, S.B.; investigation, S.B.; resources, S.B.; data curation, S.B.; writing—original draft preparation, S.B. and J.S.; writing—review and editing, S.B., J.S., and M.L.; visualization, M.L.; supervision, S.B.; project administration, S.B. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

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Appendix: Table of scales and items

Item number	Scales and items
	Social networking interest (Goldberg, 2010)
1)	Used a computer for social networking
2)	Read someone's personal web-page
3)	Made an entry on a personal web-page
4)	Participated in an online discussion group
5)	Used instant messaging to chat online
	Rigidity (Simms et al., 2011)
1)	Do not like reading or hearing opinions that go against my way of thinking
2)	Find it difficult to consider as valid opinions that differ from my own
3)	Have been told that I am rigid and inflexible
4)	Have fixed opinions
5)	Am often accused of being narrow-minded
6)	Am convinced that my way is the best way
7)	Believe strongly that the world would be a much better place if I had my way
8)	Am inflexible when I think I'm right
9)	Find it difficult to compromise in policy debates
10)	Believe that most questions have one right answer
	Intellect (Hogan & Hogan, 1995)
1)	Read quickly
2)	Have a rich vocabulary
3)	Can handle a lot of information
4)	Quick to understand things
5)	Show a mastery of language
6)	Have difficulty understanding abstract ideas (R)
7)	Read slowly (R)
	Political party affiliation
1)	Please indicate your political party affiliation. Democrat, Republican, Independent, other [fill in blank]
	News hours
1)	On average, how many hours do you read/watch news each week? Less than 1 hour, 1 hour, 2 hours, 3 hours, 4 hours, 5 hours, 6 hours, 7 hours, 8 hours or more
	Recency voting
1)	Please indicate if you voted or did not vote in the general election for the given year. 2018, 2020, 2022

Notes: (R) denoted reverse coded items. There was random presentation of items within each scale section. Including news hours accounted for potential influence of one's news consumption patterns. A variety of news sources were read/watched by participants (e.g., CNN, Fox News, etc.). Recency voting captured if participants voted in the last three general elections (which occurs every two years). If they voted in the last three or all age eligible general elections dummy coded 1, otherwise 0. For instance, if a participant was 20 years old and voted in 2020 and 2022 they were coded as 1). This allowed analysis to account for potential differences among infrequent and routine votes.