

“Like”-minded Views on the Ferguson Grand Jury Decision

An Experimental Test of the Spiral of Silence in a Social Media Setting

Zarine Kharazian

Department of Government, The College of William & Mary

According to the “spiral of silence” theory on public opinion formation, the fear of social rejection discourages people in opinion minorities from expressing their opinions publicly (Noelle-Neumann 1993). When and how does the spiral of silence occur in online social settings, however? Does it manifest through social endorsement cues particular to online social networks, such as Facebook’s “like” button? These cues make individual users especially conscious of their friends’ and acquaintances’ opinions and attitudes. As a result of their design, online social networking sites thus expose people to the opinions and attitudes of even weak social ties.

This study tests the impact of online social endorsement cues on individuals’ willingness to publicly express an opinion on the Ferguson grand jury decision online. We conducted a 2x2 factorial experiment on Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) which presented respondents with a stylized Facebook post expressing an opinion on the Ferguson grand jury decision not to indict Officer Darren Wilson. The experiment manipulated respondents’ agreement/disagreement with the post and the number of “likes” on the post. While the study was underpowered to detect statistically significant differences between treatment groups, the results revealed attitudes and patterns of behavior among Facebook users that warrant future research.

Hypotheses

- **Willingness to “Like” Initial Post:** A high number of “likes” on a counterattitudinal post about the Ferguson grand jury decision will have no effect on willingness to “like” the post. A high number of “likes” on an attitude-consistent post will increase willingness to like.
- **Willingness to Comment on Initial Post:** A high number of “likes” on a counterattitudinal post will decrease willingness to comment on the post. A high number of “likes” on an attitude-consistent will increase willingness to comment.
- **Willingness to “Like” Follow-up Petition:** A high number of “likes” on a post linking to a petition with which respondents disagree will have no effect on willingness to like. A high number of “likes” on a post linking to a petition with which respondents agree will increase willingness to like.
- **Willingness to Comment on Follow-up Petition:** A high number of “likes” on a petition post with which respondents disagree will decrease willingness to comment. A high number of “likes” on a post linking to a petition with which respondents agree will increase willingness to comment.
- **Willingness to Sign Follow-up Petition:** A high number of “likes” on a petition post with which respondents disagree will not affect willingness to sign the petition. A high number of “likes” on a petition post which respondents agree will increase willingness to sign the petition.
- **Willingness to Share Follow-up Petition:** A high number of “likes” on a petition post with which respondents disagree will not affect willingness to share the petition. A high number of “likes” on a petition post which respondents agree will increase willingness to share the petition.

Sample

- **Mechanical Turk Experiment**
 - 209 respondents recruited from Amazon’s Mechanical Turk service
 - 51.7% male, 47.9% female
 - 71.4% identified as white, and 8.1% identified as Black or African American
 - The majority (55.6%) identified as liberal
 - 16.6% reported discussing politics on Facebook at least once a week

Method

- Survey consisted of three sections:
 - A battery on sociodemographic indicators of political participation, personality traits, Facebook use habits, and attitudes toward the Ferguson grand jury decision
 - An experiment involving a stylized Facebook post expressing an opinion on the decision
 - A post-survey assessing participants’ willingness to express their opinion on the decision by liking or commenting on the post, as well his/her willingness to like, comment, sign, or share a petition, either the “Support Officer Darren Wilson” or the “Prosecute Officer Darren Wilson” campaign, from one of two subsequent posts
- 2x2 factorial design model: participants randomly assigned to one of four treatment groups according to their initial response to whether they agreed with the Ferguson grand jury decision
 - Experimentally manipulated agreement/disagreement with the decision and number of “likes” on the post
 - 51 in Agreement x No Social Endorsement, 46 in Disagreement x No Social Endorsement, 63 in Agreement x Social Endorsement, 49 in Disagreement x Social Endorsement



Right x No Social Endorsement



Wrong x No Social Endorsement

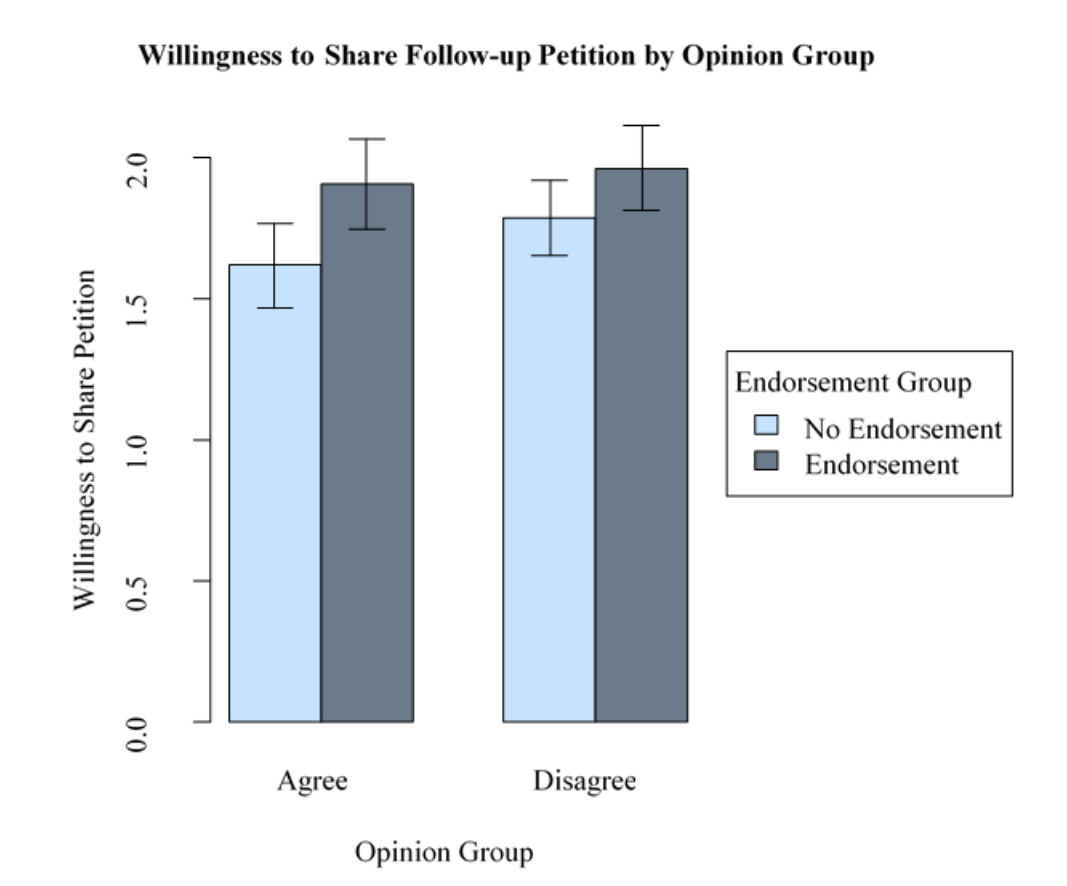
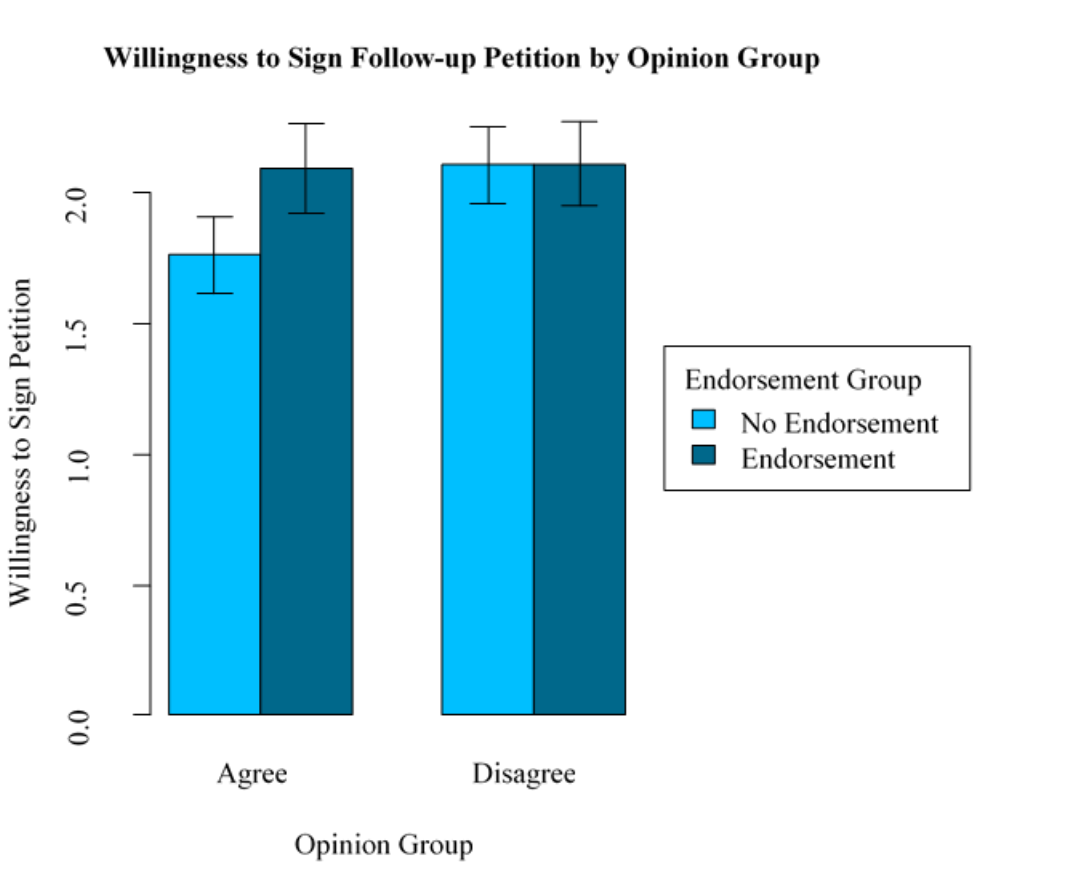
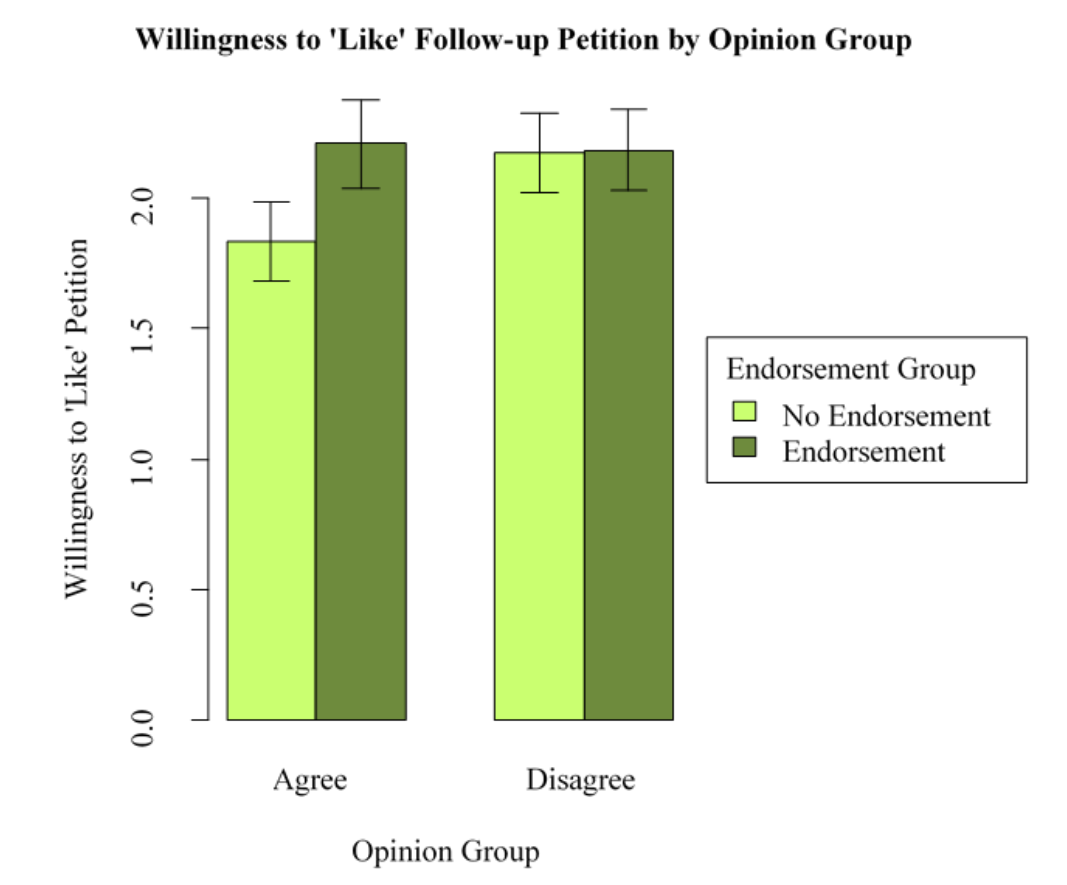
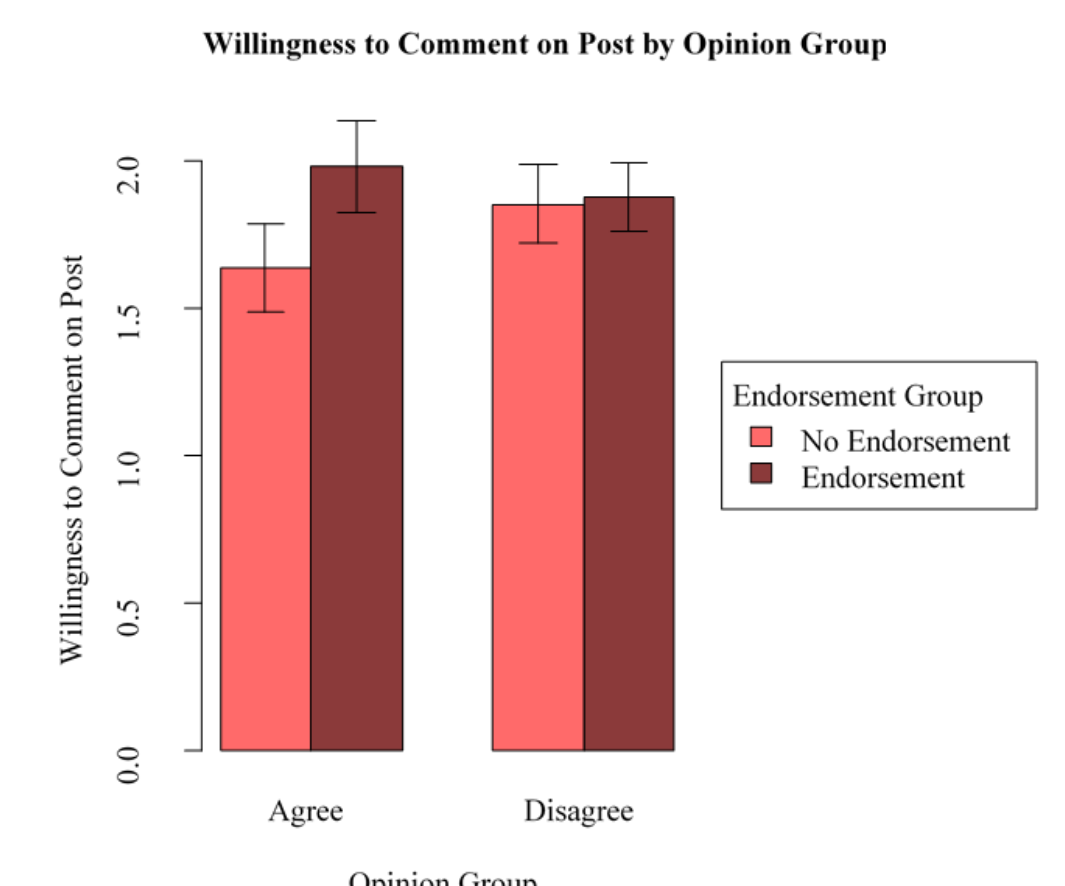
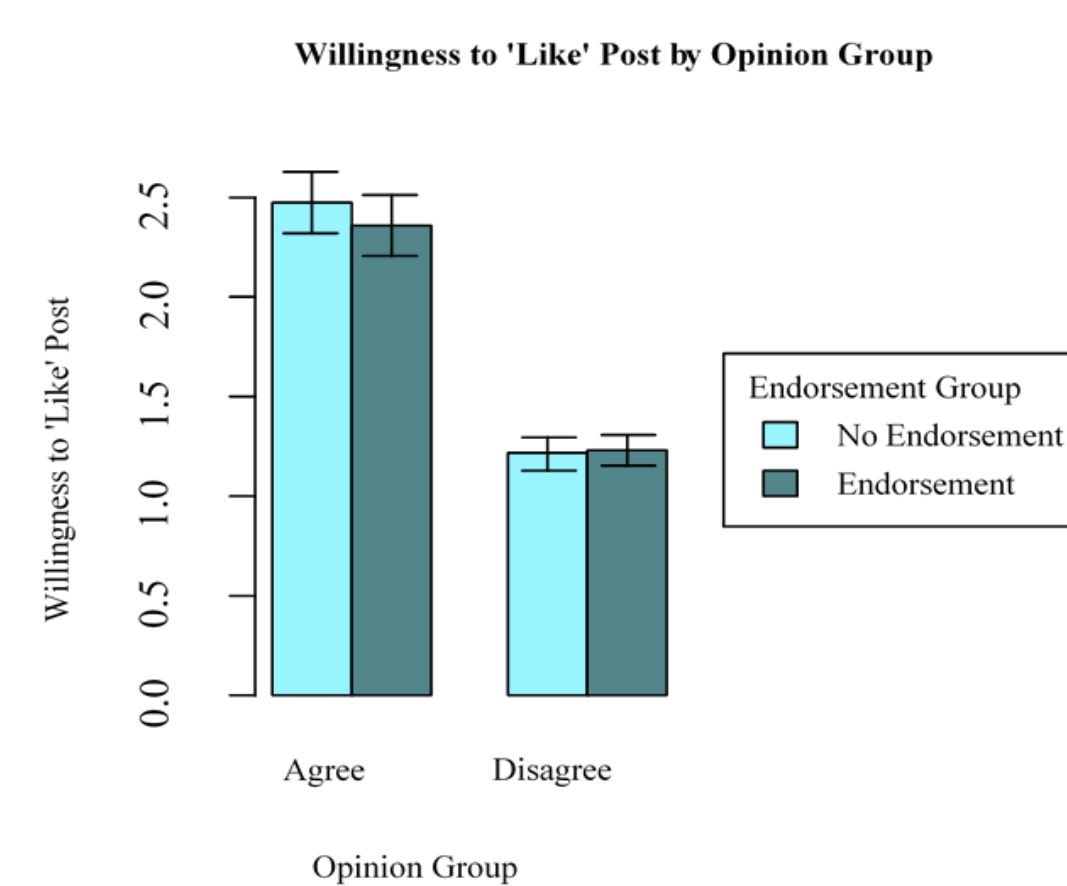


Right x Social Endorsement



Wrong x Social Endorsement

Treatment Effects



- **Upper Left: Willingness to “Like” Post by Opinion Group, lines represent standard error of means.**
- **Upper Right: Willingness to Comment on Post by Opinion Group, lines represent standard error of means.**
- **Middle Left: Willingness to “Like” Follow-up Petition t by Opinion Group, lines represent standard error of means.**
- **Middle Right: Willingness to Sign Follow-up Petition by Opinion Group, lines represent standard error of means.**
- **Lower Left: Willingness to Share Follow-up by Opinion Group, lines represent standard error of means.**

Future Steps

This study did not detect any statistically significant effects between the treatment groups, besides a main effect of opinion group on “willingness to like” a post. Individuals who viewed a post with which they agreed were more likely to report a willingness to “like” that post. Given the small sample size, however, we were underpowered to detect significant differences. The following future steps are thus warranted:

- Replicate study with larger sample size able to detect statistically significant results between treatment groups
- Develop standard operational definitions for online social behaviors, and identify their real-life counterparts (e.g., “liking” a post means endorsing it, but we do not know what commenting means)
- Assess relationships between individual personality traits and opinion expression on social networking sites during contentious political discussions