FULL PAPER

# Self-effects of (perceived) public vs. private opinion expression, elaboration, and composition

## Selbsteffekte von öffentlichen vs. privaten Meinungsäußerungen, Elaboration und Komposition

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**Abstract:** Self-effects in communication research refer to effects of opinion expressions on the senders themselves. Despite growing empirical support for self-effects, moderators and mediators of these self-effects are barely researched. The article outlines theoretical arguments that individuals elaborate more and put more effort into message composition when expecting a public vs. a private setting. This, in turn, should lead to higher self-effects on the senders' perceived knowledge, issue interest, and behavioral intentions. In a preregistered between-subjects experiment, we found tentative support for these assumptions.

**Keywords:** Self-effects, opinion expression, political interest, elaboration, experiment

**Zusammenfassung:** Selbsteffekte in der kommunikationswissenschaftlichen Forschung sind Effekte von Meinungsäußerungen auf die sich Äußernden selbst. Trotz zunehmender empirischer Belege für die Existenz von Selbsteffekte sind Moderatoren und Mediatoren kaum untersucht. Der Artikel führt theoretische Argumente aus, wonach Menschen mehr elaborieren und mehr Aufwand auf die Gestaltung einer Meinungsäußerung verwenden, wenn sie (vermeintlich) in einem öffentlichen vs. privaten Kontext kommunizieren. Dies sollte zu stärkeren Selbsteffekten auf ihr wahrgenommenes Wissen, ihr Themeninteresse und ihre Handlungsintentionen führen. Eine präregistrierte Experimentalstudie unterstützt diese Annahmen teilweise.

**Schlagwörter:** Selbsteffekte, Meinungsäußerung, politisches Interesse, Elaboration, Experiment

### 1. Introduction

When we express our opinions, we might influence not only others but also ourselves. In her seminal piece, Valkenburg (2017) draws attention to a phenomenon "that can be named self-effects: the effects of messages on the cognitions (knowledge or beliefs), emotions, attitudes, and behavior of message creators/senders themselves" (p. 478). Whereas such self-effects have also been researched in private settings with no or a very small audience (e.g., Gonzales & Hancock, 2008; Tice, 1992), they received growing scholarly interest with the rise of social media (for an overview, see Carr et al., 2021; Pingree, 2007; Valkenburg, 2017). Such

settings can have a public character; individuals can communicate their messages to larger and less identifiable audiences (Carr et al., 2021; Wang & Sundar, 2022). Research indicates that the context of a message matters for self-effects, with stronger self-effects generally observed in public settings (e.g., Carr et al., 2021).

Two central mechanisms may account for differences in the strength of self-effects in public vs. private settings: First, when people anticipate speaking in public, they engage in greater *elaboration* on the issue to perform well (Pingree, 2007). This increased elaboration then increases self-effects (e.g., Eveland & Thomson, 2006). Second, opinion expression often affords *composing a message*, that is, transforming thoughts into language, and constructing a coherent idea (Pingree, 2007). This process is heightened by the anticipation of a larger audience (Bargh & Schul, 1980).

The current study sets out to test these mechanisms in the context of self-effects on variables influencing political behavior. In a preregistered between-subjects experiment, it investigates how public vs. private opinion expression – via elaboration and composition as mediators – influences the expressers' interest and perceived knowledge on the political issue of expression and their intention to further engage in the issue.

The paper makes three important contributions: First, it explores the mechanisms behind self-effects and thus contributes to theory building and testing. Second, by examining expressions on a controversial political issue, it applies self-effects to the less intensively studied field of political communication (for exceptions see Lane et al., 2019; Neubaum & Lane, 2023; Prochazka et al., 2025; Winter et al., 2024) and therefore tests its applicability in additional contexts. Third, it contributes to the understanding of the determinants of political engagement in an era of enhanced opportunities to express opinions in front of more and less public audiences (Abramson & Aldrich, 1982; Prior, 2010).

## 2. Self-effects of public and private expressions

Research in different areas finds general support for self-effects. For instance, self-presentations of character traits influence the self-perception of these traits (Carr et al., 2021; Gonzales & Hancock, 2008). Van Oosten et al. (2018) show that sexy self-presentations in social media lead adolescents to think of themselves as being more sexually outgoing. Expressions can even lead to behavioral effects: Users who shared health-related messages in social media were more likely to comply with the stated healthy or unhealthy behavior (D'Angelo & Moreno, 2019; Nabi et al., 2019). Self-effects have also been found in political online communication. Research shows that people who communicate their attitudes on political issues online later advocate these attitudes more strongly and have a stronger preference for originally favored political candidates (Cho et al., 2018). Lane et al. (2019) show that political self-expression in social media can influence the self-perception of being interested and engaged in politics. Gil de Zúñiga et al. (2014) find that political expression in social media has behavioral self-effects as well – it increases political participation online and offline.

The strength of self-effects is contingent on the communication setting, which can vary, among other aspects, in its degree of publicness: Public refers to settings with broad or undefined audiences, while private refers to those restricted to specific individuals or small groups. The perception of publicness is at least partly construed: When (considering) sharing content with others in online contexts, individuals imagine their audience based on available information and individual evaluations (e.g., Litt, 2012; Litt & Hargittai, 2016). This results in interindividual variations in the perception of how public a communication setting is.

(Presumably) public compared to private expressions create a sense of "public commitment" (Schlenker et al., 1994). Individuals are driven to be consistent in their self-presentation of their beliefs about themselves, their attitudes towards issues, as well as their behaviors. They feel committed to the external image of their public self-presentation and are motivated to remain consistent with it in their internal and external states (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004; Leary & Kowalski, 1990). Therefore, they internalize their public self-presentation (Tice, 1992). Public expressions should thus have stronger self-effects, while expressions in front of a smaller or less relevant audience motivate less commitment (see also release effects, Pingree, 2007). This process is reinforced by concerns of social desirability: People want to be seen positively by others and adjust their self-expressions in line with prevailing social norms and expectations (Paulhus, 1991). At the same time, the motivation to maintain a coherent and consistent identity fosters alignment between one's public and private selves, since inconsistencies could threaten both self-integrity and social credibility (Swann, 1983). Research supports this: Identity shifts in reaction to self-presentation of character traits are stronger in public than private contexts (Carr & Hayes, 2019; Gonzales & Hancock, 2008) and when the communicator is identifiable (Carr et al., 2021; see H1 below).

## 3. Self-effects through elaboration and composition

In addition to the effect of publicness, we differentiate two cognitive processing mechanisms behind self-effects: Elaboration and composition (similar to Pingree, 2007). *Elaboration* refers to the extent to which a person deeply thinks about and considers the information and its implications. It includes recalling pre-existing knowledge, tying together ideas, and interpreting them in meaningful ways (Eveland, 2004; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). The process of *composition* includes transforming one's thoughts into language and constructing a coherent idea (Pingree, 2007).

Substantiating the potential influence of *elaboration on self-effects*, research on effects of media reception and interpersonal discussions provides extensive evidence that cognitive processing – foremost elaboration – has positive effects on objective political knowledge and opinion strength (Eveland, 2004; Eveland & Thomson, 2006, but see for social media news use, Oeldorf-Hirsch, 2018). Additionally, Nanz and Matthes (2022) show that superficial processing is negatively correlated with interest and subjective knowledge, while deeper elaboration is positively related (see below, H2 b-path of the mediation).

With regard to a *composition effect*, Nekmat (2012) shows that composing a message increases learning (in education research: Lachner et al., 2022). Lane et al. (2019) find that expressive political behavior on Facebook that is more effortful (commenting, posting) leads to higher political interest and perceived engagement, while merely liking content does not. This suggests that the higher composition afforded by creating posts and comments increases self-effects compared to less composition during liking (see below, H3 b-path of the mediation).

*Elaboration as well as composition* can create familiarity with a topic (Choi et al., 2017), which, in turn, enhances the perception of being knowledgeable (Müller et al., 2016; Schäfer, 2020). Additionally, greater cognitive effort during self-presentation (whether through elaboration, composition, or both) increases commitment to the presentation and related future behaviors (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004). For example, participants who actively declared their participation in a study were more likely to act on it weeks later than participants who only passively agreed to participate in the same study (Cioffi & Garner, 1996). This suggests that the goal to behave consistently with one's expression is stronger after more effortful self-presentation.

## 4. Relation between the public context of expressions and elaboration and composition

Elaboration and composition should be contingent on the context of the opinion expression. An important reason for elaboration and composition in expectation of future expression is the (potential) senders' motivation to perform well (Bargh & Schul, 1980). The motivation to perform well is greater in public settings, because the senders would like to present a favorable public image (Goffman, 1967), because they have an interest in convincing their audience (Eveland, 2004), and because the audience has the power to sanction the senders negatively for disliked messages (Neubaum & Krämer, 2018). Eveland (2004) refers to this mechanism as anticipatory elaboration: "the expectation of an impending discussion is an internal motivation that then increases cognitive elaboration" (p. 180) of information (see below, H2 a-path of the mediation). The perception that the audience will hold them accountable (Tetlock et al., 1989) also requires senders to consider the audience's characteristics and create a message that is defensible and effective (Nekmat, 2012). Thus, they engage in the composition of the message (see below, H3 a-path of the mediation).

Educational research, too, supports that people show increased conceptual learning when they expect to teach on a subject compared to when they only prepare for themselves (for an overview, Lachner et al., 2022): The preparation to teach increases retrieval practice as well a generative processing. Through these processes, students build a coherent mental representation of the subject matter. Additionally, the expectation of the audience triggers adaptations and adjustments in the presentation to make it more comprehensible to the public, thus it stirs composition. Actually tutoring others further increases learning effects over only preparing to teach others (Annis, 1983), even if teaching only includes pre-

senting the lesson without interaction with the students (Fiorella & Mayer, 2013; Lachner et al., 2022).

## 5. The present research

The present study tests the differences in self-effects of public and private opinion expression and the mediating role of elaboration and composition on variables relevant for political engagement, more specifically, issue interest, perceived knowledge, and behavioral intentions.

*Interest in an issue* increases information search, leads to more certain attitudes, and can enhance discussion willingness and engagement in further behaviors related to the issue (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). In the realm of politics, political interest is an essential determinant of further information consumption, news use (Stromback et al., 2013), and political participation (Gil de Zúñiga & Diehl, 2019; Prior, 2010). However, the self-effects of one's own communicative behavior on interest are largely unknown. Yet, Neubaum and Lane (2023) and Lane et al. (2019) show that political expression on social media can increase the senders' political interest.

Politically knowledgeable individuals hold stronger attitudes (Marquart et al., 2019). They are also more likely to participate in politics, for example, by attending discussions, contacting politicians, or voting (Andersen et al., 2016; Gil de Zúñiga & Diehl, 2019; McLeod et al., 1996; McLeod et al., 1999). However, evidence is accumulating that it is not necessarily objective knowledge but *perceived knowledge* that exerts effects (Lee et al., 2022). The difference is relevant insofar as (social) media use can create an illusion of knowledge by enhancing familiarity (Park, 2001). Even though factual and perceived knowledge on an issue do not necessarily coincide (Schäfer, 2020), perceived knowledge is positively related to attitude strength (Aertsens et al., 2011; Raju et al., 1995), willingness to discuss a topic (Rios et al., 2018), and behavioral intentions (Dreston & Neubaum, 2023). Schäfer (2020) even finds that while perceived knowledge is related to these outcome variables, factual knowledge is not. Furthermore, the feeling of being informed can prevent the use of further news sources (Müller et al., 2016).

Recent research has already considered how exposure to social media influences perceived knowledge. Most importantly, the great amount of news and its repetitiveness can create the illusion of being informed, although one has not read the full source (Müller et al., 2016; Schäfer, 2020). What is missing from the picture is how active participation contributes to perceived knowledge. Albeit, Ward et al. (2023) show that sharing news content even without reading it (Sundar et al., 2024) increases subjective knowledge because people believe they are as knowledgeable as their posts make them appear. However, it is possible that engaging more effortfully with a topic and trying to compose a more complex message makes individuals more aware of their deficits (Weber & Köhler, 2017).

Beyond cognitive self-perceptions of interest and knowledge, engaged individuals are also more likely to *intent behaviors* related to the issue under consideration (Nabi et al., 2019; D'Angelo & Moreno, 2019). Expression on social media

might increase their willingness to further express themselves about the issue and self-mobilize further actions on the communicated issue.

To sum up, based on the theoretical arguments that self-effects are stronger in public vs. private settings and that elaboration and composition account for this, we hypothesize:[1]

> *H1: a) Interest in the issue of opinion expression, b) perceived knowledge, and c) behavioral intention are greater when an opinion is expressed in a public compared to a private setting.*
>
> *H2: Opinion expression in a private vs. public setting increases a) interest in the issue, b) perceived knowledge, and c) behavioral intention through higher levels of elaboration.*
>
> *H3: Opinion expression in a private vs. public setting increases a) interest in the issue, b) perceived knowledge, and c) behavioral intention through higher levels of expression composition.*

## 6. Method

The hypotheses, study design, and analysis plan were preregistered (https://osf.io/d6hce/). All materials, data, and code are publicly available (https://osf.io/tfj4g/).

### 6.1 Design and procedure

We conducted a between-subjects experimental design embedded in an online survey, manipulating the degree of publicness (public vs. private) of the context of the opinion expression. Participants received information about the real-life, non-governmental campaign "The Angry Cactus", which criticizes advertisements with sexist portrayals of women. Participants saw exemplary advertising images. They were then randomly assigned to one of the two experimental groups. In both conditions, participants were asked to state their opinion on portrayals of women in advertising and on "The Angry Cactus". In the public condition, participants were informed that their statement would be published on the website and social media channels of a news provider with about 500,000 followers, including their first name and place of residence. The news provider's name was fictitious but resembled real news providers. This scenario was chosen based on a comprehensive pretest with 130 participants comparing three different versions

1 The hypotheses, study design, and analysis plan were preregistered (https://osf.io/d6hce/). The order of the hypotheses deviates from the preregistration because we restructured the postulated mediation effects. Furthermore, we excluded the hypotheses referring to the direct effects of a public compared to a private setting on elaboration and composition. Nevertheless, these paths are tested in the mediation analyses (H2 and H3 in the preregistration). We reformulated the wording of H2 and H3 (H4 and H5 in the preregistration) to indicate the postulated causal direction. Finally, we changed the wording from perceived expertise to perceived knowledge to adhere to a more established term in the literature. The construct itself, however, remains the same.

of the manipulation of the public condition (see OSF). In the private condition, participants were informed that only the researchers read their statement. All subjects were fully debriefed at the end of the study.

### 6.2 Measures

After the manipulation, participants answered the following items on a scale from 1 = "strongly disagree" to 7 = "strongly agree". *Issue interest* was measured with eight items (e.g., "I'm interested in how women are portrayed in advertising"; $M = 4.62$, $SD = 1.60$, $\alpha = 0.93$; based on Otto & Bacherle, 2011; for all items see questionnaire in OSF). *Perceived knowledge* on the topic area was measured with four items (e.g., "I can make a statement about whether or not an ad is sexist"; $M = 4.83$, $SD = 1.31$, $\alpha = 0.83$; based on Flynn & Goldsmith, 1999). *Behavioral intention to engage with the issue in the future* was measured with six items (e.g., "I could see myself volunteering to teach others about sexism in advertising."; $M = 3.91$, $SD = 1.41$, $\alpha = 0.83$; developed for the specific topic). *Elaboration on the topic* was measured with six items (e.g., "I thought about what I already know on the subject"; $M = 5.44$, $SD = 1.18$, $\alpha = 0.76$; based on Eveland et al., 2003). *Expression composition* in the creation of a statement was measured with four items (e.g., "I have tried to write in a way that makes my opinion as convincing as possible."; $M = 5.76$, $SD = 1.04$, $\alpha = 0.77$; developed based on Pingree, 2007). Prior to the manipulation, *involvement in the topic* was measured as a control with seven items (e.g., "It is important to me that women are not portrayed as sexual objects."; $M = 4.88$, $SD = 1.27$, $\alpha = 0.82$; developed for the specific topic). The perception how many people had seen the participants' statement (1 = "very few" to 7 = "very many"; $M = 2.67$, $SD = 1.40$) as well as five items on the participants' perception of publicness (e.g., "My opinion will be published on the Internet", $M = 3.24$, $SD = 1.45$, $\alpha = 0.80$) served as *manipulation checks*. Additionally, we measured *gender, age,* and *education level* and conducted an *attention check* ("Please choose '7' as answer here").

### 6.3 Sample

The target group was individuals 16 years or older with online access. The sample was recruited via an online access provider (SoSci Panel). After completing the questionnaire, participants had the option to participate in a lottery and the chance to win one of five vouchers worth €50.

Participants were eligible for the study if they had (1) made a statement and (2) could see the advertisements (i.e., no technical obstacles). Following a power analysis for parallel mediation models (.85 power to detect a medium effect size of .20 with a standard alpha error probability of .05; Schoemann et al., 2017), we targeted a sample size of 330 participants (approx. half in each experimental condition) who created a statement about sexist advertising. Before checking the inclusion criteria and data cleaning, the sample comprised 396 participants.

Twenty-eight participants had not made a statement[2] and two could not see the advertisements. After data cleaning (34 excluded because they did not pass the attention check, none because they took less than three minutes to complete the entire study), a total of 333 participants remained for the following analyses (64% female, 93% highly educated, $M_{age}$ = 44.31, $SD_{age}$ = 17.18), 167 in the private and 166 in the public condition.

### 6.4 Data analysis

We estimated three parallel mediation models to analyze the data using the package lavaan (Rosseel, 2012) in R (R Core Team, 2021). Outcome variables were a) issue interest, b) perceived knowledge, and c) behavioral intention. The public vs. private context of the opinion expression served as independent variable, elaboration and composition served as mediators. Involvement and gender served as control variables.

## 7. Results

### 7.1 Manipulation check

The manipulation check was successful ($t$(325.81) = -1.97, $p$ < .05, $d$ = -0.22); participants in the public condition ($M$ = 2.83, $SD$ = 1.47) estimated their audience to be larger than the private condition ($M$ = 2.52, $SD$ = 1.31). Participants in the public condition also perceived more publicness ($M$ = 3.73, $SD$ = 1.41) compared to participants in the private condition ($M$ = 2.76, $SD$ = 1.33; $t$(327.67) = -6.42, $p$ < .001, $d$ = -0.71).

### 7.2 Hypotheses testing

The results of the parallel mediation models are summarized in Tables 1–3. H1a–c are not supported: Issue interest, perceived knowledge, and behavioral intention did not differ in public vs. private settings (total effects, c-paths). Elaboration was associated with higher issue interest and behavioral intentions (but not perceived knowledge). Composition was associated with higher perceived knowledge (but not issue interest and behavioral intentions, b-paths). The experimental manipulation also did not impact elaboration and message composition (a-paths). Thus, there were no significant mediation effects (indirect effects, a1*b1-paths and a2*b2-paths); H2a–c and H3a–c are not supported.

2 Participants who did not make a statement differed from those who made a statement in behavioral intention ($t$(25.56) = -3.12, $p$ = .004, those who made a statement had stronger behavioral intentions). They did not differ in issue interest ($t$(23.68) = -0.89, $p$ = .380), perceived knowledge ($t$(25.71) = -1.68, $p$ = .106), elaboration ($t$(24.37) = -1.00, $p$ = .327), gender ($\chi^2$(1) = 0.58, $p$ = 0.444), and education ($\chi^2$(1) = 1.64, $p$ = 0.201). Experimental condition and participant characteristics influenced whether participants made a statement (experimental condition ($\chi^2$(1) = 4.99, $p$ = 0.026, a higher number in the public condition did not make a statement), age ($t$(27.97) = -2.49, $p$ = .019, older participants more often made a statement), involvement ($t$(26.16) = -2.87, $p$ = .008, participants more involved more often made a statement)).

**Table 1.** Parallel mediation model – IV experimental manipulation, DV issue interest

| Path | Effect | *SE* | *z* | *p* |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| X → Y: Direct effect (c') | 0.11 | 0.13 | 0.82 | .413 |
| X → M1 (a1) | -0.16 | 0.13 | -1.25 | .210 |
| X → M2 (a2) | 0.09 | 0.12 | 0.81 | .419 |
| M1 → Y (b1) | 0.53*** | 0.06 | 9.49 | < .001 |
| M2 → Y (b2) | 0.02 | 0.06 | 0.30 | .763 |
| X→ M1 → Y: indirect effect (a1*b1) | -0.09 | 0.07 | -1.24 | .214 |
| X→ M2 → Y: indirect effect (a2*b2) | 0.00 | 0.01 | 0.28 | .777 |
| X→ Y: total indirect effect (a1*b1 + a2*b2) | -0.08 | 0.07 | -1.21 | .225 |
| X → Y: total effect (c) | 0.02 | 0.15 | 0.16 | .873 |

*Notes*. X = experimental manipulation (0 = private, 1 = public), M1 = elaboration, M2 = composition, Y = issue interest. Control variables: gender and issue involvement.

**Table 2.** Parallel mediation model – IV experimental manipulation, DV perceived knowledge

| Path | Effect | *SE* | *z* | *p* |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| X → Y: Direct effect (c') | -0.04 | 0.11 | -0.38 | .704 |
| X → M1 (a1) | -0.14 | 0.13 | -1.10 | .272 |
| X → M2 (a2) | 0.11 | 0.12 | 1.00 | .340 |
| M1 → Y (b1) | 0.06 | 0.05 | 1.29 | .198 |
| M2 → Y (b2) | 0.24*** | 0.05 | 4.37 | < .001 |
| X→ M1 → Y: indirect effect (a1*b1) | -0.01 | 0.01 | -0.84 | .403 |
| X→ M2 → Y: indirect effect (a2*b2) | 0.03 | 0.03 | 0.93 | .351 |
| X→ Y: total indirect effect (a1*b1 + a2*b2) | 0.02 | 0.03 | 0.58 | .564 |
| X → Y: total effect (c) | -0.03 | 0.12 | -0.22 | .824 |

*Notes*. X = experimental manipulation (0 = private, 1 = public), M1 = elaboration, M2 = composition, Y = perceived knowledge. Control variables: gender and issue involvement.

**Table 3.** Parallel mediation model – IV experimental manipulation, DV behavioral intention

| Path | Effect | *SE* | *z* | *p* |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| X → Y: Direct effect (c') | 0.19 | 0.13 | 1.48 | .140 |
| X → M1 (a1) | -0.14 | 0.13 | -1.12 | .263 |
| X → M2 (a2) | 0.11 | 0.12 | 0.93 | .353 |
| M1 → Y (b1) | 0.14** | 0.05 | 2.63 | .009 |
| M2 → Y (b2) | 0.06 | 0.06 | 1.03 | .303 |
| X→ M1 → Y: indirect effect (a1*b1) | -0.02 | 0.02 | -1.03 | .303 |
| X→ M2 → Y: indirect effect (a2*b2) | 0.01 | 0.01 | 0.69 | .490 |
| X→ Y: total indirect effect (a1*b1 + a2*b2) | -0.01 | 0.02 | -0.63 | .532 |
| X → Y: total effect (c) | 0.17 | 0.13 | 1.36 | .175 |

*Notes*. X = experimental manipulation (0 = private, 1 = public), M1 = elaboration, M2 = composition, Y = behavioral intention. Control variables: gender and issue involvement.

### 7.3 Exploratory analyses

Given the null findings and the possibility that participants may vary in their audience perception (see above; Litt, 2016; Litt & Hargittai, 2016), we reran all analyses with the perceived audience size as the independent variable instead of the experimental manipulation. The results are reported in Tables 4 to 6.

**Table 4.** Parallel mediation model – IV perceived publicity, DV issue interest

| Path | Effect | *SE* | *z* | *p* |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| X → Y: Direct effect (c') | 0.25*** | 0.05 | 5.45 | < .001 |
| X → M1 (a1) | 0.15** | 0.05 | 3.29 | .001 |
| X → M2 (a2) | 0.09* | 0.04 | 2.14 | .032 |
| M1 → Y (b1) | 0.49*** | 0.05 | 9.00 | < .001 |
| M2 → Y (b2) | 0.00 | 0.06 | -0.04 | .969 |
| X→ M1 → Y: indirect effect (a1*b1) | 0.07** | 0.02 | 3.09 | .002 |
| X→ M2 → Y: indirect effect (a2*b2) | 0.00 | 0.01 | -0.39 | .969 |
| X→ Y: total indirect effect (a1*b1 + a2*b2) | 0.07** | 0.02 | 3.01 | .003 |
| X → Y: total effect (c) | 0.33*** | 0.05 | 6.45 | < .001 |

*Notes*. X = perceived publicity, M1 = elaboration, M2 = composition, Y = issue interest. Control variables: gender and issue involvement.

**Table 5.** Parallel mediation model – IV perceived publicity, DV perceived knowledge

| Path | Effect | *SE* | *z* | *p* |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| X → Y: Direct effect (c') | 0.12** | 0.04 | 3.01 | .003 |
| X → M1 (a1) | 0.14** | 0.05 | 3.13 | .002 |
| X → M2 (a2) | 0.08* | 0.04 | 2.04 | .041 |
| M1 → Y (b1) | 0.05 | 0.05 | 1.00 | .319 |
| M2 → Y (b2) | 0.23*** | 0.05 | 4.19 | < .001 |
| X→ M1 → Y: indirect effect (a1*b1) | 0.01 | 0.01 | 0.95 | .342 |
| X→ M2 → Y: indirect effect (a2*b2) | 0.02 | 0.01 | 1.84 | .066 |
| X→ Y: total indirect effect (a1*b1 + a2*b2) | 0.03* | 0.01 | 2.05 | .041 |
| X → Y: total effect (c) | 0.15*** | 0.04 | 3.61 | < .001 |

*Notes*. X = perceived publicity, M1 = elaboration, M2 = composition, Y = perceived knowledge. Control variables: gender and issue involvement.

**Table 6.** Parallel mediation model – IV perceived publicity, DV behavioral intention

| Path | Effect | *SE* | *z* | *p* |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| X → Y: Direct effect (c') | 0.32*** | 0.04 | 7.53 | < .001 |
| X → M1 (a1) | 0.14** | 0.05 | 3.12 | .002 |
| X → M2 (a2) | 0.08* | 0.04 | 2.03 | .043 |
| M1 → Y (b1) | 0.10 | 0.05 | 1.89 | .059 |
| M2 → Y (b2) | 0.04 | 0.06 | 0.76 | .447 |
| X→ M1 → Y: indirect effect (a1*b1) | 0.01 | 0.01 | 1.61 | .107 |
| X→ M2 → Y: indirect effect (a2*b2) | 0.00 | 0.01 | 0.71 | .477 |
| X→ Y: total indirect effect (a1*b1 + a2*b2) | 0.02 | 0.01 | 1.75 | .080 |
| X → Y: total effect (c) | 0.34*** | 0.04 | 8.04 | < .001 |

*Notes*. X = perceived publicity, M1 = elaboration, M2 = composition, Y = behavioral intention. Control variables: gender and issue involvement.

For all three independent variables, the assumed audience size had a significant impact (total effects, c-paths); the larger the assumed audience, the higher issue interest, perceived knowledge, and behavioral intention. This also showed for the mediators; the larger the assumed audience, the more participants elaborated and the more effort they put into message composition (a-paths). For issue interest, the mediation showed for elaboration, but not composition (indirect effects, a1*b1-paths and a2*b2-paths). This was not the case for perceived knowledge and behavioral intention.

## 8. Discussion

The presented study contributes to our understanding of the mechanism of self-effects of opinion expression. We tested whether public opinion expression compared to private expression would increase self-effects on interest in the issue, perceived knowledge, and intention to engage with the issue in the future.

Our results showed that publicness of a statement does neither increase self-effects on interest, perceived knowledge, and behavioral intentions, nor does it increase the cognitive processing mechanisms that we assumed would lead to the self-effects. Thus, the results raise questions about the impact of audience size on self-effects. For one, this might be due to methodological limitations: Participants expressed their opinion only once, on a predetermined topic, in a hypothetical setting, and the effect was measured immediately after the expression. In such a procedure, participants might be less motivated to elaborate and convince their audience and feel less committed to the voiced opinion, and thus not infer individual characteristics from this behavior. Additionally, the mock-up character of the study, too, could have been obvious to some participants and biased the results compared to opinion expression on authentic websites and users' social media accounts. Furthermore, the sample was not representative of social media users actively posting statements on political issues. Thus, the results cannot be generalized. It is possible that individual characteristics like participation experiences and issue involvement could moderate self-effects. Longitudinal studies with diverse samples and repeated expressions on multiple topics might be especially fruitful for understanding how self-effects of opinion expression cumulate over time. However, some previous studies have found self-effects even in single public expressions (e.g., Gonzales & Hancock, 2008; Walther et al., 2011).

Thus, the present study strengthens the suggestion by Carr et al. (2021) who, after summarizing contradictory findings on the effect of publicness in identity shift research, state: "people […] have different understandings of what constitutes a 'public' behavior and who or what their imagined audience is [… and] it is possible publicness does not matter as much as the value a social media user attaches to the audience for whom they are – or think they are – performing" (p. 206; see also Litt, 2012; Litt & Hargittai, 2016). This is supported, for one, by the participants' subjective interpretation of the size of the audience of 500,000 followers, which varied strongly (see standard deviation of the manipulation check variable in the public condition). For the other, it is supported by the fact that the assumed relationship of publicness of the expression with the mediators

and the dependent variables showed in the exploratory analyses based on the de facto perception of publicness. In other words: If a participant perceived the audience as large by their own standards, they elaborated more, put more effort into composing their statement, and showed higher levels of issue interest, perceived knowledge, and behavioral intention. However, when interpreting the results of the exploratory analyses, we need to keep in mind that – since they lack an experimental design – we cannot be certain about the causal order. It is also possible that the associations between the variables represent a „reversed self-effect": More elaboration, composition, issue interest, perceived knowledge, and behavioral intentions might influence the communicators' mental conception of the imagined audience. If people express their opinion, elaborate a lot, and perceive a topic as interesting and worthy of their future engagement, they might falsely overestimate how many others engage with this topic and read their statement (cf., false consensus effect, Mullen et al., 1985). We think it is worth pursuing this line further: It adds to the literature on self-effects because it considers an additional outcome variable. Expressing one's opinion on social media could influence one's impression of the audience of social media. It thereby adds to the literature on predictors of imagined audiences (Litt, 2012; Litt & Hargittai, 2016), because, to our knowledge, this research area has not fully considered that imagined audiences could be contingent on self-confirmation motivation or a false consensus effect.

Additionally, the size of the audience may matter less for public commitment and as a motivation to perform well. Instead, the visibility of the opinion to relevant others could be influential (see e.g., Carr & Foreman, 2016) as well as the assumed involvement of the audience in the discussed issue. For example, users elaborate more intensively when creating media content for an audience similar to themselves and recipients who are presumably critical or highly involved (Kornfield & Toma, 2020; Nekmat, 2012). Future studies should thus additionally take the relational closeness of the audience into account.

The lack of effect of the experimental condition could also indicate particularities of the area of *political expression* self-effects. Many previous experimental studies examined identity shifts due to public self-presentation of personality traits (e.g., extraversion, Carr et al., 2021). The present study considered self-effects of expressions on political interest, knowledge, and behavioral intentions, which are conceptually different and less stable over time and across situations than personality traits. Previous studies in the area of political self-effects (Cho et al., 2018; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2014; Lane et al., 2019; Neubaum & Lane, 2023; Prochazka et al., 2025; Winter et al., 2024) have barely tested the effect of public expression context experimentally. It needs further research to differentiate whether public commitment plays different roles for expressions in different areas.

Beyond the influence of public and private contexts for self-effects, this article also set out to investigate cognitive mechanisms that lead to stronger effects of expression on the senders themselves. We assumed that higher levels of elaboration and composition resulted in stronger self-effects. In line with previous research, the study supported the impact of elaboration on two of the three dependent variables, namely issue interest and behavioral intention (Gil de Zúñiga et

al., 2014; Kwak et al., 2005; Lee et al., 2022; Müller et al., 2016; Nanz & Matthes, 2022; Schäfer, 2020; Shah et al., 2005). It is particularly noteworthy that the present study investigated elaboration on a specific topic. Thus, the study adds to the literature that applies (panel) surveys on political elaboration, interest, and engagement in general. The lack of influence of elaboration on perceived knowledge is worth further investigation. It substantiates the claim that deeper elaboration – contingent on circumstances or personality characteristics – can make individuals more aware of their lack of knowledge (Weber & Köhler, 2017). As discussed above, we did not find support for the assumed mediation as the experimentally manipulated context of the expression did not affect elaboration. The exploratory analyses, however, partly supported the mediating role of elaboration for the perceived audience size.

The effects of composition are less consistent. The participants' effort to transform their thoughts into language and make them most understandable for their audience only increased perceived knowledge. This supports the assumption that when people put thoughts into writing and thereby construct a more coherent argumentation, they might infer their own knowledge about the subject from this process.

It should be noted, however, that the effect of elaboration and composition on the three outcomes of self-effects was not tested experimentally. This opens the possibility of a reversed causal order or at least reciprocal effects, in which online users with greater interest, perceived knowledge, and engagement intentions elaborate and compose more.

To sum up, our study is limited in its artificial and short-term setting. Still, our results provide important insights into research on self-effects: (1) We find that the perceived audience size seems to be more important than the actual audience size. (2) We find sufficient support for elaboration as an important mechanism explaining self-effects, but weak and inconsistent support for the role of composition. (3) Considering the unclear (as non-experimentally manipulated) direction of our effects, we provide important avenues for future exploration of potential "reversed self-effects" and research on the construction of the imagined audience.

## Generative AI declaration

This work was completed without the use of AI-assisted tools.

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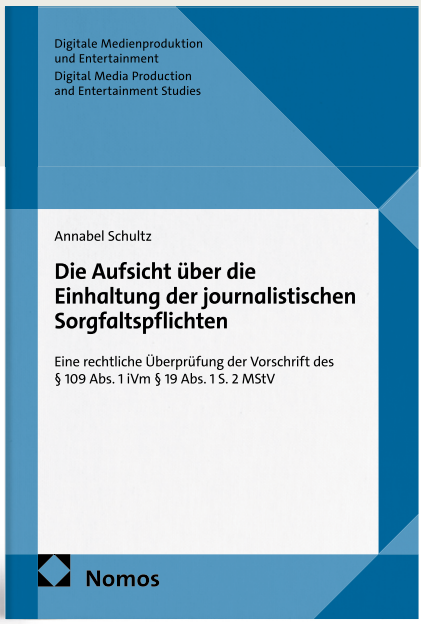
# Ensuring Media Supervision Independent of the State




## Die Aufsicht über die Einhaltung der journalistischen Sorgfaltspflichten

Eine rechtliche Überprüfung der Vorschrift des § 109 Abs. 1 iVm § 19 Abs. 1 pp. 2 MStV

By Dr. Annabel Schultz

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Responsibility for supervising online media providers lies with the media authorities, which are organized independently of the state. In view of the increasing spread of disinformation on the internet, the voluntary commitment under the leadership of the German Press Council (Deutscher Presserat e.V.) was no longer sufficient, which is why the jurisdiction of the state media authorities was significantly expanded in November 2020. This now makes it possible to officially monitor compliance with journalistic principles in online reporting. In view of the constitutionally guaranteed freedom of speech and freedom of the press, this regulation is highly controversial in literature and practice.

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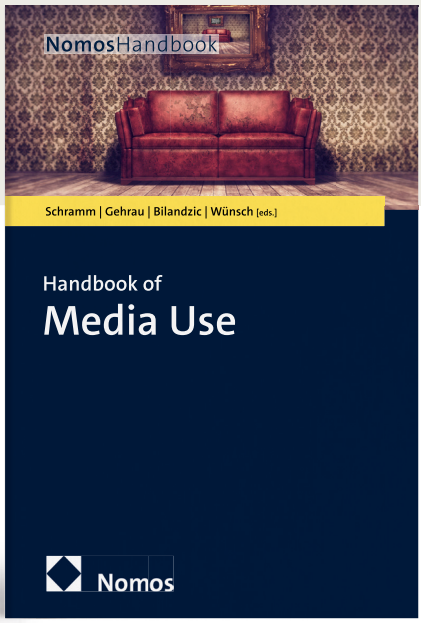


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